What's not to learn? A critical evaluation of the potential impact of Postdigital arts-based research as Resistance

Prologue

As a consequence of a large war many millions of people who never before had fired a shot will have acquired the skills to operate a gun. As a consequence of an extensive plague, many millions will have gained skills and knowledge in forms of communication beyond the physical, As a result of migration becoming a more pervasive feature of life (though migrations have always occurred), millions of people have gained skills and knowledge in perilous navigations. It is 'a truth universally acknowledged' that existential 'limit situations' can lead to the painful accelerated acquisition of survival knowledges and skills which make possible 'paradigm shifts' – including the realization that, wherever people have come from, they are now in a postdigital space.

If we may, we will offer a critical account of one postdigital, arts based, co- research project with rural migrant women in Canada and Northern Ireland. It is likely that such a project could not have been possible twenty years ago. The limit situations of the last few years have, in 'fast-tracking' digital competence, enabled the migrant women and the academics to inhabit the online 'home' of the project.

Background

The project, 'Images of Incoming: A Photovoice project exploring belonging and exclusion with newcomer and migrant women in rural areas' engaged 73 women from Northern Ireland and Canada. The Northern Ireland-Canadian project emerged from an initial partnership between Queen's University Belfast's Open Learning (Adult Education) Programme and the University of the

Fraser Valley, British Columbia's Adult Education Department. The University of Atypical, Northern Ireland's arts and disability network, later joined the partnership to curate an exhibition of photographs from participants, facilitate the creation of an accessible website and make a documentary film – recognizing the postdigitality of accessible dissemination and impact.

Aims and Research questions

In proposing this project, we embedded holistic outcomes for participants such as: improved digital literacy, through the online medium of teaching, learning and research and, for some, through the workshop interchanges between participants, English language and literacy skills, increased self-confidence, stronger social relationships, intercultural awareness, self-awareness, self-efficacy, conflict-management skills, community organising and increased knowledge of community-based supports in each respective geographic region.

The overarching research question was, how can we create a postdigital arts-based co-research model which can offer migrant women a voice to articulate their resistance to negative stereotyping and exclusion and to reveal what belonging means? We did not assume that all the participants would experience negative stereotyping or, indeed, exclusion as rural women. Subquestions included:

1. Can communities in Canada and Northern Ireland learn from one another about practices and policies of inclusion and exclusion?
2. How do newcomer communities define exclusion and belonging – to their own communities, to the new, host communities, or a new liminal identity?
3. Can newcomer communities gain solidarity and learn new skills and gain new knowledge through a postdigital exchange between Northern Ireland and Canada?
4. Can arts-based projects benefit newcomer participants in terms of learning new skills, gaining accreditation and developing wellbeing and improved mental health?
5. What do newcomer communities need in terms of overcoming exclusion and

can a small scale innovative co-research partnership focused on SDGs offer lessons for policy and funding in both countries?

6. Can the project , create a 'community of practice', raising awareness and effecting change?

7. Can the project form the basis from which further collaborative partnerships can be built?

How was the project delivered: The story of the process

Planning for the project began in the Spring of 2019 after informal discussions between Queen's Open learning team and the Adult Education team in the University of the Fraser Valley. A detailed proposal was jointly drawn up and then funding applications were made in both universities Both universities were very supportive, seeing the project as part of their vision as an engaged university and seeing how it met key SDG aims, including gender equality, quality education and working for the goals through partnership. Ethical approval was also sought and obtained. A part-time project coordinator was appointed in Belfast, Dr Federica Ferrieri.

It was agreed that the process in each country should follow the natural *modus operandi* of each partner (since 'natural' is such a heavily connotated term, perhaps this could be expressed in a slightly different manner – "the modus operandi that would emerge spontaneously from…" or something like that). Thus, in Northern Ireland, the project was platformed as two consecutive courses within the Open Learning Programme and participants were able to obtain credit points (at the equivalent of first year University study). No prior qualifications are (where? needed but participants will (would?) gain 10 credit points at university first year standard. The aim of this was that participants would be able to add to the skills they have which could benefit them in applying for educational courses or jobs.

 The approach in Canada was more informal and involved two workshops (2.5 hour each) throughout the Lower Mainland of British Columbia or in an online environment. The different

platforms allowed for flexibility and the needs of the participants. For example, childcare was provided to the participants, as well as transportation and food.

 It was agreed that the two groups of participants – in Canada and Northern Ireland – would come together for 5 x 2 hour 'exchange workshops.' This would create solidarity between the women and also further enhance the international element.

In each country, the project organisers spent some considerable time meeting with voluntary organisations and developing relationships so that migrant women would come forward. Both teams were experienced in delivering projects with a range of voluntary groups, but, especially in Northern Ireland, a substantial amount of additional research needed to be done, especially by the project coordinator, to identify relevant groups and approach them. There was also one-to-one work done with other people who were experts in this field or who were involved in informal networks. It is important to emphasise that, in both counties, the academic teams were both well aware of the importance of a sustained developmental process which recognized that some women had felt alienated and excluded and also that some women were lacking in confidence or others were not entirely sure for a while what the project was about. We were able to enlist a number of community facilitators from a range of voluntary groups in Northern Ireland working with migrants and they played an absolutely invaluable role in helping to explain the project and persuade the women to participate, in particular, Asma Niazi (various Muslim groups), Ana Peters (BAWA, Belfast Asian Women's Academy), Ana Cucu (EWANI, European Women Association in NI), Sanjay Ghosh (ImageNation NI), Marta Kempny (Migrant Centre NI).

In fact, not all the initial connections with groups came to fruition, but, on the other hand, we created an important partnership with the First Steps Women's Group in Dungannon – a rural town 40 miles south west of Belfast with a large incomer population. This group had got in touch with the

Open learning team to find out if Queen's might work with them to develop or accredit courses and when the Images of Incoming project was mentioned to their CEO, Michael McGoldrick, by the Open Learning Director (PI for this project), they were really keen to form a strand. The Dungannon group included both incomer women and local women which was a new angle we had not thought of and here the workshops were delivered face-to-face by the PI as this group was not so digitally confident.

This incidental partnership was followed sometime later by another – again, as a result of a contact from the PI to University of Atypical relating to arts and disability, the CEO, Damien Coyle. Damien offered to not only curate the exhibition formed from the 'gallery of photos created by the participants, but also to develop a virtual tour, incorporating sign language, and to help us to raise the level of the project website in terms of 'aesthetic high production values' and accessibility and then to make a short documentary film about the project. Thus, while there were setbacks in terms of partnering with voluntary sector groups; unpredictable, disappointing and perhaps inevitable, there was also the serendipity, the good fortune of incidental partnerships which have added such richness to the original project conception.

In Northern Ireland, after a number of months we were able to arrange pre-project meetings and enrol 33 incomer women. In Canada, the process of engaging with participants was done through outreach to community organizations. Two of the researchers, Tanis Sawkins and Amea Wilbur, had worked extensively in the sector before entering the academy and were able to reach out to contacts. The research assistants were recruited based on their lived experiences, skills and interest in the project.

In Northern Ireland, the first series of workshops (5 x 10 hours) began on 25 January, 2022 and ran until 24 February 2022. At the request of participants, we scheduled two online, digital workshop 'slots'; one on Tuesday mornings and the other on Thursday evenings. This offered participants greater flexibility. The third group met face-to-face in Dungannon. There is no doubt that this is a

considerable time commitment for workshop facilitators, but if the project is to respect the voluntary commitment of co-learners and co-researchers, then it must be built around their real lives. In Canada, at the first meeting with participants, the researchers explained what Photovoice is and then explored the methodology in practice. In? The second workshop participants were asked to share one photo of belonging and one photo of exclusion with the group. The UFV researchers took the participants through the process of analysing photos during both our first and second meetings. The second series of workshops, 24 March-12 May, brought together participants from Northern Ireland and Canada. While the first series was designed to give all the women space and time to discuss their photos, creating a commentary and interacting with the other women in the group, the second series was more about creating international exchanges, comparing and contrasting migrant experiences and also, indirectly getting a sense of the contrasting policy and practice in each country. In the evaluation below, participants offer their insights on the workshops.

Given the crucial importance of enacting a true co-research and co-learning ethos, we accepted that not all those who took an initial interest were going to complete the project. We do not regard this as a failure because every woman was able to engage on her own terms without any pressure. Some women produced a set of images or gallery, but were not able to attend the workshops and so there were no commentaries. We have included all their photos, on the website. Other women could only attend the series offered in their own country and were not able to also engage in the international workshops.

There were also - perhaps inevitably - problems because of the digital/postdigital medium of delivery. Participants and facilitators discuss some of these in the evaluation below, but it may be added that the decision to use disposable digital cameras, while protecting the anonymity of participants - a key concern for some of the women - in a way which mobile phone technology could not, offered some other challenges. The process of getting the disposable cameras out to every single woman and getting them back, was, at times, complex. Even with a useful video about using

the cameras, provided by University of Atypical, not all the photos came out. In the printing and digitizing process, there were some technical problems. Nonetheless, all in all, the use of the digital cameras did secure anonymity (we asked participants not to photograph actual people) and offered a relatively easy digital mode.

The workshops concluded on 12 May 2022. The next phase, evaluating the project then began, in tandem, with organizing exhibitions, website and documentary. [The final version of this chapter will comment on the later phases.]

Theoretical frameworks

Postdigital democratic research

Our research positioning was very much in line with Peters (2020) in challenging neoliberal concepts of ownership and privatization of knowledge with an ethos that research should not just be for the common good, but, should be empowering democratic, agentic. This is sometimes referred to as Responsible Research and Innovation (Tassone and Eppink, 2016). Hayes and Jandric (2020) argue that postdigital practices can constitute a form of resistance to political and economic 'illusions' of democratic forms of public culture found across the internet, and can address issues pertaining to power, exploitation and emancipation'. The research aimed to address one of the Grand Challenges of our time within the imperatives of *the Sustainable Development Goals* (perhaps indicate how the research meets the SDG?)

Critical Pedagogy

Such an ethos lies behind and, arguably, emerges from a theoretical tradition known as critical pedagogy, which has its roots in Friere's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) and has been developed by scholars like Biren, Gurin and Lopez (2003). Of especial relevance to this project, is the work of

Harman and Varga-Dobai, as it focuses specifically on critical pedagogy approaches with migrant learners on local immigration issues.

The ethnographic evaluator elaborated on the importance of Freire:

Freire's pedagogical theories rest on the radical assumption that "knowledge already lies with the people" (Jarldorn 2018: 29). Not unlike the Socratic educator, the educator inspired by Freire's views works *with* the learners to help them tease out the knowledge that already exists within them. in Freire's thought, this knowledge coincides with the awareness of the social structures and discursive constructs that place certain groups and communities in a subordinate position. The goal of Freire's pedagogy is to raise awareness: a goal that would become central also to the feminist movement. Freire's pedagogy is in contrast with traditional views of education in multiple senses. While traditional views of education regard the educator as the bearer of knowledge and the learners as 'passive vessels,' Freire's pedagogy rests on the assumption that knowledge\awareness lies in the learners' lived experiences (Jarldorn 2018: 30). While traditional views of education tend to separate the (passive) acquisition of knowledge from *action* – be it social, political, personal, or all the above – Freire's critical pedagogy revolves around the notion of 'meaningful praxis.' With the expression 'meaningful praxis', Freire referred to "reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it" (Freire 1972: 52). Contrary to traditional views of education, which rest on a hierarchical separation between educators and learners, Freire views both learners and educators as equal members of a community from whose interaction knowledge emerges. This implies that educators/teachers must be prepared and open to question their own assumptions, positionalities, and practices (Jarldorn 2018: 32): reflexivity, another central tenet of feminist epistemologies, is crucial.

If we apply these notions to a Photovoice project, some founding principles emerge. The approach is a collaborative one: both educators/researchers and learners are involved in all the phases of the project. An important goal of this photovoice project was to create a community of practice, raising awareness through and within this community, and effecting change.

Arts-based approaches

For the past several decades, scholars have maintained, and it has become increasingly accepted, that a shift in methodology towards infusing arts into research can bring tremendous insight, and create solutions that may not be possible through descriptive and linear language (Maginess, 2017; Barone & Eisner, 2012; Sinner et al, 200). Using art (photovoice) with migrant women who may have lower levels of English language and literacy provides an alternative mode of expression which centres (on?) the women's experience. Images can also stimulate dialogue with others.

Qingchin et al (2017) have foregrounded the connection between arts-based methods and socially engaged research practice, thus echoing the goals of postdigital democratic research. He aims to live up to the Values articulated by Jackson et al (2007), including a humanistic approach objectivity (isn't objectivity, at least if traditionally understood, in contrast with engaged research?), ethical diligence and rigour. Graeme Sullivan (2006) usefully argues that this kind of research is both personal and public. From a more pedagogic perspectiv4e, Topolovcan (2016) identifies arts based research as emerging from a Constructivist, Participatory pedagogy. The Photovoice project; breaking down the barriers between teaching,learning. Pedagogy and research, and questioning traditional assumptions about who is expert, who has authority, was, in the opinion of the author, able to do so because the same ethos of co-construction and active engagement characterised all the elements.

Methodology

Research paradigm

The overall research paradigm for the project is qualitatiative. While there had (has?) been much debate about what this term means, we follow Aspers and Corte (2019) in their conclusion that this paradigm oscillates between theory and practice, is concerned with getting closer to the actual experience of people and about improved understanding – of, we may add, hidden or erased realities. And we hope to fulfill the ideals adumbrated by Jackson et al (2007) in deploying a humanistic ethos, ethical diligence, objectivity and rigor. Qualitative research is a more effective methodology for challenging hegemonical and stereotypical characterisations of migrant people, so often represented in crude quantitative terms implying that thousands of migrants are 'swamping' developed countries and that, most of them are, in any case, not 'real' refugees and asylum seekers but 'economic migrants', as if the vast majority of migrants over the centuries have not, in fact, been economic migrants seeking a better life. That they have come to countries whose wealth has

been, to some extent at least, built on colonial exploitation prosecuted by the receiving countries, is occasionally, conveniently forgotten.

In line with the theoretical frameworks outlined above; an engaged, democratic research ethos, manifested in critical pedagogy and deploying arts-based approaches, shown to be relevant, meaningful and just especially for those excluded, a co-learning and co-research ethos of the project is the methodological engine. The participants were agentic in choosing their own images and talking about them not to some pre-ordained academic agenda, but on their own terms.

Metaevaluation

The project generated two kinds of analysis; the first kind was the commentaries of the participants about the photographs they took. These are all documented in the website gallery and in the project exhibition. While these commentaries to the photographs can be regarded as the primary data of the project, revealing the views of participants on their experience of exclusion and belonging, the meta-analysis constituted another dimension to the co-research; enabling all those involved to comment critically on the process of the project. This panoptic view was very important in enabling all of us there to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the Photovoice models if there is to be impact and the potential for developing further projects which start to build sustainability and empowerment. And, just as the participants were researchers of their own experiences in creating their galleries and critical commentaries, they were also central to the metaevaluation. So, after the first phase was complete, we undertook a second series of workshops and a number of interviews conducted with and, in many cases, by participants.

Part of our purpose was to compare how those involved in each country modelled their version of the project. We agreed from the outset that this is how we would proceed, acknowledging that systems, set-ups, and stages of development in both countries were different but also, to see what

we could learn from each other through our somewhat contrasting approaches. In Canada, three Research Assistants were recruited and they actively participated in the project evaluation, community outreach/facilitators workers helped recruit participants, translate and organize workshops along the RAs and researchers. The outreach/facilitators workers were also invited to participate in the evaluation of the project.

In Northern Ireland, we invited all participants to express an interest in taking part in the evaluation. We made it clear that they could do this by interviewing fellow participants, being an interviewee, contributing to desk research, offering commentaries in any arts-based medium and co-authoring the evaluation and academic articles.

The evaluation was conducted over a number of months and the project coordinator, Federica Ferrieri, played an invaluable role in matching interviewers to interviewees and coordinating the scheduling of the recorded interviews. The Canadian team also conducted their own evaluation and this was incorporated. The views of the project coordinator were also included. University stakeholders offered their perspective in their recorded addresses to the exhibitions. A further welcome incidental connection with Dr Elena Bergia, an Italian anthropologist who was, herself an incomer in Northern Ireland, resulted in an additional ethnographic analysis of the project, considering, among other things, how the project constituted a community of practice.

Ethical considerations

Both teams from the two universities applied to their respective Ethics Committees and obtained approval. Recognising the importance of anonymity for some of the women and balancing this against the importance of revealing the voices of incomer women, at each stage of the project we obtained specific consent. Thus, for example, some participants were willing to have their views recorded in text but did not want their voice or image used. Others were happy to have their voices

recorded but did not wish to appear on camera, and others were happy to have both their voice and image made visible.

Data collection

The meta-evaluation aimed to gain the views of the participants across a range of measures in a series of semi-structured interviews. All those involved in the project were invited to take part in the evaluation, as interviewers and interviewees. Participants interviewed one another in keeping with the co-research ethos. Facilitators, the Canadian Research Assistants and the project coordinator were also involved as interviewers and interviewees. Project moderators, Amea and Tess, interviewed the Research Assistants and Amea and a colleague interviewed facilitator/participants Marcela, Huda, Shenga and Venera.

Data analysis

In analyzing and editing together the commentaries from participants in both countries and, subsequently, in the metaevaluation, the views expressed by all those involved in the project, we used thematic analysis, which, as Maguire and Delahunt (2007), argue, allows themes to emerge from the data, rather than imposing a preset structure. The metaevaluation collected data around the core themes of exclusion and belonging but also, following the other research questions, on the more process based aspects of the project, for example, the pros and cons of postdigital delivery, the partnership between the universities as well as recommendations for the future.

Findings from the metaevaluation

A total of 14 interviews were conducted. Participants were first asked to grade their answers in a simplified Lickert scale (1. Very much so, 2. To some extent, 3. Not really). They were then invited to add comments if they wished. The questions were:

- What were the benefits of the project to participants?

- What did participants think of the pedagogy – the teaching and learning style?

- How did participants, facilitators and and organisers assess the operation of the Partnership?

- What did participants and organisers think of the mode of delivery – online and face- to-face?

- What did participants and organisers think of the project co-ordination and funding?

- What did the organisers/stakeholders think about the potential impact of the project?

- Are there ideas for future directions?

Each main question was then subdivided into subquestions so that we could ensure that the data was as fine-grained as possible.

1. **Overview. Did the project empower rural migrant women? What were the benefits to participants?**

1.Has the Photovoice project helped you to think more about belonging and exclusion?

All participants responded, 'very much so.'

Helen commented:

> That was nice of you to ask these questions about belonging and exclusion, because in 23 years, nobody asked us. Somebody from government ought to, I thought, maybe they might

have seen we are doing good, because we were paying taxes, contributing. Wanted

somebody to evaluate us after five years after 10 years to say, you came from a refugee

from war from how are you doing?'.

Gemma reflected on how the project reflected some important aspects of the historical context for

migrant women, particularly in relation to exclusion wrought through racism and stereotyping, a

key theme which emerged in the workshop exchanges; 'The project revealed the progress that has

been made from how it used to be – and where we can get to in the future.' Hannah recognized

the importance of the process of the project itself, especially 'listening to other participants'.

Helen concurred with this and also enjoyed the exchanges because 'the conversation, the debate, it

was so sincere, open spontaneous. . . I listen to other people I say yeah I tried to make myself in

their shoes and understand . . . everybody has different kind of struggle, but in a way we have so

Much in common'. I didn't know much about multiculturalism, but when I met people I talked to

them, and I see, there is not such a difference'.

 Maria 'welcomed the opportunity to express how she feels in a safe environment.' Lisa concluded

that she became more aware that her sense of identity was 'more belonging than not'.

The Project coordinator in Northern Ireland, Federica, interviewed by one of the participants, Lisa,

testified that, in the workshops there was willingness to share, readiness to listen and respect

different opinions, and an open mindedness in wanting to understand other people's perspectives.

RA, Sarah-Ann, agreed that the voices of participants were heard, and her view was that they did

feel a sense of belonging with others'.

Canadian facilitator, Huda Bolow, thought the project was important as a way that she could support

and empower the immigrant women she works with. She saw the project as a chance for women to

tell their inner stories that, sometimes, they had been afraid to share, or that they did not feel it was

necessary to talk about their experiences. It was a way for women to 'speak out, to talk about their experience, in a space where they can feel connected.' She also thought that the project was beneficial in creating reconciliation within a multicultural society.

RA Serrah, saw belonging as relative and related to people's circumstances and status; 'belonging for one can look like exclusion for someone else'. She illustrated this by noting that one person might have a laptop which helped their sense of belonging, but another person might not have one or did not know how to use it so that could be very excluding.

2. *How well do you think the project built connections and understanding between the participants?*

Most of the participants answered 'very much so' and one thought 'to some extent'.

It was clear that there were ways in which the women connected and understood one another and yet, also, ways in which they do not share a common experience. Gemma 15ecognized that, with regard to racism, 'not everyone could connect with me . . . they could sympathise, but not feel the same way as they had never experienced racism.' Amy also commented on the 'microaggressions' – compliments made with good intentions which jarred.' Hannah saw the project exchanges as 'clicking on some points, where people could say, 'yes, that happened to me too. . . there was a sense of bonding', a view shared by Amy; 'the project was a really good starting point . . . it resonated, it was inspiring to hear other people's stories.' Serrah also affirmed that the project enabled people to 'validate their own emotions'. Rose said that she could relate to what others were saying but also the project 'helped her to think from a different perspective.' Hannah also commented that it was difficult to develop friendships online – it was easier face-to- face, though Amy did feel

that friendships had been forged. Canadian RA, Sarah-Ann felt that the workshop space was a place of belonging and understanding'.

The ethnographic evaluator commented:

What I find very interesting is the fact that, as researchers, we tend to <u>assume</u> that participants will *want* to create bonds with other participants, will *want* to create friendships; but this is not necessarily the case. In the interview with Hannah, I think it emerged clearly that she wasn't looking for *friendships* necessarily, but was more interested in the <u>learning</u> process (understanding more about her own experience and the experiences of others) and in possible practical '<u>solutions</u>' to the problems of migrant women in rural areas, and particularly of Muslim women.

Hannah's observation on **nature** and how nature provides a space, in NI, for people to feel free and to create a bond with the land was eye-opening. This definitely applies to me as well; and is interesting from a theoretical perspective because it suggests that migrants are not necessarily, always, looking for 'approval' from the host community: while feeling welcome is of course essential, a migrant also needs to develop a personal, individual bond with the place. As migrants, we interact with the host countries as individuals, and need to have a bond with it as individuals; this bond is not always or only about people, but about the place and ourselves: a bond between ourselves and the place, unmediated by the locals who inhabits the place, and independent on how they feel about us

Lisa highlighted the difference the circumstances of migration made in terms of how people might connect. She noted how many of the Canadian group had endured forced migration; 'it was a real eye-opener.'

The ethnographic evaluator concluded that:

There was common consensus regarding the fact that the researchers were helpful, respectful, 'non-invasive'\non-hierarchical, and able to suggest theoretical concepts that proved useful to the learners. Regarding the interactions among the participants, a few things seem to have emerged.

The participants seem to have benefited from the interaction with one another: listening to other people's stories seems to have helped the participants to better understand the experiences of others as well as their own. There is some suggestion that discovering that others had had similar experiences was positive and created a bond; however, others noticed that there were great differences in people's experiences: the fact that some had not

experienced blatant racism, for example, seemed to create some distance from those who had.

3. *In relation to the two poles of exclusion or belonging, what do you think were the most important ideas or themes which came across in the project, e.g., gratitude, discrimination, a sense of being in two worlds happily, unhappily?*

Participants noted, in relation to exclusion, the presence of racism (Gemma, Hannah and Lisa), and also in relation to exclusion, that locals may not always be welcoming. Canadian Project moderator, Amea, made the point in one of the workshops that some identities are valued and some are not'. Language was also cited as a barrier, impeding belonging by Rose. Integration was viewed by Lisa as important in terms of a sense of belonging but what she termed 'the Brexit delusion' had the effect of making her feel excluded from Europe.

In relation to identity, a comment in the workshops from Gemma about having two identities, 'two' souls' really resonated with Rose; 'it makes perfect sense.' Amy, who was conflicted about her identities, saw the project as 'providing a space' to think about 'what was at the back of my mind, but I did not feel safe talking about it. Amy's view of having two souls or two identities was less about a harmonious relationship between two souls and more about experiencing tension or riveness between two identities– one relating to the originating culture and the other relating to the desire to be accepted in the new culture. This led to a feeling of being excluded from two cultures.

Helen revealed how she had tried very hard to belong:

> I love Canada and I choose to see the big picture on the positive sides, trying to fit but not exactly getting that understanding the culture or something. But when I listened to other participants, it made me realize like an alarm; It is not okay that somebody belittle you or bully you for your accent or for not knowing language. And when listening to the other participants, I think all those things happened to me too. [The Canadians] they don't know, they don't understand that they don't know what we have been through. Seeing other

participants and hearing their point of view, actually I understand they struggle to, so we are not alone.

[We are] working hard, triple hard and trying to fit in this society, which is not, not easy . . . Probably if I was in their position here I wouldn't have understood either.

The web project help us to understand each other better, and in a way to empower us too - not to feel like a intimidated, to feel free, we are a part of this country, the fabric of this society, but I sometimes feel like I'm in somebody's space . . .

Canadian RA, Serrah, who has Indian heritage, observed another interesting theme which emerged; participants spoke about having a family here but also having a family in their home country and how that might be both comforting and anguishing. And she said, 'until someone else said it, I thought it was just me.' Canadian RA Sarah Ann, who is of Dutch heritage, concurred, 'the heart is in multiple places' .

Hannah caught the mood of many in the groups when she talked about the positive effect of nature:

Many women, most of them in fact, talked about nature and about how beautiful NI is, and it's the same for me: it provides that kind of *space*. Because the population here is not too much, so when you go to open places, you *can* have that place to your own self, and I think that sense of belonging, you feel it with the land itself. Many women have talked about nature, and how they connect with nature, they have talked about the sea and the hills and different places. I feel that when people are not around, these places, these voids provide that sense of belonging that we *want* to feel to a place. And nature gives us this connection. You need that kind of anchor to a place you come to, and I think that nature provides that kind of anchor here in NI. I don't know about other places.

Canadian facilitator, Marcela, commented, 'The project revealed how women could be included or excluded based on their migration status, social profiling, isolated because of their lack of language, or lack of opportunities to study, on their connections or lack of connections. She saw the project

as a way to offer flexible support especially to women who had temporary status. The project, in effect, allowed for the development of a new programme with the women.

4. What do you think were the main themes that came across?

A central theme was how migrant women navigated double or fractured identities – a sense of belonging in some ways and a sense of exclusion in others, a sense of wanting to be close to the cultural identity that they came from but also to embrace aspects of the new culture.

Participants articulated this sense of feeling excluded and feeling that they belong talking a lot about foods that they could not get in the new country or how they had learned to adapt with the ingredients available. Food also served as a way of bringing people together – either form one migrant community or between different communities. In addition, clothes and other cultural products were invested with great significance as a way of maintaining connection with the original country.

Another important theme, identified by Serrah, was the experience of older migrant women, often overlooked and disconnected. But Sarah-Ann also spoke of the difficulties facing young people – children of migrants – with high expectations placed upon them. For young migrant women, body image and dress was a further troubling and complex issue – 'Can I change, Do I have to change, maybe I don't like it when I change.'

5. What do you think were the main needs and aspirations identified by participants?

Gemma reflected the view of many that the main aspiration was for a better life, and touched on the challenges for equality faced by migrants in being enabled to have 'the same opportunities as their native counterparts in terms of housing, jobs and promotion', especially in high position jobs.

Related to this was the need to address the problem of having to retrain or get re-educated, identified by Amy. This implies the need for more bridging courses accessible and affordable for migrants bringing their own skills and qualifications.

More than one participant wished to see more multicultural events with the funding to connect both with people from their own culture and with the host country (Gemma and Hannah). However, Lisa remarked that there was a need for migrants to 'avoid being critical of other migrants' – sometimes this is generational, as when second or third generation migrants support anti-immigration policies.

3. Teaching and learning style (Pedagogy and research)

6. Did you find the learning/teaching approach effective?

Most participants found the learning and teaching approach very effective while one thought it was effective to some extent.

Most of those who were engaging online with the project thought this was an effective learning and teaching mode. Gemma commented that 'people were able to see verbal and non-verbal clues. She added that 'people communicated well what they wanted to say'. Importantly, she stressed the empathic connection between participants; 'we sympathised with each other. We laughed together.'

Others, like Hannah and Rose appreciated the informal teaching and learning style. Hannah commented; 'It didn't feel like you were in a classroom'.

The use of literature by the moderator in Northern Ireland, Tess, as a way of seeing how different issues connected also appealed to some participants, including Hannah; ' the way things linked up to the literature', while Lisa felt that 'the moderator's knowledge put everything in perspective. She was able to show us things that were maybe not seeing.'

Rose stressed the importance of 'being able to learn from others', while Amy remarked on how, at the beginning, she thought the workshops were rushed and she felt reluctant at first to contribute and express her views, that later, 'even outside the meetings, I was thinking about the brief'.

Maria, from the Dungannon group, reflected the views of other women in that group when she commented on how enjoyable and valuable the visit to Queen's campus was.

7. Did you find it relevant to your life to be involved in this research?

Two participants answered this question and attested that they did find the research relevant. Rose commented, 'I got flashbacks taking the pictures, of the good and bad experiences and the long way I have come.'

RA, Sarah-Anne, said that the project made her notice where she could improve, in terms of her own attitudes. It made her question and reflect; 'how, as an educator, am I hearing?

3. Partnership Working

8. In your opinion, how well did partnerships between the universities and community groups work?

In the beginning, it was difficult for some facilitators to get different groups to respond. Perhaps, as Hannah suggests, they were not clear about the benefits to them. The project coordinator, Federica, commented, 'I did interact with some community groups and their leaders throughout the project, but in most cases the initial contact was directly with individuals rather than groups (the role of community group leaders' was usually limited to the very beginning of the project).

9. In your opinion, how well did partnerships between the universities work?

Rose thought that the partnership between the universities was 'an amazing idea – it's good to have a group of women having one thing in common'. Amy felt that such projects were 'better established in Canada. Here they are just at a nascent stage'. She also felt people in Northern Ireland had a lot to learn from Canada as they had a longer tradition of grassroots involvement. But Hannah found it frustrating to learn about the racism in Canada. Research Assistant, Sarah-Ann, commented that in Canada 'we see a lot of newcomers, but we don't necessarily really see them

Rose was very pleased that the Canadian moderators were interested in 'listening to our stories' while Lisa thought at first 'it was a bit strange, but then after the first session, it was easy'. Gemma felt that there was more time to talk in the Northern Irish groups because there were more sessions and thought 'the project gave us a chance to improve' how we work more justly with incomers. Amy thought it was interesting to hear people so proud of being Canadian –people from all over the world'.

Gemma appreciated how the universities had 'reached out'; it shows what we can strive for and achieve . . .   it doesn't really matter if we are in Northern Ireland or Canada, our problems are the same'.

For others, like Lisa, the project 'opened up new ways of thinking'

Some participants believed the partnership worked well because of the different approaches in each country.

The project co-ordinator, Federica, commented in her interview that,

> when communicating with the project participants, she and Tess tried to keep messages simple and with a friendly tone, making them pleasant and accessible. This resulted in a high number of participants responding promptly and enthusiastically to the emails, and in good participation in the workshops, including the joint ones (Northern Ireland and Canada).

The ethnographic reviewer, Dr Elena Bergia, observed: that 'not all participants were fully aware of how the project worked (in terms of the collaboration with the other university, for example). It is worth noticing that not all the participants would necessarily be interested in these aspects.

10. *In your opinion, what were the benefits of each partnership [approach to structuring the project (comparing NI and Canada)?*

The project coordinator, Federica, was very positive about the partnership between the universities:

> There was some very effective and pleasant communication between universities – our Canadian partners were responsive but also very proactive, they had experience of running similar projects in the past and could guide us, anticipate potential problems and mitigate risks. The difference in time zone was not a problem, on the contrary ideas and written contents have always been revised by all parties involved in a quick, industrious way, always using great, positive tones. A true opportunity to share best practice and learn from each other.

> Canada is very multicultural reality with a long history of immigration. Our partners have a stronger experience in dealing with migrants and it was extremely useful to learn from them.

11. *Did you like the international aspect of the project?*

Maria felt that the online sessions with the Canadian partners were very professionally delivered and she appreciated the opportunity to give her opinion', while Amy also enjoyed the interchange with the Canadian women.

The project co-ordinator commented:

> It was the best part of the project, a virtual journey among the different types of immigration. Something I noticed was English as a second/additional language was more an

issue in Canada than in Northern Ireland. And even the difference of migrants who were
involved.

RA, Sarah-Ann, was especially keen on this aspect, 'it was really neat to see women from across the
world. They were a really good starting point'

4: Mode of delivery – online and face-to-face

Most participants in Northern Ireland participated online. There were two groups, one meeting on
Tuesday mornings and the other on Thursday evenings. The Dungannon group, based in a town 40
miles south west of Belfast with a large number of incomers met face to face in the local women's
group building (STEPS). Each of the groups participated in five tw0-hour workshops.

A number of participants from all the Northern Irish groups took part in the five two-hour follow-on
international workshops with the Canadian women, also engaged with the Canadian interchange
workshops.

12. What were the challenges of the mode of delivery?

Technical issues was a common theme, with one session between Canada and Ni having to be
cancelled. Otherwise, at time, there were distortions in the connection and Gemma felt that
instructions were not clear and the time zone difference was noted by Lisa as another challenge.
Hannah noted that the online format did make the formation of friendships difficult.

13. What were the advantages?

On the other hand, Gemma believed that the project developed connections. Hannah felt that the
online delivery did enable the project to reach a wider audience. 'Virtually seeing people and hearing

their stories made it very real', said Gemma. Rose confessed, 'I was in my pajamas without anybody knowing. And after [the workshops] you just start whatever you have to do in the house'. The convenience was also a great advantage for participants – there was no need for transportation or parking as Lisa pointed out, while Amy said that she ' would not have been able to participate so often face-to-face'.

The ethnographic evaluator concluded:

> The online methodology was appreciated in terms of accessibility, but some noticed that meeting people online, as opposed to in person, comes with limitations. One participant I interviewed noted that 'there are things that come with in-person meetings, like you have coffee breaks, you move away from that structured setting, and you go to the informal setting and then you talk to one another and connect. We didn't have that time. So that may be an important factor if people are not meeting each other after the end of the project.'

5: Co-ordination and funding

14. Do you think the project was well organized in each country?

Most of the participants believed the project was very well organised.

The project coordinator, Federica Ferrieri, was praised. Amy commented, 'she was really good at it, polite and friendly and always so kind', while Rose testified that 'Federica's friendly email reminders' were very helpful'.

Federica offered her own perspective:

> We tried to compress the project in a short space of time as we know it is the best way to keep participants engaged. Having said that, I feel we 'lost' some people on the way, as it often happens. We stayed in touch with our participants as much as possible, but to protect anonymity and in an online context they did not have the opportunity to stay in touch with one another outside the meetings. In hindsight, a WhatsApp/Facebook group (after receiving people's consent) could have been useful for participants to socialise in an informal and more spontaneous way in between sessions.
>
> Also, it would have been beneficial to have a website ready before the project started, with basic information and updates – participants and potential participants could have been

redirected there to find more explanatory contents, and this could have made it easier to advertise the project and recruit participants.

15. *Did the fact that the project was free make a difference to whether or not you participated?*

Perhaps surprisingly, most participants that this made no difference, or only to some extent. However, Hannah did highlight the importance of the course credits.

16. *Did the flexibility of the timetable – being able to attend sessions in mornings or evenings make a difference to your participation*?

The flexibility of the timetable was very much appreciated by all participants. Rose noted, 'I must say it's good because there were two online sessions, one morning and one evening'.

The project co-ordinator commented:

> The two options (morning and evening workshops) suited most participants who were working (they'd attend the evening slot) and not currently employed (they'd attend the morning slot, when children were at school). A third option in the weekend would have been beneficial (and Tess organised it on a couple of occasions in response to the request of some groups) but with the resources at our disposal it would have been difficult to manage a lot of extra sessions, as it would impact on coordinators' personal life and free time.

17. *Did the organisers enable you to feel included and welcome?*

All participants testified that they were very much made to feel welcome and include. 'I feel that the moderators made sure everyone got a chance to speak', Amy testified, while Rose commented. 'You are smart, Hannah, Federica and Tess. All three of you made us feel very welcomed and respected'.

18. *Did you feel your culture and beliefs were respected?*

All participants responding believed that their culture and beliefs were very much respected. Lisa said, 'We pointed out that stereotypes are what blocks you when you come to a new country, but we didn't have stereotypes.'

6: Impact

19. Is this project relevant and useful in terms of informing policy?

All participants agreed that the project was relevant and useful in terms of informing policy.

RA, Sarah-Anne, very much hoped the project would have an impact on policy makers.

The ethnographic evaluator concluded that the project was, in Freirian terms, transformative:

> It seems like, through the project, the participants gained a greater awareness of their own difficulties, struggles, as well as personal successes and achievements. Rather than creating a permanent bond (which the participants were not necessarily looking for) among the participants, the project seems to have succeeded in raising awareness. Hannah pointed out that the *method* adopted in the project – taking photos and talking about your photos, as she put it – was a brilliant idea. Photos are a good way to start a conversation because 'The pictures allowed you that kind of baseline, from where you could build your story and talk about things you had come across'.

20. Can this small scale project offer lessons for policy and funding in both countries that would benefit newcomer women, especially those who are most exclude?.

Participants drew attention to a number of lessons: Hannah commented, 'The pictures photos allowed participants baseline to build their story. You can take something from the host culture and keep something from your own and make a new one in the process'.

21. Is this research and methods that can be replicated in other contexts?

Two participants believes 'the research could be replicated because, a Lisa confirmed, 'there are immigrants in every country, while Maria believed that the Dungannon group in the project demonstrated how the First Steps Women's group could be a' resource for migrant ladies'. Rose said the research could be applied in other contexts; 'it was just perfect'.

22. *Are there broader potential impacts of this type of research (arts-based methods) on migration and the inclusion of newcomer women?*

Gemma stressed the importance of the project results being disseminated; 'We will have an impact if our voices are heard'. Hannah believed the project was important as a way of combating racism'. This was echoed by RA, Sarah-Anne, who commented that it was important to know that the project could make a difference – 'having others hear the stories of the participants'. Another RA, Marcella, believed that the project had the flexibility in delivery that enabled the organisers to bring the voices of women, including women on temporary status, who are usually note included or consulted. 'The project brings these voices forward'. , Marcella argued that there needs to be more engagement between educational institutions and communities to increase the impact on policy. 'We need to ask how we can continue to bring these voices forward'.

7: Future directions

23. Do you have any suggestions about how the project might have worked better?

One participant suggested that an introductory discussion before the photos were discussed would have been helpful. However, there was an introductory session for each group. Some people joined a little later, so that might explain this.

The project coordinator, Federica, offered a thoughtful assessment:

I think it could be useful to reflect on the women who have been 'excluded' from the project – meaning those who did not take part in it – and why this happened. Did they know about the project and decided not to take part in it, or were not informed about it? In the second case, we would need to understand how to advertise the project more widely. In the first case, other questions arise – was the university an intimidating organizer/environment for some women? Were the days and times proposed not working for them? Did they think some specific skills were needed to take part, which they didn't have?

Analysing not just the data provided by those who took part, but also reflecting on potential factors for exclusion, could provide us with some concrete points to improve the project in its next editions.

I would suggest to dedicate a longer time, at the very beginning, to consult with migrant communities and understand the format that could best work for them, meet with potential participants in person and explain the project better, and also work on a simple and clear explanatory website and video to circulate on social media.

Quite a lot of the participants at first thought this was also a photography course – this is probably reflective of their needs and expectations. As a result, I think it could be a good idea to combine our content with some upskilling workshops where participants learn how to use a camera in a professional way.

Serrah suggested that, for future projects, we have more Zoom/Teams meetings so that participants, facilitators and Ras have a more detailed sense of the project.

24. Do you have any suggestions for future projects you would like to work on?

Gemma said she would be keen to work on more projects involving Muslim women and migrant women and another participant indicated she would be open to contributing to a further project.

25. What needs to be done to address the needs and aspirations voiced through this project?

Gemma argued that, 'the most important thing was to 'be taken seriously by the lawmakers'.

Hannah suggested that there be more public parks, or that the existing parks could be made more friendly, for example, through having more cultural fairs and festivals so that migrant people could connect to the wider community'.

Hannah thought that there was potential also in literature and creative writing; 'we could share a short story or a poem– this would add more layers, more depth. We could bring something from our own culture – translate that, for example, there is a story about the India-Pakistan border, which might have relevance in Northern Ireland' (because there is a border], but it is in Urdu. Maybe we have something to share'.in a similar vein, Helen commented that she would like to work on a project involving collecting the stories of incomers, ' not just how we came and why but what the first year based in this country was like – funny stories maybe too, because you don't understand the culture. She also suggested that such a collection would be useful for new incomers, heaping them to recognize some of the same problems.

Sarah-Ann thought that it would be great if the project could act as a kind of forum or connection point between the women, like a 'carrefour' or crossroads where they could talk to each other informally when they needed advice or wanted to share new information. Lisa also appealed for practical outcomes – a guide for newcomers and for Maria, from the Dungannon group, the outcome could be to make better known the Women's group as a resource for migrant women. Another practical suggestion from Amy was that we should encourage organisations to offer more assistance with English language and qualifications conversion and bridging courses.

Gemma, Hannah and Rose all felt that addressing the poor availability of food, cultural products, costumes, would be to meet an important cultural need, while Rose argued for bringing greater awareness into schools; 'because when I was assaulted by pupils, there was no awareness'

Canadian facilitator, Huda suggested that the organisers ask participants in this and future projects, 'how can I identify what you need and how can I help? Marcella suggested that there needed to be more engagement between formal education and communities.

The project co-ordinator, Federica, commented:

The project output needs to be shared with political stakeholders, to give migrant communities a real opportunity to take part in decision-making processes in Northern Ireland. Also, the project should be repeated on a yearly basis to create a longer-term perspective of continuity with participants, to secure this safe space where women can continue to share their lived experience and ask stakeholders to act on the project findings, year after year, to reflect a society that is nowadays based on many, many more colours than just two.

Sarah-Ann proposed that the universities consider some kind of scholarship fund, which could attract funding from major Irish-Canadian Foundations and cultural organisations to support education and opportunities for migrant women. The ethnographic evaluator commented that this demonstrated 'the wish to be active agents, and not passive recipients.'

Serrah proposed a project where the two partners would work with older Punjabi women. The project would work best, delivered in person, rather than online.

The ethnographic evaluator commented:

One thing that seems to emerge clearly from the interviews is that the participants would like the project to have practical applications, and that they also have ideas on how this may be done - which confirms Freire's view that the learners' imagination has the ability to go beyond the status quo. Lisa, for example, talked about a handbook/vademecum where migrants could find all the information they may need to navigate the local bureaucracy. Lisa thought of this handbook as something produced by migrants themselves, using (also) the information on migrants' needs that has emerged from the project. Again, agency and self-organization seem crucial. It would be interesting to inquire further into the relevance that the project may have had in terms of generating awareness of this need and ideas on how to fulfil it.

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