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Creative Activism, Creating Pleasure: The Power of Emotion in Participatory Research

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ABSTRACT In this paper the authors consider the power of emotion in participatory research and explore feelings of pleasure and joy that were experienced through processes of creative activism by researchers, trainers and participants during their involvement in feminist qualitative research conducted as part of the Global Gender and Cultures of Equality project (GlobalGRACE project: globalgrace.net). Specifically, we focus on one of the research projects within GlobalGRACE concerned with 'Women Working in Men's Worlds'. This project is working through participatory film and photography to enhance gender equality and wellbeing with a group of female construction workers based in Sylhet, north eastern Bangladesh. Here we are particularly interested in the dynamics of overlapping emotions: pleasure, friendship and joy that emerged during the course of the study and the experiences of three groups of participants: the research team, the group of young male audio-visual trainers, and the participant women.

INTRODUCTION

This research project is based in Sylhet, a city to the north east of Bangladesh, where women work on building sites to earn a living for themselves and their family in defiance of normative patriarchal gender codes. The authors of this study form part of one of the research teams within the Global Gender and Cultures of Equality (globalgrace.net) research project. Tanzina Choudhury, the research lead for this particular project or 'work package', is based at the Faculty of Sociology at the Shahjalal University of Science and Technology (SUST) and we work in partnership with the Sylhet-based NGO, the Institute of Development Affairs (IDEA). Other members of the research team include Puspa Begum from IDEA who works with the team as a research assistant supporting the female participants in the group, and MD. Ashraful Bari 'Ovi' and Prova Mehedi 'Joy' who provided training and technical assistance in film and photography¹. This paper has been produced with the contribution of Ovi, Joy and Puspa, as well as all the female construction workers and young male audio-visual trainers participating in the creative training workshops whose names have been changed to protect their identities.

This project builds on research led by Choudhury (see for example Choudhury 2013; Choudhury and Clisby 2018; 2020) with female construction workers in the city. Our central focus within this

GlobalGRACE project is on gender-based in/equalities, poverty, health and wellbeing among female construction workers who are employed as day labourers on building sites in the city. In this study, issues of employment, marginalization, gender norms and stereotypes are explored both in the Bangladeshi context and located within wider global frameworks. The focus on female construction workers draws together interesting dynamics of intersectional gender in/equalities. Through this work women experience health harms, poor mental wellbeing, labour exploitation, gender-based discrimination and sexual abuse. However, these women also challenge normative gender codes in Bangladesh pertaining to women's appropriate roles, employment and public visibility which can generate valuable public debate (see Clisby and Choudhury 2018; 2020). The project aims to generate wider public impact through the curation and production of a series of short films, photographic exhibitions and digital media presence led and curated by this group of female construction worker participants. These participants have also created their own Workers' Manifesto of Rights which we are in the process of disseminating and encouraging key employers and policy makers to take on board.

As Choudhury's (2013) work has previously revealed, the overwhelming majority of female construction workers in Sylhet are rural-urban migrants, marginalized through poverty, class

and gender. The women who work on these construction sites tend to lack formal education and the more highly valued forms of marketable skills, and as many of them are lone parents or do not have male household members who are able or willing to support them financially, they become construction labourers as a strategic survival strategy to support themselves and their children. Although not the explicit focus of this paper, as noted above, work on construction sites challenges social norms and gender expectations about women's visibility and norms of employment in the public sphere in important and interesting ways (see, for example, Choudhury and Clisby 2018; 2020).

Pleasure and Emotion in Field Research: A Decolonial Feminist Approach

Feminist, decolonial and participatory methodological approaches and creative praxis are the foundation stones of this project. Our approach is one that takes seriously the position of the female participants as 'situated knowers', a concept that is important within feminist epistemology. Through this lens we understand gendered beings as, "knowers situated in relation to what is known and experienced by both themselves and in relation to other knowers. What is known, and the way that it is known, thereby reflects the situation or perspective of the knower. This is itself legitimate knowledge" (Clisby and Holdsworth 2014: 4). Feminist standpoint theories "reject the notion of an "unmediated truth", arguing that knowledge is always mediated by a host of factors related to an individual's particular position in a determinate socio-political formation at a specific point in history" (Hawkesworth 1989: 536). In line with our feminist approach, we are also concerned to acknowledge, understand, but also to attempt to mitigate, power imbalances between researchers and participants, beginning with the experiences and standpoint of the women with whom we are working.

The concept of situated knowledges is further developed and critically extended within decolonial feminism. As Maria Lugones (2010: 747) suggests, "*Decolonizing gender is necessarily a praxical task. It is to enact a critique of racialized, colonial, and capitalist heterosexual gender oppression as a lived transformation of the social. As such*

it places the theorizer in the midst of people in a historical, peopled, subjective/intersubjective understanding of the oppressing←→resisting relation at the intersection of complex systems of oppression. To a significant extent it has to be in accord with the subjectivities and intersubjectivities that partly construct and in part are constructed by "the situation." It must include "learning" peoples. Furthermore, feminism does not just provide an account of the oppression of women. It goes beyond oppression by providing materials that enable women to understand their situation without succumbing to it."

The concept of situated knowledges is most widely developed within but is not exclusive to feminist scholarship. Walter Mignolo (1999; 2000; 2009), for example, also speaks to 'situated knowledges', but he is coming at this standpoint from a decolonial rather than explicitly feminist perspective. Mignolo makes links between the geo/body-politics of knowledge production and situated knowledges to ask critical questions about the power to know and to tell our human histories. As he explains, "[b]y setting the scenario in terms of geo- and body-politics I am starting and departing from already familiar notions of 'situated knowledges'. Sure, all knowledges are situated and every knowledge is constructed. But that is just the beginning. The question is: who, when, why is constructing knowledges?" (Mignolo 2009: 2).

Drawing on these frames and through a decolonial feminist and participatory lens, here we are interested in the role of pleasure and emotion in creative activism. Hochschild (1983) initially developed the concept of 'emotional labour' to describe the management of feeling that is demanded by a range of paid and unpaid work in modern society. Feminist scholars are well aware of the highly gendered construct of emotional labour, which is all too often biologically essentialized as something 'women naturally do', and hence a form of labour that does not accord status or concomitant capital (Guy and Newman 2004; Wharton 2009). Building on the concept of emotional labour, Janet Holland (2007) has argued that emotions are important and necessary in the production of knowledge and add power to our understandings, analyses and interpretations of data. However, and as Holland acknowledges, we also need to be cognizant of the ethical implications of establishing rapport in researching with women, considering

differential power and capital that permeate intersectional identities including one's class, ethnicity, age dis-ability, sexuality and so on. Power pervades the research setting and relationships that are developed therein in complex ways that need to be unpacked, acknowledged and understood.

Hubbard et al. (2001:119) also point to the power of emotion, arguing that we need to understand the importance of emotion in social research, for both the researcher and participants, stating that, "unless emotion in research is acknowledged, not only will researchers be left vulnerable, but also our understandings of the social world will remain impoverished." More recently Feldman and Mandache (2019) draw attention to the importance of what they call "emotional overlap" which they define as moments in which "both the informant and the ethnographer converge in intimate episodes of confession, understanding, and empathy" (2019: 229). They emphasize overlapping rather than parallel or equivalent emotions, recognising that researchers and participants occupy structurally different subject positions. Far from overwriting those differences, attending to overlapping emotions precisely provides insight into those situated knowledges and differences. As Hubbard et al. conclude

"[t]he greatest challenge facing researchers is not about developing research teams where emotional labour can be successfully managed, but about recognizing that emotions have epistemological significance. Being emotional is a way of knowing about, and acting in, the social world and is just as significant for how we make sense of our respondents' experiences as our cognitive skills. By acknowledging the role of emotionally-sensed knowledge in our research teams we may be able to further our understandings of the social world" (2001: 135).

In this paper we extend insights about the importance of emotion and in particular of emotional overlap by focusing on emotions that are produced within and through participatory film and photography. Participatory photography, which has its roots in conjunction of Freirean pedagogy, feminist praxes and documentary film, "is a method which puts cameras into the hands of participants in order that they document their own lives and experiences, and then uses the resulting images to articulate and communicate those experiences in

different ways" (O'Reilly 2019: 105, for an early exemplar see Wang et al. 1996).

Previous research employing participatory photography has demonstrated its efficacy in enabling people to move from being objects to active subjects in producing knowledge about themselves, enabling forms of self-exploration and positive self-identities (Byrne et al. 2016: 7-8). Lykes and Scheib (2016), for example, describe how visual methodologies and participatory research in post-Katrina New Orleans enabled researchers and health promoters to enact care for themselves and for others in a post-disaster situation. O'Reilly (2019: 104), whose work concerns people's experiences and negotiations of the in-between space of movement and dislocation, draws on participatory visual methods as a tool to facilitate collaborative working and "encounter" that she contends moves beyond the "surface" [...] towards the sensuous, the embodied".

Our work and experience not only foregrounds the way that participatory visual methodologies facilitate care and embodied encounter but also, and perhaps more unexpectedly, an overlap of emotions focused on joy and pleasure. In this context, we want to talk about a significant project, in many ways what we might see as an exemplar of 'creative activism', the *Valor y Cambio* Project co-developed by Frances Negrón Muntaner. We focus on this here precisely because this project created encounters with what Negrón Muntaner has termed 'decolonial joy'. The *Valor y Cambio* project, developed in Puerto Rico, is "a storytelling, community-building and solidarity economy project that contains an interactive art installation and six bills of a community currency, Persones de Peso Puerto Rico (People of Weight Puerto Rico), or pesos for short" (Negrón Muntaner, 2020: 171). The project had three main aims:

'one, to offer a widely accessible platform for participants to consider what they value; two, to introduce the notion of community currencies; and three, to provide a practice of an exchange economy capable of fostering different social relationships. [...] Moreover, the project envisioned community currencies as a means to promote critical conversations about what is generally termed 'the economy' and some of its core assumptions, including the necessity for capitalist 'development' and 'employment'. On the ground, *Valor y Cambio* is a participatory and

public experience: To take part, people approach a refurbished ATM machine called the VyC (the acronym for Valor y Cambio) and speak into a camera and recorder for up to 3 minutes. The VyC asks participants to tell stories about what they value, how their communities can support what they value, and which people or groups are already sustaining these values. Participants can then exchange the bill [they receive from VyC in exchange for their story] for items at the partner businesses and organisations that agree to accept the currency for a period of time.' (Negrón Muntaner 2020: 171-2).

What Negrón Muntaner found as the project unfolded was an unexpected "joy that greeted it" (2020:173) and which she has since theorized as a form of "decolonial joy", articulated as, "the (active) manner by which people become aware of, reason with, and connect the emotion of joy to a desire for decolonial justice. [...] decolonial joy encompasses and connects both emotion and feeling, to redress pain, suffering, and anger" (Negrón Muntaner, 2020: 188). As she noted, however, emotions of pleasure and joy are complex and nuanced and, "[a]t times I distrusted this joy. All joy is not 'good', or intends to do good" (Negrón Muntaner, 2020:182). Joy as an emotion must be contextually located in its socio-cultural, economic and historical trope. Indeed, joy is political, a politics of power, moreover, "theorising the politics of joy in general and decolonial joy in particular is not without difficulties" (Negrón Muntaner, 2020: 183). Similarly, joy or pleasure are not uniformly experienced or understood, there is no singular way of experiencing any emotion, nor are there singular motivations for these emotions, as Negrón Muntaner states, "although the expressions of joy appeared alike, their political locations were diverse, underscoring the complexities of joy as politics, decolonial or otherwise" (Negrón Muntaner, 2020: 190).

Drawing then on these conceptions of feminist, decolonial and participatory creative activism, we consider the emotions of pleasure and joy that we experienced within our project working alongside a group of female construction workers in Bangladesh - a project through which we aim to promote gender equality, support enhanced wellbeing and promote confidence and self-esteem (Maynard 1994; Hammersley 1995; Edwards and Ribbens 1998; Letherby 2003; Clisby and Holdsworth 2014).

RESEARCH CONTEXT

Working primarily with a core group of twelve female construction workers over an 18-month period, we have facilitated weekly training and creative workshops in which participants have learned photography and film-making using mobile phones. The workshops also serve 'a safe space' for crafting material culture while discussing issue of labour rights, health and wellbeing and gender in/equalities. Participants are provided with meals and funded for the day they spend within the research project to ensure that they do not lose a day's income. They have also been provided with mobile phones and phone credit as well as training in audio visual skills.

The female participants decide how they want to make a film and digital visual photographic exhibition, what images and narratives they want to portray about their lives in their communities and at work on the construction sites. The research team have provided training in mobile phone use and audio visual techniques, and support the women in their process of designing and developing their individual visual curation. Recording this process is an integral part of the research process, alongside conducting qualitative, ethnographic research and life history interviews with the participants and their communities. The research team are also working with the female participants and a local NGO coordinator in the curation of material culture, film and photography that will become part of an international Global Museum of Equalities to be launched in 2021. Participants launched and exhibited their films and photography and Workers' Manifesto of Rights at a community festival that they designed and coordinated with the support of the research team held in Sylhet for all their families and friends in February 2020. Their exhibition of films and photography and Workers' Manifesto was subsequently exhibited in Kolkata in liaison with a group of Indian female construction workers in April 2020 and tours to Dhaka, Manila and Cape Town are planned for 2021. Key to this process is the foundational principle that participants take control of the process, decide what is portrayed, how the films are edited and

how their selected photographs are displayed. We also co-created an exhibition catalogue in which participants selected how their chosen images were displayed and they were invited to include a short narrative to provide some context about their lives alongside their photography. Their narratives were created and agreed upon following discussion among the participants within the group in a process of decision-making prior to becoming a written text.

As mentioned at the inception, the participants belong to resource-poor households and, in most cases, they are the only or most important breadwinners in their family. They have a great deal of work and responsibility and as such they tend to have few opportunities to dwell on their own wellbeing, enjoyment or leisure. In this project our participant women have been coming together for over a year in weekly bespoke workshops tailored to build capacity in different skills that have not been previously so familiar or accessible to them. In this paper we focus on emotions: the feelings of our participants who have not previously engaged with photography or filming about their involvement in this, the feelings of the local trainers as they engage for the first time in participatory training, and we also think about the experiences of the researchers who work closely with the participants and facilitate the project.

In Sylhet it is not uncommon to see women working in the construction sector to support themselves and their family. Every morning at dawn, female construction workers congregate at busy locations in the city to draw the attention of potential recruiters who come to hire both men and women as day labourers. In this project we purposively selected 12 such female construction workers, who were contacted through a variety of means – for example through key community contacts and fellow construction workers. The participants estimated their ages as ranging from their late 20s to mid-50s. It was, however, difficult to be exact about their age as they do not have birth records and were vague about specific dates as this, they explained, was not so important for them. Most participants had not been taught to read or write, and all but two women had been unable to access formal education as children, mainly due to household poverty and gender norms about choosing which children to send to school. Two participants had been sent to school by their

parents, but they dropped out before completing primary education.

The majority of the participants had migrated to Sylhet from different rural areas within Bangladesh with their husbands. During their participation in the workshops, approximately half of these women lived with their husbands, in a conventionally structured male-headed household, and half were the head of a female-headed household. All our participants live in resource-poor households, although their monthly family income is difficult to calculate as most do not have a clear idea of their husbands' or sons' earnings. Participants were also unable to tell us their exact monthly income, as they work as day labourers so their income varies depending on how many days they are able to secure work. Their monthly incomes vary depending on whether daily labour is available, but, based on average daily wages and approximate days worked per month we estimate that their monthly income at times when work is available ranges from tk.4500 to tk.10000 (approximately £40 to £100 British Pounds). All the participants live in a rented house and the rental costs range between tk.2500 (£23) and tk.3500 (£33) per month. Easy access to clean water and electricity was limited for most households. In some houses food was prepared using a traditional clay oven heated by burning wood, while some other participants share a single gas oven with their neighbours, requiring them to wait in a long queue for their turn to cook their meals.

It was important that we were able to compensate each participant for her time spent on the project for three key reasons: to acknowledge their labour and expertise within the research; as a way to ensure that they did not lose their daily income; and so that they could justify to themselves and their families time spent doing what they came to see as 'just having fun', something these women saw both as an indulgence and something they had little opportunity for in their normal daily lives. In addition to the weekly film, photography and material culture crafting workshops held with participants, we also drew on more standard sociological research methods, conducting a series of 12 focus group discussions with the female participants, ethnographic research over the course of twelve months within their communities and 50 kinship network life history interviews - with our participants, key family members, and with some neighbours, friends and co-workers.

THE PLEASURE OF PARTICIPATION IN SOCIAL RESEARCH

I. Pleasure in Participation: The Female Construction Workers

'It's like Oxygen' (Female Workshop Participant)

It is no small thing for these women to come to the workshops and take part in the research within the context of patriarchal gender codes and social norms of Bangladeshi society. Indeed, Najma reported that her husband asks “*about who are there with them in this workshop, what they do, whether there are any males over here*”. She told him “*some [male] students come here. They take photographs, teach us how to take photographs, [show us how to] make videos and talk to us. Two apa [female researchers] are there. They gossip. We make fun. Boro apa [the research coordinator] entertains us with food and sweets.*” It took some persuading to assuage her husband’s concerns about her participation, and this was a similar issue for most participants initially, but, as Salma added, after “*hearing all the stories about the workshops my husband feels relaxed and tells me that it is good that I am learning so many things because of joining the workshops.*”

Hence, at the beginning of their engagement with the project most of the participants were, understandably, feeling quite anxious about being involved in the workshops and not so sure about their role and responsibilities, and initially at least, seemed to lack confidence in the value of their participation. However, after just a few meetings, the participants became far more relaxed and felt confident enough to take over control of how they wanted the sessions to run. Henceforth, on each occasion we worked together, whether that be in conducting the life history interviews, focus groups or the skills sharing/transferring workshops, our participants took the lead and decided how the sessions would be structured. Their friendships and confidence with one another grew to the point that soon they would laugh, joke and even sing together during the workshops. As facilitators we also consciously felt happy and proud to see this transformation among the research participants. At one point we had to postpone the workshops for two consecutive

weeks. When we conducted the first workshop after our absence, all the participants said they had missed the workshop and had particularly missed their chats, friendship and information exchanges made possible through group working. They talked passionately to us about the pleasure and enjoyment they gained through the workshop activities and ability to spend time together in the group away from family and work responsibilities. Here, Nazmin², talks about her feelings as a research and workshop participant:

“In the beginning I was afraid of coming to the workshop, then I asked apa³ what kind of questions will be there, what will I be asked? Apa said, nothing remarkable, what kind of things you do, how you survive. Now I do not feel afraid. I enjoy coming here. [...] I feel like coming here, without having to be asked or phoned. We get to meet and talk to so many, sing and have fun coming here and we enjoy it. Nowadays I enjoy it very much. [It is the] first time we are here in such gathering, we do not usually go anywhere. Now I enjoy it.”

Another participant, Ahmuda, added that the workshop space is a place where she enjoys coming as she could talk freely, discuss different things with the whole team and ask whatever questions come to her mind in what feels like a safe space. She said that learning new skills and doing new activities also gives her immense pleasure as she rarely has the opportunity to do something new or different due to her heavy workload. Ahmuda added that she likes to get together with the other women at the workshops and it has created an “*affectionate environment*”. Shikha, another participant, added:

“I can talk a lot about myself which I like [...] here we do newer things [...] Mostly I enjoy the programs here. We do not get frequent opportunities to attend such programs because we do not have rich people among us that [would mean that] we will be invited, also we do not have such ability. Few can arrange such programs. We become familiar with new people and I enjoy this too. Newer acquaintances create relations. You ask us questions, we also ask [questions], which is interesting. Having acquaintances is a benefit in some way. We enjoy music, food and fun here. Also, we talk about this [coming to the workshops and being part of the study] with our friends and co-workers. In the beginning there would be a

kind of tension regarding where to come, what will happen. But now I enjoy it."

An older participant, Naju, also agreed with these sentiments and mentioned that the light moments they share with other participants, trainers and the researchers "wipe off all the tiredness and freshen [her] up". Fulon also commented that they enjoy coming to the workshops "very much", that she enjoys coming with some of her fellow participants, doing fun activities, and talking to everyone. As she says:

"The time [the two week break in sessions] when we could not come felt bad. I talk about this, what we do here, who did what, even after getting back home. We enjoy this workshop very much. We don't feel lazy. When we happened to see anyone [meaning a fellow participant, trainer or researcher] in the street, we greet each other and talk, I enjoy that too. Now, my relationship with the residents of my locality has improved. I feel better when I come. Otherwise I have to be very busy in work."

Banu recounted how she tells her daughter at home what they did at each day's workshop and the food they shared. She also added that after the workshops end in the future, she thinks she will "feel gloomy". Another participant, Naju, narrated how she "steals some time for herself" from her household responsibilities to join the workshops:

"I have come here leaving my household chores. My husband has come home with [some] onions [he is a small-scale food vendor]. I have sorted them something [prepared food for her family]. [But] I couldn't continue as I felt drawn towards the workshop here. My daughters were insisting [that I do] not come here, leaving the task [food preparation] for them to carry out. I convinced them it will not take much time. Then I came, now I have grown used to it. I told my daughters [that] we gossip and make fun over there [in the workshops]. If I don't come, I don't feel good. My daughter said gossiping idly is always enjoyable. Getting acquainted with new people is also enjoyable. A kind of affectionate environment has developed. I have told everyone at my home that I will get a mobile phone. My sons laughed at me hearing this, saying that I cannot hold a phone let alone take photographs. I said I will take everyone's photographs, whoever I meet outside. Apa [referring to the research team coordinator] will give our pictures in television

[referring to the mobile-phone based films participants also make]. We make jests about these at home."

A different reason for liking the workshops was presented by Shikha, who explained:

"Here everyone speaks nicely. In our slum people talk to each other disrespectfully. In fact, they do not know how to say things in a pleasant way without using harsh or vulgar words. They keep asking me about the workshop and tell me to wear a burqah [full body covering] while commuting to the workshop venue. I do not reply, just smile back at my neighbours. I will not be able to make them understand that it feels so good to me to be treated nicely in the workshops and how this helps me to think positively about my future."

As we can see from the narratives above, contributing to the study and participating in a new environment away from their usual community networks, albeit in the same city space, has facilitated for some of the participants a broadening of their usual horizons, enabling them to feel respected and valued in this different social context. For many of these women, despite everyone involved in the workshops and locally-based research team being Bangladeshi and living in Sylhet, it was not the norm for them to engage as peers and in an atmosphere of mutual friendship and respect with these more middle-class and formally educated male and female trainers and researchers.

In these kinds of ways, these means of social engagement - through the workshops, the training the women have participated in, their ownership of and skills development in the stereotypically male-dominated arena of mobile phone technologies, and their new abilities in using mobile phones as mediums for highly accomplished film and photography - have all contributed, we would argue, to visibly increased self-esteem, greater confidence and improved mental wellbeing among this group of women. Indeed, owning a mobile phone and being trained in its various uses, as well as in how to take high quality photographs and films with their phones, has been a source of particular pleasure among the group. In Bangladesh, particularly among resource-poor households, owning and using mobile phones is seen as a largely male preserve. Younger women in their late teens and early twenties in Sylhet are

increasingly likely to acquire and use a mobile phone, but older women, such as the majority of our research participants, are assumed not to have the knowledge or capacity to use such technology. As such, being able to demonstrate not only their ownership but their skill in using their phones has, they say, given them a feeling of pride, accomplishment and esteem. As Rozina, reported, her greatest reason for liking our workshops has been because she was given a smart phone. Rozina explained that she had long desired to have a “touch mobile phone” of her own but, as a good quality smart phone is an expensive commodity, given her financial situation it was not possible for her to buy one. However, one of Rozina’s sisters has managed to acquire a smart phone but, as she recounted:

“Although I am dying to use this kind of phone, I do not touch my sister’s phone. If something happens to her phone, she will blame me for this; no matter whether I am responsible for the damage or not. Her husband gave her this phone and both of them will become annoyed if something happens. I thus restrain myself from using it with all my might [laughing]. And in our workshops, I am told by our trainers to use a smart phone without fear and they keep saying ‘nothing will happen to the phone and if something happens, we will fix it. You don’t worry’. This opportunity to handle a smart phone and encouragement and assurance on the part of the trainers and researchers gives me immense happiness.”

As became clear from listening to the women’s narratives, some of which we have cited above, they talk quite often about their emotions of pleasure during their participation in the research project. While understanding emotion as complex and nuanced, and making no claims for unmitigated or simplistic joy here, the participants nevertheless appear to have experienced enjoyment during the time they have been working with us and one another. They seemed to us to have gained greater self-esteem and have developed the confidence to take control of their participation, deciding how the various sessions are facilitated and what they want to learn or discuss within them. Similarly, we, as trainers and researchers, have enjoyed working with them. The process of the research has, on the whole, been a pleasurable experience for us and

we have also gained confidence and self-esteem. This emotional engagement and exchange - an emotional overlap in Feldman and Mandache’s (2019) terms - is, of course, inevitably imbued with complex underpinnings of identity, power, politics, socio-cultural and economic histories, trajectories and positionings. We are not trying to obfuscate those differential power dynamics here, but within all these situated complexities, we have also found pleasure in working together.

At various points throughout the research process, the participants have reported that being part of the workshops makes them feel “good”, makes them “happy”, and that they take “pleasure” in their participation. Banu smiled as she told us that these workshops are the only place where they can relax and spend some time without worrying about work and family. This is no small matter given the burden of paid and unpaid work these women carry every day. Indeed, all the women unanimously told us that the workshops have become an important and pleasurable part of their lives, that they enjoy the “fun” they have, the “gossip”, the jokes, humour and banter, the food, the atmosphere and the sharing of betel leaves and nuts with their fellow participants. A few of our participants even mentioned that they like the building where the workshops take place, the fan that cools the air, the peaceful space, and the housework they escape from to attend the workshops. All our participants placed great emphasis on the fact that in the contexts of their difficult social realities, they rarely have the opportunity to do something and have something for themselves. Through these workshops and their participation in the research project, they have been able to create their own, albeit temporally limited, space where they can enjoy time for themselves to have some fun. In the following two brief sections we want to provide a few small vignettes that are illustrative of how friendships and care for one another have developed within the group and between the younger male trainers and older female participants.

Vignette 1: Pleasure Through Banter: Making Fun of the Trainers

One of the young Sylheti-based male trainers who teaches photography and filmmaking in the workshops, we will call him Zaheen, has developed an interesting relationship with the

group, a combination of both appreciation and gently sarcastic banter, and this is particularly so with one of the older participants, Shokhina. The participants return his banter and make fun of him, and he seems to take great pleasure from their repartee. One day, for example, he was delivering photographic training and, at one point, Shokhina asked him to pose for her so that she could take his picture to demonstrate her newly acquired photography skills. He moved a chair to take a seat in front of her and Shokhina asked him to smile for the photograph, and he grinned in response. She took his picture and then made a show of critically scrutinising it. After looking closely at the photograph for some time, she started laughing and said, “*look at his face, what a feature, you can only see his teeth!*”. Her way of saying it made everybody laugh and she went around the group insisting all the trainers and fellow participants look at his portrait to see if they agreed with her about how funny he looked. She was obviously deliberately teasing Zaheen, who is a classically handsome young man, quick to smile with a broad grin, and he laughed along with her. Indeed, this young man and elderly woman from across distinct socio-economic divides have developed a friendship that is based on mutual teasing and the exchange of banter, but also, we suggest, on mutual care, as the following incidence illustrates.

One day we were running a handicraft skills sharing session and when the session was almost at its end, the group asked Zaheen to sing a song. Initially he tried to turn down the request but eventually he agreed to sing. He is a good singer and sang a couple of songs very well, but he was expecting a sarcastic remark about his performance from Shokhina who he jokingly and affectionately calls his “arch enemy”. All the participants, trainers and researchers thanked him warmly for his performance, but to our surprise Shokhina was very quiet throughout and even after his performance. For the whole team it was a new experience as we have all come to anticipate Shokhina’s amusing or sarcastic comments at his expense, so we started pushing her to say something - which we expected to be a witticism. Shokhina, however, looked at Zaheen kindly, laid her hand on his cheek and praised him for his performance.

Vignette 2: On Plans for Marriage: Developing Trust and Seeking Advice

One of the construction worker participants, Panna, was married in 2019, a few months into her participation in the research and workshops. It is usual for a lot of discussions take place regarding a forthcoming wedding for weeks or months in advance. However, this was not the case for Panna. She had not said a word about her plans until she suddenly revealed her news at one of the workshops. It transpired that she had discussed it with another participant but in confidence, and she and her prospective husband had been communicating with her through some of her neighbours for several months. When we were told of the wedding, we decided to celebrate the announcement by providing cakes and deserts during the workshop and during this impromptu feast the imminent wedding became the main topic of conversation among the group, who were keen to offer advice and support to Panna. At the end of the day, when all the participants were leaving for home, we asked Panna whether she would join us next week. Another participant then interjected, “*don’t worry khala! She will come. This [...] husband doesn’t have the power to prevent her from doing anything she wants to do. If she wants to come, she can come!*” The next week, after her wedding, Panna came to the workshop and of course the other women were keen to hear all about it. She said that the groom provided her with two sarees, whilst she gave him 2500tk. in cash. Unfortunately, the marriage was short lived as her new husband abandoned her within a few weeks to return to living with his first wife. We might speculate about his intentions, particularly as he gained 2500tk from the marriage, but we do not know his motivations. Panna came to the group in an emotional state, she was understandably very upset. She told the group that she knew that her husband was already married with children, which is not uncommon in Bangladesh where polygamy is a traditional form of relationship for some men, but had hoped that he cared for her as well. All the women did what they could to console her and they continued to provide emotional support in the months afterwards.

Another participant, Rozina, was also recently married. Before the wedding took place rumours

were in the air that she was getting married, although she herself had not said anything to us. Puspa (workshop facilitator and partner NGO worker) asked her if it was true that she was getting married again. At this point, Rozina told her that she was seeing a man but, in order to make the final decision about marriage, she wanted to sit and talk to Ovi (GlobalGRACE researcher and visual trainer). Puspa was surprised to hear this and she asked Rozina what Ovi had to do with her marriage decisions. Rozina's answer was "*Ovi had met this man before coincidentally and I think Ovi would be able to advise me rightly whether to marry this man is a good idea or not.*" Rozina's desire to seek advice from Ovi, and the emotional support Panna received from the group are just two illustrations of the ways in which the group participants developed trust and friendship among themselves and also with the research team. However, as Ovi said, asking the project team for such advice placed him "*in a dilemma as to whether we were in a position to comment on such critical issues.*" On the other hand, he said, the fact that Rozina had sought his advice also "*made him feel good that he had managed to gain the trust of our participants and that they felt able to come to him to discuss important matters.*"

II. Pleasure in Training: The Experiences of the Trainers

The workshop trainers were invited to participate in the project in their capacity as members of the film and photography societies at Shahjalal University of Science and Technology in Sylhet. We wanted to work with local people with local knowledge, language and expertise. Initially we worked with a larger group of volunteers, including three female students although the majority were male, which reflects the membership of their societies. This larger group were provided with a week of intensive training delivered by *Voices of Women Media* (<http://www.voicesofwomenmedia.org/>) in participatory film and photography and participatory approaches to working with women. After this initial training we asked who would be able to commit to paid work for one day per week with the project as trainers over an 18-month period. A few of the male students wanted to do so and were able to commit to continue to working us on that extended basis but, unfortunately

although understandably, most, and none of the female trainers, were able to commit to the time required. The student trainers who were able to work with the project over the longer term have the experience of providing training on photography and filmmaking within Bangladesh, particularly for other university students. As they explained, the people who they usually train tend to be younger and more highly educated, more middle class people, who are already fairly familiar with most of the gadgets and have a clear idea about the skills they want to acquire. This was the first time they had worked with older women from resource-poor communities who neither had clear ideas about such training nor had they ever thought that they would receive training in film and photography. As one trainer said, "*Our participants even did not have the rudimentary form of understanding about filmmaking and photography.*" In the beginning the trainers found it challenging as the participants "*even could not hold the phone properly.*" We asked the trainers to make some notes along the way about their experiences of working with the project and they have agreed to share with us here some of their notes that speak to their experiences of (overlapping) emotions. One trainer noted:

"An overwhelming majority of our participants were very shaky to hold a smartphone at the beginning. And it was a huge challenge for us to eliminate this fear from their mind. Actually, it took quite a while to familiarize our participants with a smartphone. However, when they started getting accustomed to it, everything became easy. At the beginning of the photography and film-making workshops, to inspire them, we told them if you host a family function in your house, you'll be able to take pictures and the memories will last long. You will be able to see the pictures after years, decades. And it all will happen if you learn taking good pictures and making quality videos. This worked like magic. They all felt very inspired. In these photography and film-making workshops, the moments that give me immense happiness are when our participants take a good picture and come to me almost running to show the picture. I feel so good to see their happy faces. It seemed to me, at the beginning they were not so excited or keen to learn photography. They might have been thinking that this particular skill is not going to be helpful for them. But now things have changed. They all have become very keen to

learn and thoroughly enjoy what they are doing.”

The trainers also talked about how they find it rewarding and feel happy that the participants “became very comfortable with them within a short while.” As another trainer noted, “We had not expected the participants so readily to be able to create a congenial relationship with [the trainers] as they are different in diverse ways – age, gender, class, education and so forth. Yet, the way both groups assimilated with each other is remarkable. The trainers and participants crack jokes whenever a situation arises. Participants often instruct their trainers to become their models when practicing photography and instruct them how to pose inside their frames.”

Another trainer commented that he enjoys being able to interact with people from different age groups. He is a young man completing his university degree in his early 20s who has never worked closely with older women before, and he noted that “The interest shown on their part to learn photography and film-making encourages me, it gives me a moral boost that I can teach people from different walks of life with dissimilar levels of understanding about the art [of photography].”

The young Bangladeshi men who provided the film and photographic training have not previously worked with older women beyond their socio-economic circles and neither have they previously been asked to reflect on their own emotions and perceptions of the relationships that developed between them as part of a research project. The point here is not to critically deconstruct these notes, rather we include these brief narrative extracts to illustrate the ways that the trainers also expressed emotions of pleasure and enjoyment from their participation in the training workshops. These encounters with older women from different socio-economic class and educational backgrounds were something quite novel for the younger trainers and through this experience we would suggest that they also gained in confidence and developed a greater appreciation of the knowledge and experience of the women with whom they were working.

III. The Researcher’s Emotional Experiences of Participation

The research team (and the lead coordinator and co-author) who worked within the workshops in Sylhet were also women who had grown up in the city. As with the trainers, they made

notes about their experiences of working with the workshops and we draw on some of these narratives here. From their perspective, much has been gained from this project. As one researcher stated, “It has been a wonderful experience to be able to work closely with our research participants on a regular basis for over twelve months.” Growing up in a patriarchal social framework, the women involved in this project – researchers and construction worker participants alike – have learned very well normative socio-cultural gender codes. They have particularly learned the lesson that, as one female researcher explained, “we are taught that women should not think about their own wellbeing, they should put the needs of their family, their husbands, fathers and children, before their own, and if they fail to be seen to do so, they are likely to be seen as not very good women, poor wives and bad mothers.”

The research team expressed having enjoyed sharing the company of the female participants and male trainers throughout the various stages of the project. The space provided through the workshops also gives participants some time to think about themselves and reflect on their lives and experiences. The knowledge that through this project we have been able to facilitate this space for these women has also made us feel good about ourselves as researchers, and we take pleasure from being able to facilitate this space, as one of the team said: “Through this space we hope that they have been able to value their own wellbeing and spend time doing things they enjoy, and hopefully believe that they are not ‘poor wives or bad mothers’ for doing so.”

Conducting workshops with this particular group of women over a longer period of time has enabled us to build friendships and, we hope, trust, and to reduce, or at least work through, hierarchies of power based on complex histories, identities and socio-economic positioning. As one of the researchers noted:

“Over time we have developed a friendship network, a bond with one another and the participants no longer feel the pressure to behave ‘appropriately’ with us, rather they talk to us as if we also belong to their group. Now, rather than nervous silence, if we try to instruct them while doing something, they just ask us to keep quiet, tell us they know what they are doing and not to interfere. This gives us a great sense of satisfaction

because we see this as an indicator that not only have we succeeded in earning their acceptance and friendship, but that they have developed greater confidence and self-esteem alongside their skills development as photographers and film makers. Whenever these women participants learn a new skill, film technique, or have taken particularly good pictures, they invite us to join them so they can show us what they have done. Engaging in training on photography and film making is a completely new experience for them and they have been rightly proud of becoming accomplished at these new skills. Their confidence has visibly grown and now as they practice their filming and photography on us, they constantly shout instructions at us or exchange banter such as "you look better crying than smiling!". Now the [participants] have taken the lead and seem to gain pleasure from their new powerful roles."

In the workshops, as we talk with one another, we often hear about the different personal difficulties of the participants (marital breakdown, accidents and ill health), as well as happy stories (someone's daughter is getting married, someone bought something new). While sharing their everyday stories, the participants often get into heated discussions about the rights or wrongs of one course of action or another, sharing advice, disagreeing about advice given. One of the more difficult issues the researchers have experienced is that the participants seem to believe that we are able to solve their problems if we wanted to, and that we have unlimited resources. As one researcher said, *"Whenever they encounter financial hardship, they come to us for help. We try to explain that we are only human, we only have finite resources through the project funding, and that it is not possible to solve all their problems. We keep reminding the group of our project remit and the extent of our parameters. We try to explain that our aim is to develop their capacity by offering them training on different skills, but we cannot solve all their problems, we simply do not have the resources."*

As part of the project, and in liaison with the female participants, we are also able to offer an opportunity for support for wider training to an additional family member with the aim of helping them to increase their earning opportunities. However, at times this has also been a source of difficulty and disappointment. One of our

participants, for example, said that she wanted her 12 year-old son to have driving lessons, but we were not able to support that as he is under the legal age to drive. She was disappointed and this also made the researchers feel upset that we had disappointed her: *"As researchers we face such challenges on a regular basis. We do not want to make false promises to our participants which we would be unable to keep, at the same time, we do not want them to be hurt."* In this dynamic process of complex negotiation, we endeavor to find ways to maintain the good relationships we have developed with the group and continue to support the participants as far as we are able.

For the researchers, being in the privileged and powerful position of being able to facilitate time and a safe space for this group of women to share time together outside of the daily grind of paid and unpaid work, and, indeed, to have fun, was also an enjoyable experience. The power dynamics here are acknowledged – the emotion of pleasure gained from occupying a relatively powerful position could be seen as paternalistic, patronising and even Imperial in a postcolonial context: while the research team is led by and comprises researchers and trainers from Bangladesh – the formerly colonized - the funding comes from the UK - the former colonizer. Moreover, a key ethical caveat the research team are all too aware of is that the project will end in a few months and the space that has been created will disappear – and that they have the power to take this space away along with the data they have extracted. We can only hope that at that future point, this group of women will be able to continue using their new skills, continue meeting with the friends they have gained through the workshops, and that the pleasure and confidence they expressed through their involvement in the study will be something they carry forwards. But we can only hope, and hope is somewhat intangible, and never enough.

CONCLUSION

Emotion is as important within the research context as it is elsewhere. Indeed, if we fail to acknowledge emotion in research, both researchers and participants can be left vulnerable. We would argue that through these workshops the female participants, female research team, and male

trainers have developed a mutually beneficial and supportive emotional bond. We believe that there exists genuine respect and care between the group, and there has been a lot of fun enjoyed along the way. Relationships between participants, researchers and trainers are never neutral or objective, and nor could they be. As we set out at the beginning of this paper, overlapping emotions are necessary in the production of knowledge and add power to our understandings, analyses and interpretations of data. However, we also need to be cognizant of the ethical implications of establishing rapport in researching with women, considering differential power and capital that permeate intersectional identities, and that pervades the research setting and relationships that are developed therein in complex ways.

Our project has enabled group of people to come together over a significant period of time, in research terms at least, and we think that much has been gained – friendships, confidence, esteem as well as new knowledge, insights and skills. But this has in turn facilitated our access to these participant women's everyday experiences of joy, sadness, pleasure and dreams. As researchers, this is good for us, it is good for our research, and it is also important that these women have a space to speak about themselves and their lived experiences, so we believe it to be a positive experience for the participants as well. However, it also brings legitimate ethical concerns. We do not want to exploit the women who agreed to share so much with us, we do not want to have developed these bonds only to extract their life stories. It is a delicate ethical tight rope we walk. However, we are also well aware that power is complex and not simplistically experienced or exchanged - these women have power and forms of capital in ways that we do not. We are privileged to be involved in a small part of these participants' lives and also privileged (socio-economically, educationally) to be able to facilitate their access to a space where they can spend some time with other women, some time for themselves, in empathy, with pleasure and joy, albeit for a limited period of time. We believe it has been a mutually beneficial research encounter in many different and nuanced ways. But, as we note above, what remains when the project ends? We think this group of women

will take something positive away from their experience of working with us- they tell us as much - and we know that we take away more than data, that we have found a great deal of pleasure in getting to know this group of women. We acknowledge the power and politics of that privileged positioning in this complex interplay of overlapping emotions.

As a final note we want to mention what is currently happening on a global and local local scale in 2020. At the time of writing, we are experiencing the global pandemic of Covid-19 and much of the world is in a period of crisis and also stasis - 'lock down'- where normal work, school, and routines have come to an abrupt end – at least for the time being, we hope. This is posing significant challenges for the research process, the team and trainers, but it is having critical consequences for the female construction worker participants. They are largely unable to work - most construction sites stand deserted. Many have no other form of income and they are afraid of contracting coronavirus in a world where they have very little access to health care. It is difficult to sustain physical distancing in the close quarters of their resource-poor neighbourhoods, and it is difficult to maintain the additional hygiene standards we are told we need to keep the virus at bay. It is difficult to stay inside, to wash your hands with antibacterial soap, to keep safe, when you do not have water on tap in your home or enough food to eat.

The workshops have had to be suspended but we hope to resume our gatherings as soon as we feel it is safe to do so. However, having provided each participant with a smart phone to take photographs and make films has the additional benefit that we are able to maintain contact with them and we communicate regularly via mobile phone. We can talk about their wellbeing and their immediate needs. In our privileged positions -because we have some funding - we have also been able to continue providing some basic provisions to support household survival. The participants call one another and support one another over the phone, they exchange pictures of their days, their families, with one another. Their phones have become a source of greater wellbeing than we had ever imagined.

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NOTES

- i We also acknowledge the invaluable training and guidance provided by Vivien Lee and Pooja Pant of Voices of Women Media who provided training in participatory visual methods for a series of ‘training the trainers’ workshops held in Sylhet in 2018.
- ii All names have been pseudonymised throughout.
- iii Apa means elder sister, and in this instance apa is in reference to our research team member from our NGO partner who has a long-standing relationship with vulnerable women in poorer communities within the city.

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