

Getting Through Difficult Conversations: Co-Creative Interactive Documentary and Advocacy

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*Politics and art, like forms of knowledge,
construct “fictions”, that is to say material
rearrangements of signs and images, relation-
ships between what is seen and what is said,
between what is done and what can be done.
(Rancière 2004)*

Difficult conversations are messy but essential. Needs, necessities, and concerns cannot be completely expressed if we are unable to begin a discussion, or interaction. To start such a conversation, a very specific one about women's homelessness in Lisbon, we turned to co-creation and interactive documentary. The whole process of making and distributing the documentary, as well as the peripheral events involved, are at the same time being used to exercise empowerment among the group and political and civic action beyond it.

Throughout the last decade, documentary projects have been increasingly described as participatory, collaborative, co-creative, and interactive¹ (see, e.g., De Michiel & Zimmermann 2013; Gaudenzi 2013; Kermanchi 2022; Nash 2022; Nichols 2017; Rose 2014, 2017; Wiehl 2019). Consequently, alongside concern with the documentary text, there is growing interest in studying and exploring documentary's “configurations, practices and processes” (Wiehl, 2018), which derive from participatory practices, collaboration, and co-creation. These terms are often used as equivalents and may seem porous and interchangeable. Nevertheless, there

1 When Nichols classifies the modes of documentary film production, he distinguishes participatory from the interactive mode by linking the latter to web-based technologies, to the computer. However, they are not closed, fixed categories: “Once established (...) modes overlap and intermingle” (Nichols 2017). An interactive documentary can be produced through participation, co-creation, or collaboration, and even more so, the category of participant or co-creator can be expanded to include the viewer (see e.g., *18 Days in Egypt, Palestine Remix, A Journal of Insomnia*).

are some nuances. The concept of “participation” in documentary filmmaking emphasizes the interaction between the filmmaker and the subject [sic]² of the issue portrayed (Nichols, 2017), and Martin Gruber traces a concern with participation to early ethnographic filmmaking, to the works of Robert Flaherty, followed by Jean Rouch’s idea of “handing over the camera” and by David and Judith MacDougall’s push for “filmmakers putting themselves at the disposal of their subjects” (Gruber, 2016; MacDougall, 1995; Rouch, 2003). Looking beyond ethnographic documentary and examining the contemporary media configuration, participation “within and through the media has again become one of the normative anchor points to discuss and appreciate future directions” (Carpentier, 2015). And yet again, it remained very ambiguous, and when power is directly embedded in a concept, as we could argue is the case with participation, it calls for more scrutiny of the conceptual interpretation.³ That is one of the reasons I turn to, and favor, the terms collaboration and co-creation. The terminology itself⁴ emphasizes the fact that power should be redistributed and the decision-making process should be shared as well, ultimately presenting the media product as something we truly worked on together. Finally, for clarity and to distinguish the nuances between these two terms, I will take on Longfellow (2020), who recognizes collaboration as a part of co-creation while distinguishing them by characterizing co-creation as the “longue durée of community engagement, the explicit aim of power sharing, and the relational aspects of working with community members as partners.”

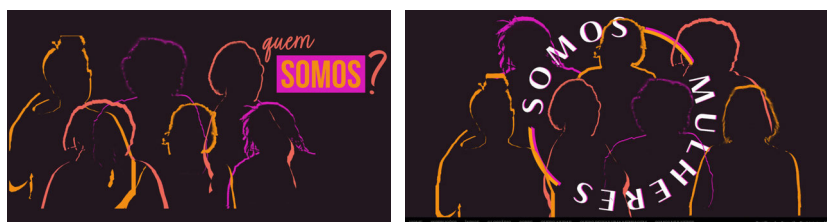
In an article published in *Afterimage* in March of 2020, Reece Auguste et al. presented “Fifty Speculations and Fifteen Unresolved Questions on Co-creation in Documentary” (Auguste et al. 2020). Here, I would like to examine and comment on some of these speculations and perhaps offer solutions in reference to our co-creative interactive documentary “SOMOS MULHERES”.

Who are the partners at SOMOS MULHERES? The association started as an informal group of women who experienced homelessness, that was supported by CRESCER, a non-governmental organization that works across the city of Lisbon

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- 2 Or, as referred to in *Collective Wisdom*, “people formerly known as subjects” (Cizek et al. 2022).
 - 3 In an attempt to clarify the concept of participation and to differentiate between access, interaction, and participation, Carpentier developed a theoretical model – the AIP model – that structures their different meanings on the basis of technology, content, people, and organizations, while at the same time taking into consideration the production and reception stages of a media project (Carpentier, 2015).
 - 4 Collaboration – “an act of working together, united labor”, from French *collaboration*, noun of action from past-participle stem of Latin *collaborare* “work with”, from *com* “with” + *laborare* “to work”; and co-creation – *com* “with” + *creatio* “a creating, a producing”, in classical use “an electing, appointment, choice”, noun of action from past-participle stem of *creare* “to make, bring forth, produce, beget”.

and its surrounding areas, dedicated to harm reduction and eradicating homelessness. The women were mostly part of the CRESCER's Housing First program, which prioritizes providing – without preconditions – permanent housing to individuals experiencing chronic homelessness, accompanied by personalized and professional support. Gradually, this informal group started to grow. Helped by CRESCER and a Civic Europe grant that recognized the value of including individuals who have personally experienced homelessness, and their distinctive viewpoints in providing assistance to those currently facing homelessness, they were encouraged to formally establish their own non-governmental, peer-based organization. A documentary that seeks to support the work of an association organized horizontally and the ground-breaking potential of peer assistance should follow a similar approach. This is how the idea of the need for collaboration, co-creation, and subsequently interactivity, was introduced. The incentive behind the documentary project was never to simply portray or represent, but rather to engage, open dialogue, educate, and foster relationships and actions.

Fig. 1: A screenshot from the original teaser for the project, asking “Who ARE we?” as a play on words with the name of the association (and the interactive documentary) – SOMOS MULHERES (We are women); together with the homepage of the documentary in its current state, showing that another member joined the group.



Source: Screenshots

When dealing with the subject of homelessness, it is common to encounter prejudices and stereotypes. Looking at this through a gendered lens further increases the complexity of the issue. The harrowing stories presented by the members of the group could relatively easily be represented in a linear documentary, and even though participatory practices and techniques could have been used for that purpose, and the women portrayed and their experiences treated with respect and high ethical standards, personally, as an outsider, I would be haunted by guilt at the possibility that this was nonetheless exploitative. At the same time, I wondered if the Web 2.0 technology, interactivity, and continuous long-term collaboration and co-creation on different fronts could help grasp this complex subject better,

more honestly, ensure its heterogeneity and fairness toward the women willing to participate in it, and at the same time, broker the open dialog and action we desired – both online and offline. This art aims to be political, not just by representing political themes or ideas about and around women's homelessness, but by actively engaging with the politics of perception and creating new possibilities for political action.

1. (4.)⁵ *Co-creation assumes different forms and distinctive practices, nuanced to contested spaces, people, places, and technologies.*

Starting the project with a group of women, still in the informal phase, it was necessary to weigh and comprehend the particular stories and specific needs of each participant individually, by attending meetings, participating in informal gatherings, by getting to know each other. Throughout this process, we gradually came to understand the dynamics of the group, different identities, and struggles, with questions arising around gender, immigration, race, class, substance and alcohol dependence, mental health, chronic ailments, and so on. Taking these heterogeneous and multifaceted realities into consideration, we conceived of co-creation as an open process, malleable, and adaptable to different circumstances. In very concrete terms, this means that there were times when the group was not complete, when there were only two or three women available, emotionally and physically, to collaborate and lead the project further. At other times, it was necessary to take a break, relying on the individual support of social workers and psychologists, who, although not directly involved in content making, were crucial for the well-being and strength of various participants, and therefore for the collective as a whole. What was usually noticeable afterwards was greater cohesion, understanding, and empowerment, striving towards the actualization of the goal. All these fluctuations were made possible and manageable because of the openness and adaptability of the process itself, a very loose timeline and schedule, and the tailor-made approach that considered this specific group, with all its strengths and vulnerabilities.

2. (7.) *Co-creation enacts lateral structures, but exists in a state of constant change during a project.*

5 Numbers in brackets correspond to the original numbering in "Fifty Speculations and Fifteen Unresolved Questions on Co-creation in Documentary," the paper this work engages with. I also want to acknowledge the profound contributions of the late Patty Zimmermann, one of the authors of these speculations, to both the field and my personal journey as a researcher and practitioner.

This “speculation” is closely connected to the previous one. A lateral structural arrangement is crucial for the effectiveness of the co-creative process. Not only in situations where, as mentioned above, there are some drawbacks to collaboration, such as when co-creative tasks need to be redistributed, or when new members join, but also for ensuring the flexibility of the process. Around certain tasks, there will be more (or less) enthusiasm during development, and new skills will be gained, along with confidence to start to experiment and execute them. For instance, probably the most difficult task was keeping the meeting minutes. They were mandatory, but in a group where the education level is predominantly below secondary level, or where Portuguese is not a primary language, and where one participant does not even know how to read or write the Latin alphabet, it was challenging. On the other hand, when the group understood the importance of this weekly task and the benefits that outweighed the “dullness” of it, two of the participants joined forces and even enrolled in the special training program for administration and management, which will be recognized as a secondary-level qualification upon successful completion. Another issue was with media exposure. The fear of the microphone and camera, even the journalistic presence was not easily welcomed by every member, while for others it was a moment of validation and pride. For some, showing their face in front of the camera continues to be out of the question, but their contribution can take the form of design ideas or copywriting. However, when the task was the distribution of goods, specifically hygiene and menstrual health products in the streets of Lisbon, the willpower and the eagerness to do it were unanimous. Finally, during the whole process, participants had to deal with emotional or financial struggles that sometimes required them to take a step back and retreat for indefinite periods of time, while others restructured and redistributed the responsibilities. Constant change thus requires greater flexibility. This may call for additional dedication, patience, and perseverance; however, it also strengthens bonds and builds the community.

3. *(10.) Co-creation functions in deep time rather than by short fixes or parachuting into communities. Working in deep time requires full immersion, long conversations, and recognizing and then resolving differences in organizational or media production skills through strategies of empowerment.*

The title of one of the Industry Talks at the International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam in November 2022 was “Co-creation is everywhere but hard to see”. It was moderated by Kat Cizek, who, in her opening statement, advocated for co-creation founded on relationships rather than following a predetermined script or objective established by a single author at the beginning (Cizek 2022). There are two main takeaways here. First, in recent years, “co-creation” has become an increasingly popular term, both to use and denominate projects and to gather funding. Along-

side the equally attractive “impact”, it can unfortunately also be equally vague if used simply as a *mot juste* for a particular socio-cultural moment. Second, for co-creation to be easier to see in the multitude of projects that present themselves as such, time is crucial – the deep time that functions almost as an unawareness of time. Co-creation definitely cannot arise from parachuting into a community and disappearing after the completion of the project.⁶ The work of building the documentary with SOMOS MULHERES started long before the camera and microphones were introduced into our environment. Long before that moment, through a friend of mine, I joined the group and started to participate in the meetings, helping with bureaucratic and legal tasks relating to the formal establishment of the association. We held official meetings and met privately when there were rough patches. We organized initiatives directed at women experiencing homelessness, policymakers, and the general public. There were times when producing this interactive documentary was not a priority. Looking back, it appears that it was precisely this approach that allowed us to build trust, respect, and empowerment – the long process of getting to know each other, recognizing our strengths and weaknesses through conversations and joint actions, building capacities and skills, being there for each other, learning mutually, and acknowledging the differences, but without judgment or moralization. Finally, this is not an error-free process. It therefore takes this *deep* time to get right. Even when it is messy and uncomfortable, there should be an ethical and moral standard inscribed in the co-creation process that obliges us not to withdraw, seeing that as filmmakers, we are often welcomed into and embraced by the communities, and that trust should be respected and recognized.

4. (20.) *Co-creation is frequently positioned as emancipatory and nonhierarchical. What is the distinction between this promotional, utopian image and more complicated embodied practices?*

Co-creation is not an easy and straightforward endeavor. However, neither are human relations in all their plurality. The starting point and goal of a co-creative project should be non-hierarchy. In theory, this emancipates participants and should highlight their individual agency, though it does need to be worked on continuously through open conversations and negotiations. In our project, although it would have been ideal if dedication, work, and other contributions had been distributed equally throughout the process, this was a utopian image we could only strive towards but did not manage to accomplish. In reality, the division of labor and responsibilities was never static. There were weeks when it would be almost

6 Interestingly, this brings us to another speculation – if a truly co-creative project needs this deep time, flexibility, and constant change, can it ever come to true completion? Or does it live and metamorphose as long as the co-creating community exists?

equal, but then there were weeks when one or two people would take on the burden of doing almost all work. How was it possible to manage that? It was necessary to work through frustrations, take responsibility, and express gratitude towards those pushing the project forward. This was repeated several times with different actors, but over time, it also brought up difficult and necessary discussions about the concept of safe space, group cohesion, support and understanding, and many conversations about trauma, mental health, and alcohol and substance use.

5. (23.) *Co-creation is an embodied practice produced through interpretative acts, investigating experience, building communities, and interdisciplinary media arts practices. Co-creation is contingent upon dialogue, openness, and the free play of imagination and understanding.*

Since the process we established was custom-made for this particular group of women and the advocacy plan of the association they were trying to make, we knew it might be turbulent and open to modifications. Although the group has a common denominator in the experience of homelessness, their individual stories, socioeconomic background, knowledge, and perspectives are different. To pursue meaningful collaboration and co-creation, the process depends heavily on constant dialog, open-mindedness, and willingness to learn about and understand others. Approaching it this way, we managed to create a sense of community by working together and, in particular, by presenting in public the pieces born of the co-creation, which resulted in a sense of belonging, collective ownership, and pride. Following these public presentations, the impetus to do more would also usually grow. For instance, after successfully presenting an audio-visual installation based on the individual experiences of the members of the group and a fruitful Q&A session with the audience, members were overflowing with ideas about where to present next and whom to talk to in order to broaden our network of supporters. Even those who were initially reluctant about public appearances asked me to try to get in touch with this or that journalist or public figure, wanting to talk to them about furthering our cause. When we presented the interactive documentary publicly, similar things happened, and proposals included doing a radio show, a podcast, or even a webinar. The distribution of hygiene kits in the streets was a great success from the start. Now, almost three years later, there are plans to open a fully equipped drop-in center, with a kitchen, bathrooms, washing machines, beds, clothing, medicine, psychologists, gynecologists, social workers, and of course them: the peers. And in the process of getting there, the interactive documentary and all the media and art produced around it can serve as a means of ignition, a conversation starter.

6. (24.) *Co-creation engages with ideas and contestatory spaces that engage multiscalar structures of ideas, politics, and practices. Multiscalar means multiple levels and different scales.*
- (25.) *Multiscalar events and issues move from larger issues, themes, and contexts to the small and the specific.*

As homelessness is omnipresent around the world, policies to eradicate it and tackle housing exclusion in general should be transversal and intersectional – we can also say multiscalar. Although the issue is large and complex, through our co-creative interactive documentary, our approach was to focus on the micro level – starting from a particular group of initially six women and their individual stories that could help elucidate the larger issue, specifically challenging the stigma and stereotypes around homelessness. Throughout the two-year process so far, the focus was always on this small group. Though some have dropped out, new members have also joined. “I don’t want to change the world; I want to change Portugal. But first Lisbon,” are the words of Elda, the woman who first dreamed up the idea of the association. Starting at this very personal scale and focusing on specific problems she felt and identified during her ten-year experience of homelessness, other layers started to emerge in the stories and experiences of other women, through discussions among the group and with social workers. By this means, we could start to visualize objectives and ideas around possible ways of tackling these issues, finally forming and expanding the advocacy plan – from the bottom-up.

We are using this framework to engage various actors, going beyond the group of women working on a documentary, and inviting into conversation psychologists, psychiatrists, and social workers accompanying them, then other artists and cultural and civic actors, all the way to the highest representatives of policymaking and politics. They do not necessarily have to take part in media-making, but their participation and support will be crucial on other levels, namely in organization, distribution, advocacy, or political action.

7. (31.) *Multiscalar suggests multiple ways of working with people, processes, and projects. It moves toward multiple interfaces and iterations rather than a single output.*

The interactive documentary is not an entity of its own in this process. It accompanies the group and adds another layer to the broader context. Although it can function as an art object in itself, it is not a single output. Its purpose is better highlighted if it is considered to be part of this multiscalar structure. Building the documentary in parallel with the building of the association ensured that it was part of a broader sociopolitical project. The community work comes first: the street outreach and multidisciplinary intervention teams we are part of, operating in the form of peer support. The group is also directly political – publicly speaking on events

and commemorations, such as the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women or International Women's Day, participating in a global campaign, the *16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence*, meeting with policymakers, public authorities, and other stakeholders, such as mayor of Lisbon, ministers, representatives of charitable foundations, and even the president of Portugal. Finally, work around the interactive documentary led to the creation of a number of other works of artistic expression, such as a short video produced and presented at Lisbon Town Hall, celebrating the formal establishment of the association, an audio-visual installation presented at the Largo Residências cultural center, and a concept for a show on the local online radio station Pavão. The more exposure the project gets, and the more interaction there is around it, the more connections are established and new ideas can emerge.

Fig. 2a: & 2b: The live audiovisual installation PASSAGES was presented at the Largo Residências Cultural Centre, followed by a Q&A with the co-authors. This installation is intended to travel to different auditoriums and venues to promote the work of the association, the interactive documentary, and raise funds for social work.



Source: Maria Irene Aparício

8. (39.) *Multiscalar events and political struggles necessitate a theory and a practice of polyphony, the construction of temporary heterotopias through assemblages of difference, diversity, and interdisciplinarity.*

We have already established that our political struggle is complex and multiscalar and includes a variety of voices and concerns. What we need to produce is an open space for “complex dialogues that reject binaries through polyphonies and which creates mosaics of multiple lenses on issues (...) where technology meet places meet people”. (De Michiel & Zimmermann 2013). All of these voices bring their own experiences to the broad story. When the audience is included in the process, there is another spectrum of possible voices added to the whole. Throughout the concep-

tion, creation, and distribution of an interactive documentary, when polyphony is considered and upheld, there is no single narrative. Singular voices can turn into a “choral multiplicity” and the narrative becomes open, multi-layered, avoiding the all-knowing narrator and thus exposing “new ways to consider complex, interconnected social and political issues” (Zimmermann & De Michiel 2018). Interactivity, through its connection to the digital and to computers, itself describes “forms of responsiveness, exchange, and adaptation” (Nash 2022). This is important because it allows the project to grow and accompany the changes in narratives, issues resolved, and new necessities that arise, as well as offering insight into the different stages of life, individually and as a group that it portrays. This can create a space where different perspectives are represented and contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the issue while acknowledging the co-existence of this multiplicity of perspectives. Here, it is not so much about interactivity being better than participative and collaborative practices in linear documentary; rather, for the purposes of our project, interactivity allowed us to build upon collaboration and, for instance, not depend on community screenings to get in touch with the audience. The easily accessible QR code spread across the city, and the novelty of the form helped us in trying to reach and intrigue a public broader than just documentary enthusiasts. Furthermore, we can expand the work and, when necessary, alter some of the clips or further elaborate on issues raised, embracing the negotiation using all means necessary to be available, present, and open.

We made hundreds of stickers with a QR code leading to the documentary’s website and distributed them around the city. They can also be glued to the mobile phone, as Somae, one of the women from the group, did here. This allows her to simply take it out and show it to anyone interested in knowing more about the association, who can then see her testimony in depth, as well as that of the other protagonists.



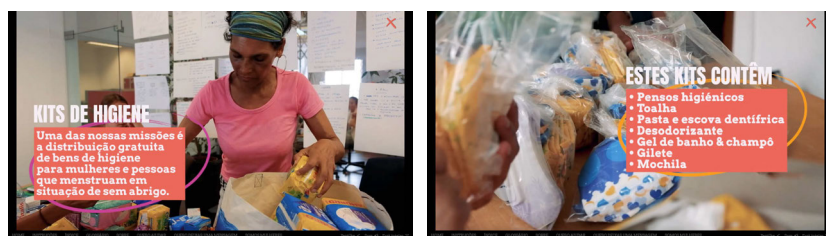
Source Fig. 3a & Fig. 3b: Marta Fiolic

Source Fig. 3c: João Dias Ferreira

9. (45.) *Granularity galvanizes encounters in the process of creation, generating unexpected and unpredictable conversations that reshape the process and make room for commitments, mistakes, and revisions.*

The concept of granularity encourages a meticulous examination of the elements involved in the creative process. By paying attention to smaller, often overlooked aspects, we can discover new angles, possibilities, and connections. This meticulousness can lead to richer and more innovative outcomes. For example, this was visible in our project when we dealt with a very specific problem – access to menstrual hygiene among the population experiencing homelessness. Most projects working directly with this population focused on food, clothes, and other material goods, but only when the voices of women who experienced homelessness themselves entered the debate did the issues around menstruation, menopause, and related matters of hygiene enter the debate, quickly rising to the top of the agenda. At the same time, there was an attempt to turn to a more sustainable approach, with menstrual cups for instance, only to encounter another set of problems – the inadequacy and/or structural unavailability of public bathrooms that could allow for proper and safe use and care. And this debate led to the co-creation of a manifesto and petition, which now have a spotlight in the interactive documentary.

Fig. 4a: & 4b: Screenshots from the part of documentary capturing the campaign around menstrual hygiene and call for awareness and action.



Source: Screenshots

The idea that granularity can result in unexpected and unpredictable conversations aligns with the notion that creative endeavors often thrive on serendipity. As we have already established that sensitive topics – and working on them through co-creation – requires time, we can now delve into the finer details. Work of this kind can lead to chance discoveries, new insights, or alternative perspectives on the topics of the documentary, which can also infuse fresh energy and ideas into the creative process. Granularity also allows for a more organic and flexible approach, where we can adapt and refine our conceptions and ideas as they progress.

10. (48.) *Documentary must come to terms with extraction as an ethical issue. We must recognize that documentary ethics and politics are more complex than simply giving voice to the voiceless, or speaking truth to power, or having a commitment to the dialogic.*

The history of the *committed documentary* is as long as the history of the medium itself. Although the expression of ethical concerns in documentary form is nothing new,⁷ there has never been a standardized written code or a set of ethical guidelines for the filmmakers and authors. Only recently, in the last couple of decades, with the popularization and subsequent commodification of the documentary genre, as well as a noticeable cultural shift, have ethical concerns and debates become more articulated and comprehensive in their examination of the practices in documentary filmmaking (see, e.g., Aufderheide, Jaszi and Chandra 2009; Aufderheide and Woods 2021; Nichols 2006, 2016; Sanders 2010, 2012). The interactive, via the digital, further complicates various ethical questions. For example, when the narrative is fragmented, how it is “patched” depends on who is tasked with doing the “patching”, and their point of view, or even on algorithms tasked with this function. How will this impact our thinking about representation, trust, truth, consequence, or accountability? Furthermore, the documentary is easily available online to almost everyone – to use and potentially abuse. How does this affect the notion of privacy, consent, or vulnerability? And then there are questions of power relationships, inclusion, and availability. We tend to assume that everybody has access to the internet and digital technology, but is it really so, and how can we ensure that the people involved and concerned have access to the film?

Finally, when we talk about documentary and its connection to advocacy and social change, the move should be made from looking at “the intentions of the filmmaker or historically constructed aesthetic choices” and towards its social function and influence, and whether and if so how it “facilitates material and cultural justice for the communities and issues represented on screen(s)” (Aguayo 2019). Here lies the foundation for another difficult conversation among co-creators, practitioners, artists and filmmakers, researchers, communities, and audiences.

Throughout the project, our collaboration and co-creation tackled these ethical issues by enabling active participation in decision making, giving the same amount of power to me, positioned as a “context-provider” (Daniel 2009), and the women

7 Early concerns with ethics in filmmaking that arose in the sixties out of concerns about portrayed people and communities and resulted in filmmakers sharing at least some parts of the production process can be traced to Jean Rouch, who showed his subjects the materials as a work in progress, or filmmakers like Colin Low and Fernand Dansereau from the National Film Board of Canada, who also shared the editing process. Then, in the eighties, two anthologies came to life, sharing the concern about documentary ethics: Gross, Katz and Ruby 1988 and Rosenthal 1988, these were followed by Nichols 1991.

building the association and creating a movement. For instance, we held several meetings and discussions to define the main topics to address in the documentary, in which we try to illustrate the dominant issues around women's homelessness and the complexity of the topic in an effort to mobilize the community. To achieve this goal and live up to its activist impetus, high levels of civic engagement, personal interaction, and social commitment are present and flow both ways. As mentioned before, since the beginning of our collaboration, I have been involved in the day-to-day functioning of the association. This meant helping with bureaucracy and organizational and technical issues, building a website and designing flyers. When there were other pressing issues to deal, this sometimes meant taking a break from recording and documentary-making. In this way, we can avoid extractivism and move away from the archaic idea of "giving voice to the voiceless", while the agency of the key participants, the core group of women who started the project, can have the time and space necessary to further grow and flourish.

Fig. 5: Three members of the group, presenting at the Awareness Raising Action for the Elimination of Sexual Violence against Women Experiencing Homelessness. The SOMOS MULHERES Association organized this action to commemorate the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women in 2022.



Source: Marta Fiolić

An open conclusion

Collaborative practices in documentary filmmaking allow for a more flexible and co-operative approach. By involving participants in the creative process, from conception and production to distribution, filmmakers can create more nuanced and authentic representations of complex issues. The advantage that the interactive documentary offers lies particularly in its openness and malleability, which make it suitable for continuous expansion. It can extend the discussion beyond the filmmaker-participant axis and invite the audience to participate, both online and offline.⁸ The interactive documentary can thus instigate dialog and help us get to and through difficult conversations.

In our interactive documentary, made through co-creation, our ambition was to break boundaries, principally in accessing the public; to address challenges by tackling stereotypes; and to find opportunities to raise support in dealing with women's homelessness. Some of the most important lessons learned while planning and executing this interactive documentary were to *foster open communication*, by establishing clear lines of communication from the very beginning, and encouraging all participants to share their ideas, perspectives, and concerns. This helps build trust and creates a collaborative environment that promotes innovation and creativity. Second, to *embrace diverse perspectives* because participants will always be different, from distinct backgrounds, and with different experiences. Embracing this diversity and actively seeking out a range of perspectives can help create a more nuanced and comprehensive narrative. Third, to *be open to, and encourage, experimentation*. Since interactivity in documentaries offers opportunities for experimentation, innovation, and adaptation to different participants, projects, and needs, we should use it. Furthermore, new formats, technologies, and storytelling techniques are constantly emerging, enabling the boundaries of documentary filmmaking to be pushed further, squashed, expanded, rebuilt, and rethought to be more inclusive, to contemplate and accompany changes in our cultures and societies. Fourth, when undertaking the co-creative interactive journey, we should *plan for flexibility*. Making an interactive documentary – and making it profoundly collaborative and co-creative

8 In the first public screening of SOMOS MULHERES, there was an elderly man in the audience, who was one of the first people to put his hand up when we opened the Q&A session. After admiring the courage of the protagonists and expressing his complete ignorance concerning their realities, he confessed that he will never look the same way at another person experiencing homelessness when he passes by them in the street. Furthermore, he took his mobile phone out and asked how he could see the film again and how to share it with other people. And right after the same session, we also received private testimony, through the form embedded in the documentary open for comments and questions, from someone who had clearly been in the audience, but was probably too shy to express their reaction there in front of the people.

– is always unpredictable. This became obvious very early in the process. There was no fixed timeline or participants. The only way to deal with the frustration this can cause is to make peace with it and learn to accommodate each other's needs and difficulties.⁹ Finally, it is vital to *address power dynamics*, which will inevitably emerge within co-creative projects, particularly if there are differences in resources and experiences. Being aware of these dynamics is the first step, but continuously working to create a level playing field where all participants feel valued and heard is of utmost importance.

"The marriage between interactive documentary and politics provides a new opportunity for creating and reformulating expressions of civic participation" (Cortés-Selva and Pérez-Escobar 2016). This is not a novel idea, particularly with reference to the possibility of the internet and digitalization bringing about more democratic and inclusive societies; yet so far, it has not taken us much further, and in fact seems sometimes to have led in the opposite direction. Nevertheless, we set out to test the "new opportunity" for the political and civic aspects of the SOMOS MULHERES association. Fortunately, we did this from the very beginning of the association, which allowed for the civic participation and the development of documentary production to evolve in parallel. Actively co-creating an interactive documentary required an enormous level of communication and coordination, of shared roles and responsibilities, but this effort has been rewarded during the process by honing a sense of shared ownership. And through this, the group could be empowered, the representation turned into negotiation, and the process of exchange has been effectively decentralized and made horizontal. Allowing for true polyphony of voices and perspectives, this process challenges power structures and dominant narratives and further facilitates collaborations and connections. Even structurally, the interactive documentary is all about layers and connections. Co-creating this way – thinking, creating, and designing collaboratively, through multiple layers and polyphony – we can aspire towards more refined, inclusive, and empathetic documentary production.

9 Here, we should acknowledge that the funding opportunities and grants usually don't take into consideration this unpredictability. And maybe, precisely because of that: "co-creation is everywhere, but hard to see". In the funding applications, at the same time, the impact value and community value are being highly appraised. We should collectively consider this discrepancy.

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