Who speaks? For whom? Where? And why?—Conceptual, methodological, and ethical considerations in research on intimacies and forms of well-being in the global South
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The techniques and practices applied to global health and development stem from collective histories that are fundamentally shaped by where and how we place ourselves (or are placed) in systems of knowledge production and knowledge exchange. Amid an ongoing debate within the field of global health that has laid bare significant power inequalities embedded within the structuring framework of the field, we offer a critical reflection on the conduct of research on intimacies and forms of well-being in and from the global South. Drawing on our own experiences, we explore what it means to work as critical social scientists— and feminists—in the space of global health in sub-Saharan Africa. The concept of ‘voice’— who speaks? for whom? where and why?— has been a central concern of critical researchers for decades, especially in the global South. We argue, however, that an awareness of issues related to representation, voice, power, and agency has done little to genuinely shift the modes of research and intervention that dominate the field of global health. In this context, we suggest, there is an urgent need to develop strategies for actively shifting whose voices are privileged, what forms of knowledge shape decision-making, and how agency is enacted in global health research and practice. This requires new methodologies, epistemologies, and modes of collaboration and engagement. To provide grounding for our critical thinking, we reflect on our experiences working across three different sites of global health knowledge production: a large-scale transnational clinical trial, an implementation research project embedded with the intervention of a large international non-governmental organisation, and an ongoing youth-led project facilitated by our local non-profit organisation. Across the three projects, we interrogate our role as critical social scientists, as feminists, as women, and as advocates for social change working within the structures of knowledge and power in global health and explore possibilities for new forms of collaboration, co-creation, and creative disruption.