Participatory visual research with displaced persons: 'listening' to post-conflict experiences through the visual

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Abstract

Research with refugees, IDPs and other marginalised groups entails complexities which make it imperative to think through the ethical and methodological strategies to not only 'do no harm', but also allow the research to be valuable for the participants. This article contributes to this methodological debate by demonstrating how participatory visual research offers an innovative tool for democratising research and avoiding the risk of retraumatisation. This type of research moreover enables participants to visually represent and communicate their – gender-specific – truth, thus enabling them to counter official representations of their situation and gendered stereotypes of vulnerable IDP women. Participatory visual research can thus become an instrument to contribute to social change, in line with the goals of feminist research. This article describes its use during a research process with women in two communities of returned IDPs in Colombia's Caribbean coast.

Ana presented her images. She said that although she cannot read or

write, she does have things to say (Field notes 21 January 2016).

Introduction

The methodological challenges and ethical risks involved in research with refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) are well established. These groups have often experienced traumatic events and may be in situations of poverty and insecurity. This can make it more difficult to take informed or autonomous decisions to participate in research which might have – unintended – harmful consequences by stirring up traumatic memories, raising false hopes for change, or using participants merely as research data instead of as subjects with voice and agency (Fuller 1992; Goodhand 2000; MacKenzie et al. 2007). These risks are even greater when working with refugee women, who often face additional cultural and language barriers. This not only leads to their lower participation in many research projects, but also makes stereotypes which depict refugees as helpless victims with little agency and ability even stronger for women, failing to recognise them as persons with agency and ability (Goodkind and Deacon 2004; Eastmond 2007).

Several authors have therefore argued for ethnographic 'hanging out' with refugees as a research method. The time and interest that 'hanging out' requires enables the creation of relationships of trust, which allow for a better understanding and more humanist representation of the complexity of participants' situation. On this basis, attempts can be made to make the research of value to participants by inspiring actions or policy recommendations to change their situation (Goodkind and Deacon 2004; Rodgers 2004; MacKenzie et al. 2007; Block et al. 2013). Participatory research has

been suggested as an additional way of 'doing some good' by starting a process of empowerment and capacity-building (Goodhand 2000). This article contributes to this methodological debate, particularly through engaging with feminist approaches to research and debates on participatory visual research methods. It describes why, in addition to ethnographic 'hanging out', participatory visual methods offer an innovative, adequate and ethical way of doing research with survivors of conflict, and with IDPs in particular. This corresponds with feminist concerns about minimising the harm that research can do and the power imbalances between researcher and participants. Furthermore, the visual can give insight into aspects of everyday life which are often neglected in interviews and thus provide a more holistic and visually represented understanding of displacement and its effects from the standpoint of survivors (McIntyre 2003; Giritli-Nygren and Schmauch 2012). The article further contributes to this debate by adding a gendered lens. It describes how participatory visual research can promote autonomy and capacity among IDP women, and challenge gendered stereotypes about female refugees and IDPs. In this way, research can go beyond the 'do no harm' approach argued for by several authors (Goodhand 2000; MacKenzie et al. 2007).

I start this article by briefly describing the conflict in Colombia and the measures implemented to redress its survivors, many of whom are IDPs, thus outlining the research on which this methodological reflection is based. I then go on to explain how I used participatory visual methods here, and discuss the importance of these methods undertaking research in an ethical way. I subsequently describe their benefits for undertaking research with IDPs, and their particular potential for contributing to feminist research goals when working with IDP women. I conclude by describing some of the practical and ethical challenges encountered in the research process and how

these can be mitigated in order to take the method forward. All images included in this article were published with the consent of their authors. Names of participants have been anonymised, except the names of the photographers, which was done with their explicit consent.

Displacement and transitional justice in Colombia

Colombia has been the site of one of the world's longest internal armed conflicts between a weak state, several guerrilla and paramilitary groups, caused by social and economic inequalities. Paramilitary groups, which were especially strong in the north of Colombia, have demobilised since 2005. Peace with the FARC guerrillas was signed in late 2016. Negotiations with the ELN guerrillas are still on-going. The conflict has been characterised by large-scale human rights violations against the civilian population, including enforced disappearances, kidnappings and sexual violence. An estimated 200,000 people were killed between 1958 and 2012 (Grupo de Memoria Histórica 2013). The conflict has caused massive displacement flows, making Colombia one of the countries with the highest number of IDPs worldwide.

Law 1448, also known as the Victims' Law, was adopted in 2011 to address the effects of conflict and displacement on survivors. The Victims' Law offers land restitution and reparations to the millions of Colombians who were displaced after 1991 – in November 2016, 7,011,027 people were registered as IDPs for the purpose of this law (García-Godos and Wiig 2018). Land is a key aspect of gendered inequality, since customary and formal laws of marriage and inheritance often exclude women from land ownership (Huggins 2009; León 2011). The joint land titles provided by Colombia's Victims' Law could therefore contribute to transforming gender inequality. My research, based on a feminist approach to participatory research, explored the role that

transitional justice mechanisms like the Victims' Law can play in transforming the structural – gendered – inequalities that led to this situation of large-scale displacement. Participatory visual research methods, seldom used within research in the field of transitional justice and displacement, provided an innovative tool for this.

The communities where my research took place are located in the municipality of Chibolo, in the Magdalena department in the north of Colombia. This was the stronghold of the paramilitary group *Bloque Norte*, which displaced the villagers – small-scale cattle farmers – in 1997. The community members spread across Colombia's Caribbean coast and even into Venezuela. It was only after paramilitary demobilisation that the villagers could set foot on their land again. Their return in 2007 meant the start of the difficult and lengthy process of rebuilding their lives and communities, labouring on overgrown plots of land to make them suitable for cattle grazing again. Since 2012, these communities have been involved in land restitution, individual and collective reparations as a pilot case of the Victims' Law. Yet although this process has led to increased state presence, living conditions are still defined by poverty and the absence of basic public services such as running water and electricity, adequate education and health care. Gendered role divisions are traditional. Women are predominantly concerned with household tasks and play a subordinated role in the community organisation, since public roles are mainly performed by men. Previously existing women's committees were lost as a result of displacement, although some female leaders are currently attempting to re-animate these. During my fieldwork I worked with these groups of women.

Participatory visual research in Chibolo

Between August 2015 and April 2016 I undertook research in these communities, using

ethnographic 'hanging out' to understand the everyday impact of the Victims' Law process. This involved participant observation, semi-structured interviews, focus groups, innumerable informal conversations and attending the frequent meetings between the communities and various state and civil society stakeholders. Basing my research on feminist epistemologies, I was especially interested in whether and how this process impacted upon the gender relations in the communities, and how women envisioned the future after having returned to their land. In community meetings, women's viewpoints were often overshadowed by more general concerns. As in other contexts, women tended to be less present and participate less vocally in mixed spaces (Cornwall 2003). I therefore decided to use participatory visual research methods as a way of engaging women in my research and adding another dimension to 'listening' to their everyday experiences and needs.

Feminist research aims to produce knowledge that is useful for women and other oppressed groups, seeking the transformation of different forms of oppression (Stanley and Wise 1993; Letherby 2003; Nagy Hesse-Biber 2012). The production of knowledge is therefore regarded as part of a political process of emancipation and social change (Letherby 2003; Hawkesworth 2012). As a result, I decided to work with the feminist Photovoice method developed by Caroline Wang (Wang and Burris 1997). Over the past decades this method has been used in settings as diverse as China, Guatemala and the United States to give – mostly female – participants the chance to influence social change by visually documenting and producing their own narrative about a wide range of inequalities they face in their lives and their local communities (Wang et al. 2000; Lykes 2010). This builds on the assumption of participatory approaches that participants are best placed to define and articulate their own needs and design actions to address these (Wang and Burris 1997). In Photovoice, after a 'crash course' on photography,

issues of power and ethics, participants take photos of issues that are relevant for them in their everyday lives (Wang and Burris 1997; Mitchell 2011; Blakey et al. 2012). These images are then discussed in focus groups to analyse the phenomena documented and create a narrative based on the main themes identified (Wang and Burris 1997). This process can help increase solidarity among groups of people by enabling them to discuss and raise awareness about shared concerns (Molloy 2007). Finally the images and narratives are collated in a visual product, which can be disseminated to policymakers and other stakeholders.

Since not all women in Chibolo were interested in taking photos, I undertook this process with 18 women in the two communities. This made the method feasible to implement, as undertaking participatory visual research with the 50 or more women of the two wider women's groups had been impossible time and resource-wise. I involved these larger groups in the collective analysis, to enable a more general perspective on women's situation and needs. I asked the photographers to take images of their daily lives, both of the things they were proud of and those things they considered as obstacles for a better life. I then visited the participants individually to discuss their images and understand what they meant to them. Even though these audio-recorded interviews revolved around the pictures the women had taken, many other issues related to their daily lives, and experiences during and after displacement were discussed as well. Their images therefore became a tool for elicitation (Harper 2010).

Since most participants took many images, I asked them to select between one and five images to discuss with the wider women's groups, which could be included in the final visual product. I also asked them if they were happy for their images to be showed in publications, presentations or exhibitions. They could decide differently for each question and give me the corresponding copyright over the images by signing a

specific copyright consent form, as without expressed consent only the authors of the pictures have copyright over them. Most participants, eager to show their images and tell their stories, were quite pleased to give me permission. I nevertheless promised to contact them if I were to publish their photos, as they might have changed their minds with the passing of time. Consent thus becomes a process and a negotiation, rather than a one-off event (Visual Sociology Study Group of the British Sociological Association 2006).

After the photo elicitation interviews, the participants presented their selected images in informal visual focus groups with the wider groups of women in each community. As in other contexts (Cornwall 2003), most of the women in these communities were not used to participating in larger groups, and many of them felt uncomfortable speaking in front of the group. Conversations were therefore initiated in small groups of three to five people to break the ice. In these small groups, the women created captions that expressed their feelings towards the images, enabling them to discuss shared needs and concerns. They then presented the captions to the rest of the group, followed by discussions which allowed the captions to be adapted to include other women's opinions. These visual focus groups thus provided a space for collective analysis of the visual data. On the basis of these images and captions, divided into themes, I collated and printed photo booklets. This tangible result stayed with the participants – one of several elements that make the visual a potential tool for doing ethical research, to which I now turn.

Doing ethical research through the visual

An important area of concern in feminist research is the presence and positionality of the researcher and her influence on the research through interpreting and selecting data.

In many cases the researcher tends to 'speak for' the research participants, since differences in ethnic, class, and educational background often create unequal power relationships (Nagy Hesse-Biber 2012). Research thus risks becoming a form of exploitation (Tuhiwai Smith 2012). Participatory visual research offers a way to democratise research and diminish the power imbalance between researcher and participants. By taking images, the research participants become investigators, in control of the issues they portray. This contributes to establishing the subject/subject relation called for by Fals-Borda (1987). It must however be pointed out that it is hard to completely eliminate power imbalances, since ultimately it is the researcher who writes up the research and selects which images to show in published articles like these. I for example might have sometimes slightly steered women's selection of images in order to present a more balanced account of their needs in the resulting photo booklets, hoping to increase their potential as a lobbying tool. As Lykes (2010) describes, my own voice might thus have crept in. Nevertheless, the process enables a more important role for the participants than in 'traditional' research.

Giving participants more control over the research is especially important in post-conflict contexts, where participation in research might stir up conflict-related traumas. Even in feminist research, which aims to include marginalised voices and combat inequalities, interviewing conflict survivors entails the risk of retraumatisation (Sharp 2014; Robins and Wilson 2015). The fact that Photovoice enables the participants to decide which images to take and to steer the conversations, deciding what they feel comfortable telling the researcher, helps avoid this risk. At the same time, this allows the data to better reflect the views and priorities of the participants (Fuller 1992; Block et al. 2013). Rather than me as outside researcher deciding which topics merited interview questions, the women showed me what their most pressing

concerns were. Like other authors (Campbell 2002; Wood 2006), I found that this can make research a positive experience. Cecilia's comment illustrates this: 'You won't believe it, but sometimes one relaxes like this, telling about one's situation' (Interview 23 January 2016).

After each participant had finished taking photographs, I printed their images as a way of 'giving something back' in return for participating in my research. People did not possess cameras here, and even though taking photographs on cell phones has become common, the poverty of most participants and the lack of accessible print shops in these remote villages meant that printing images was restricted to special occasions such as weddings or graduations. Visual research thus leads to a tangible research product, which is co-created and owned by the research participants. This makes the research process, with its inherent power imbalances that risk benefitting the researcher more than the participants, a bit less 'exploitative' (Pink 2007). This is especially true for communities with lower levels of formal education. Many of the participants I worked with had not finished primary, let alone secondary school, and they were not used to reading. Although upon their leaders' request I also produced written reports about the implementation of the land restitution and reparation process in their communities, these written reports received far less interest than the photo booklets produced by the women. This illustrates the importance of the visual as a source of knowledge and communication, which is not sufficiently valued or explored within academia with its continued focus on and preference for the written (Butler-Kisber 2010; Tuhiwai Smith 2012).

Finally, using methods that appeal to the participants can be a way of preventing 'research fatigue' or a lack of interest to participate in research. Research fatigue often appears after long-term or repeated participation in research projects. This is especially

common in 'over-researched' contexts, such as post-conflict situations, and tends to be even stronger when there are no perceived changes as a result (Clark 2008). My experience was similar. Although I was the first academic researcher to work in these communities, I was not the first person to undertake research here, nor were participatory research methods new to the communities. The Victims' Law process had led to an influx of state institutions, many of them using participatory methods such as mapping and drawing exercises. This reflects a trend towards the use of participatory approaches by non-academic institutions, ostensibly as a tool for democratisation (Kapoor 2005). Various community members however told me they were tired and bored with repeating the same exercises, especially as they indicated that the state institutions always took their drawings with them – contradicting the assumption of participatory research that data belong to the research participants (Cooke 2004). Moreover, the results of all this work were notable in their absence, since the implementation of the reparation process was slow. The clearly expressed lack of enthusiasm for participatory methods such as mapping contrasted with the appreciation for the use of photography, which participants and other community members found *chevere* (cool), and which they repeatedly described as enabling them to show their real situation.

The potential of participatory visual methods in research with IDPs

Beyond helping to make sure that the research does no harm, participatory visual research also has the potential to promote social and political change for IDPs. By increasing understanding of the impacts of displacement on the lives of survivors through their own eyes, and by providing the tools to communicate this 'truth', the visual can help to improve efforts to address these impacts. Images produced by IDPs

can challenge 'outsider' interpretations of what harms survivors of conflict or displacement experience (Eastmond 2007; Robins and Wilson 2015; Shamrock et al. 2017). The visual has particular potential for portraying places and their material characteristics (Pink 2007). This is important when dealing with the effects of displacement, especially for farmers for whom land not only represents economic stability but also a way of life, producing an emotional attachment to the land (Meertens and Zambrano 2010). The importance of land and their life as farmers was apparent from the number of images taken of the land and the lack of development conditions in the communities, representing 493 of a total of 1257 images taken. This is surprising, since these communities are a pilot case in the Victims' Law process, and since this internationally acclaimed transitional justice process promises to transform people's lives through land restitution and accompanying infrastructural and productive projects, one would expect more rapid progress at improving the living conditions for farmers in rural areas. The contrary was true.

Taking images enabled people to visually express their most pressing needs, which contrast with what post-conflict interventions generally offer. Work with conflict survivors is often based on a human rights framework, which has historically privileged attention for civil and political rights over social, economic and cultural rights (Douzinas 2000). As a result, post-conflict reconstruction efforts and transitional justice mechanisms tend to focus on direct and political violence – the 'spectacular' events. Survivors' subjective experiences and social and economic needs are often pushed to the margins (Weine 2006). Also the underlying causes of conflict, often related to social and economic inequalities in terms of land and natural resources, are generally left unaddressed. These however often define survivors' most pressing needs (Huggins 2009; Gready and Robins 2014). The participants in Chibolo clearly emphasised this

need for the everyday socio-economic conditions required for a dignified life as farmers.

Although return to the land and formal land restitution have been crucial in terms of restoring people's physical relationship to the land, the images taken in the Photovoice process showed that for many the received state support had not been sufficient to make a profitable living on their land. The recovery from displacement was complicated even further by repeated droughts, which significantly reduced people's income through milk and cheese production, also causing lost harvests of yucca and corn. The lack of state support with these difficult conditions caused anxiety. The images taken of the drought that hit the area in the first months of 2016 (see figure 1) contrasted with the official message of state commitment with the communities.

[Figure 1 here]

Figure 1. 'The need we have is that there is no pasture, there is nothing. So I took three or four pictures of that, of the drought. Here we have received no support for that, from the state' (Photograph by Aida March 2016, Interview 29 March 2016).

The Victims' Law process is one of the flagship policies of President Santos, prior to his successful attempt to achieve peace with the FARC. It is therefore accompanied by a costly communication strategy that transmits a message – disseminated through official televised and social media channels – of the state's commitment to and success in repairing victimised communities. The communities in Chibolo, for example, feature in various official television programmes. Nevertheless, many participants told me that they felt that the reports, photos and videos produced by the state did not reflect their real situation. Instead, they felt that these 'official'

accounts only showed the situation of certain community members, whose living conditions were less dire. The visit of Colombian President Santos to one of the communities in 2012 is a case in point. It strongly impacted the community members, who felt it was 'world news'. Several people however mentioned that the community leaders went out of their way to show the best cows and horses and prepare the best food to receive the President. This way, they showed a 'truth' that did not reflect the situation of poverty and the needs of the majority of the community members. Community leader Tomas explained:

> (The director of the Land Restitution Unit) comes to visit the land, and goes to visit Roberto and the father of Juan García. Those were *fincas* (farms) that the paramilitary maintained with pasture the whole time. (…) But why doesn't he come here, to see what was lost because of the displacement? (Focus group 18 March 2016).

Participants considered that showing only part of the situation or telling only certain aspects of their story made it look like everything was perfectly fine, preventing them from receiving the support they needed. This way, visual images were used by the state as a political strategy, showing the alleged success of its policy to respond to the effects of displacement. According to the community participants, this official narrative contrasted with the Photovoice booklets produced by the women, which represented their living conditions more accurately – showing the 'real reality' in community leader Josefa's words.

Giving people the possibility to present *their* truth therefore enabled them to counter outside romanticised perceptions and official representations of their situation

(Molloy 2007). Beyond allowing the research to do no harm, visual research can thus enable IDPs to visually represent the effects of displacement and their post-displacement needs, thus giving them a tool to lobby for policies that better respond to the effects of displacement. The National Centre for Historical Memory (NCHM) has been working in these communities since 2013 to reproduce the historical memory of the communities, as part of the collective reparations process implemented by the Victims' Law. The NCHM accepted to include some of the women's images in these historical memory reports to illustrate their lives as farmers, after I suggested this and discussed it with the participants. Actions like these can enhance the political impact of the research, and can make people feel greater ownership over the policies intended to benefit them. This can also help to overcome the research fatigue described above.

Finally, the photos had an additional symbolic layer in this post-displacement context. In the photo elicitation interviews, several participants explained that through these images they had created lasting memories of aspects of their current lives. They considered this important, because their experience of displacement had proved how things could change drastically in a short period of time. Since most documents and images of the period before displacement were lost during displacement, printing photos was not only a way of giving something back to them, but also of creating new, visual memories, which had a special value since older visual memories were lost.

Visualising gendered understandings of the effect of displacement

In many developing countries with patriarchal social contexts, women tend to participate in lower numbers and less vocally than men in mixed spaces (Cornwall 2003). As a result, the specific needs of women are not always adequately addressed in research on refugees (Goodkind and Deacon 2004). I also experienced these gendered

dynamics in my research, as women were not used to voicing their opinions in Chibolo's rather *machista* setting. In the semi-structured, non-photo-led interviews which I also undertook in the communities, women often seemed intimidated by the interview questions. They would say that they were not sure if they were giving the correct answer, or that I should ask their husbands instead. In the photo elicitation interviews, in contrast, women felt more confident, since they themselves had taken the images. As other researchers (Goodkind and Deacon 2004; Block et al. 2013) have found, the visual prompts tended to inspire greater engagement in the conversations than the non-photo aided interviews and focus groups. This helped to include women's perspectives in the research, and make sure it contributed to feminist concerns of promoting social change for women.

Women's increased engagement in research can help to overcome the interiorised idea that women do not have valuable knowledge. For example, in an informal conversation Julia said that she had thought that participating would be very difficult, but she was relieved to see that she could do it. She believed that doing interviews like this she would little by little lose her fear of giving her opinion in public. This way, the participants realised they were capable of presenting their images and ideas to others. They seemed proud of the photos they took, showing them to interested family members and neighbours. This contrasts with women's daily lives, in which their roles are often taken for granted. Photovoice can thus help to increase participants' self-esteem by enabling them to share their own lived experiences (Wang et al. 2000; Molloy 2007), as is also illustrated by the opening quote of this article.

In turn, images can also help to change imaginaries about women's gender roles in their communities, as well as wider gendered stereotypes of vulnerable displaced women and children. Although in rural societies it is generally assumed that men have

the main relationship to the land (León 2011), through their images the women in Chibolo demonstrated that in reality the division of labour was not so rigid. Several participants took photos that visualised how they and their husbands worked together on their farms, for example showing the women separating the cows from the calves in the afternoon (see figure 2). They thus demonstrated that the relationship to the land and the animals is not limited to the men. Moreover, this active participation in the reconstruction of their lives and communities showed an ability and agency that contrasts with the often-held assumptions about refugees and IDPs as traumatised, victimised and disabled (Eastmond 2007; Hovil 2012). As Turner (1992) similarly found, taking images – or videos in his case – not only allows participants to use their own cultural categories of representation, but also to use the visual in a performative way, helping to establish the reality they portray. This way, the visual can promote political empowerment.

[Figure 2 here]

Figure 2: 'This photo represents that we have a company, in which we work as a family. The man, woman and children all work in cattle farming' (Photo by Perfecta January 2016, Caption in Photovoice booklet April 2016).

These images for instance led the women to discuss their interest in diversifying their roles, in order to play a more active role in the functioning of their cattle farms. Images and discussions like these can thus raise awareness among women, enabling them to visualise their agricultural work and demand recognition for it. This can help to transform patriarchal notions of gendered divisions of labour in rural communities. These insights can moreover help to improve the gender perspective of the land

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restitution process, which is currently based on a patriarchal conception of agricultural work, focusing on men's relationship to the land as cattle farmers (Author 2018). Taking these photographs therefore gave women an opportunity to 'shoot back' at rigid gendered imaginaries (Lykes 2010).

In terms of capturing the gendered impacts of the post-displacement rebuilding of lives, taking photos gave women a tool for showing the aspects of their lives they found most difficult or valued most (Pink 2007). These were often related to seemingly trivial, everyday activities that are normally taken for granted in interviews or research on conflict (Sontag 2008; Giritli-Nygren and Schmauch 2012; Rose 2013). Paying attention to these everyday experiences is in line with a long-standing tradition in feminist research. By demonstrating the oppression and inequality inherent in everyday experiences, the ordinary is problematised and questioned with the objective of transforming gender inequalities (Fonow and Cook 1991; Stanley and Wise 1993). The experiences showed by the women in Chibolo included acts such as cooking on wood fire, the straining process of washing by hand, and the laborious task of fetching water from community wells in the absence of running water. Several women also visualised the inadequate or complete absence of bathrooms (see figure 3).

[Figure 3 here]

Figure 3. 'This is the bathroom. Look, this is one of the biggest needs that has one here, the bathroom. Because we have this small bathroom to bathe, but to relieve oneself one has to go look for a bush' (Photograph by Mari February 2016, Interview 3 March 2016).

In this way, the images that the women produced form an addition to common understandings of the gendered effects of conflict and displacement, by focusing on everyday experiences that are often taken for granted in research on conflict and displacement. Rather than focusing on spectacular 'gendered' conflict experiences like sexual violence, which has come to be understood as *the* gendered experience of conflict (Crosby and Lykes 2011), the images of the everyday experiences of female IDPs in Chibolo demonstrated that the gendered impacts of displacement were more comprehensive. The lack of basic development conditions portrayed by the participants, illustrative of gendered and other structural inequalities, makes women's household tasks more time-consuming and physically demanding. This ultimately restricts their roles to these everyday tasks and limits their time for participating more actively in the communities' public life. This indicates the need for a wider range of post-conflict responses to transform survivors' situation. Creative research methods can thus offer new ways of knowing. Combining narrative and visual elements to document and 'listen' to conflict survivors can not only improve understanding of their experiences, but can also produce a stronger impact, as the visual is capable of expressing things that are difficult to express in words (Weine 2006; Pink 2007; Butler-Kisber 2010).

Challenges of participatory visual research

In spite of this quite rosy picture of the visual research process, I also encountered several practical and ethical hurdles. Unable to find disposable cameras in Colombia, I opted for the use of digital cameras. Although the digital era provides great potential for producing and disseminating images, allowing participants to see the results immediately, the use of digital cameras in places with little electricity and far away from print shops also presents logistical challenges, especially when working with

limited time and human resources. These aspects are important to bear in mind when designing a research project. Yet there are also other, more ethical issues to reflect upon.

First, although the Photovoice process aims for the participants to visualise and reflect upon their shared concerns and needs, to actually enable changes a sense of political agency is needed. By this I mean the capacity to act in and influence the world through dissenting or negotiating (Kabeer 2012), in order to make a difference to the pre-existing state of affairs. The weak agency displayed by the women in Chibolo, which is the result of their subordinated position in the communities, provided a clear challenge in this regard. As described above, gender roles in these villages were traditional, and with a few exceptions women's principal roles were in the household, or doing agricultural tasks close to the house. It was therefore hard to convince women of the importance of participating in meetings about the visual research or women's concerns more generally, and some women attended meetings rather irregularly. Women's participation in wider community organising was also weak, giving them little experience in demanding their rights. It is therefore unclear to what extent they will use the produced photo booklets as a lobbying tool. This means that the process can cause disillusionment as a result of unmet expectations about what the research can achieve in transforming the problems it identified (Molloy 2007). This shows the importance – for any qualitative research project – to pay attention to expectation management about the short-term changes that research can achieve. To prevent this disillusionment, a stronger and longer-term process of organisation and training in lobbying skills is needed. This is not always realistic, even less so for time and resource limited PhD projects. There might however be a role to play here for civil society organisations that accompany transitional justice processes. The images taken by the

women show that policymakers and civil society organisations should make a stronger effort to listen to women and support their lobby efforts, as they have visions and ideas which should be heard and supported.

Another risk inherent in the Photovoice process is its focus on transforming structural inequalities, which tends to portray the problems experienced by the participants. Zooming in on these problems can cause embarrassment to those portrayed, thereby reinforcing feelings of vulnerability and marginalisation (Butler-Kisber 2010; Mitchell 2011). Photographs showing people in a powerless position risk reducing people to this powerlessness (Sontag 2003). It moreover risks pathologising communities, defining them by their state of brokenness and oppression (Tuck 2009). This can produce the opposite effect of the transformations intended. A way of mitigating this risk could be to place a stronger emphasis on people's hopes and ideals for the future, rather than on the problems they face (Robbins 2013).

Working in a rigidly gendered space made the visual research process interesting, but also complicated. Limited by the women's irregular attendance of meetings, I was not able to provide the more in-depth training on photography and ethical issues envisioned by the Photovoice method. Although I managed to talk through some technical and ethical issues, provided handouts with instructions and if needed reinforced this on an individual basis, it would have been desirable to spend more time exploring the different technical and ethical aspects of the process. On a personal level, it was challenging and sometimes frustrating to facilitate discussions with women who were not used to voicing their opinions. This also illustrates the need to manage the researcher's own expectations about the research. I often felt we kept scratching the surface, discussing basic development needs instead of what I originally perceived as more strategic goals in terms of gender equality. Nevertheless, part of the

participatory approach to the research was recognising women's needs and goals as guiding. Although they did not always correspond to my ideas as a Western feminist researcher, they can be part of women's strategy of manoeuvring within margins of gendered power relations while attempting to avoid conflict with their male counterparts (Cornwall 2003; Mohanty 2003). Furthermore, my ethnographic experience of sharing the participants' living conditions made me understand why their daily struggles were their main concern. Seemingly basic issues, which were so powerfully visualised through the participants' images, actually reflected the structural inequalities and marginalisation that these communities of returned IDPs continue to suffer, and their particular gendered effects.

Finally, it must be noted that the use of visual methods can also heighten tensions and inequalities. Turner (1992) for example describes how empowering only certain people with camera and editing skills can provoke jealousy and even community conflicts. I did not experience this problem, since only certain women volunteered to take images, whereas most women seemed less interested. A challenge I did share with Turner (1992) was who would store the cameras after my research. I decided to leave the cameras with the respective women's group's leaders, pointing out these were the property of the women's groups as such. This however provoked some discontent with other women, who felt that the same women always received the benefits. But in the absence of a central base for both women's groups, I did not see any other options. Fortunately, during my return visit a year later I did not perceive any tensions that could be connected to the cameras' use.

I did experience that additional caution is needed when working with groups of diverse socio-economic characteristics. The visual can provoke jealousy and divisions by demonstrating socio-economic differences in a much clearer way. In one of the

communities where I worked, one family stood out for their better economic position. Some of the participants expressed discomfort with the fact that one of the members of this family also participated in the Photovoice process. For the community's standards this woman had a comfortable life and other participants believed she would have little to say about the problems most of them faced on an everyday basis. Eventually her images actually formed an interesting contribution to the collective visual narrative, as they focused on collective rather than individual problems. This anecdote nevertheless illustrates that in spite of romantic assumptions of unity, the 'local' is often a heterogeneous space, characterised by a multitude of networks, interests and identities (Kothari 2001; MacKenzie et al. 2007). This is even more true for post-conflict situations, where conflict has often damaged the ties that held communities together and post-conflict reconstruction processes can benefit some survivors more than others (Lundy and Mcgovern 2006; Robins and Wilson 2015). The researcher needs to be aware of these divisions and balance different views and opinions within the participatory process. Complementing participatory visual research with ethnographic methods, like I did, increases awareness of these power dynamics and prevent the research from reinforcing them (Masaki 2004).

Conclusions

This article has described why visual research methods such as Photovoice provide an important methodological tool for researching the impacts of displacement and the gendered dynamics of post-conflict recovery. In line with feminist concerns, the visual allows for greater ownership of the research by the participants. This democratises the research process, as far as possible within PhD research with its rigid expectations about the researcher's own original rather than co-produced contribution to knowledge. The

collective discussions and awareness raising that takes place in the Photovoice process allows for research to better represent the participants' self-defined needs and concerns and mitigate the risk of retraumatisation which is inherent in research with refugees and conflict survivors. Showing their own 'truth' can moreover be a way for participants to claim their rights. Nevertheless, the collective agency needed to demand these rights can also be one of the pitfalls of the Photovoice process, since women's individual and collective agency is often weak in strongly patriarchal settings. A stronger process of capacity building could mitigate this risk. Strengthening the research focus on participants' hopes for the future can also help to prevent the research from reinforcing participants' feeling of hopelessness and vulnerability. These strategies are worth exploring, since the visual offers an innovative and engaging way to increase understanding about the gendered effects of displacement. It allows survivors to visually represent their everyday lives and corresponding social and economic concerns, which are often excluded from post-conflict analyses and responses, which instead privilege 'spectacular' direct violence. Participatory visual research thus offers IDP women a tool for 'shooting back' at official narratives of state commitment and gendered stereotypes of vulnerable IDP and refugee women.

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