



The Gender, Justice and Security Hub and Innovative Methods

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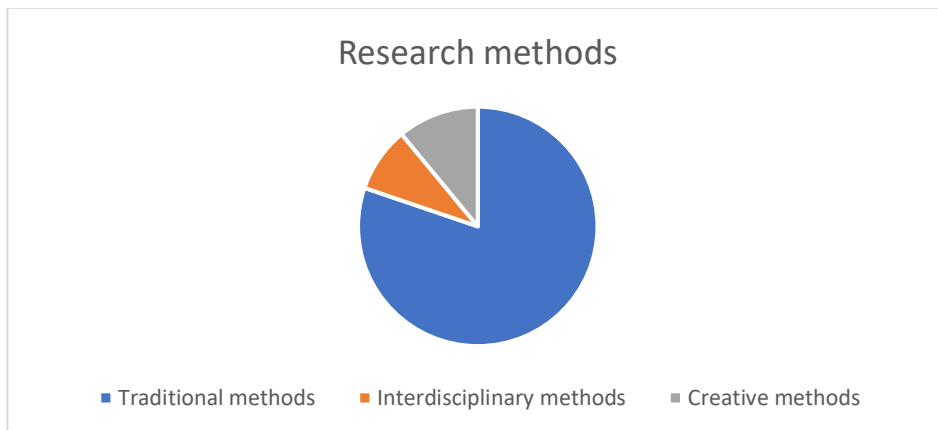
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As part of the Hub's ongoing project 'Innovative Methodologies and Methodological Innovations', within the Methodological Innovation stream, we surveyed the members of the Hub between March and June 2023. This was the second of two surveys; the first was conducted in mid-2020, with the results published as a [report](#) and a [blog post](#) in October 2020. Similar to the first iteration of the survey, we wanted to understand the kinds of methods being used across the Hub, including the kinds of data being collected; how the Hub members conceived of research innovation; and how their research might be employing innovative research methods. We also wanted to understand how members' thinking and/or practice on research methods may have changed since 2020. Specifically, we were interested in if and how the unforeseen challenges of the last three years – including COVID-19, the UK government's cuts to the Official Development Assistance (which funds the Hub), and deteriorating security contexts, particularly in Afghanistan – had an impact on the types of research methods Hub members were employing, as well as the extent to which being a part of and involved in the Hub had an impact on members' methodological thinking and/or practice.

Methods being used

We asked the Chief Investigators from each project to indicate the method(s) that they were using to undertake their research. We received a wide range of responses from traditional methods to interdisciplinary and creative interdisciplinary methods.



Hub researchers are using a variety of methods to collect data, including more traditional approaches, such as:

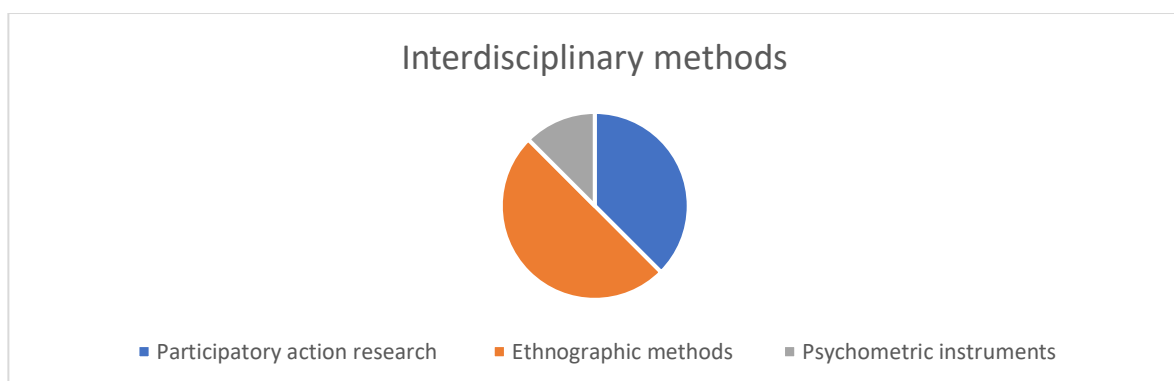
- Surveys (7 responses)
- Statistical analysis (5)
- Interviews (20)
- Focus groups (8)

- Case studies (14)
 - Participant observation and reflection (4)
 - Spatial observation and mapping (1)
 - Archival research (5)
 - Policy analysis (8)
 - Process tracing (1).
- (Total 73 responses)



They are also drawing from interdisciplinary methods, including:

- Participatory action research (3)
 - Ethnographic methods (4)
 - Psychometric instruments (1)
- (Total 8 responses)

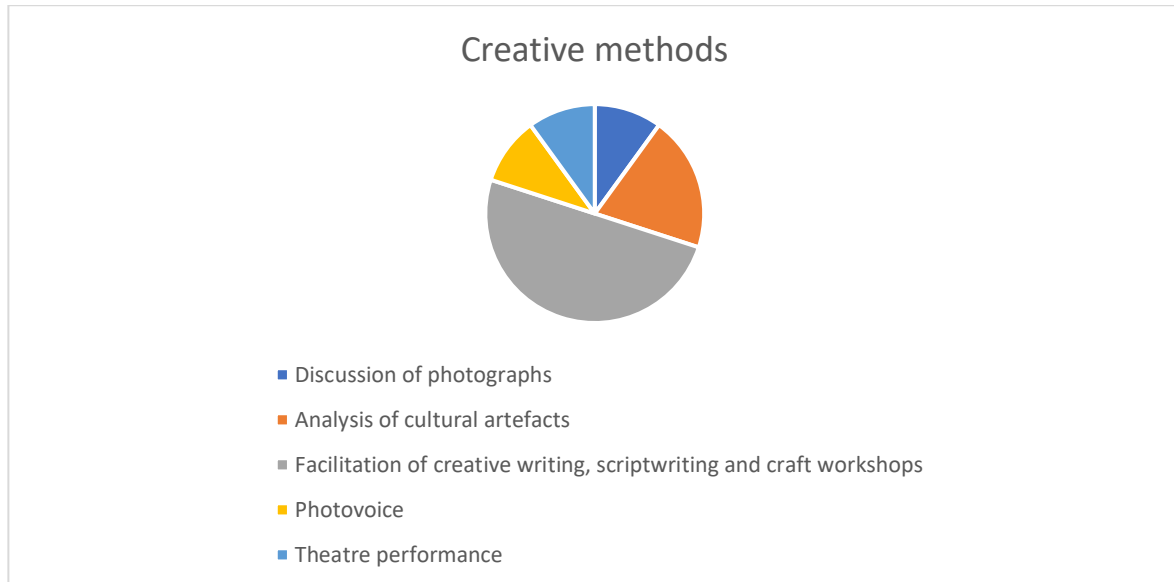


Some are using innovative or creative methods of data collection, for example:

- Discussion of photographs (1)

- Analysis of cultural artefacts (poetry, radio programmes, songs etc.) (2)
- Facilitation of creative writing, scriptwriting and craft workshops (5)
- Photovoice (1)
- Theatre performance (1).

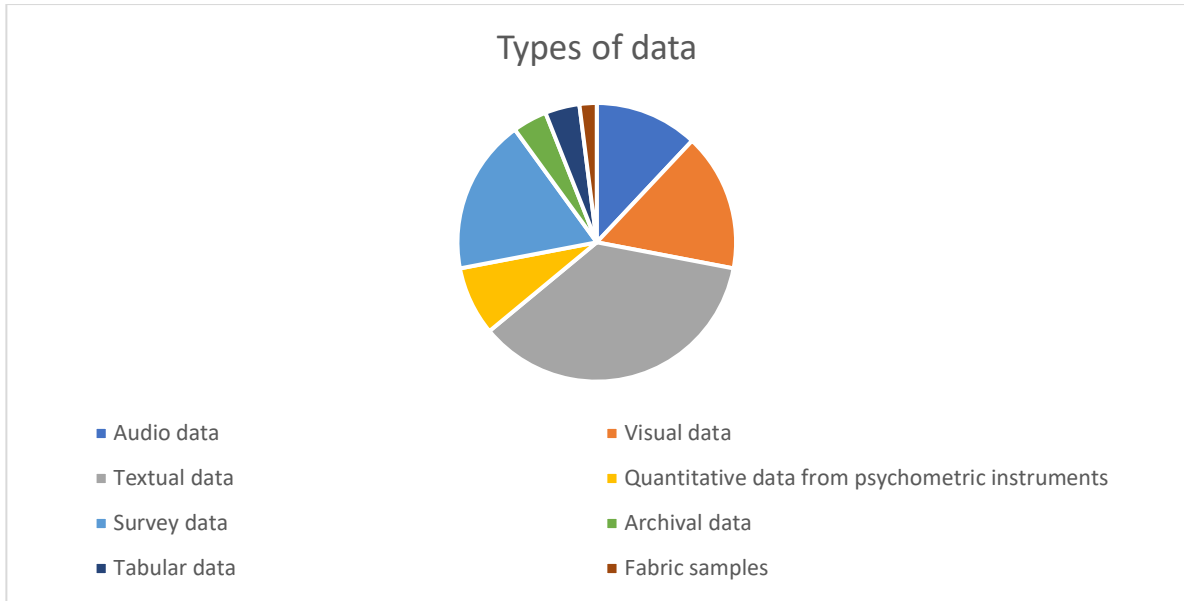
(Total 10 responses)



Many of the projects are using more than one method or are using mixed methods. Also, some projects are using both interdisciplinary or innovative creative methods and traditional approaches to collect a variety of data.

. Researchers report collection of the following kinds of data:

- Audio data (6)
- Visual data, including photographs and videos (8)
- Textual data, including interview transcripts, scripts, testimony, and documentation (18)
- Quantitative data from psychometric instruments (4)
- Survey data (9)
- Archival data (2)
- Tabular data (2)
- Fabric samples (embroidered pieces, maps). (1)



Innovation

A key aspect of the Hub’s work is methodological innovation. Recognising that this could represent different things, we asked the CIs ‘What does methodological innovation mean to you?’.

For many, it means seeking innovative and progressive shifts that challenge and push the boundaries of conventional methods. Overwhelmingly, however, the Hub researchers that we surveyed felt that innovation in research methods related to conducting research in a context-specific considerate way or using creative research practices in a challenging environment. The responses included the following, for example:

- “Methodological innovation for me means to find clever solutions to applied methods in a new and challenging research environment, thus developing the existing methods to incorporate that challenges that comes with each new research setting.”
- “Exploring the use of new methods to gather credible and reliable data: novel practices that go beyond the mainstream. However, what is novel is context specific. What is common practice in the global North, maybe be innovative in contexts such as Sri Lanka.”
- “Methodological innovation is the process of thinking about, developing, and trialling new ways of cultivating knowledge as part of the research process.”
- “I would say it has been about adjusting method under the constraints of a particular context so as to maximise the value of the final product while respecting competing values (principally that between confidentiality and exposure).”
- “Developing new ways to approach new or existing issues, with the aim of improving outcomes for researchers and participants.”
- “It involves a process in which there is constant adaptation, change and creative evolution.”
- “We wanted to extend and break down some of the boundaries set in academic spaces on what is considered ‘valid’ or legitimate knowledge and we wanted our methodological practices to reflect this discussion.”

- “Methodological innovation occurs when subject/discipline silo-based understanding of method and methodology is put aside. We have worked on methodology that has been built organically from within the field. Here, capacity, capability, and needs of our partners, access to resources, and the overarching vision of the project allows us to create innovative approaches”.

Others suggested that innovation offered an opportunity to build relationships with research participants in more considerate and caring ways. The responses included the following, for example:

- “Choosing methodologies and methods that are accessible and meaningful to the people you are doing the research with (in a participatory project).”
- “New ways for building relationship with communities, enhancing their participation in research, and generating data which truly reflect people's realities.”
- “Responding to the world around you with curiosity and openness, shaping research tools to your subject matter, thinking carefully about the weaknesses of any one method, doing your best to explain your choices to your participants and intended audience.”
- “We also wanted to undertake our research with a commitment to feminist ethics and principles that prioritised care and relationality. So, for the project, methodological innovation did not just mean innovation in the different methods we used in the course of the project but to also innovate and adapt along the journey of the project depending on the circumstances and environments we were looking at”

Many of our researchers are employing innovative methods in their Hub research projects. This includes:

- The use of visual data and theatre in innovative ways, such as in image and playback theatre, where participants constantly create and draw on artistic choices to match, reinforce, supplement, and complement a chosen mood and storyline.
- Facilitating research assistants to become peer researchers who were trained to do interviews, and also be interviewed themselves to experience being interviewed for a research study, and also share their own experiences and reflections, as well as conduct observations of the field research.
- The use of mapping an urban space.
- The use of a mixed methods approach for the topic (land and women’s empowerment) was methodologically innovative in the local context when there is no national database on private land ownership among women.
- The use of poetry writing workshops to get men to express themselves and define masculinity. Also, use a modified version of PhotoVoice where participants take photos of examples of masculinity and femininity and write up short descriptions of what they have photographed.
- Adapting applied theatre practices/methods (memory mapping, movement, image and playback theatre) to a local context.
- The use of arts, including visual arts, performance arts, and literary arts, to provide a rich, nuanced, and emotive means to express and understand human experiences that can sometimes be lost in traditional academic writing.

Changes

Innovation is inherently about change. It has been three years since our last survey, and we were curious as to whether the Hub researchers' methodological thinking and/or practice had changed – and if so, how. We also wanted to understand whether members had been inspired or had learned from other Hub members and projects and made changes to their thinking and practice. As such, we asked CIs: 'Has your membership of and involvement within the Hub impacted your methodological thinking and/or practice? If so, how?'

Many respondents answered 'Yes' to the question of whether their thinking about research methodologies had changed since they started working with the Hub. Particularly, researchers found the value and difficulties of practising feminist research ethics during the crisis context of the pandemic and challenging field environments. For instance, researchers said that through their Hub research, they could reflect on doing decolonising feminist research and explore the feminist ethics in encountering power relations and power imbalances between the researchers and researched, as well as Global North and Global South communities. However, some researchers pointed out that there were limited changes in interdisciplinary and innovative methodology given that fundamental conversations on epistemology and methodology had not taken place.

Many researchers also expressed that Hub's projects brought some positive changes and fostered innovation in members' thinking and practices. Many respondents answered that they had become more aware of safeguarding strategies, feminist ethics, and fostering collaborative endeavours of research in conflict settings as a result of working with the Hub. This led to reflections on equity issues in the research process and outcome distribution, and the question of the impact researchers can have on communities through their research and how the community can benefit from the mutual relationships with the researchers. Researchers also found inspiration and expanded their traditional methodological boundaries by engaging with various disciplines, and respondents to our survey indicated this did not just extend to scholars but also to practitioners, activists, and communities.

Challenges

Over the last few years, members have faced multiple challenges, including the COVID-19 pandemic, the devastating cuts to Hub funding, and the deteriorating security contexts and circumstances of partner countries such as Afghanistan and Sri Lanka. We asked members how these had affected their projects and the changes they had to make to their research methods as a result.

- Covid-19 pandemic: Hub members reported pandemic-related impacts to travel, data collection, and opportunities, as well as access to data, spaces, and people. Most of the Hub's projects have been impacted by the pandemic. Many researchers had to redesign their research methodology, switch research methods from in-person to online, and, in some cases, address new confidentiality concerns due to the changes in methodology. The changes resulted in more limited field research, local engagement, and types of collected data; a great reliance on secondary data; and less ability to conduct collective work such as focus groups or participant observation. Many researchers responded to the crisis by turning to online methods such as online messenger platforms and phone interviews. One project developed a fieldwork researcher manual "to allow communities to become researchers in their own rights" instead of using a research method that required intensive field research.

- Work precarity due to the funding cuts: In addition to the pandemic challenges, ODA funding cuts impacted research methodology and methods in many ways. For instance, it limited the use of technology in making video installations; delayed the digitalisation process; and restricted the research sample and reduced collaboration between researchers and NGOs and policymakers. Overall, many researchers reported having to scale down their research plans and reduce costly research, and the number of participants, research assistants, and project staff.
- Deteriorating security contexts and circumstances of partner countries in Afghanistan and Sri Lanka: Some researchers had to completely give up some research activities or redesign their research methodology given the fall of Kabul and the political crisis in Sri Lanka. In some cases, due to the takeover of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, the government and ministries that the research aimed to reach were dissolved overnight, meaning that the research had to be entirely redesigned. The rapid change in circumstances raised various issues in conducting research with partners in conflict settings.

Overall, the political crisis and circumstances in Afghanistan and Sri Lanka had implications not just for research methods and design; it also had logistical and emotional implications for researchers and participants.

Conclusion

The Hub's projects have tended to adopt traditional research methods overall. However, some projects drew upon interdisciplinary and creative methods from a wide range of disciplines and saw the collection of various types of data spanning from visual data to audio and fabric materials. Through the Hub's projects, researchers indicated that they had experienced a considerable change in their thinking and research practices, particularly in deepening their reflections on feminist research ethics, care ethics, and decolonizing research methods. However, a series of unforeseen crises – the COVID-19 pandemic, ODA funding cuts, and deteriorating security contexts in Afghanistan and Sri Lanka – impacted research methodology and methods in multiple ways. Given scarce resources and a limited and precarious research environment, researchers have been flexible and responsive in adopting and adjusting their research methodology and methods.