

## COMMENTARY

# *PARTICIPATISING STATELESSNESS RESEARCH: TOWARDS MORE INCLUSIVE SCHOLARSHIP*

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### I INTRODUCTION

Growing calls for interdisciplinary approaches to situate statelessness within a broader scholarly context have become louder over the past decade.<sup>1</sup> In an emerging field of inquiry and practice on statelessness, some have begun to criticise the lack of visibility of those with lived experience within the research community.<sup>2</sup> As a peacebuilding practitioner, I conduct participatory action research ('PAR') with marginalised communities who lead the research process, rendering their participation in the research process as much an intervention as it is a tool of inquiry. More recently, coming into academia with the aim to inductively understand our evolving work and its theoretical implications beyond practice, my research has focused on situating participatory design within the context of power. My research also explores the potential for the transformation of all involved in the process of inquiry and the knowledge participatory research can produce in confronting gaps in literature that lack direct, reflexive community contributions *about* and *by* those who are the centre of study. One of the key goals in my work is to provide space for direct voices to be heard by those from the communities who are researched who also have the potential to lead the research

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Manly and Laura van Waas, 'The State of Statelessness Research: A Human Rights Imperative' (2014) 19(1–2) *Tilburg Law Review* 3; Deirdre Brennan, 'Statelessness and the Feminist Toolbox: Another Man-Made Problem with a Feminist Solution?' (2019) 24(2) *Tilburg Law Review* 170; Lindsey N Kingston, 'Expanding Statelessness Scholarship: The Value of Interdisciplinary Research and Education' (2019) 1(1) *Statelessness & Citizenship Review* 165; Maria Jose Recalde-Vela, Sangita Jaghai-Bajulaiye and Caia Vliet, 'The State of Statelessness Research: 5 Years Later' (2019) 24(2) *Tilburg Law Review* 139; David Baluarte, 'The Arrival of "Statelessness Studies"' (2019) 1(1) *Statelessness & Citizenship Review* 156; Deirdre Brennan et al, 'Editorial' (2023) 5(2) *Statelessness & Citizenship Review* 132.

<sup>2</sup> See, eg, Jozefien Boone, 'A Power Imbalance in Academic Scholarship on Statelessness: A Thematic Analysis of the Academic Literature on Statelessness from 2014 Onwards' (2023) 5(1) *Statelessness & Citizenship Review* 76; Christiana Bukalo, 'Knowledge to Empower: Closing the Gap between Stateless People and Statelessness Research', *Critical Statelessness Studies Blog* (Blog Post, 11 April 2024) <<https://law.unimelb.edu.au/centres/statelessness/resources/critical-statelessness-studies-blog/knowledge-to-empower-closing-the-gap-between-stateless-people-and-statelessness-research>>, archived at <[perma.cc/3W4U-VD7U](https://perma.cc/3W4U-VD7U)>.

themselves. Stateless communities in Cambodia were some of the early participants who engaged in the application of PAR and have contributed to its evolution through a novel method known as Facilitative Listening Design ('FLD').<sup>3</sup> FLD's roots in Cambodia, where it was conceived, conducted and continuously tweaked over time, have led to the generation of new knowledge from direct community perspectives whilst simultaneously fostering desired change as determined by impacted communities in real time.

This commentary tackles the methodological gap in statelessness scholarship in applied participatory methods and inclusive approaches. Such a gap ultimately leads to an academic–practice nexus in which those who are most often the subjects of research — stateless individuals — are missing within broader research processes. It incorporates a case study from Cambodia wherein practitioner–researchers conceived a participatory action approach with a stateless population that brought research much closer to those it was about but was still unable to achieve its goal; to have researchers themselves come from the stateless communities under study. By exploring a local and participatory turn through a wider interdisciplinary lens, I argue for more attention to be placed on methodological design that not only incorporates stateless people into research but also reorientates their role and status within the process of inquiry at large. Reflecting on our own emerging scholar–practice space on statelessness at this pivotal time, we must evaluate our past and present attempts at genuine inclusion and look towards the possibility of a more engaged and participatory turn within our own growing interdisciplinary scholarship.

## II A PARTICIPATORY TURN

PAR should be understood as an approach rather than a method. Most PAR strives for wider participation and action by communities who are directly impacted by research conducted *about* them. In one sense, it is part of a participatory worldview functioning as a critical response to centuries of positivist dominated research in which a dynamic of *voyeurism* positioned research subjects as objects to be watched, classified and even collected like artefacts.<sup>4</sup> The social sciences have experienced a discernible participatory turn towards impacted communities in research over the last four decades.<sup>5</sup> Paulo Freire is often credited for igniting such a movement within the field of education, arguing that '[a]ttempting to liberate the oppressed without their reflective participation in the act of liberation is to treat them as objects which must be saved from a burning building'.<sup>6</sup>

Moves for more participatory approaches in the statelessness space have been advanced as the community of scholars grow. Alison Gardner and Phil Northall

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<sup>3</sup> Raymond Hyma and Lyhour Heang, *Listening to Ethnic Vietnamese Living Along the Tonlé Sap: A Community at Crossroads* (Report, Women Peace Makers, 2022); Raymond Hyma et al, *Who's Listening?: Understanding 'Us' to Know 'Them'* (Women Peace Makers 2022) ('Understanding "Us" to Know "Them"').

<sup>4</sup> John Paul Catungal and Robyn Dowling, 'Power, Subjectivity, and Ethics in Qualitative Research' in Iain Hay and Meghan Cope (eds), *Qualitative Research Methods in Human Geography* (5<sup>th</sup> edn, Oxford University Press 2021) 23.

<sup>5</sup> See, eg, Juan Mario Díaz-Arévalo, 'In Search of the Ontology of Participation in Participation Action Research, Orlando Falsó-Boorda's Participatory Turn, 1977–1980' (2022) 20(4) *Action Research* 343; Mary Van Der Riet, 'Participatory Research and the Philosophy of Social Science: Beyond the Moral Imperative' (2008) 14(4) *Qualitative Inquiry* 546.

<sup>6</sup> Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* [Pedagogia do Oprimido] (Myra Berman Ramos tr, rev edn, Continuum 2005) 65.

propose place-based working specifically for researchers of statelessness in order to build a shared research agenda through co-designing, developing a stronger systemic perspective in the field and better identifying solutions to the problems we are investigating.<sup>7</sup> Md Mizanur Rahman argues that emerging arts-based approaches to humanise statelessness require a stronger ethnographic component to ensure that the resulting art truly represents direct stateless standpoints and is grounded in their genuine participation.<sup>8</sup> Community-based participatory research ('CBPR') within the discipline of psychology focusing on Rohingya refugees in the United States has shed light on the importance of research–community partnership, particularly in the scope of statelessness and mental health.<sup>9</sup>

Among the growing calls for a participatory turn in statelessness research, perhaps no voice can better contribute to a more convincing argument than that of researchers who are stateless themselves. Christiana Bukalo has shared her direct, reflexive experience in conducting research on statelessness as a stateless person. It was her own feelings of exclusion within the field that brought her into inquiry where she has since dedicated her career to narrowing the gap between those who are stateless and the actors that work on statelessness. Her 'discovery' of multiple organisations working in this space that impacts her so directly shines a light on the importance of bridging these two groups and fostering direct communications to shift a paradigm of what she refers to as 'user research'.<sup>10</sup> We see a clear shift towards a desire for deeper inclusiveness and participation within our own emerging field, most recently at the second 2024 World Conference on Statelessness in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. In 2019, the first such conference, taking place in The Hague in the Netherlands, targeted activists, advocates, academics and artists dedicated to the rights and issues of stateless people.<sup>11</sup> About 10% of the 290 participants had lived experience of statelessness. Five years later, the second conference put more emphasis on supporting and centring the participation of those with lived experience of statelessness, resulting in about 30% of the 450 participants identifying themselves in such terms as in an opening plenary.<sup>12</sup> This concerted effort for tangible inclusion and the nearly tripled percentage of participants with lived experience is just one outcome of a discipline within the throes of a participatory turn.

PAR cannot be taken as a panacea for participation, however, particularly in the scope of stateless people who operate in distinct hierarchies and structures involving dimensions of legal identity not always analogous to other marginalised populations. After conducting an extensive PAR study amongst youth in Kenya's Kakuma Refugee Camp which critically assessed educational exclusion, Michelle J Bellino noted that the expectation that the transformative approach would allow impacted community participants to rethink the educational system and advocate

7 Alison Gardner and Phil Northall, 'A "Place" for Stateless People? Connecting Place-Based Research with Statelessness' (2020) 2(1) *Statelessness & Citizenship Review* 148.

8 Md Mizanur Rahman, "'Humanising" Statelessness Through an Artistic Approach' (2020) 2(2) *Statelessness & Citizenship Review* 272.

9 Anne Saw et al, 'Laying the Groundwork for Participatory Research with a Rohingya Refugee Community' (2022) 28(3) *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology* 306.

10 Bukalo (n 2).

11 Institute on Statelessness and Inclusion, *ISI World Conference on Statelessness: Building a Global Movement* (Report, 2019) 3.

12 Institute on Statelessness and Inclusion, *2024 World Conference on Statelessness: Preliminary Synthesis Report* (Unpublished Report, 2024) 1; '2024 World Conference on Statelessness: Solidarity, Knowledge, Change', *Institute on Statelessness and Inclusion* (Web Page, 12 April 2024) <<https://www.institutesi.org/pages/conference2024>>, archived at <[perma.cc/KBK2-954D](https://perma.cc/KBK2-954D)>.

for more inclusion did not materialise.<sup>13</sup> Rather than a grassroots action oriented outcome that would be most aligned to more typical PAR objectives, participants instead appeared to tap into their own agency in search of individual exceptions to navigating the existing system and accepting their own exclusion. Bellino surmised that, particular to stateless participants, it was precisely their own survival, which was facilitated through access to such structures, that prevented them from challenging the oppression from which their lived experience came.<sup>14</sup> This unique dimension of the status and positionality of stateless people must be considered carefully within PAR work, thus ensuring that their inclusion and participation (within the limitations of traditional PAR collaborative partnership) is not generically incorporated as simply *any* marginalised group. This is also a much broader issue for PAR in which the *kind* of participation and the power dynamics between actors, including academic researchers and community members, requires constant critical reflection and adaptation throughout. This is crucial in order to avoid any risk of performative participation and to serve as a responsive mechanism accompanying the evolution of relationships among the very different stakeholders involved.

### III PILOTING INCLUSIVE STATELESSNESS RESEARCH IN CAMBODIA

The plight of stateless people in Cambodia has long flown under the radar across disciplines. Perhaps it has been within the emerging scholarly space of statelessness that this understudied phenomenon has received the most academic attention, with only a small number working on it, particularly focussing on the minority exclusion which ethnic Vietnamese residents in the country have suffered for multiple generations.<sup>15</sup> In practice, it has also been an issue that has garnered very little attention in Cambodian civil society or among the plethora of non-governmental organisations working with marginalised populations. Notable exceptions, however, include the Raoul Wallenberg Institute, Khmer Community Development and Women Peace Makers ('WPM') who have all incorporated stronger statelessness lenses into their programming.

WPM has been experimenting with PAR since 2017, with a considerable focus on the ethnic Vietnamese minority, including the predominately stateless population located along the Tonlé Sap River in floating houseboat communities.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Michelle J Bellino, 'Shifting Ground or Moving Furniture Around: Youth Participatory Action Research in Kakuma Refugee Camp' (2023) 54(4) *Anthropology & Education Quarterly* 414.

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Christoph Sperfeldt, 'Minorities and Statelessness: Social Exclusion and Citizenship in Cambodia' (2020) 27(1) *International Journal on Minority and Group Rights* 94; Christoph Sperfeldt, 'Legal Identity and Minority Statelessness in Cambodia: Recent Developments' (2021) 3(2) *Statelessness & Citizenship Review* 347; Christoph Sperfeldt, 'The Perpetual Foreigner: Statelessness among the Vietnamese Minority in Cambodia', *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs* (Blog Post, 14 June 2022) <<https://gjia.georgetown.edu/2022/06/14/the-perpetual-foreigner-statelessness-among-the-vietnamese-minority-in-cambodia>>, archived at <[perma.cc/3Q7R-7VP7](https://perma.cc/3Q7R-7VP7)>.

<sup>16</sup> See, eg, Suyheang Kry and Raymond Hyma, *Who's Listening?: Tackling Hard Issues with Empathy* (Women Peace Makers, 2017); Suyheang Kry and Raymond Hyma, *Who's Listening?: From Centre to Periphery* (Women Peace Makers 2019); Raymond Hyma et al (n 3) *Understanding 'Us' to Know 'Them'*; Raymond Hyma and Lyhour Heang, *Listening to Ethnic Vietnamese Living Along the Tonlé Sap: A Community at a Crossroads* (Report, Women Peace Makers, 2022) <<https://wpmcambodia.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/a-communityatacrossroads.pdf>>, archived at <[perma.cc/VYN2-EDZN](https://perma.cc/VYN2-EDZN)>; Le Sen and Raymond Hyma, *The Diverse Cambodian Woman: An Exploration of Minority Women Outside the Mainstream* (Women Peace Makers, 2023) ('*The Diverse Cambodian Woman*').

Having developed FLD as its own customised PAR method, WPM leverages this participatory approach to provide an opportunity for ‘insider’ ownership among marginalised communities to drive their own research agenda through process oriented data gathering and transformational relationship building.<sup>17</sup> FLD aims to go beyond the traditional confines of many PAR initiatives centred on collaboration among key stakeholders which most often distinguish between academic researchers and community members. Instead, it involves local community members as researchers themselves who are referred to as ‘Listeners’ and normally come directly from the communities at the centre of study.<sup>18</sup> Such a reorientation of *who* becomes the researcher is rare, but not unheard of. The emergence of Indigenous research methods in a range of disciplines throughout humanities and social sciences have challenged Western traditions of outsider research and the associated power dynamics involved. In her pioneering work to decolonise methodologies, Linda Tuhiwai Smith has described much research about Indigenous peoples to date as Western ‘research adventures’ and has asked the provocative paradigm-challenging question: ‘What happens to research when the researched become the researchers?’<sup>19</sup>

In 2022, WPM led an FLD study on the situation among the ethnic Vietnamese residents on the Tonlé Sap River.<sup>20</sup> The same community had been previously engaged in FLD studies on minority groups, including this specific target population in a regional scope and on issues specific to gender dimensions of minority women.<sup>21</sup> This, however, was the first time putting the particularity of statelessness at the forefront of study. The aim was to better understand the status, challenges, needs and issues of this understudied and socially and politically excluded population. In line with the FLD method’s focus on emancipatory involvement in change, the study also prioritised gathering information on community-driven solutions and the hopes and dreams of those at the centre of inquiry.

The study took place at the height of a contentious effort to evict residents from the waterway involving numerous external actors.<sup>22</sup> In this FLD initiative, however, the attempt to enlist stateless residents from the floating communities to join as Listeners did not transpire as hoped. Although such residents were interested in participating and offered their perspectives and views, all declined to take on a role of local researcher within the scope of the project. Challenges in engaging stateless people directly are already well known to researchers working

<sup>17</sup> Women Peace Makers, *The FLD Handbook: Using Facilitative Listening Design for Your Project* (Handbook, 2017) <<https://wpmcambodia.files.wordpress.com/2018/06/fld-guidebook.pdf>>, archived at <[perma.cc/5LNE-RPK5](https://perma.cc/5LNE-RPK5)> (‘*FLD Handbook*’); Raymond Hyma and Le Sen, ‘Inquiry as Practice: Building Relationships Through Listening in Participatory Action Peace Research’ (2022) 34(3) *Peace Review* 343.

<sup>18</sup> *FLD Handbook* (n 17).

<sup>19</sup> Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (3<sup>rd</sup> edn, Zed Books 2021) 239.

<sup>20</sup> WPM, *2022 Status of Ethnic Vietnamese Residents in Kampong Chhang* (Report, 2022) (‘WPM Report’). The results of this study were publicly released in June 2024.

<sup>21</sup> Hyma et al, *Understanding ‘Us’ to Know ‘Them’* (n 3); Le Sen and Hyma, *The Diverse Cambodian Woman* (n 16).

<sup>22</sup> ‘WPM Report’ (n 20) 26–7. See also Matt Blomberg, ‘“Please Show Mercy”: Evicted by Cambodia, Ethnic Vietnamese Stuck at Watery Border’, *Reuters* (online, 2 July 2019) <<https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSKCN2E75R9>>, archived at <[perma.cc/LX7U-8XCN](https://perma.cc/LX7U-8XCN)>; Chan Thul Prak, ‘Cambodia Begins Evicting Floating Homes amid Protests’, *Reuters* (online, 12 June 2021) <<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/cambodia-begins-evicting-floating-homes-amid-protests-2021-06-12>>, archived at <[perma.cc/RF85-JTET](https://perma.cc/RF85-JTET)>.

within this space and are often revealed early on during data collection. Respondents considered stateless may be unaware of their own status and those who are may know of their potential vulnerability and feel themselves at risk when answering questions if not provided with protection from immigration enforcement.<sup>23</sup> Lindsey N Kingston argues that marginalisation is a symptom *and* a cause of statelessness, and that social and political forces contribute to structural violence towards such groups beyond the simple attribution of citizenship.<sup>24</sup> Both the political and social narratives particular to the Vietnamese in Cambodia are complex and undoubtedly intertwined within the causes of statelessness of this population, rendering them in a unique situation that ultimately puts them at far greater risk when speaking out compared to other marginalised groups. It is likely that in the case of the Vietnamese stateless residents involved in this work, their hesitancy can be attributed to their precarious legal identity and the risks they faced in moving around the community which stem from long-time structural violence grounded in sociopolitical marginalisation. During the period during which the study was undertaken, with the level of observation and monitoring by outsiders, the substantial political and social pressure to relocate was presumably only one layer of this lived experience for residents who have faced such unwanted attention over generations.

Instead, four individuals identifying as ethnic Vietnamese Cambodians or mixed-raced Vietnamese-Khmer Cambodians with legal status from other parts of the country, who spoke Vietnamese and who felt a degree of cultural, linguistic and social connection to the floating village residents were recruited to conduct FLD.<sup>25</sup> In addition, two Khmer Listeners who had gained the trust of many of the community members also participated and conducted their research in the Khmer language, a second language for most of the ethnic Vietnamese residents. In total, 50 ethnic Vietnamese residents living both in the houseboats and on land along the river shores participated. Except for one individual, all respondents, known as ‘Sharers’ in the FLD method, lacked any form of documentation associated with citizenship and could not prove their legal identity anywhere beyond residency.

The findings of the study shed light on the lived experience of statelessness in the Cambodian context with much more emphasis on the relocation impacts among Sharers. One of the lasting questions for those involved in the research, however, concerned the challenge of engaging members directly from the community as Listeners. In spite of successful engagement with a vast range of marginalised participants of other backgrounds on issues pertaining to social inequality, discrimination and exclusion in past FLD endeavours, WPM was unable to do the same with stateless individuals and those at risk of statelessness. This has meant that those who the research was about were unable to present findings or represent the work of themselves and their communities. Instead, others have conducted the research *about* them, as most research tends to do, therefore bypassing the usual objective of FLD to generate knowledge owned and mobilised by those whom it is about. This reality, however, must be further

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<sup>23</sup> Mary Strobe and Melanie Khanna, ‘Improving Official Statistics on Stateless People: Challenges, Solutions, and the Road Ahead’ (2021) 37 *Statistical Journal of the IAOS* 1087, 1092.

<sup>24</sup> Lindsey N Kingston, ‘Worthy of Rights: Statelessness as a Cause and Symptom of Marginalisation’ in Tendayi Bloom, Katherine Tonkiss and Phillip Cole (eds), *Understanding Statelessness* (1<sup>st</sup> edn, Routledge 2017) 17.

<sup>25</sup> ‘WPM Report’ (n 20) 7.

considered, particularly within a strong contemporary movement of global advocacy work that encourages a ‘nothing about us without us’ approach. For those of us working within this context and who understand the potential risks specific to bringing stateless people into the spotlight, it is crucial to consider the importance of participation whilst putting safety at the centre of research and intervention planning. This experience with FLD and the engagement of stateless people in a more peripheral space has taught us that our own research approaches must be flexible and adaptive. At the same time, the engagement of stateless peoples in research requires continuous critical reflection on what participation truly means and how it can achieve genuine inclusivity with those at the centre of study. Future FLD initiatives will continue to take this into account, not only through seeking ways to recruit stateless participants, but also by considering more creative approaches to provide the necessary participatory space. A space which can be safe, authentic and meaningful to those involved whilst simultaneously enriching our knowledge and contributing to *participatising* the field of statelessness research.

#### IV CONCLUSION

With more evident attempts to bridge the emerging field of statelessness inquiry directly with those who are stateless or who have lived experience of statelessness, PAR is one way in which those who are most often research subjects can transcend traditional research barriers to collaborate on (and even lead) research *about* them. In line with a broader participatory turn, some examples of PAR and more participatory research are materialising both in research and in practice. Despite being unable to recruit stateless members of the ethnic Vietnamese community to conduct FLD research themselves as Listeners in Cambodia, the recent work of WPM to understand the lived experience of those facing mass relocation contributes several lessons for stateless research and advocacy. The efforts to generate knowledge through community research fills a gap in the epistemic knowledge available and provides a more direct conduit to understand lived experience and local realities through knowledge that is generated more closely to those with contextual understanding. It also engages those at the centre of inquiry in a much more inclusive way. Were it to reach the point in which the inclusion of a vibrant community of stateless researchers from the communities of study themselves existed, our scholarship, conferences and the entirety of our emerging discipline would look very different from what it is at present. At this critical juncture in which we all know our work lacks the defining presence of those we study, we need to incorporate more PAR into the statelessness space; always with an adaptive approach that can take in the realities and the unique challenges that stateless people face in their own marginalised contexts. Embracing a participatory paradigm, as seen in other disciplines, will only enhance the knowledge we have and deepen the participative nature of our work, allowing us to achieve our goal of truly engaging those experiencing statelessness and those with lived experience of statelessness.