



RESEARCH REPORT

WE STILL FIGHT IN THE DARK

**Evaluation Findings, Reflections,
and Lessons for Policy & Practice**

2022



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Reflections, and
Lessons for Policy
& Practice**

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1. Executive Summary

Background

This document reports on co-produced creative arts-based research conducted with Brazilian migrant women survivors in London, who have experienced direct and indirect forms of gender-based violence. Working with Migrants in Action (MinA), a community theatre organisation, this project sought to develop and deliver a series of experimental, co-produced and creative applied arts workshops and an audiovisual installation with Brazilian migrant women survivors in order to capture and illuminate Brazilian women's institutional and creative stories as a form of community healing and rights-claiming. In doing so, we also sought to evaluate whether and how engagement in this research might improve these women's wellbeing and to use these insights to inform a set of practical recommendations for policy and practice.

We outline the key findings of our work below and set out a number of recommendations for policy and practice.

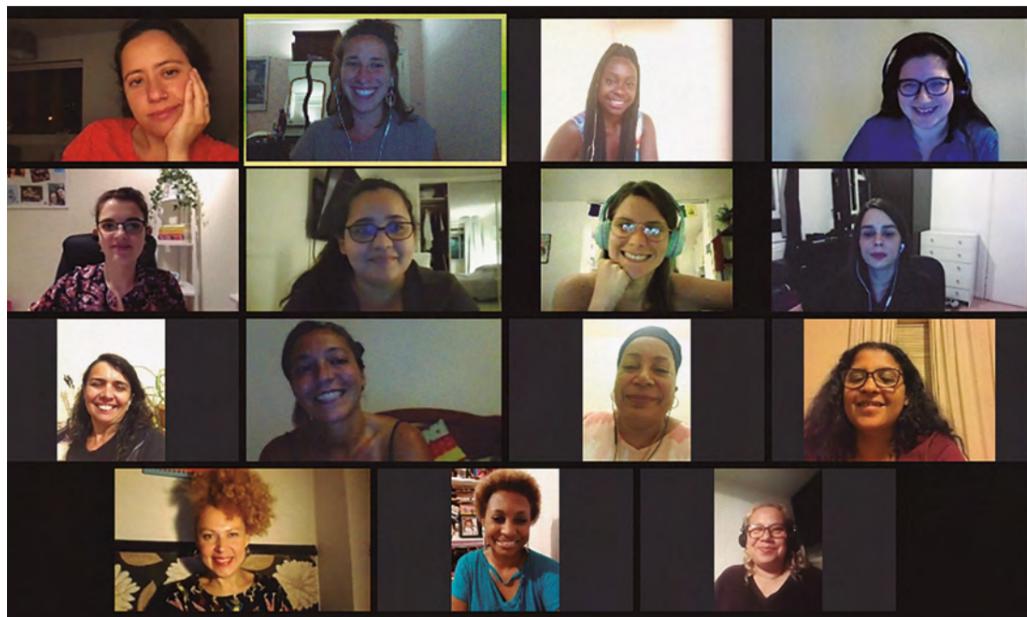
Finding 1 - Initial findings from our evaluation survey, using The Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale, suggest creative, co-produced research interventions, such as ours, may improve overall mental wellbeing of participants. Using survey responses collected before and after the creative research intervention, we found a small aggregate increase in the wellbeing of the women who took part in the workshops. Acknowledging the limits of our sample size and of using normative, quantitative frameworks for understanding mental wellbeing, these initial results provide us with a useful starting point a) to conduct further research on the impact of co-produced creative research on participants and b) to advocate for the use of these methods in other contexts.

Finding 2 - Through our analysis of ethnographic observation data, we found that the theme of "belonging" is key to a deeper understanding of these Brazilian migrant women's isolation and susceptibility to violence, as well as participants' hope for liberation. Participants reported a sense of alienation and isolation, often linked to the hostile immigration environment, which added to their material conditions of marginality and difficulties in accessing support. At the same time, "belonging" was reported to have a negative side, especially in relation to feeling "suffocated" or "tangled" by one's identity, community, or wider experiences of intersectional discrimination.

Finding 3 - Offering migrant women survivors of violence a safe space that facilitates agency appears to be of benefit to psychosocial wellbeing. Participants suggested a safe space to be somewhere where they can trust the

process and each other, speak their own language, share their own stories without being judged or questioned further, a space where they can take risks, learn and grow from other migrant women. Participants were enabled in taking control or agency over their histories and experiences - a consistent theme in accounts of how the workshops benefitted them. Participants reported variously on how the workshops provided different forms of agency, including creative, artistic, expressive forms of empowerment as well as a sense of social agency by strengthening connections with their peers.

Finding 4 - The question of race challenges simplistic understandings of the “migrant experience” and requires further explication. Participants noted an absence of engagement with race, specifically the experience and struggles of black women, in the original research, the re-interpretation of which formed the basis of these workshops. This important point provoked challenging conversations among participants who felt unrepresented by the research as well as among those for whom specific focus on racialised identity obscured their own particular experiences. The need for these kinds of difficult conversations in this work may challenge simplistic hopes to “enhance” wellbeing in the short-term, but also underlines the importance of generative conflict taking place within the boundaries of a safe space with trusted facilitators.

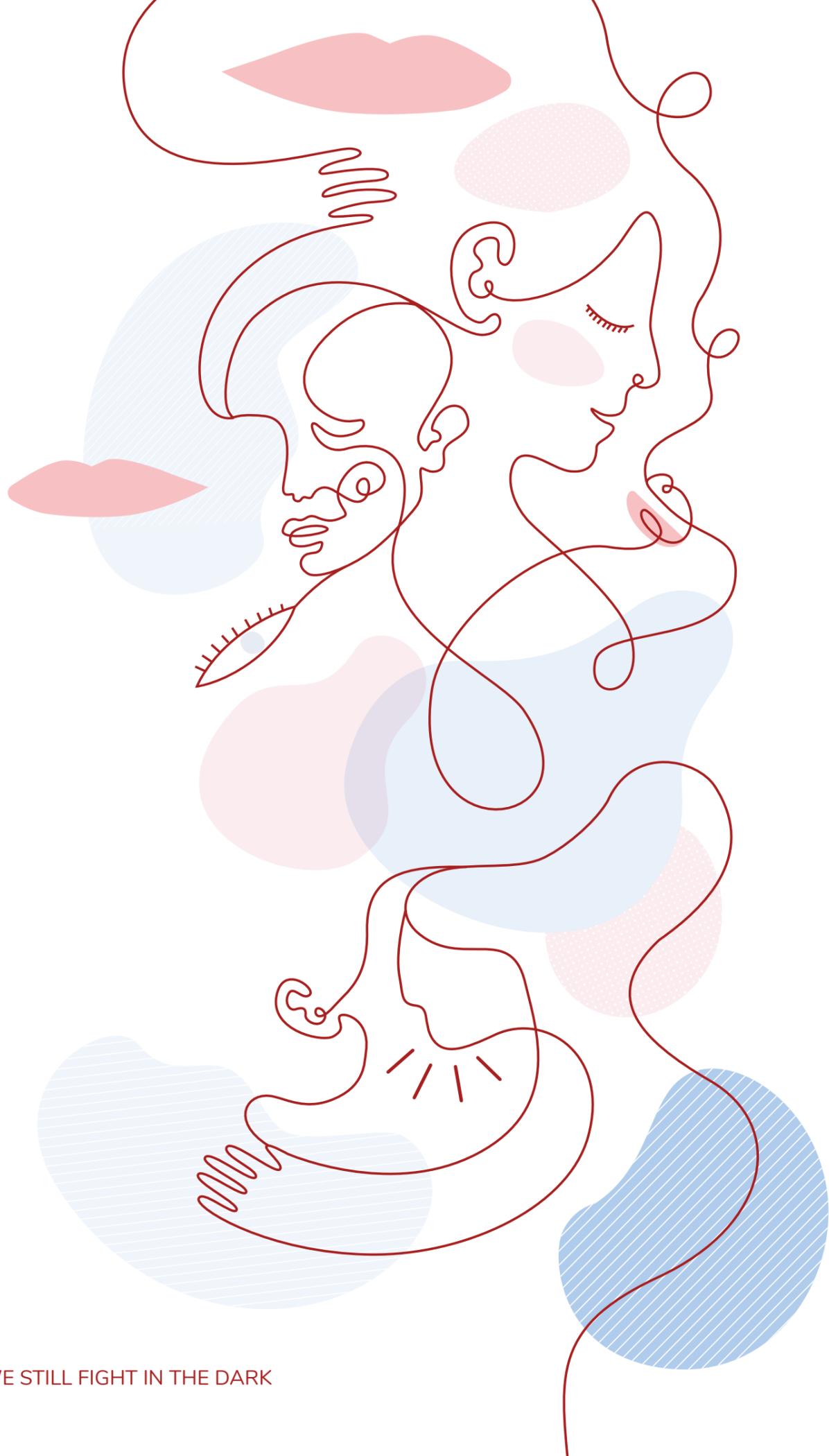


Recommendation 1 - Researchers seeking to undertake co-produced and creative research with marginalised groups should recognise the ethical and practical complexities of undertaking this work and should integrate ethics approvals, safeguarding resources, trauma informed approach and facilitation training to ensure the work can be both richly productive and carried out in a safe way.

Recommendation 2 - Both policymakers and researchers should recognise the value of co-produced, creative research interventions both as a relatively inexpensive means of ameliorating the lives of those who take part, but also as a source of a uniquely valuable evidence base with which to inform decision-making, in governmental and non-governmental contexts.

Recommendation 3 - Wholesale structural reform is needed to address the persistent and deep-rooted issues of patriarchy and sexism that underlie gender-based violence, together with wider racialised state and institutional violence that excludes migrant women survivors. Policymakers seeking to enact even incremental policy change to address gender-based violence need to work to address the issues of lack of trust in state institutions and social isolation among migrant women often associated with the hostile immigration environment.





2. Introduction

In England and Wales in 2020, 28% of women aged 16-74 had experienced domestic abuse; 7% had experienced actual or attempted sexual assault in the home (ONS, 2021). These figures refer only to reported violence and to that which occurs within the home. Rates are much higher when gender-based violence in general in private and public spheres are accounted for; 44% of women in the UK as a whole have experienced physical and/or sexual violence by a partner or non-partner since the age of 15 - higher than the EU average of 33% (EU Agency for Fundamental Rights 2014, 29).

These stark figures are often (but not always) higher for migrant women. It is important not to assume that migrants experience more gender-based violence because of inherent cultural differences. Instead, migrants' vulnerability is linked with a hostile immigration environment, racism, discrimination and exclusion. Insecure immigration status is a persistent challenge for migrant women survivors of gender-based violence as they are reluctant to report to state authorities as they fear deportation, losing their children or reprisals from perpetrators. In addition, they have 'No Recourse to Public Funds' (NRPF - where they are unable to access any state support) (McIlwaine, Granada and Valenzuela-Oblitas, 2019).



2.1 The experiences of Brazilian women in the UK

This report focuses on Brazilian migrant women in London, who form part of a wider Brazilian community in the city and beyond. The most recent reliable figures of the size of this population is based on the 2011 census, which suggests that, in the context of a Latin American population of approximately 250,000 in the UK - with 145,000 of them based in London, there were 52,000 Brazilians in the UK, with 60% based in London (McIlwaine and Bunge, 2016). The likelihood is that these are under-estimates due to the focus on the 2011 census and the fact that many Brazilians are unlikely to be included in the statistics. The only existing research on Brazilian women's experiences of gender-based violence, on which this current project is based (and from which it adapts its name - based on a collaboration with the Latin American Women's Rights Service [LAWRS]), shows that 82% have experienced some form of violence during their lifetime, of which 70% was in the public sphere (based on a survey with 175 women). Within this, 48% was psychological violence, followed by physical (38%) and sexual (14%). Also important is that while 77% experienced violence before leaving Brazil, 52% who have suffered in Brazil, experienced it again in London. In racial terms, those who identified as having mixed heritage were more likely to suffer (66%) than white women (58%) (two of the three Black women included in the survey experienced violence) (McIlwaine and Evans, 2018, 2022).

This research has been important in providing the first study of the incidence, nature and causes of gender-based violence among Brazilian migrants in the UK. However, this work did not re-engage with the women participants (for reasons of confidentiality) or seek to explore further how this group copes with such violence. It is essential for theoretical and practical reasons not to treat these women as passive victims. Instead, in this project, we sought to investigate how these women understand their experiences as survivors. How do they perceive the social, economic, or political conditions that underlie their experience of violence? And what strategies, solutions, or coping mechanisms do these women employ in response to violence?



Asking these questions is not only an important step in developing a deeper understanding of Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) against Brazilian women in the UK by re-centring the voices and experiences of a marginalised, but not passive, group of women. They are also vital for the practical task of beginning to formulate a set of policy recommendations and practical guidance to VAWG which is grounded in and responsive to the experience of these women.

Yet, the scale of this task cannot be understated - as is attested by the statistics already cited above. Addressing the problem of gender-based violence internationally and in local contexts, requires deep structural reform to overturn profound and historically persistent intersectional misogyny, racism, and xenophobia. These structural conditions are reinforced in the UK by the immigration regime - the so-called "hostile environment" - that actively militates against migrants, especially migrant women survivors. Indeed, this often creates another form of violence against such women when they are unable to access support because of active or passive infrastructural violence (McIlwaine and Evans, 2022).

In this context, therefore, a further set of questions arises with practical and methodological implications. What kinds of actions or interventions might have a reparative impact for these women? What forms of intervention can facilitate community healing? Is there a role for co-produced research, which seeks to re-centre the lived experience of migrant women, in supporting these aims? If so, what methods and methodologies might be appropriate to do this? And can creative, co-produced methods like these be wielded to have a practical impact on policy and practice?

These questions have been at the core of the work on which this report is based.



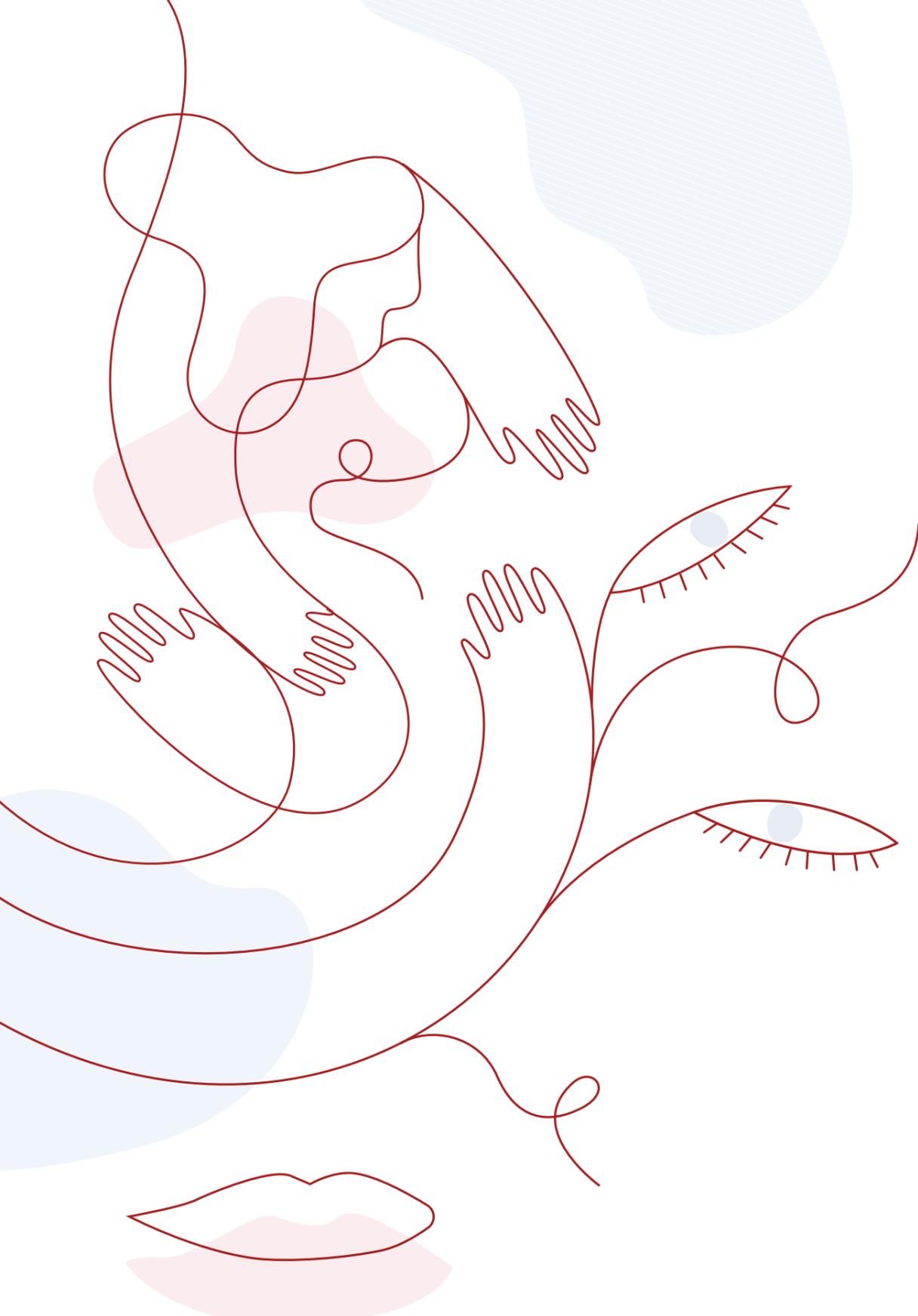


3. Background: the project

This project works directly with Brazilian migrant women survivors in London, who have experienced direct and indirect forms of gender-based violence, using innovative, co-produced creative arts-based research methods. Working with Migrants in Action (MinA), a community theatre organisation, it has addressed the following aims:

1. To develop experimental, co-produced and creative applied arts workshops and an audiovisual installation with Brazilian migrant women survivors, to capture and illuminate Brazilian women's institutional and creative stories as a form of community healing and rights-claiming
2. To understand whether and how engagement in this creative process might improve Brazilian migrant women's well-being, understood broadly
3. To produce a set of reflections and recommendations for practitioners, policymakers, and researchers based on the findings, with a specific focus on the role of creative engagements in influencing policy.





4. Research question(s)

1. **Outcomes:** In what way did a series of creative, collaborative arts-based workshops contribute to the individual and collective wellbeing of migrant women in the UK who have experienced gender-based violence?
 - a. Did this intervention appear to improve mental wellbeing? And, if so, in what ways and how?
 - b. Did this intervention affect these women's sense of creativity? And, if so, in what ways and how?
 - c. Did this intervention enhance or change this group's sense of community/collectivity/solidarity? And if so, in what ways?

2. **Policy/Practice:** What lessons can researchers, arts and community support practitioners, and policymakers with an interest in gender-based violence and/or and migrant women in the UK?
 - a. In the context of the current national and local policy landscape, can arts-based interventions like this provide an effective method for community organisations and policy makers to draw on, to improve the lives of migrant women with experience of gender-based violence?
 - b. What lessons can policy-makers specifically learn about the lives of migrant women with experience of gender-based violence that can inform current and future policy?
 - c. What lessons can practitioners learn about the development, delivery, and evaluation of creative arts-based workshops?
 - d. What can researchers learn about a) the value of creative research methods for engaging with marginalised groups and b) how these lessons apply to wider questions re: co-production, co-creativity, and expertise by experience, etc.?



4.1 Methods

This project is a multi-method investigation into the nature of gender-based violence among Brazilian women that used both participatory and creative research methods combined with qualitative evaluation methods to examine the impact, key themes, and emergent reflections for policy and practice.

The core activities consisted of ten applied drama workshops with 14 Brazilian women migrants to London with experience of gendered and intersectional violence as well as a workshop/premiere of the film installation. These were conducted mainly between September and November 2021 with an additional evaluation workshop in September 2022. These workshops entailed participants taking part in a series of collaborative and creative engagements with existing research into Violence Against Women and Girls conducted by Cathy McIlwaine with other collaborators including the Latin American Women's Rights Service (LAWRS). Specifically engaging with the project report 'We Can't Fight in the Dark' (McIlwaine and Evans, 2018) from which the current project adapted its name, these workshops included poetry, theatrical performance, song, video and audio art, and were facilitated by Carolina Cal Angrisani (artistic director of MinA), Nina Franco (visual artist), Alba Cabral (musician), Louise Carpenedo (videomaker) and Renata Pepl (Project Manager) (see Appendix 1).

These workshops were evaluated through a combination of pre- and post-workshop surveys and a workshop exploring participants' mental wellbeing. In addition, ethnographic observations were undertaken during each of the workshops, which inform a qualitative discursive analysis of the key themes emerging.



It is also important to note that additional funding was secured following the completion of the workshops. The funded dissemination events involved MinA showing the video installation at a range of festivals (Festival of Latin American Women in Arts - FLAWA; Migration Matters Festival, Sheffield), university events (Reading, Queen Mary University of London, Birkbeck, King's College London) including a visit to Rio de Janeiro in July 2022 where the installation was presented twice (at partners, Casa Rio and Casa das Mulheres da Mare). The majority of these events involved the staging/showing of the video installation coupled with a short performance by MinA participants. These performances also entailed a series of training and rehearsal sessions using 'Theatre of the Oppressed' (TO)¹ methodologies. The main reason for this was that the Artistic Director and the women themselves felt that viewing the video alone was an objectifying experience that did not reflect the co-produced, collective nature of the process as noted by one woman:

"When we watched the video with the audience and went straight to the Q&A, I felt like a subject of study, a guinea pig. But when we added the live performance, the acting, I felt much more comfortable; It felt that we were representing a collective, that story wasn't mine, it was everyone's."



1. Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) is an aesthetic method created by Brazilian playwright Augusto Boal that stimulates critical observation and representation of reality, envisioning the production of consciousness and concrete actions. In the last decades' Theatre of the Oppressed games, exercises and techniques have become powerful tools for many practitioners across the world. It is a participatory art form that is meant and applied as an empowering and liberating practice that inspires individual and collective transformation and searches to shift oppressive power structures.



5. Key findings

The following sections outline some analysis and reflections, based on survey responses and an analysis of the ethnographic material (notes, images, and video) collected during the workshops together with assessment of the material produced by the women in the workshops and analysis of the evaluation workshop. This report focuses specifically on “wellbeing”, understood as mental wellbeing or mental health, as well as psychosocial wellbeing. It is important to note that the sample sizes are small and so the conclusions drawn here are tentative, intended as the basis for further reflection and not conclusive in themselves.

Key Finding 1: participation in creative workshops appeared to have a positive effect on participants’ mental wellbeing

In order to investigate the impact of the creative workshops on participants’ mental wellbeing, participants were surveyed before and after the “intervention” using the Edinburgh-Warwick (EW) scale. In the absence of a large sample size or control groups, this data was used as an indicative means of understanding the general mental wellbeing of participants prior to the workshops and to investigate whether any changes could be detected. The assumption was that this would correlate with the activities of the creative workshops over that duration.

Prior to the workshops, surveys (n=14) indicated that the overall aggregate mental wellbeing of the group was generally considered relatively low, by the metrics of the EW scale. The average score for participants was 44, only 2 points above the cut-off point for “low wellbeing” and half of the survey respondents scored below 42, considered in the bottom 15% of the population, or “low wellbeing”. This is higher than the expected distribution for the population and, although with the small sample size it is difficult to attribute too much significance to this, this finding suggests that participants may have had slightly lower mental wellbeing than the average UK person.

Commenting on her expectations of the workshops prior to beginning, one participant noted that she wanted the following:

‘Take away from me the hurt from two whole years, using the arts, my own body expression; take away from my body everything that does not belong to me. Everything that comes from others and that I have been carrying like a heavy suitcase full of clothes that no longer fit me.’

The chance to heal and build self-esteem was viewed as very important by participants. One woman taking part in the workshops hoped the work could “help alleviate the traumas generated by domestic violence... little by little I am healing”. Another noted: “I find it very creative to have the opportunity to resignify the pain I experienced due to domestic violence and to be able to work on self-esteem for personal and collective strengthening”.

The post-workshop survey (n=8) showed an aggregate increase in the group’s EW score (48), which is within the average for the UK population, with only two participants scoring 42 or below. This indicates that after the workshops had taken place, participants reported slightly higher levels of mental wellbeing. But this change does not prove causation, only that there is a correlation for a small number of survey respondents between apparently improved overall mental wellbeing and participation in the creative workshops.



In reflecting on the value of the workshops, a participant noted:

“MinA was a unique experience; I expressed myself, participated, and spoke without fear, it was something that made me release my fears. I had never done theatre before, I was a bit shy, but every meeting was different: dancing, singing, writing poems, being able to express our emotions, something that helped me a lot and the other women too. Every meeting was an emotion. I cried, I rejoiced, I felt special”.

Key finding 2: the concept of “belonging” is key to understanding isolation and susceptibility to violence as a migrant, as well as participants’ hope for liberation

Analysis of ethnographic observer reports provides further qualitative insight into the mental wellbeing of participants. Where the EW scale provides us with a numerical indicator of mental wellbeing as a normative measure of health (i.e. as either “good” or “bad”), qualitative data can offer us a) potential insight into the origin of the participants’ mental wellbeing, its imbrication with social or psychosocial aspects of their experience and b) a more complex picture of the experience of the participants, absent of any explicit judgement as to whether it is positive or negative for mental health.

A key theme that emerged from the workshops was that of belonging and the complex way it contributes to the psychosocial wellbeing of participants. For participants, Brazilian women migrants in the UK, some with uncertain immigration status, isolation and alienation appeared to contribute to their vulnerability and susceptibility to violence of different kinds, as well as to mental suffering.

As one participant put it: “I’m in a limbo where I don’t know where I belong, when my skin and my flesh do not translate what I am (...) I do not belong there or here”.

This sense of not belonging either in the UK or at “home” also contributes to material vulnerability, regarding access to support, in particular for women living outside London: “Social isolation contributes a lot to this process [lack of access to support]. The worst feeling is for you to be at home and not to have a support network, you don’t have options. The women who live in the countryside will suffer and will have a huge difficulty to access support”.

However, “belonging” was reported to have a potentially negative side too, especially in relation to feeling “suffocated” or “tangled” by one’s identity, community, or wider experiences of intersectional discrimination.. Belonging ties together key issues of isolation and alienation for these Brazilian women migrants in the UK: both the practical and psychological importance of “belonging” as well as a desire to be liberated from certain constraints of living in a complex and potentially exclusionary environment created by state, institutional and infrastructural violence .

Belonging also emerged in the poetry written by the participants. The following is a collective poem.

I belong nowhere.
I am not welcome.
I don't belong here nor there.
I don't fit in.
Even though I try.
Fear.
I fear losing my children.
I fear revenge.
I fear deportation.
In between four walls, I shrink.
They have the power.

(created collectively by Brazilian migrant woman participants in We Still Fight in the Dark workshop)

This poem was written by one participant, again focusing on belonging:

I don't belong anywhere.
I no longer fear loneliness as I feared before,
time has taught me.
I don't belong here or there
I unlearn everything I am, what I was,
And I don't fit.

(created by a Brazilian migrant woman participant in We Still Fight in the Dark workshop)

Key finding 3: creative methods are useful in allowing participants to take on agency to reinterpret research material to co-produce their versions of their lived experiences in order to reach wider audiences

Creative methods can play a positive role in ameliorating the lives of those affected by a certain issue, by affording participants the opportunity to take on expressive or creative agency in relation to their lives, where other forms of social, legal, or economic agency may be absent. This project entailed the reinterpretation of an existing research report by those who had been the subject of it.

This raises two important issues. First, researchers must be open to the criticism of their work, as in the case of the limited attention paid to race in the original research (see key finding 4). Second, the interpretation using creative media speaks to different and wider audiences. For example, a participant in the workshop premiere of the video noted:

“I think that one thing that is important is that these projects help us create a bridge. And sometimes not many people who have access to it can understand, can actually translate it. Women that work the data, we are scared to gather this. But we took the data and actually are showing them to a different audience”.

In a similar way, another participant stated:

“Also, the data is just very abstract. You know, you're meeting people who have lived this ... And then people are coming and sharing their own experiences because they're part of this ... like humanising things.”

In workshops, participants engaged through theatre, poetry, and other media with a number of highly challenging issues raised by the research of McIlwaine. The implications of this were raised by the workshops' ethnographic observer, who noted her concerns regarding the impact of acting out scenes relating to violence, victimhood, or trauma.

However, as the observer notes, in one case, the individual about whom they were most worried was able to recognize her own situation through theatre and, significantly, to see it “from the outside” – providing distance rather than traumatic proximity.

This sense of participants taking control or agency over their histories and experiences was consistent in accounts of how the workshops benefitted them.

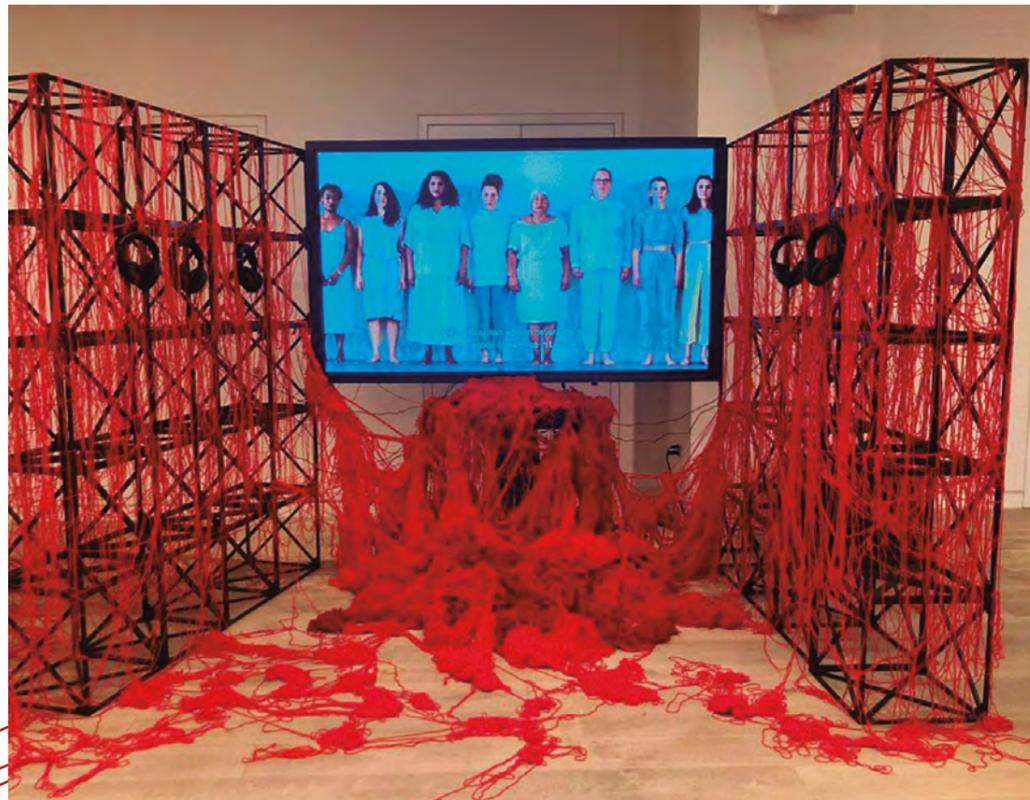


“One of the participants said this was the first time she could hear herself singing out loud, it was the first time she could voice something. “I used to be afraid of speaking up”, she said. She then shared that she was happy.”

The observer notes that participants’ confidence appeared to improve when encouraged to bow and take ownership of their performance. While they also note how, despite a number of participants feeling ill on the day of one performance, and needing assistance, “they really made all the effort to be there, be present and to perform. They wanted to be in that video, they wanted to be seen, to tell their story and, by doing that, to tell the story of a community of women.” One of the women who was ill stated: “I remember on that day of the recording, I was very ill, because I had the flu, I had a fever, and I made a great effort to be there. My body said no, but my head said yes. And if I didn’t go, I would feel even worse than I did on that day.”

Another participant noted of the process as a whole:

“The project, so far, has always been amazing not only to strengthen connections with people I already knew but also to bond with other women, listen to their stories, their pains and victories and celebrate this not easy life as an immigrant alongside Brazilian women so diverse and at the same time very similar in their challenges and struggles.”



This is reflected in this poem:

Where does your pain hurt?
Where is your deepest scar?
Give me your hand, hold my hand
And together, in sisterhood
We will walk side by side
To heal. To be

(created by a Brazilian migrant woman participant in We Still Fight in the Dark workshop)

In reflecting on the value of the video and its impact, another participant noted:

“My mom died when I was 9 and my father when I was 15. We don’t have a single picture of them, no image. There was a picture somewhere, which my uncle took from us and I simply have no image of my parents. Participating in this film gave me hope and joy. My image is there for everyone to see. I’m gonna be there on the screen forever for people to remember me.”



Key finding 4: Race emerged as a key theme in workshops, opening up new pathways for research, while provoking difficult conversations, which may challenge simplistic hopes to “enhance” wellbeing in the short-term

The complex issue of race emerged a number of times in workshops. For some participants, they felt that the experience of black women was not reflected in the research with which they engaged, and they used the opportunity of the workshops to express their identity and visibility. Specifically, they criticised where the research on VAWG referred to women of “mixed race” and the sense that it made black women invisible. In response, they exclaimed: “I exist. Black woman”.² One participant noted in the workshop premiere of the video the following:

“I think it’s important to talk about the invisibility of black women. This statistic is not in the projects, and it took black women involved in the project to stand up and say: ‘Wait a minute, but where are we here? And that’s when the second part of the video came up which was ‘They (the research) are not talking about us’. So Brazilian women, we are not just one type of woman; there are black women, indigenous women, white women. So it is important that we don’t put all of us in the same pot, because it is not the same experience.”

This testimony underscores the importance of being sensitive to race in this context, and more generally on identity as intersectional, in order to avoid reproducing a simplistic and reductive conception of a notionally homogenous national community, and the erasure of black experience.

Another participant raised the question of race with regards identity and belonging. The ethnographic observer noted: “She commented on the struggles of black women including the struggle to accept her appearance, her skin, her identity, her hair. She said how some mothers and grandmothers would cut their child’s hair short so it wouldn’t show what kind of hair the child had, as if trying to hide their black identity in an attempt to prevent them from suffering further discrimination.”

The effect of research that disregards the specific experiences of black women, this suggests, may be to reproduce the subjective and social experience of “invisibility”. This highlights the importance of being sensitive to the question of race in future research in this area.

2. It is worth noting that the research identified the racial characteristics of Brazilian women according to the census typology. Only 3 women self-identified as ‘Black’ in the survey (McIlwaine and Evans, 2018). Many more women identifying as Black were included in the in-depth interviews as discussed in subsequent analysis (McIlwaine and Evans, 2022). However, the participants were completely correct to note that race was not given enough prominence in the research report.

This text was written and performed by the Black Brazilian women in the group as a way to challenge the ‘mixed race’ term used in the research and the racial democracy idea of ‘we are all Brazilians’.

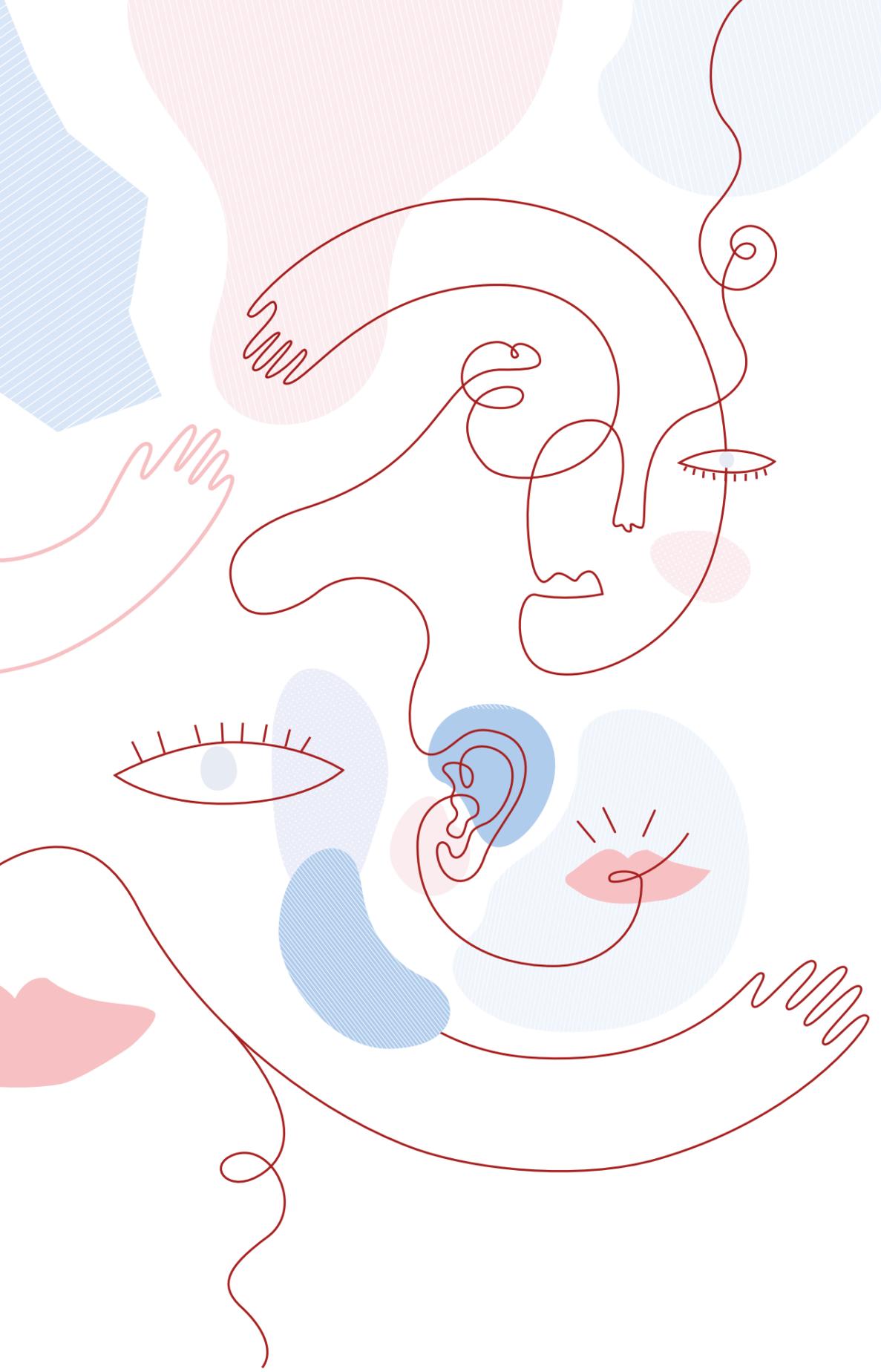
We meet in the desire of affection, in the desire to break through the pain.
We mismatch in the lack of empathy, in the privileges, of colour.
I exist, Black!
We meet as migrant women
We mismatch in the right to immigrate.
We had our history burned and with that our right to come and go was denied.
We don’t know our history and we don’t even have European ancestry.

(excerpt from video script)

However, at the same time as some women articulated these concerns, other participants seemed to feel ambivalent about these questions. One participant noted how she felt “unrepresented” in material concerning black women specifically, pointing out the importance of producing instead “texts that represent everyone”. This caused significant disagreement, with participants entering into a debate around representation, universality, and unconscious racism.

This debate seems to have caused some distress and upset among participants, perhaps calling into question the workshops’ aims to enhance the wellbeing of this group. However, such disagreement could also be understood in a positive light - as a form of generative conflict against a backdrop of shared experience. Moreover, this exchange raises the complexity of this question and the need for future research to actively engage with its subjects and deal with these issues in consultation with those it affects.





6. Reflecting back: summary reflections from the participants

After a year of engagement with We Still Fight in the Dark, the participants reflected on the process from a range of different perspectives. While pain clearly emerges as a central aspect, sharing, self-awareness and self-knowledge are also important. The women elaborated on this in relation to how their life stories had changed, the majority of which were positive and revolved around increased self-belief. One woman spoke about her enhanced self-awareness and self-knowledge:

“I’ve learned to look more clearly into my own life stories and without judging or blaming myself but recognising my strengths and the obstacles from the past that insisted in leaving marks in the present”

Self-confidence was key for another participant:

“It has helped me a lot because I was attending counselling but was insecure and afraid of speaking in public. Our meetings were a different experience, they have helped with my confidence: today I am a woman who can express my feelings.”

The process was transformative for several of the women in relation to the visual effect of seeing themselves in the video in relation to challenging their self-image and coming to terms with it:

“I’ve learnt how to use my image to call people for action and transform them. To see myself on the screen was very empowering, it made me proud and in a ‘shock’ I’ve learnt to accept myself”.

This was not always comfortable evoking painful memories, but it made some of the women feel stronger:

“To see myself in the video was something very different and challenging at the same time. I didn’t expect this to bring past memories but I believe it was important and needed to make me stronger. I could express myself”.

In considering the effect of the video on the women, pain, pride and strength were the overarching feelings.

“The red yarn and what it represents made me reflect, look back and realise all I went through. But it also helped me to recognise where I am today and feel proud of it”.

“That phrase: Oh, Brazilian ... (in the beginning of the video) has triggered me so much, brought so many bad memories. Especially in the part we mention ‘fear of losing my children, that really hit me hard. But I now understand that I had to go through this (MinA) process to heal and feel stronger”.

There was also a sense of the pain being shared in a collective manner: “we are bearers of pain and collective reflection”. This was explored in relation to how the women felt about sharing their stories with an audience. Generally, this was perceived as being positive because of the collective protection they felt: “To share my story with the audience wasn’t intimidating because the collective voice protects us and makes us stronger”. Some of the women felt safe and also stronger about the sharing process which was based on the trust that was developed in the group:

“I don’t feel like telling my own personal story but our stories, and because of that I feel safe. This is powerful because by telling our stories, as a group, it feels like we are shouting and making our struggles louder and visible”.



Some of the women spoke of making peace with their own experiences and of opening people’s minds. They felt like they were engaging with the audience, especially when the video was accompanied by a performance:

“In the beginning I felt exposed but as the performance went on, and people related with our lines/stories, I could sense a shift. From being the subject of study we were then ‘humanised’ and then I felt at the same level as the audience - from strangeness to recognition”.

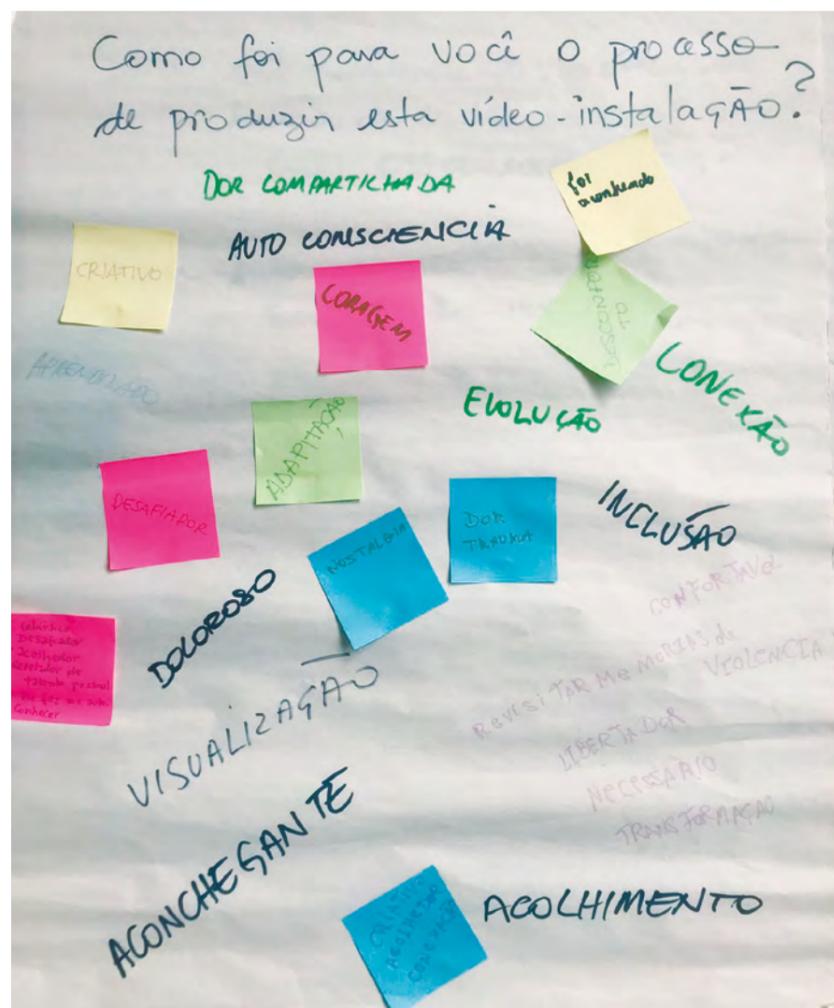
In terms of how the project has affected their lives, the creative dimension was identified as being crucially important in improving their well-being and bringing about wider awareness of Brazilian migrant women’s lives, especially in terms of race:

“Talking about the experience of Black women in the group and performing them in the video, was very important and enriching for our process and discussion for very much needed structural changes”.

Occupying spaces such as rooms in King’s College London which the women tended to view as privileged emerged as very important, contributing to women’s self-worth”.

“I felt so proud and part of an amazing collective effort. I come from a very small town in Brazil and being here, part of this group and supported by Kings College, makes me feel that I’ve achieved something that not many have the chance to”.

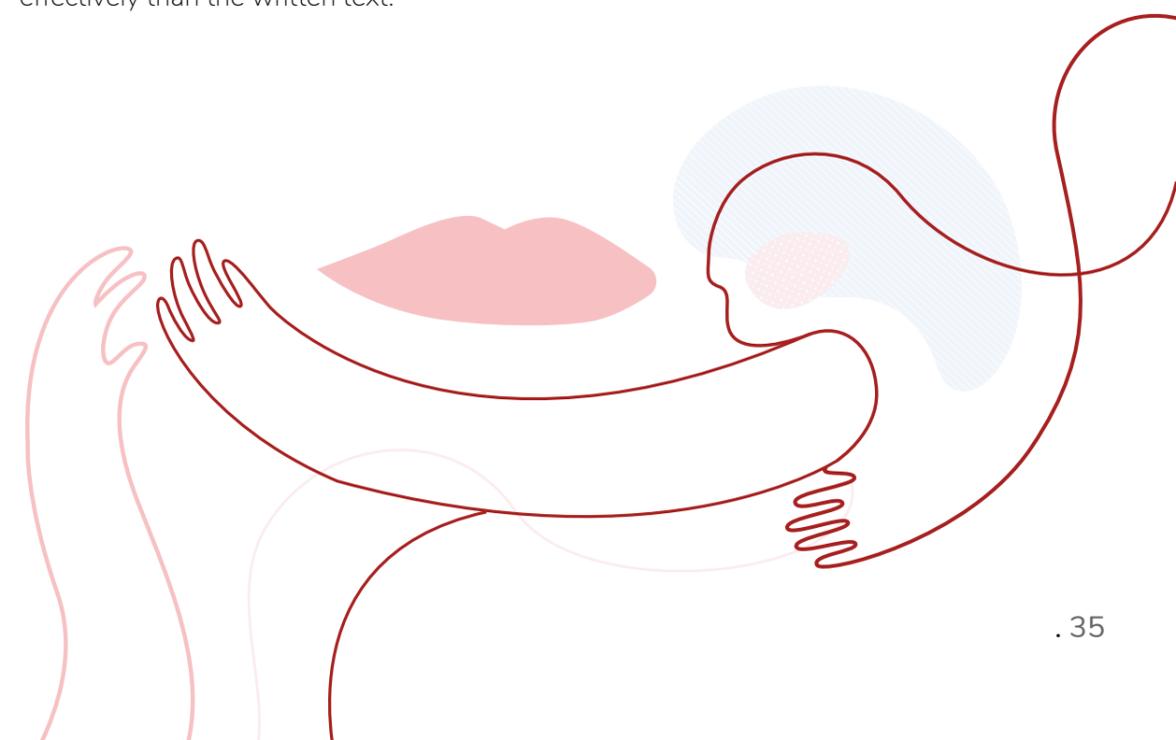




7. Reflections for practitioners and researchers

This section provides some reflections for policymakers, practitioners, or researchers seeking either to work with similar groups to this project (migrants, survivors of VAWG) on similar issues, or using similar kinds of creative/co-productive research methods.

- **Co-production** is essential in order to fully explore, interpret and communicate the lived experiences of research subjects especially when exploring complex social issues. They need to own the data as a form of agency and awareness raising. Researchers should be open to employing such approaches to challenge and explore their models/theoretical framework/empirical findings.
- **Co-production** is ethically and practically complex, from an institutional ethics perspective, and the “medical model” of ethics is not always well-suited to projects involving potentially vulnerable people taking part in research, even with trusted partners. Researchers should integrate extra time for ethics approval into project plans. More broadly, ethics processes should support collaborative, co-produced modes of research.
- **Experimental and creative methods** should be integrated with evaluation, observation, and recording where possible and ethical, a) to allow for robust assessment of the impact of the work and b) to provide other researchers with data on what works and further develop these areas of practice and research methodology.
- **Practitioners** working on complex issues such as gender-based violence migration, racism, or other challenging areas should be prepared and trained for complex and challenging conversations and should be able to provide support or signposting to support where possible, should participants require it.
- **Creative methods** are valuable in communicating to policymakers the lived realities of research subjects. They can portray the key issues more effectively than the written text.





8. Key lessons for policy and policymakers in relation to VAWG and migration

Social and geographical isolation is a key factor in some migrant women's vulnerability, especially with regards their access to support. Providing safe, trusted spaces for women migrants to convene - without risk of further violence - is key not only for facilitating community healing and solidarity, but as a platform for knowledge exchange, practical support, and a social safety net. Policymakers should be aware of how social geography impinges on access to key services and can deepen exclusion.

Lack of trust in state institutions such as the police exacerbates the already precarious position of women migrants with experience of VAWG. State agencies should take this issue seriously and seek to rebuild trust in order to ensure women migrants feel able to access what support services are available. This includes, for example, access to vaccines, the take-up of which is correlated with levels of trust in the NHS.

Community groups, art groups, and other non-governmental forms of social support or community resources should be supported through funding but enabled to remain independent. Such trusted organisations can provide highly effective, inexpensive and targeted support through community experts in vulnerable communities in contrast with expensive and ineffective centralised state services.

Co-produced, collective creative engagements are extremely useful in capturing the existing knowledge, experience, and ingenuity of women migrants. This kind of research has the twofold benefit of potentially enhancing their well-being and providing these women with important forms of social and cultural agency, as well as ensuring research and policy-formulation is informed by "grassroots" expertise.

It is appropriate to conclude with an excerpt from the script that highlights how this type of co-produced, creative approach can not only improve well-being but challenge wider societal racism and intersectional discrimination.

I am a Brazilian woman
because they think I am exotic
because my body is sexualized.
I am not capable, smart or an intellectual.
because they say I am 'too much' , too loud.
because they think I am stupid just because I am learning English.
I am a Brazilian woman and they say I can't dream.



9. Appendix 1: Outline of the workshops

Workshop 1: 09.09.21

We can't fight in the dark (Online)

Led by Carolina Cal

To introduce the project, research and participants.

Workshop 2: 16.09.21

Turning pain into art (Online)

Led by Nina Franco

To present and analyse artwork of women who used their experience of violence to create art.

Workshop 3: 23.09.21

This is my story (at Embassy of Brazil)

Led by Carolina Cal

Methodology: Theatre of the oppressed

To use theatre as medium and red yarn as an inanimate object to create images and scenes from research data and analysis.

Workshop 4: 30.09.21

Being a migrant woman (Online)

Led by Carolina Cal

Methodology: Creative writing

To develop a collective narrative of migration and womanhood.

Workshop 5: 07.10.21

Intersectionality (Online)

Led by Nina Franco

To use the term intersectionality to better understand the inequalities and layers of oppression and discrimination that exist in our society/ community. It can be considered an important tool for thinking about the social relations of race, sex and class, and the challenges for the adoption of effective public policies.

- poems and writings from workshops were organised and structured into a script by Beatriz Grasso and Carolina Cal -

Workshop 6: 14.10.21

Our inner sounds (at King's College London)

Led by Alba Cabral

Method: Body percussion

To explore and turn the script into sounds and songs.

Workshop 8: 23.10.21

Audio Recording (at King's College London)

Led by Alba Cabral and Carolina Cal

Workshop 9: 30.10.21

Video Recording (hired studio in East London)

Led by Carolina Cal, Louise Carpenedo and Nina Franco.

Workshop 10: 29.11.21

Premiere at Battersea Arts Centre

First screening and discussion of film and installation

Workshop 11: 29.09.22

Evaluation of process (King's College London)

Discussion of the entire process and what women learned, how they felt about their participation in positive and negative terms.

From February to November 2022 'We still fight in the Dark' was exhibited and performed at several festivals and events across the UK and internationally: King's College London, Reading University, Birkbeck University, Queen Mary University, FLAWA Festival, Migration Matters Festival, Shameless Festival, Latin American Women's Rights Service, Casa das Mulheres (Redes da Maré, Rio de Janeiro) and Casa Rio (People's Palace Project, Rio de Janeiro).



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