

# Using photovoice methodology to capture narratives of Sri Lankan Northern Muslims displacement

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This paper explores the Photovoice method as a participatory research tool. Using the case study of displaced northern Muslims in Sri Lanka, it illustrates how the method can yield valuable insights into experiences of protracted displacement. The study highlighted four key methodological strengths of photovoice in displacement research, they are: illustrating the power of the visual; eliciting deeper understandings of lived experiences — through dialogue and images; taking meaningful steps towards co-production of knowledge; and offering meaningful processes for participants, including community dialogue, across positionalities that are different. A key emphasis of the paper is the usefulness of Photovoice due to its breadth and ground-up approach. We worked closely for one year with 45 Muslim Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) who were forcibly evicted from Northern Sri Lanka by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 1990. The people selected had a range of displacement, resettlement and/or local integration experiences and they shared with us images and stories of loss, grief, support and recovery in three distinct settings across a 30-year period. Their narratives demonstrated how the displaced and the local humanitarians held each other to account, as they reflected on the power of ‘their’ visuals through voice accounts. By participating in the research as photographers and story tellers, the IDPs together with the researchers were able to actively shape and share their experiences in the broader discourse of conflict, displacement and humanitarian assistance. The study illustrated new ways to think as researchers, and about the relationships towards and with participants.

**Keywords:** Photovoice, qualitative method, protracted displacement, memories, Northern Muslims, Sri Lanka

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## Introduction

This paper contributes to the growing discourse on participatory research methodologies by examining the use of the Photovoice (PV) method to explore experiences of protracted displacement. Focusing on the case of Northern Muslims in Sri Lanka, who were forcibly expelled from their homes in 1990, the study demonstrates how Photovoice enables participants to articulate their long-term displacement experiences. While the narratives of the displaced Northern Muslims are central, the primary aim is to evaluate the potential of Photovoice to generate nuanced insights and to assess its applicability in research with displaced and marginalized populations in similar contexts.

Photovoice, a form of visual participatory methodology, empowers participants to document and express their experiences and concerns through photography and reflective dialogue (Weber 2018; Karr *et al.* 2021; Jimenez *et al.* 2023). It typically involves participants capturing images of places, objects, events or everyday life that hold personal or communal significance. These photographs serve as visual prompts in reflective sessions — such as interviews or group discussions — where participants articulate their thoughts, emotions, and experiences. By combining visual and verbal modes of expression, Photovoice extends beyond conventional qualitative methods, offering a platform for participants to shape the research process and narrate their stories on their own terms. This approach not only amplifies marginalized voices but also reveals insights that might otherwise remain hidden. Furthermore, Photovoice encourages a less extractive research process, fostering collaborative learning and mutual accountability between researchers and participants (Wang & Burris 1997; McConnell & Garrison 2025).

By providing a localized approach that emphasizes the socio-spatial dynamics of displacement, the Photovoice methodology facilitated the sharing of the lived experiences of displacement and resettlement in the evicted Muslim population from northern Sri Lanka. Through the use of visual data to capture specific community experiences tied to their distinct geographical and cultural realities through a span of three decades, this approach fosters place-based understandings of displacement by addressing local circumstances and everyday struggles that are often overlooked in broader displacement narratives. It gives voice to the community's complex relationship with their environment and evolving sense of belonging by offering nuanced insights into the intersections of location, identity, and memory, and highlights how these dynamics shape their long-term efforts to reclaim home, rebuild lives, and reestablish continuity in disrupted landscapes.

Photovoice fosters accountability not only among researchers but also among humanitarian actors and participants themselves. In the case of displaced Northern Muslims in Sri Lanka, it provides a platform to highlight overlooked realities of displacement and resettlement. This helps bridge the gap between affected communities and decision-makers, making Photovoice both a research method and a tool for transformative accountability.

Accountability is broadly understood as the process of holding actors responsible for their actions (Hilhorst *et al.* 2021). In humanitarian contexts, accountability goes beyond formal reporting mechanisms and includes relational and ethical dimensions. In mainstream humanitarianism accountability has been described through frameworks that define accountability as

the means through which power is used responsibly, such as in the 2010 Humanitarian Accountability Partnership (HAP) Standards. The approach considers the views of, and being held accountable by, different stakeholders, and primarily the people affected by authority or power (HAP 2010, 1).

These processes reveal how accountability is embedded in power relations, raising critical questions about who is answerable to whom, under what conditions, and with what consequences.

Hilhorst and colleagues. (2021) define accountability through three interrelated components: taking account (listening, participation, engagement), giving account (transparency, communication), and responsibility (ownership of actions and inactions). The Photovoice method aligns with this framework by promoting inclusive, ethical research practices. It facilitates *taking account* by allowing participants to express lived experiences through photos and dialogue, ensuring their voices shape the research. It enables *giving account* by making those experiences visible to decision-makers through

transparent, emotional communication. It fosters *responsibility* by encouraging shared ownership between researchers and participants, emphasizing ethical engagement and reflexivity.

By providing displaced communities — such as the Northern Muslims in Sri Lanka — with a platform to share their stories and images, Photovoice fosters greater accountability among those who deliver assistance, including humanitarian organizations and policymakers including researchers. It is important to highlight how accountability plays out especially in the research process due to its potential for transparency and reflexivity, the democratization of knowledge, and validation through verbal and visual expression. Aspects such as how accountability of researchers occurs in photovoice through ethics and ethical responsibility and the commitment to action, and then the participants involvement in analysis, and the accountability of the research participants through their active role in the knowledge production, including their responsibility to the group in which they participate as well as the group, in this case Northern Muslims, are all matters for consideration. As some displaced individuals have returned to their places of origin and continue to face significant challenges during resettlement, Photovoice serves as a research tool to bridge the gap between marginalized voices and the decision-making processes that shape their lives — particularly for those experiencing prolonged displacement.

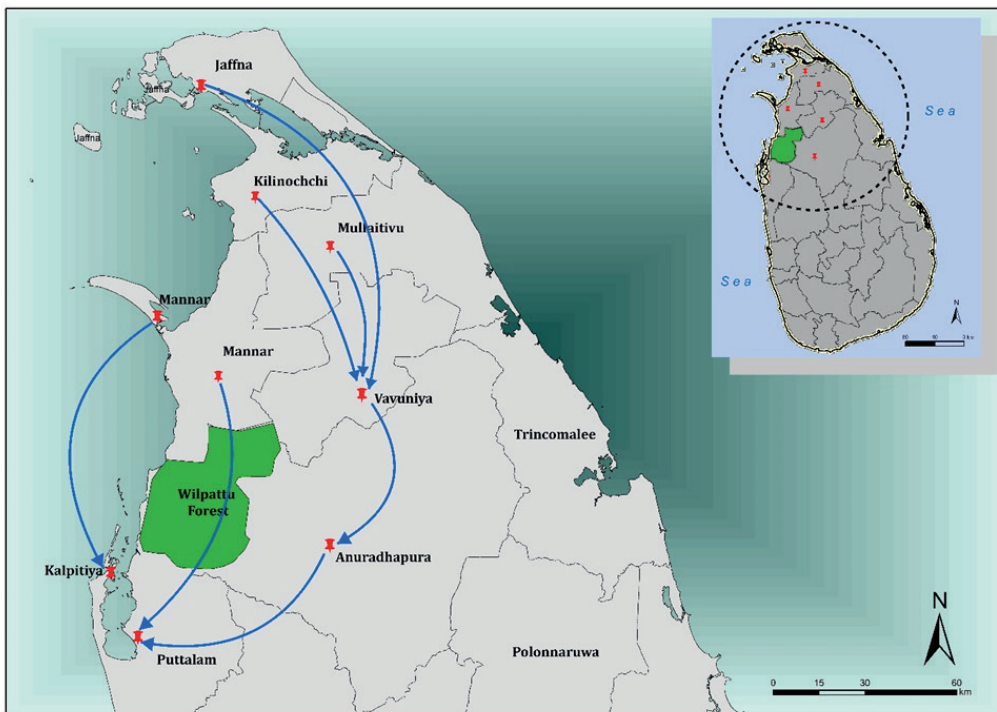
For instance, in the case of Northern Muslim returnees to Mannar and Jaffna, Photovoice has illuminated not only the ongoing struggles related to housing and land, but also the critical role of community solidarity and informal coping mechanisms in rebuilding lives. Such insights can contribute to more accountable, inclusive, and context-sensitive institutional responses — particularly when stakeholders, including state actors, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and community leaders, engage in direct dialogue with displaced populations and are given the opportunity to reflect on these visual and narrative accounts. This participatory engagement not only humanizes policy debates but also fosters policies and practices that are more responsive to the actual conditions on the ground.

Overall, this paper argues that Photovoice helps amplify the voices of marginalized groups experiencing protracted displacement, such as the Northern Muslims in Sri Lanka. By enabling participants to visually and verbally express their experiences, the method fosters co-production of knowledge, facilitates dialogue across diverse positionalities, and conveys the emotional and spatial dimensions of displacement.

In exploring the Northern Muslim displacement, this paper will demonstrate how Photovoice can be used to: 1) illustrate the power of the visual 2) eliciting deeper understandings of lived experience; 3) taking meaningful steps towards co-production of knowledge; 4) promote meaningful processes for participants, including community dialogue, across positionalities. By analyzing the images and narratives produced by participants, we reveal the strengths and limitations of Photovoice as a tool for understanding the multifaceted challenges and opportunities associated with protracted displacement.

## **Northern Muslim displacement in Sri Lanka**

The forced displacement of Northern Muslims from Sri Lanka in 1990 remains a deeply significant and sensitive event, marking a period of immense disruption (Brun 2003; Chatteraj & Gerharz 2019). Approximately 75,000 individuals were evicted from their homes in the Northern Province amidst the civil war, initiating a protracted period of displacement, resettlement challenges, and enduring humanitarian needs (Hasbullah 1996; Haniffa 2015). The evicted Northern Muslims from the five districts of Jaffna, Mannar, Kilinochchi, Mullaitivu and Vavuniya (Figure 1) relocated mostly to Puttalam, with the intention of eventual return.



**Fig. 1** Places and directions of displacement (author's creation)

Despite various attempts by the Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) to return during the Norwegian mediated peace negotiations in 2002, and subsequent occasions when there were pauses of fighting, it was anticipated that Northern Muslims would finally return to their original location in the North following the end of the civil war in May 2009 (Muggah 2008a, 2008b). However, by 2022, thirty-two years after the violent event, a substantial number of Northern Muslims and their second and third-generation descendants continued to live a life of displacement, in-betweenness or semi-resettlement, scattered across various locations, among the places of their expulsion, hosting and return (Brun *et al.* 2024).

Over the three decades of displacement, these Northern Muslims have accumulated a body of largely untold narratives that evoke memories of their pre-eviction lives in the North (Saroor & Thiruvarangan 2021). Their experiences during the displacement and their stay in places such as Puttalam, and return to places such as Mannar and Jaffna, have left them lasting impressions, particularly the assistance and support provided by the local community and various aid actors, as well as the difficulties encountered during the resettlement or local integration processes (Brun 2010).

### Photovoice as a participatory visual method

Visual methods, particularly the use of photographs, have emerged as valuable tools in qualitative research, offering unique pathways to understand and represent lived experiences. Raggl and Schratz (2004) note that photographs have the capacity to prompt individuals to engage in reflexive thinking, recall personal memories, and express emotions, thoughts, and narratives that may be difficult to articulate through words alone. In this sense, photographs not only serve as records of events or environments but also act as catalysts for deeper introspection and storytelling. Kirova and Emme (2006) similarly argue that verbal narratives often fall short in capturing the complexity and nuance of

the lived experience, particularly when dealing with marginalized or emotionally charged contexts. Visual images, by contrast, can evoke dimensions of meaning that elude traditional verbal expression.

Unlike conventional techniques, which rely heavily on researcher-defined questions and verbal storytelling, Photovoice allows participants to select and interpret visual content based on their own priorities and perspectives (Anderson *et al.* 2013; Tsang 2020). This method thus enables participants to express emotions, articulate social issues, and highlight overlooked aspects of their lives in ways that might not emerge through speech alone. This potential of visual imagery is further supported by Harper's (2002) work on photo elicitation, which suggests that the use of photographs can produce a distinct kind of knowledge. According to Harper, visual stimuli tap into deeper layers of human consciousness, triggering emotional and cognitive responses that are otherwise inaccessible through standard verbal interviews.

Photovoice is particularly valuable in research with marginalized or displaced communities, where conventional approaches may overlook the complexity of lived experience. Julien, Given and Opryshko (2013) emphasize that Photovoice facilitates the collection of rich, emic data by empowering participants to document and reflect upon their everyday realities. Furthermore, the method fosters inclusivity and co-creating of knowledge, where Photovoice enhances participant involvement not only during data collection but also in the analysis process. This participatory dimension strengthens the ethical grounding of research and supports the production of knowledge that is both meaningful and transformative, especially in post-conflict and transitional contexts (Gamage & Jayatilaka 2022; Gamage 2023).

Photovoice has been widely applied across various social and cultural contexts to explore the lived realities of migrants and displaced populations. Roman and colleagues (2023), for example, employed Photovoice to investigate the experiences of migrants and their perceptions of host societies. In their study, participants were invited to take photographs representing key moments of their migration journeys, accompanied by descriptive narratives that explained the significance of each image. The findings highlight how Photovoice not only captured the challenges faced by individuals with refugee backgrounds but also illuminated the positive aspects of resettlement, such as hope, adaptation, and belonging.

Similarly, Mozaffarian (2019) demonstrates how Photovoice enables participants to visually articulate complex experiences such as displacement and belonging through metaphorical representation. By focusing on sports and social interaction among refugees, the study shows how images function as 'snapshots' of participants' worldviews, offering powerful visual expressions of identity, connection, and resilience.

Weber (2018) further advances the discussion by illustrating how participatory visual methods can democratize research and minimize the risk of re-traumatization in studies involving refugees and internally displaced persons. By involving participants in the co-creation of visual narratives, the approach attempted to shift the interpretive power away from researchers and towards those with lived experience. In doing so, it challenges dominant external narratives and foregrounds the agency of participants. Visual outputs produced through such methods can thus serve not only as data but as acts of resistance and reclamation, contributing to more ethical, inclusive, empowering and transformative research practices in post-conflict and displacement contexts.

Photovoice has also been widely employed to explore and amplify gender-specific experiences, particularly those of women facing structural inequalities and displacement. Through visual self-representation, the method can empower participants — especially women — to challenge dominant narratives, institutional portrayals, and gendered assumptions that often frame their circumstances. As a participatory method, it has allowed internally displaced women to document their realities, reflect critically on their lived experiences, and advocate for change. Over the past few decades, Photovoice has been implemented in a variety of socio-cultural and geographical settings, often with female participants, offering them a creative and accessible platform to engage in social critique and contribute to broader discourses on gender, identity, and marginalization (Wang & Burris, 1997; Wang 1999; Weber 2018).

This visual methodology also aligns closely with feminist research principles, particularly in its emphasis on participation, empowerment, and the disruption of hierarchical researcher-participant



relationships. By foregrounding women's voices, Photovoice enables marginalized individuals to not only share their experiences but to actively shape the research agenda. Budig and colleagues. (2018) explicitly link Photovoice to feminist theory, highlighting its capacity to recognize local expertise and empower marginalized women by centering their knowledge. Edwardson (2019) furthers this argument by exploring how Photovoice, when used with mothers from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, supports matricentric feminism. Edwardson's work illustrates how the method elevates maternal perspectives in policy dialogues and community development initiatives. Similarly, Macdonald and others (2022) underscore the inclusivity of Photovoice in enabling women with physical disabilities to represent their identities and lived realities. The method, they argue, fosters personal and collective agency, promotes self-awareness, and challenges societal marginalization through both visual and narrative expression. Dhari and colleagues (2023) also support this view, noting that Photovoice facilitates the formation of critical consciousness among women and serves as a catalyst for collective empowerment.

Returning to the foundational work of Wang and Burris (1997), Photovoice is described as a community-based participatory research approach that encourages individuals to document their daily lives and express pressing concerns through photography. In their study with village women in Yunnan, China, the process validated participants' perspectives and highlighted their public health needs, thus underscoring the method's potential to democratize knowledge production and foster social change. Still, despite its many advantages, Photovoice is not without its limitations and criticisms. Scholars have questioned its capacity to fully address power imbalances between researchers and participants, noting that the method may inadvertently place individuals at risk, cause embarrassment, or damage personal relationships (Julien *et al.* 2013; Pollak 2017). Ethical concerns may arise regarding participant consent, transparency, and the use or interpretation of images. There are also practical and logistical constraints: Photovoice can involve considerable financial costs, including the provision of cameras, training sessions, and facilitation. Legal liabilities, such as image rights and privacy issues, further complicate the process, especially in contexts involving vulnerable populations. Additionally, Photovoice may struggle to capture historical experiences due to its emphasis on real-time image production, resulting in gaps in representation.

Nevertheless, despite these challenges, Photovoice continues to gain traction as a participatory method due to its adaptability and potential to empower participants. Its ability to promote autonomy, enhance participant engagement, and create a more enjoyable and accessible research process has made it an appealing choice for researchers working with marginalized communities. Ultimately, the method's strength lies in its co-creative and flexible approach, which allows for the nuanced exploration of complex social realities even amid methodological tensions.

## The Photovoice process

This paper is an outcome of a four-year project (*Holding Aid Accountable: Relational Humanitarianism in Protracted Crisis (AidAccount)* (<https://www.prio.org/projects/1884>) July 2020 to May 2024) which aimed to understand the definition and implementation of aid accountability in the context of civic and professional humanitarianism in protracted crises. In selecting participants, we considered both IDPs and host communities, along with their perspectives and memories of the protracted displacement. As part of the project, Photovoice was used as a continuation of focus group discussions (FGDs) and in-depth interviews. The participants who took part in the FGDs and interviews were also invited to take part in the Photovoice method. Additionally, respondents were selected through purposive sampling based on their significant experience, active participation in humanitarian efforts, community engagement, field expertise, and availability to voluntarily participate in the research. The prior experience of the authors and their institutions in conducting fieldwork with displaced Northern Muslims facilitated smooth access to the sites and engagement with participants.

The study included 45 participants divided into two categories: IDPs and hosts. The IDPs were individuals displaced from the Northern Province who had received aid at various stages over the past 30 years. The hosts included stakeholders such as local residents, private individuals, and members of formal and informal institutions that provided humanitarian assistance. Participants were equally

distributed across three research sites: Puttalam — a site of local settlement and integration), Mannar — a site of displacement, return, and resettlement), and Jaffna — a site of displacement, return, and resettlement) in the Northern and Western regions of Sri Lanka (see Figure 1).

These locations were selected because they represented a range of experiences related to displacement, settlement, and resettlement. Researchers also had prior contacts and experience working in these areas. The selected participants received in-person training from two Sri Lankan researchers, who were also involved in the FGDs and interviews, with assistance from a Research Assistant (RA) who had herself been displaced from Jaffna at the age of five. During the training, participants were briefed on the photo-taking requirements and ethical considerations.

All participants had access to smartphones and were willing to take part in the research. They were comfortable taking photos, familiar with applications like WhatsApp and Bluetooth, and were willing to participate in the interviews and perspective workshops. Participants were instructed to conduct themselves respectfully, avoid capturing inappropriate or sensitive content, and refrain from photographing identifiable faces whenever possible. A few practice photos were encouraged at the start, with follow-ups conducted to check progress. The training also covered project objectives, procedures, expected outcomes, confidentiality, copyright and acknowledgement protocols, and informed consent for participation and photo publication. Each participant was asked to take approximately 10 photos of objects, events, incidents, or memories — past or present — related to their experiences of displacement or their hopes for the future. Photos were viewed on either the participants' or researchers' smartphones or laptops, and the interviews were audio recorded. For each participant, the complete set of 10 photos, the three selected images, interview recordings, and translated transcripts were securely stored.

These photos were to reflect personal meaning and significance. Participants shared their photos with the research team, and a follow-up meeting was arranged within a few days. During this meeting — held in a quiet and private setting — the participants selected three favorite photos and shared the stories behind them in a 15–20minute conversation. Participants were encouraged to tell the stories behind their chosen photographs. Through this storytelling process, guided by a few simple prompting questions — such as "what is this photo about?", "why did you select it?", and "how is it important in your life?" — the researchers aimed to understand the key messages participants wished to convey and the personal significance of each image. This approach allowed participants to share their experiences in their own words, supported and deepened by visual evidence.

Following the photography and interviews, three separate perspective workshops were held in Puttalam, Mannar, and Jaffna with the 45 Photovoice participants. These workshops aimed to raise awareness and inform policy and practice. In addition to the participants, around 10 guests — community leaders, government officials, and NGO representatives — were invited to each workshop, bringing the total number of attendees to approximately 25 per site. Each three-hour event included the display of the 45 selected photos.



**Fig. 2** Photo collection in Puttalam workshop

Participants were divided into smaller groups during the workshops. They organized photo presentations by category or theme to facilitate focused storytelling, highlight diversity, and encourage collective reflection. Researchers did not interfere with the discussions or the selection process, allowing participants to independently prepare and present their collections. Workshops were held in community or public halls.



**Fig. 3** Group work selecting photos in Mannar workshop

The data were analyzed using a visual-narrative thematic analysis approach that integrated both the verbal narratives and visual content generated through the Photovoice process. First, an inductive thematic analysis was applied to the interview transcripts and workshop discussions (Braun & Clarke 2006) allowing key themes to emerge directly from participants' accounts without imposing pre-established categories. In parallel, a visual analysis (Rose 2016) of the photographs was conducted to interpret their symbolic content, context, and composition, guided by participants' explanations and reflections. This dual approach enabled a deeper understanding of how participants represented and made meaning of their experiences. By combining visual imagery with narrative accounts, the analysis captured recurring themes related to displacement, identity, aid relationships, and accountability, offering insights from the perspectives of both IDPs and host communities.

This integrated methodological approach not only facilitated the collection of rich, layered data, but also created space for participants to articulate their lived experiences through both visual and narrative means. The Photovoice process moved beyond data generation to become a dialogic and participatory practice, enabling participants to reflect critically on their realities and engage in collective meaning-making. In what follows, we illustrate how the visual medium served as a powerful tool for eliciting deeper insights into displacement and accountability, fostering co-produced knowledge (Refstie 2021), and supporting meaningful community dialogue across diverse positionalities.

### **Illustrating the power of the visual**

This section focuses on the power of the visual within our study of displaced Sri Lankan Northern Muslims, demonstrating how the method enabled participants to articulate complex emotions, memories, and aspirations that might otherwise remain unvoiced or overlooked. Through the Photovoice methodology, participants used images to communicate the emotional and social consequences of the 1990 eviction. The memories associated with pre-eviction life, the experiences of humanitarian assistance, and the challenges of resettlement were vividly captured through photographs, offering tangible representations of the participants' realities.



One of the key strengths of the visual is its ability to evoke emotions and memories that are deeply embedded in participants' life experiences. The act of taking a photograph becomes an act of remembering — returning to emotionally charged places and events that continue to shape their present. In this study, many participants chose to photograph places and objects that held personal significance — such as a family home now in ruins, a plot of land once used for farming, a worn bicycle used to travel to work, or a faded family photograph kept through displacement — each symbolizing a connection to their pre-displacement lives. These visual representations served as powerful reminders of what had been lost. The grief and sorrow associated with protracted displacement became especially palpable as participants explained the significance of their chosen subjects.

For instance, consider the emotional example of a participant who photographed her house, built with considerable effort shortly before the eviction. As she recounted:

The reason I intend to tell you this is because we built this house with many difficulties. We moved to our new house in May 1990. We were chased soon after we moved to our new house and started to live happily.... They (LTTE) asked us to hand over the keys. At that time, we were very sad because we had to leave all our things in the house. In 2004, we went there to see the house. When we saw the situation of the house, which we built with difficulties, we were more upset (PV 5, female, 50 years, Puttalam).



**Fig. 4** Photovoice picture illustrating life prior to eviction: memories of house

This narrative, coupled with the visual representation of the house, provides a far more compelling understanding of the emotional toll of displacement than words alone could convey. The image becomes a symbol of lost stability and a testament to the enduring impact of forced migration on individual lives. The home in the photo does not simply depict a structure; it captures a moment in time that embodies security, happiness, and sudden loss.

While many visuals served to preserve personal and collective memory, others focused on documenting the broader social and communal dimensions of life before and after displacement. There were notable similarities between the first and second generations' photo choices across Puttalam, Mannar, and Jaffna. Just as the first generation emphasized memories of their pre-eviction lives, the second generation — many of whom were children during the eviction — also used Photovoice to visualize and reconstruct the life their families once led in Northern Sri Lanka. Some participants recalled the events vividly, while others described how their awareness of place and identity had been shaped through the stories of their parents.

Particularly striking were photos taken by participants from Jaffna, which reflected on the inter-ethnic coexistence that once characterized life before the conflict. One participant captured an image of a pond where he and his Tamil friends used to play, and shared the following description:

There is a place called the small mosque on our Muslim College Road. When we were 9 or 10 years old, we used to sit on the wall and talk about that pond and the flowers in the pond and eat the petals of those flowers. During that time, there were ornamental fish in that pond, and we played by catching them. Sometimes our Tamil friends would pick large flowers in that pond to keep for their gods. Also, that pond had been used to fulfill the basic needs of people. After we were chased in 1990, the pond was covered with sedge grass.... The lotus and other plants had disappeared. There was only trash and wild plants there. This is a place where we played and had memories; therefore, we feel sad when we see this pond. I'm unable to describe that sadness in words. (PV 6, male, 38 years, Jaffna).



**Fig. 5** Photovoice picture illustrating life prior to eviction: memories of childhood

This narrative illustrates how the visual representation of a familiar place can trigger powerful emotions and memories. The current state of the pond — overgrown and neglected — serves as a stark contrast to its past vibrancy and symbolizes the breakdown of inter-ethnic relations and shared spaces. It underscores how the consequences of displacement extend beyond material loss, reaching into the realms of cultural memory and community cohesion.

Beyond visualizing memory and loss, participants also share the experience of life in displacement camps, especially the difficulties of basic survival and the humanitarian support they received and the accountability they saw in it. These images portrayed both the resilience of the displaced and the crucial role that aid played in sustaining them. The photographs ranged from illustrations of toilets and water sources to education materials, cooking facilities, and temporary housing structures. In doing so, participants constructed a visual record of the assistance received from various organizations and individuals.

However, these images also captured the limitations and inconsistencies of humanitarian responses. They revealed the often-precarious conditions of camp life and the gaps in services that forced people to adapt in difficult circumstances. In one such example, a displaced woman reflected on the severe water shortage and sanitation issues she faced in the camp: "In the camp, we had to use the public toilet and struggled to get drinking water. After some time, we started using water from the well provided by OXFAM" (PV 4, female, 55 years, Puttalam).



**Fig. 6** Photovoice illustration of life in camp: access to water and sanitation

Her account highlights the significance of humanitarian support while simultaneously drawing attention to the difficult conditions faced before such aid was available. The photograph she provided visually complemented her narrative, showing the infrastructure that eventually eased the burden.

These contributions were not limited to general observations — they also revealed the gendered dimensions of displacement. Women participants, in particular, conveyed how the experience of being forcibly displaced affected them in specific ways. Their photos and narratives reflected their roles as caregivers, their vulnerability in public spaces, and the inadequacy of gender-sensitive facilities during emergencies. One such example is a striking narrative from a woman in Mannar who used a photo to recount the hardships she and other women faced when they were forced to flee their homes:

We lived in Erukalampidy. The LTTE asked all families to leave within 2 hours, and later it was extended to 2 days as the church fathers requested them. We reached the seashore by walking for 5 miles. My mother and my grandmother reached there with my six sisters, a brother and me. When we were on the seashore, the LTTE also was there. We had to stay there during the sunny and rainy times. The girls who were in their menstruation days struggled a lot to change their clothes.... People used to raise their sarees and let the girls change their clothes. Even girls struggled to pass urine because the LTTE was there beyond a certain distance. People dug a hole in the beach, covered it with sarees, and used that as a toilet. That beach was like a resurrection ground (as described in Islam). We got that much punishment without making any mistakes (PV 4, female, 55 years, Puttalam).



**Fig. 7** Photovoice illustration of memories of displacement

By showing this photo, she drew attention to the specific challenges that women and girls face during displacement — challenges that are often underreported in mainstream humanitarian assessments. The image and accompanying story serve as a powerful reminder that gendered suffering must be understood and acknowledged in both academic and policy discourses.

The power of the visual is further underscored by its ability to transcend linguistic and cultural barriers. In a multi-ethnic context like Sri Lanka, where multiple languages are spoken and historical grievances remain sensitive, visual storytelling offers a common ground. Through the Photovoice process, participants from different backgrounds — including displaced Muslims, host community members, humanitarian actors, and Tamil social activists — engaged in shared reflection. The workshops enabled participants to use photographs not only to express personal truths but also to open dialogue on difficult issues such as inter-ethnic relations and contested resettlement processes.

This section has shown that images generated through Photovoice do more than simply document reality; they animate memory, evoke empathy, and give voice to perspectives that might otherwise remain marginalized. The visual becomes a powerful medium through which trauma, resilience, and community narratives are both remembered and reimagined.

### **Eliciting deeper understandings of lived experiences through dialogue and images**

Photovoice not only enabled participants to visually represent aspects of their lived experiences, but also provided an entry point for deeper conversations — some of which had been long silenced or subdued. By allowing individuals to frame their own narratives through photographs and accompanying explanations, the method offered a participatory way to reflect on cultural legacy, disrupted routines, and complex emotions tied to displacement.

The workshops held in Puttalam, Mannar, and Jaffna created safe, dialogic spaces where participants, community leaders, local officials, and other stakeholders came together, as illustrated in the below quote by a participant. Participants said that these gatherings encouraged active listening and reflection across community boundaries notably, the inclusion of both displaced and host community members to foster mutual understanding of sometimes contested histories. One local government representative at the Puttalam workshop commented:

I'm very happy about participating in the discussion of the Northern people who were displaced in the 1990s. It's a different topic for me because the photographs have been taken of their past life, the problems they faced, the effects and issues discussed here. (PV-Puttalam workshop)

This observation underscores how images were not just representations of individual memory, but catalysts for collective recognition.

A key strength of this visual-dialogic combination was its ability to bring to the surface deeply felt but often unspoken emotions. Photographs served as springboards for participants to talk about difficult experiences, such as the trauma of eviction, the loss of homes and relationships, and the long, uncertain path of resettlement. For example, as shown in the previous section (Figure 5) participant presented a photo of a dilapidated pond where he had once played with Tamil friends. The image of the overgrown, neglected space triggered a moving reflection on fractured inter-ethnic relationships and lost childhood connections: "I'm unable to describe that sadness in words." (PV 6, male, 38 years, Jaffna).

This statement powerfully captures how images opened emotional terrain beyond the reach of language. While the previous section emphasized this image's visual resonance, in the workshop it became the basis for discussing the participant's memories of pre-1990s coexistence, the tensions that followed, and his unresolved grief over what was lost.

Photographs of homes, kitchen utensils, prayer items, or family heirlooms similarly functioned as more than just symbols — they became prompts for discussing daily life, ritual practices, and the rhythms of existence before displacement. One participant shared a photo of her mother's pot. During the discussion, she explained how her family had carried it across several locations after eviction, despite its fragility:



When my mother was displaced in 1990, she had many things which she received as presents for her marriage which was held in 1989 but she couldn't bring anything with her. However, suddenly she had thought about bringing some rice, sugar, and flour with her to make food wherever they got displaced. At that time, she had put those in this pot and brought them with her by boat, and used that for a longer period after the eviction. Still, my mother keeps this silver pot as a memorable thing. (PV 1, Female, 33 Years, Puttalam)



**Fig. 8** Photovoice illustration of memories of displacement: daily life- a pot

Such narratives reveal how material objects embodied resilience, continuity, and identity under precarious conditions. A suitable photo to accompany this account could be a close-up of the clay pot placed against the backdrop of a temporary shelter — visually linking object, memory, and migration.

Beyond personal stories, the workshops allowed participants to collaboratively categorize and contextualize their experiences. For instance, the Jaffna group grouped their photos into three timeframes: life before 1990, the displacement years after 2002, and resettlement in 2023. This structured reflection helped illuminate how perceptions of place and identity evolved over time. The group's presentation traced the transformation of a single village through these stages — capturing its pre-war architecture, damaged remains, and the reconstructed homes of returnees. A compelling photo series here would be a triptych: one image from each period, placed side by side, capturing change and continuity.



**Fig. 9** Photo collection in Jaffna workshop



The intergenerational nature of the workshops further deepened the storytelling. Younger participants, some of whom had no direct memory of the eviction, listened as elders narrated experiences tied to family photos or ancestral land. In one case, a teenager brought a photograph of her parent's house in Jaffna, taken during a recent visit. This exchange prompted others to share memories, creating a chain of storytelling that passed knowledge and emotion across generations.

This dialogue not only emphasized material needs but pointed to psychological and emotional gaps in aid efforts — something that may not surface in needs assessments or where people are always not provided the space to frame the stories on their own terms. As one participant at the Puttalam workshop said: "Actually, all the photographs displayed have an unforgettable story behind them. Every photograph tells a story." (PV Puttalam workshop)

This sense of authorship and collective reflection gradually shifted the role of participants from being 'researched' to becoming contributors in meaning-making to the research. It is this shift that paved the way for the next phase of Photovoice — where we began to explore how displaced communities could become co-creators of knowledge about their own past and future.

### **Taking meaningful steps towards co-production of knowledge**

The Photovoice method provided a foundation for actively involving displaced Northern Muslims of Sri Lanka in every stage of the research process, from data collection to analysis and dissemination. This section illustrates how the study moved beyond mere participation to co-production of knowledge — enabling participants to become active agents in documenting and shaping the narrative of their own displacement.

At the heart of co-production lies the recognition of the displaced community members as experts of their own lived realities. Their insights, formed through enduring displacement, navigating bureaucratic barriers, and rebuilding lives in unfamiliar environments, are crucial for any meaningful understanding of post-eviction experiences. By using smartphones, participants gained the freedom to choose what stories to tell, how to tell them, and which aspects of their past or present to visualize. For instance, a participant from the Puttalam workshop said "When we talk about those who supported us immediately after we were displaced, we must first mention the native people here. They were the ones who offered us the most basic help — only later did the organizations arrive." (PV workshop, Puttalam). This reflection highlights the importance of local collaboration and community-based support in the early stages of humanitarian response, long before formal aid systems intervened.

The trust that developed through long-term engagement was vital for this process. Many participants were involved in multiple stages of the research project—from initial orientation and photography training to photo selection and narrative sharing at the workshops. The photographs reflected a wide thematic spectrum, from everyday life and religious practices to images of derelict homes, emergency relief items, community gatherings, and children's education.

In particular, women engaged actively throughout the project, demonstrating how Photovoice can amplify often-muted voices. Several female participants documented not only household routines but also their resilience in sustaining families during and after displacement.

Moreover, the participatory framework of Photovoice on some occasions blurred the line between researcher and researched. Participants, by choosing what to capture and what to say, redefined the research agenda itself. Their visual and narrative contributions moved the project from researcher-led inquiry to a more democratic process. Instead of being subjects of study, they became co-researchers who had the opportunity to author their lived histories.

This co-production was further enhanced during the dissemination phase. At workshops held in Puttalam, Mannar, and Jaffna, participants presented their photographs to other community members, local authorities, NGO representatives, and government officials. These events allowed for broader dialogue and mutual learning. The participatory dialogue also challenged mainstream representations of displaced populations. Rather than portraying Northern Muslims as passive victims or aid recipients, the images and stories reflected agency, pride, and strength. Participants also contributed to shaping the research findings that would be shared with stakeholders. During a final review session, participants were invited to help curate images for inclusion in publications and

exhibitions. Their feedback on how the photographs should be interpreted ensured that the visual messages remained aligned with their lived realities.

Importantly, the process of co-production was not free from limitations. The quality of engagement often depended on the strength of relationships — between researchers and participants, between participants themselves, and with the community facilitators who supported the project.

The use of simple technology — smartphones already owned by participants — made the process accessible and inclusive. It also helped to avoid the power imbalance often associated with professional equipment. The autonomy to photograph familiar subjects, combined with the collective reflection in workshops, gave rise to insights that may not have emerged through traditional interviews or surveys.

Including an image from the Mannar workshop (Figure 10), where a group of women are seen collaboratively selecting and arranging photographs for display, would be particularly valuable here. It visually captures the participatory spirit and collective decision-making that defined the project's methodology.



**Fig. 10** Active engagement of group of females in the selection and displaying photos in the Mannar workshop

In sum, this section has illustrated how Photovoice enabled displaced Northern Muslims to become not just participants, but co-creators of knowledge. Their photographs and stories were not mere data — they were declarations of memory, identity, and vision for the future. The process challenged conventional hierarchies in research and created space for dialogue, empathy, and mutual recognition.

### **Offering meaningful processes for participants, including community dialogue across positionalities**

The Photovoice workshops offered more than an opportunity for data collection — they became spaces of meaningful engagement, reflection, and potential social transformation. Designed to include displaced Northern Muslims, host communities, local officials, and social activists, the workshops fostered dialogue across positionalities, creating platforms for shared understanding in the aftermath of long-standing displacement and ethnic division.

Participants did not only present photographs — they shared deeply personal stories that illuminated experiences of displacement, resettlement, aid dependency, and fractured IDP-host relationship in Puttalam and inter-ethnic relationships in resettled Mannar and Jaffna. These visual narratives helped to surface complex layers of emotion and memory that conventional interviews often fail to capture. As 47 years old woman participant in Puttalam reflected, “...Until that time the natives (Puttalam) discussed and provided us with common buildings, private lands, private houses, and so on, and played a huge role. After that only, the organizations came to help us.” (PV Puttalam

workshop). This highlights the crucial initial role played by the host community in supporting displaced people — a vital aspect of understanding humanitarian assistance within the framework of localization. These reflections underline how Photovoice provided an avenue for acknowledging undocumented, informal assistance provided by local residents — contributions that might otherwise remain invisible in development and aid discourses.

A significant strength of the Photovoice method was its ability to generate horizontal spaces of dialogue — where participants from different social, ethnic, and generational backgrounds could speak as equals. In Puttalam, participants from both the host and displaced communities jointly discussed issues that had long remained under the surface. A 32 years old IDP male participant in the Puttalam workshop, after hearing the stories of others, offered a critical reflection:

We always talked about the problems we faced, but we didn't think about the difficulties the Puttalam natives went through. They also suffered because of our presence. I think we should mention their struggles here as well (PV Puttalam).

This moment of self-awareness showcased how the workshops facilitated not just storytelling but also ethical reflection and mutual recognition. It helped reframe displacement not solely as a victim narrative but as a shared history of disrupted lives, strained resources, and overlapping identities.

Similarly, in the Jaffna workshop, the presence of local Tamil social activists and community elders sparked powerful conversations about historical coexistence and shared futures. A 58-year-old Tamil participant reflected on the legacy of the Muslim expulsion and the silence that followed:

The proper resettlement did not happen for Muslims in Jaffna. From my point of view, we have a responsibility for the resettlement of Muslims in Jaffna and the Northern Province. We did not do that properly (PV Jaffna workshop).

This act of acknowledgment, coming from a Tamil elder, carried particular weight in a region where ethnic tensions have long shaped narratives of belonging. It also demonstrated the capacity of participatory methods to promote reconciliation through interpersonal gestures of accountability.

The participatory nature of Photovoice allowed participants to explore not just the past but also to envision what kind of future they desired. Discussions frequently returned to the importance of youth and the need to share forgotten histories with the next generation. In Puttalam, participants noted that younger people lacked awareness of the early days of displacement and the relationships that were built during that time. A 54 years old male said:

The young don't know how we came here, or who helped us. They only see the current tensions. If they hear our stories, maybe they will understand that we lived through this together.

Intergenerational understanding was also emphasized during the Jaffna workshop. Participants proposed that the photographs and narratives be shared with schools and local civil society organizations to encourage dialogue across generations. A 48-year-old Tamil participant in Jaffna workshop, in particular, suggested that these materials be disseminated among schoolchildren. "The Tamil and Muslim children should know that their families once lived together, side by side" (PV Jaffna workshop). This desire for broader dissemination underscores the potential for visual storytelling to serve as a peacebuilding tool — not just within communities but also across them.

Workshops also became spaces to question existing power hierarchies in policy and aid. A 42 years old local activist in Jaffna argued.

The dialogue should happen at the bottom level of society. It can be achieved through civil societies, between mosques and Kovils, and among schools. Collaboration is not there between our schools. We should admit that (PV Jaffna workshop)

This insistence on grassroots-level engagement speaks to a core philosophy of Photovoice: that change does not only come from above. Rather, it emerges when communities are given tools to reflect, document, and act upon their own experiences.

Photovoice also empowered participants to critically examine their ongoing struggles with access to land, housing, and public services. Photographs of dilapidated resettlement areas and neglected infrastructure formed a silent yet powerful critique of post-war development failures. The visual

medium gave participants a way to articulate grievances without needing technical jargon or formal political platforms.

In sum, the Photovoice workshops potentially offered a participatory, relational space for healing, reflection, and collaboration. They demonstrated the power of visual storytelling to bridge divides, surface hidden histories, and challenge dominant narratives about displacement and aid. More importantly, they provided an opportunity for participants to speak with, rather than be spoken about — marking a shift towards a more inclusive and accountable mode of knowledge production.

As we move into the concluding section, we reflect on the broader implications of this participatory, visual approach. What does it mean to center displaced voices in the reconstruction of historical narratives? How can such methods contribute to more accountability to address protracted displacement? These questions guide our final thoughts in the conclusion that follows.

## Challenges in Implementing Photovoice

Despite the valuable outcomes of using Photovoice as a participatory visual method, several challenges emerged during its implementation. A primary difficulty lay in aligning participants' photographic choices with the core research agenda. This study sought to examine how humanitarian assistance functions in contexts of protracted displacement and how accountability is maintained throughout these processes. Since the Photovoice phase followed interviews and focus group discussions — many of which involved the same participants — it was anticipated that the images would engage with themes of aid and institutional response. However, most participants chose instead to highlight deeply personal and emotional aspects of displacement and resettlement through their photographs.

This divergence prompted a shift in the researcher's role — from interviewer to facilitator and listener — allowing for the emergence of new and unexpected insights. While these narratives enriched the research, they also posed analytical challenges in integrating the visual data into the original framework focused on humanitarian accountability.

The method also demanded significant logistical planning, time, and financial resources. Coordinating initial meetings, conducting training sessions, and facilitating follow-up workshops required sustained engagement between the researchers and participants. Although most participants had access to smartphones — eliminating the need for additional equipment — the organization of the training workshop involved unanticipated expenses and effort. This also meant some participants from the original research were dropped out due to their not having access to smart phones or inability to use them, even though they may have had rich stories to share.

Ethical considerations were central to the Photovoice process. During the initial training, participants were guided to adopt a 'do no harm' approach by avoiding images that might reveal identities or depict culturally or politically sensitive subjects. This awareness proved essential, particularly when images were later shared in public forums, but it had also meant certain photos that may have been valuable could have been omitted.

Confidentiality, trust, and data protection remained guiding principles throughout the study. Informed consent was obtained at multiple stages, covering both participation and the use of visual and narrative data, with a strong emphasis on anonymity. Participants were offered three authorship options for their photographs: (1) full attribution with their name, (2) attribution with their name and the local research institution, or (3) complete anonymity. Most participants chose 1 and 2 with no one opting for 3, though it raised the question if some members felt obligated to provide their consent due to the enthusiasm they had shown during the photo taking and interpretation phases. This flexibility nevertheless fostered transparency and mutual respect, accommodating individual comfort levels regarding visibility and ownership.

While these challenges highlighted the complexities of participatory visual research, they also reinforced the potential to open new spaces of engagement and co-production. The insights generated — though at times extending beyond the original research questions — offered a deeper and more textured understanding of protracted displacement. By centering these lived experiences, the method ensures that the complex and often overlooked realities of displacement — such as loss of land and housing, disrupted livelihoods, weakened social networks, and psychological trauma. These reflections

point toward the broader implications of using Photovoice as a method of critical inquiry, as discussed in the conclusion that follows.

## Conclusion

This paper has examined the use of Photovoice in engaging with the narratives of Northern Muslims displaced from Sri Lanka's North in 1990, demonstrating its potential to foreground marginalized voices and offer more situated understandings of protracted displacement on a backdrop of aid accountability. By enabling participants to visually document and interpret their lived experiences, Photovoice supported the co-production of knowledge, opened space for community dialogue, and revealed emotional and spatial dimensions of displacement often elided in conventional methodologies, contributing to a greater understanding of accountability in processes related to research.

The study shows how participants used images and narratives to express layered emotions, memories, and aspirations — ranging from life before eviction to experiences of aid and ongoing challenges in resettlement. The workshops provided spaces for ethical reflection and mutual exchange among displaced persons, host community members, officials, and activists including researchers. This participatory process resisted dominant framings of displaced populations as passive victims, instead highlighting their agency, resilience, and critical perspectives fronting Photovoice as a platform for free expression.

Photovoice also enabled a more collaborative research dynamic, as participants contributed actively across all stages of the project. Their perspectives, shaped by long-term displacement and recovery, significantly informed the research narrative. In this way, the method sometimes blurred the boundaries between researcher and researched, foregrounding participants as co-authors of knowledge.

The study also shed light on the gendered dimensions of displacement, particularly the specific struggles faced by women. Participants' images underscored the importance of recognizing undocumented and informal support provided by host communities, advocating for more localized, culturally sensitive humanitarian responses. The intergenerational nature of the workshops further encouraged the transmission of forgotten histories and the imagining of shared futures.

In conclusion, Photovoice emerges as a powerful tool for engaging marginalized communities in reflective, inclusive, and action-oriented research. By centering displaced voices in the reconstruction of historical and social narratives, the method contributes to a more nuanced and accountable understanding of protracted displacement. Photovoice thus embodies a layered notion of accountability — through listening and engagement, transparent communication, and shared responsibility between researchers and participants. To maximize its impact, efforts should be made to integrate the insights and recommendations from Photovoice projects into policy and humanitarian frameworks — ensuring that the voices of displaced communities are not only heard but acted upon.

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