



“Ain’t I a Woman?”: Feminist Participatory Action-Research with African Migrant Women Living in Spain

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Abstract

There is a growing trend towards a feminization of migration which calls for an urgent intersectional analysis in migration and integration research. Migrant women are exposed to numerous barriers that make difficult to participate in host communities due to the intersections between their gender, ethnicity, migratory status, etc. These barriers range from structural to daily discrimination in the shape of sexism and racism, particularly for women from regions further south of Africa. Undertaken in collaboration with a local NGO in Southern Spain, this study aims to approach African migrant women’s experiences and to promote agency and participation in host communities. It was framed in Feminist Participatory Action-Research (FPAR) based on photovoice. The participants ($n=15$) generated and shared photo-narratives about their daily experiences during five sessions that were participatively analyzed, classified into four themes as follows: (1) migratory projects; (2) violence and discrimination; (3) health and social care; and (4) to be and resist as an African migrant woman. Photovoice was valued as a safe, non-hierarchical, and caring environment that promoted agency in participants and reflexivity in researchers. Our results highlight the importance and necessity on undertaking FPAR in collaboration with social organizations for emancipatory research praxis and put the emphasis on photovoice as a transformational method.

Keywords African migrant women · Agency · Community participation · FPAR · Photovoice

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Introduction

Migration is one of the main causes of population change in the twenty-first century, which is increasingly characterized by a greater female presence, a phenomenon known as the “feminization of migrations” (Paiewonsky, 2007). According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM, 2020), 48% of refugees and displaced persons are women, who are increasingly autonomous in their migratory processes. In this scenario, international agencies have alerted that women are impacted by discrimination and violence in all stages of migration because of their gender, ethnicity, or migratory status, among others (The UN Refugee Agency, n.d.). Once in host societies, discrimination is materialized at different levels: there is both structural and institutional (e.g., social stigmatization, difficulties in regularizing administrative status), and also in their daily interpersonal interactions (Babatunde-Sowole et al., 2016; García-Ramírez, et al., 2011; Gonçalves & Matos, 2016; Hourani et al., 2021; Moane, 2003).

Social and community participation is an effective element that could counter these disadvantaged conditions (McNamara et al., 2013) and promote their wellbeing, agency, and integration (García-Ramírez et al., 2011; Taurini et al., 2017). The problem is that the social participation of migrants is very low in host societies, especially of women, due to numerous personal, family, work, and cultural factors (Ortensi & Riniolo, 2020; Taurini et al., 2017). Moreover, there are numerous sociopolitical barriers that limit the participation of migrant women in influencing policy-making spaces, and their “needs, priorities and voices are often missing from policies designed to protect and assist them” (UN Women, n.d.). Therefore, it is needed to introduce a gender perspective in approaching migration and integration research, as well as policy-making and social actions in host societies (International Organization for Migration, 2016; Nawyn, 2010).

To address this challenge, the present study was commissioned by MAD Africa, a local NGO placed in Seville, which works with African populations. It arose from their interest of exploring the lives and experiences of African women in Andalusia (Southern Spain) to understand their low participation, contrasting with their increasing presence in host communities. To address this challenge, this research developed a Feminist Participatory Action-Research (FPAR, Reid & Frisby, 2008) based on photovoice. It aims to approach participants’ experiences at the intersections of being Africans, women and migrants from their own voices, as well as generate spaces in which these women can participate and promote their agency. Below, we contextualize the situation of African migrant women in Spain, describe the principles of FPAR and our photovoice project, as well as present and discuss our results and conclusions.

African Migrant Women’s Experiences and Community Participation in Spain

In the Spanish state, existing migration policies and legislation not only do not facilitate safe entry, but it also does not ensure migrants protection and rights once they are in the country (APDHA, 2021; www.mipex.eu/spain). The organic law

4/2000 of January 11, on the Rights and Freedoms of Foreigners in Spain and their Social Integration, has significant impacts in terms of deprivation of basic human rights as decent employment, safe and appropriate housing, access to public health and social services, and participation in sociopolitical life (García-Ramírez, et al., 2011). Moreover, the scarcity of support networks face by migrants in host societies has been identified as a barrier to sociopolitical organization, and thus, to be able to promote social changes at structural level (García-Ramírez et al., 2011). In this regard, it also should be noted that 73% of migrants in Spain are not entitled to vote in state and regional elections (Gutierrez & Ordaz, 2019), to which must be added those who are in an irregular situation and are not counted in these statistics. Undocumented migrants live in extremely violent situations with the threat of being detained and deported, which hampers visibility and the possibility of influencing policy-making spaces (Nikunen & Valtonen, 2022).

By and large, migrants suffer from institutional and daily racist violence, but migrant women's experiences are also subjected to certain specificities. We recognize that migrant women are a diverse group, nevertheless, "they shared the common experience of being 'gendered' and racialized by colonization and capitalist expansion" (Okeke-Ihejirika et al., 2016, p. 14). For example, the employment opportunities that migrant women are able to access are used to be linked to exploitative working conditions, as domestic labor, itinerant trade, or agriculture (King & Zontini, 2000; Zaptsi et al., 2021). These working conditions are compounded often by the transnational care of their families, which continues to fall almost twice as heavily on women (Orozco, 2010). This can be translated into limited time for getting involved in social and political causes.

On the other hand, migrant and racialized women are also exposed to different types of discrimination at the intersection of racism and sexism in interpersonal relationships, communities, and social movements (Babatunde-Sowole et al., 2016; García-Ramírez, et al., 2011; Gonçalves & Matos, 2016; Hourani et al., 2021; Moane, 2003), also in feminism. Despite the fact that the intersectional theory was elaborated decades ago, sexist oppression is still often privileged over other oppressions, falling into the logic that the end of patriarchy will mean the elimination of all systems of domination (hooks, 1984). Under this logic, this leads to a scarce incorporation (more or less consciously or explicitly) of the specific demands and needs of women located on the margins from other axes of their identity (Crenshaw, 1991; hooks, 1984). Furthermore, when included, migrant women or women from non-Western cultures have been constructed as victims and passive agents in need of being saved by the tools of white feminism (Bidaseca, 2011; Mohanty, 1988). Specifically, regarding African women, this homogenization implies the alliance of hegemonic feminist currents to "generate a control of knowledge about the totality of African women" (Nnaemeka, 2008, p.83), undervaluing their historical resistances and responses to the patriarchal, capitalist, and colonial order (Tamale, 1996). Thus, the lack of problematization of white, class, or geopolitical privilege is preventing feminism from becoming a truly liberating political project (Moon & Holling, 2020).

All these experiences of symbolic and explicit violence seem to be related to women migrants' choice to engage mostly with ethnic, cultural, or religious community organizations (Ireland, 1994; Kraal & Vertovec, 2004), reinforcing their

cultural identities as a way of resisting systemic racism and sexism (Ali & Sonn, 2017). Based on existing literature, community participation has positive impacts in migrants' psychological wellbeing, resilience, and agency (García-Ramírez et al., 2011; Taurini et al., 2017), as through the process one acquires the self-perception of being able to make changes in the oppressive conditions crossing their lives (Becker et al., 2002; Gilster, 2012). According to García-Ramírez et al. (2011), agency is a liberation journey that facilitates the inclusion and wellbeing of migrant people that consists of three phases as follows: (1) critical awareness, (2) gaining capacity to act, and (3) taking action to promote social justice.

Therefore, participation and agency are the first steps in the process of producing changes at community and sociopolitical level (Taurini et al., 2017). However, research on the experiences of African migrant women and their community participation remains limited (Okeke-Ihejirika et al., 2016, 2022), especially in Spain (Minkette & Infantes, 2016), where research from feminist and participatory approaches are almost non-existent (Alhassan et al., 2016). In order to fill this gap, this research is framed in FPAR.

Promoting Community Participation Through FPAR and Photovoice

According to Reid and Frisby (2008), to democratize action-research processes we need to focus on defying power structures—gendered, classed, racialized, etc.—giving importance to lived experiences of oppressed communities in order to assure the achievement of greater social justice. To do that, the authors propose FPAR (Reid & Frisby, 2008), which focuses on women's diverse experiences, accounting for intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) as a framework for understanding women's realities. Following Byrne (2015), it stresses not only “the need to understand and analyze the mutually constitutive, intersecting axes of race, class and gender” (p.2), but also “how different models of social inequality and discrimination are related to each other” (p.8). Then, in our research, intersectionality offers a framework that allows us to conduct spatially and temporally sensitive research, identifying structural elements that perpetuate the oppressions exerted over African migrant women (Reid & Frisby, 2008).

Also, honoring voices through participation is central in FPAR (Reid & Frisby, 2008). This involves generating opportunities for women to take part in all stages of the research as defining research questions or analyzing and disseminating results (Evans-Agnew & Rosemberg, 2016), creating inclusive and safe spaces where participants feel respected, comfortable and valued, and can develop partnerships with others. In this context, it is imperative to recognize communities as valid interlocutors in seeking the means through which they can raise their voices, promoting their agency.

However, the lack of horizontality and cultural humility in researchers can affect participants' agency (Miranda et al., 2021) and the generation of truly transformative processes. Researchers' reflexivity, self-criticism, and transparency with participants are of great importance. In this line, feminist scholars have called into question the supposed objectivity of science and the probability of conducting value-free research

(England, 1994). Haraway's proposal of situated knowledges (1988) revealed that any analysis is always partial and influenced by the researcher's biography and position within society. Power relations are always present within the research process, and it is not enough to use participative methodologies to decrease the possibility of exercising discursive colonization (Mohanty, 1988) on participants. In this research, we were white, middle-class European female researchers, and reflexivity implied to question our racial and geopolitical privilege throughout the process, analyzing its potential impacts in power dynamics within research. Hence, FPAR aims to be transformative not only for participants, but also for researchers since it is "both explicitly personal *and* political" (Campbell & Wasco, 2000, p. 788).

Finally, co-producing knowledge with participants and communities and exploring innovative ways of doing science is crucial for FPAR because of the potential it has to promote social change (McDiarmid et al., 2021; Reid & Frisby, 2008). According to Suarez-Balcazar (2020), co-producing knowledge and developing more creative ways of disseminating results broadens the potential impact of research, especially in communities. Thus, photovoice can be a participatory, innovative, and potential horizontal method of collecting, interpreting, evaluating, and communicating research findings (Cornell et al., 2019; Miranda et al., 2021).

On the basis of these theoretical and methodological premises, we decided to use photovoice, as a FPAR, for our study (Cornell et al., 2019; Ponc & Jategaonkar, 2012). Photovoice is a form of visual ethnography (Delgado, 2015) that uses photography and narratives to express the values, feelings, and/or thoughts that a community has about its problems (Wang & Burris, 1997). It is an empowering process by which groups can express and make visible their real-life experiences and their perspectives on a topic (Garrido, *in press*). Photovoice can also be used for sociopolitical impact and opening up opportunities for the general public to get involved in the planning, development, and evaluation of community actions and services (Pedersen et al., 2021).

Photovoice was influenced by feminist theory (e.g., Maguire, 1987), visual methodologies (e.g., Collier & Collier, 1986) and critical pedagogy (Freire, 1973). It provides participants with cameras to foster critical thinking, group dialogues, and visibility of community concerns (Suffla et al., 2014). Photovoice can be considered "one way to do feminism" (Latz, 2017, p. 59), and a decolonial feminist praxis while "participation must espouse an ongoing commitment to challenging these historical multiple and interconnected forms of power" (Cornell et al., 2019, p.62). Therefore, designed to promote agency in oppressed populations, it has frequently been used with migrant women (Chai, 2021; Chapman et al., 2013; Guariso et al., 2016; Pearce et al., 2017; Saksena & McMorrow, 2020).

Nevertheless, photovoice also has limitations. First, there is a potential for the invasion of privacy and confidentiality, especially when the results are disseminated (Wang & Redwood-Jones, 2001). Therefore, it is very important to work on the ethical aspects of images and representation (Ponc & Jategaonkar, 2012). Second, photovoice can reproduce the typical power logics of research, by which researchers usually decide the agenda, the objectives, and the topics to be addressed. This reduces participants' agency in knowledge production process (Ponc & Jategaonkar, 2012). Hence, it is necessary to continually ask oneself what the objectives of the research are, who defines them, and who the beneficiaries of its results and possible unexpected effects are.

Finally, although photovoice aims for social justice, it may run the risk of reinforcing the status quo rather than questioning it (Sanon et al., 2014).

Methods

Context and Participants

The project was undertaken in Seville, the most important urban context for the settlement of migrants in Andalusia (Garrido et al., 2019). This southern region of Spain is one of the main gateways to Europe from Africa (“the Southern border”), where human rights are constantly violated (APDHA, 2021), and the migratory profile has seen a recent increase in the arrivals of women and children (Tyszler, 2019). According to the National Institute of Statistics (INE, 2019), 71,120 African women reside in Andalusia—excluding those who are not registered in the census because of irregular status or naturalizations. These are mainly young women from Nigeria and Senegal, who live in segregated areas and work in precarious jobs (INE, 2019).

The participants were recruited by snowball or chain-referral sampling; the coordinating NGO publicized the project and its benefits among its users, local contacts, and social networks, asking for it to be disseminated. The selection of participants was intentional, after an interview, and the inclusion criteria were the following: (1) African women of different nationalities; (2) residents in Seville; (3) a minimum basic command of spoken Spanish; and (4) available and motivated for participation.

The participants were 15 Black women from Nigeria ($n = 7$), Senegal ($n = 4$), Togo ($n = 1$), Kenya ($n = 1$), Guinea Conakry ($n = 1$), and Ivory Coast ($n = 1$). Their ages ranged from 30 to 41 years. All except one were married and were mothers. Their socio-economic status also varied substantially; some of the women were employed in good working conditions and had average incomes, while others suffered from precarious employment and very low incomes. In terms of educational level, most of them had primary education and professional training. The participants were Christians ($n = 6$), Muslims ($n = 8$), or non-religious ($n = 1$).

All participants were informed about the project and the conditions of participation and had to sign the informed consent form to authorize the use of their images and narratives for research purposes. They received economic compensation to ensure that they attended and to cover travel expenses. In addition, a toy library service was provided for the children of those participants who were mothers.

Procedure

This FPAR followed the usual procedures in photovoice projects, which are divided into five phases (Garrido, in press) as follows (Fig. 1): (1) preparation, (2) individual phase, (3) group phase, (4) social phase, and (5) evaluation. Below, we describe how we carried out each of these phases in our project, which took place between September 2018 and January 2020.

Preparation of photovoice	Phase 1: Individual	Phase 2: Group	Phase 3: Social	Evaluation of the photovoice's results
Recruitment Engage participants Introduce photovoice's methodology and ethics. Select the topics Ensure cameras	Think critically about the topics Develop individual photo-narratives Supervision and support Remember ethical issues	Share individual photo-narratives with the group Generate conditions for a safe and horizontal space Identify common issues and differences Codify themes	Plan and implement a strategy to share results with the audience Visualize realities Advocate for rights Supervision of ethical issues	Evaluate the impact on participants in terms of agency. Evaluate the impact on researchers in terms of reflexivity. Evaluate the impact on community (this was not done).

Fig. 1 Photovoice's process (adapted from Garrido, [in press](#))

Before starting, we prepared the process. Participants were recruited. Then, the first session aimed to break the ice between participants, get to know each other, and create a WhatsApp group. They were also given instructions in photovoice methodology, the underlying ethical issues, and how to take photo-narratives. Participants decided to use their mobile phone cameras.

The topics of the photo-narratives were based on the needs identified by the coordinating NGO, previous projects and participants' interests, which were elicited in the pre-selection interviews. The chosen topics were the following: (1) migratory projects (2-3); being an African migrant woman (divided into "Violence and discrimination" and "Being and resist as African migrant women" in [Results and Discussion](#)); (4) health and social care; (4) to be and resist as an African migrant woman; and (5) sexuality and couple relationships [these results have not been included in this paper, out of respect for the privacy of the participants]. These topics guided the five photovoice sessions—combining individual and group phases. The specific questions to elicit the photo-narrative were agreed upon before the session, so that they would be of interest and understood by all.

The participants individually reflected upon the selected topic and carried out their personal photo-narratives where and when they considered most appropriate. One week later, in the in-person group session, they shared their photo-narratives, discussing views and identifying common themes and possible community solutions. It should also be noted that a cultural mediator was required throughout the process, especially to encourage the women to participate at the beginning of the process, as she was a person of reference whom they knew, and to facilitate language in some cases. This person was selected and hired by the NGO.

The photovoice process ended with an evaluation session in which women highlighted the strengths and weaknesses of the project and the methodology. The researchers facilitated this session through art; they impressed the photo-narratives produced during the project, as well as markers, scissors, glue, and a support where they could make a collage with the main contributions.

The information was collected during the photovoice process as photo-narratives and feedback from participants. The photo-narratives were analyzed and classified by the participants in each session; the main themes were identified with help from the researchers, who used questions to encourage categorization and analysis: How do you think this picture relates to the others? Which themes have consistently come up in the photo-narratives and during the debate? How could we say that this picture is related to more than one theme? These themes were named by the participants, and the structure and words have been respected in the “[Results and Discussion](#)” section. Furthermore, all the sessions were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed through thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) based on participants’ categories.

On the other hand, researchers took field notes with thoughts and feelings on power relations during the process. We discussed about them in 3 meetings. Furthermore, this reflexivity was present during the analysis, where we reflected on the potential influences in the interpretation from our privileged position (Haraway, 1988).

Finally, the researchers and the NGO offered the participants the possibility of exhibiting their photo-narratives in community spaces and universities if they wanted to. The aim was to make their experiences more visible to promote social awareness of their realities and to advocate for their rights. All the participants wished to exhibit the results collectively, agreeing among themselves on the messages and the photos exhibited. Thus, the photo-narratives exhibited were freely chosen by the participants in terms of author, formats (A3/A4/A5), and numbers ($n = 15$). The anonymity and privacy of all participants were respected.

Nine community exhibitions were held in five Andalusian universities and four social spaces between April 2019 and January 2020. These places were chosen on the basis of the NGO and researchers’ alliances. Participants (minimum 2) led all these events and established a critical dialogue with academic and community agents about their concerns and strengths. The online exhibition was discarded so that the photo-narratives could be subject to greater control. The exhibits were not evaluated.

Results and Discussion

Exploring the Experiences and Community Participation of African Migrant Women

Various themes emerged during the photovoice process, some of which were consistent. We divided these into four clusters as follows: (1) migratory projects; (2) violence and discrimination; (3) health and social care; and (4) to be and resist as an African migrant woman. The relation of the categories is represented in Fig. 2. For each theme, examples of narratives are presented (from the photo-narratives and the group discussion), accompanied by a photo from the exhibition. These are also discussed in terms of their effects on women’s participation and agency, through the lens of intersectionality and in relation with previous literature.

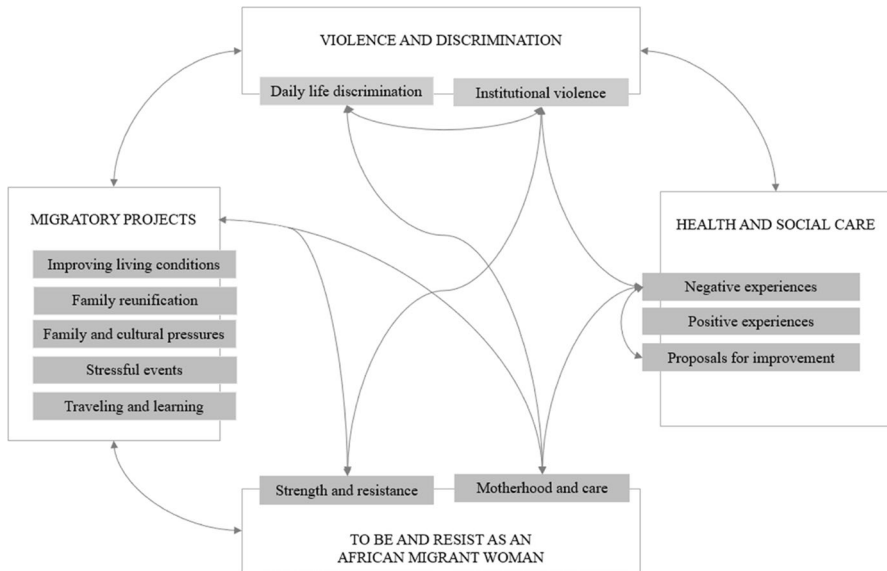


Fig. 2 Relation of categories

Migratory Projects

During this session, participants reflected on their migration projects and the changes they had brought about in their lives. The themes that emerged were linked to motivations for migrating, which were diverse, in line with the complexity of migration today (International Organization for Migration, 2020). Some of these motives were as follows: (1) improving their living conditions; (2) family reunification, mainly with their parents or husbands; (3) family/cultural pressures; (4) stressful events; and (5) travelling and learning about other cultures (Fig. 3).

Some of participants stated that their main motivation for migrating was to improve their standard of living and increase their socio-economic status by continuing their studies or seeking new job opportunities. Changes in forms of production and lifestyles have increased the demand for female labor in recent decades (Campani, 2000). In Andalusia, African migrant women are engaged in a variety of work activities—usually temporary—that tend to involve exploitative working conditions (King & Zontini, 2000; Zaptsi et al., 2021), such as domestic labor, itinerant trade, health and home help services, hospitality industry, and agriculture (Suarez, 2020). In this respect, many participants said that their expectations regarding employment had not been met in the host society.

Some of the participants stated that they had become the main breadwinners for family members back home. However, others reported the numerous constraints on employment in Spain, and that they could only find jobs in the caregiving sector or with irregular conditions, which often linked to lack social protection and stigmatization.



Fig. 3 Photo-narrative example of migratory projects. “We decided to emigrate because my father was already living here and his dream was that we could all be here together. I was 14 years old and right away my father called my mother and said ‘hey look, I already have the visas’. That was a Monday and on Tuesday I was already traveling. Very quickly (...) And I knew we were coming to Spain, but I had no idea where we were going. I couldn’t say goodbye to anything, I couldn’t take anything, we left our whole life there. And since then, we have been here in Spain for 16 years (...) The motivation to come was obviously to meet with my father and for the five of us to be together, and that’s how it is (P13)”

Another frequent motivation for migrating was family reunification, especially for those who had arrived in Spain many years ago when migration was predominantly male. However, many women undertake their migration project alone: “Before I finished school my father died and I failed my exams (...) I was the first daughter. I wanted to help my mother so I come to Europe” (P7). These results support the feminization of the migration trend (Paiewonsky, 2007), and suggest that women generally decide to migrate as an extension of their family responsibilities (Nawyn, 2010).

Therefore, the migratory projects were highly diverse. In consequence, during the group phase, they pointed out the stereotypes created and maintained by the mass media about migrants coming from the Global South, such as poor people crossing the Mediterranean Sea by boat or coming “to steal jobs” or “to live on benefits”. These discourses may permeate in Spanish society, where 34.6% of hate crimes in Spain are based on racism and xenophobia (López-Fonseca, 2021).

Our results are consistent with studies with migrant women in other countries (King & Zontini, 2000; Orsini & Gatullo, 1995; Saksena & McMorrow, 2020) and in Spain (Caballe-Climent, 2018; Suarez, 2020). It has been documented that the violence suffered by women who migrate from African countries to Europe often begins in their

countries of origin with the obstacles that are put in the way of their safely embarking on their migratory projects safely (for example, high visa fees or outright refusal to issue visas to some African nationalities) (Suarez, 2020). This forces many women to migrate through irregular routes, where women and girls are at risk of sexual violence and human trafficking mafias (Morokvasic, 1993). Thus, the racialized and gendered vulnerabilities of migrants are increased, and gender-related violence is reinforced throughout their migratory process (Tyszler, 2019). However, it is important not to generalize these experiences so as not to victimize migrant women.

Violence and Discrimination

Participants systematically expressed experiences of discrimination and violence result of the intertwining of different systems of oppression, epitomized in racism and sexism. In this regard, they classified the photo-narratives into two closely connected themes such as (1) daily life discrimination and (2) institutional violence.

Regarding the first theme, every woman reported many forms of daily racism and sexism, such as police or sexual violence. For example, in the street: "I often walk down the street afraid of being stopped... with the car, the police will always stop me, how many times have they stopped you? If you're Black, they stop you whether you do something or not" (P08). This is supported by many scholars and social movements like Black Lives Matter who have alerted that the streets are often places where black people are not safe (Weissinger et al., 2017), even from the police (Ritchie, 2017).

In addition, violence in public spaces is even more complex for women, who are exposed to sexual violence or harassment (Campani, 2000; Ritchie, 2017). In this respect, the following narrative about street harassment was shared by 11 women, and in one case the violence was even committed by police officers. The women assume that the cause of this lies in the stereotype of Black women being linked to sex work and hypersexualization, which is known as the Jezebel stereotype (Collins, 2002). In this vein, African migrant women have reported being continuously stigmatized by being linked to prostitution, trafficking, gender-related violence, etc. (Suarez, 2020).

There's one thing that I suffer a lot, and that's a guy gets behind me and starts doing things to me or telling me things. One day I was in the park with my children and other moms and there was a man who called me and I thought maybe he was calling someone else. ... But no, they call you thinking you are going to go with them. ... There are men who think that Black women are all whores (P12)

One participant explained how these intersecting oppressions hinder the livelihood development of Black migrant women. She also expressed the differences in terms of power relations between white and Black women, talking about the film *Hidden Figures* (Fig. 4). She coined the term *steel-concrete ceiling* to make an analogy with the famous glass ceiling concept (Morrison & Von Glinow, 1990) widely used by Western feminist currents. She also brought up the famous phrase "Ain't I a Woman?", citing Sojourner Truth. Thanks to this, after the session, participants watched a video re-enactment of her famous speech and they felt strongly represented. This is the reason for the title of this paper.



Fig. 4 Photo-narrative example of violence and discrimination. “Being an African migrant woman is not only having to face inequalities for being a woman, but also having to face discrimination, hostility and difficulties in the country where you arrive or are born. That is, being an African migrant woman is that you always have double difficulty and have to continually justify and demonstrate your reason for presence and also to break stereotypes and prejudices” (P13)

Moreover, many participants pointed out discrimination in the workplace, by both colleagues and bosses:

There was a guard at the place where I worked and I don’t know why that man, whether because I was a woman, he never gave me the keys at the change of shift. ... so as not to shake my hand. Where I work, I have been working for 10 years and I am the only person who does not have a permanent contract and it is very hard, because you see people who work worse than you and there they are. I think this happened to me because I am a woman and an African Black woman (P03)

Institutional racism and its consequences were also an important issue discussed by participants. In Spain, the organic law 4/2000 of January 11, on the Rights and Freedoms of Foreigners in Spain and their Social Integration, exerts institutional violence against migrants, making it difficult for them to regularize their administrative situations, and thus, leaving them in situations of vulnerability and lack of protection where their most fundamental rights are denied.

For instance, their lack of rights resulted in precarious jobs in the caregiving sector (e.g., domestic workers) or in the underground economy (e.g., street vending and agriculture) that have no labor rights, so they are unable to report situations of exploitation (Zaptsi et al., 2021). According to Nawyn (2010), the prevalence of migrant women and men in particular occupations should be analyzed by the intersectional lens. The intersections between labor market inclusion and the gender and family roles of migrants explain why migrant women usually perform some forms of care work as part of their paid employment, as well as part of their family obligations (Piper & Rocés, 2003). Likewise, public services were a scenario pointed out as racist by all the participants. In fact, we dedicated a specific session to work on this issue, which results are presented below.

Health and Social Care

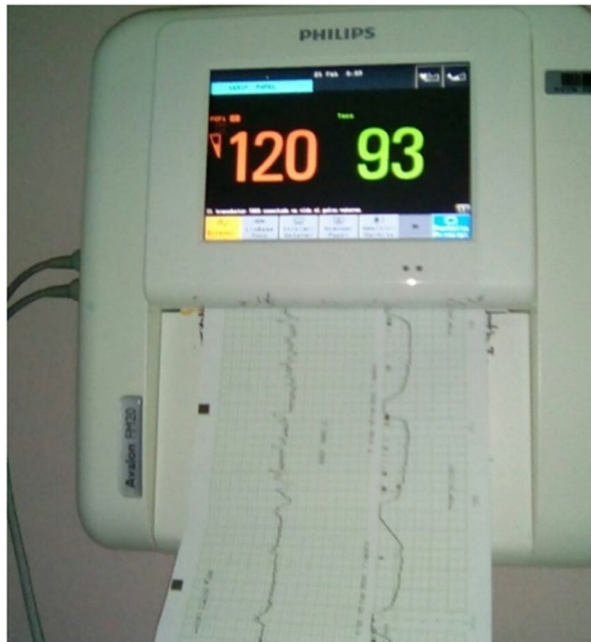
Regarding health and social care, the three themes that emerged were in line with the questions planned for the development of the photo-narratives as follows: (1) negative experiences, (2) positive experiences, and (3) proposals for improvement.

First, negative experiences were related to racism or lack of sensitivity by professionals and services, as well as to the lack of resources and the functionality of the system. As example, a participant stated: "there are too few workers there, too many people, but too few workers and you don't have enough time to be served" (P05). Many negative experiences reported were related to sexual and reproductive health services, where the women had felt discriminated against or that their needs had not been taken into account (Fig. 5).

These experiences were especially hard for participants who had been living in Spain in an irregular legal situation or without work. Several studies showed that migrants—especially undocumented ones—have limited or difficult access to health and social services and face numerous administrative barriers and the lack of sensitivity of the professionals who attend them (Garrido et al., 2019; www.mipex.eu).

Second, we also explored the positive experiences they had in these services. In most cases, these experiences involved being well cared for by the professionals, who communicated and treated them well. The professionals provided patient-centered care and were sensitive to the needs of each patient. This is in line with research findings that point out the importance of cultural competence in both professionals and organizations, if the service provided is to be equitable (Garrido et al., 2019; International Organization for Migration, 2020).

Fig. 5 Photo-narrative example of health and social care. "They decided to give me an epidural and the pain went away and shortly after that they took me to the delivery room and as I was no longer in pain I was lying there and the two midwives with their phones in their hands were commenting on my sex, making comments about the differences between the genitalia of white and black women. ... They asked me if I worked and I said no and she said why do you want to have a child if you and your husband don't work. At that moment I didn't want to answer anything, what I wanted was to save my life and the life of my daughter (P01)"



When they gave me the epidural, with all the pain, the woman said to me, ‘Oh what beautiful braids you are wearing! And I laughed. ... I had a great time there with them and in the end they put it in and I calmed down and that was it (P08)
I went to a doctor and it was a man. And, you know, doctors usually tell you to take your clothes off, they look at your tits, they usually touch you a lot.... And the man said to me, ‘do you want me to go out? And a girl took care of me and the man came back when I had already put my clothes back on. I liked this a lot (P12)

Finally, the participants made the following proposals to improve the care of migrant women in health and social services as follows: (1) translation/interpretation services, (2) staff training on cultural competence, (3) sanctions on racist behavior by professionals, (4) more male and female workers in various health services, and (5) more efficient appointment schedules. In any case, it should be noted that they rated the Spanish public system very positively in comparison with the system in their own countries.

To Be and Resist as an African Migrant Woman

In response to the question “*what does it mean being an African migrant woman to you?*”, participants presented gender as a fundamental part of their experiences, among the multiple intersections that make up their identity. Moreover, at the beginning of the group reflection, they said that Africa is a very large and diverse continent, with an infinite number of cultures, languages, ethnicities, and religions, so defining African identity would be difficult. They decided to focus on two themes such as (1) strength and (2) motherhood and care.

All participants identified themselves as strong women. As a constant, they highlighted that despite the violence and discrimination suffered in all stages of their migration projects, they found ways to overcome these situations, becoming stronger. Strength as the key to their identity was defined as “the ability to move forward without family, the difficulties, the daily struggle for a better life, the courage to create a family in a different place, the ability to learn to integrate into a different culture” (P04). This supports earlier studies which argue that migrant women react to difficulties through their capacity of agency and resilience (Brodsky & Cattaneo, 2013) and community support (García-Ramírez et al., 2011; King & Zontini, 2000; Mejia et al., 2013; Orsini & Gatullo, 1995; Saksena & McMorro, 2020).

In this regard, during the group phase some participants problematized how these experiences contradict the stereotype of Black migrant women as victims or people with no capacity for agency. This has been widely discussed by decolonial and post-colonial feminists (Mohanty, 1988), who ask questions about how migrant and racialized women were stereotyped as homogenous, powerless, and potential victims, with no capacity of agency (Bidaseca, 2011). Many participants also denounced the powerful role played by the media in this negative image and the absence of role models for their children beyond their immediate contexts. This point has been supported by many scholars and by social movements like Time’s Up (Cottle, 2000; Garrido & Zaptsi, 2021).

Motherhood was a key issue during the collective debate, which was described as a substantially significant experience in participants’ lives (Fig. 6). Most of them



Fig. 6 Photo-narrative example of To be Resist as an African Migrant Woman. “For me, being a woman means giving life, caring, listening, infinite patience, organization capacity, embodying beauty, life energy, humanity, transmitter, protector, fighter, being able to do several things at the same time, helping to grow... (P04)”

said that motherhood and providing care give them a positive identity and great wellbeing:

I felt like a woman from the moment I got pregnant and had my children, when I get up in the morning and have to get my kids up, take them to school, bathe them, and always look after them. ... And that’s when I feel like a woman. I feel proud to see my children grow up, I feel proud, because I have come this far because of them, that’s why I feel a strong, fighting woman, proud of myself (P01)

Nevertheless, motherhood was also identified as an element that can promote discrimination when it becomes a social and cultural imposition. Participants debated about the stigma of women who do not have kids, who, according to their discourses, are socially on the margins of femininity, defying their identity as (African) women: “I see her as a woman, but since she doesn’t have children, she doesn’t feel like a woman... I feel that when I can have children, when I can raise them, I feel like a woman” (P01). Historically oppressed communities have given important community meanings to motherhood which cannot be understood from white theorizations of motherhood that do not take into account the intersections between race, class, culture, gender, sexuality, and, in this case, also migratory status (Collins, 1994; Lawson, 2000). Thus, this topic needs to be further explored, specifically in our context.

Additionally, participants also shared reflections on how since motherhood they had begun to come into contact with neighbors and with other mothers at their children’s schools. Thus, they interpreted maternity as a facilitator for their inclusion and

participation in social and community life. The only participant who did not have children looked back on this problem: “Racism is there. You’re telling me that you have friends because you have children, her too, her too... if there are no children, forget about it (P13).” Those who have adolescent children pointed out that this only happens when the children are “small chocolate bonbons”; when they grow up, they become “shitty niggers” for white people. Black African young males and men suffer a strong stigmatization, as they have been portrayed in the media as highly dangerous or violent; while kids are seen as “poor innocents” from a white salvationist perspective, reinforced also in mass media through victimizing NGO advertisements (Rideout, 2011). In the face of this racist violence, it is important to highlight that black and migrant maternities are the first space of racial socialization and identity to provide their children with coping strategies to deal with it (Collins, 1994).

It is important to note that the only participant who was not a mother had lived in Spain since she was a child. She questioned certain assumptions of identity associated with motherhood. If the composition of the group had been different, these assumptions would also have been different.

Photovoice as an FPAR for Promoting Agency and Community Participation

Our results reinforce the idea that photovoice is a FPAR that not only integrates the intersectional perspective to understand women’s experiences, but also generates inclusive and safe spaces that promote participation and agency in participants. Below, we discuss these points.

Participants described the sessions as welcoming spaces where they could freely share their experiences and visions and where they felt that all the voices of the group were valuable and needed to be: “The photovoice sessions were about empathy and sisterhood, where I felt understood and my voice had value, as did those of my companions” (P04). In fact, there was very little absenteeism, and they were looking forward to the day of the week to meet and chat. In this regard, and in line with other studies (Cornell et al., 2019; Guariso et al., 2016; Mejia et al., 2013; Wang & Burris, 1997), photovoice was a safe space where women felt free to share their experiences, learn from each other, integrate different viewpoints, and create new support networks, as FPAR proposed (Campbell & Wasco, 2000; Reid & Frisby, 2008).

This project generated processes to facilitate women’s participation and agency in the face of the inequalities they suffer as African migrants. They actively participated in all stages of the photovoice, from the selection of topics to the analysis phase and dissemination. This active role is absolutely necessary to promote socio-political incidence and to challenge power dynamics (Cornell et al., 2019). In accordance with the dimensions of agency proposed by García-Ramírez et al. (2011), throughout the sessions, participants were involved in an empowering process, which increased their critical awareness (e.g., enhanced understanding of some topics), gave them greater capacity to act (e.g., greater ability to make decisions), and enabled them to take action to promote social justice (e.g., promotion of feminist actions). Table 1 illustrates each dimension.

Table 1 Photovoice for promoting agency and community participation in participants

Dimensions	Evidence
Increasing critical awareness	<p><i>Enhancement of the ways of understanding some topics</i> ("I have loved the topic of sex... Sex is a free thing, when both of you feel like doing it, but when you don't feel like doing it it is not to force, because if you do it by force it is an abuse, right?"; "There I have put the freedom to choose to be a mother or not... That is also a feminist struggle")</p> <p><i>Rights awareness</i> ("We have more knowledge, and knowledge gives you power. The more you know, the more you can fight for your rights, the more you can demand and also, even if you don't fight, at least you know when your rights are being violated")</p> <p><i>Certainty of their capacity to make decisions</i> ("In our daily lives we must improve to have our own voice, both to be heard and to make decisions. The course has given us tools to be able to change our environment")</p> <p><i>Commitment to rights advocacy</i> ("That we also have the right to participate in the decisions of our neighborhood, there are many who did not do it, because we are just here to seek life... We also have to know the problems of our neighborhood, yes, we have to know, we have to integrate, we have our children there, who are growing up and who have to integrate... We have to know the laws of the country in which we live and demand our rights")</p>
Gaining capacity to act	<p><i>Capacity to organize community exhibitions</i>: collectively, they organized nine community exhibitions to expose the photo-narratives and to promote a dialogue with other social groups in community and academic spaces</p> <p><i>Ability to speak in public and present the results of the project</i> ("I am very proud of myself: I never thought I would be able to speak in front of so many people and here! Me at the university!")</p> <p><i>Selfcare network</i>: they continue the WhatsApp group and they eventually meet to talk about their issues and have their own space of "women only."</p> <p><i>Greater autonomy in their homes</i> ("After the course, at least in our house, in the 70 m floor, at least we know how things are going. There we are going to be presidents of our house!")</p>
Taking action to promote social change	<p><i>Promotion of feminist actions</i>: They promoted the first black women group to participate in the feminist march, carrying a large banner with the slogan "Feminism will be anti-racist or won't be". Also, one of them, impulsed and lead the first afro-feminist cafe in Seville</p> <p><i>Promoting initiatives aimed at social justice</i>: Some of them have been engaged on the design and implementation the second part of the NDER project that address racism in host societies, focusing on schools</p>

Community exhibitions led by participants were held in a variety of community and academic spaces, making their problems visible, amplifying networks, and advocating for their rights in various contexts. Then, photovoice offers a way to re-narrate the discriminatory daily experiences of oppressed people that usually internalize the stigma, thus promoting their agency and community participation (Merino et al., 2020; Saksena & McMorrow, 2020).

Furthermore, after the process, many participants remain committed to their community and the NGO, participating, advocating for their rights, and even promoting their own actions. For example, many of them also participated in actions for social justice, such as the World March of Women, and others helped design and implement a second phase of the NDER project—focusing on racism in host societies. According to other studies (Pearce et al., 2017; Suffla et al., 2014), photovoice strengthens the capacity of oppressed people not only to choose their priorities, but also to construct knowledge and drive social changes.

Limitations and Future Research Lines

This research has some limitations that should be taken into account. First, horizontality and the active participation of women in all phases of the research was not possible. A clear example is that participants did not take part in the process of writing this article. Reflections on the possibilities of co-authorship and revisiting participants' discourses with them in the writing phase would be necessary, if we are to talk about a process of collective knowledge production in its entirety. Then, breaking the—patriarchal, capitalist and colonial—logics of power that still sustain our universities and the academic knowledge production is a challenge for feminist researchers.

On the other hand, as far as the researchers are concerned, although our whiteness could unavoidably influence the research process and, therefore, be a limitation of this FPAR (Deliovsky, 2017), it has deepened our reflexivity. In Table 2, we share some of those reflections about it, together with an excerpt from one of the participants, following the structure proposed by Cornell et al. (2019).

Furthermore, photovoice evaluation processes should be strengthened in future research. For example, including pre-post tests that can verify the changes generated in participants, without losing the participatory and flexible essence of qualitative methodology. Then, mixed methods are required. Also, assessing possible impacts of the actions from the community phase (i.e., exhibitions) in local communities, as well as to follow up on participants' agency and community participation, in the short, medium, and long term.

Table 2 Photovoice for promoting reflexivity

Positions	Evidence
Reflection as a mentor-researcher	<p>As a white, middle-class, non-disabled, bisexual female born into a Spanish low-class family and brought up in an excluded neighborhood, I have experienced both privilege and oppression in many contexts. This has made me aware of how power relations influence my everyday experience. This project has made me continually question my position as a researcher and activist, rethinking the costs and benefits of FPAR. With this project, I had two goals. Firstly, to collaborate with African women in their process of raising their voices. Throughout the process, this challenged my privileges as a white academic female, which made horizontality impossible. But, at the same time, these privileges gave me opportunities to obtain resources for the project and expand the results in numerous contexts, including the academy. Moreover, listening to the participants, I identified common elements of oppression from my intersections. Secondly, I aimed to accompany my student/colleague in her FPAR learning process, from the perspective of sisterhood. This put a strain on my position as a teacher and on academic hierarchies. Undoubtedly, it has been a very enriching process, which has required time and commitment, which sometimes is not rewarded in university spheres, but it is rewarded on a personal and civic level. Today, I continue to collaborate with the NGO and many of the women involved, for achieving social justice</p>
Reflection as a student-researcher	<p>This project was my first job as a community psychologist when I was finishing my master's degree. In this regard, it was a challenge to face the considerable difficulties of carrying out an FPAR with the little experience I already had as a young researcher. Through this project, I was able to continue deepening the reflections that I had already been making in spheres of activism and academia. This FPAR was the first time I realized that action research can be an essential space for activism that breaks away from the traditional extractivist logics of knowledge production. However, it was not exempt of internal conflicts because I questioned whether I was entitled to occupy the space. These conflicts revolved around my place of enunciation and the privileges and oppressions I was subject to. And how, in my case, privileges prevailed over oppressions: I had a racial and geopolitical privilege. I am white; I am European, and thus, I would never suffer the weight of this racist and colonial system on my back. On this premise, the sessions became a space for active listening to experiences, thoughts and feelings of women; a space in which we gradually built friendships among us, both participants and researchers. I strongly believe that this was one of the most important strengths of the project: power relations were present, but we built relationships of admiration and respect that allowed us to forge alliances that are still in place today. In FPAR we can build alliances between those of us who inhabit the margins in one way or another to break down oppressive social structures</p>

Table 2 (continued)

Positions	Evidence
Reflections from a participant	The white researchers in charge of implementing and developing the photovoice in this project, it seems to me, tried to carry out the method in the least hegemonic way possible, although it is clear to me that there is a long and rough road ahead in terms of visibility, representation, and whitesplaining. As an African woman and a militant feminist, I was very pleased that the researchers were militant and that they were not and did not remain oblivious to racial and gender issues in the streets. Racist and feminist struggles, like academic struggles, should and must be militant

Conclusion

This photovoice-based FPAR has helped to increase understanding of the oppressive conditions that African migrant women have to face in Southern Spain and how they try to overcome them through processes through agency and community participation. Following Campbell and Wasco (2000), this FPAR has been “transformative by creating settings for oppressed people to come together to examine their lives (...) FPAR can be and should be, a setting for consciousness raising and social change” (p. 788).

We hope that our findings reinforce the use of participatory methods not only for research proposals, but also for action in order to promote agency and community participation. Then, we believe that they are also useful to practitioners and agencies when planning, developing, and implementing community-based interventions (Pedersen et al., 2021). We emphasize that boosting collaborating networks between academia and social organizations is a good way to address and challenge structural inequalities based on gender, race, and other intersected dimensions. Finally, we highlight FPAR as a powerful tool for undertaking truly anti-patriarchal and anti-colonial research to make our diverse and complex societies more equitable.

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Declarations

Conflict of Interest The authors declare no competing interests.

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