

## Resettled Syrian Women and Food Security in Kitchener-Waterloo, Canada, During COVID-19: Personal Reflections on a Photovoice Participatory Study

by Heba Hamzeh\*

### Introduction

In the early months of 2024, I acted as the primary facilitator of a Photovoice study with eleven displaced Syrian women who had resettled in the Kitchener-Waterloo area after 2015. The study focused on their physical and mental well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants also discussed the state of their food security over a longer duration following their displacement from Syria. This dialogue focused on their food traditions and daily food practices and examined how these essential activities had been affected after exiting Syria. Cultural food security thus became one of the critical themes of the study. Additionally, the study attempted to understand changes to the respondents' food accessibility and availability through the years of the COVID-19 pandemic (2020 to 2022).

The study utilized the Photovoice technique to document and highlight the experiences of these participants. Photovoice is a participatory action methodology which allows respondents to engage more actively in the research process by sharing their stories and lived realities through selected photographs that they have taken (Budig et al., 2018). These images further enable participants to visualize and discuss community-specific issues during the focus group sessions organized as part of the study (Nykiforuk et al., 2011). For example, a follow-up study with female residents of a low-income neighbourhood in Spain who had previously participated in a Photovoice project found that this participatory method had contributed to three dimensions of empowerment: gain in knowledge and skills, positive change in self-perception, and use of resources (Budig et al., 2018). Another assessment of this method with young indigenous respondents found that it fostered participant autonomy and authority, was culturally appropriate, and was deemed an effective method to engage marginalized groups (Anderson et al., 2023).



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In this research brief, I explain the photovoice research method and how it was organized with the Syrian women participants. I also offer some personal and critical reflections on my role as a peer researcher and sole facilitator for this study. I identify some challenges faced during the study and offer some suggestions for future Photovoice projects with similar objectives.

## The Participants

Potential participants for this study were identified with the help of three organizations working with Syrian women: the Canadian Arab Women's Association (CAWA), ShamRose for Syrian Culture, and Levant Canada. CAWA supports the integration of Arab women in the Waterloo Region and Guelph. Shamrose for Syrian Culture is another community-based organization that has supported Syrian migrants in rebuilding their lives in Canada since 2015. Levant Canada is a non-profit organization that supports newcomers in Canada, including Syrians. Through these three organizations, I reached out to Syrian women who had resettled in Canada, bringing together a group of eleven participants with diverse experiences and backgrounds.

## Photovoice Sessions

Four group sessions were organized with the participants, each with its own specific focus to facilitate open dialogue and discussions on the photos they had taken. The first three sessions were conducted virtually and in person, while the final session was held in person at the Balsillie School of International Affairs.

**Session One:** Establishing Rapport and Ethical Guidelines: The first session involved introductions and an overview of the Photovoice methodology. The group discussed ethical guidelines, and each woman shared her story of migration to Canada and food security. The sense of comfort and trust established early in the study created a supportive space for the women to express themselves.

**Session Two:** Photography and Storytelling Training: The second session gave guidance to participants about taking meaningful photos. Despite familiarity with mobile phones, they needed instruction on photo quality and ethical considerations such as respecting privacy by avoiding identifiable images of people without their consent, refraining from photographing sensitive or potentially stigmatizing situations, and ensuring that their photos represented the themes of the study accurately. We also discussed themes around food consumption in daily life, the impacts of migration, and changes during the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Session Three:** Sharing and Discussing Photos: Participants began to share their selected photos with the group in this session. They used these photos to contemplate the role of food in their lives and how migration has shifted their food culture. Participants identified challenges such as accessing traditional ingredients, the financial dimension of purchasing Syrian foods from specialized markets, and the comfort that food offers amid the transition to their new life in Canada.

**Session Four: Final Discussion:** The final session involved deeper reflection on each photo, and sharing their stories. These discussions revealed resilience amid challenges. The theme of cultural preservation through cooking emerged strongly.

### The Role of the Peer Researcher and “Insider” Perspectives

Like the study participants, I was born in Syria, although I migrated voluntarily to Canada as an international student. The study participants had fled the armed conflict in Syria to a neighbouring or nearby country and later resettled in Canada under the government, private or blended sponsorship program in 2015 or thereafter. I acted as a peer researcher and the sole facilitator for this study, and as such, I navigated the opportunities and challenges inherent in this role. Coming from a similar background as the participants, I shared linguistic and cultural commonalities with them. These commonalities eased the recruitment process and enabled me to communicate easily with the participants in Syrian Arabic or Levantine Arabic.

### Insider Status, Sense of Ease, Familiarity with Social Practices

As an insider familiar with the sociocultural milieu of Syria, one advantage was the immediate trust and sense of comfort fostered by our shared identity. Being an insider was advantageous for this study because it allowed me to build communication quickly with the participants and facilitate openness during the group sessions. I was also familiar with the various food dishes and items discussed by the participants, including specific vegetables and spices consumed in Syria.

Most participants openly expressed their discomfort with the “refugee” label and preferred the term “displaced Syrians” to describe themselves. They felt that the “refugee” tag had negative connotations and conveyed a sense of charity. The comfort felt by the participants also allowed some to share their personal challenges and needs beyond the scope of the Photovoice study. For example, some participants sought my guidance on navigating work opportunities in Canada and asked for help with resume writing. I provided this assistance to some of the participants. However, it was important to balance empathy with analytical distance, as the participants sometimes shared sensitive information with me.

### All-Female Group and Inclusive Participation

Beyond our shared origin in Syria and common cultural background as Syrians living in Canada, the female-only composition of our participant group was central to enabling the openness and richness of our discussions. In Syrian culture, particularly for newly displaced Syrians adapting to a different society, gender roles are traditionally well-defined. Women are typically responsible for cooking and managing household meals, placing them at the centre of food-related activities, conversations, and experiences.

Additionally, if the group had included male participants, the gender dynamics would have shifted, limiting the depth and comfort of the discussions by the female respondents during the various sessions. Many participants felt free to express themselves and discuss topics openly in an all-female environment, which they might not have done in a mixed-gender group. Partly due to cultural norms, women may have felt hesitant or shy to voice their opinions in front of men, especially on domestic matters like food preparation, traditionally seen as “women’s responsibilities.” While these participants are the primary decision-makers regarding meals and food choices for their families, they may have felt reserved or embarrassed to share their experiences, preferences, or the personal challenges they faced in the presence of men.

The all-female group also provided a safe and supportive space where the women could reflect on how their forced migration from Syria had impacted their cooking practices. They shared their recipes for cooked foods and discussed their difficulties accessing culturally familiar food ingredients in Canada. This environment empowered them to speak openly and allowed them to bond over their shared experiences without feeling judged or constrained. Including male participants could have added a barrier to these conversations. Many women participants may have limited their comments, especially on sensitive subjects like financial constraints they experienced during the pandemic and thereafter or the emotional connection they feel to certain familiar foods. They may have downplayed or withheld their anecdotes, preferring to remain silent rather than articulate their experiences in the presence of men.

As a peer researcher, I realized how important it was to create an environment where the respondents felt validated and could participate freely in the group discussions without the pressure to conform to traditional expectations of modesty or deference around male participants. This gender-sensitive approach highlights the significance of culturally informed methodologies in qualitative research (Pelzang & Hutchinson, 2018). By organizing an all-female group, the study fostered a level of engagement and authenticity that might not have been achieved in a mixed-gender setting. More importantly, it allowed the women participants to lead the conversation on their terms.

## Methodological Challenges

**Recruiting participants:** One of the initial challenges I faced was organizing the focus group, particularly identifying and reaching out to migrants living in the Waterloo Region during the pandemic. Syrian migrants may be reluctant to engage with researchers, as some could dislike being treated as “case studies”. The study participants were therefore located with the assistance of three organizations with an established history of supporting resettlement in the Waterloo Region.

**“Error of normality”:** An insider perspective can sometimes create an “error of normality.” Certain community practices or struggles that seem ordinary to the insider researcher can hold deep significance for an outsider’s understanding. Striking a balance between empathy and objectivity requires careful reflection during the study. Since the researcher shared the same background as the participants, having migrated from Syria to Canada, there needed to

be more clarity about which cultural norms should be considered and those which could be overlooked. The researcher adopted the “Six Thinking Hats” method in which a wide variety of perspectives and opinions are considered to maintain objectivity and focus on a research setting (De Bono, 2010). Such an approach may be needed especially when the researcher shares marked similarities with participants, by separating the facilitator’s personal experiences from the methodological approach required for the study and the reporting process.

**Juggling multiple roles:** During the focus group sessions, food was a central and comfortable theme for the participants, who freely shared recipes and discussed the various dishes they have adapted to their lives in Canada. They also talked about the dishes that they have abandoned after being forced to leave Syria. Their resilience in preserving cultural dishes was particularly evident, yet the shift to unfamiliar Canadian ingredients created frustration and creative adaptations. Facilitating these conversations was deeply rewarding as a peer researcher. However, translating between Arabic and English, facilitating the discussions effectively and simultaneously taking notes was much work. Without a dedicated note-taker, I felt occasionally torn between managing the session dynamics and capturing every moment.

**Sensitive topics:** Despite the marked sense of ease and comfort in the group sessions, participants were less willing to discuss certain “sensitive” subjects. For instance, many were uncomfortable talking about the prevailing circumstances in Syria and their personal or family circumstances that forced them to leave their country of birth. It is likely that the background of violence and trauma associated with the ongoing conflict in Syria may have influenced their decision not to discuss these painful and difficult aspects of their personal history.

**Unfamiliarity with research projects:** Most participants, especially homemakers and others who had only recently sought refuge in Canada, had not participated in any similar activity before this study. They had no experience in training workshops with NGOs, foundations, or international agencies, nor had they been involved in interviews or surveys tied to research projects, presenting another challenge for the facilitator.

**Sustaining interest:** Motivating participants to remain engaged throughout the research process was also tricky. A larger group of participants was recruited to ensure that a certain number could be retained until the end of the study. While some participants were motivated by financial incentives, others were initially hesitant, viewing the gift cards they were offered with suspicion. The facilitator had to explain that the gift cards given to them were not a form of bribery but rather a standard practice in such projects and that their involvement was entirely voluntary.

## What Would I Do Differently in Future Projects?

If I were to conduct a similar study, I would implement several key changes to streamline the process and ensure deeper engagement and outcomes. These may be useful reflections for other researchers using Photovoice and in a similar position:

- **Hire a note-taker:** One of my key challenges was balancing multiple roles of facilitating discussions, translating between Arabic and English, and simultaneously taking notes. These tasks often stretched my focus, making it difficult to capture every moment, thought, or exchange with the necessary detail. Including a dedicated note-taker fluent in Syrian Arabic would allow me to focus entirely on facilitating the conversation and creating a comfortable space for the participants. Having someone whose sole responsibility is taking accurate notes would also ensure that every important detail is noticed, especially in the nuances of the discussion that are critical for analysis later.
- **Recruit fewer participants:** While the diverse insights from the eleven participants were important, managing a group of this size in a participatory research method was challenging. A smaller group could have delved deeper into individual experiences and given each participant more time to share and reflect on their experiences. A group of around six to eight participants would have allowed for more focused discussions, greater participant engagement, and the opportunity for each person to contribute more extensively. The smaller size would also make it easier to manage the logistics of the sessions, including photo sharing, group discussions, and one-on-one support where needed.
- **Extend the number of sessions:** Given the richness of the topics that we covered, the four sessions, while productive, felt somewhat rushed. A higher number of sessions say at least six or seven, would allow for a more in-depth exploration of each theme and give the participants additional time to reflect on their photos and experiences. More sessions would also give the participants additional time to learn and refine their photography skills, share their stories, and build upon the discussions that arose during the earlier meetings or group sessions. This extended timeline would enhance the depth of the insights gathered and ensure that participants feel they have fully explored the topics that matter most to them.
- **Allow for more one-on-one engagement:** Another suggestion is to create more opportunities for individual check-ins with participants between sessions. This reworked focus group structure could involve one-on-one conversations where participants can ask questions or express concerns privately. While the group discussions were meaningful, some one-on-one engagement would help address personal challenges or specific issues that participants might not feel comfortable discussing within a group. It would also allow more tailored support, whether that be guidance on taking better photos, discussing the themes they want to explore, or addressing any personal difficulties they encounter throughout the process.
- **Increase participant training on photography and ethical guidelines:** Though all participants had smartphones and some basic familiarity with photography, there was a noticeable gap in understanding how to take photos that convey their stories meaningfully. Another suggestion is to offer more comprehensive training sessions on photography techniques, storytelling through images, and ethical considerations, particularly around consent and privacy when taking photos in public or of others. This extra training would give participants more confidence in capturing their experiences visually, resulting in a striking diversity of images for focus group discussion.
- **Explore additional themes beyond food security:** While food security was the central theme of this study, many other important topics were mentioned during our sessions, such as mental health, cultural identity, and employment challenges. Broadening the scope of

discussion to include these other themes would allow participants to explore how forced migration from Syria has impacted all aspects of their lives. It would also provide a more holistic view of their experiences as displaced Syrians in Canada and offer deeper insights into how various aspects of their lives intersect.

- **Provide more structured support for participant needs:** Several participants requested my help with job searches and resume writing during and after the study, highlighting a broader need for support beyond the photovoice process. In future studies, I would collaborate more closely with local organizations or offer structured workshops that address practical needs like employment, language skills, or accessing community resources. This extra step would ensure that the study serves as a space for expression and reflection and contributes to participants' empowerment in tangible ways.

## Conclusion

The findings of this study emphasize the value of participatory methods like Photovoice in amplifying the voices of marginalized groups and providing them with a platform to share their stories on their own terms. However, future studies could benefit from refinements such as smaller participant groups, extended sessions, and dedicated note-takers to enhance the depth of the research. Moreover, expanding the scope to address intersecting challenges like employment, mental health, and cultural integration would provide a more holistic understanding of the resettlement experience of displaced newcomers to Canada.

Ultimately, this study serves as a call to action for researchers, policymakers, and community organizations to adopt inclusive and culturally informed approaches that prioritize the needs and aspirations of displaced populations. By fostering spaces for dialogue and empowering participants, such initiatives can contribute to not only understanding their experiences but also supporting their integration and well-being in meaningful ways.

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