5 Participatory Photography With Women's Rights Activists in Nepal

Towards a Practice of Decolonial Feminist Solidarity?

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Introduction

In this chapter, I analyse a small-scale experiment in participatory photography co-organised in Kathmandu with women activists from two organisations, a landless women's network organisation, Nepal Mahila Ekata Samaj (NMES), and the Women's Rehabilitation Centre (WOREC). The workshops took place in May–July 2014, with the activists utilising disposable cameras in photographing their activism and daily lives, followed by reflective group discussions.

The questions I seek to answer are: How can participatory photography be used in the research design phase, and can it contribute something to the efforts to decolonise participatory research—that is, to enable a more horizontal approach to co-production of knowledge in (the later phases of) research? What kinds of potential and benefits emerge when focusing mainly on the reflective discussions around the photos (instead of the photos themselves or their dissemination)? What kinds of problems and challenges might this involve? The perspective through which I approach these questions is that of decolonial feminist solidarity, while also drawing on discussion about prefigurative epistemologies and methodological debates related to the use of photovoice in participatory action research. This combination establishes the basis for my attempt to reflect on the aims, process, outcomes, opportunities and challenges of the chosen approach.

The structure of the chapter is as follows. In the following section, I first describe the background and context of the experimental project. Then, I introduce the theoretical-methodological basis of the chapter, after which I move on to describing the process, focusing on the discussions in the reflective workshops. In the concluding section, I summarise the main findings and end with a discussion on the learnings of the project, its benefits and challenges.

The Context

I became acquainted with the organisations involved in this project, NMES and WOREC, during my first fieldwork period in Nepal in 2012 when doing research on slum evictions and forced displacement in the 'Governing Life Globally: The Biopolitics of Development' research project, funded by the Academy of Finland. Many activists in both organisations were involved in movements defending the rights of

local slum communities. In Kathmandu alone, over 50 slum communities are under constant threat of forced eviction due to urban development projects connected with the rapidly rising value of land in the city, as well as industrial and environmental projects taking place in the Kathmandu valley. The activists work together also on women's rights-related issues and campaigns.

NMES is a non-profit network organisation established in 1998 by landless women, working for the rights of women living in slums and informal settlements in 40 districts throughout Nepal. Since its inception, it has relentlessly worked to combat discrimination against landless and displaced women and women without citizenship and advocated for their rights, especially housing, shelter and land rights. NMES envisions a prosperous—economically equitable, culturally plural, socially equal and inclusive—society. It defines collective effort, empowerment, inclusion and accountability as its key values. In practical terms, it seeks to mobilise landless women living in different parts of the country, make them aware of their rights, develop their capacity for a dignified life in the society and work against forceful evictions and for the elimination of gendered domestic violence in a patriarchal society. Over the years, NMES has done remarkable and successful work in each of these areas and contributed towards a more equitable, multicultural and inclusive society in various ways.

WOREC is another movement-based organisation working for women's rights—an endeavour it considers a prerequisite for peace, social justice and sustainable development. Established in 1991, WOREC has worked for three decades to prevent violence against women and its causes and consequences, and to ensure the economic, socio-cultural wellbeing of women and other marginalised groups by promoting their access to rights and social justice. Originally, it was founded to rehabilitate female trafficking survivors in Nepal, but its mission has broadened over the years. In addition to gender-based and domestic violence, WOREC focuses on issues such as women's health, sustainable livelihoods and the right to mobility and decent work. It works with a broad range of community-based women's groups and provides them with support in multiple forms. It has engaged in many campaigns, such as Violence Against Women (VAW), in partnership with local, national and international partners.

WOREC and NMES also collaborate with each other. For example, they have been co-organising protests such as the Monday *dharna* (Nepali word for protest) for years. Moreover, they both engage in the National Alliance of Women Human Rights Defenders (NAWHRD), which is, with over 5,000 members, a broad network alliance working to advance human rights.

During my first visit in 2012, I stayed in Nepal for three months, getting acquainted with the activists, conducting fieldwork and visiting slums and programmes run by NMES and WOREC. NMES Project Coordinator Bhagavati Adhikari played a key role in my fieldwork, helping me organise practically everything. We kept contact through Messenger/Facebook, and prior to my second visit, we discussed how to continue our collaboration in practical terms, planning together activities for my upcoming fieldwork period.

During the second fieldwork period in 2014, our collaboration was part of my research project 'Governance, Resistance and Neoliberal Development: Struggles against Development-Induced Displacement and Forced Evictions in South Asia' (Academy of Finland, 2013–2016). It studied the dynamics between governance, resistance and neoliberal development, focusing on struggles against development-induced forced displacement in three neighbouring countries: Nepal, Bangladesh and India.

I had two months for my fieldwork in Nepal, and when discussing with the activists, it became clear that the most suitable forms of research–activism collaboration from their perspective would include different forms of participation in events and campaigns, as well as joint projects planned and implemented together. I felt it was very important for us to discuss these issues in detail in advance, not only because of the underlying research ethics, but also because I needed to take seriously the lessons that I had learned during the first project. It really had changed a lot for me, as I had started to realise the blatant Eurocentrism and deep power imbalances and complexities of ethnographic research. The learning process already started when doing research in India (2011–2012). I have reflected on this process of unlearning and relearning in my previous works (e.g. Seppälä, 2016, 2017; see also Khanam & Seppälä, 2020), and will not go into detail here. Yet, it is important to underline that due to these experiences and various challenges, mistakes and failures, it was necessary to develop a different kind of approach. This is how the participatory photography idea originally emerged, first when discussing with the NMES activists, then together contacting others to see whether there would be interest in developing the idea further and experimenting with it in practice.

Decolonial Feminist Solidarity

When working in solidarity with feminist activists in different life-worlds and with different life experiences, it is important not to negate or try to transcend this diversity (Mohanty, 2003; Lugones, 2010). For decades, feminists of colour have written about the discursive colonisation of lives and struggles of women of the Global South, pointing out that mainstream feminism is a Eurocentric, highly theoretical and elitist philosophy that serves ‘the narrow self-interest of Western feminism’ (Mohanty, 2003, pp. 222–223), reflecting white, bourgeois and liberal frames of feminism while not taking sufficiently into account questions of race and class. While Mohanty and other post/decolonial feminists have critiqued Eurocentric and falsely universalising methodologies in feminist cross-cultural scholarship, a similar critique has been voiced by Black, queer and working-class feminists who have criticised mainstream feminism for silencing and ignoring their voices, experiences and strategies (Motta et al., 2011; see also Collins, 2000; Frankenberg, 1993; Motta, 2013). An important source of criticism is that considerable sections of the feminist movement in/outside academia have become institutionalised and are ‘easily assimilated within the logic of late capitalism’ (Mohanty, 2003, p. 244), which raises questions of how well they can understand and support struggles against neoliberalism by less privileged women (Motta et al., 2011, p. 1; Mohanty, 2003, pp. 248–250). Moreover, the high level of abstraction in feminist theorising has been denoted as a problem, as the deconstruction of the subject of ‘woman’ has resulted in academic research detaching itself from women’s actual struggles, depriving ‘feminist politics of the categorical basis for its own normative claims’ (Motta et al., 2011, pp. 11–12; see also Mohanty, 2003, p. 6; cf. Butler, 1990; Haraway, 1985).¹

This is why post/decolonial feminists stress the importance of centralising the experiences and struggles of marginalised women whose histories have previously been considered ‘deviant, marginal, or inessential to the acquisition of knowledge’ (Mohanty, 2003, pp. 200, 231–236). This means bringing forward voices that are ‘excluded and delegitimized by the universalizing and violent power dynamics of

patriarchal colonial capitalism' (Motta, 2013, p. 37) in a way that does not disregard contextual differences, produce women as 'a singular, monolithic subject' (Mohanty, 2003, p. 51) or overlook their agency and experience (Motta, 2013, p. 37; see also Spivak, 1988).

Applying this approach in the context of women's movements means that the realities, views and concerns of marginalised women must be taken seriously to learn and 'engage in solidarity with the complexity of feminized political subjectivities being formed and the contradictions and tensions in this process' (Motta, 2013, p. 49; 2018; see also Motta & Seppälä, 2016). I have built on this perspective, trying to develop further the concept of Mohanty's 'feminist solidarity' (2003), and what I have referred to as decolonial feminist solidarity (Seppälä, 2016), which, as an approach, has much in common with intersectionality in stressing the importance of recognising different sociocultural categories and their interactions on multiple and often simultaneous levels (e.g. Collins, 2000), and also with the idea of 'border thinking' by Anzaldúa (1987) and Mignolo (2000), developed further by Lugones (2010) in her 'feminist border thinking'. All of these can be thought of as methodologies privileging 'those on the margins . . . without reifying or homogenizing their positionalities and struggles' (Motta, 2013, p. 50). As Motta eloquently puts it, in seeking 'to break down conceptual and theoretical categories of knowledge by speaking from the epistemological margins of modernity', these methodologies encourage a 'dialogue between different places and experiences on the margins' through which it becomes possible 'to further, in solidarity, our struggles' and to bridge 'our experiences, struggles, theories, and lives, transgressing the borders of capitalist coloniality that seek to divide us' (p. 37).

Building on the ethico-political approach of decolonial feminist solidarity in my own work has also necessitated methodological rethinking. Here, I draw on Motta's article (2011) on prefigurative epistemologies,² where she urges researchers to unlearn their academic privileges—to relinquish part of what we have been taught about our roles as social scientists in Western academia to widen our understanding of movement-relevant research, learn from the practices of movements and transform our practices. The presumption that the researcher has 'the epistemic privilege of producing theoretical knowledge' needs to be challenged, as it fails to recognise that movements also create theoretical knowledge (Motta & Nilsen, 2011, pp. 21–22). According to Motta (2011), theory is not produced individually but collectively, 'via reflection, within political struggle, based upon the lived experiences and struggles' of those who have been excluded or marginalised, and consequently, research that is done 'in solidarity with such struggles for social justice' (p. 194) must build on 'a horizontal relationship of mutual "learning" in which abstraction is based upon closeness as opposed to distance from lived experience and in which epistemology becomes a prefigurative practice of everyday life' (p. 196). Engaging in participatory photography with the activists was one way to explore and experiment with this perspective in practice and to step away from the conventional role of a researcher in the way described.

Participatory Photography

Participatory photography and different forms of photovoice (also known as photo novella) have been used for decades in participatory and community-based research. As a research method, it was first introduced by Wang and Burris (1994) in an effort to 'promote a process of women's participation that would be analytical, proactive, and

empowering' (p. 179). Photovoice is based on the idea that images and words together can effectively express community and individual needs, problems and desires, and broaden the participants' perspectives, which makes it an effective tool for self-development, creating awareness and doing advocacy (Nykiforuk et al., 2011; Wang & Burris, 1994, 1997). It is closely connected to the premises of participatory action research, which is 'grounded in lived experience, developed in partnership, addresses significant problems, works with (rather than simply studies) people, develops new ways of seeing/interpreting the world' (Bradbury-Huang & Reason, 2003, p. 156).

While some scholars question photovoice as a research method, claiming that photographs taken by research participants have more to do with 'art' than research, for others, such photos are not 'real' art but 'only' research data. For the first criticism, it can be said that certain types of data that can be acquired through photography (or other arts-based methods) are difficult to capture or produce by traditional research and data collection methods. For the second line of criticism, it can be stated that it is not necessary to produce art valued by conventional artistic standards or to be a professional artist to utilise arts-based research methods meaningfully (see e.g. Leavy, 2015). Photographing is not automatically an artistic activity, but when used as a method of self-expression through visualisation, it can be considered an arts-based method.

Photovoice first became popular in health and social work research, and only later more broadly in social sciences. Originally, it drew on Paolo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2007/1970) and was strongly influenced by feminist theory and the concept of empowerment. Some scholars maintain that, over the years, these premises have become diluted, and photovoice has lost its critical edge (e.g. Lykes & Scheib, 2015; Sitter, 2017). Indeed, in recent years, a growing amount of critical literature has emerged, making visible photovoice's limitations and complex challenges, as well as ethical dilemmas and power imbalances related to it (e.g. Carlson et al., 2006; Evans-Agnew & Rosemberg, 2016; Sitter, 2017). It is stressed that photovoice becomes misused if considered 'a "quick-and-easy" replacement for long-term ethnographic engagement and immersion in fieldwork contexts' (Gubrium & Harper, 2013, p. 73). Another body of critical literature argues that the significant aspects of empowerment and social transformation are ignored in many studies (e.g. Coemans et al., 2017; Johnston, 2016; Liebenberg, 2018).

From the perspective of this chapter, the most important studies are those reflecting on the ethical dilemmas, power relations and the de/colonising potential of participatory photography. Higgins (2014) claims that the critical and pedagogical potential of photovoice is 'not always actualised as the assumptions that undergird photovoice are often the same ones that (re)produce inequalities' (p. 1). This is because most projects are designed 'by and for the researchers and center deficit narratives rather than . . . much needed stories of survivance and resilience' (p. 3; see also Higgins, 2016; Hergenrather et al., 2009; Truchon, 2007). Higgins (2014) talks about de/colonial aspects related to 'using and abusing visual methodologies', and underlines the importance of recognising 'decolonial goals and other inter-connected objectives' such as feminism, anti-racism and anti-capitalism (pp. 3–4). Importantly, he reminds us that 'every attempt to work against colonization is also within colonization and inevitably reifies (neo)colonial constructs, concepts, or structures through the process' (p. 6).

Furthermore, in pointing out that 'every act of research is an act of power, even when the goals and aims strive for empowerment', Higgins (2016) underscores the risk of photovoice 'being ethically problematic through the reproduction of the oppressive

relations of power that it aims to work against, albeit differently' and points to the question posed by Lather (2007, p. 13)—'how can writing the other not be an act of continuing colonization?'—which necessitates 'a persistent ethical questioning of whether what is gained through research is worth what is lost, and for whom' (Higgins, 2016, pp. 673, 675–676).

Although there are many pitfalls to avoid and a broad spectrum of justified criticism and important words of warning to seriously consider, photovoice has also been used successfully, for example, in revealing and resisting racialised stereotypes and the culture of whiteness in academia by studying Black students' experiences of transformation (Cornel & Kessi, 2017), developing feminist and anti-racist practices (Lykes & Scheib, 2015) and envisioning decolonial feminist praxis (Cornell et al., 2019). This is also where this chapter seeks to make a humble contribution. However, it must be clarified that the rationale of the project discussed here differs from conventional photovoice projects in several ways. The main differences are related to the primary objectives of the project (and thus, also the process) and the role of the photographs.

The main components in a traditional photovoice project are usually defined in terms of: 1) participation; 2) research; 3) action; and 4) social change. In this case, however, the focus was only on the first two, and with regard to them, the emphasis was more on the first than the second component, as the primary purpose was not to produce data to be directly utilised in research or activism *as such*. Instead, the aim was to co-organise a small-scale experiment with participatory photography as a means to engage in collective doing and learning, to become more familiar with each other and discover themes that could be explored in later phases of research–activism collaboration. This is not totally uncommon in the context of arts-based methods, as they are utilised in all phases of the research process, including the research design phase, which was the case here. However, this approach is not without problems, as the original premises of photovoice are intimately related to the creation of possibilities for social change. Photovoice projects commonly include the following phases: 1) identification of community issues; 2) participant recruitment; 3) photovoice training; 4) camera distribution and instruction; 5) identification of photo assignments; 6) photo assignment discussion; 7) data analysis; 8) identification of influential advocates; 9) presentation of photovoice findings; and 10) creation of plans of action for change (Hergenrather et al., 2009, p. 695). Here, the approach was different: it focused on phases 1–7, but phases 8–10 were not included. The rationale was first to experiment with the method, and only later develop a more comprehensive photovoice project.

Second, this project differs from many conventional photovoice projects in that the photos themselves are not displayed here; they are only described textually. This was a conscious decision, collectively made with the participants beforehand. In the meetings preceding the workshops, we discussed this issue from several perspectives and came to this particular conclusion. Although the activists often use photos for campaigning, awareness building and advocating for their cause, in this context it was more comfortable for them to take photos quite freely, without having to worry about privacy issues and not being sure of the audience. Even though the photos will not be used in any research publications, one of the organisations (NMES) did exhibit a selection of their photographs in 2014 for their own community purposes.

The Workshops

From NMES, 11 activists participated in the workshops, taking a total of 242 photos. There were four participants from WOREC, and 41 photos in total. Before distributing

the cameras, we discussed, in both groups, the aims of photographing, and then practised using the disposable cameras. Next, we set a timeline for returning the cameras and organising our reflective group discussions. We also discussed ethical questions, as well as practical challenges which included difficulties in using a disposable camera, lack of time and possible lack of interest amongst the participants. We agreed that, if someone did not have time, they could freely withdraw at any point. It was important not to add any extra burden to women who already had so many responsibilities and duties. As Smith (2012/1999) points out, 'ideas about community collaboration and active participation need to be tempered by realistic assessments of a community's resources and capabilities, even if there is enthusiasm and good will' (p. 141).

Materials

The primary material on which this chapter is based consists of my fieldwork notes and workshop diaries in which I documented the discussions with the participants about the photos, their meaning and the photography process. Additionally, material collected through personal interviews, focus group discussions and participatory observation (April–June 2012, May–July 2014) is used to provide more context and depth. In addition to the slum area in Sinamangal where the NMES office is located, I also visited three other slums: Bhangsighat, Manohara and Shankha-Mul, and conducted interviews there. Also, previously in 2012, I had visited many of the same slums, interviewing and engaging with many of the same people. As it would not even be possible to fully distinguish the multiple forms of knowledge gained during these different periods, I draw on all of them here, as they have enriched my understanding. In fact, without them, it would not be possible to comprehend and contextualise many of the issues covered in the workshops.

In the following section, I will present a summary of the discussions in our reflective workshops in the form of thick descriptions that are based on my workshop diaries. As the photos themselves are not displayed, this is an alternative way to visibilise some of the issues that are important to the activists and to share their stories and experiences. The text has been read and approved by the participants, and I have gained consent to use their real first names.

Learning From/With the Activists

Meeting at NMES Office, 14 June 2014

I have arrived at the NMES office in Sinamangal. Two years have passed since my previous visit in 2012. Although I still am, and always will be, an outsider, a privileged white Western feminist, we are no longer complete strangers to each other. We chat for a while, drink some tea, sit down on the pillows in the meeting room and start discussing our plans.

Meeting at WOREC Office, 27 June 2014

We are at the WOREC office in Balkumari. Luisa informs us that Sunita has collected the disposable cameras; four have been returned so far. We discuss the situation while drinking tea. Luisa says that, for her, it has been difficult to take photos, as she has been very busy. Sunita tells that three other women who wanted to take part have also

been so busy that they cannot participate. We all agree that this is very understandable and decide to meet again the following week to see if any more cameras would have been returned by then. We also reserve a date for our reflective discussion.

Meeting at NMES Office, 1 July 2014

We are discussing the practicalities of the project. Manika tells us that so far, five cameras have been returned. We re-schedule our next meeting for Sunday, and Manika asks me to join a public women's rights protest in New Baneshwor on Monday. We also make plans for visiting the Balkhu slum.

Workshop at WOREC Office, 2 July 2014

We are sitting on the floor of the meeting room, going through the photos. Luisa has taken eight, of which two have failed due to difficulties with the camera. For Geeta, too, using the disposable camera has been challenging. When she showed it to her 9-year-old daughter, she could not believe that it really was a camera. Geeta is accustomed to taking photos with her mobile phone, and for her, the disposable camera was old-fashioned and clumsy. It was difficult to take photos from a distance, as the camera does not allow zooming.

Having taken nine photos, Geeta says that she has mixed feelings about them. It was easy to photograph activism and NMES-related work, but she would have also liked to take more personal photos. However, as we decided in our discussion about privacy issues, the photos should be such that they could be shown to everyone in the group without hesitation, including the researcher. Hence, Geeta has focused on taking photos at different protest sites. She explains that she often takes photos in programmes run by WOREC, especially on their impacts, and posts them on Facebook. Then, she talks about one of the protests. At first, only a few women were protesting, but later, increasingly many people joined. Geeta points out that a continuing problem for the activists is that there is no permanent space for protesting—they have to stand on a narrow pavement near a busy road, which is dangerous. Luisa and I agree, as we have been there. I briefly share my experiences of when I was taking part in the Monday protest two years earlier, wondering why this site is still used.

Geeta explains that despite the risks, the place is very effective—during office hours on weekdays, hundreds of vehicles and thousands of people pass it. The protest gets a large audience. The activists have protested every Monday for over two years, and slowly, more people take an interest in it. Geeta says that even young girls attend the protest despite being organised beside a busy and polluted road. She mentions that both journalists and police officers often ask them questions. She says that there is a strong presence of the police in the protests: 'Sometimes there are more security people than we are!' Sunita adds that often also passers-by come and talk with the activists, asking about their reasons for protesting. They are very happy to explain their aims in defending women's rights, working to end violence against women and challenge patriarchal societal norms.

Luisa has categorised her photos into six thematic groups. First, she has photographed the activists attending protests. Second, she has taken informative photos that could be used for creating awareness and support for women's rights. Third, she has photos of female police officers to highlight that, although women are not expected

to join the police force in Nepal, women now have new roles, both as police officers and activists. She mentions that Nepal is not as dangerous for protesters as some other countries where the police are equipped with guns. Fourth, Luisa has photographed materials with argumentative content such as t-shirts, which she regards as an effective way to use one's body to show support for a cause: 'Clothes are a means of communication, too. We don't need big things to do protest'. Fifth, she has taken photos related to environmental issues. These include images of solar energy, rechargeable batteries and non-disposable bags to highlight 'small decisions that we can do to make an impact'. Sixth, Luisa shows photos taken at a WOREC meeting organised in the city of Dang, where they met a women's group that is growing onions for sale. The women talked about their results, mentioning that they are now making a decent living, earning between 2,000–5,000 Nepali rupees monthly. They have also started new activities, such as knitting, with the help of WOREC.

As Deepak and Kavita, the two other activists who have taken photos, are not present, we do not discuss their photos in detail. Sunita and Geeta pick out a few they consider important. One of them illustrates a women's dance group performing traditional dances. Sunita explains that female dancers at the entertainment section work for long hours, and they have participated in the protests to demand equal pay and respect at the workplace.

'Stop Rape' Protest, 7 July 2014

It is 10 am, and we are attending a women's rights protest in New Baneshwor, across the street from the Everest Hotel. Tens of activists from both NMES and WOREC are present. We are embodying a 'STOP RAPE' banner with signs, each of us carrying a different letter. Luisa is holding 'A'; I am holding 'R'. Some of the activists take turns in giving public speeches. On the narrow street pavement, there is also an ongoing street theatre performance dealing with gendered violence. Many people have stopped and are watching it. I am talking with a person holding the letter 'P'. She says she attends the Monday protest every time it is possible. For her, the most important issue is to bring more attention to legal issues concerning rape cases—they should be fast-tracked in court. According to her, previously, it was more difficult for women's rights activists to protest, as the police were much stricter. Now, they stand in the background observing; rarely are there any problems.

While we are protesting, Luisa actively takes photos. At times, she also engages in the discussion. She is pleased that the street performance is attracting considerable interest. She points out the importance of the activists utilising different strategies for gaining attention. She also refers to one of the activists, Shristi, who is being interviewed by a journalist with a camera group behind her, and tells us that as she is actively engaged in making a documentary film, she does not have time to participate in our project.

Meeting at NMES Office, 7 July 2014

We have come back from the protest site in New Baneshwor and are starting our first group discussion. Bhagavati, Manika, Mani, Maya and I are present. Bina joins us for a while, but has to leave as she is busy with her work. Maya begins by stating that it was beneficial for her to have a camera when working in the Kathmandu-Bhaktapur

district, as she was able to document the hard work the team is doing there. She laughs when telling us that some people in Bhaktapur did not believe that the disposable camera was a real camera. One of Maya's photos is taken at a children's learning centre where NMES activists work daily. In the photo, they are washing hands after cleaning the school classroom together. Maya has also photographed everyday life in the Manohara slum. In one photo, children are outside playing football. During the rainy season, the slum and nearby roads were flooded. Now, the situation is better, and Maya says she feels proud of the photo where children are playing outside, safely. There are also photos of a water tank and an old man holding medicine in his hands. Health services are available in the Manohara slum only once a week, on Saturdays. I am also familiar with this as I visited there when Bhagavati arranged the possibility for me.

Mani has taken 23 photos, most of them at the previous week's protest. In one photo, there is a man cycling. Mani explains that the government has promised to construct proper cycling lanes, but this promise has not materialised, not even when the road itself was widened. Another photo illustrates a micro-bus, which serves to remind that it is difficult for women to travel safely in Kathmandu. Mani is one of the NMES activists actively involved in the 'Safe City' campaign, which aims at raising awareness of gender-specific challenges of living, working and travelling in Kathmandu.

Amongst Mani's photos, there is one that looks like it was taken by mistake; it portrays an empty seat in a micro-bus. However, it turns out that this photo has an interesting story behind it. Mani tells about an incident taking place one morning when she was entering a bus. A man was sitting on a seat reserved for women, and Mani asked him to give the place to her. When he refused, Mani took the camera out of her handbag, and at the precise moment when she was going to take a photo of the man, he stood up and left the bus, looking embarrassed. Mani also shows another photo and talks about a man who was pushing women to enter the micro-bus, but when Mani took out the camera, he started to behave very nicely. We discuss these two incidents in detail, and come to the conclusion that 'a woman with a camera' seems to hold some emancipatory power.

Mani also talks about her own work in NMES and as an activist. She is very dedicated to the cause and believes that she can truly express herself, having an important role with diverse responsibilities. Currently, she is working to expand the NMES unit committee, and she shows a photo taken of one of the meetings. Another one portrays the women's savings cooperative office. In a photo taken by her daughter, Mani is doing dishes. She mentions that she was washing pots and pans very quickly, as she was in a hurry to attend the Monday protest. With this photo, she wanted to point out the double burden of female activists, having to also do household work. Then, she shows a photo of a man carrying vegetables and explains that he has been selling vegetables for 22 years. With this image, she highlights the fact that people working in agriculture are not valued or offered enough possibilities to develop their livelihoods and improve their working conditions. Mani then shows a photo of a woman with vegetables and explains that the woman had given them to the NMES activists as a token of appreciation for their important work. She mentions that vegetable gardens used to be common in Kathmandu, but due to the increasing number of building blocks, there is no longer much space for cultivation.

Mani has also taken some photos at the riverbank. She notes that slum communities are highly dependent on the river, as it gives them access to water. However, the

river also presents some risks. During the monsoon, the riverbank and nearby areas often become flooded, washing away houses and leaving people homeless. She next shows a photo of a huge amount of riverside garbage, emphasising that it has not been dumped there by the slum communities but by outsiders. Indeed, there have been many complex challenges with regard to the Bagmati River, as the slum communities have tried to convince the authorities, including the team in charge of the Bagmati River conservation campaign, that most riverside garbage does not originate from the slums. Rather, the residents are trying to protect the river, as they need clean water. These issues have caused a lot of controversy, as the government has used river pollution as an argument for slum evictions. For example, in April 2012, the riverside slum Thapathali was evicted, leaving hundreds of families homeless. More generally, the lack of clean drinking water is a serious problem in slums. Water plays an important role in the daily lives of women, as they are in charge of collecting water; men do not usually take part in it.

Dillu takes her turn in presenting. Most of her 25 photos have been taken when working on the Bhaktapur district committee. She describes them as ‘development photos’. In the discussion, she prioritises talking about a sharing group in which 500 women are involved in the NMES livelihood programme that is organised in the area monthly. Manju has also focused on livelihood issues. She presents a photo of herself milking a cow and explains that she could not attend the Monday protest as she was busy with the cows. She is working hard, as she is saving money. In another photo, there are clothes hanging in a room; Manju explains that many women take part in the sewing programme. In another image, a woman is running a small tea shop, which represents a common livelihood in the slums. She has also taken a photo of the slum school, which has been expanded, first with funding from the government, later from NMES and some NGOs.

Manika joins in by talking about the significance of school. She says that women in slums ‘waste most of their time collecting water,’ and do not have time to study. She tells about NMES programmes focusing on unpaid domestic labour and shows a photo of a couple she considers to be a good example of sharing household work. She also has a photo of children playing at the office, which, for her, demonstrates how much work women do. She points out that men usually do not take children to their work.

After discussing for several hours, we end the session by talking about the ethics of photographing. Manika says it is understandable that not everyone likes to be photographed. Yet, when she has been taking photos, nobody has refused when she has explained for what purposes they are taken. She believes that photographing is an effective method to engage in activism, as it can be used in many different ways to educate, inform, protest and create solidarity, as well as to reflect on one’s own role. Adding to Manika’s views, Mani concludes that she would love to have a digital camera to be able to take photos of their work all the time. We end the meeting by deciding on a date for our second reflective meeting.

Workshop at NMES Office, 14 July 2014

We have gathered for the second group discussion. We are Bina, Sabitri, Pushpa, Sita, Devaki, Sweta and I. We discuss the key points of the previous meeting and start going through the rest of the photos. Devaki presents her 23 photos, first at a rapid pace,

then slowing down, photo by photo. First, she shows us a photo of a small shop near her home in the Sinamangal slum and a photo of a school assembly. In the next photo, children are playing, including the son of one of her colleagues. There are also photos of mothers with their children, women doing household work and women teaching their children. At the office, she has taken photos of women working and writing. Devaki proudly presents a photo of a Child Message Award, which NMES has won four times. The competition is organised by Action Aid Nepal. This particular award was granted for the 'best photo and report', and for Devaki, the award 'represents motivation to do this work'. There are also some more private photos; for example, of her brother doing homework.

Sabitri has been very active in taking photos. Three of them are of a child training programme and related posters. She tells that, as her son is still quite small, she cannot take part in this or similar programmes herself. She usually brings her son to the office when working there. Sabitri also shows photos taken in Bhaktapur, where NMES is running multiple programmes. In one photo, a girl is carrying a sign that reads 'We are not to be silent'. Then, she shows photos taken at protests organised during an anti-rape campaign. In one of the photos, there is a large watch. Sabitri mentions that 'time is important for us, activists are busy'. She also has taken a photo of me (the author). She explains this with a reference to the importance of international partners and cooperation, and adds that many volunteers and foreigners have visited the NMES office over the years.

Then, Sabitri shows a beautiful photo of women's hands and fingers intertwined, which to her represents women's unity. Additionally, she has taken a series of photos related to rights. A photo of a water bottle serves to illustrate the right to water, and the following one, an image of a computer and mobile phone, serves to illustrate the right to communication. There is also a photo of a big house that highlights the importance of secure shelter rights. When showing us a photo of a guest house with a green lawn in Bhaktapur, Sabitri says that she wants to remind us of the right to a clean environment, which is also connected to land rights issues. The right to food is manifested by two photos: in the first, a man is eating alone; in the second, there are women eating together. In some photos, women are cleaning plates and washing clothes—this represents the right to sanitation. Sabitri also points out the right to leisure time and entertainment: in one photo, there is a young girl and a child playing. In another photo, a man is reading a book; this relates to the right to education. A car and moped in one of her photos refer to the importance of affordable transportation in the city. Concerning livelihoods, Sabitri shows a photo of two men constructing a road pavement outside the NMES office. She then presents photos taken in the NMES programme in the Shankha-Mul slum, dealing with unpaid care work. One photo portrays a man who has cooked his first meal ever, which demonstrates that it is possible to improve women's position by educating men about the importance of sharing the burden of household work.

The first of Sweta's photos is of her mother Bimala, who she considers her idol. Sweta tells us that she has taken photos of her typical day. In the morning, women have many responsibilities, such as cooking and getting children ready for school. Sweta says that they are busy with household work all day long—they need to decide what to cook, buy it and cook it, while also collecting water. She shows a photo of a differently abled woman who does not get any help from her husband. The woman is making small handicrafts for sale. In another photo, there is a boy begging; he

does not have any fingers. Sweta says that he has important skills—he is very good in drawing with his toes, and in this way, he can earn some money. Sweta mentions that also she has faced many difficulties, but is doing quite well at the moment, as she has managed to open a small shop for her livelihood.

One of Sweta's photos has been taken on a roof-top, where there are vegetables growing. Sweta points out that agriculture is one of the most important livelihoods in the community. There is also a photo of a micro-bus, which she took when remembering how difficult it was for her to travel when she was pregnant. In the Manohara slum, she has taken some photos of children and points out that community child-care centres are very important for women, as they enable them to spend some time together outside their homes where they have to do a lot of unpaid care work. Sweta has also taken photos of her family members: her husband and her son and daughter.

Then, it is Pushpa sharing her stories. In one photo, there are women attending the school in the Manohara slum. It is open on Saturdays, and the classes last for two hours. In another photo, children are reading and writing in a small room inside the community house—this is part of one of the programmes in Bhangsighat. In photos taken in the Manohara slum, children are playing football. Pushpa points out that the very dirty riverside, full of garbage, has been cleaned by the residents of the community. They have also planted trees by the riverbank to protect the area from flooding.

Sita first shows a couple of trial photos, which did not work out. Three of her photos are related to water. She explains that the government has made several plans to provide water for slum communities, but so far, water problems have not been resolved. One of the photos illustrates a bridge. The river underneath looks highly polluted, and the riverbank is covered with garbage. Sita explains that the bridge has been declared dangerous by the government, and most of the traffic has stopped. Yet, many people have to use it for livelihood purposes—they are selling vegetables and other goods on the bridge, as the government has forbidden street vendors from selling on the roadside.

Next, Sita shows three photos of children playing, explaining that, instead of video games, they are playing with sand and grass. One of her photos portrays a community shop, run by one of the women in the community. In two photos, there appears a big hole in the ground; it is used for collecting garbage. Sita explains that pollution is damaging the health of the community. There is also one photo of large bulldozers, which the authorities typically use for demolishing slums.

It is Bina's turn. She explains that many photos are of her family and NMES colleagues, as she found it easier to take photos in the private rather than in the public sphere. She presents a photo of her family celebrating her brother's son passing a school entrance exam. There is a series of photos where children, mostly girls, are studying. Bina regards the right to education as crucial. In one photo, one of her activist friends, Bishal, has a mobile phone in his hand—Bina tells us that he is sharing important information with other activists. In one photo, Bina's brother is helping his wife serve food for the kids—this is meant to be a reminder that it is not only women's responsibility.

Several of Bina's photos are related to water. She is angry about the fact that slum communities have to drink dirty water despite the right to safe drinking water. She also shows photos of vegetables and planting tools, saying it would be important for low-income people to be able to cultivate vegetables in the city. At the same time, she points out that all resources are not utilised to the fullest: people throw away a lot

of goods that could be recycled, and garbage can also be collected and sold. In one photo, there is a statue of a goddess in beautiful environmental surroundings. Bina explains its message to us: 'We all think that natural resources are a gift from god, so why are we destroying them?' In the last photo, one of Bina's friends is featured with tape over her mouth. She says that while women are eager to do many things, the patriarchal society prevents them from speaking out or, at least, makes it very difficult: 'I took the photo to symbolise that'.

Discussion

What can be concluded about the contributions of the photography workshops, and especially the reflective discussions? The process started by discussing the aims of the project and its potential benefits and challenges, and outlining the actual process, including some training and discussion about photography ethics. After that, the participants individually took the photos and selected the ones they wanted to present and discuss in the reflective workshops, in which they constructed a meaning for each photo to be further discussed in the group. In this way, the issues and experiences represented in some of the photos (but not all) also gained a shared, collective meaning. This collective element is very important in photovoice; it enables the participants to use the photos to reflect on their lived experiences while sharing and discussing them with others (Liebenberg, 2018). When we reflected on the outcomes in connection to the aims and the desired and potential benefits of the project, the opportunity to reflect on one's life and activism together with others (including the group members and the researcher) was one of the aspects that came up, in addition to others such as learning a new skill (taking photos for a collective purpose) and spending time together. As Liebenberg (2018) mentions, photovoice can be used for creating a slow, reflective space in which photos 'prompt a different kind of reflection on lived experiences' as well as emotions and thoughts about these experiences.

When used well, photovoice can also enable 'going beyond a narrow focus on discourse into the realm of perception, experience and spatial and embodied ways of knowing the world' (Gubrium & Harper, 2013, p. 71). This echoes what Wang and Burris (1994, 1997) emphasised in the original version of photovoice: it can enable participants to reflect on strengths and concerns in the community and produce knowledge and critical dialogue about issues experienced in the community, which can be then utilised in informing policy-makers to bring about social change. In the case under discussion, however, the aims or outcomes were not as substantial. The project was experimental by definition and is best understood as a small-scale example of doing and learning together in an effort to create some common ground.

In practice, this means that as the aim was not to develop concrete strategies for taking action to affect social change, the outcomes cannot be evaluated by conventional standards of photovoice. This, then, raises the question: How can the views of the participants become heard, and how can this result in seeing the results in action? It is important to acknowledge that participants are not 'empowered' by merely providing them with cameras and asking them to transform their experiences into photos, even when they have the possibility to reflect on the photos collectively (Liebenberg, 2018). Moreover, it invites critical questions about my role in the project, as it is important to remember that 'despite the critical positions taken by "outsider" researchers and their embrace of critical reflexivity . . . they are sometimes blinded by their own

positionality, the demands of their university-based contexts' (Lykes & Scheib, 2015, p. 139), a paradox that has been discussed in great detail by Jauhola (2020) in the context of her conceptualisation of 'stumbling scholarship'.

Even though the project was co-organised and did not primarily seek to produce research data for academic purposes, it is not possible to avoid these critical questions in this context, either. Hence, I do not feel comfortable in making any grand claims about the usefulness or benefits of the project, but would rather like to emphasise, in the words of Higgins (2016), that different forms of 'negotiations, relationships, and modes through which knowledge are produced are as important as the knowledge itself' (p. 679). This echoes the premises of decolonial feminism, which is based on the imperative to 'learn about each other as resisters to the coloniality of gender at the colonial difference, without necessarily being an insider to the worlds of meaning from which resistance to the coloniality arises' (Lugones, 2010, p. 753). Yet, the researcher has to see and understand the colonial difference while 'emphatically resisting her epistemological habit of erasing it' (p. 753). In the kind of a context described in this chapter, working through the perspective of decolonial feminist solidarity in practice has meant doing and learning together with the women, as well as bringing forward some of their stories and perspectives. It is in this way it has been also possible to honour, at least partly, the feminist origins of photovoice.

Conclusions

This chapter has described an experimental participatory photography project co-organised with women's rights activists in Nepal as a part of a long-term research-activism collaboration. As the project differed from conventional photovoice projects in several ways (most substantially in terms of aims, the process and role of the photographs), it has to be openly acknowledged that it has left out some of the important components and phases of photovoice in the way originally outlined by Wang and others. As the chosen approach was different, the analysis does not follow traditional ways of elaborating on the outcomes. Rather, the value of the project is understood from the perspective of practicing decolonial feminist solidarity, including dialogue and reflection, as well as collective doing and learning.

In the descriptive section, some of the stories and experiences from the reflective workshops were shared in the form of thick descriptions. The section worked to demonstrate, in a very practical way, how participatory photography is not only about taking photos, but its significance is also related—and often even more so—to the process of reflection. It was the reflective discussions that helped us achieve what was aimed for in the first place; that is, to become more familiar with each other and discover important themes to focus on in more detail later in our research-activism collaboration. When discussing together, we found common ground and understanding, for example, with regard to many issues related to working towards women's rights and defending slum communities against evictions. Developmental justice also emerged as a significant theme; it was considered an aspect that combines several different struggles in fighting against the nexus of patriarchy and neoliberal developmentalism as a cause of gender inequality.

While the project helped some of the participants, and particularly me as a researcher, to become more aware of certain larger social processes and structural issues in which the everyday experiences of the activists are embedded, at the same time, it left us all

a bit uncertain about what the concrete benefits were, both from the perspective of the activists and from my perspective as a researcher. We could not anticipate all the results of the process in advance, as its value would become concretised only later. Indeed, the decision to write this chapter was made several years after the workshops. When discussing about the issue, we decided that in this particular piece, it would be my role to describe the process and learnings from the perspective of the methodology, and later we would co-author another article together.³

Moreover, the project reminded us of the inescapable power imbalances and inherent inequalities in research–activism relationships that cannot be erased despite the best of intentions. One of the most concrete manifestations of this was related to the different scale of effects brought by the failure to gain funding for implementing the next phase of the project. Originally, our plan was first to experiment with participatory photography as a method and later develop the approach further in the context of a separate project. However, we have not been able to acquire funding for it, despite numerous efforts in which we have been involved with some of the women activists during the past five years. While for me as a researcher, this has been disappointing, for the activists, who invested a lot of time and effort in the project, it has been a cause of much more serious and deeper frustration, and very justifiably so. We still continue to write applications, but due to discontinuity the initial excitement has been partly lost; yet, our collaboration continues in alternative ways, in ways not confined by the neoliberal academy.

Notes

1. Moreover, as Mohanty (2003) notes, ‘One problematic effect of the post-modern critique of essentialist notions of identity has been the dissolution of the category of race’, as it has been ‘accomplished at the expense of a recognition of racism’ (p. 137).
2. Cf. discussion on alternative, Black feminist epistemologies (e.g. Collins, 2000).
3. Hence, the reflections presented here must be considered partial and one-sided as they focus mostly on the researcher’s perspective.

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