

Building Community Integration through Arts

As a woman who has migrated twice in her life, I am aware of the difficulties of starting a new life in a new country where you might need to overcome several obstacles to integration and settlement. I can relate to the complications migrants face within their new communities, which range from separation from loved ones to learning a new language, finding new friends, finding employment and housing, dealing with financial insecurities – to name just a few.

In June 2021, a group of researchers including myself¹ in the Centre for Global Migrations at the University of Otago started a research project with women from Farsi/Dari-speaking migrant communities. Through this research we intended to explore how arts can facilitate the community integration, resettlement, and homemaking of migrant women in Dunedin, New Zealand. We aimed to explore community integration from the experiential perspective and lived experiences of the migrants. Therefore, it was crucial for us to gain insights from migrant women themselves about their experiences of adapting to and integrating into their new communities. Since language is a barrier to participation for some migrant women, we used art as an alternative means of expression and participation. Art allows us to “reorganize the realm of the visible, diverting the position and the roles of observers and observees, in order to gain different perspectives” (Mazzara, 2015, p. 460).

Eight women were invited to attend four 3-hour art workshops, each of which were run by artists from the community. These four workshops covered four different art forms. One translator was present in all workshops to facilitate the communication between women and artists.

Our first workshop was run by Jo Bone. Jo is an illustrator, artist, and nature sketcher. Since we started the project in winter, Jo ran her workshop indoors and invited the participating women to make a collage. The results were beautiful, and it was interesting to see that “family” was a prevalent theme in most of the collages.

The second workshop was run by Pamela Brown. She has worked as a secondary and intermediate art teacher and at tertiary level as a lecturer in visual art. Pamela invited the attendees to make a visual diary for themselves, and her workshop was the starting point for many of these women to visually document their feelings and lived experiences.

¹ The research team is comprised of Dr Pooneh Torabian (principal investigator), Sayedali (Ali) Mostolizadeh, Dr Neil Vallely, Dr Vivienne Anderson, and Dr Parisa Saadat Abadi Nasab.



Dr Pooneh Torabian is a lecturer at the University of Otago. As part of her research, she works with marginalised communities to explore how arts can help with resettlement, homemaking, and integration. Pooneh loves spending time with her family. She is an ice cream lover and enjoys doing jigsaw and wasgij puzzles.





The third workshop was run by Chloe MacKenzie, a Dunedin based needle felter. Chloe showed the women how to use needle felting to create a piece based on a picture or their imagination. For most participants it was the very first time they were trying felting, and they enjoyed it so much that some decided to work on a second felting project during the workshop.

Anne Morrison and Linda Dunn ran the last workshop. They invited the women to make cushion covers using a sewing machine. The attendees used this as an opportunity to make cushions for their homes. The last workshop led to the formation of a group of women who now get together to sew every Friday. We were thrilled to see how this workshop helped women with establishing a sense of belonging and building networks.

With language being a barrier for some migrants, this series of workshops helped women with self-expression through art as an alternative way of communication. When interviewed with the help of a translator, many women reported that they found the workshops to be therapeutic and some mentioned that the workshops had been helpful in working through their trauma. One of the women noted that she had talked with her therapist about the workshops and how adding to her visual diary had helped her feel calmer and less anxious. In addition, the workshops helped the participating women to meet and socialise with other women. One participant, Pari, mentioned that she had felt lonely before when she was at home because she did not know many people, but the workshops had helped change that.

Karimeh, another attendee, mentioned that the workshops provided her with the time and space to focus on herself rather than doing housework. She also noted that she was looking forward to participating in more workshops because that way she could catch up with other women and experience new forms of art.

Some of the women in our workshops did not know English, but they were really engaged and connected well to the way workshops were run. At times, women and artists communicated with each other with no translation – only through art. It was remarkable to see art as a way of bypassing the barrier of language.

We are looking forward to expanding these workshops and connecting more migrant women with Dunedin based artists.

Mazzara, F. (2015). Spaces of visibility for the migrants of Lampedusa: The counter narrative of the aesthetic discourse. *Italian Studies*, 70(4), 449-464.

