**Research article**

# Another kind of opportunity: film-making education in the context of displacement

Jenn Durrett[1,*]

[1]Senior Lecturer, Department of Media Production, Bournemouth University, Poole, UK
*Correspondence: jdurrett@bournemouth.ac.uk

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## Abstract

Art group Another Kind of Girl Collective offers a case study of what teaching practical film-making outside formal education settings can look like, by offering film-making and photography workshops to young women around the world, including to young Syrian women living as refugees in Jordan. Another Kind of Girl Collective's approach prioritises flexibility, mentorship and building trust between students and tutors. Rather than focus exclusively on the technical skills of film-making, the collective's workshops are as much about mentorship and developing self-expression as they are about imparting the technical expertise required to operate a camera; this dual focus allows the technical to become a vehicle for the socioemotional. This article analyses Another Kind of Girl Collective's approach to informal practical film-making education, contextualising it in how it differs from more formal, institution-based approaches, as well as how this approach compares to similar international development-focused programmes that prioritise product over process. Another Kind of Girl Collective presents a model of practical film education that not only educates a new generation of innovative film-makers, but also speaks to the socioemotional needs of students living as refugees.

**Keywords** refugee; international development; art/occupational therapy; Syria; female film-makers

## Introduction

There is no shortage of excellent film education programmes around the world. Due to their geographic locations, cost of admission and other requirements, however, institutions offering these programmes are more accessible to some fledgling film-makers than to others. This divide can result in a glut of new film-makers with life experiences influenced by privilege and financial security, and a paucity of new film-makers with a less privileged world view. This ultimately limits the sorts of stories being shared on the screen.

Thanks to advances in technology that have made camera equipment more portable and less expensive, offering film-making education in less formal settings has become easier since the turn of the century. One such context where informal film teaching increasingly takes place is among young adults living as refugees. In this environment, practical film education can be delivered in a way that not only imparts the technical and theoretical components of film-making, but also encourages students to develop soft skills that will serve them beyond their film-making endeavours, as well as offer a coping method for processing the trauma of displacement.

Art group Another Kind of Girl Collective (AKGC) offers a case study of what this can look like: AKGC offers film-making and photography workshops to young women around the world, including to young Syrian women living as refugees in Jordan. Rather than focus exclusively on the technical skills of film-making, AKGC workshops are as much about mentorship and developing self-expression as they are about imparting the technical expertise required to operate a camera; this dual focus allows the technical to become a vehicle for the socioemotional.

Using AKCG as a case study, this article argues that a pedagogical approach to teaching film-making that synthesises components from formal film production education, participatory film-making and creative arts therapies can offer a new approach to dealing with the aftermath of violent conflict that not only educates new film-makers but can also speak to the socioemotional needs of students living as refugees. Generally speaking, 'socioemotional needs' refers to the skills needed to manage oneself and one's relationship with others. For young people living as refugees, this means addressing the trauma of forced displacement, which may include interrupted education, separation from family members, loss of sense of agency and witnessing acts of violence, among other things; see Sánchez-Puerta et al. (2016) for further definitions of this term. This blended approach speaks to these needs by offering a temporally holistic coping method with opportunities to reflect on the past, interpret the present, and look to the future, and contribute to the development of soft skills beneficial to young adults navigating the experience of forced displacement.

## Film education, participatory film and creative arts therapies

Before considering how components from formal film education, participatory film-making and creative arts therapies might be synthesised for use in post-conflict relief programmes, it is useful to consider each area separately. Approaches to formal film-making education have been well covered in the past decade, by scholars such as Hjort (2013a, 2013b) and Petrie and Stoneman (2014), among others. Broadly speaking, formal film-making education can be divided into two categories: national film schools, such as FAMU in Prague and the National Film and Television School (NFTS) in the UK; and university film schools and programmes such those at New York University and the University of Southern California. With a few exceptions, these institutions are either placed geographically in Western nations, or exist as part of branch campus initiatives run by Western universities (see Naficy, 2013). These bodies teach a blend of technical skills, aesthetics, theoretical knowledge and history required to join their respective major regional film industries, and they generally offer their students access to top-end cameras, lights, sound stages and editing facilities. Most formal film production education is aimed at students of university age or older, but there are also arguments for the value of practical film education for teenagers and secondary school students – see de la Garza (2013).

Future film-makers living as refugees typically have easier access to informal film production education opportunities than the more formal ones outlined above. These informal offerings typically become available to displaced populations via two sources: development communication initiatives, which typically take of the form of participatory film and media, and creative arts therapies.

Participatory film and media sit within the field of participatory communication, which in turn is located within the broader field of development communication. There is a lack of consensus concerning a definition for 'participation' in the context of development communication; see Thomas (2014) and Tufte and Mefalapulos (2009) for further reading on the relevant debates. There are many different approaches to, and definitions of, participatory film and media, but anything that might fall under the umbrella of 'participatory media production' suggests a collaboration between 'an unfamiliar "outside" person(s) and an individual or group of "inside" people to explore a phenomenon by collaborating on the production of visual (often audio-visual) documentation' (Mitchell and de Lange, 2011: 186).

Participatory film-making methods are most often used by either non-governmental organisations, as a component of their work in a given area, or as part of formal academic research. Mitchell and de Lange (2011) offer 'collaborative video' and 'community video' as another way to classify subdivisions in this kind of work. Citing Marcus Banks (2001) and Sarah Pink (2013), they differentiate 'collaborative video' as cases where the facilitator (typically a community worker or researcher) works closely with participants to create a video, whereas 'participatory video' describes cases where participants create videos with limited assistance from the facilitator (Mitchell and de Lange, 2011: 171). For examples of what participatory film and video initiatives have looked like in practice, see Hinegardner (2009) and Norman (2009).

Creative arts therapies can be found in the fields of art therapy and occupational therapy. Within art therapy, there are two practices that utilise film and video as a psychotherapy tool: cinematherapy (see Izod and Dovalis, 2015) and videotherapy (see Cohen et al., 2015). Cinematherapy involves patients viewing existing films, while videotherapy has patients involved in creating their own short films.

The field of occupational therapy often uses arts activities in treatments, and, in fact, it originally developed out of art therapy before morphing into an independent field in the late twentieth century (see Rubin, 2010). While occupational therapy sometimes employs arts activities, the 'art' involved in those activities is of less priority to practitioners than how the activities achieve the ultimate goals of their treatments. Simó-Algado et al. (2002: 206) note that 'the role of occupational therapy is to empower participants of the community to recognise their own potential through meaningful occupation and to work towards occupational justice'. For examples of occupational therapy studies that utilise creative or art-based activities, see Gruenfeld (2010) and Simó-Algado et al. (2002).

Creative arts therapies are commonly components of larger responses to mass conflict or major natural disasters. As Rubin (2010: 229) notes, 'art as solace in times of anguish is older than the field of art therapy. Some events are so devastating that words fail, and images become the best way to say what presses for release'. She expands, 'Art therapy is often part of public and private efforts to provide crisis intervention. This is a particular form of secondary prevention, offering help to those who are in the throes of responding to overwhelming events' (Rubin, 2010: 231). Theatre and dramatherapy have been used in these contexts since the 1970s, and many of these programmes find their theoretical underpinnings in the pedagogical theories of Paulo Freire (1972) and Augusto Boal (1979).

Although practical film-making education is still finding its place as a tool in conflict response, AKGC offers evidence of its potential to serve some of these same functions. Conflict response is a place where film as communication (participatory media) and film as art (creative arts therapies) come together; participatory media and creative arts therapies are both already utilised in this area. By bringing film-making's communicative and artistic components together in the context of youth conflict response programmes, it may be possible to enrich both areas, as well as to develop new approaches to dealing with the aftermath of violent conflict.

This case study is an example of how this might be done: it is a film production workshop that takes advantage of film's artistic and communicative aspects, and that was offered to youth participants who have been displaced by the war in Syria. I will discuss this workshop project in more detail below.

## Case study: another kind of girl collective

Another Kind of Girl Collective was founded by Laura Doggett, an American teaching-artist with more than 20 years of experience conducting film-making and creative arts workshops with young women. AKGC began as a three-month workshop in Za'atari Refugee Camp in northern Jordan in summer 2014, and grew into a more cohesive organisation as Laura and her colleagues were able to continue conducting workshops annually for several years, working with previous participants as well as new ones.

AKGC describes itself as:

A media arts collective for and by young women living in displaced, migrant or transitory communities around the world to connect and co-create multimedia artworks. It is a space across geographies where they can express their stories, collaborate, and develop a collective process for their artistic work to be experienced by one another, and on a global level. (Doggett and Brewer, 2019: n.p.)

AKGC has hosted six workshops working with Syrian girls living as refugees in northern Jordan – a total of 33 young women living in Za'atari Camp and the city of Irbid. Participants ranged from 11 to 21 years old, and of the 33 participants, 12 took part in workshop sessions across different years (see Table 1).

The 2015 Irbid workshop produced seven short films:

- *Another Kind of Girl* – Khaldiya, 18 years old (09:31)
- *Children* – Marah, 15 years old (05:06)
- *The Girl, Whose Shadow Reflects the Moon* – Walaa, 15 years old (05:08)
- *Dreams Without Borders* – Muna, 16 years old (04:50)
- *The Silence of Nature* – Bushra, ? (03:09)
- *Barriers of Separation* – Raghad, 19 years old (04:30)
- *The Long Road* – Rafif, 17 years old (04:02).

**Table 1. Another Kind of Girl Collective participants and workshops 2014–17**

| Location | Year | Number of participants | Age range | Participant make-up | Workshop length |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Za'atari Camp | 2014 | 16 | 15–18 | All new | ~10 weeks |
| Za'atari Village* | 2014 | 5 | 11–16 | All new | – |
| Irbid | 2015 | 8 | 15–19 | 6 new from Irbid, 2 from Za'atari Camp 2014 group | 6 weeks |
| Za'atari Camp & Irbid | Winter 2016 | 11 | 15–20 | 6 from Za'atari Camp (3 old, 3 new); 5 from Irbid (2 old, 3 new) | Nov 2016–Jan 2017 |
| Za'atari Camp & Irbid | March 2017 | 12 | 15–21 | 6 from Za'atari Camp (same as Winter 2016) 6 from Irbid (same as Winter 2016, + 1 from 2015) | 4–25 March |
| Za'atari Camp & Irbid | Summer 2017 | 11 | 15–21 | Same as March 2017, −1 from Za'atari Camp | 15 July–19 Aug |

***Note:** The experience of this workshop changed AKGC's focus to older girls, as they found that the younger girls lacked the focus to really benefit from the workshops; since then, workshops have only been offered to young women who are least 15 years old.

These films were submitted to international film festivals on the girls' behalf, and screened at dozens of festivals around the world; in some cases, the films were screened on their own, and in others as a programmed block of seven. The short films can be viewed on AKGC's website (https://anotherkindofgirl.com).

AKGC is not a participatory film-making initiative, nor can it be considered 'formal' film education. While their approach more closely identifies with art and occupational therapy, it is not technically this either, as they are not acting as an overt 'therapy'. AKGC's approach draws on elements of each of the above to create a unique offering that simultaneously teaches practical film-making and also speaks to the socioemotional needs of members living as refugees.

AKGC does not run workshops in the same manner as the development-oriented participatory film-making examples outlined above. Those types of workshops focus on the technical skills of film-making, as their ultimate goals are communication focused. AKGC's goals are around creativity and self-actualisation; this is more in line with creative arts therapies, but, again, these workshops are not intended as an overt therapy. Their balanced approach to the communicative and creative elements of film-making is in line with formal film education; however, their lack of resources means this is where the similarity ends. In essence, AKGC brings together elements of all three approaches – participatory film-making, creative arts therapy and formal film education. AKGC workshops are as much about mentorship and developing self-expression as they are about imparting the technical expertise required to operate a camera; in this case, the technical becomes a vehicle for the socioemotional.

There are several key components to AKGC's approach that, in conjunction with each other, allow their programmes to operate as they do. These components can be divided into two categories: staff–student relationships and the purpose of the activity. The staff–student relationship components include trust, flexibility and mentorship; AKGC's purpose in teaching film-making prioritises the student first and foremost, which in turn impacts on the topics and style of the finished films, as well as on the relative importance of completing a project.

AKGC staff have developed a high degree of trust with the participants over several years of workshops; this is in part due to their continued contact with participants, as well as being an intentional component of their teaching approach. This is particularly important because the film workshops, as would be expected, involve cameras; and because all the participants in the Jordan-based workshops were female and wore hijab, they were particularly cognisant of where photographs depicting them might end up. The environment created during classes – one where participants were encouraged to express themselves freely – both relied on and helped generate this trust.

Jordan and the surrounding region do not ascribe to the same approach to scheduling as does much of the West, and the ability to adjust to local expectations surrounding timeliness was an important aspect of planning and executing workshops. While AKGC staff planned sessions ahead of time, this was always done with the understanding that circumstances would probably change multiple times between the formation of the plans and their actual execution; this often resulted in staff reworking each day's plan on the car journey to session locations. While sometimes stressful, this approach allowed staff to cater workshop sessions more specifically to the participants' needs and interests; if one of the members arrived at a session with an idea about which she was passionate, it took little effort to make the adjustments necessary to accommodate her goal, which ultimately allowed participants a greater sense of ownership over both process and product.

Mentorship is an important aspect of AKGC's work; the environment they create implicitly fosters the development of a mentor–mentee relationship. In creating a space where the girls are free to be themselves, the mentors also inadvertently position themselves as adults in whom it is safe to confide, teachers who are happy to lend an ear, particularly to subjects that the participants might be uncomfortable talking about in other contexts.

Contact was maintained via WhatsApp, both during and between workshop periods; locally based staff also frequently visited the girls and held one-off classes between 'official' sessions. Over the years,

these relationships grew and developed to the point where the participants reached out to the instructors with life and family problems, or even if they just needed to vent or chat; one or more instructors have been significant parts of participants' lives. The all-female dynamic of the organisation plays an important role in creating this environment.

The longevity of AKGC's relationships with members also contributes to this. It is very common for film workshops to be 'one-offs', where a team comes in for a few weeks, or maybe a few months, offers training for a group in the process of creating a film, and then leaves. Very few can return or follow up. AKGC, however, was able to return in person several times over the course of three years, which is not typical, especially considering the organisation's small size. AKGC staff and mentors have continued to maintain contact since in-person workshops became less frequent from 2017 onwards.

AKGC is a student/member-focused organisation, which means that film topics are chosen by the participants, creativity is encouraged, and the successful completion of a short film is second to the needs and goals of the given participant. As a result, the topics and styles of the films completed by AKGC members look quite different to development-focused initiatives conducted in similar places with similar resources. Development-focused participatory film projects often have two goals – to teach film-making, and to create short films that can be used to disseminate public service information within the community; as such, the created films are typically documentaries with a journalistic (fact-focused) style. While most of the short films created by AKGC members are documentaries, most are poetic or abstract, with some verging on experimental; the film-makers' ideas are expressed implicitly as well as explicitly.

These films are for the film-makers first and foremost, and the topics they choose have a wide range, from remembering a loved one or life event, to reflecting on hopes and dreams for the future, to advocating for a social issue about which they are passionate. In the case of the latter, it is important to note that students who make films touching on social issues have chosen these issues based on individual passion for them, whereas often, host organisations will choose a topic for participants to make films about. This is a practical, common approach, but it may not be suitable for projects looking to develop individuals rather than communities.

Another key distinction is that, while the goal is always for each member to create a short film if they wish, AKGC is still fully supportive if some students do not wish to – some just want to learn photography, while others enjoy the social aspects. For AKGC, product (a completed film) and process (the journey of making it) have equal weighting, whereas participatory film is very product-focused – if every student does not walk away with a film, this may be viewed as a failure of the programme. On the other hand, art and occupational therapy are more process-focused; there are also ethical implications for sharing these films (see Cohen et al., 2015). Formal film education has a similar balance between the importance of the process of creating a film and the finished product.

## Benefits of a blended approach

The blended approach outlined above, which uses components from formal film production education, participatory film-making and creative arts therapies, not only educates new film-makers; it can also speak to the socioemotional needs of students living as refugees. It speaks to these needs in two ways: by offering a temporally holistic coping method with opportunities to reflect on the past, interpret the present and look to the future; and by contributing to the development of soft skills beneficial to young adults navigating the experience of forced displacement, including sense of agency, critical thinking, creative problem solving, cooperation and socialisation.

AKGC activities offered participants the space to explore their experience of displacement through a temporal canvas that addressed the past, present and future. Addressing the past allows individuals to identify and begin processing past traumas. Displacement implies that an individual has been relocated to a new geographic environment that they will need to learn about, and to which they need to adjust – learning practical film-making skills can allow students to understand their new surroundings from

various perspectives. Creating short films allowed them to convey their first-person experiences as Syrian refugees to a wider audience, offering an insider's perspective to the wider world.

One of the short films created in 2015, *The Silence of Nature*, is a useful example of how this approach to practical film education facilitated reflecting on the past. The film is a poetic, experimental documentary that combines shots of nature and the film-maker, Bushra's, verbal reflections to create a lovely portrait of the way she remembers her brother. The tone of the film is calm and meditative, and that tone is created in large part by the fact that most of the film is composed of static shots of nature: snow on olive trees near a wall, a cat strolling through a back garden, a pigeon taking flight, falling snow illuminated by a streetlight. Many of the shots that include people are also very still and pensive: a girl sipping tea, another walking upstairs and looking out of the window, a boy raising and lowering a red plastic bag.

The film's voice-over doubles as a short interview in which Bushra talks about what inspired her to film the subjects that she did. As she says:

> I like calm places. I don't know why … my brother, who died in the war, he liked taking pictures in those places. I like to take film like him. (00:39–00:53)

> We had trees. My brother, who passed away, was the one who planted them. And the smell of mint, it reminds me … It reminds me of my brother. (01:20–01:40)

It is relevant to note Bushra's use of nature in her film, and the way she was drawn to filming nature because of her brother's love for it, but it is possible that other factors could be at play. An occupational therapy case study carried out with Albanian children who lived through the siege of their city during the war in Kosovo (Simó-Algado et al., 2002) also noted the frequent inclusion of images of nature in their patients' drawings. In her film, Bushra grieves the loss of her brother, and her sadness is evident in her short film. It is interesting to note that Bushra, who survived the war in Syria, and children who survived the war in Kosovo, all used nature to express sadness. Images of nature also regularly appeared in the raw footage of many AKGC participants, from both Irbid and Za'atari. There is no explicit evidence of that footage relating to sadness, however.

More than just filming in places that her brother used to love, and that reminded her of him, Bushra's motivation to learn film-making in the first place was, in part, inspired by her brother. It was something he loved to do, and so learning it gave her the opportunity to do something that he was passionate about. In her interviews with Bushra in 2019, before she made the film, Laura Doggett recalls that:

> she talked a little bit about being able to reconnect with her brother – who had been killed in Syria – through the act of film-making, because I think he liked to take movies, and he also loved nature; he planted trees. And so, these two things came together for her.

For Bushra, film-making was not simply a matter of finding an outlet for her grief, but rather an active response to it. Learning an activity that her brother loved likely provided a very personal level of meaning for Bushra, as film-making allowed her to remember her brother through her actions as well as her words.

Just as reflecting on the past through film-making can help those learning how to make films process the experiences before – or that led up to – their displacement, learning film-making also offers these new film-makers a space to examine their current reality, which in turn can help normalise their new surroundings. It also offers the opportunity to take ownership over their reality by using film's communicative and artistic aspects to share their first-hand experience of that reality with audiences outside their community. In other words, it is about telling their story in their own words, and from their own point of view.

Khaldiya, one of the first participants in the workshop from Za'atari Camp, was keen to tell these narratives. As she said in a press interview in 2016 for her short film *Another Kind of Girl*:

> Because the world has this wrong image of people that live in camps, they think we're ignorant, with no education and no culture. Especially when it comes to girls, they think everything is

forbidden for us. However, in reality, that's not the case. Our traditions may be different than theirs, but we do have cultures, and the girls in the camp do have dreams and ambitions; we can be creative. We may have hardships, and our society may put some limitations on us, but we strive to conquer them, and we work towards our dreams.

Khaldiya's comments refer to the dominant practice of portraying those who have experienced suffering as being without agency or voice; Western coverage of war and its aftermath can be so suffering-centric that it overlooks the fact that other contexts and experiences are occurring at the same time (see Boltanski, 1999; Moeller, 1999).

When someone such as Khaldiya tells the story, however, it is to make an account of her experiences and those of her community in order to respond to misrepresentations of her and their lived experiences. As she notes in the same interview:

When any person has the wrong idea about you or your society, wouldn't it be your responsibility to right the wrong image in their minds? Just because we live in the camp, and live a life different than others, doesn't mean that we don't have dreams and ambitions, that we are ignorant. I feel like it's my responsibility to let the world know that, to let them see the truth.

Taking the initiative to share her first-hand experience allowed Khalidya to engage with her new environment by translating and reframing it for a global audience.

As young film-makers come to see their new circumstances in a new light, they are likely to notice things that they find problematic, and that they want to see changed. Learning film-making provides an opportunity to follow through on this desire to address social ills; working for positive change, in turn, can provide goals and a sense of purpose to help displaced youth move confidently into the next phase of their life.

Film-making can provide the opportunity to address social ills by acting as a tool for activism. Hinegardner's (2009) study makes the case that activists who used documentary film as a tool to advocate for human rights saw the act of creating the films as a form of direct action in and of itself, beyond creating a digital artefact that could communicate their position to a wider audience. Prior to this study, it was generally understood that the function and benefit of using human rights media was to change laws or other institutional structures. AKGC member Marah had a similar experience with her own film-making.

A common theme in reporting on the Syrian refugee crisis in mid-2010s was the fear of the creation of what commentators called a 'lost generation' – that the group of children growing up and being born as refugees would lack the opportunities necessary to develop into adults who would be able to take up the mantle of Syrian society. Marah created two short films, *Children* (2015) and *Girls Behind the Lens: Za'atari Camp* (2017). (*Girls Behind the Lens* was completed in collaboration with Liz Mermin and the Thomas Reuters Foundation.) Both films featured the camp's children, and Marah used the press interviews for the former to advocate for international support for them.

More than just making films that include conditions she would like to see changed, she uses the act of film-making itself – regardless of telling any particular story – as a way to try to influence the changes she wants to see. She does this by using her hobby of film-making as a way to be a positive role model for her peers and those younger than her. When she is out filming in the camp, and kids ask her what she is doing and why, she tries to direct them to the many learning centres in Za'atari Camp that teach activities such as sewing and computer use, so that they are at least acquiring new skills, even if they choose not to return to school.

During the process of learning how to make a film, students learn more than just the technical particulars of telling a story with moving images; students develop many other, non-film-specific, skills at the same time. Many of these skills have broad practical applicability than can benefit students in other areas of their lives. Some of these skills may be particularly useful to young adults growing up in a context

of displacement, such as an increased sense of agency, critical thinking and creative problem solving, and cooperation and socialising.

It is common for persons who have experienced a traumatic event to lose some of their sense of agency. At its most basic, 'the sense of agency is the experience that I am the one who is causing or generating' a given action (Gallagher, 2012: 18). Certain elements of film production, such as directing, can help student film-makers increase their sense of agency in their lives.

AKGC member Raghad took a particular interest in directing following her first workshop in 2015 – while most of the other 2015-produced shorts have a *cinéma vérité* style, all but two shots of Raghad's film, *Barriers of Separation*, were either crafted or adjusted by her in some way. Several shots required her to direct 'actors', one of which depicts three children (her siblings) sitting in a vertical line, using their hands to cover their mouth, eyes and ears respectively. Raghad spoke about this shot in an interview with AKGC staff in 2015, after she had filmed it, but before the short film had been completed. When asked about why she created the scene with the three children, Raghad replied:

> I cannot express what's inside of me to people, so I express them through these movements. What I have inside of me, I wasn't able to express it to anyone. So [I took this shot] in the hopes of being able to say something.

When asked about how she directed her siblings. Raghad explained:

> I told one of them to sit, I told my sister to sit on the chair, and my eldest brother to stand. Then, one of them to put their hand over their mouth, one on their eyes and one on their ears. They all listened to me.. For me, I felt happy from inside – what I wanted, it happened.

Raghad enjoyed that her siblings did what she asked; by simply saying something, she made it happen. This is an example of Gallagher's (2012) definition of agency – Raghad was experiencing that she was the one who had caused a given action, in this case her siblings arranging themselves in this pose. It can conceivably be considered a secondary form of agency – she is not the one performing the action of posing herself, but rather it is her action of speaking that causes her siblings to create the pose. Cumulatively, however, Raghad's combined actions of directing her siblings and using a camera to record them directly results in the creation of the shot itself.

Raghad values having people listen to her, having what she imagines in her head made reality simply by speaking it; it is a small level of control in a situation where she feels like she has none. She clearly enjoys directing and the feeling of control it offers her. It provides a space to reclaim her agency in a context of displacement, wherein she has essentially no control over what happens to herself and her family.

Derived from the higher order levels of thinking laid out in Bloom's taxonomy, critical thinking and creative problem solving are key components in many educational initiatives (see Gruenfeld, 2010; Norman, 2009). Navigating forced displacement and learning to live in a new society presents many challenges – developing critical thinking and creative problem-solving skills can make facing these challenges easier for youth living as refugees.

AKGC uses activities in workshop sessions that are specifically designed to help foster critical thinking and creative problem solving. One such activity is known as the 'Inside/Outside' exercise. In this exercise, participants are encouraged to reflect on how they (as individuals) are perceived by those around them, and then how they perceive themselves 'on the inside', which no one might see or know; they are given 5–10 minutes to write or draw their reflections. Facilitators also participate in this activity. Afterwards, the group gathers to discuss each participant's page, and then brainstorm how their ideas might be translated into a photograph. Following this discussion, the group attempts to stage and capture these photographs.

During this activity in 2017, one of the images selected to be translated into a photograph was one of the facilitators relaxing in a rowing boat as it floated down a choppy river; it was meant to represent

that people saw her as a 'chill' person who could easily 'go with the flow'. One of the newer members observed that being chill and going with the flow can be a very hard balance to strike, so she suggested that the photograph could be of someone trying to balance on something. The group went to a parking lot and lined up a row of rocks, then photographed the facilitator trying to walk across them.

Another member's drawings showed that while to outsiders she appeared content, she was full of worries, and often did not show when she felt sad. To turn this into an image, the group found a long coil of smooth wire next to the road; this was positioned so as to trap the member against a wall, as if she were being smothered by her worries.

This activity helped participants develop critical thinking and creative problem-solving skills in several ways. Initially, participants were asked to critically consider outside perceptions of themselves versus their personal perceptions. Next, they were asked to expand on these ideas to devise a way to photograph the abstract concepts. Finally, participants needed to creatively engage with the available locations and materials in order to realise the proposed photographs.

Adolescents who have been displaced from their homes by war have been taken away from their school and other social networks, and redeveloping these in their new home can be difficult. AKGC workshops became a place where members could connect with other young women their own age. Studies on adolescent friendship support the importance of the opportunity to develop new friendships that the workshops offered – 'mutually satisfying friendships are important buffers against maladjustment, especially when adolescents' … friendship network is small' (Waldrip et al., 2008: 848).

All the AKGC members interviewed as part of this research expressed some level of enjoyment learning film-making; for some, it is an interesting new hobby, while others now wish to pursue it as a career. An example from the former end of this scale is Raghad; while she enjoyed learning film-making, continuing to develop her craft does not appear to be the motivation behind her continued participation in AKGC. Instead, the community aspect of the workshops appears to hold the most value for her.

Raghad was very active during her first workshop in 2015 – she turned in more than four hours of raw footage to her instructors, used her camera in class activities, and often volunteered her camera for instructor demonstrations. Overall, her footage suggests that she was very engaged during the first session.

In the second session, in 2016, Raghad submitted far less material, but still demonstrated a good level of engagement with the lessons. She spent time both in class and at home learning how to operate the new manual features of the DSLR camera, which was introduced to participants during that workshop session.

By the third and fourth workshops in 2017, Raghad's class participation had dropped drastically – she submitted less than an hour of footage combined between the March and Summer workshops; only participated with her camera in class during the March session, and on only one day; and only did one batch of filming outside class time. This steady decline suggests that while she enjoys film-making, it is probably not something she will continue to pursue; she seems to have steadily lost interest.

Despite this, Raghad continued attending the workshops regularly, remains in touch with her instructors, and has formed close friendships with several other participants, suggesting that it is only the film-making aspect of the workshops for which her enthusiasm has waned; other aspects of the course – her community of friends, and the mentorship of her instructors – are probably what keep her involved.

In this way, the workshops remain a beneficial activity for her; even though the film-making aspects no longer take priority, she has received much-needed opportunities to socialise and develop relationships with peers her own age. There have been ongoing debates among film and participatory media instructors concerning whether participants need to complete a short film in order for a film-making workshop to hold value for them. Raghad's case supports the claim that film-making workshops can have value for participants, even if they do not complete a film, because of the social environment they facilitate. Raghad did, in fact, complete a short film in 2015, yet it is still the social aspects that appear to have benefited her the most.

## Conclusion

AKGC's approach to informal film-making education offers an example of how elements of participatory film-making, creative arts therapies, and formal film-making education might be combined to provide a learning experience that not only communicates the fundamentals of film-making practice, but also speaks to the socioemotional needs of students living as refugees. Emphasising trust, flexibility and mentorship in student–staff relationships allows participants to further develop self-expression as they work to master technical skills.

Furthermore, the blend of approaches outlined above, along with the student-centred nature of the programme, speak to the socioemotional needs of students living as refugees in two ways: by offering a temporally holistic coping method with opportunities to reflect on the past, interpret the present and look to the future; and by providing space to further develop soft skills beneficial to young adults navigating the experience of forced displacement, such as sense of agency, critical thinking, creative problem solving, cooperation and socialising.

Although this research was conducted in the context of the Syrian experience of living as refugees, young people experiencing displacement in other areas of the world may also benefit from this blended learning approach – while the exact experience of displacement is unique to each people and place in which it occurs, the broad themes of disruption and loss remain. As such, these concepts may be applied to other post-conflict responses, once the appropriate regional context is applied. Additionally, although the original research was designed with less-privileged students in mind, some of these concepts may also find useful application in formal film-making settings; soft skills such as cooperation and critical thinking may be particularly useful.

Beyond the educational experience itself, some AKGC members continued to pursue film-making – while the social aspects of learning film-making held the most importance for Raghad, Khaldiya and Marah continue making films – most recently, they collaborated with two other AKGC members, Christy and Karoli, Indigenous Shipibo women from Lima, Peru, to direct a feature film, *Only the Ocean between Us* (2021). Comprised of correspondence made up of film diaries, *Only the Ocean between Us* 'tells four profoundly personal stories of motherhood, displacement, and the power of both personal and communal resistance' (Another Kind of Girl Collective, 2021: n.p.). The film received support from the Sundance Institute and Creative Capitol, and it had its world premiere at Hot Docs in 2021. The sorts of stories these young women bring to the screen are both unique and important, as they offer an understanding of the world to which few people outside these areas are privy. Independent cinema can only be improved by the addition of more voices such as these, which can speak directly to the experience of displacement.

## Declarations and conflicts of interest

### Research ethics statement

The author declares that research ethics approval for this article was provided by the SOAS, University of London ethics board.

### Consent for publication statement

The author declares that research participants' informed consent to publication of findings – including photos, videos and any personal or identifiable information – was secured prior to publication.

### Conflicts of interest statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the author during peer review of this article have been made. The author declares no further conflicts with this article.

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