

Through the eyes of mothers: Using PhotoVoice to study the challenges women in one Nairobi slum face in balancing work and child care

Context: In urban informal settlement areas of Nairobi, as throughout sub-Saharan Africa, women's ability to achieve economic autonomy is often limited by their concurrent responsibility to care for young children. For many women full engagement in the labour force depends on their ability to find safe and affordable child care. However, the extent to which the nature and magnitude of how the barriers of high childcare costs and its low quality affect women's labour force participation is not well known. How do the women themselves see the issues? How might PhotoVoice as a participatory visual methodology be used to deepen an understanding of the issues?

Fieldwork: In 2015, women from Korogocho, Nairobi responded to this question through a method of inquiry known as PhotoVoice. The project's prompt asked them, "how does child care effect your work?" And, "what are some of the challenges and some of the solutions?" PhotoVoice is the process of taking pictures and writing short captions that identify community-based challenges and explore possible solutions. Participants used digital cameras and mobile printers. They collected their photographs in groups, and were accompanied by security guards who were well-known to the women and made them feel safe. The women produced over one hundred photographs. The narratives they generated encompassed the various views and tensions these women experienced in relation to child care.

PhotoVoice: A Brief Background. "How can we as women [girls] tell stories that eradicate the disparity between how we are seen and what we feel? How do we present who we really are in terms of images? And why does it matter that we do? To answer this we need to understand the very fundamental way that the representation of people helps to determine who they become" (Spence and Solomon cited in Wang, 1999, p. 187). The term PhotoVoice refers to the use of cameras by community members to explore stories, experiences or ideas about a particular topic or issue. In a sense, the photographs taken can act as a visual "voice," with or without written captions, to help tell these stories. The actual term 'PhotoVoice' was first coined by American researcher Caroline Wang in the 1990s through her work with women and policy makers relating to health issues in rural China. It is now a well-established approach for doing qualitative research, as well as working with young people in educational contexts. Photovoice as a method is deeply rooted in feminist traditions, particularly in relation to women's bodies and women's health. As such it is highly appropriate to use this method when working with women in relation to child care. In the tradition of feminist research, the use of PhotoVoice as a research tool privileges the voices of those most marginalized (typically girls and women), and serves as a tool for self-representation and reflexivity. When used in areas such as women's health, this method has the potential to challenge dominant views of how girls and women are seen.



PhotoVoice as a Research Methodology

The participatory visual methodology of PhotoVoice involves giving simple point and shoot (usually digital) cameras to participants to visually 'voice' that which is often difficult to put into words. As such, PhotoVoice is a tool to see 'through the eyes' of those who are often the most marginalized in the research process (Wang & Burris, 1997). The method gives participants opportunities to (1) document and record experiences and conditions around them; (2) critically reflect on the issues; and (3) develop strategies to reach policy-makers. While PhotoVoice has been used with many different populations, it has played a particularly important role in work with marginalized groups. In previous work this has included working with children in many different settings, ranging from children living in informal settlements in sub-Saharan Africa (Mitchell, Moletsane, Stuart & Nkwanyana, 2006; Chege, Maina, Mitchell, & Rothman, 2014) to rural youth in South Africa in relation to addressing stigma and HIV and AIDS (Moletsane, De Lange, Mitchell, Stuart, Buthelez & Taylor, 2007).

Visual researchers have found that the strength of such an approach lies not simply in researchers analyzing the pictures produced by the participants, but rather, in the engagement with the participants themselves in relation to narrating their own stories behind the photos, having participants analyse/interpret their own visual productions, and the fashioning of resulting exhibitions.

PhotoVoice Process

The process of conducting a group PhotoVoice session, as we have documented in the various publications noted above, involves a number of steps. Whilst there is some flexibility around these steps, they typically include at a minimum the following: (1) a lead in time to contextualise the work (why are we working on this issue?); (2) participants learning about working with cameras and taking photographs; (3) engaging with the prompt (or what they are going to be focusing on in their photographs); (4) learning how to operate the cameras; (5) visual ethics (including the 'no faces protocol' of what to take pictures of besides or instead of faces); (6) taking the pictures; (7) looking at the pictures; (8) small groups working with the photos, reflecting on the ideas, and creating captions to go with the photos; (9) small groups presenting their analysis to the larger group; and (10) planning and preparing for disseminating the work through exhibitions to community members and policy makers.



Process Photos

Behind the scenes photographs that show the participants in action; learning and testing the technology; taking photos in response to their prompt; analyzing their images; identifying themes and producing analytical narratives in relation to the photographs

"What has excited me is the way we have gone to the field. At least community members know that I know how to take photos."

"We are digital."

"What has excited me is our communication here"

"I have learnt to use a camera, to zoom"

"I have learnt that you are not supposed to take someone's face when taking a photo"

Some of the key objectives of using photovoice as a visual methodology include the following:

Education and Empowerment: Photovoice aims to raise awareness and develop critical thinking about a topic. It is a fun way for participants to engage with the topic, and often feels rewarding to take, discuss and exhibit photographs. It is through the process of thinking critically about an issue, deciding what photos to take, and engaging in dialogue with other participants that photovoice is educational. Rather than focusing on textbook facts and rote learning, it provides participants with the opportunity to explore the relationships between social and environmental issues in their lives.

Participation: It is a method often used with groups of people whose voices are marginalized, overlooked or ignored. It is a participatory tool that puts cameras in the hands of people with the belief that they have something important to say. When used with youth, it can be a meaningful way to realize children's rights to be heard in matters that affect them. This approach challenges traditional views of what counts as knowledge, and who creates knowledge. The photographers are the experts about their own lives.

Advocacy and Action: Photovoice aims to advocate for and influence social and/or environmental change. By showing the photographs to key people, like policy or decision-makers, the photographers can share their experiences or perspectives. The specific goal for change may vary, depending on the target audience. For example, students may display their photographs at the School Board to express concern about a particular issue affecting them.

Artistic Expression: Building on the expression, "a picture can tell a thousand words," PhotoVoice involves using photographs as a visual medium to express something. You can tell a different story with photographs, or you can tell a story in a different way using photographs. PhotoVoice provides the opportunity to use creativity, imagination, metaphor and 'artistic license' to learn about a topic, or communicate a message (Thompson, 2013).



Participants' Analysis

PhotoVoice lends itself to a multi-layered approach to working with the data. First, there is the idea of participatory analysis or the analysis carried out by the women themselves. The women produced more than 100 photos, and worked with their own photos to produce captions and then poster narratives through which they offered their analysis of the issues. In presenting their poster narratives to each other at the time of the PhotoVoice workshop and later to a community forum, they further explored the issues. The audio recordings and resulting transcripts serve as key data sources that are based on the words and images produced by the women. Second, there is the analysis carried out by the research team which takes into account the photos, the captions, the posters and the oral presentations. There are many different ways to carry out this analysis; for example, Gillian Rose's (2012) visual discourse approach which draws together the idea of sites : (1) sites of production, (2) the site of the image (content, themes, mood and so on), and (3) sites of audiencing. In addition, PhotoVoice analysis can also be carried out through more conventional thematic approaches, such as Nvivo software. Here we offer the work according to three dominant themes: Safety and Security, Financial Security and Child Care, Environment and Safety.

Workplace Hazards and Child Well-Being arose in many aspects of the participants' discussion. These aspects not only concerned women in their workplace, but also, the safety and well-being of children. Women discussed the congested spaces they live within, which create workplace hazards. Often, with the little money the women do manage to make, they have to spend it on medical bills because either they or their children have been injured. This kind of issue makes it even more difficult for the women to save money for day care since most of it is spent of healthcare. One concern that arose repeatedly for the women was the fact that their unattended children are at high risk of physical and sexual assault by older kids and other adults.

Participants' Captions

"This village has become very congested. You can see there is this woman cooking 'githeri' (mixture of maize and beans) here... There is fire there where 'githeri' is being cooked. There could be a child who has been sent to buy tomatoes and vegetables and the child gets burnt while passing there."

"Here there is a mother who is coming from work on the road and there is a trench. She is in danger because anything can happen... she can slide and fall in that trench."

"This woman is plaiting; she is a local salonist. It is good in terms of income, but it is still risky because she is plaiting by the roadside and her child plays on the road. A vehicle can come and hit the baby without the mother seeing."

"A daycare would be good for us single mothers. You know you'll be leaving them in a safe place."



Participants' Analysis

Economic Security figured predominantly in the participants' discussions as one obstacle. Many participants noted that a mother must go to work in order to have money for food even if she does not have someone to care for her children. Even if a woman has a job, or runs a small business, she may not make enough money for day care. With little choice, mothers will either bring their child to work, or if necessary, leave them unattended for the day. These choices also come with risks: children can be injured at their mother's place of work (burned by oil; hit by a car; fall into a trench) while for the children left unattended, some have to scavenge in the trenches for materials to trade for food, many play out on the street, and many of them are vulnerable to other peoples' actions. These risks are tied to the limited choices these mothers have for child care: affordable or free day care is seen as a priority.

Participants' Captions

"She [the mother] has left the child to sell the tomatoes as she goes to look for other casual jobs... whatever income she is getting from that business is not enough to take care of these children. If she was supported with money so that she can start a bigger business- expand her business so that she won't need to leave the child in the business to go and look for money elsewhere."

"We have trash that is picked/ collected and it is put on top of the iron roof. There are children putting stuff in a sack. Maybe the mother sent this child there, 'go and come back with lunch money,' because maybe the mother doesn't have an option and could not come to such a place. The child finds it simple to do because there are other children."

"If the mother was able, she would not give the child clothes to wash. If the mother had money, she would have looked for a casual employee and paid her so that at least the child could go and study."



Participants' Analysis

Environment and Safety—Many participants commented on the health and well-being of their children as it tied directly to their daily environments. Women expressed their concern over how dirty their surroundings are—whether that is children playing in waste water or on the roads, mothers washing clothes or cooking food near open sewage trenches—these situations often lead to costly medical bills because their children have picked up a disease or hurt themselves. These costs related to living in places with a lot of health risks becomes an obstacle for them to save money for daycare.



Participants' Captions

"Where the sewer is being emptied, there is a "Mahindra" (cart for carrying feces/human waste). These children are playing in the water that has remained behind from the toilet. This is feces and you know it has dirt. There was that cholera outbreak there. The children have gone to play, but what if they come back with cholera, where will you say they got it from? From this!"

"This is a place where our children bring plastics and such things—they can be pricked by bottles... wearing no shoes where bottles and metals are dumped."

"This dirty water is bad because it brings us diseases. When schools are closed, you normally just leave your children as you go to work. So you will find those children have gone to play in that water, they even swim in that water and they get diseases from that water."



Women's Recommendations

The following is a list of recommendation based on the participants' findings of their PhotoVoice inquiry into the child care obstacles they face in their daily lives:

FINANCIAL SECURITY AND CHILD CARE

- Mothers with many children need to get education-fund sponsors
- Day care centers which are subsidized are needed for all to afford
- Provide loans to improve on businesses run by women
- Involve men in such conversations/workshops to give them a chance to learn/share the challenges women face in providing child care and work

SAFETY AND SECURITY

- Build better places for doing the already existing businesses i.e. well-built kiosks, safe and with lighting
- Land allocation - good spaces and structures should be built for small businesses e.g. a sheltered area with access to water for washing clothes, safety, and with lights for doing business at night
- Extra-tuition for the children especially during holidays so they are not idle
- The government's directive has moved rehabilitation from center-based to home-based care, and people should now be ready for the transition and educated

ENVIRONMENT AND HEALTH

- Conduct free medical camps to deal with illnesses affecting children
- Open ditches/trenches should be covered as they are accidents spots, mostly for children
- Construct more toilet facilities for people to use

What PhotoVoice Can Do?

PhotoVoice has been found to be a very effective tool for reaching the voices of community members, and providing a forum for stakeholders to come together to both see and engage in dialogue about the issues. It can be a stand-alone tool or it can be used in combination with other methods and tools such as individual interviews and even surveys. It is regarded as a tool for action and works best when there is a commitment on the part of researchers to take time to engage the participants in ways that are meaningful from beginning to end (from taking the actual photographs and engaging in participatory analysis through to being part of determining who should see the photographs). It is ideal then for community dialogue and provides the basis for policy-making dialogue, especially because the images can be displayed in so many different settings and to so many different stakeholder groups. It is not a panacea, however. Its strength rests on the time and commitment of the community and research team and the recognition of the significance of the idea of research as social change.

A Word About Visual Ethics

In using participatory visual methodologies there are several critical issues. One is in relation to how we as researchers act with the participants in research studies. We should make sure that participants are fully aware of what will happen in the project, that every attempt will be made to ensure confidentiality and anonymity, and that they have a right to withdraw if it is a research study. The second issue, and the one that is perhaps more challenging, is to provide training and support to the participants who are themselves going to go out and take photographs. One might call this visual ethics training. It is also a way to provide human rights training.

Do's

The following is a list of do's that are helpful in providing training to participants in the area of visual ethics.

Do Think About Anonymity: No Faces. An important point in research relates to anonymity – something particularly challenging when using photography or video. When participants are involved in video and photo productions, it is important to provide some training on what might be called a 'no faces approach', or on what one could photograph besides faces. Much of this work is symbolic and may actually encourage more creativity and abstract thinking. It is a good idea to take time to review different types of images. You might want to create your own Powerpoint presentation or poster that can be re-used, and that can be used to facilitate discussion. Often there is no 'one size fits all' answer and context is very important.

For example, the participants can take:

- Photographs of objects and things;
- Photographs of scenes or buildings without people in them at all;
- Photographs of people at a distance so that no one is easily recognizable;
- Photographs of a part of the body (hands, feet); and
- Photos of people in a shadow or taken from the back.



Other Points

- Do Ask permission to take pictures in public places such as shops.
- Do Ensure the safety and security of community photographers who may be more vulnerable because they have cameras. .
- Do Be sensitive (and teach sensitivity) to local contexts. Sometimes it is not appropriate to take photographs or make videos in public places.

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