

Photovoice: A Participatory Photography Methodology

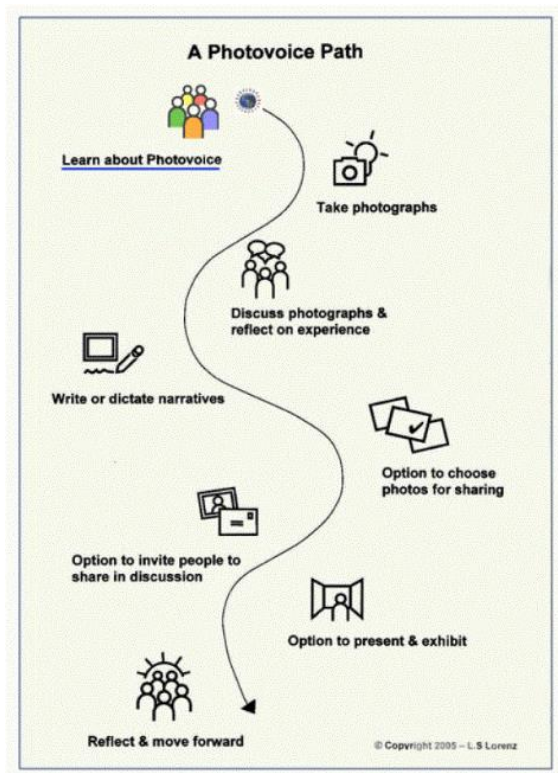


Figure 1: A Photovoice Path, created by Laura Lorenz, presented in the Photovoice Worldwide website

Photovoice is a community-based participatory research (CBPR) method that empowers participants to construct their own narratives through photography (Wang and Burris, 1994, 1997). By capturing images that reflect their experiences, participants highlight issues that matter to them and their communities, providing researchers with deeper insights into the topic under study (Nykiforuk et al., 2011). This approach acknowledges the difficulty of articulating lived experiences through words alone and seeks to inspire social change by engaging with policymakers (Sutton-Brown, 2014). Photovoice has been successfully applied in education, disability studies, public health, and migrant studies, demonstrating its broad relevance (Cubero et al., 2024; Moffitt and Vollman, 2004; Sutton-Brown, 2014; Wang et al., 1998).

This methodology was first implemented in 1994 by Caroline Wang and Mary Ann Burris in collaboration with peasant women from Yunnan Province, China—one of the most marginalized groups in Chinese society (Wang and Burris, 1994). The project involved small and large group discussions where women collectively analysed their photographs, comparing their experiences of childhood, marriage, and motherhood. The researchers aimed to cultivate participants' ability to take both individual and collective action for social change. The study revealed how photography could serve as a powerful tool for self-expression, raising awareness of social issues and amplifying these women's voices in decision-making processes.

Origins

Although Wang and Burris coined the term “Photovoice,” the method draws on several traditions and theoretical foundations:

- **Empowerment education** inspired by Paulo Freire (Freire, 1970), later adapted to health education (Wallerstein and Bernstein, 1988)
- **Feminist theory**, challenging depictions of women as passive subjects and valuing experiential knowledge (Mies, 1983; Reinharz et al., 1993)
- **Documentary photography**, long used to explore social realities and their political implications (Collier and Collier, 1986)

As described on the [Photovoice Worldwide](#) website, Dr Wang identifies **four origins** of Photovoice:

1. Documentary photography for social justice and advocacy
2. Photo novella (using photos and drawings to tell a story and educate)
3. Critical consciousness education (Paulo Freire)
4. Feminist theory and practice, which recognizes the expertise of “non-professionals”

Why Photovoice in a Feminist Research Project?



Figure 2: From the study of Wang and Burris, [Source](#)

Feminist research methodologies aim to challenge power structures and amplify the voices of marginalized subjects. They encourage participation not only as informants but also as contributors to the research process. As a participatory method, Photovoice enables participants to tell their own stories and control how they and their experiences are represented.

Through photographs and the discussions they trigger, Photovoice can capture diverse and intersectional narratives around race, class, gender, and ability.

Feminist research also values **reflexivity** and the centring of lived experiences. Photovoice provides participants with the means and the space to reflect on their realities, situating them within broader patterns of governance, politics, and socio-ecological change. This breaks away from hierarchical researcher-participant

dynamics. The visual aspect of the method strengthens the potential for advocacy, policy change, and social transformation (Hesse-Biber, 2013).

The methodological guide of the **Transit Tales** project highlights the multi-layered impact of participatory photography:

- **Individual plane:** participants record and reflect on their journey, identity, hopes, and losses — a potentially healing and empowering process.
- **Collective plane:** shared reflection and storytelling within the group foster mutual understanding and collective support.
- **Advocacy plane:** Photovoice can challenge dominant narratives and reshape imaginaries about marginalized groups (Transit Tales, n.d.).

In this sense, images produced through Photovoice function both as **visual data** and as **gateways to rich conversations**, which themselves constitute research findings. As Peake and Koleth (2025) explain in *Doing Feminist Urban Research*, researchers may interpret images by focusing on their creation process, content, or context, asking “what is made visible, who sees what, and how seeing, knowing, and power are interrelated” (citing Craine and Gardner, 2016).

Empowerment—understood as a group, participatory, developmental process in which marginalized people gain control over their lives—depends heavily on methodological decisions within participatory action research (PAR) such as Photovoice (Cubero et al., 2024). The authors offer a graph linking Photovoice implementation phases to different levels of migrant empowerment:



Why Photovoice for Studying Climate-Related Health Vulnerabilities with Migrants?

Photovoice can be understood as both a feminist and decolonial method that emphasizes researcher self-reflection and awareness of identity intersections (gender, class, race). This is essential when working with migrant and refugee communities and helps centre marginalized knowledge systems (Cubero et al., 2024).

IMBRACE examines what shapes immigrants' climate-health vulnerability and how their situated knowledges and practices can inform their responses and broader urban adaptation strategies. Engaging with migrants as knowledge-holders, the project explores how racialized migrants understand and navigate vulnerability, and how their experiences can inform more just climate and health policies.

Photovoice bridges expert-driven narratives on climate change—often abstract and technical—with the lived, embodied experiences of migrants. The researcher becomes both facilitator and translator, enabling these forms of knowledge to inform local action and broader policy. The method helps reveal power relations across everyday life, urban planning, climate policy, and institutional contexts.

Implementing Photovoice in IMBRACE

Photovoice is typically conducted over **three to four sessions**, depending on context and participation. One session per week usually works well. Ten participants is a manageable size, allowing sessions to remain within roughly three hours (often split into smaller groups to accommodate gender, care, or work constraints).

Session 1: Introduction, Research Question, Photography Training

- Present project objectives and Photovoice method
- Co-create the central photographic research question (RQ)
- Consider holding this session with all participants together
- Conduct a mini photography workshop (with a photographer or trained researchers)
- Assign participants to take **5–8 photographs** for the next meeting

Session 2: Presenting Photos and Stories

- Participants share their photographs, motivations, and context
- Each selects **3–4 key photographs**
- Group discussions are rich and insightful, but time management is essential

Session 3: Collective Coding and Analysis

- Print photographs and ask participants to identify themes using post-its
- Researcher groups themes into sub-themes in dialogue with participants
- Use a whiteboard to visualize and refine emerging categories

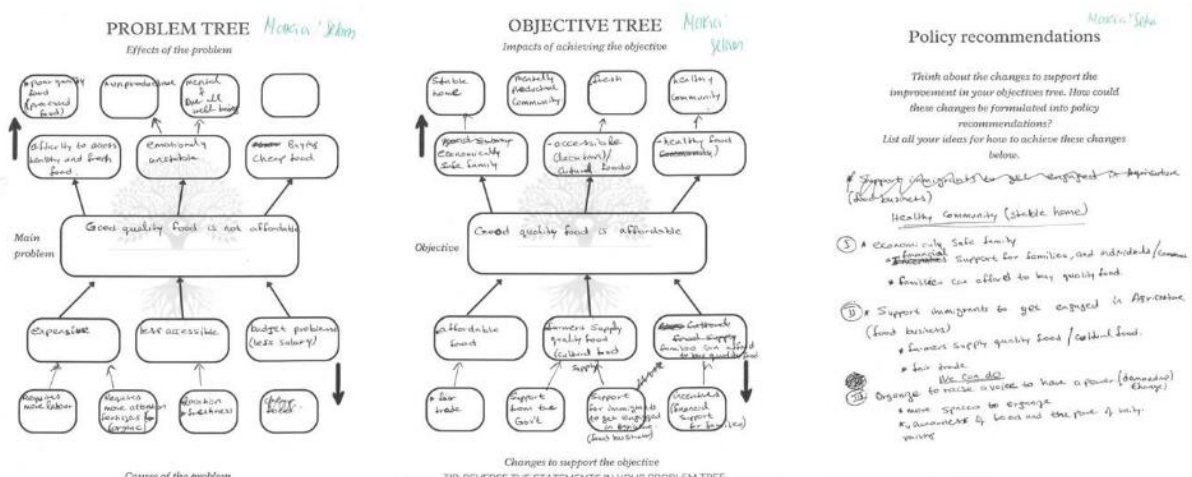
Session 4: Policy-Oriented Workshop

This session aims to identify actionable recommendations. Ideally both groups meet together.

Steps may include:

1. Researcher compiles a shortlist of challenges based on themes
2. Participants vote using stickers; the top four challenges are selected
3. Small groups develop *problem and objective trees* for each challenge
4. Groups present their work to the plenary
5. Participants collectively prioritize policy recommendations
6. If possible, discuss next steps: exhibitions, photobooks, events, etc.

Here an example of a **problem-and-objective tree**:



Importantly:

- Ongoing consent must be sought for the use of photographs and their interpretation
- **Giving back to participants** - Provide certificates (e.g., “citizen scientist”), photography training recognition, and suggested CV wording.

Technical Materials

- **Cameras or smartphones** (with basic training to ensure inclusivity)
- **Photo release and consent forms** in participants’ primary languages
- **Storage devices** (memory cards, USB drives, or secure cloud folders)

Environment and Accessibility

- **Safe meeting space:** quiet, comfortable, confidential; community locations are ideal
- **Catering/refreshments and childcare/transport** support to reduce participation barriers, especially for economically vulnerable migrant groups

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