



Tomorrow

FREEDOM WOMEN COLLECTIVE

Impact Report
February 2025



Freedom Women Collective – group pic © Paul Goldthorp

Project team

Freedom Women Collective (FWC) are artists Arafa Gouda, Nisreen Barazi, Gaida Dirar, Shuke Halake Aeroro and Faisa Omar, supported by fellow artists, activists and collaborators including Ethar Dirar, Mayas Dirar, Malak, Biftu and Sabrina. Based out of Hull (UK) the international collective are women who have survived war, conflict and persecution.

Research team

Curator-filmmaker Prof Sarah Perks (Teesside University), photographer and visual researcher Dr Lee Karen Stow (independent).

Project partners

Freedom Festival Arts Trust, Hull
IWM's War and Conflict Subject Specialist Network (SSN)
Ferens Art Gallery, Hull Museums and Galleries

Funders

Tomorrow was supported by the 14-18 NOW Legacy Fund commission, Imperial War Museum and Teesside University's Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) Impact Acceleration Account (IAA), part of UK Research and Innovation (UKRI).

Impact report

Prof Sarah Perks (Teesside University), Ethar Dirar and Dr Lee Karen Stow (independent) with Dr Pippa Oldfield (Teesside University) and Dr Sally Blackburn-Daniels (Teesside University).
Designed by Clemence Dumoulin
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Cover image: 'Hope' © Mayas Dirar

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About *Tomorrow*

“... the commitment and the reality for the group that it brings... that’s what I learned from that. But the skills that the group work, building the project from zero to the end, [discussing] how is like we can make the event happen... that process of building up to the end, it was so amazing.”

(Gaida Dirar, FWC artist)

“I found it incredibly moving and there were tears... I found it empowering and humanising in the face of so much manipulative political and media vitriol. It is the most moving exhibition I have seen at the Ferens and a very beautiful celebration of human spirit, remembrance and hope for the future.”

(LE, visitor)

“As I prepare to step down from my role here at Freedom Festival when I think back on all the myriad of works we have commissioned and supported over the last 9 years of my tenure this commission, collaboration and final exhibition will be remembered as one of the proudest achievements.”

(MM, Freedom Festival)

Mayas designs our logo



Tomorrow is an enduring reference to hope, belief and self-determination. In every language, tomorrow can be a promise, a practical arrangement or a philosophical proposition. It is always a way of looking to the future, together.

The project explored artistic and curatorial practice-based methodologies for and responses to artists who are female survivors of displacement and conflict, including access, representation and narrative-building and sector change. This report, covering the period March 2023 to October 2024, outlines the profound changes experienced by the artists, new audience perspectives, and the need for sector change to increase access and inclusivity.

Tomorrow comprised:

- A series of workshops led by female artists who are female survivors of displacement and conflict
- The creation of five new artist commissions and a collective artist film
- A month-long public exhibition at Ferens Art Gallery in Hull as part of Freedom Festival, Hull
- A public programme of talks and events
- Events, articles and discussions to share learning with the GLAM sector (galleries, libraries, archives and museums) and policy makers
- Activities to support wellbeing and professional development of artists
- Evaluation including in-depth interviews with artists, audiences and partners

Tomorrow was led by Freedom Women Collective (FWC), a Hull-based international collective of women who have survived war, conflict and persecution. FWC artists include Arafa Gouda, Nisreen Barazi, Gaida Dirar, Shuke Halake Aeroro and Faisa Omar, supported by fellow artists, activists and collaborators including Ethar Dirar (Coordinator of Volunteers, Refugee Council), Mayas Dirar, Malak, Biftu and Sabrina.

The research team was led by curator-filmmaker Prof Sarah Perks (Teesside University), with Freedom Women Collective and independent photographer and visual researcher Dr Lee Karen Stow.

Project partners were Freedom Festival Arts Trust, Hull; IWM (Imperial War Museums) and IWM War and Conflict Subject Specialist Network; and Ferens Art Gallery at Hull Museums and Galleries. Funders included the 14-18 NOW Legacy Fund commission, Imperial War Museums, and Teesside University's Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) Impact Acceleration Account (IAA), part of UK Research and Innovation (UKRI).

The *Tomorrow* project has had a direct impact on the artists and the wider collective in terms of confidence, empowerment and new skills and knowledge, changed audience perceptions of work from refugee communities and led to changes in how the project partners will support this work in the future, particularly in terms of forming new strategies and spaces.

Key facts

- **9,991 people** saw the exhibition *Tomorrow* at the Ferens Art Gallery, Hull.
- **Five new artist commissions** by Arafa Hassan Gouda, Nisreen Barazi, Gaida Dirar, Shuke Halake Aeroro and Faisa Omar.
- **31-minute artist film** created by Freedom Women Collective with Lee Karen Stow, Sarah Perks and Jessica Eleanor Zschorn at Studio Blue Creative Hull.
- **Exhibition interpretation** including 9-minute documentary *About Tomorrow* and interpretation in Arabic, Somali and Oromo as well as English.
- **Extensive media feature** on BBC *News: In Pictures*.
- **70 attendees to panel discussion** with FWC, special guests from Ukraine and Afghanistan, chaired by Palestinian human rights activist Basma El Doukhi.
- **Four Meet the Artist Saturday events** with Freedom Women Collective at Ferens Art Gallery, Hull.
- **Twelve artist workshop development sessions** with FWC.
- **Emotional wellbeing session** ‘Collective Care’ for FWC with a trauma counsellor.
- **Sharing event and film screening** with FWC at MIMA (Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art, Teesside University).
- **‘Public Speaking/Persuasive Storytelling’ event** with Hull Truck Theatre.
- **Article published** on IWM and Freedom Festival blogs.
- **Tomorrow project presented at the United Nations in Geneva** by FWC member Gaida Dirar, refugee ambassador at the Annual Tripartite Consultation on resettlement.
- **Invitation for FWC to speak at Imperial War Museum London** as part of the Legacy Fund Symposium on Thursday 13 February 2025.

Timeline and activities

There were four main phases of activity:

1.

Artist workshops
and development
of artworks by FWC
(March to August 2023)

2.

Exhibition and
public programme
(September 2023)

3.

Impact interviews
(October 2023 to
March 2024)

4.

Post-exhibition
development activities
by FWC (December 2023
to October 2024)



Arafa painting artwork in her garden

Artist workshops and development of artworks

“I learned how to share my knowledge with people and learned from all the others [women in the Collective] about the different women’s stories. [...] When you share your story, you get advice from other people. It was good to do this as group. When we came together, we are happy, laughing and enjoying.”

(Faiza Omar, artist)

In the lead up to the exhibition, FWC held twelve workshops and meetings in each other’s homes and cafes. These sessions provide the opportunity to discuss themes, share artworks in progress, and provide mutual support and feedback.

FWC also had meetings with curatorial staff and technicians at the Ferens Art Gallery, prior to and during exhibition installation, and worked closely with the wider team at Freedom Festival throughout the project.

Exhibition

"I think those of us who were involved knew how special the artists were and how amazing the exhibition could be, but I think it still blew everyone away, what we ended up with."

(LB, Freedom Festival)



Gaida with Freedom Talk advertisement

Freedom Women Collective wove stories from Ethiopia, Libya, Somalia, Syria and Sudan to create an exhibition at Ferens Art Gallery, Hull, that used visual and textile art, sculpture, performance, poetry and photography. Created as the heart of the exhibition, the film *Tomorrow* explores ownership of representation and memory of displacement from the artists' personal archives.

The *Tomorrow* exhibition took place from Wed 30 Aug to Wed 27 Sep 2023 at The Studio, Ferens Art Gallery, Hull as part of [Freedom Festival 2023](#). The exhibition contained five new artists commissions and a collective artist film. The exhibition received 9,991 visitors.

Arafa Hassan Gouda

من السكون الي
الإلهام
(From Stillness
to Inspiration)
Acrylic on
calico fabric

Gaida Dirar

أزرق و أبيض
(The Blue
and White)
Cloth, digital
photograph on
printed jigsaw

Faisa Omar

Xafalad
(Celebration)
Cloth

Nisreen Barazi

عائلي مصدر قوتي
(My Family is
My Strength)
Artificial olive
tree, wood frames,
photographic prints

Shuke Halake Aeroro

Siinque Nageenyaaf
(Siinque for Peace)
Wood

Tomorrow

31 minutes
Digital video
Directed and produced
by Freedom Women
Collective with
Lee Karen Stow
and Sarah Perks

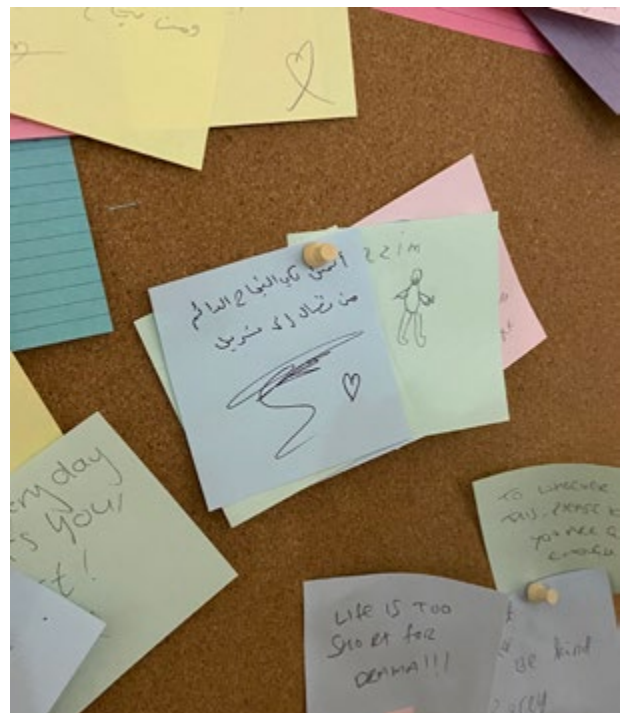


Top: Arafa stands beside her paintings
 Bottom left: Nisreen with visitors to the olive tree
 Bottom right: Faisa Omar with her artwork at Tomorrow

The exhibition interpretation included a 9-minute documentary film *About Tomorrow* made by FWC about the creation of the exhibition and shares their stories of upheaval and displacement. *About Tomorrow* can be viewed on [Freedom Festival's YouTube channel](#). Additional interpretation included text panels in Arabic, Somali and Oromo as well as English (see [Appendix A](#)).



Pieces of Me jigsaw being replaced



*Top: Tomorrow montage of sketches photos textures
Bottom: Comments board at exhibition*

Public programme

“I was very proud of the women’s ability to express these feelings and these journeys in these pieces of art. So, it was very powerful actually, very powerful to share, to act for change and to get people connected in, and aware, of another.”

(Basma El Doukhi, chair of panel discussion)

The collective held events as a part of the exhibition to share experiences of loss, resistance, resilience and survival.

These included an exhibition opening event at Ferens Art Gallery, Saturday, 2 September 2023, accompanied by a panel discussion *Talking About Tomorrow* before a seated audience of around 70. The panel was chaired by Palestinian human rights activist Basma El Doukhi, with special guests Basima Zamani who fled Afghanistan with her family and Mariia Moiseienko Ukrainian artist who sought sanctuary in Hull. The panel and audience explored notions of precarity and hope when faced with war, conflict and forced displacement.



Nisreen at Meet-the-Artist event with personal pieces from Syria and Egypt

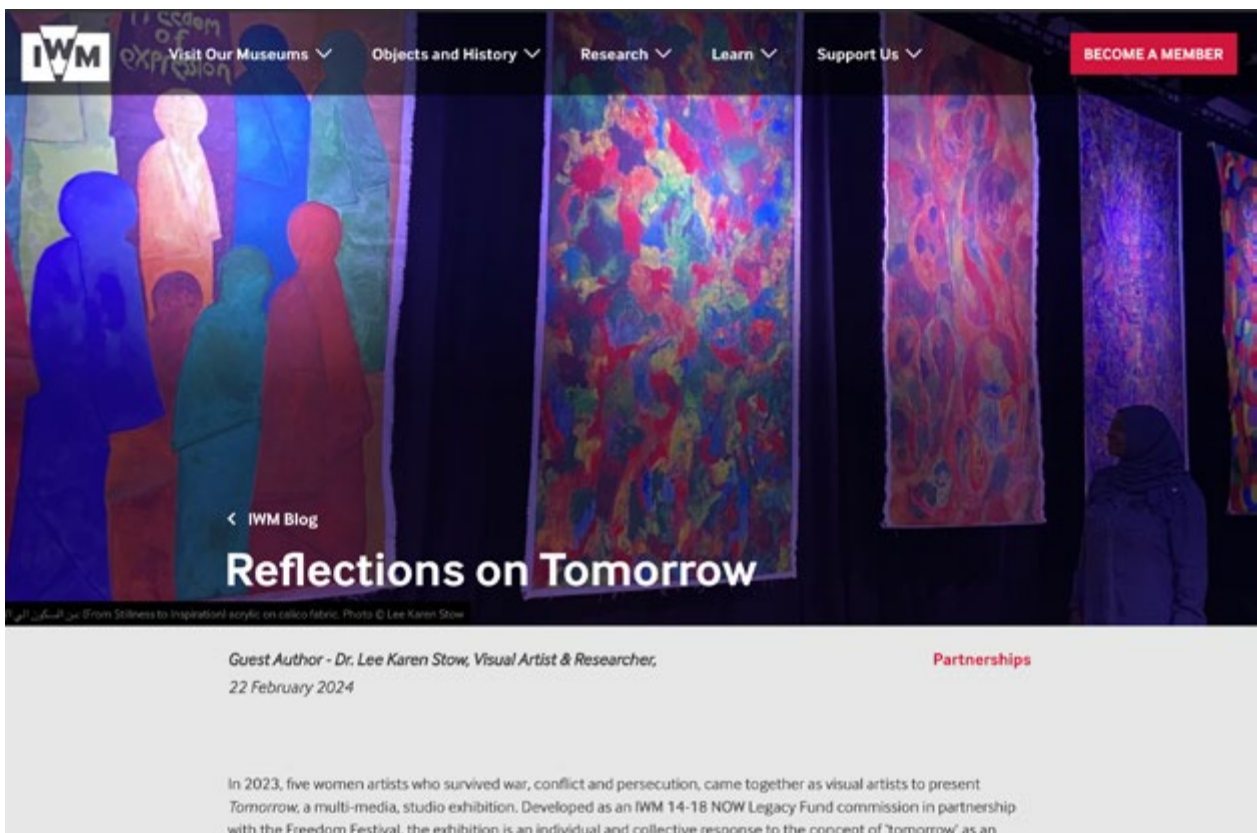
Freedom Women Collective hosted four *Meet the Artist* events on Saturdays throughout exhibition on 9, 16, 23 and 30 September. The artists were in the exhibition space to speak with members of the public and provide deeper background to the exhibition artworks, photo film and their individual stories of war, flight and refuge. These events were managed by a Freedom Festival volunteer refugee female artist from the wider Freedom Women Collective as an opportunity for paid work experience with the festival team.

Media coverage and PR



BBC In Pictures coverage

- Extensive feature [‘Refugee Women’s Personal Photos on Show’](#) for article in BBC In Pictures
- Feature on [Freedom Festival website](#)
- Article by Dr Lee Karen Stow, [‘Reflections on Tomorrow’](#), for Imperial War Museum Partnerships blog and Freedom
- Article by Dr Lee Karen Stow, [‘Reflections on Tomorrow’](#), for Freedom Festival blog



IWM blogpost

Impact interviews

A series of interviews and discussion sessions was conducted by Dr Lee Karen Stow and Ethar Dirar between November 2023 and March 2024 with the following groups:

- **Artists:** the five artists exhibiting and producing new work for the exhibition *Tomorrow* at Ferens Art Gallery as part of Freedom Festival
- **The wider collective:** FWC and those who are connected including friends and family, women survivors of conflicts including Ukraine and other contemporary conflicts, and those researching the topic
- **Audience:** follow up with people who attended the exhibition and events
- **Speakers:** from the public programme as part of the exhibition
- **Partners:** those formally involved in *Tomorrow* including Freedom Festival, Imperial War Museums and Ferens Art Gallery

Interviewees were given prompts and asked questions that explored the project's aims and research questions and sought to determine the impact on:

- Female artists from refugee, asylum seeker and displaced backgrounds
- Audience responses to work from female artists from refugee, asylum seeker and displaced backgrounds
- Cultural and creative sector change to improve access for women survivors of displacement

The section 'Impact' below includes excerpts from the interviews that evidence the changes brought about by *Tomorrow*. Please see [Appendix B: Excerpts from Interviews](#) for a more comprehensive selection of longer excerpts. Very minor grammatical edits have been made to the quotations for consistency. The full original transcripts are available on request.

Post-exhibition development activities



Thanks to follow-on funding from Teesside University's Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) Impact Acceleration Account (IAA), we were able to support activities to help develop Freedom Women Collective and share learning. These activities included:

- **Collective Care**, an emotional wellbeing session for Freedom Women Collective with a trauma councillor, Saturday 2 December 2023.
- **Public Speaking/Persuasive Storytelling session** to develop presentation skills, with Hull Truck Theatre on 20 January 2024.
- **Sharing trip to MIMA** (Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art, Teesside University), Saturday 14 September 2024, to celebrate achievements, visit MIMA and film screening of *Tomorrow*.



Top: Collective Care session with Sudan meal
Bottom: Hull Truck skills workshop

Additional outcomes

- FWC member Gaida Dirar, refugee ambassador and Volunteer Coordinator for Refugee Council, presented *Tomorrow* at the Annual Tripartite Consultation on Resettlement (ATCR) at the United Nations in Geneva, 26 June 2023. ATCR is the most important multilateral forum for UNHCR, States, private sector, academia, NGOs and refugees to discuss and advance resettlement issues of common interest.
- Ethar from FWC and Dr Lee Karen Stow were invited to speak at a panel discussion at Imperial War Museum London for their Legacy Fund Symposium on 13 February 2025.



Top: Gaida Dirar at Geneva conference

Bottom: Ethar Dirar and Lee Karen Stow at the Legacy Fund Symposium at the Imperial War Museum

Impact summary

Change in types of activities and opportunities to improve access to creative and cultural sector for women survivors of displacement

The camaraderie, trust and mutual support within FWC was crucial to the project's success. The artists and research team for *Tomorrow* encouraged informality and friendship, for instance by holding workshops and meetings in each other's homes over food and drink. Space and time were allowed to enable members of the collective to deepen understanding of each other and develop mutual respect and appreciation. This aspect cannot be underestimated in terms of producing a sense of safety and wellbeing, as well as providing a catalyst for creative exchange.

"I find the idea of meeting or talking over lunch, I find this revolutionary because it's the best cosy and safe space to be [...] even that the Freedom Festival joined this way [of working]... you tend to see with a lot of interviews or projects happen around a table in an office or in a formal way [...] It's not easy to find people you feel safe and comfortable around, that is what we have here"

(WHO - artists and collective, 21 October 2023 meeting discussion 3)

"I improve. We talk together. I see many things from another [culture] ... Somali, Congolese, Oromo, from many tribes, I get knowledge from Arabic [cultures, from] the other refugee women. When I am talking, am understanding."

(Shuke Halake Aeroro, FWC artist)

"...it's not just the learning ...[it's] the empathy you felt for the other Collective members. We don't work as work, we work as a family, and that's what makes it more strong [...] we need to empower each other instead of putting down each other, so we need to give each other the same space, the same value."

(Gaida Dirar, artist)

"...looking at different views from different women... seeing everyone's individual story, each one give me impact to myself and the things I most learned is working [together] can make the work greater, the project, it make it bigger."

(Mayas Dirar, collective)



Mid-project treats

Project partners expanded their understanding of the needs of women survivors of displacement, and how to remove barriers that might prevent them accessing opportunities in the creative sector:

“We learnt how to better hold the space for this kind of collaboration, how to be more flexible with the planning timeframes and needs of the artists, how to be more flexible with our working patterns to accommodate meetings and planning.”
(MM, Freedom Festival)

“...access is bigger than just level access for wheelchair users isn’t it, it’s what needs to be put in place for you to participate and show up as you are, authentically, and not be barred from taking part or missing out on opportunities.”
(LB, Freedom Festival)

Change in lens-based professional development for women survivors of displacement in the cultural and creative sector

For the FWC artists and the wider collective, the process has been transformative in terms of developing confidence and building professional skills. They have identified ambitions to develop creative careers in the GLAM sector, not just as artists but as arts professionals.

It should also be noted that the artistic practices of collective expanded through the project, going beyond lens-based practices and embrace other artistic fields such as performance and textile art.

“[I want] to attend art school. To be more connected and involved with organisations and art projects aimed at artists development [...] It has improved my self-confidence greatly and confirmed to me that what seems impossible could be a reality.”

(Arafa Gouda, artist)

“I would like to learn more about curating and being an artist agent. I would like to spend more time and develop the Mandala project further.”

(Ethar Dirar, FWC)

“I improve my knowledge from different women, from different countries, from me I improve in the future... improve presentation skills, ya!... and speaking about Siinque, my traditional clothes ...I talk about this and improve.”

(Shuke Halake Aeroro, FWC artist)

“I never talked [at school] even though I did have opinions, but I was too scared... [the women in FWC] really inspired me to start speaking up. Now when I’m in college and I hear students talk, I want to share my opinion.

(Biftu, FWC)

“It was the first time I hold the camera [an SLR] in my hands and it was very nice. It was different feeling [to using the camera phone]. Like it’s more important when I hold it in my hand.... I’d like to join for any [future] project because it gives me something to learn.”

(Malak, collective)

“The skills I would like to learn is to speak more in public areas, like conference... this workshop [on presentation skills at Hull Truck Theatre] it helped us a lot and give us a lot of ideas about how to speak in public and how to be confident”

(Mayas Dirar, FWC collective)

Changes in representation and narrative building for audiences led by and with displaced communities

For the artists and the wider collective, *Tomorrow* provided an opportunity to self-represent and to challenge negative perceptions of refugees and resettled people in the UK. This was often an affirming experience that built pride and self-confidence.

“... I don’t feel I’m represented anywhere in the media. I feel like I live in the shadow of the world... I need to be able to see me... for who I am and my truth. Yeah, I’m Sudanese... [and] I grew up in Libya. I feel now from here, from the UK I’m belonging here ... it’s important for people to see that so they don’t see me as a stranger. I’m part of the community now and I am one of the UK citizens.”

(Gaida Dirar, FWC artist)

For exhibition visitors and audience members at the Ferens Art Gallery, *Tomorrow* was illuminating and surprising. The artworks and events challenged their assumptions and complicated the simple representations of refugees in the media. Many commented on the positivity and vibrancy of FWC.

“...using family photographs to explore the life experiences of refugee women helped me to see the normal aspects of their lives... It helped me to see past the label of 'refugee' to attach words such as 'mother', 'carer', 'loving', and 'resilient' to this woman.”

(CW, audience)

“... it was so positive, the atmosphere... I was taken aback... in the world today, with the news and everything, we focus on the bad, but while we’re focusing on the bad we’re not seeing the good and the value of culture and what’s there...”

(KO, audience)

“I was really very inspired by the exhibition and how art can be a powerful tool to challenge the status quo, the narrative, despair, the painful journeys and can bring all of these into an artistic piece where all the feelings that sometimes words can fail us to express, art and film can really express.”

(Basma El Doukhi, chair of panel discussion)

“For me it has confirmed that there are deep layers to all people... It brings the real human cost of leaving your home and life behind, the hardships but also finding hope in the journey to a new country, taking hold of moments of joy and power.”

(SP, audience)

“The exhibition transformed forced migrants into human beings like any of us and it stopped the belief of criminalising forced migrants as it is promoted on other media platforms.... This has been a magnificent experience and events like this change the world, keep going!”

(YFC, audience)

Project partners had not anticipated the complexity of emotions evoked by artworks in *Tomorrow* exhibition, and in particular the positive aspects:

“[One] thing that was maybe unexpected, but only unexpected right at the start... [was] that there would be a lot of joy involved in the exhibition... there were elements of it that were very sad, very reflective, but... it was balanced with joy, and pride around survival and resilience.”

(LB, Freedom Festival)

Change in GLAM’s sector’s approach (particularly curators and learning teams) in their work with for women survivors of displacement in the cultural and creative sector

Project partners commented on the value of a refugee artist-led approach, in which FWC was central to leading the development of the artworks and the exhibitions from the outset.

“I think the main motivation [for Freedom Festival] to be involved was around doing an exhibition with artists who are usually under-represented in the sector and having an exhibition which was very much voiced, and created, and every element decided by the artists who themselves have the lived experience of displacement...”

(LB, Freedom Festival)

“It was invaluable for us to learn how to successfully structure and realise co-creation projects, and to fully democratise the process of creating new artistic responses by empowering the Freedom Women’s Collective to tell their own stories.”

(CP, Imperial War Museum)

However, others felt that FWC was still dependent upon the support of the wider research team and partner organisations, and that this aspect should be developed in future:

“I felt - and I might be wrong but this is a good point to reflect on... [the direction] is always coming from you, Lee, or the people who are funding, or from the Freedom Festival. I understand the barriers to women, about language, about participation... Are the women able to lead a big event for a big festival without, for example, the contribution, the guidance from Lee or, like, from other

people? For now, I don’t believe that this is the case, with all my respect, you are doing a great job and I’m very inspired by you... but the idea is here more about the leadership, the real leadership and agency of the women, to take the lead in the Collective... So, I feel that there is a missing gap.”

(Basma El Doukhi, chair of panel discussion)

Partners valued the support from the research team, which helped mitigate the perceived risks working with an emerging artist collective and helped curators and producers learn and gain confidence:

“... there were definitely moments, where, how is this all going to come together as a coherent piece... how do you work with a collective? [...] I had to hold my nerve a little bit and trust the process... as a producer it’s always tricky having unknowns and when you’re in that process of creation... I think Sarah [Perks] was brilliant in that aspect... really holding that process and I think we all felt a lot of confidence and support in her.”

(LB, Freedom Festival)

Change in policy for working with displaced communities for senior management of GLAM sector and key sector agencies

Project partners expressed appetite for further work with refugee artist-led, co-produced projects.

“In providing opportunities to under-represented artists to express their responses to or explore a particular theme, this partnerships model was successful. The project enabled the artists to stretch existing skills, develop new skills and share their practice with new audiences in an atmosphere of mutual learning. We would like to develop and expand this model in future projects.”

(RD, Imperial War Museum)

“Our commitment to collaboration with the Freedom Festival remains though further discussions are needed as to how our partnership can develop, there is potential to offer an annual slot for a co-production project in one of the main galleries at the Ferens for Freedom Festival from 2025.”

(SH, Ferens Art Gallery)

“...I would look at working with collectives again in the future, I think that’s really rewarding, having those multiple points of view is a really valuable way of working [...] we should be listening to those voices and seeing their perspective on things rather than putting a different gaze on it or forcing our perspective onto someone else’s experience”.

(LB, Freedom Festival)

Ambitions for future work

1. New project: *Line Time* artist commissions

As a direct development of *Tomorrow*, Freedom Women Collective artists Arafa Gouda, Ethar Dirar and Mayas Dirar are currently working on the project *Line Time* with Dr Pippa Oldfield (Teesside University), and Dr Lee Karen Stow. The project will explore factory work undertaken by resettled refugees, and its potential for creativity and agency. Through commissions of new artworks and a participatory creative workshop, *Line Time* aims to find innovative ways for refugee artists and factory workers to create and engage in cultural opportunities, and to be central to their own self-representation.

Line Time is funded by Teesside University's Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) Impact Acceleration Account (IAA), part of UK Research and Innovation (UKRI). Project supporters include IWM (Imperial War Museums), The Sir James Reckitt Trust and the Reckitt Archive, which has material relating to one of Hull's longest established manufacturers and famed for the production of domestic cleaning products such as Brasso.

2. Sharing learning with GLAM sector

In addition to presenting at the Imperial War Museum symposium in February 2025, FWC and the researchers will continue to seek out and respond to dissemination and sharing responsibilities.

3. Increased participation in GLAM sector of FWC and other women with experiences of displacement and conflict

Currently, many members of FWC are under-employed, for example working on zero-hour contracts in factories. *Tomorrow* has helped members of FWC develop confidence and build professional skills that can support them to develop creative careers in the GLAM sector, not just as artists but as arts professionals. There is an exciting opportunity to further support Freedom Women Collective to access training, gain experience, and develop networks to help them achieve these ambitions. We hope to develop projects and funding applications that could support this kind of intervention in the sector, in which women with experiences of displacement and conflict, particularly from the 'Global South', are underrepresented.

4. Development of research proposal and funding application to support a major project

In addition to exploring artistic and cultural funding for future projects, the team at Teesside University will also investigate options for new and further longer-term practical research funding from UKRI (UK Research and Innovation) and opportunities from other formal academic research bodies.

Afterword

by Prof. Sarah Perks

Even reports like this, that are trying to achieve sector change, can add to the problem of instrumentalisation of the diversification of audiences, artists and participation through focusing on servicing and promoting one characteristic, and building formulas that should not be cut and pasted to other places. The same can be said of academia that follows rigid structures for research and formulas of language, impact and productivity. Certainly, the collective practice-based approach is far from being seen as equal to the sole researcher monograph, though it is slowly changing. The research team highlight the strategies and methodologies need to be used to form unique approaches, and this work is to highlight both the ways to achieve this, and where structures need to be more accessible, flexible and tailored.

“... now we[are] seeing thousands of people fleeing Sudan just because they cannot stay in the country, and the country is completely corrupted, and the stories about women and children and elderlies, and it’s just horrific. And seeing this it [makes me] reflect a lot and I would like to speak about it, I would like to, as a Sudanese refugee girl I would like to speak about it [...] I would like to be this is my next project.”
(Mayas Dirar, FWC collective)

It’s important to end with a reminder why this work takes place in the first place, because of horrific events and conflicts around the world, and for us to embrace any small part we can play within the wider geo-political landscape without feeling hopeless. We should also acknowledge how we would want a welcome to creative and cultural experiences to meaningfully extend to anyone and their needs, and how ensuring these welcomes starts from how we as individuals engage and empathise with other people.



Project meeting at Freedom HQ Hull

Research team profiles

Freedom Women Collective

Freedom Women Collective are artists Arafa Gouda, Nisreen Barazi, Gaida Dirar, Shuke Halake Aeroro and Faisa Omar, supported by fellow artists, activists and collaborators including Ethar Dirar, Mayas Dirar, Malak, Biftu and Sabrina. Based out of Hull (UK) the international collective are women who survived war, conflict and persecution, working with photographer and visual researcher Dr Lee Karen Stow and curator Prof Sarah Perks.

<https://freedomwomenscollective.com>

Prof Sarah Perks Teesside University

Perks uses relational curatorial strategies to build engagement and empathy for societal challenges, designing collaborative and future visioning projects for inclusive creative social action. These new curatorial methodologies combine creative practices (contemporary art, performance, creative writing and filmmaking) with science- or humanities- based explorations (ecopsychology, quantum physics, artificial intelligence, history and heritage) to investigate equitable and non-hierarchical partnerships. Perks previously worked as Artistic Director at Cornerhouse and HOME in Manchester as a joint appointment with Manchester Metropolitan University, where her projects including Ceremony with artist Phil Collins, a major IWM 14-18NOW Legacy Commission. She also specialises in lens-based work and artist film, exploring how process, context and aesthetic affect representation and notions of desire for relational change.

Dr Lee Karen Stow

Independent researcher and artist

Tomorrow grew from long-term collaborative research between Stow and a number of women resettled to Hull & East Yorkshire as refugees. This became a PhD practise-based research study calling for the recognition of refugee women as custodians of memory, identity and knowledge. Research identified how the visual heritage the refugee women carried with her, could be activated by her as a significant contribution to an understanding of how war and forced displacement affects women. Research called for more spaces and platforms to enable and support her to resist invisibility through visual self-representation. By evolving visual research methods, women and researcher engaged long-term in multi-linear conversations. Existing photographic images were approached as sites of knowledge to illuminate memories, multiple identities and knowledge from before, during and after displacement. As witness and observer, not bystander, she shows that becoming a refugee is a moment in her life, not her whole life. These alternative perspectives challenge dominant visual representations and complicate the notion of what a refugee woman looks like.

Further information

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Tomorrow film

Please email us for a link to view the artist film.

IWM 14-18 NOW Legacy Fund

<https://www.iwm.org.uk/partnerships/subject-specialist-network/14-18-now-legacy-fund>

BBC coverage of *Tomorrow*

Refugee women's personal photos on show, 01 September 2023

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/in-pictures-66594398>

IWM Blog

Reflections on Tomorrow, 22 February 2024

<https://www.iwm.org.uk/blog/partnerships/2024/02/reflections-on-tomorrow>

Freedom Festival

Link to original project page:

<https://www.freedomfestival.co.uk/what-we-do/commissions/freedom-women-collective-tomorrow/>

Appendix A: Artworks

Arafa Gouda

From Stillness to Inspiration

acrylic on calico fabric

We go willingly and unwillingly through life, never thinking war will come. Yet war is with us since the beginning of creation. These paintings shed light on some of the harsh experiences in my life. They show what I went through in the war, how it affected me emotionally and psychologically. How I lost my identity and disengaged from life. War cannot erase the memories that we carry within us, and it cannot paint bright colours around us. But after the war burned us with its harsh flames, sunlight shone into our dark places, and we went out in peace. We faced life with a different view and a richer experience. We wanted to give to life and engage with it again. We wanted to make up for what had passed, to challenge the difficulties that we faced, to break the stillness that shackled our feelings. These paintings express my memories: the Sahara Desert, my mixed feelings of fear, amazement, death, and emptiness. The painting of motherhood is safety, stability, and the love that we missed. My colour palettes are a reflection of reality and my imagination, and I paint the pride of women. By God's willing, I will continue to live. To draw, create and put my mark on this life, despite its difficulties and restrictions. Because I know tomorrow is better.

من السكون الي الإلهام:

لتتوافق مع وصف عملك الفني: المواد المستخدمة

لا بد من خوض التجارب في هذه الحياة، بإرادتنا أو دونها. دون ان نضع الحرب في حساباتنا مع انها تصطحبنا منذ بدء الخليقة. هذه اللوحات تلقي الضوء علي بعض التجارب من حياتي و التجارب النفسية التي مررت بها في حرب افتقاد الهوية و عدم التفاعل مع الحياة. لكنها لم تستطيع ان تنتزع الذكريات التي نحملها في دواخلنا و لم تستطيع ان ترسم الوان زاهية من حولنا. و لكن بعد ما صهرتنا الحرب بلهبها القاسي اشرقت الشمس في دواخلنا المظلمة و خرجنا بسلام نواجه الحياة بنظرة مختلفة و تجربة ثرة دفعتنا الي العطاء و التفاعل مع الحياة بقوة و كانها تريد ان نعوض ما فات و وتحدي الصعاب التي واجهتنا و نحرك السكون الذي كبل احاسيسنا و مشاعرنا. و هذه اللوحات تعبر عن ذكرياتي: لوحة الصحراء اختلطت فيها مشاعر الخوف، الدهشة، الموت، و الفراغ. لوحة الامومة، الأمان، الاستقرار، و الحب الذي افتقدناه لوحات الألوان خليط من الاحاسيس و انعكاس الواقع و الخيال. لوحة النساء تعبر عن شموخ المرأة. بأذن الله مستمرة في الرسم و الابداع و ووضعت بصمتي في هذه الحياة دون ان تحاصرني المصاعب و تكبلني القيود. و بكره احلي.

Faisa Omar

Celebration

cloth

Layers of embroidered satin and sheer fabric make up the Dirac, the long, traditional dress worn by Somali women to celebrate a wedding, a special occasion, a party. Earthy green colours represent many lands and flowers. A shimmering blue is like the blue ocean of Mogadishu, where waves touched the windows of Faisa's childhood home on the edge of the beach. "My favourite colour is the blue Dirac, and when dancing, always dancing, I feel happy."

Xafalad

maro

Lakabyo ka samaysan Satin iyo maro cad ayaa ka samaysan Diraac, oo ah dhar-dhareed, dharka hiddaha iyo dhaqanka ee ay xidhaan haweenka Soomaaliyeed si ay ugu damaashaadaan arooska, munaasabad gaar ah, xaflad. Halkan, midabada cagaaran ee ciidda leh waxay u taagan yihiin dhulal iyo ubaxyo badan. Buluug dhalaalaya wuxuu la mid yahay badweynta buluugga ah ee Muqdisho, halkaas oo mawjado ay taabteen daaqaadaha guriga Faa'isa ee carruurnimada oo ku yaal cidhifka xeebta. "Midabka aan jeclahay waa Diraac buluuga ah, marka qoob-ka-ciyaarka, had iyo jeer qoob-ka-ciyaarka, waxaan dareemayaa farxad."

Gaida Dirar

The Blue and White

Cloth, digital photograph on printed jigsaw

A jigsaw puzzle of my younger self, from a photo taken by my mom in 2010. Each piece carried a dream and hope for a bright and prosperous future. Each piece carried a memory, a story, an imprint of times, and a scent of places. With unlimited ambition, I longed for a brilliant future. Flowing around me are Sudanese toubes. The blue toub represents the waves of the Nile River in Sudan where I was born, flowing side by side with the white toub of peace. The white toub represents the pioneering freedom, strength, independence and progress of the women of my country.

أزرق و أبيض

اماروناب يل ع ةي مقر ةروص ، شامق

بانوراما صورة اللغز لنفسى الأصغر سنا. صورة ألتقطتها أمي في 2010 حملت كل قطعة حلما وأمل بمستقبل مشرق مزدهر و حملت ذكرى وقصة و بصمة للأزمنة و عبق للأمكنة. تشوقت لمستقبل باهر و حملت طموحات لا محدودة. و تتهادى حولي التياب السودانية. التوب الأزرق يمثل أمواج نهر النيل في السودان حيث ولدت منسياً جنباً إلى جنب مع توب السلام الأبيض ممثلاً الحرية الريادية و القوة و الإستقلالية و التقدمية لنساء بلادي

Nisreen Barazi

My Family is My Strength

artificial olive tree, wood frames,
photographic prints

When I got married, I didn't know I had this power. My journey began after I had my first child, Abudi, who has special needs. From here I felt that I would start my life over, or be strong and hold on to my child, or surrender to the reality of the war. The worst thing that happened to me is that I witnessed this unjust war that made me lose the most precious person in my life: my father, who was killed by an RPG (rocket-propelled grenade). One of the shells that I saw falling everywhere in my country killed my father. Everywhere the lives of children, the elderly and women are being lost. It was my husband who really supported me. I hope you and your family are always safe. I hope to meet the sisters I haven't seen in 12 years.

عائلتي مصدر قوتي

شجرة زيتون صناعية ، إطارات ، مطبوعات
فوتوغرافية.

عندما تزوجت ، لم أكن أعرف أنني أمتلك هذه القوة. بدأت رحلتي بعد أن أنجبت طفلي الأول ، وكان ديسيبيل. من هنا شعرت أنني سأبدأ حياتي من جديد ، أو أن أكون قوياً وأتمسك بطفلي ، أو أستسلم للواقع الذي اكتمل مع الحرب. أسوأ ما حدث لي هو أنني شاهدت هذه الحرب الظالمة التي جعلتني أفقد أغلى شخص في حياتي ، والدي ، الذي استشهد بقذيفة آر بي جي. إحدى القذائف التي رأيته تتساقط في كل مكان في بلدي قتلت والدي. في كل مكان تزهق أرواح الأطفال وكبار السن والنساء. كان زوجي هو الذي دعمني حقاً ولم يحاول كسري. أمل أن أكون وعائلتك بأمان دائماً. أتمنى أن ألتقي مع أخواتي الذين لم أراهم منذ 12 عاماً

Shuke Halake Aeroro

Siinque for Peace

wood

Siinque (sinqee) is a revered peace stick, part of Gada (Gadaa), an ancient system of governance of Ethiopia's Oromo people. A symbol of the Oromo woman's power in the Oromo society, it used peacefully to protect and defend the married woman against male oppression, harassment, and verbal and physical abuse. Cut from the tree by her father, it is given to the woman by her mother on her wedding day. When a woman feels threatens, she clutches her peace stick and calls for help from the other women in the village who, clutching their own peace sticks, form a protective circle around her. Elders gather to pass judgement on the perpetrator and try to resolve the issue. Shuke left behind her siinque when she ran, fleeing conflict in Ethiopia. When she returned to visit to her village to visit after 23 years absence, she brought back this siinque, as a symbol of her rights.

Siinque Nageenyaaf

muka

que (sinqee) ulee nagaa kabajamaa, qaama Gadaa (Gadaa), sirna bulchiinsa ummata Oromoo Itoophiyaa durii ti. Mallattoo aangoo dubartii Oromoo hawaasa Oromoo keessatti, dubartii heerumte cunqursaa dhiiraa, rakkina, fi miidhaa afaaniifi qaamaa irraa eeguu fi ittisuuf karaa nagaa itti fayyadamaa ture. Abbaan ishee muka irraa murame, guyyaa cidhaa ishee haadha isheetiin dubartiif kenniti. Dubartiin tokko yeroo balaan itti dhaga'amu ulee nagaa ishee qabattee dubartoota ganda sana keessa jiran kanneen biroo ulee nagaa ofii qabatani naannoo ishee geengoo eegumsaa uumuun gargaarsa gaafatti. Jaarsoliin walitti qabamuun nama yakka raawwate irratti murtii dabarsuudhaan dhimmicha furuuf yaalu. Shukeen yeroo fiigdu siinque ishee dhiistee, waldhabdee Itoophiyaa keessaa baqatte. Waggaa 23 booda ganda ishee daawwachuuf daawwachuuf yeroo deebitu siinque kana, akka mallattoo mirga isheetti deebifte.

Appendix B:

Excerpts from interviews

Access to culture

“For an audience to witness achievement and for members of the Sudanese community to attend at the Ferens Art Gallery for the first time.”
(AG, artist)

“We became part of Hull culture, the movement that’s going on, and that built our confidence in ourselves again”
(21 Oct 2023 meeting discussion 2 – talking whilst shooting the About Tomorrow documentary)

“... there’s no one type of artist or refugee or woman... we all have these different intersectionalities and whatever those needs are whether it’s childcare, disabled access, timing... access is bigger than just level access for wheelchair users isn’t it, it’s what needs to be put in place for you to participate and show up as you are, authentically, and not be barred from taking part or missing out on opportunities.”
(LB, Freedom Festival)

Benefits to FWC and expanding skills, opportunities and ambitions

It has improved my self-confidence greatly and confirmed to me that what seems impossible could be a reality.”
(AG, artist)

Before this whole project when speaking out loud ... like in secondary school, in history classes and other classes, I never contributed. I never talked even though I did have opinions, but I was too scared. But in the group, and hearing women sharing their feelings and opinions ... and the women asked me my opinion and wanted to hear me speak. They really inspired me to start speaking up. Now when I’m in college and I hear students talk, I want to share my opinion.
(B, collective)

“[I want] to attend art school. To be more connected and involved with organisations and art projects aimed at artists development. To continue to participate with other artists and creatives. To continue to exhibit with the Freedom Women Collective. To write a book about my art. And to continue making screen prints.”
(AG, artist)

“I would like to learn more about curating and being an artist agent. I would like to spend more time and develop the Mandala project further.”
(ED, collective)

"I've learnt many things from [the other] artists, such as how to make design artwork for the presentation and the way we should present the project."

(S, collective)

"It was the first time I hold the camera [an SLR] in my hands and it was very nice. It was different feeling [to using the camera phone]. Like it's more important when I hold it in my hand.... I'd like to join for any [future] project because it gives me something to learn. Not just taking photo but movies. When you film films and make films. And nature, I like to take photos a lot, the sky and sea."

(M, collective)

"The skills I would like to learn is to speak more in public areas, like conference... I think this is most important because each one now are feel like a little bit responsible to speak and to work more... our first experience was a workshop in Hull theatre, so this workshop it helped us a lot and give us a lot of ideas about how to speak in public and how to be confident to speak in public areas."

(MD, collective)

"I learned that you take a picture and later you describe to people what it means. Also, I learned about time management and the meetings."

(FO, artist)

"I want to work with disabled children and help their mothers and families. I want to learn sign language."

(NB, artist)

"I learned the power from Arafa [from FWC collective] and saw Arafa as a strong woman. Every time when I look at Arafa it is a great feeling. And Arafa always said when she saw me said you should be strong, be brave and don't give up."

(NB, artist)

"In the future? ... I improve, I am learning many things. I did many things. I improve my knowledge from different women, from different countries, from me I improve in the future... improve presentation skills, ya!... and speaking about Siinque, my traditional clothes ...I talk about this and improve."

(SHA, artist)

Self-representation and challenging stereotypes

"For an audience to witness achievement and for members of the Sudanese community to attend at the Ferens Art Gallery for the first time"

(AG, artist)

"And when the time of the exhibition came and to see these painting hang there, it was very, very beautiful. And it was so emotional ... how my mum wants to show and send a message, and let the people recognise what these women were trying to say"

(MD, collective)

“Every time I don’t feel I’m represented anywhere in the media. I feel like I live in the shadow of the world. I feel like I’m going like ... I need to be able to see me to .. for who I am and my truth. Yeah, I’m Sudanese, part of my in Libya because I grew up in Libya. I feel now from here, from the UK I’m belonging here, and I don’t even think to go back and live in Libya. I need ... I would like to visit ... but ... in Sudan and Libya, but I feel this is my life. So, it’s important for people to see that so they don’t see me as a stranger. I’m part of the community now and I am one of the UK citizens.”

(GD, artist)

“It added colour and vibrancy in what can sometimes be clouded by concern and negative wider coverage.”

(FB, audience)

“The body of work made me incredible aware of stigma surrounding refugees and how little women’s experience was represented. It’s really shocking when you realise just how far the media goes to destroy the people that have already experienced so much. I had a general understanding of camps, war but never visuals – this exhibition gave me an honest and unfiltered into that insight. It wasn’t polished or twisted to create a bias – it simply was the experience, and I think this is very important these days.”

(JEZ, film editor)

“I am, and continue to be, very interested to hear something of the person stories of women - how they experience their world - how this ‘experience’ differs depending on culture, status, context, race and geography. I think for women there are also issues of gender bias and inequality. The ‘Tomorrow’ presentation reminded me that refugees are thousands of individuals, are people with varied talents and aspirations and that it takes a special courage to move beyond the ‘refugee’ identity.”

(ML, audience)

“... in the end we present ourselves, like, truly who we are. So, that process of building up to the end, it was so amazing I can say.”

(GD, artist)

“It has made me consider the role of refugee women as guardians of heritage and community memory, which I had not done before. But on a more basic level, using family photographs to explore the life experiences of refugee women helped me to see the normal aspects of their lives, to see them as women with family lives apart from the label of ‘refugee’, and to observe small connections and similarities to my own life. I was particularly struck by the story of the woman with the son who required medical care as I’ve known a number of families who have struggled to get treatment for children with disabilities. It helped me to see past the label of ‘refugee’ to attach words such as ‘mother’, ‘carer’, ‘loving’, and ‘resilient’ to this woman.”

(CW, audience)

“... it was so positive, the atmosphere... I was taken aback... It’s a testament to all of us that we need to take the time to get to know people... in what’s going on in the world today, with the news and everything, we focus on the bad, but while we’re focusing on the bad we’re not seeing the good and the value of culture and what’s there...”

(KO, audience)

“For me it has confirmed that there are deep layers to all people. We can only ever know a fraction of that which people are willing to share but we need to be mindful that there’s much, much more – don’t make assumptions, challenge your prejudices and perceived knowledge.... It brings the real human cost of leaving your home and life behind, the hardships but also finding hope in the journey to a new country, taking hold of moments of joy and power.”

(SP, audience)

"I was looking for a wellbeing activity during my workplace break and I found online this activity as a perfect match.... It provided a clear insight into their personal journey, and it was tangible the feelings involved during these challenging times. The exhibition transformed forced migrants into human beings like any of us and it stopped the belief of criminalising forced migrants as it is promoted on other media platforms.... This has been a magnificent experience and events like this change the world, keep going!"
(YFC, audience)

"... we never have that experience directly from people who have experienced it and that actually we should be listening to those voices and seeing their perspective on things rather than putting a different gaze on it or forcing our perspective onto someone else's experience."
(LB, Freedom Festival)

Experience of workshops and participating in project

"...through working with the women group and being part of the women group, I was in the process of learning, looking at different views from different women, and seeing the stories, each one, and at some point I worked with Nisreen ... seeing everyone's individual story, each one give me impact to myself and the things I most learned is working [together] can make the work greater, the project, it make it bigger."
(MD, collective)

"I learned to hear from others... it's not just the learning ... the empathy you felt for the other Collective members. And even for you [Lee Karen Stow] when you worked that group work so supportive and we don't work as work, we work as a family, and that's what makes it more strong. The gain of the commitment and the reality for the group that it brings... that's what I learned from that. But the skills that the group work, building the project from zero to the end, [discussing] how is like we can make the event happen... So, that process of building up to the end, it was so amazing I can say."
(GD, artist)

"I thought this would be really serious and when I came people listened but also people [were enjoying] laughing. I was surprised and it was a really different thing."
(BZ, speaker)

"I was surprised and grateful for all the learning I got from other artists in this project. Because despite us knowing each other for years we got to see different sides of each other for the first time."
(ED, collective)

"I learned how to share my knowledge with people and learned from all the others [women in the Collective] about the different women's stories. [...] When you share your story, you get advice from other people. It was good to do this as group. When we came together, we are happy, laughing and enjoying."
(FO, artist)

“To know where to speak and when to stop speaking, or don’t comment so you know where your colleague on the table... to speak more or maybe just to value what she’s saying. Maybe in your opinion it’s not that important, but you need to value what they say. So, it’s manner I think, like conversation manners ... I don’t know how to describe it ... but, you get me, like ... we need to empower each other instead of putting down each other, so we need to give each other the same space, the same value.”

(GD, artist)

“Because I have worked with my mum previously through Arafa & The Dirars she has always been a creative peer. We worked, thought, developed and created together. But this time it was different as I was the viewer this time. I got to see her under a different light. She was not my mum, the superwoman I could rely on at any time. I was able to see the woman who struggled, who fought, who got broken but didn’t give up. I saw her as a woman and not just my mum.”

(ED, collective)

“In the exhibition I got many ... I improve. We talk together. I see many things from another [cultures] ... Somali, Congolese, Oromo, from many tribes, I get knowledge from Arabic [cultures, from] the other refugee women. When I am talking, am understanding. When I look at the board [screen] Somali, Sudanese ... when I see, I am very happy - good, good thing....”

(SHA, artist)

“I find the idea of meeting or talking over lunch, I find this revolutionary because it’s the best cosy and safe space to be, it’s like your talking with a friend, sharing, and this is what I love, and even that the Freedom Festival joined this way [of working] and you tend to see with a lot of interviews or projects happen around a table in an office or in a formal way. I think this is revolutionary because this is how a lot of people communicate, how they talk, even with families at the end of the day they just having a meal together, with a friend over drinks, and this has always been the natural way for our people around the word, the universal language.... It’s not easy to find people you feel safe and comfortable around, that is what we have here, and the evidence is that nobody read the questions before they came here [laughter]

(artists and collective, 21 October 2023 meeting discussion 3)

Impact on others involved (speakers etc)

“...it was a nice experience and especially it was good for the women and I think about them and their families. All the women already knew what they were doing. I was thinking, what should I say? I was thinking all the time, even in my dreams. But it was a really nice experience for me.”

(BZ, speaker)

“I wanted my story to feel also connected to the other stories and I find that it was really a real privilege and pleasure. I have learned a lot, reflected a lot. I get inspiration and enjoy, by seeing the courage of the women, the determination, thriving, and in Hull area and all around inshallah. So that’s why I decided. I wanted to support the women and also, I wanted to get the support myself.”

(BED, speaker)

"Thank you so much for the trust and openness. My heart has been deepened through this experience. I feel pride that my time was used to support such important issues and I feel gratitude for knowing such amazing people, the artists, curators and creators included. I really look forward to keeping an eye on this project and see how it evolves further, it is vitally needed in this selfish world, and dearly hope to meet you again."

(JEZ, film editor)

"I have wonderful memories of this project. At that time, I was still not fully aware of the reasons and opportunities that arise for people, especially women, who came from Muslim countries to Britain. I realised their very rich background and how happy they are now. This was a very useful and necessary experience for me."

(MM, speaker)

"I appreciated how all the women continued to create work and how Gaida, passionately continued her journey onwards to places like the Geneva Peace Convention. If these resilient women can go through all of that, what can we be doing also to make the world a better place? This is a very inspiring feeling to give people."

(JEZ, film editor)

Quality of artworks and exhibition/film impact

"I think those of us who were involved knew how special the artists were and how amazing the exhibition could be, but I think it still blew everyone away, what we ended up with."

(LB, Freedom Festival)

"Definitely. I feel that photography is a great medium for helping people to make personal connections with an unfamiliar subject matter. But more than this, the personal involvement of the women whose lives made the exhibition possible can only be considered a good thing. This seems to me not just an exhibition for viewers but a really creative way of helping refugees and people not born into the local community to get inside that community, to have a voice, and to meet and interact with the community to aid mutual understanding and co-operation."

(CW, audience)

"I found it incredibly moving and there were tears. Empathy is grounding and powerful, I was struck [by] how anyone could find themselves in a similar scenario, it is luck what situation we find ourselves born into. With climate change, conflict and persecution affecting so many already vulnerable people it really brought the importance of compassion, allyship and collaboration to front of mind. I found it empowering and humanising in the face of so much manipulative political and media vitriol. It is the most moving exhibition I have seen at the Ferens and a very beautiful celebration of human spirit, remembrance and hope for the future."

(LE, audience)

“So, I was really very inspired by the exhibition and how art can be a powerful tool to challenge the status quo, the narrative, despair, the painful journeys and can bring all of these into an artistic piece where all the feelings that sometimes words can fail us to express. Art and film can really express. And I was very proud of the women’s ability to express these feelings and these journeys in these pieces of art. So, it was very powerful actually, very powerful to share, to act for change and to get people connected in, and aware, of another.”

(BED, speaker)

“I don’t like to make judgements but you go on with what you’re aware of, but because it was so informative and it was visual - I’m a visual person as well - and so, because I have a learning disability, I have dyspraxia, so sometimes lots of writing and things like that, y’know, baffle me but this was something that was engaging for all. And it was visual, there was sound installation, there was everything there for people of all different learning styles, and languages, language was not a barrier.”

(KO, audience)

“When I walked into the exhibition my first reaction was 'WOW!' I found it a very visual, stimulating and informative exhibition... [it] reinforced my very positive views of 'refugee women'. Under adversity and hardship along with the sole responsibility for their family, they have shown tenacity and resourcefulness. Their talents and personality have shone through and are a wonderful example to us all.”

(RW, audience)

“And do you know one thing that stood out for me, it was so positive, the atmosphere. It was absolutely ... I was taken aback ... and I just think what some of those women and their families have gone through, look at this. It’s a testament to all of us that we need to take the time to get to know people. I think we look for the bad in everything, even in what’s going on in the world today, with the news and everything, we focus on the bad, but while we’re focusing on the bad we’re not seeing the good and the value of culture and what’s there.... Do you know, for all ... it was colourful. It was really colourful.”

(KO, audience)

“For me it was a really good way of sharing their stories, because I think people may get it a bit more. You can’t tell that story in any other way than what you did, than what those women and yourself did.”

(KO, audience)

Motivation of partners

“... that central proposal put forward that this needs to be an exhibition that’s about us by us, our individual experiences, there’s not one story, it’s not heard... that was the most important thing for me.”

(LB, Freedom Festival)

“I think the main motivation to be involved was around doing an exhibition with artists who are usually under-represented in the sector and having an exhibition which was very much voiced, and created, and every element decided by the artists who themselves have the lived experience of displacement and realising how so often the exhibitions, or the artwork, or the media reports that we see, we never ... we never have that experience directly from people who have experienced it and that actually we should be listening to those voices and seeing their perspective on things rather than putting a different gaze on it or forcing our perspective onto someone else’s experience.”

(LB, Freedom Festival)

Experience of partners in the project process

“... I had to hold my nerve a little bit and trust the process... as a producer it’s always tricky having unknowns and when you’re in that process of creation there’s always lots of unknowns and working in a co-creative way between five different artists, curator, Lee’s input ... there was maybe more unknowns, for longer, than you would if you were working with a single, established artist... I think Sarah [Perks] was brilliant in that aspect... really holding that process and I think we all felt a lot of confidence and support in her.”

(LB, Freedom Festival)

“...there was definitely moments, where, how is this all going to come together as a coherent piece, how is this gonna make sense as a whole, even though the individual elements were always breathtaking, and incredible from the start, it was this how do you make this an exhibition? How do you work with a collective? ... we just had to trust that, right, we just had to go with it, and it worked out.”

(LB, Freedom Festival)

“... Sarah’s maybe been through that process more than the rest of us, so... she knew that that’s the way we had to do it and that it would work out, so we just had to have faith in her I think.”

(LB, Freedom Festival)

“And I guess, the only other thing that was maybe unexpected, but only unexpected right at the start and then once I sort of got to know the artists, it was very clear from the start that there would be a lot of joy involved in the exhibition. I think, yeah, a lot of people wouldn’t expect that to be the case given the subject matter and the artists’ experience in their lives, but it was clear from the start, once we got to know them, that

that would be a really big focus of the exhibition, it wasn’t gonna be something that ... y’know there were elements of it that were very sad, very reflective, but you got a real sense of ... it was balanced with joy, and pride around survival and resilience, yeah, so I think a lot of people would find that unexpected but yeah it was important to the exhibition.”

(LB, Freedom Festival)

Impact on partners

“In sharing their personal experiences of displacement and their attempts to find a new sense of belonging in the UK in a film without dialogue, I witnessed a purity of expression of their innermost feelings. It was an honour to see these expressions take a physical form. Also, I knew the audience reaction to the film would be positive and thoughtful. What I hadn’t expected was the extent of the honest, beautiful audience responses to the film at the screening – it was incredibly powerful.”

(RD, Imperial War Museum)

“In providing opportunities to under-represented artists to express their responses to or explore a particular theme, this partnerships model was successful. The project enabled the artists to stretch existing skills, develop new skills and share their practice with new audiences in an atmosphere of mutual learning. We would like to develop and expand this model in future projects.”

(RD, Imperial War Museum)

“The exhibition was a great success as a collaborative installation and as a cultural experience to immerse yourself in, this in many ways transcended the individual art works themselves and was a great example of collaborative energy and authentic creativity from all involved to create a collective experience.”

(MM artistic director, Freedom Festival)

“As I prepare to step down from my role here at Freedom Festival when I think back on all the myriad of works we have commissioned and supported over the last 9 years of my tenure this commission, collaboration and final exhibition will be remembered as one of the proudest achievements.”

(MM, Freedom Festival)

“We learnt how to better hold the space for this kind of collaboration, how to be more flexible with the planning timeframes and needs of the artists, how to be more flexible with our working patterns to accommodate meetings and planning. As a commission and producing festival we are not new to this but every time we commission work with artists the context is different, so this experience was another step on our journey to support artists from any form or practise better.”

(MM, Freedom Festival)

On leadership and facilitation

“For me it was a really good way of sharing their stories, because I think people may get it a bit more. You can’t tell that story in any other way than what you did, than what those women and yourself did. But I’d also like to say, and not just you’re recording Lee, but it takes a good person who understands and who really gets it to actually be in the driving seat and to bring those women together, because trust is part of that, because you wouldn’t have gathered all that, you wouldn’t have engaged with all those stories, with all those women if they didn’t feel they could trust you. So, there’s a lot of groundwork that needs to go into that, to get that in the first place.”

(KO, audience)

“I think the main motivation [for Freedom Festival] to be involved was around doing an exhibition with artists who are usually under-represented in the sector and having an exhibition which was very much voiced, and created, and every element decided by the artists who themselves have the lived experience of displacement...”

(LB, Freedom Festival)

“... I had to hold my nerve a little bit and trust the process... as a producer it’s always tricky having unknowns and when you’re in that process of creation there’s always lots of unknowns and working in a co-creative way between five different artists, curator, Lee’s input ... there was maybe more unknowns, for longer, than you would if you were working with a single, established artist... I think Sarah [Perks] was brilliant in that aspect... really holding that process and I think we all felt a lot of confidence and support in her.”

(LB, Freedom Festival)

“I felt - and I might be wrong but this is a good point to reflect on... [the direction] is always coming from you, Lee, or the people who are funding, or from the Freedom Festival. I understand the barriers to women, about language, about participation... Are the women able to lead a big event for a big festival without, for example, the contribution, the guidance from Lee or, like, from other people? For now, I don’t believe that this is the case, with all my respect, you are doing a great job and I’m very inspired by you... but the idea is here more about the leadership, the real leadership and agency of the women, to take the lead in the Collective... So, I feel that there is a missing gap.”

(BED, speaker)

“... it takes a good person who understands and who really gets it to actually be in the driving seat and to bring those women together, because trust is part of that, because you wouldn’t have gathered all that, you wouldn’t have engaged with all those stories, with all those women if they didn’t feel they could trust you. So, there’s a lot of groundwork that needs to go into that, to get that in the first place... I know in the work I do and what I do, trust is really important, so for you to do that and for them to feel comfortable to get that message across in the way they did, it takes a lot.”

(KO, audience)

Calls for more work to continue (evidence of demand)

"I would love to see further events and workshops with the collective. I mentioned to Lee that it was important this film and if possible, the exhibition was seen by more audiences. I would love Artlink and community groups to collaborate with the collective in the future."

(LE, audience)

"Co-production and working with underrepresented artists is already part of our plans for 23-26 (and beyond). We are working to address some of the organisational and operational barriers such as agreements are now in place so that we can procure catering externally for culturally sensitive events. Our Open exhibition at the Ferens is marketed via community partners to attract submissions from more diverse artists and our exhibitions programme is highlighting work by disabled and black artists, acknowledging their absence in our own collection through commissions and new acquisitions. At Wilberforce House we work with an advisory board made up of local people of colour and we are currently commissioning a Black artist to respond to the museum, creating a new piece of work that could potentially launch at this year's Freedom Festival. 35 artists from around the UK applied for this opportunity."

(SH, Ferens Art Gallery)

"I'd also like to see such events joined up with other groups, whose members might not be motivated to visit, or feel comfortable visiting, an art gallery – to extend the reach of the message."

(SP, audience)

"And after this experience, all of us we feel, like, we still didn't finish the project, we feel like we are hungry to do more as a group, as a collective group."

(MD, collective)

"Our commitment to collaboration with the Freedom Festival remains though further discussions are needed as to how our partnership can develop, there is potential to offer an annual slot for a co-production project in one of the main galleries at the Ferens for Freedom Festival from 2025."

(SH, Ferens Art Gallery)

"So for me now, the project I would like is, again, speaking about women's struggle ... in Sudan right now, what I'm seeing in my country, and this is the first time for me, like, we know the things that happened in West Sudan and Darfur for a long time, but this also wasn't like a big image of what's happening in Sudan. But now we seeing thousands of people fleeing Sudan just because they cannot stay in the country, and the country is completely corrupted, and the stories about women and children and elderlies, and it's just horrific. And seeing this it [make me] reflect a lot and I would like to speak about it, I would like to, as a Sudanese refugee girl I would like to speak about it, because this is one reason why I'm a refugee today. This is one of the big reasons why I am a refugee today - the war - so I would like to be this is my next project."

(MD, collective)

Impact on sector and calls for changes in policy

“And for me to see something like that which is so, from a social aspect, from people directly, being involved all through the process of an art installation, but obviously telling the stories of people ... I don’t think we often get that in our civic buildings, especially in Hull. Hull’s migration and emerging communities has been changing over the last few years, but I think sometimes we’ve been behind the times. And I think people, migration, asylum seekers and refugees, and people generally, of colour, and all different diverse groups are totally misunderstood and I think people have shied away from actually, sort of, telling that story. I truly believe that I think we could have started to tell stories before, you know, different diverse stories and from different aspects of cultures.”

(KO, audience)

“All our communities need to have a voice, a means of expression – museums, galleries, art and community spaces need to provide this opportunity. Despite the difficult stories told, there was an overall optimism about the show, which was heartening for all our 'tomorrows'”

(GMP, audience)

“In providing opportunities to under-represented artists to express their responses to or explore a particular theme, this partnerships model was successful... We would like to develop and expand this model in future projects.”

(RD, Imperial War Museum)

“I might be an observer because I am part of this journey, but I am not part of the daily experiences of the Collective, of the women. I felt - and I might be wrong but this is a good point to reflect on - I felt, er, I don’t know, it’s always coming from you, Lee, or the people who are funding, or from the Freedom Festival. That for example ‘we need to do this,’ ‘we need to do that’ so that’s why we are gathering the women to plan for this or to kick this initiative... I understand the barriers to women, about language, about participation... Are the women able to lead a big event for a big festival without, for example, the contribution, the guidance from Lee or, like, from other people? For now, I don’t believe that this is the case, with all my respect, you are doing a great job and I’m very inspired by you, this has nothing to do with what I am saying... I know the impact of external factors, but the idea is here more about the leadership, the real leadership and agency of the women, to take the lead in the Collective. It’s not about Lee, it’s not about the funding, it’s not about the Festival - so I don’t know. So, I feel that there is a missing gap.”

(BED, speaker)

“It was invaluable for us to learn how to successfully structure and realise co-creation projects, and to fully democratise the process of creating new artistic responses by empowering the Freedom Women’s Collective to tell their own stories.”

(CP, Imperial War Museum)

"I think the main motivation to be involved was around doing an exhibition with artists who are usually under-represented in the sector... we should be listening to those voices and seeing their perspective on things rather than putting a different gaze on it or forcing our perspective onto someone else's experience"

(LB, Freedom Festival)

"Everyone's different... and just remembering that everyone is an individual, there's no one type of artist or refugee or woman, you know, we all have these different intersectionality's and whatever those needs are whether it's childcare, disabled access, timing, whatever that is, like access is bigger than just level access for wheelchair users isn't it, it's what needs to be put in place for you to participate and show up as you are, authentically, and not be barred from taking part or missing out on opportunities."

(LB, Freedom Festival)

"I think I'll apply that to similar exhibitions in the future that are with under-represented artists but also with all artists that I work with - that kind of level of flexibility and care can be appropriate and valuable to artists from all walks of life and trying to make sure that that - I guess it's like a person-focused way of working and that's a good thing to take into everything you do."

(LB, Freedom Festival)

"...I would look at working with collectives again in the future, I think that's really rewarding, having those multiple points of view is a really valuable way of working..."

(LB, Freedom Festival)



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