What are the Affordances of Arts-Based Workshops with Refugee Women and Girls?

与难民妇女和女孩开展基于艺术的工作坊的影响是什么？

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Abstract

This article explores the particular benefits of arts-based interventions with refugee women and girls and the potentialities for enhancing social justice. This truncated review of literature makes reference to arts-based communication, notions of female empowerment, symbolism and metaphor, and expressions of identity and agency and then moves on to explore a number of primarily participatory arts-based interventions with women and girl refugees, looking at the particular affordances yielded.

Keywords: female refugees and arts, social justice and art interventions, arts and gender, arts and female health, women's empowerment and art

摘要

本文探讨了基于艺术为基础的干预方式对难民妇女和女孩的特殊益处，以及增强社会正义的潜力。这篇删减的文献综述提到了基于艺术的交流，女性赋权的概念，象征和隐喻，身份表达和能动性，随后继续探索一些与难民以参与性为主基于艺术的干预方式与女性和女孩难民工作，着眼于产生的特定影响。

关键词：女性难民和艺术，社会正义和艺术干预，艺术和性别，艺术和女性健康，妇女赋权和艺术

The Affordances of Communicating Through Art

Visual art is an important means of expression cross-culturally. Limited migration research has explored a gendered perspective despite gender being "an essential element to consider in the context of international migration, as it is a key feature in the complex and intersecting asymmetrical social power relations embedded in society"; hence, the focus of this paper (Brigham et al., 2018, p. 107). Images can hold complex multiple layers of meaning, enabling powerful communication, and art can elicit empathy in viewers while also enabling the expression of experiences too painful to speak about (Toll, 2018). Indeed, inchoate feeling can be eloquently captured in art works (Hogan, 2016). Words, even if they are in the refugee's first language, sometimes fail, and arts-based work can overcome this gap (Huss, Braun-Lewensohn, & Ganayiem, 2018). Further, the use of art-based activities can encourage skill-building and support women

and girl refugees in recognizing and employing their abilities and strengths. Through the development of skills, women and girls are enabled to contribute to their communities and families, and the use of creative methods can be regarded as an acceptable activity within communities that hold traditional views on female roles. This article will discuss how the arts have been of particular value in project work with young women and girl refugees. Arts-based engagements are capable of situating women and girl refugees as holders of knowledge, privileging their choices, perspectives, and desires through the process of creative expression (Rousseau, Drapeau, Lacroix, Bagilishya, & Heusch, 2005; Fobear, 2017; Oliveira, 2019).

Methods

Searches of databases for this review included Web of Science, Google Scholar, and Scopus. Searches of refugee-specific websites, including UNICEF (United Nations Children's Fund), UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees), UNFPA (United Nations Population Fund), and UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) were also conducted. Gray literature from this latter search of refugee-focused literature included newsletters, in-depth articles from refugee support agencies, and agency policy documents. Articles that encompass practical and theoretical insights on working with refugee girls and women and using arts-based methods were selected. Key words and phrases included "refugee women," "refugee girls," "gender-based violence," "refugee training," "digital literacy," "arts-based methods," and "refugee education." This review generated a breadth and diversity of data; thus, the focus is on those articles that discuss the affordances of art-based interventions (drawing, painting, sculpture, or mixed-media) and make distinct claims about them.

Metaphor, Symbolism and Color

One of the particular affordances of an art-based approach is the opportunity for metaphor and symbolism to play a part in the process of self-expression, replacing or adding to factual narratives and conveying powerful emotions for what might be difficult to represent and describe (Denov & Shevell, 2021). Indeed, metaphors, symbols, and the expressive use of art materials combine to create a rich language for self-expression, allowing for pictorial expressions which can be visceral in their intensity; tone, color, perspectives, contrasts in scale, along with the use of metaphors and symbols allow for a potentially sophisticated communication of feelings and thoughts (Hogan, 2016). Visual symbols and metaphors can condense difficult feelings in a more evolved way than words alone can achieve (Gil Schwartzberg, Huss, & Slonim-Nevo, 2021, p. 5). As Hogan (2016, p. 1) put it:

> Symbolism is multi-faceted and able to contain manifold and contradictory meanings. Indeed, a veritable constellation of meanings can be generated at the meeting point of several symbols. The use of symbols enables the expression of moods and immaterial ideas or qualities, which would be otherwise hard to articulate.

Tacit, embodied feelings can be sensed and explored through the exploration of art materials (Hogan, 2016). Myths and metaphors can provide a distancing action, helping to address past trauma and create coherence from pre-migration and migration experiences (Lemzoudi, 2015). Drawings that are "metonymic and metaphorical reveal cultural values, ways of seeing and understanding the world" (Huss et al., 2021, p. 2). However, the meanings ascribed to their work may differ from facilitators' cultural contexts; thus, facilitators/practitioners "should be 'aware' of the participants' cultural symbols and underlying practices without creating or imposing assumptions from an ethnocentric lens" (Toll, 2018, p. 10). This is a fraught, or perhaps an impossible task, and issues of interpretation are always going to be important. As Hogan (2015, p. 20) has pointed out, "It is imperative that art therapists avoid interpreting art, and work in a facilitative manner, especially so with those using unfamiliar symbolic schemas." Talwar (2003) points out that "our own socio-political choices and theoretical orientations determine our use of interpretation" and cautions that art therapists may "lack the ability to apprehend [the] visual information" being presented (pp. 191–192). Talwar and Hogan's remarks are an important cautionary reminder to practitioners working in such contexts.

Notwithstanding, Rousseau, Lacroix, Bagilishya, and Heusch (2003) note that the use of metaphors can move beyond dichotomous thinking and help refugees represent a transitional space. Hence, a metaphoric framework assists participants in exploring their experiences directly or indirectly (Hogan & Coulter, 2014). For example, Miriam Denov and Meaghan Shevell (2021) used a '"river of life"' autobiographic mapping tool to explore life experiences through drawing with Rwandan children born of rape. Colors and objects conveyed powerful meanings in Green and Denov's (2019) mask-making with Ugandan war-affected children. A Bosnian woman working on a memory quilt recalled how white held specific memories for her; "they were being forced to put white in the windows to signify that they were Muslims" (Baker, 2006, p. 196). LGBT refugees in Canada who were involved in a community art project chose to use the imagery of a Monarch butterfly to portray their journeys across bounded terrain: "The Monarch butterfly was used as a testament to the creativity, bravery, and tenacity that refugees display in their survival against oppressive odds" (Fobear, 2017, p. 58). The butterfly was both a symbol of beauty and a challenge to national borders.

Expressing Identity and Agency

Migrants face complex journeys across unfamiliar territories during which some elements of their sense of identity and belonging may become fragmented, contributing to feelings of isolation and disorientation. They may negotiate times of rapid change and times of waiting that are experienced as being in "limbo" (Kohli & Kaukko, 2018, p. 496). Despite the similarities in elements of their lives, refugees' experiences are varied (Rousseau et al., 2003), and not all refugees will deal with challenges in the same way; therefore, some models of recovery can impose essentialism and further marginalize. One particular complication for women and girls is the frequent threat of sexual abuse and gender-based violence (Hart, 2021), by traffickers, and when living

in refugee camps. This can lead to potential ostracism from their own communities if they speak out on this subject. Consequently, arts and health practitioners must show sensitivity to these contextual issues, or risk unwittingly exacerbating women's distress.

Arts-based interventions offer multiple interpretations, where participants have room to craft and define their own meanings instead of having those imposed upon them by others and share skills. Feen-Calligan et al. (2020) regard the individual's engagement with arts materials as mimicking patterns of thought in other areas of their lives.

Art therapy and storytelling can, when well-planned and well delivered, put a safe distance between refugees and the feelings they are exploring, while offering an opportunity for them to be heard as they voice their version of events (Akthar & Lovell, 2018).

Although discourse regarding refugees is frequently framed around vulnerability and victimhood (Oh, 2012; Guruge et al., 2015), particularly in the case of women and girls, the use of visual methods focusing on participants' strengths and agency, as well as their issues, helps reframe notions of inherent vulnerability. This approach treats refugees as social actors (Oh, 2012; Green & Denov, 2019) in their lives, rewriting the repetitious labeling of refugee populations. The outcomes of arts-based activities can inform community members, parents, and staff on how to support refugees (Yohani, 2008), providing an alternate discourse than despair, violence (Fobear, 2017), and hopelessness. However, some refugee communities may feel pressured to focus on producing work that is sensational and revealing of their displacement and loss (Fobear, 2017; Chatzipanagiotidou & Murphy, 2020). This can be a way for organizations and groups to secure attention and resources, but the categorization of "refugee art" may convey specific "thematic expectations" (Chatzipanagiotidou & Murphy, 2020, p. 2). This focus on the individual's pain can reinforce disempowerment and work against "seeing them as complex and capable actors" (Fobear, 2017, p. 54).

O'Neill and Hubbard (2012) discuss the role of arts-based workshops and techniques with asylum seekers as a means to produce work that shifts public discourse about them, enabling new knowledge to flow out from these spaces to challenge mainstream knowledge. Hearing from marginalized and misunderstood participants foregrounds their views and perspectives, offering the chance for transformations in how they are thought of and spoken about (Oliveira, 2019). In arts-based work, representations of different experiences challenge narrow perspectives and contribute to social justice, and O'Neill (2017) embraces this ethos in exploring the lives of women asylum seekers and refugees through the activity of walking, photography, and filming the walks taken: "Arts-based walking methods are embodied, relational, sensory, multi-modal and can often help to access the unsayable…They involve the role of the imaginary, imagination and politics—a radical democratic imaginary" (O'Neill, 2017, p. 92).

The development of 'soft skills' can be an additional benefit during arts-based work, through learning new techniques such as how to use photography and other digital equipment. Miled (2020) used Photovoice in a project with refugee girls and young women. They were asked to take photographs relating to their lives and experiences,

and they then shared the images during group discussion. Photovoice created a setting for the women and girls to consider their journeys, their losses and gains. Through this technique they were able to express themselves, engage in teamwork, enhance communication skills, and hear other participants' experiences and perspectives.

Utilizing methods that support active involvement and participation helps refugees and asylum seekers engage with the challenges they face and also impacts upon public perceptions of refugees. This acts as a counter-narrative to monolithic and hegemonic discourse (Bell, 2020; Holle et al., 2021) that may position refugees as powerless or "other" (Fobear, 2017). Through art, they have the facility to define themselves instead of being defined by others (O'Neill & Hubbard, 2012) and challenge entrenched stereotypes (Potash, Bardot, Moon, Napoli, Lyonsmith, & Hamilton, 2017). Art creates an expansive space for dialogue with host countries, engendering social justice and the re-visioning of complex lives (O'Neill, 2008; Oliveira, 2019).

Participatory Art-based Interventions with Women and Girls

Refugee populations are marginalized across intersecting areas of their lives, limiting them from fully realizing and using their abilities, an issue that the United Nations (UN) concurs is as unproductive (UN General Assembly, 2016). Arts-based projects and interventions provide a setting for individual- and group-level development and growth, factors that encourage and equip participants who may have had few such opportunities. These methods may also be regarded as less intrusive or threatening to traditional gender roles, offering girls and women opportunities to be involved in activities that are deemed acceptable by their families and communities.

Brigham, Baillie Abidi, and Calatayud (2018) report that a participatory photography workshop helped refugee women to recognize their abilities. One participant in the workshop used a photograph of handmade goods crafted by women she knew who still lived in a refugee camp. Through the activity, she was able to speak up for them and to promote sales of their handicrafts in her host country. Hence, interventions can give women the chance to represent matters that are important to them, to act as role models among their peers, to encourage other women, and to raise women's profile in refugee work both generally and in host countries. Vacchelli (2017) employed collage making with refugee and asylum-seeking women to explore their journeys to the UK; this technique leaves the participant in control of what they want to represent through the choice of imagery they cut out and use.

Among young Syrians, collage proved to be an accessible activity (Feen-Calligan et al., 2020). Sawkins (2020, p. 108) used collage making with immigrant and refugee women, considering it as enabling time for individual reflection, the collective articulation of experiences, and to create a space for exploring lived experience. She also suggests that it aligns with feminist perspectives through being accessible and intentional about building forms of social capital and states that "the practices and materials used in the collage-making workshops engaged the women in using their imaginations and creativity, and provided a safe space to dream and express their hopes for the future" (Sawkins, 2020, p. 183).

Kurdish Yezidi women living in a refugee camp were invited to take part in an arts-based program that involved painting and drawing. Abdulah and Abdulla (2019, p. 169) state that "a positive psychology framework emphasizes the individual's resilience, and at the end of the project, the women had improved confidence and self-esteem and were not under nearly as much psychological strain after completing the course." Supportive arts-based approaches teach and encourage skills and generate enabling contexts for women to build peer networks; the women also gained a sense of achievement and mentioned that "engaging in art helped free them from feeling the brunt of their life stresses" (Abdulah & Abdulla, 2019, p. 169).

Walker and Oliveira (2020) facilitated creative storytelling with women asylum-seekers, the activities included collage making and painting. The participants responded to the introduction of textiles because working with fabric was more familiar than painting and drawing, and many had grown up doing embroidery. Therefore, as this built on their expertise and skills, they chose to make a collective quilt. The authors recognize that this use of sewing techniques may be considered sexist by some commentators; however, the women based the textile stories on the narratives they had written, ensuring that their meanings and interpretations were in focus. The women valued this nurturing environment: "It's so nice to have this space—to listen to what other people say while we are busy making quilts. Like this we get power from each other" (Walker & Oliveira, 2020, p. 199). There were also times when the facilitators wondered if they were "out of their depth" when the women talked of their trauma, but they reflected on the positive role that witnessing can have. Hanania (2017) proposes that employing embroidery in art-therapy with female refugees can be a culturally relevant way of working with them through using a textile form that has an established history.

Lenette and Boddy (2013, p. 73) note that the term "refugee" "often overlooks distinctive stories and circumstances beyond preconceived classifications, meaning that women's social worlds can be examined out of context." Lin (2016, p. 67) considers the role filmmaking has in women's empowerment as a means of self-affirmation that represents the way they see themselves, and how by participating they establish their own presence. The aim is "to encourage the empowerment of migrant women by having them participate fully in the storytelling process both creatively and technically, and by honouring the stories they produce." Women in the participatory project used digital cameras, mobile phones, video cameras, and sound recording to create self-portraits as part of a creative process which privileged their choices and stories, while also contributing to technical skills and artistic expression.

For women refugees who have HIV, past experiences, poor healthcare, and a sense of stigma and shame limit their adaptation in the host country, and therapeutic activities can help them deal with a range of issues: "participants' mental health was affected by the multiple stressors associated with the intersection of being refugees and HIV positive, including social inequalities, poor health and mental health conditions, isolation, racial discrimination and HIV-related stigma" (Vitale, Khawaja, Nigar, & Ryde, 2019, p. 2). The women reported bad experiences while being held in detention centers, with some considering this to be the "most traumatic experience of their life" (Vitale et al., 2019, p. 4). They drew a Tree of Life to represent the different aspects of their lives and found

this to be a way of coming together with other women and realizing they were not alone in their struggles and diagnosis. When grouped together, the trees can create a forest of "empowering collective narratives of strengths and protective capacities" (Denov & Shevell, 2021, p. 24). However, returning to the issue of context sensitivity, all images are open to multiple interpretations. They are polysemic; thus, "Efforts to understand local metaphors, idioms, and subject matter increase the likelihood that directives will be context-sensitive [and] more closely aligned with the intentions of the maker" (Potash et al., 2017, p. 79). Lemzoudi (2015, p. 19) cautions that "Art therapy would profit from additional attention to the interplay between cultural identity, migration and the acculturation process and its depiction and resolution through art, as this aspect has not yet been fully developed in the current literature." Further to this, working alongside women and girls refugees in a participatory, negotiated process can avoid imposing others' expectations for creative expression upon them. Thus, their preferences and choices for how they wish to express themselves are observed as part of progressive change that upholds women and girls' rights (Hart and Krueger, 2021).

Discussion

The lack of research along gender lines is surprising (Brigham et al., 2018), and the affordances of arts-based interventions require further analytic scrutiny (Clift, Phillips, & Prichard, 2021). It is crucially important to recognize structural disadvantage, and that resources in refugee camps are often subject to unequal distribution along gendered lines. This structural inequality includes access to education, training, computer use, workshops, and activities that generate the acquisition of skills. Improved equality of access to creative activities supports women and girls' empowerment (Davis, 2019), and girls with low levels of literacy and interrupted schooling can benefit from these methods (Harris, 2011). The accrued benefits can build resilience in refugee communities because mothers frequently pass their knowledge on to their children, and this development of education and learning has protective outcomes including a reduction in child marriage and early pregnancy (UNESCO, 2021). Nevertheless, discussions of 'empowerment' must be viewed analytically. Whilst reaching women and girls through art-based engagements can assist them in realizing their potential, thus furthering working toward equality and participation, it is useful to analyze underlying motivations for arts-based work. Notions of empowerment can be complicated. Muftee (2014, p. 57) suggests there may be a tendency to ascribe "otherness" to refugee girls and women, with attempts at empowerment being "imbued with certain preconceived ideas about the girls." For example, Muftee observed a cultural orientation program for refugee girls preparing to resettle in Sweden, suggesting that some of the representatives' discussions about Sweden and gender equality assumed that the girls did not currently have experiences or views relating to equality. The representatives stressed the "importance of the girls taking control of their life while, at the same time, telling them just how that life ought to be" (Muftee, 2014, p. 53). Contentiously, Lin (2016, p. 72) suggests that "empowerment is not something that can be measured, quantified, or defined by someone in a position of privilege or power", though what that means is not clearly defined. However,

dichotomous and stereotyped thinking about female refugees as lacking any agency *is potentially problematic* if it feeds into and generates discourse that may overlook their capacities, rather than creating space for dialogue (Muftee, 2014). It also can perpetuate stereotypes around female passivity.

Mixed-sex interventions need to be cognizant of the very real difficulty that girls and young women may face in being able to participate, both in terms of access issues and being able to fully engage because of cultural prohibitions, including gender deference norms, caring responsibilities, and the risks female refugees face when travelling on foot to venues. These challenges can lead to women and girls being limited to highly local, domestic spheres within camps. Furthermore, sexual and gender-based violence is prevalent but underreported, and acknowledgment of it can result in women and girls' stigmatization and ostracism (UNHCR, 2011). Moreover, the act of enabling refugees to "speak up" may be motivated by expectations about how female refugees should speak and what they should say… Conversely, "speaking-up" may be quite impossible in certain contexts resulting in profound ostracism, which we may regard as unwarranted or irrational, but is nevertheless very real. We should also recall that, *even* in so-called developed countries, women who do speak out might be viewed as strident or aggressive; self-assertion is far from straightforward for women in any context.

Notwithstanding, the potentially positive outcomes of arts-based activities can be significant in helping female refugees deal with their experiences, while also recognizing and developing their abilities. This can support some measure of recovery from difficult events and enable sense making of their current situation. Practitioners must weigh-up each situation based on the contextual factors, as there may by a case for girl and women-only interventions. Conversely, women learning to express themselves amongst male peers may be a huge and empowering step. Refugees deal with complex adjustments when they leave their home country, adapt to refugee camps and, in some cases, move on into host countries. Along this continuum, they may need to learn more than one new language and adapt to local customs and values, leading to a hybrid sense of negotiation between different languages and cultures (Evans, 2020). Art-based work with people who have been displaced can help them to connect with their emotions due to the stress, change, and uncertainties of living in camps or while they await news of claims for asylum (Lemzoudi, 2015).

Participatory Approaches

Ethical sensitivity and reflexivity are necessary when designing and delivering arts-based workshops, but it is possible that despite care in the planning and delivery of an activity, participants might choose not to be involved in a sustained way, might adopt the methods, but then make their own choices about the end results, or take part but not enjoy or understand the purpose of the work. Nevertheless, brief or longer-term arts-based interventions can assist in helping refugees engage with their abilities, explore their potential, contribute to generating skills, and indicate how future support can be planned and facilitated. This is of particular concern with regards to women and girl refugees, a population who are repeatedly marginalized. O'Neill and others above

have stressed the utility of participatory approaches. These are approaches that seek to recognize and use the particular expertise of those being worked with. Participatory approaches are in sharp contradistinction to "conventional elitist research which treats people as objects of research processes" (Tilakaratna, 1990, p. 1). Therefore, Birch and Miller (2002) remind us that participants should have clarity about project aims, and those conducting activities must be mindful of ethical and practical considerations that will ensure women and girls have the best opportunity to take part and to gain benefit. This can be encouraged through ensuring that participants are active co-researchers in the participatory ideal (Wadsworth, 1998), who are involved in planning processes and defining research problems (Anyanwu, 1988). Models of participatory research and project development vary, but through prioritizing engagement and consultation with community members during decision-making, participatory social change can be enabled. A participatory approach concords with the UN General Assembly 2016 recommendations on inclusivity and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1990). The affordances of interventions in terms of social justice are enhanced by this approach. However, it is evident that there are different notions of 'participation' at play in the above range of interventions. For example, in the above sections, some of the tropes around expressing identity and agency have been critically explored in relation to making and exhibiting art with female refugees. Few of the papers talk in any depth about issues of interpretation, but some do stress polysemy—that images are open to multiple readings. It is perhaps Lemzoudi (2015) who does this most persuaively. However, context sensitivity is not always addressed in the papers to a satisfactory degree.

Women and girl refugees could benefit, we suggest, from an explicit acknowledgement and awareness of structural injustice in the planning, delivery, and reporting of interventions. As Skyrme, Hogan, and McDougall (2022 in-press) have recently argued: "It is imperative that projects move beyond post-colonial pacification and a mere deficit 'skills building' model; they need to be citizen-led, culturally appropriate transformations employing 'radical incrementalism' toward sustainable developments (Swilling, 2020, p. 7)."

Conclusion

Art-based work with refugee women and girls can contribute to justice, and challenges hegemonies (Corbett & Moxley, 2018; Holle et al., 2021), informing the public, humanitarian agencies, and services at the political, social, artistic, and emotional levels and demonstrating refugees' skills and experiences through their art. This is an important factor in undoing negative discourse about refugees' passivity and dependency, which has the capacity to reproduce cycles of exclusionary processes and poor treatment of refugees (O'Neill & Hubbard, 2012). We would like to conclude by exhorting those working with refugee women and girls to maintain an awareness of structural injustice in the planning, delivery, and reporting of interventions and to adopt inclusive and contextually sensitive participatory methods in the conceptualization, development, and conduct of projects. Not only is this beneficial at the level of the individual refugee woman or girl's involvement, but it has longer term potential in terms of enabling

protective factors such as educational, and skill-building outcomes that equip female refugees to take a greater role in the lives of their families and communities.

Acknowledgement

This is a Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) QR Fund project 2021 awarded to Professor Susan Hogan. Particular thanks are due to Professors Alexandra Kendall and Julian McDougall and to Lisa McCabe.

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