

# Seeing how it works: A visual essay about critical and transformative research in education

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*As visual researchers in the field of education we have initiated and completed numerous participatory projects using qualitative visual methods such as drawing, collage, photovoice, and participatory video, along with organising screenings and creating exhibitions, action briefs, and policy posters. Locating this work within a critical paradigm, we have used these methods with participants to explore issues relating to HIV and AIDS and to gender-based violence in rural contexts. With technology, social media, and digital communication network connections becoming more accessible, the possibilities of using visual participatory methods in educational research have been extended. However, the value of visual participatory research in contributing to social change is often unrecognised. While the power of numbers and words in persuasive and informative change is well accepted within the community of educational researchers, the power of the visual itself is often overlooked. In this visual essay, we use the visual as a way to shift thinking about what it means to do educational research that is transformative in and of itself. As an example we draw on our visual participatory work with 15 first-year women university students in the Girls Leading Change<sup>1</sup> project to explore and address sexual violence at a South African university. We aim to illustrate, literally, the possibilities of using the visual, not only as a mode of inquiry, but also of representation and communication in education and social science scholarship.*

**Keywords:** gender-based violence, sexual violence, visual participatory research, women university students

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## Introduction

The burgeoning area of arts-based methodologies within qualitative research has opened up the space for photography, video, and film, for example, to become more accepted as tools of research (Knobloch, Baer, Laurier, Petschke & Schnettler, 2008; Butler-Kisber, 2010; Mitchell, 2008). This is particularly so in a contemporary society in which the importance of images and visual technologies cannot be ignored (Lister & Wells, 2001), and where, as Pauwels (2000), and Emmison and Smith (2000) note, there is a visual turn in academic research, and a recognition that “[t]he assumption that the ‘languages’ of social sciences, i.e. propositional language and number, are the exclusive agents of meaning is becoming increasingly problematic” (Eisner, 1997:4). As we have argued elsewhere, participatory visual research, as a key approach to qualitative research, has a particular focus on voice, on marginalised or silenced groups, and on challenging the conditions that contribute to silencing these groups (De Lange, Mitchell & Stuart, 2007; Mitchell, 2011; Milne, Mitchell & De Lange, 2012).

In our writings about work with young people, teachers, and community health workers we have set out to articulate the power of doing visual participatory research and demonstrate how it can contribute to engagement, reflection, and agency. Like Cole and Knowles we have sought “what we considered to be more appropriately inclusive approaches to inquiry processes and representation—methodologies that honored the diverse forms of knowing that were part of everyday experience and that paid appropriate respect to both research participants and those who ‘read’ or might be interested in ‘reading’ research texts”. In this way, we, too, have been “trying to get closer and closer to human experience and to communicate it in a way that seemed truer to its original form and to those who may be involved” (2008:58). In reporting on this work we have seen journal editors include our visual data (De Lange, Mitchell, Moletsane, Stuart, Buthelezi, 2006; Moletsane, De Lange, Mitchell, Stuart, Buthelezi, & Taylor, 2007), photographs of the research process using visual participatory methods (De Lange, 2008), and even an online video clip of the participants’ engagement (De Lange & Mitchell, 2012). In other publications we have made the visual itself the point, as can be seen in work on looking (Pithouse & Mitchell, 2007), and in images of image-making (Mitchell, 2011). As Mitchell highlights, such work draws attention to the significance of “visually verifiable evidence” (2011:153). At the same time, we acknowledge that it is sometimes difficult to persuade scholars in the area of educational research of the power of visual participatory methodology. We want them to realise that it is rigorous (and transformative); to recognise it as a mode of inquiry, a mode of representation, and a mode of dissemination in researching *with* participants; as well as viewing it as a mode that enables research that is deeply engaging (for participants and researchers) and which lends itself to reflexivity.

## Participatory research in addressing sexual violence

The role of participatory research in ensuring that the voices of participants are foregrounded, and that they are “naming their world as they see it” (Westmore-Susse, 2014:119) seems particularly appropriate to addressing sexual violence. In taking on this position, we draw on two critical points from the well-known Columbian sociologist, Fals-Borda:

*Do not monopolise your knowledge nor impose arrogantly your techniques, but respect and combine your skills with the knowledge of the researched or grassroots communities, taking them as full partners and co-researchers.*

*Do not impose your own ponderous scientific style for communicating results, but diffuse and share what you have learned together with the people, in a manner that is wholly understandable and even literary and pleasant, for science should not be necessarily a mystery nor a monopoly of experts and intellectuals. (1995: n.p.)*

In the study that we embarked on with young women, Digital media for change and well-being: Girl-led ‘from the ground up’ policy-making in addressing sexual violence at a university in South Africa, <sup>2</sup> we posed the following questions: How can participatory initiatives with young women—a group typically excluded from policy dialogue—inform practices, policies, programmes and services related to their own safety, security, and well-being at university? What appropriate methods could we use to explore with them their insider knowledge of sexual violence at university? How could we enable them to communicate the results in ways that empower them to engage with policy makers at university? In other words, we wanted to explore how our research could contribute to political participation and civic engagement. This was possible within a critical transformative paradigm, using visual participatory methods: we created cellphilms (videos made with a cellphone); we created policy posters and action briefs; and we set up spaces for dialogue. The research process included creating cellphilms in phase one, policy posters in phase two, action briefs in phase three, and using these to facilitate dialogue with the policy makers in phase four.

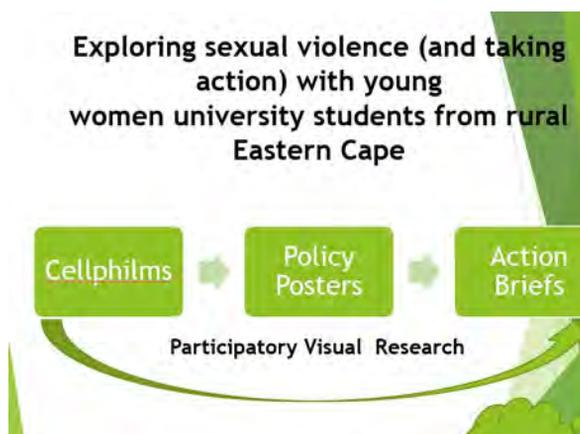


Figure 1. The Research Process

## **Seeing how it works: A visual essay**

### ***Curatorial statement***

In “Seeing How It Works” with its images and captions—our own and those of the participants—we pose the question: If researchers see, literally, how the engagement process works, how might this contribute to their understanding of its significance for effecting critical and transformative research in education? As three women researchers studying the use of the visual and issues of sexual violence, we consider that posing the question challenges both the entrenched regimes and structures of what counts as research as well as the patriarchal, and often racially discriminatory structures, which still govern the institutions within which we (and our participants) work and study. To answer the question we draw on our Girls Leading Change project, as it has come to be called, with 15 young women, all first year education students. Writing about the situation of campus violence in South Africa several years ago, Bennett observes that “there has been very little ongoing engagement with the issue of sexual harassment [including sexual violence] at university” (2009:12). We are, of course, mindful that campus violence is not something that is unique to South Africa. The situation of reporting is beginning to change world-wide and in South Africa, at least in relation to an increasing awareness that university campuses are often enclaves of sexual violence. However, how to give visibility to the specific challenges facing young women, especially those living on campus, remains problematic. The 34 images in the essay will, we hope, help the viewer to see how the visual and participatory methodologies can lead to a transformative agenda for addressing sexual violence.

### **Phase one: Making cellfilms**

We started with lead-in time for talking about sexual violence, in general, at school and at university. Then we offered the first prompt.

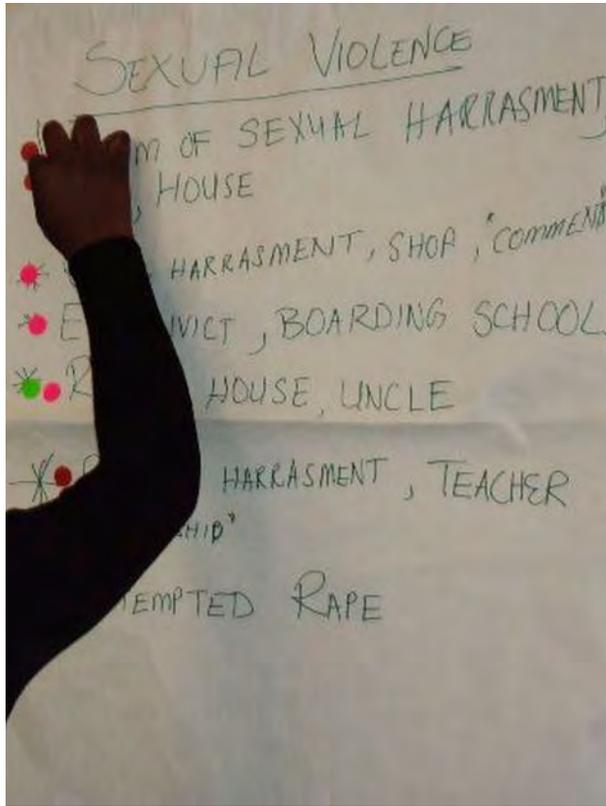


**Figure 2. Prompt 1: Looking back at your own schooling in your community, discuss good/nice/happy/pleasant experiences at school.**

Once the girls had discussed these experiences, we provided Prompt 2: “Looking back at your own schooling, discuss experiences of feeling unsafe at school”.



**Figure 3. Working in groups, the participants listed many different experiences, and talked about each one.**

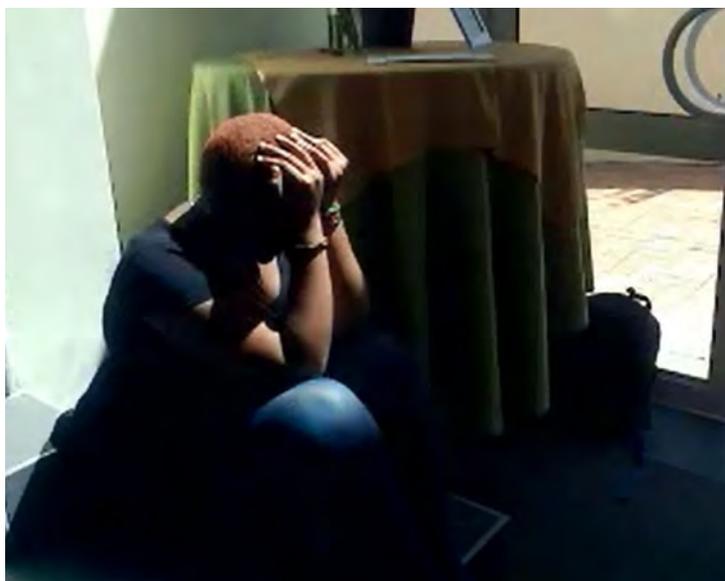


**Figure 4. Voting procedure: Each participant voted to choose the topic she regarded as most pressing and about which she would like her group to make a cellphilm.**

The participants then discussed the chosen topics. Using a participatory video approach (see Mitchell & De Lange, 2012) the groups made their first cellphilm. These were entitled, *Forced marriage*; *Sexually transmitted marks*; *Step-fathers raping their step daughters*; and *Your choice is up to you*.



**Figure 5.** *The title frame of one of the cellphilms*



**Figure 6.** *In the cellphilm, Sexually transmitted marks, the young learner is confronted by a teacher who expects her to have sex with him in exchange for good test marks in his subject.*

Since the participants had engaged with examples of sexual violence in their respective rural schools, we wanted them to think about sexual violence at the university. We provided Prompt 3: “Make a cellphilm about ‘feeling safe’ and ‘feeling not so safe’ in and around the university as a woman student.

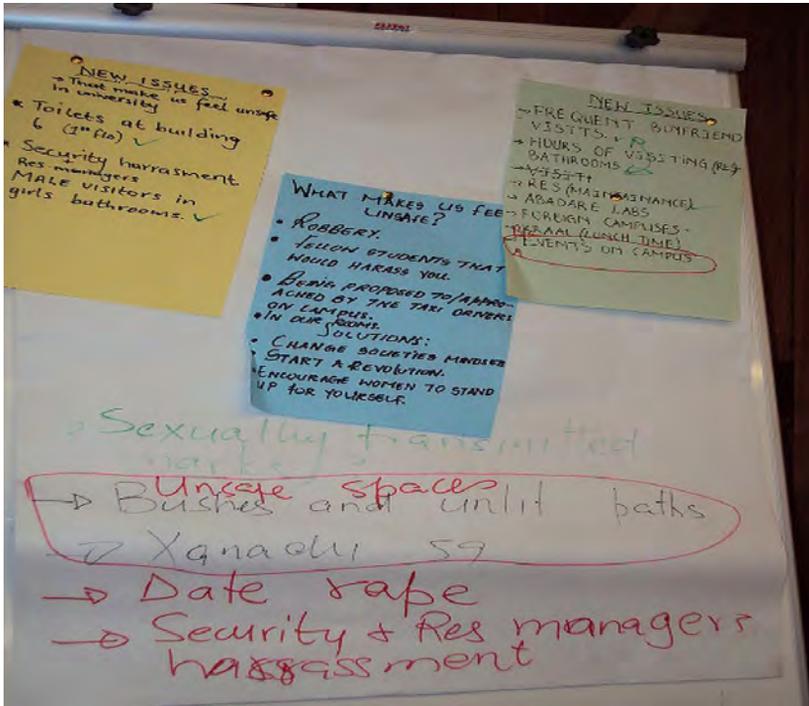


Figure 7. The participants came up with new ideas.

In the plenary discussions, the girls discussed these new ideas, and, as before, they again voted for the most pressing issue in their own groups. They then plotted a storyline—using storyboards—for their cellphilms. Each group began by deciding on a title for its cellphilim.

The participants decided to make four cellphilms, *Getting into Res* (about girls having to have sex with an off-campus residence manager so as to get a room on campus), *The Game* (about muggings around the university sports field during and after games), *Xanadu Square* (about a place on campus notorious for sexual harassment of female students), and *Careless Securities* (about security personnel sleeping on the job and failing to protect residents).



**Figure 8.** Working in groups, they filmed their stories.



**Figure 9.** The participants ended off the process of making a cellphilm by creating and filming their credits.



*Figure 10. Screenshots from Getting into Res; The Game; Xanadu Square; and Careless Securities*

We used a laptop, data projector, and speakers to view the cellphilms. This led to further discussion about sexual violence as experienced generally by girls on campus.

### **Phase two: Creating policy posters**

The question of how to get policy makers to take note of what the girls were saying encouraged us to consider a visual approach which could be more in the face, as it were, of these university policy makers. We drew on Walton's (1995) photo work with Grade 6 girls in the United Kingdom during which the girls produced media posters using photographs, drawings, and slogans targeting the boys who were sexually harassing them at school. We also, however, drew on Jessica Taft's (2010) work on the idea of political education. This genre of politically inspired media posters was deemed useful in our participatory visual project since we wanted the young women to be able to impart the message, in all its visual clarity, to the policy makers.

## Designing and Creating a Policy Poster

- Go back to issue for which you already have a solution.
- Discuss how to present the issue and the solution in a poster.
- Plan and create the first draft of a policy poster while keeping these points in mind:
  - Who is your primary audience?
  - What do you want the members of the audience to understand?
  - What do you want to have happen?
  - What do you want to include in your poster? Photograph?  
Drawing? Slogan? Message?
- Present your poster to the whole group and ask for feedback.
- Use the feedback to edit and refine your poster.
- Present your revised poster to the whole group for discussion.

*Figure 11. Guidelines on creating a policy poster*

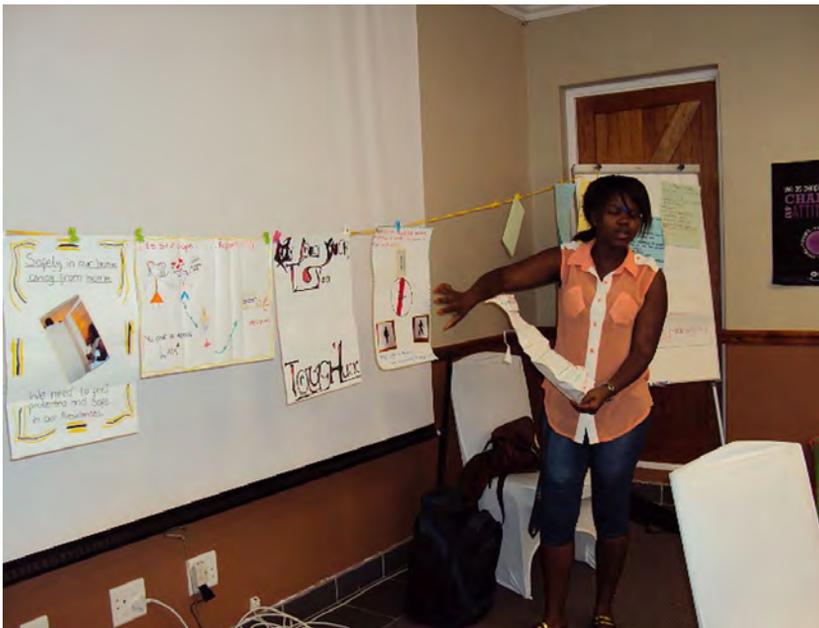
The girls worked in their groups to design and create their policy posters to complement the cellfilms they had made.



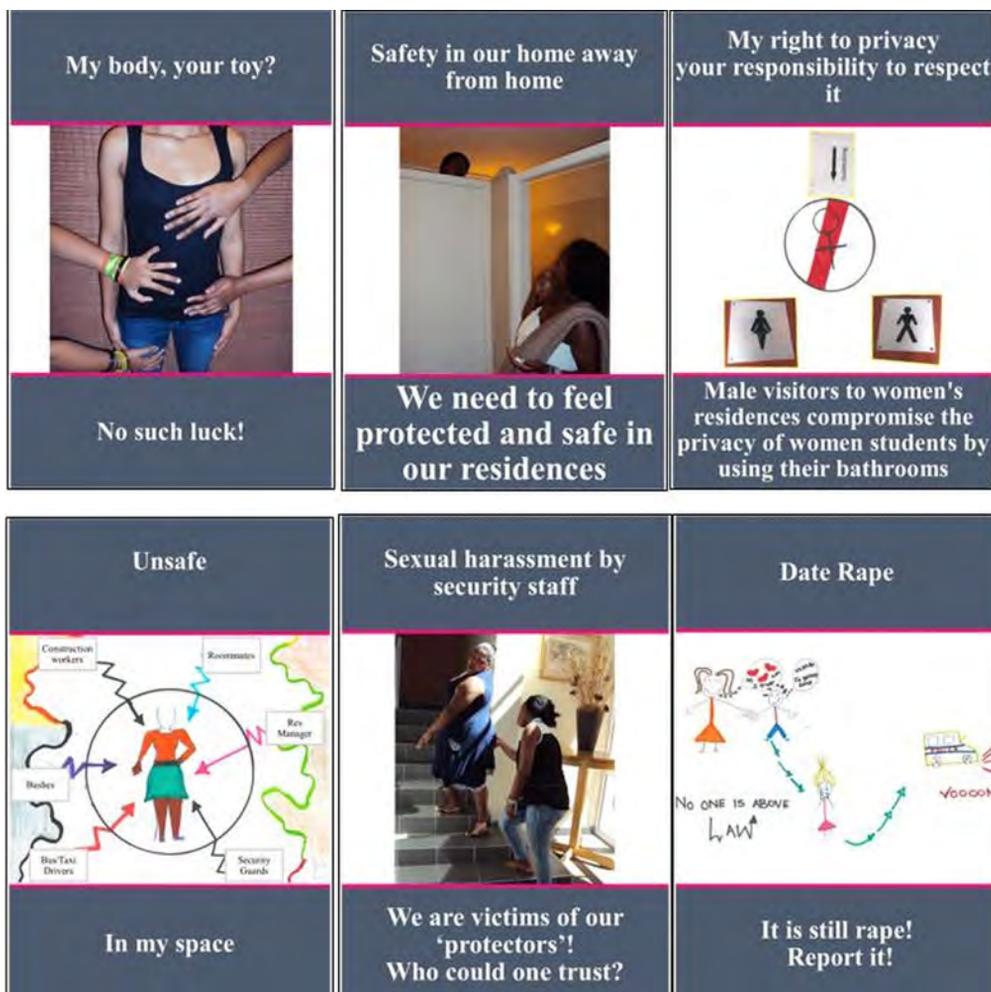
*Figure 12. The participants sometimes staged a photograph to represent an issue that was to be included in their poster.*



**Figure 13.** The cameras and photocopiers we had on hand enabled participants to try out various images to use in their policy posters.



**Figure 14.** The opportunity to present their draft policy posters to the whole group, for criticism leading to refinement, encouraged the participants to think more deeply about their ideas so as to clarify them. This, in turn, prepared them for the final phase—dialogue with the policymakers.



Figures 15 to 20. Using MS publisher, our research assistant digitized the six handmade policy posters. This enhanced the quality of the participants' work. Several sets were printed, ready to be handed to the policy makers.

### Phase 3: Creating Action Briefs

The participants, having identified where and how feeling unsafe at university manifested itself, and having made policy posters to visually represent these experiences of feeling unsafe, were ready to begin, again following Taft's (2010) ideas on political education, to generate ideas for taking action to deal with these critical issues.

## Developing an Action Brief

- An action brief is a concise document that sketches, first, the background to a problem that requires attention. Second, it explains clearly the nature of the problem and offers a solution. Third, it suggests who is best suited to implement this solution.
- Working with your cellphilm, develop an action brief.
- Your action brief is meant to persuade relevant policy makers so it must be short, crisp, clear, and convincing.

Figure 21. Guidelines on creating an action brief



Figure 22. The participants worked in groups to create a draft of an action brief for the problem identified in their cellphilms.

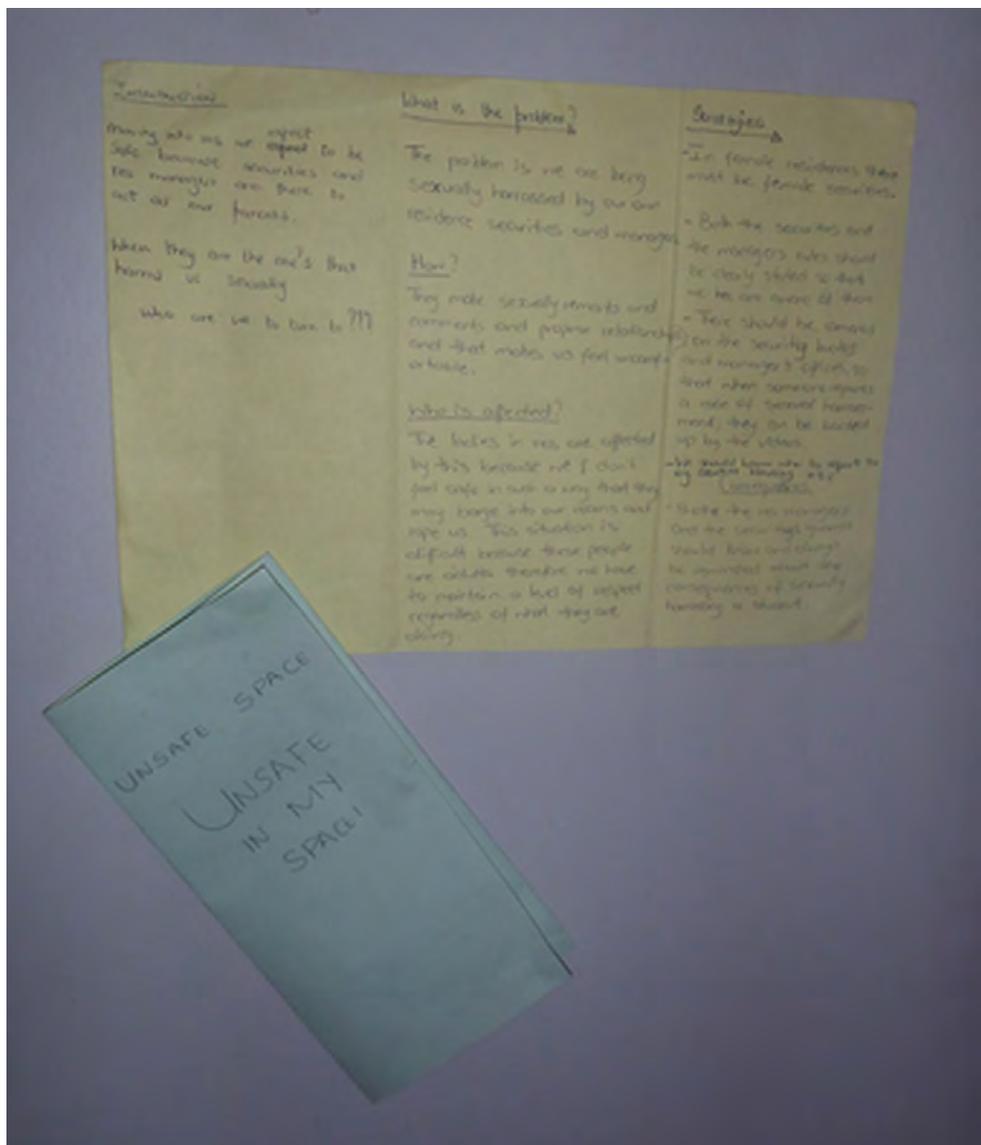


Figure 23. Each group presented its draft action brief and invited criticism that was then used to refine it.

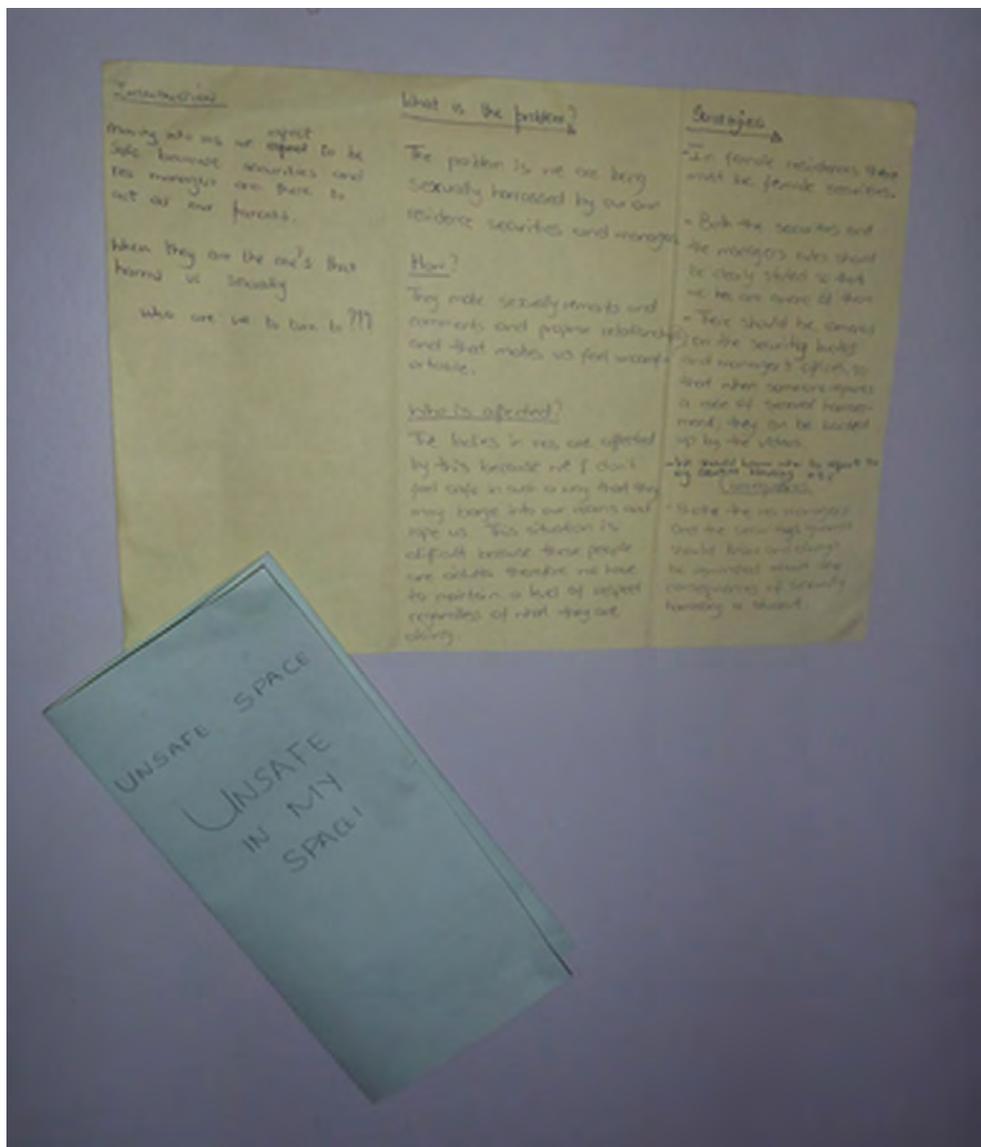


Figure 23. Each group presented its draft action brief and invited criticism that was then used to refine it.



Figure 24. The final version of an action brief created by participants

## Phase four: Dialogue with policy makers

Throughout the earlier phases the many opportunities to think and talk about their chosen issues, present work on them, reflect on and revise this work helped the participants to clarify their thinking about sexual violence in many of its different forms. This equipped them to initiate dialogue with policy makers at the university.



**Figure 25.** Exhibition (only partially shown here) showing the intricacies of the visual participatory research process and creating a backdrop for the first dialogue with policy makers



**Figure 26.** Seated in the Education Faculty Boardroom around the table with the DVC Research and Engagement, and the Dean of Education, the team of young women introduced themselves and their work on sexual violence—each contributing to the presentation—thus enabling critical dialogue with these policy makers. Questions were asked and responded to and a set of the policy posters and action briefs were handed over to the DVC and the Dean.

The participants concluded the first dialogue by asking the DVC and Dean to whom else they thought the dialogue should be extended. The girls went on to have conversations with the Director of the Centre for the Advancement of Non-racialism and Democracy (CANRAD) at the university, the Senior Director Institutional Planning, Director Transformation Monitoring and Evaluation, the DVC Institutional Support, the Dean of Students, the Residence Manager, the Head of Protection Services, and the Student Representative Council, and student organisations.



**Figure 27.** This third dialogue was with the DVC Institutional Support, the Dean of Students, the Director Student Housing, the Residence Manager, and the Head of Protection Services.



**Figure 28.** These dialogues also extended beyond the university. The group took part in a feminist dialogue hosted by Agenda Feminist Media Project in Durban. This not only exposed them to the work of more experienced feminists, but also enabled them to disseminate their own work and communicate with others about how they see their world.

## What We Are Seeing: Portraits of change

The images and captions above highlight the process, and, in particular, illuminate the ways in which this work, if it is to be transformative, must go beyond simply the production of visual data in participatory ways; there must be explicit reference to how it works in relation to engaging communities. The data above offers what Mitchell (2011) calls visually verifiable evidence of this process. We offer six portraits of change, as we term them, in response to the three questions that might be asked: “So what?”; “How will we know that anything is happening?”; and “Can we picture transformation and what would we see in such a picture?”



*Figures 29 and 30. Picturing Young Women's Agency*

Not only were the young women invited to several initiatives at the university and beyond, including participating in a Humanising Pedagogy panel during the university's diversity month celebrations, and the launch of the Kwanele, Enuf is Enuf initiative to stop sexual violence, they also initiated activities (such as the Bring back our girls campaign) that tackled wider societal and international issues. These public presentations gave these young women the opportunity to gain confidence and learn new skills in political and social activist work.

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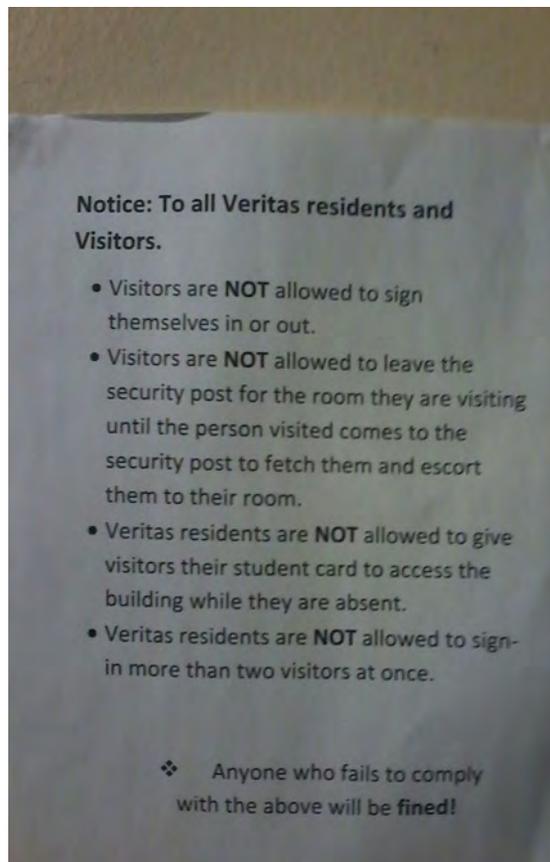
**Figure 31. Picturing Political Engagement**

The dialogues with the Director of the Centre for the Advancement of Non-racialism and democracy (CANRAD) at the university allowed the young women to take up issues of safety with policy makers in the university. They learnt about the decision-making structures at the university and engaged the policy makers in identifying strategies for addressing safety on campus.



**Figures 32 and 33. Picturing Change**

Ntaki wrote: "... by the post office. There used to be dark painting, no lights and broken chairs which were carelessly kept... They have now changed the painting, it's white. There has been lights [put up] and the chairs have been removed and that makes the place to look safer for us ☺".



*Figure 34. A further example was offered by Ntaki, who noted that the old Rules for Veritas residents “[were] now ... printed in bold and [this] ensure[s] people comply with them.”*

Clearly, these portraits depict the beginnings of change, enabling us to see that the work with the women students and the policy makers is not yet complete; that it has to continue relentlessly; and that it has to be done over and over again until everybody understands and works towards lasting change.

## Concluding Reflections

Facilitating the process of ensuring that the girls could “[name] their world as they see it” (Westmore-Susse, 2014:119), and by our “not imposing [our] own ... scientific style for communicating results”, as Fals-Borda (1995:n.p.) suggests, enabled us to offer this visual essay as an example of scholarly arts-based research with visual evidence of how these girls came to name their world as they see it, and how they aim to change their world through dialogue.

We do not offer this as a see-how-it-works manual in an uncritical way, but suggest that our participatory research enables local possibilities for change—what Kumashiro (2000) refers to as “movement” (cited in Baez, 2000: 53), rather than

extensive social change. The visual essay shows the engagement of the participants in small leaps of social transformation (Mertens, 2009), enabling the educational research to restructure the dynamics of power in the research process, simultaneously “making scholarship more accessible” (Cole and Knowles, 2008: 59). There are, of course, certain challenges to representing all aspects of the project. The visual, for example, can be of concern in representing data. Working in a critical paradigm and wanting to do transformative educational research, we as co-researchers with the participants, engaged with the issue of research ethics relevant to the significance of anonymity and confidentiality. How could the girls’ voices be heard if they were to remain anonymous? Dealing with their issues and solutions in confidence would make a mockery of the whole project. This, we all agreed, would be another instance of the silencing of young women’s voices, something we were not willing to support. The young women wanted shirts printed with the slogan *Girls Leading Change* to wear to the dialogues; we had these made for them. Now they wear these to classes so as to be seen to be part of the *Girls Leading Change* movement. We need to think more about how photo essays and other visual essays can be used to provoke researchers to rethink issues of anonymity in work that sets out to make voices heard and that aims at getting policy makers to listen to these voices and see the visual data.

In conclusion, we return to our original question: If researchers see, literally, how the engagement process works, how might this contribute to their understanding of its significance for effecting critical and transformative research in education? We have tried to show that participatory visual work is a rigorous and transformative mode of inquiry, a mode of representation, and a mode of dissemination in research done *with* participants. At the same time, the production of the essay raises for us a number of questions about representation: Does our visual data offer compelling evidence of process? How does our visual evidence contribute to the persuasiveness of the argument? Is the visual evidence seen to be trustworthy? How do we address some of the challenges in relation to the aesthetics of representation? Reinikainen and Zetterstrom-Dahlqvist (in press) discuss, for example, the politics and aesthetics of exhibition curation from the perspective of social scientists rather than from that of artists. Have we been sufficiently reflexive in our curatorial work in this visual essay? Have we managed to convey enough about the significance of our positionality? These are, of course, questions that evoke, in turn, further questions about what counts as academic or scholarly evidence. Can we, through a visual essay based primarily on visual data and captions (as opposed to an article with illustrative images), influence what might come to be counted as a scholarly article? How do we adapt the review criteria and process for arts-based scholarship? Finally, how do we picture change itself? Is it possible to both see change and represent change for others to see? While questions of representation have been raised by other scholars (see for example Jipson and Paley, 1997) in relation to arts-based research, they are questions that are specifically elicited by digital scholarship, as various researchers are exploring in this issue of *Perspectives in Education* and in special issues of other

journals such as *Sociological Research Online* and the *McGill Journal of Education* (see, for example, Strong-Wilson, Morrison, Mitchell, Pithouse-Morgan, Radford & Daniels, 2015). Given the digital spaces afforded by new media technology, we conclude that this research has the potential to help the educational research community to revise what counts as an intervention and what counts as research, and, ultimately, what counts as evidence of change.

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## **Endnotes**

1. The Girls Leading Change project is a pilot study (funded by NMMU research theme funding) feeding into the Networks for Change and Well-being: Girl-led 'From the Ground Up' Policy-making to Address Sexual Violence in Canada and South Africa project (funded by SSHRC and IDRC).
2. The NMMU research committee granted ethical clearance for the study (H13-EDU-ERE-016). We also met with the participants and discussed this article with them, giving them the opportunity to withdraw any image if they so wished. We also circulated the article to the policy makers we engaged with, giving them the opportunity to withdraw any image if they so wished. They all chose not to remove any images.