

Female circumcision in Malaysia: Challenges and Lessons learned in using Focus Groups through an NGO-Academia Collaboration

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Abstract

Female circumcision is a relatively understudied topic in the Malaysian context. It is also a topic that is considered sensitive due to its strong association with culture and religion. This paper explores the challenges and lessons learned from a larger project that focuses on the discourse analysis of female circumcision in Malaysia. The project involves collaborative work with a local NGO that works on the advancement of Muslim women's rights in Malaysia. This paper outlines the processes involved in data collection via focus group discussions and is written as a reflexive exercise based on the recommendations proposed by Olmos-Vega *et al.* (2023). This reflexive paper on the methodological challenges and lessons learned from the collaboration offers insights that can help other researchers make more informed research choices on working on collaborative research and on the use of focus groups as a method of data collection.

Keywords: Female circumcision, Focus group discussions, Research Collaboration, Methodological Challenges

1. Introduction

Research collaborations are increasingly encouraged as universities try to bridge the gap between producing new knowledge and ensuring that their research matters to society. Academics could be perceived as being out of touch with realities on the ground as they keep themselves in a privileged bubble within the ivory tower of academia. The technical expertise and grassroots network that non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have established can provide valuable insights, especially in dealing with social issues. Driving social change is one of the pillars of academia and construction of knowledge in academia is aimed at advancing the overall betterment of society. This aspect that involves the contribution of universities to society is dubbed the ‘Third Mission’ by Compagnucci and Spigarelli (2020) who reviewed studies that have examined this mission. They concluded that the ideation and manifestation of the ‘Third Mission’ for universities are continuously changing as universities stand at the intersection of reduced public funding and the pressure to legitimise their socio-economic impacts by different stakeholders.

Production and dissemination of knowledge is no longer exclusive to academia. Similarly, NGOs have also strengthened their foundation through production of knowledge based on their experience with the grassroots. The commonality of purpose among academic researchers and NGOs can introduce a research synergy that leads to the creating of meaningful research with real world applications. To this end, it is important to establish a middle ground between academic researchers and NGO bodies as both parties may have differences in understanding and research practices. For instance, there are differences in the ways that NGOs and academic researchers perceive the production of knowledge (Green, 2017). Despite this, the changing landscape of the production of knowledge should be treated as a welcomed change as it democratises knowledge.

Reflecting on the experience we had in collaborative work with a non-governmental organisation (NGO) in 2020, this paper intends to highlight the potential of such partnerships in pursuing meaningful language-based research that can drive social change and the ways in which research partnerships can be improved in future. The research project focuses on analysing discourses related to the practice of *sunat perempuan* or female circumcision in Malaysia, and perceptions on the practice. The focus of this paper is to discuss the processes that were involved

data collection through focus group discussion method in the manner of a reflexive writing, following the recommendations proposed by Olmos-Vega *et al.* (2023). This reflexive exercise proposed by Olmos-Vega *et al.* (2023) offers an insight into “decisions and dynamics that were most impactful in the research process” by looking at various dimensions such as personal, interpersonal, methodological, and contextual aspects of qualitative research (p. 247). Similar forms of review focusing methodology are those by Hemmings (2020) and Suppiah and Kaur (2018). The former is a detailed discussion of the effectiveness of the methods used in language documentation and description for the Kelabit language in Sarawak, while the latter discusses the methodological challenges involved in collecting data from transnational sex workers in Malaysia respectively.

1.1 The practice of *sunat perempuan* (female circumcision)

The practice of *sunat perempuan* or female circumcision in Malaysia is a multifaceted phenomenon that is deeply interlaced with cultural and religious sensitivities. The World Health Organization (WHO) classifies the practice as a form of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM). According to the WHO’s typology of FGM, there are four types of practices that fall within umbrella term that is used to describe the practice (UNICEF, 2022; WHO, 2022; WHO, 2018). According to existing studies (Rashid & Iguchi, 2019; Rashid *et al.*, 2009; Isa *et al.*, 1999) on female circumcision in Malaysia, the practice in Malaysia is categorised as Type 4 which involves harmful, non-medical procedures to the female genitalia that are not listed in the definitions for Types 1 to 3. These procedures include the act(s) of pricking, piercing, incising, scraping, and cauterizing the genital area. However, recent evidence reported by Rashid *et al.* (2020) suggests that medical practitioners in Malaysia may have carried out Type 1, which involves the partial or total removal of the clitoral glans, and/or the prepuce/clitoral hood. From the medical perspective, Type 1 is a more invasive form of cutting as it involves some removal of a healthy tissue. Type 2 involves partial or total removal of the clitoral glans and the labia minora, sometimes involving the removal of the labia majora as well. Type 3 involves a process that is more commonly known as infibulation which is the process of narrowing the vaginal opening using any parts of the labia to create a covering seal for the vagina.

Female circumcision has been a subject of decades-long debate, especially in academia. The practice is viewed as a global issue by the United Nations (UN) as it is practiced in different

regions worldwide. Various types of the practice are carried out in African, Southeast Asian, and Middle Eastern countries. It has also been identified as a practice carried out by migrant diasporas in European countries. The UN included the elimination of FGM as one of its targets under Sustainable Development Goal Number Five which focuses on the empowerment of women and young girls. In 2021, the World Health Organization (WHO) published a guideline document that focuses on the ethical considerations in research on FGM due to the absence of such guide despite the increasing number of studies on the practice.

1.2 The collaborative process in focus group discussions

There were three stages involved during the collaborative process in conducting the focus group discussion sessions. It comprised the planning stage, the execution stage, and the reporting stage.

Figure 1 visualises the steps in the whole collaborative process.

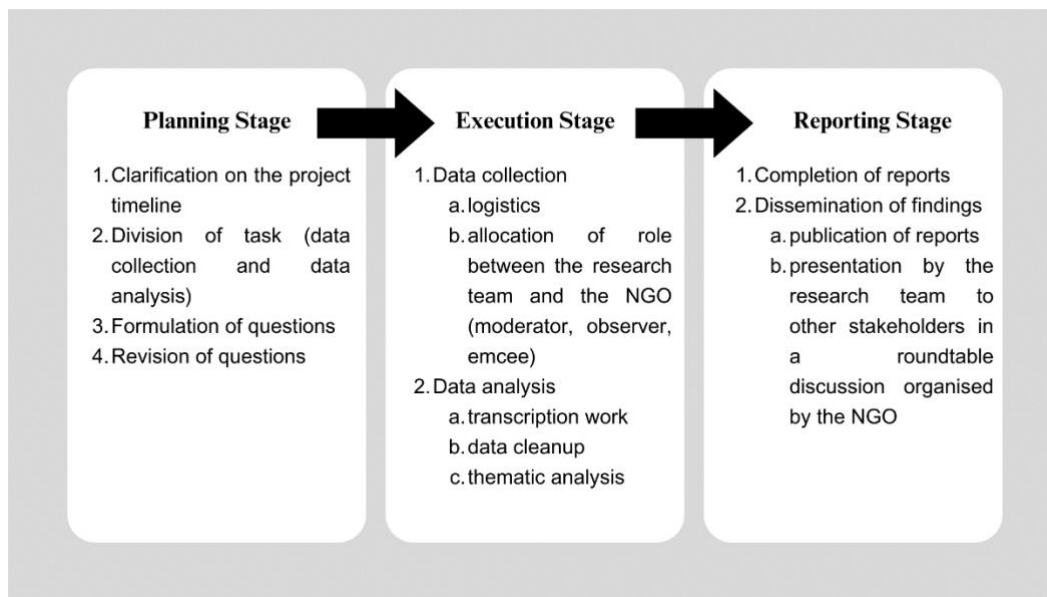


Figure 1: Overview of collaborative process

The first stage involved planning work, and the research team had visited the office of the NGO for clarification on the project timeline. It was agreed that the NGO would organise the focus group sessions, and members of the research team would be present for all sessions. The analysis was carried out by the research team entirely. Prior to the focus group sessions, communication in the form of email exchanges and instant messaging took place to discuss matters related to the

focus groups. These included the questions that were to be used for the focus groups, the logistics, as well as the recruitment of participants. The questions that were formulated were mostly suggested by the NGO, drawing on their expertise and grassroots experience. The questions involved several aspects related to the practice of female circumcision such as awareness and personal experience, opinion and knowledge, beliefs, and stakeholder roles in advocacy. The second stage was the execution stage, involving the decisions agreed upon regarding the handling of the logistics, allocation of roles for the focus group sessions, and the process of analysing the data. The final stage was the reporting stage which involves completion of reports and dissemination of research findings.

1.3 Overview of the research project and the research foci

The rationale for the collaboration was to create evidence-based research that would contribute to deeper understanding of the practice in Malaysia. The research proposal was pitched by the principal investigators to the NGO, and the proposal was accepted. The collaborative process involved an integration of the NGO's expertise and resources into the data collection for the study on perceptions of Malay-Muslim women on the practice.

Broadly, the project aimed to look at discourses related to the practice, and perceptions that university students and Malay-Muslim women have towards the practice. To examine the discourses related to the practice, Malaysian mainstream and alternative online news articles published were examined. A textual and corpus-assisted analysis was carried out on mainstream and alternative online news articles. The perceptions of university students on the practice were gauged using online questionnaire where respondents share their knowledge of the practice based on their understanding, as well as their attitude towards and personal experience with the practice. Finally, focus group discussions were organised and conducted by the NGO to understand the ways in which Malay-Muslim women perceive the practice.

Four focus group discussion sessions were carried out when the Movement Control Order was enforced during the Covid-19 pandemic. Two focus group sessions, Groups A and B, were conducted physically whereas the other two sessions, Groups C and D, were done virtually. Initially, participation from 20 Malay-Muslim women were anticipated as they had agreed to take part in the discussions, but three of them were unable to attend due to last minute issues. A total of 17 participants took part in the discussions; there were five participants for Groups A and B,

four participants for Group C, and three participants for Group D. Convenience sampling method was used in recruiting the focus group participants, with the inclusion criteria of Malay-Muslim women who are mothers, with ages ranging from 20 to 70 years old. This sampling method was employed within the restricted circumstances during the pandemic period. Participants in Groups A and B were in the higher age segment, ranging from 40 to 70 years of age whereas Participants in Groups C and D were the younger participants aged 20 to 39 years old. This decision of grouping the participants was informed by the assumption that participants from similar age groups may have generational similarities and shared experiences in relation to female circumcision.

Most of the participants were recruited through their established connection with different women's societies, including the single women's societies. Participants in Groups A and B were from the single women's societies and their connections. The management of logistics and the choice of moderators were handled by the NGO, and at least a member of the research team was present throughout all discussion sessions. The briefing and the obtaining of consent were also handled by the NGO.

2. Challenges and the lessons learned

Through the collaboration period, a few methodological challenges were identified. Some of the identified challenges during the collaborative process involve time constraints, unclear expectations, collection of data for the focus groups, and finally, absence of reflection. The analysis was carried out fully by the research team comprising two principal investigators, a doctoral student, and a research assistant hired for the project. The doctoral student was supervised by both principal investigators, and the NGO was aware that the research work carried out under the project would be part of the student's work.

2.1 Time constraints

One palpable challenge of carrying out the focus groups through the collaborative project was the time constraint. The project was carried out over the course of six months, with an addition of a two-month extension. During the collaborative period, commissioned research can become a race against time due to the obligation to adhere to the timeline agreed at the onset of the project which denied the opportunity for researchers to do some reflections on the work, and carry out abductive reasoning, as experienced by Richter and Hostettler (2015) in their commissioned projects. The

research work was carried out based on the timeline stipulated in the proposal, with a two-month extension requested for the completion of the technical reports that were written for the NGO.

2.2 Unclear expectations

However, throughout the collaborative process, the negotiation of roles was not clearly outlined. This becomes a problem during the process of carrying out the research, especially involving the collection of data as the focus group sessions were conducted by the NGO. The negotiation of roles between collaborators needs to be consolidated further so that all areas are covered and clarified clearly. The expectations also need to be communicated between the collaborators.

2.3 Issues in the process of data collection (selection of moderator, execution of focus groups)

Communicating expectations is important because problems may arise during the process of data collection. Due to the nature of the multiway dialogue in focus group discussions, there is a certain social dynamic that could affect the collection of data. For instance, some participants can overpower a conversation and the moderator needs to play a role in ensuring other participants have the turn to speak (Krueger & Casey, 2015). This happened in Group A when some participants were reluctant to speak, thus, it seemed as if they agreed with what the participants who spoke had mentioned. Nyumba *et al.* (2018) stated that this dominance effect is one of the biases that could affect the discussion as one of the participants controls the discussion. Sim and Waterfield (2019) highlighted that the moderator plays an important role in accommodating the needs of the participants and giving them the opportunity to speak when they wish to without interruptions from dominating individuals. The moderator was selected by the NGO we worked with, and they may not have the academic training necessary to moderate focus groups. Although the sessions are organised by the NGO, the moderator must be one of the members of the research team. This important aspect of data collection is included by Lokot and Wake (2023) in their inventory of questions that researchers and their collaborator(s) need to consider at different stages of research co-production. Therefore, moderators who are entrusted with the responsibility to maintain order and ensure focus in the discussions should ideally be someone from the research team who is trained on the ways a focus group should be conducted.

Next, another problem that can arise from focus group discussions is departure of focus from the topic either by the entire members of the group, or by several participants in the group. This could happen when participants know each other and a strategy to filter out the irrelevant content of discussion is to use partially abridged transcripts. This involves omitting the content that does not relate to the questions or the study (Krueger & Casey (2015). This becomes a problem for the researcher as the limited time allocated for the focus groups was not maximised fully, and some aspects of the topic might not surface. In this regard, the role of moderators is again, fundamental in ensuring participants stick to the topic.

2.4 Absence of reflection

A broader discussion and the opportunity to reflect on the topic took place after the project ended and were reflected in the consecutive writings produced by the doctoral student such as the doctoral thesis. The application of reflexive practices is the central focus in research which should complement the research questions through a dialogic approach (Lazard & McAvoy, 2017). This has become increasingly important in qualitative research and informs meaning-making of the research itself. A researcher with similar experience to the research participants can have the advantage of readiness in accepting and understanding the content and nuances within the data which comes at the cost of the researcher having to actively disentangle themselves from the struggles of their research participants (Berger, 2013). However, it is difficult to actively include reflexivity systematically due to the time constraint issue mentioned previously, as researchers have tight deadlines to finish their analysis and reports for the project. Hence, part of the motivation for this paper is to treat it as a reflexive exercise to reflect on the project we had carried out and identify the ways in which we could improve NGO-academia collaboration in future.

3. Conclusion

The methodological challenges and lessons learned when we carried out research on the practice of female circumcision in Malaysia through collaboration with an NGO has been discussed in this paper. Among the constraints faced throughout the collaborative period are time constraint, unclear expectations, issues involving data collection, and absence of reflection. These challenges mainly stem from the time constraint issue which necessitates the researchers to work quickly to produce the research outputs within the timeline of the project.

3.1 Significance and implications of the collaborative approach

Upon the completion of the project, a roundtable discussion session with other academic researchers, religious experts, NGOs, and doctors was hosted by the NGO. The findings from the studies conducted under the project were presented. Other than that, two reports were published on the websites of the NGO. NGOs are better acquainted with collaborative approaches and stakeholder engagements in their line of work. The involvement of multiple stakeholders, including community members, local organisations, policymakers, and researchers is a hallmark of their advocacy work. By engaging in partnership with NGOs, academic researchers can venture into this collaborative culture, working together to co-create knowledge, and conduct research that are more contextually relevant and meaningful. Findings from the research carried out under this project have the potential to inform directions in policymaking, to create a shift in public discourse on the practice, and lead to the development of new studies to enhance the existing knowledge of the practice.

3.2 Future prospects and recommendations

Academic researchers can leverage on the community engagement and access that NGOs have in order to connect with society. An NGO-academia collaboration is a point of intersection between academic approaches and field works that are centred on lived realities. It offers a multitude of possibilities in driving social change. We propose the two recommendations in ensuring a more effective NGO-academia research collaboration. The first recommendation involves extensive documentation of the collaboration through journaling and the second recommendation is to tally the expectations and outline them clearly at the onset of the project. We also propose the inclusion of insights from participants after the completion of the project, or a research practice known as member reflections.

3.2.1 Document the entire collaboration through journaling

An extensive documentation of the collaboration will help the researchers in reflecting on the research and collaborative process. It will also ensure that all the minute details of the project including the aspects involved in the tasks distributed have been confirmed and planned clearly. If a qualitative research model is adopted, this documentation will be useful for a reflexive process. Adoption of reflexivity will reduce researcher bias when the decisions and dynamics behind a

research work are made transparent. This can be achieved by using various methods such as narrative autobiography, self-interview, reader-response exercise, structured team-reflexive exercise, and member reflection, as suggested by Olmos-Vega *et al.* (2023).

3.2.2 Outline expectations from the beginning

It is imperative that all the parties involved in a research collaboration communicate their expectations early. This will enable them to execute their tasks effectively and ensure that all the aspects of the research process are covered. If it helps, a detailed list of tasks that need to be accomplished can also assist the collaborators in making sure that the due diligence is done. The set of questions by Lokot and Wake (2023) might be useful in discussing the delegation of tasks for the different stages of research co-production.

3.2.3 Incorporate insights from participants

Involvement of participants in research can take on many forms after a research project has been completed as an avenue for feedback. Member reflections, specifically, lend the researchers an opportunity to enrich their findings, build on their existing work, and strengthen the credibility of their work (Tracy, 2010). This will certainly contribute to meaningful research, rather than collection of data solely for the interest of the researchers (McDermott *et al.*, 2019).

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