



Dispatch

Researching Crises in Urban Environments: Feminist Insights from Violent Spaces

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Introduction – Research During Crisis

This dispatch focuses on the profound challenges I have faced conducting research during times of crisis. Drawing from experiences in the Cape Flats, Cape Town, South Africa, I think about what has happened to me as a researcher as safety nets and the niceties of day-to-day life are stripped away, when I've gained a unique vantage point on structural functions and inequalities. Crises starkly reveal, and force people to confront, entrenched inequalities. They offer an opportunity to challenge the status quo and respond to hitherto unheard, spoken-over, and silenced voices, particularly those from marginalised communities including women, indigenous groups, and people of colour. My critical examination of how systems respond to crises unearths uncomfortable feminist research questions that support me to reveal the inequities deeply rooted in society, exposing the intersecting oppressions related to race, gender, class, and more. I've learned that research conducted from a feminist standpoint can serve as a tool for unlearning, fostering solidarity, and advancing social justice by inviting communities' perspectives in research and challenging the norms of conventional knowledge and narrative creation.

This dispatch draws on observations and learnings gained during my time as the principal investigator in a household food security study conducted in 2023 and 2024 in Cape Town, South Africa. The research findings revealed the intricate connection between food insecurity and gender-based violence, which often results in a vicious cycle where hunger intensifies conflict and gender-based violence exacerbates food scarcity. Conducted during times of polycrisis (Paganini & Khan, 2023), the household survey was an integral component of the Urban Food Futures programme, which I coordinate. The Urban Food Futures programme is led by TMG Research, a thinktank for sustainability

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based in Berlin, that partners with community-led organisations, civil society, and academia in Cape Town and Nairobi to develop and implement pathways to transform urban food systems (Paganini & Weigelt, 2023). Urban Food Futures conducted this survey in collaboration with the community-led organisation Food Agency Cape Town (FACT), a collective of grassroots activist researchers who live in high-density urban low-income areas across the Cape Flats. FACT was registered as a legal entity in 2020 after its members collaborated on food justice research by documenting and contextualising the effects of COVID-19 regulations on households in the Cape Flats and their communities' coping strategies (see Paganini et al., 2021).

The key findings from this survey were that the COVID-19 pandemic profoundly affected household food security in South Africa and amplified existing issues like spatial inequality, intersectionality, and power imbalances. The study identified households headed by women, those coping with unemployment, larger households (more than five members), and individuals involved in the food system (urban farmers, fishers, food industry employees) as the most likely to have faced food insecurity during lockdowns.

Three years after the initial survey, we repeated it with 2,200 households in six low-income areas of the greater Cape Town region in August 2023 and January 2024. Primarily designed as a statistical undertaking, the research allowed for a comprehensive exploration of the intricate dynamics of food environments, the politics of power, unabating physical and structural violence and social injustices, and the deeply rooted gender inequalities which manifest daily in the lives of my Capetonian colleagues. In furthering our feminist research approach, we sought to recognise and amplify the narratives behind the data and draw attention to the significance of each data point being a person with a unique story, a household, an experience of trauma, and a lived reality. To achieve this, FACT integrated an art-based methodology into our research framework, incorporating poetry, photography, storytelling, and theatre to provide perspective and context to empirical data.

Though the COVID-19 crisis in Cape Town has recessed since the first survey, South Africa continues to grapple with ongoing challenges: the economy never fully recovered from the severe impacts of lockdowns, curfews, and widespread retrenchments. A long-standing energy crisis, characterised by long (two to eight hour) power cuts several times a day, severely affects daily life and productivity (Naidoo, 2023); and soaring food prices add to the overall burden (Pietermaritzburg Economic Justice & Dignity Group, 2024). Less obvious, but equally tenacious, gender-based violence pulses below the surface as a silent pandemic with persistent destructive effects (Gqola, 2015). Additionally, the unique Cape bioregion grapples with the looming consequences of climate change and the loss of biodiversity, which are yet to be fully understood and addressed (Green, 2022). The study was conducted amid this complex and interconnected polycrisis to shed light on how communities in Cape Town are coping.

This reflective piece serves a dual purpose. Firstly, it serves as a concrete example of the complexities of conducting research under the conditions of societal upheaval in violent spaces. Secondly, it illuminates a key research finding around the exacerbating effect of the silenced violence of hunger on gender-based violence. By outlining the need for a feminist perspective, I argue that a different form of knowledge creation can meaningfully contribute to social justice research.

Before I share results, I want to position myself in this project as a white researcher from Europe conducting research in predominantly African urban environments on the topic of hunger and gender-based violence. My position invites me to engage in deep introspection and self-reflection regarding my role and responsibilities within this research, my inherent privilege, and the potential this creates for unintentional harm. Similarly to other white middle-class academics engaging with racism, my theoretical standpoint could lead me to address racism professionally without truly connecting with it on a personal level (Moreton-Robinson, 2000). In highly charged environments like the Cape Flats where we conducted the household food security study, I was faced with the reality that feminist research cannot effectively operate unless it acknowledges and confronts the power dynamics inherent in research. I drew on the insights of Associate Professor of African Feminist Studies at the University of Cape Town, June Bam (2023), who states:

Conducting research in equal partnership with communities as indigenous knowledge-holders will become increasingly important within the post-COVID university system. As a powerful part of everyday life, indigenous knowledge exists without the need for a special name or label because it has been around for centuries. For instance, there is reliable evidence of the ongoing existence of old knowledge and enduring cultural rituals that form part of the healing knowledge and its ecology that have survived to this day on the Cape Flats. (p. 12)

Cape Town's Dichotomy – Beauty and Brutality in the Urban Landscape

The Cape Flats, located east of Cape Town, was established during the Apartheid era as a place for people who had been forcibly removed from their homes and relocated to a low-lying, peri-urban terrain in an extensive network of highly socio-culturally diverse townships and informal settlements (Mellet, 2020). The area remains a living testament to the persistent effects of Apartheid that have barely been addressed in post-Apartheid urban development efforts. Living at the fringe of society, Cape Flats' inhabitants eke out their livelihoods by selecting and braiding together livelihood strategies in formal and informal employment.

This urban landscape continues to be marred by the brutality of legally entrenched racial and spatial segregation, socio-economic disparities, and political turbulence that continue in contemporary violence and urban inequality. Apartheid-era spatial division and the relegation of Africans and

People of Colour to peripheral townships created a stark, and persistent, contrast of affluence and hardship. To this day, residents in Cape Town's poorer outskirts endure lengthy taxi commutes to work in affluent areas. The wealth of their employers living "on the other side of the tracks" still hinges upon the exploitation of their cheap labour, historically rooted in systems of resettlement and the marginalisation of indigenous knowledge systems.

The particularly pervasive issue of gender-based violence (GBV), including sexual violence and intimate partner violence, plagues South African cities (Gqola, 2015). It is so invasive and commonplace that it restricts the freedom of movement and limits people's ability to access livelihoods – but it is normalised for the most marginalised in society. During my time working on this study, the challenge of gender-based violence surfaced continuously in the lives of those collaborating in the study, who are part of seven community kitchens where women provide meals for community members. In their public-facing roles, these women often serve as first responders to gender-based violence. Over the course of the study, they consistently reported rising violence rates; increasing community demand for victim support services such as shelter, legal advice, and counselling; and more frequent requests to attend to legal responses, such as accompanying victims to court proceedings.

Security and Social Implications of Researching within Violent Spaces

In response to these crises, our research team favoured a critical feminist approach that recognises the historical and structural roots of injustice and trauma while promoting healing, social justice, and equity. Our approach was sensitive to our partners' inheritance of trauma and psychological scars that are part of the cycles of violence, ongoing land dispossession that entrenches historical injustices, and hypermasculinity of Apartheid, with its enduring social and economic inequalities. At the same time, we anticipated and planned for challenges associated with conducting research within a violent polycrisis: determining safe areas, ensuring the well-being of teams, considering the safest travel routes and hours, and constantly adapting to strikes, power failures, and other unexpected events.

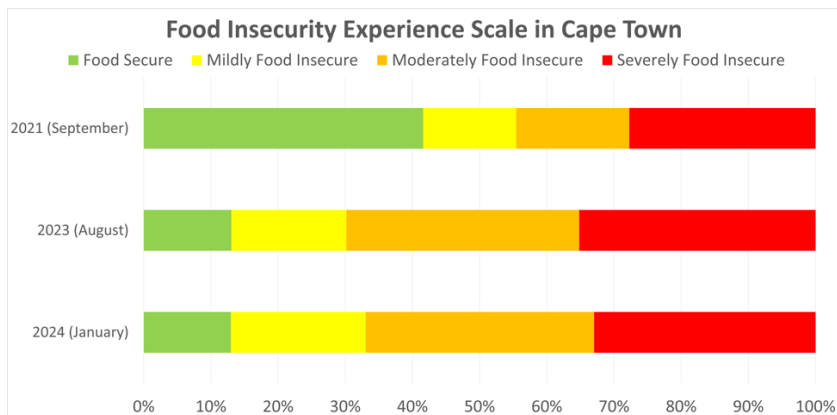
The survey was conducted by members of the communities, who received training as enumerators. Every enumerator conducted between six to eight 45-minute interviews each day and approached around 2,200 households in each round. The interviews offered interviewees the opportunity to voice dissent on food security, challenge the status quo, and disclose their experiences of violence within the system. To prepare our enumerators to bear witness to these stories, our local counterpart, the Callas Foundation, provided training to raise awareness and deeper understanding of gender-based violence including all forms of physical, mental, economic, and sexual abuse (see Callas Foundation, 2021).

Emotionally, the toll of conducting research in violent spaces is profound. Witnessing the daily struggles, trauma, and suffering of communities affected by violence is psychologically distressing. Enumerators carried the emotional weight of bearing witness to interviewees' stories of trauma and invisible violence, a lived experience many shared and recognised, as they lived and loved within the very communities that they collected data in. They observed how violence is deeply intertwined with trauma and recognised how emotional burdens, often compounded by systemic inequalities and the weight of societal expectations, can result in burnout, compassion fatigue, and moral injury among those striving to make a difference.

The Nexus of Hunger and Violence

During a two-day workshop that we referred to as the “Data Digest” held in November 2023 and in February 2024, we reflected on the first round of findings. Figure 1 describes the rates of food insecurity recorded during that round. Most notably, it illustrates a significant reduction in the number of food-secure households over the study period accompanying a rapid jump in the number of households self-identifying as “moderately or severely food insecure” (every second household in 2021 and nearly two-thirds of all respondents in 2023).

*Figure 1. Food Insecurity Experience Scale in Cape Town**



*The Food Insecurity Experience Scale (FIES) is a survey module developed by the United Nations Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) to assess the severity of food insecurity. It uses an eight-item questionnaire to measure conditions affecting the ability to lead a healthy life over one month. Severity levels are further detailed, with “moderately food insecure” implying inadequate food consumption, skipping meals, or running out of food. On the other hand, “severely food insecure” indicates experiencing hunger or going without food for a whole day due to lack of resources.

Our findings amalgamated data from different areas in the Cape Flats and show high prevalences of food insecurity across all areas, with a stark increase in food insecurity from 2020 (n=1464) to 2023 (n=1756) and 2024 (n=1662).

A recurring theme in our work in informal urban spaces is stigma attached to hunger. Though hunger lays its hand on nearly every household in the Cape Flats, it remains shameful to admit to. Unachievable but entrenched gendered social expectations play a significant role in how static this dynamic remains: even when there is no paid work or food to be found, the traditional role of a man is to provide income for his family, while the traditional role of a woman is to provide food for her family. People remain personally invested in being perceived as successful in their gendered roles as providers and preparers of food, and the presence of hunger in a family is misinterpreted as an individual failure to fulfil one's God-given and innate role as a provider. The embarrassment and shame that accompanies hunger creates stigma and deters people from seeking assistance or openly discussing their food insecurity, individualising their suffering, exacerbating their difficulties, and affecting their mental and emotional wellbeing. Problematically, the deeply internalised shame of failure prevents people from analysing and responding to the failures in government systems and interventions that cause hunger and underpin social violence.

The same underpinnings of shame uphold an entrenched patriarchal system that silences the voices of women experiencing gender-based violence. Within a patriarchal societal structure, men who fall short in meeting their duty as providers may seek power and control through alternative channels, potentially exacerbating instances of gender-based violence. Likewise, women may encounter punitive measures or violence when they deviate from expectations associated with roles pertaining to food provisioning.

When we correlated data on the presence of gender-based violence with food insecurity rates, we discovered a clear link: those who are food insecure are more likely to have experienced gender-based violence than those with higher food security. In September 2023, 61.34% of respondents who self-reported experiencing any form of gender-based violence lived in severely food insecure households. By January 2024, this number had climbed to 68.6%. The more severe the state of food insecurity, the more likely the household experiences gender-based violence. When we recall that two-thirds of households were food insecure in 2023, we can see that this correlation is nothing short of a crisis. This part of our "Data Digest" was hard to swallow.

Community kitchens address these circumstances by providing meals for those in need, including by tailoring them to men's needs with the intention of mitigating frustrations and failed expectations that could manifest as GBV within domestic settings. Men's negative coping mechanisms can often be traced back to collective community traumas perpetuated by oppressive environmental factors, particularly in relation to food insecurity. The community kitchens broke down shame and fostered dialogue, offering

solidarity and refuge where individuals addressed the root causes and traumas associated with hunger through supportive networks.

Staci K. Haines' (2019) insights into the prevalence of violence coupled with a culture of silence described in her book *The Politics of Trauma* provide a framework for understanding the systemic nature of trauma and its roots in social norms, economic systems, and institutional structures that perpetuate inequality, violence, and exploitation. Addressing the stigma associated with hunger is a crucial process in breaking the cycle of oppression and fostering mutual accountability, offering ways to overcome internalised stigma that, as Fanon (1965) notes, hinders individuals from accessing resources and challenging authorities, thereby perpetuating their suffering. Similarly, Haines (2019) delves into the pervasive nature of violence and the accompanying silence. She emphasises the systemic intertwining of the personal and social suffering and sheds light on how institutions, social norms, economic systems, oppression, and privilege, alongside family and community influences, contribute to the production of trauma, as we see in Cape Town.

Silence(d) Violence – Feminist Methodologies to Contribute to Social Justice Debates

The intertwining dynamics of hunger, gender-based violence, and trauma present our research team with a complex web that perpetuates systemic inequalities and silences suffering of bodily harm. In linking our research to recent discussions on social justice, we advocate for approaches that address the root causes of food insecurity and GBV as factors of everyday life, rather than merely treating their symptoms. The pervasive violence in the Cape Flats cannot be normalised or sensationalised in a country that ranks among the most dangerous for women, and addressing it requires critically reflecting on the historical and contemporary manifestations of racism and misogyny.

Many feminist researchers emphasise the need for a stronger integration of lived reality into research processes because it is essential for producing research that is meaningful, ethical, and applicable to real-world situations, allows for a deeper exploration of human experiences and fosters empathy. We learned that describing lived reality should go beyond surface-level observations, and we delved into the deeper structures and systems that shape individuals' experiences with a commitment to challenging gender-based inequalities and promoting equity by exposing broader structural inequalities.

To translate data points to lived realities, we listened attentively to marginalised voices and put human faces on the data by employing a storytelling approach. Our community partner, FACT, used art-based qualitative research methods to harvest stories through poetry, film, photography, and storytelling (see, for example, the film "ISISWENYE" (FACT, 2022a), the poetry collection *Fresh Offering* (FACT, 2022b), the book chapter "Getting the story right and telling it well," and the theatre of the

oppressed *The Pot of Pap at the End of the Rainbow Nation*). FACT mobilised respondents of the household food insecurity survey in crafting the play *The Pot of Pap at the End of the Rainbow Nation* that tells the story of how societal myths around hunger and food create and sustain individual feelings of shame (Nyaba & Paganini, 2023, FACT, 2022a). Their methodology was inspired by the Brazilian theatre practitioner and elected city council member, Augusto Boal's (1974) "Theatre of the Oppressed" methods, which challenged traditional spectator roles by empowering audiences to become active participants in addressing issues of oppression. The play was performed for the community itself and selected key findings of the survey were translated into roles. Our experience with this creative methodology demonstrates the potential for dismantling the stigma surrounding hunger and promoting food security and agency through community engagement and an embodied language (Lewis, 2017).

Utilising storytelling approaches showed that personal narratives evoke empathy and understanding in a way that statistics alone cannot. They highlight intersecting causal factors such as socioeconomic status, cultural norms, and systemic inequalities and, when shared, empower individuals who have experienced food insecurity or gender-based violence to reclaim their narratives and see their struggles not as the result of their individual choices and failures, but as systemic problems affecting most of their neighbours. Integrating qualitative and quantitative research methodologies, we invited local poets to contextualise survey data points through poetry. The resulting collection, "Fresh Offerings: Poems on Food, Agency and Urgency," abandons clinical responses to poverty and food insecurity, and allows the personal narratives of those represented in the data to touch the very corridors of the soul (FACT, 2022b).

Participants in our GBV Ambassador training also highlighted the importance of storytelling as a necessary step in recognising the prevalence and patterns of violence in their communities, the socio-political constructs that uphold inequality and perpetuate violence, and the powerlessness of the oppressed to independently instigate change. As participants' previously silenced stories surfaced, they discovered unity, slowly absolved themselves of shame, outgrew their position as victims, and took ownership of the word "survivor." Though statistical evidence abounds in our research, it is tempered and leveraged in policy discussions and academic reports by the unified voices of survivors who connect the dots between outdated policies, cultural norms, and expectations; the brutality they have silently endured; and the intergenerational violence that is being taught and reinforced within their homes. In this way, the storytelling approach unpacked what Bam (2023) calls cognitive knowledge. By offering the community a platform to share their experiences, they reached the realisation or cognitive knowledge that hunger is systemic and interlinked with oppression and violence.

Through storytelling, this cognitive knowledge slowly became communal knowledge; and that triggered a series of proactive responses. Enumerators

provided interviewees with links to helplines, contributing to a supportive environment. Regular debriefing sessions within community centres, and a collective debrief and grievance ceremony with a local leader provided a platform for contextualising and interpreting findings. The co-analysis process, directed by feedback and interpretation, facilitated a comprehensive understanding of the results. In this fashion, the data itself became a beacon for resistance: it enabled communities to explore rarely aired feelings of safety and security, and arrive at some communal understanding of the movements below the surface of their culture that entangle individuals in hunger and shame. As communities realised that each data point represented a family's suffering in a lengthy, shared narrative on inequity and oppression, individuals realised their role and complicity in that longer narrative, drawing whole communities out of the isolation caused by stigma and empowering them to speak out about their struggles. This process aligns with Haines' (2019) emphasis on the need to address trauma at both individual and societal levels.

Through linking statistics with community-led methodologies, the research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how systemic injustices perpetuate and exacerbate vulnerabilities. Addressing the scourge of gender-based violence necessitates a comprehensive approach aimed at mitigating violence across all spheres of society. This entails confronting entrenched systemic and cultural patriarchal patterns. The data sets produced through both qualitative and quantitative methods provide anchorage for changemakers like FACT and its networks to engage in reconciliation efforts with those in decision-making positions. The integration of questions on systemic violence and GBV in food system research is indispensable, offering a specialized perspective for researchers to scrutinise and redress systemic disparities.

June Bam (2023) says that "stories have shown alternatives, but we lack alternative thinking and new creative intellectual energy" (p. 240). New, creative intellectual energy can only emerge when we cross disciplinary borders and link creative methodologies and local epistemologies into knowledge creation. Amidst the politically and socially charged atmosphere of the Cape Flats, I aspire for this endeavour to become more than merely extractive or performative, but to courageously challenge and disrupt traditional approaches to knowledge generation.

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