

Participatory Action Research - Feminist Trailblazers and Good Troublemakers Podcast Series

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[00:00:00] **Patricia Maguire:** Welcome to Participatory Action Research, Feminist Trailblazers and Good Troublemakers. I'm your host, Patricia Maguire. Our guest today is Dr. Maggie O'Neill. Dr. O'Neill, welcome!

[00:00:24] **Maggie O'Neill:** Welcome to you as well. I'm delighted to be here.

[00:00:27] **Patricia Maguire:** The PAR-FEM podcast amplifies the contributions of feminist trailblazers such as Maggie O'Neill to participatory and action research.

[00:00:36] **Patricia Maguire:** And today we're going to talk with her about her successes and challenges bringing feminist values and ways of being to participatory and action research. The overarching goal of the PAR-FEM podcast is to encourage you to keep your action research well connected to PAR's radical and feminist roots.

[00:00:57] **Patricia Maguire:** Now, before we dive into our conversation, let me briefly introduce Dr. O'Neill. Maggie O'Neill is Professor in Sociology and Criminology at University College Cork, where she's also Director of the Institute for Social Science in the 21st Century and UCC Collective Social Futures.

[00:01:18] **Patricia Maguire:** Maggie is an interdisciplinary scholar with a long history of research in and with critical, cultural, and feminist theories, creative participatory, walking, arts-based biographical methodologies, and Praxis, making policy relevant interventions, especially in relation to sex work, migration, forced migration, and sexual violence. An avowed feminist, her unwavering commitment is to creating intellectual and practical spaces and processes to include women's voices, particularly marginalized women, in research and policymaking.

[00:01:58] **Patricia Maguire:** She's a team member of Walk Create, which we're going to talk more about today. Her last book was co-authored with a group of feminists using biographical, narrative, and participatory methods. And the book is titled, *Criminal Women: Gender Matters*. Finally, in addition to her many accomplishments, Maggie is an elected member of the Royal Irish Academy, which is the highest academic honor in Ireland.

[00:02:25] **Patricia Maguire:** So Maggie, we're going to get going here. One of your first participatory action research projects was in 1989, the pioneering POW or Prostitute Outreach Workers Project, in Nottingham. And before we get into the details of that early PAR project with sex workers, I want to back up even further. And I want to do what you call life story narrative.

[00:02:48] **Patricia Maguire:** So what in your own early life experience brought you to feminism and the need for women, perhaps yourself, to have a voice in research and policymaking?

[00:03:00] **Maggie O'Neill:** I suppose the kind of driving force of my work is, you know, a commitment to challenging, changing, addressing sexual and social inequalities. Very much rooted in my working-class background.

[00:03:15] **Maggie O'Neill:** A child of Irish diasporic grandparents, a sort of generational, a family who moved from Ireland to the northeast of England. My grandparents and my father worked in coal mining and steel work industry. So very much the kind of history of diasporic communities, but also working-class communities. And I suppose there's the sort of sexual inequalities in relation to the local, you know, the role of women, women in the home, women working, you know, the burdens for women in working class communities.

[00:03:48] **Maggie O'Neill:** And so that, that's really, I guess, the core driver. It's very much biographical, you know, rooted in working class origins. First in my family to go to university. Inspired by critical theory and feminist theory. You know, had some really inspiring lecturers. And then ended up working within the university sector for my entire career.

[00:04:12] **Patricia Maguire:** So, given that life experience, you had, the class and gender issues that, that brought you to the university, let's talk some now about the specifics of the POW project, because you're known for bringing together PAR methods, biographical and ethnographic methods, and performative arts. So, tell us about some of the specifics of those methods in that POW project.

[00:04:40] **Maggie O'Neill:** The origins of that project were, at the time, I was completing a PhD on critical theory, on Adorno's aesthetics, and so I was looking at the transformative role of art. It was a really theoretical piece of work. And at the same time, I was teaching a

class on feminism, gender, and society as a part time hourly paid lecturer at Nottingham Trent.

[00:05:06] **Maggie O'Neill:** The kind of work of Dorothy Smith and a paper by Patricia Hill Collins, which looked at, you know, black women as outsiders published in Social Problems, but really, you know, kind of looking at how marginalized voices can access or make a difference or claim their space. Obviously, for Patricia Hill Collins, in relation to the Academy and ensuring Black women's voices are center stage.

[00:05:35] **Maggie:** And, but for me, both of those texts were, you know, founding texts for my participatory research. Because I was doing that course, I was invited to do a small study on, then the language was very different, so prostitution in Nottingham. And it was funded by, Nottingham Safer Cities with home office funding, because Nottingham, as well as Manchester, Birmingham, London, had been defined as kind of cities where there was unrest. There had been race riots, um, there was a kind of knife crime was, was, you know, deemed an issue, and so kind of troubled cities, troubled communities, and so Nottingham was funded by the Home Office. And the guy who, who led Nottingham Safer Cities, was really very progressive. And he I was commissioned to do this study and they really expected, I think what they had in their mind was addressing prostitution on the street through traffic calming, through environmental changes, you know, a very sort of rational choice approach to addressing the issue.

[00:06:43] **Maggie O'Neill:** But because I was very much invested, you know, in the kind of women's, what I described at that time as women-centered approach. So my initial, you know, kind of focus was on talking to the women. So I was introduced to an amazing outreach worker who was at that time working alone. This would never happen now, but she was working alone and she was happy for me to join her.

[00:07:08] **Maggie O'Neill:** And so I went out on street with her, you know, a couple of times a week to first of all talk to the women and to find out what their lives were like, what the issues were for them. And then I went to talk to the police and to other agencies and it led to collaborations with some women who then went on to set up.

[00:07:28] **Maggie O'Neill:** I mean, I was not instrumental in the setting up of POW*. I was, you know, one of the supporters of these, this amazing group of women, along with a woman from public health, whose name escapes me now, but she was very active in using participatory methods. But again, you know, I can see that that's what she was doing, but I didn't have the language.

[00:07:51] **Maggie O'Neill:** And so the, the work led to a report, which led to a multi agency forum, which had sex workers present for the very first time. I guess in terms of principles

and values, you know, I always think of inclusion, participation, valuing all voices, not just the loudest. Because, you know, obviously that's why I went to the women first, not the police.

[00:08:11] **Maggie O'Neill:** And, um, and that there should be action-oriented interventions, but also in sustainable ways. So they were the kind of interventionary aspects of that work. But I was so moved really by women's experiences, you know, going to prison for fine defaults, even though at that time it wasn't a criminal offense to sell sex.

[00:08:33] **Maggie O'Neill:** It was if you were selling sex publicly. So for those women working on streets, it was against, it was, you know, it was a criminal act. If they shared a home with their 18-year-old son or somebody over 18, they could be prosecuted for operating a brothel. It was legal to work, but through a very tiny window.

[00:08:51] **Maggie O'Neill:** And also the stigma that they experienced was incredible. So, you know, women ending up at accident and emergency for health problems, had they been dealt with by the GP, would not have got so bad. Violence was endemic. You know, we witnessed a very violent assault on a woman and thinking about power dynamics and, you know, the kind of, I guess, institutional power.

[00:09:14] **Maggie O'Neill:** The woman who was assaulted was not accompanied to court, but we were as the witnesses, I guess. It was such a powerful project to do. It was very short. I had three months, but it led to a lifetime of doing participatory research and really having participatory research embedded in, you know, pretty much most of my research since then, I couldn't go back to doing a theoretical PhD.

[00:09:42] **Maggie O'Neill:** It led to me completing my PhD on the transformative possibilities of participatory research in working with female sex workers. And the original PhD ended up as an edited collection on the Adorno, Culture and Feminism.

[00:09:58] **Patricia Maguire:** Let's keep moving along with your work then, in the early 2000s, in collaboration with other researchers and community groups, you employed participatory action research methods in partnership with forced migrants, or people that you say are at the asylum-migration nexus.

[00:10:18] **Patricia Maguire:** And then there was sort of a 10-year series of PAR projects where the knowledge of one fed into the next project: Global connections, The long journey home, Making connections, Women in migration and transnational communities. Give us some highlights of that work.

[00:10:38] **Maggie O'Neill:** I think one of the highlights was the relationships that I made with people who were seeking asylum, some of whom had gained status. Those kind of

long-term friendships, really, that emerged out of the work. Working with some amazing community development workers. And also, um, working with some really amazing arts workers. So I think the sort of relational dimension, I, I would say is, you know, was a real highlight of the work. You know, I always say that the work we do as participatory researchers, it's like, you know, a kind of drop in a pool.

[00:11:14] **Maggie O'Neill:** I've described along with a long-term collaborator, Rosie Campbell. You know, sometimes it feels like we're moving one step forward, two steps back or two step forward, one step back. But, you know, it's kind of the consistency and accumulation of, of knowledge, but also the small impacts that one can make in addressing sexual and social inequalities, but also the introduction through walking, to walking as a practice, to include in my practice, by really being influenced and inspired by artists who use walking in their practice. Inspired by an artist called Misha Myers, who had conducted this fantastic project with, with migrants, asylum seekers in Plymouth. And so I invited her to be part of our project, commissioned her to be part of our project.

[00:12:06] **Maggie O'Neill:** And we used walking, with participants, with our participants. We launched the project with guided walks in Nottingham, Loughborough, Derby, and Leicester. A person seeking asylum or a person who had refugee status led a citizen or a policymaker or a practitioner on a walk based on Misha's model.

[00:12:30] **Maggie O'Neill** And her, in her project, she had asked to think of a route from a place you call home to a special place. And so the people we worked with, they either thought of a route or they drew a route and then they walked that route with their co-walker. And at the end of the walks we all gathered in a, it was a kind of community center for young people in Loughborough, led by just two fantastic people - community arts lead and lead for young people.

[00:13:04] **Maggie O'Neill:** And the lead for young people, Andrew was looking after something like 150 unaccompanied young people. Amazing, just amazing work. If I had been gathering people together to report back on the findings, I probably would have got people in world cafes, setups, you know, sharing information, maybe using some creative methods to draw. Or, you know, use those little bendy sticks. I forgot what they're called now, pipe cleaners, you know, to sculpt something that might express how the walk meant to you.

[00:13:33] Misha had us on our feet and she had us using interactive theater methods and image theater, you know, to sort of create shapes together of how the walk, what the, what the walk did, what the impressions were, what our feelings were in relation to our findings

in relation to walking together. It was really powerful. So that set me off really then on including walking in my participatory research practice.

[00:13:59] **Patricia Maguire:** It sounds like that in that particular walking project that it was the asylum seekers who had in a sense a leadership role, if you will, to design the walk. And so you have what had been, um, agency leaders or community leaders who now were in a learning, listening role in many ways, which I think is a powerful change of power dynamics.

[00:14:26] **Maggie O'Neill:** Absolutely. Absolutely. And, you know, Misha Myers, the artist I mentioned who was, you know, commissioned to work with us, she describes that as situational authority and I really like that. You know, that notion of having situational authority, because in the kind of participatory process and practice, you know, you seek to develop, as far as possible, subject- subject relations and a dynamic, you know, of trust, of mutual recognition. But, you know, you're still bounded by if it's a research project and you're responsible for, you know, research, the research funding, there is still always the power, you cannot flatten the power dynamics.

[00:15:06] **Maggie O'Neill:** So as far as possible, you know, what are the ways that we can you know, create and support and foster and facilitate. And so I really love that, that term, you know, situational authority. And really the collaborative, you know, the co-productive work that describes, but actually in practice, the in practice, um, experience of co-productive, collaborative work.

You know, you're in movement, you, we tend to be walking side by side, you know, and so walking around the city as all of these walks took place in city spaces, you know, you, the landmarks might meet you and bring something to, you know, something might be, might emerge as a consequence of a particular landscape that has a, you know, that, that maybe reminds the person, either walker actually, of something that is top, you know, that might bring forth more communication or more conversation in relation to experience, but, but it opens a space for shared dialogue, you know. It mediates the, the interview process becomes more conversational.

[00:16:10] **Patricia Maguire:** It sounds like that it also had an impact on the agency leaders, personnel on policy. That they were able to take some of the learnings from that walk and the experience they had and use that in the policies and practices they created.

[00:16:30] **Maggie O'Neill:** Absolutely. And for one of the arts workers, you know, a fabulous artist who was leading a community arts organization in Nottingham, it led to her transferring completely into refugee education.

[00:16:42] **Maggie O'Neill:** You know, her experience of both that project and the previous project that we had conducted together in collaboration with the Bosnian community, a newly arrived Bosnian community in the mid-90s. It, you know, the impact on her was such that she moved completely into refugee education, you know, how could she make a difference in that, in that sphere, so was such. But also, you know, thinking about the exhibitions, you know, we, with that pop project, you know, the Bosnian community really wanted to let people, let local communities know why they were there, you know, that they were a good people and verbatim quote, and that they just wanted to, you know, the people in their communities to know, um, why they were there, you know, what had led to them being there because of the racism and incivilities they had been experiencing. And the, you know, the art-based outcomes traveled to, we traveled them around community centers, they went into small art galleries, the university art gallery.

[00:17:41] **Maggie O'Neill:** But I think the visual outputs, if you like, from the participatory research can really reach a broader audience. So, you know, in one of the visitor's books, and in fact, you know, a kind of oral response by one woman to say, you know, how this could be her, her children, you know. That the experiences of the Bosnians, she really had touched her deeply through the artwork.

[00:18:05] **Maggie O'Neill:** And Sherry Nicholson, who is a friend and a fellow academic who's working in a sort of psychosocial space talks about how a visual representation and artwork could even be music, you know, can pierce us and bring us in touch with intractable reality in ways we can't forget.

[00:18:23] **Maggie O'Neill:** You know, they, it really gets to us and on an effective level. And I think the work that was produced through that project, you know, the project I just mentioned, the walking project, but also the Bosnians in Nottingham. had really had that impact, you know, on people who visited, you know, people who saw the exhibition.

[00:18:41] **Maggie O'Neill:** So I think it's the, you know, for us, the policy issues were important. You know, we went on to develop a cultural strategy. We were given funding to develop a cultural strategy to include refugees and asylum seekers in the East Midlands. With the support of a community arts organization, we were able to work with programmers, you know, arts programmers to match refugee artists with people who might need artists to work with them.

[00:19:08] **Maggie O'Neill:** And a database, you know, so that people could be accessed via a database. So there was some really practical, positive outcomes, you know, in relation to practice as well as hopefully impacting on, on policy.

[00:19:22] **Patricia Maguire:** Had you, in these series of projects then that brought in performative arts and the arts, had you previously had experience in the art world?

[00:19:32] **Maggie O'Neill:** My first degree was a, was an education degree. And creative arts was my subject, if you like. So I, I had limited experience, you know. And I guess this is where, you know, thinking biographically, the arts- based work connects back to that, but also to, you know, that, that first PhD work, you know, on the transformative role and power of art.

[00:19:57] **Maggie O'Neill:** So that, but also the biographical. You know, the importance of people's life stories. That, you know, we lead storied lives and our stories can, in biographical sociology, can tell us so much more about, you know, they can really throw a light on broader structures. And the participatory methods, you know, as a way of doing that social justice-oriented research, you know, that it is about challenging sexual and social inequalities, but working collaboratively, you know, that, that kind of collective process and practice is really important.

[00:20:30] **Maggie O'Neill:** So yes and no, you know, in terms of a kind of educating a role, you know, a strand of my education degree, but a, but a real, I guess, commitment to the power of art. And yeah, so it kind of came together. It has come together looking back from this point.

[00:20:47] **Patricia Maguire:** Much of what you're describing shows how you've been a trailblazer in this work, and I suspect also a bit of a troublemaker. You know, the podcast is called, you know, Feminist Trailblazers and Troublemakers. And I know that you've worked extensively with sex workers and asylum seekers or migrants, and you've written and talked extensively that people, particularly in this marginalized group, particularly women, are much more than their stereotypic negative identity.

[00:21:18] **Patricia Maguire:** And that women, and men, but women in this marginalized groups, they're often dehumanized, objectified, criminalized, physically attacked, etc. So what have been any of the barriers or pushback or challenges that you've experienced utilizing PAR with sex workers and migrants in collaboration with academics, agency leaders and leaders and so-called community groups who are not used to, to working collaboratively with sex workers and migrants.

[00:21:53] **Maggie O'Neill:** Yeah. You know, when I first went out on street with Karen Hughes all those years ago, I can remember a sex worker saying to me, don't think you can come out of the university and take from us and go and build your career. You know, what a powerful message, which has really kind of stayed with me. Absolutely stayed with me.

And of course, you know, one of the, I guess, in terms of participatory methods and working with marginalized communities, there is always that sensitive, you know, kind of line between, you know, working collaboratively, but also as an academic, you know, you're working in the university space.

[00:22:36] **Maggie O'Neill:** So I would say the kind of biggest issue for me has been the way that the kind of neoliberal universities set up has - they own our research in relation to the British system, you know, the research assessment framework, and then the research excellence framework, which is an audit of our work was you know, kind of that. And particularly when impact was introduced, because you know funding comes from developing good impact case and funding comes from the development from the publication of work in top journals.

[00:23:15] **Maggie O'Neill:** And so, you know, the neoliberal principles of the university as a business model monetizing our research then leads to dilemmas, of course, for people like myself, you know, in relation to the use-value that is then put on our work. In the early days, participatory research was not seen as particularly, you know, worthy of, you know, a high grade in public, in published work.

[00:23:43] **Maggie O'Neill:** But then with the introduction of impact, it was, you know, seen as something that could then bring money in. And so then that leads to the issue of tokenism. You know, work that isn't, is not necessarily participatory, but is labeled as such. And then that again, you know, comes back to us when we're working with communities who are tired of being consulted and, and have no action or interventions.

[00:24:08] **Maggie O'Neill:** You know, they're tired of being constantly used, you know, thinking back to that early comment from a sex worker on the street, you know. And so I guess that's, that's a real dilemma. It's walking that line between, you know, the integrity. If you're working from the university, the integrity of your work, you know, genuinely working in collaboration and in participation with, with organizations, with community groups, and with, in this case, marginalized women, um, whilst at the same time you're, you know, you're managing, you know, the, the issues around audit culture and the business model.

[00:24:45] **Maggie O'Neill:** I have to say my current university in Ireland, we have no ref, um, there is a, a commitment and a project just getting underway about, in kind of institutionalizing a culture of engaged research, you know, which is genuinely about how our work connects with communities and how we can work together with communities, which is, you know, a breath of fresh air.

[00:25:09] **Maggie O'Neill:** I guess a second issue, which connects kind of with the, the idea of the kind of institutional power structures and how, and how the business university

operates is also you know, a kind of patriarchal view of knowledge. And what's best, you know, what is good knowledge, what's worthy and what isn't, you know, what is little more than community work.

[00:25:32] **Maggie O'Neill:** I can remember somebody describing, describing me and my work as, you know, why doesn't she just go and be a community worker? Because it's kind of, you know, it was not seen as doing, you know, the kind of knowledge production a university lecturer should be doing.

[00:25:49] **Patricia Maguire:** I had a similar experience when I was, it would be like about 1984- 85, and I was working with three people who were then on my doctoral committee. They didn't last long. And I had found a woman anthropologist who worked in international development, a feminist. And I really thought she would be my one ally on the committee. And as I was describing what I was trying to do with this participatory research project with former battered women, she said, you know, if you want to be an activist, go be an activist.

[00:26:21] **Patricia Maguire:** This isn't research, and, uh, so I understand the, what you're talking about in terms of. Ironically what you've just described as sort of a demeaning of participatory action research until it became clear in the university setting that, oh, there are policy implications and action that happens that might bring in money or result in money, and then suddenly it's that monetization that gives it some kind of credibility.

[00:26:51] **Maggie O'Neill:** Absolutely. Absolutely.

[00:26:54] **Patricia Maguire:** In doing this podcast, probably I hear a lot from, the most from graduate students or emerging scholars who are working in places where they don't have support. They don't have, they're not in a university that supports action or participatory research, and they don't have colleagues, or they might actually have people who are trying to demean or undermine the work.

[00:27:20] **Patricia Maguire:** So you're really known and you've just described as well, all the many ways in which you've had collaboration, you've worked with allies, you've done collaborative work. You know, I don't think there's a place that you've been where you haven't founded or co-founded some alliance or networks. You know, I was looking at your work and I thought, and this is just, you know, like a sliver - the University of York migration network; Sex Work Research Hub; Race, Crime, and Justice Regional Network; the work with the Feminist Theatre - Open Clasp; and of course, your most recent book, *Criminal Women: Gender Matters*, is a collaborative work. So clearly developing and nurturing allies is important to you. So what do you say to these many graduate students or emerging scholars who feel isolated, who don't have yet the kind of allies and collaboration that you've described. What do you, what can you say to them?

[00:28:22] **Maggie O'Neill:** Well, I mean, I think that, you know, the, the experience with the supervisor and the supervisory team is really important. You know, so that I think that relationship and that level of support, you can give, you know, graduate students and master students, and also forming, you know, the classroom is, you know, I think the kind of pedagogical aspects of our work are really important as well. This is, you know, something that I think is, you know, so if you think about participatory work as a philosophy of life rather than a research approach, then you know, it becomes embedded also in the classroom and in the, and in your relationships with your supervisees, you know, students who are doing research dissertations, undergraduate, masters, or PhD.

[00:29:07] **Maggie O'Neill:** And so I think that kind of, you know, fostering and nurturing a kind of critical pedagogy, which is about, you know, prioritizing the participatory aspects of recognition, respect, you know, value inclusion and the collective, you know, the kind of look, you know, the importance of, of understanding our collective histories, not to the, you know, denial of individuality and difference and so on as, you know, the kind of shifts in feminisms have really brought to the fore.

[00:29:37] **Maggie O'Neill:** But, uh, but I think, I think it starts there and then, you know, obviously, you know, for, for yourself and myself, when you get to a certain stage of your career, you're already, I mean, I've, I'm not somebody who seeks networks, you know, like if you go to, you know, if you go to a conference, I actually really find them quite hard.

[00:29:56] **Maggie O'Neill:** So I'm completely upfront with my students about that, you know, and, and to seek out, you know, people who were doing similar research and to form networks of support. And then there are, I mean, there are so many, there's so much available to us now in, you know, in the participatory world. You know, the, um, the center at Durham, the participatory action research center that I was part of when I worked, when I was at Durham.

[00:30:21] **Maggie O'Neill:** There is a national in the UK anywhere, National Participatory Network. I, through Ruth Lister, who was a mentor, my mentor at Loughborough, feminist mentoring is really important as well. You know, I think that's absolutely vital. She introduced me to a global network of human dignity and, on human dignity and humiliation studies.

[00:30:41] **Maggie O'Neill:** And at the heart of this network is participatory, appreciative inquiry, you know, mutual respect, all the values that underpin participatory research. And so they were and have been fantastic. So, you know, I've probably been connected with that group and attend the virtual, in real or, you know, in person or hybrid or hybrid online, um, the annual workshop because it's kind of sustenance.

[00:31:09] **Maggie O'Neill:** As well as brilliant work being shared, uh, not in an orthodox model, you know, in a, in a real appreciative inquiry model. And so that network was really important for me. And so those lessons that we learn, you know, about support, network, nurturing, care, you know, an ethic of care in our work, um, can be transformed then or translated into the work with our students.

[00:31:37] **Maggie O'Neill:** And, and I think networking and, and creating networks of support is really, uh, is really vital. It's really, really vital.

[00:31:46] **Patricia Maguire:** See, you mentioned this several times today, and I know you write about it, the ethics of care, ethics of caring. Talk about that. What do you mean by that?

[00:31:58] **Maggie O'Neill:** Yeah, well, I guess, I mean, there's so many fabulous, you know, feminist sociologists and philosophers who've written about care. Kathleen Lynch, who's an Irish sociology has written a wonderful book on capitalism and care. Um, and, you know, in terms of my background in critical theory and the import, you know, and Western Marxism and the importance of collectivities and the kind of mutual support and recognition that is a founding principle of participatory action research. That for me is, is, you know, those people, you know, those, those writers, those women, those feminists and also the early feminists I described, you know, in terms of standpoint feminism Patricia Hill Collins, Dorothy Smith, Sandra Harding. Um, you know, really help us, I think, to create, I suppose a holding space, thinking psychosocially.

[00:32:55] **Maggie O'Neill:** You know, and, and our ethics review processes are fairly instrumental. It's often very difficult to get your, your participatory research through an ethic review board. Some universities are better than other where there's a lot of practice. So Durham was good. Cork is good. But I think, you know, getting people to, or certainly institutionally, you know, getting people to think about the care element of participatory research, you know, and the processual nature of that. It's still a job to do, I think, you know, that ethics doesn't start and end with your ethics forms or your informed consent and so on, but it's process, the collaborative journey through a participatory project is processual.

[00:33:35] **Maggie O'Neill:** In the recent project you mentioned at the start, the Walk Create project, which was a fabulous project to be part of, led by Dee Hedden, a theatre practitioner, artist, academic at Glasgow University. And so I suppose myself and Morag were the two, well Morag is probably more arts- based than I am and she's a geographer. But the other, the rest of the team were artists, and I think I've been really inspired by artists in relation to the ethics that they bring to their work.

[00:34:06] **Maggie O'Neill:** And I'm, and a woman called Stella Hughes, who's a theatre practitioner, I, you know, when I was looking for a way of doing ethics in participatory research, you know, I found that her ethical approach in theatre really matched what I felt the values of participatory research. And so, you know, I would bring those into my own practice, not just the usual, you know, sociological, criminological, you know, do no harm informed consent, you know. But rather the people aspect, the people-centered, the person-centered aspect of the research. And in this project we'll create, working with Clare Qualmann and Harry Wilson and Morag Rose and Dee Hedden. Our ethics, I'm, you know, I think we were all really proud of the ethics because in, we had a public statement that was an ethic of care, that is an ethic of care.

[00:35:04] **Maggie O'Neill:** So it was, you know, these are our, these are the ethics, these are the expectations, but this is how we're going to practice them. And so one of the issues that we always struggle with is institutional dynamics, you know, institutional bureaucratic processes. And so if you're working with people who want, like artists, for example, and if you're working with them and, you know, you want to be able to pay them promptly and not have to wait months, you know, for them to be paid, particularly when they're freelancers.

[00:35:32] **Maggie O'Neill:** I mean, this is just a simple example. But it is about care, isn't it? You know, it is about actioning care in our work with people. And similarly, thinking about the art, working with artists, issues of copyright and ownership. And, you know, um, because I think again, you know, coming back to my point about the neoliberal university and universities as businesses that, you know, own your work.

[00:35:58] **Maggie O'Neill:** So, you know, when I left Durham for York, you know, what I produced at Durham was owned by Durham and similarly at York before I came to Cork. And so there is that kind of, you know, ownership monetization of the work through the impact, um, you know, the ref and so on, but also, how do we work with people who are outside the academy in ways that are supportive of the trust, respect, recognition, that underpin participatory research in those simple ways, like paying them fastly, promptly, and that they own copyright. It's not the copyright of the university.

[00:36:37] **Patricia Maguire:** Are you involved with the open access sort of movement to, many academicians are beginning to figure out ways through open access to move their work beyond, outside of pay walls, etc. Are you involved in that movement at all?

[00:36:55] **Maggie O'Neill:** I suppose I'm, I'm not involved in the movement in a collective sense, you know.

[00:37:01] **Maggie O'Neill:** But I am committed to that. Absolutely. Absolutely. And I think, obviously, you know, when we work with people, you know, when we work with artists,

when we work with communities, you know, there should be, there should be open access of the collaborative work, the work we produce. And, and an example of that would be, you know, a journal where you co-produce a journal article, but the artist's work isn't open access because the artist isn't a member of a university who is paid, you know, to have the open access. And so I think, you know, yeah, we need, you know, these things really need to be addressed because they are problematic in relation to the principles of participatory and collaborative research.

[00:37:50] **Maggie O'Neill:** So yes, 100 percent committed to open access. And also different ways of sharing our work as well. You know that it doesn't have to be in a journal article. Pedagogic project, really, that was inspired by students I worked with. We, we start, it was actually in a women's studies MA session on feminist knowledge.

[00:38:09] **Maggie O'Neill:** And we were talking about, you know, the, you know, women's, and also kind of links back to a project I did on the walking borders with Jan Haaken, who's a fabulous feminist psychoanalytic psychotherapist filmmaker based in Portland. Also participatory, you know, kind of her work is underpinned by participatory research.

[00:38:28] **Maggie O'Neill:** We were looking at women in the city and where are the signs of women, of women's present representation, women's work, you know, in city spaces. And so with my students, it was like, where are the women in Cork, you know? And we discovered when we walked around that there are very few, you know, few representations.

[00:38:46] **Maggie O'Neill:** There's a bridge named after an age worker, which was you know, kind of voted on by this, by the people of Cork. And there were street names, um, mostly kind of queens, you know, but kind of reflecting British colonialism. And there was a little, it was a statue of an onion seller and an apple seller girl and a boy.

[00:39:08] **Maggie O'Neill:** And so that kind of led to a project. By them and, and community organizations and myself, we created a feminist walk of Cork. So the, you know, sexual violence center, coming back to, you know, the research that you've done and are committed to around, you know, sexual violence, intimate partner violence.

[00:39:29] **Maggie O'Neill:** They took part in the traveler visibility group, to traveler communities are, and, and the, that organization is set up by amazing women, just amazing women. Travelers are probably, you know, the, they're very indexical in Ireland, you know, it's the sort of last form of acceptable racism, you know, racism against traveler communities.

[00:39:50] **Maggie O'Neill:** But also we looked at, you know, women who really made a difference. You know, and so we put women in the topography of the city through this route, through a map, um, which has then become owned, it's a shared, you know, resource. It's

not located in the university. It's located on a website outside of the university. And it was a full collaboration with those organizations. So yeah, so that's just an example of what we can do to circumvent, you know, the academic kind of machine.

[00:40:24] **Patricia Maguire:** And it's a, also a beautiful, powerful example of walking methods so to speak. I mean, it's a different kind of walking, but.

[00:40:32] **Maggie O'Neill:** Yeah, but it then becomes, you know, a kind of way of, so there's a fantastic festival in Cork every year for Mother Jones. I mean, it's a big movement in America. The Mother Jones Movement and in Cork, there's a festival every year. And so we, we launched the walk at the Mother Jones festival. And of course Mother Jones was on the route because she was born in Shandon. And so Shandon's typically quite working-class community of Cork. It's on the north side of the river. And the fact the festival is always fantastic. You know, it's really deeply rooted in, I suppose, working class communities, working class movements and trade unionism.

And so we launched it there and that it's now become a sort of regular, you know, we lead reg, you know, walks in the festival. But it's also used for open days and, you know, it has multiple uses, but it's owned by all of those organisations who took part. It's not owned by, by the university.

[00:41:36] It's, it, there's a, there's a lovely synergy with the university in terms of connecting the university curriculum to communities, um, and what they mean and what they do and how important they are, community organisations, particularly for marginalized communities and, you know, issues such as, you know, sexual violence, coercive control and so on.

[00:41:54] **Patricia Maguire:** And I think you've also at one point produced the [*Participatory Theater and Walking as Social Research Methods Toolkit*](#), and I think that toolkit is, is easily, readily available to people. And we'll certainly have a link to that. To sort of begin to wrap this up now, is there anything else that you came perhaps hoping to talk about or may have been prompted just by some of this dialogue of what you would like to say to listeners about the importance of feminist-informed participatory action research?

[00:42:32] **Maggie O'Neill:** I think, that example that you've used, you know, the participatory arts for research and social action research was a really lovely example that brings together the points we've been talking about. It's a wonderful collaboration with feminists that's been going on for about eight years now. Umut Erel from the Open University, Tracey Reynolds, one of the very few black professors in the UK's Academy, and Erere Kaptani, who's a drama therapist, drama practitioner, theatre practitioner. It has been a really fantastic, joyful experience working with them because of the, you know, the

collaborative focus on feminist participatory action research and the power of theatre, in participatory research and participatory arts.

[00:43:25] We've done some very difficult work together, you know, working with mothers with no recourse to public funds, migrant mums and girls, working through theatre and the arts, but I think you know, their practice and the principles that underpin the collective, you know, mean that there's a very powerful process, structure practice that underpins these principles, you know, of inclusion, collectivities, the importance of the critical recovery of history, of women's history, and particularly the women that we've worked with.

[00:43:58] **Maggie O'Neill:** But also then how the work that we've done with women collaboratively, co-productively, you know, we all take part in the work, it's not them doing research, you know, it's collective experience. Then, you know, has, has emerged in short films, in theatre piece and some really wonderful, work that is accessible to everyone. You know, it's absolutely open access and has led to, you know, self-organized group of women going off and kind of taking the theater-based work themselves around communities, and training for women lead, you know, who were, I suppose, you know, we might call them community leaders, but they're women who are, you know, women who have either got refugee status or seeking it. But who are supporting their communities.

[00:44:51] **Maggie O'Neill** And then now, you know, through the theater-based work through it, kind of exercises, interactive theater, you know, the work of, Augusto Boal, are really taking the kind of support into their communities, you know, for, and supporting people in ways that, you know, are just so, you know, kind of life affirming, you know, addressing racism and incivilities and so on in a way, in ways that maintain their dignity and are really respectful, you know, the experiences and but help give tools to in small ways, obviously but also to support the collective and the collectivities.

[00:45:31] **Patricia Maguire:** You've used the term a couple of times, holding space. Say a little bit about what that phrase means for you, holding space.

[00:45:40] **Maggie O'Neill:** It really kind of relates to a sort of psychosocial and the relational aspect of our work.

I said at the outset that the person's, you know, that I took a woman centered approach to the early work before I learned about participatory research. And it was at a conference in Washington when I was giving a presentation and an academic called Richard Harvey Brown at Maryland told me about participatory research. I forgot to mention that earlier, actually.

And so I then delved into Orlando Fals Borda work and William Foote Whyte and, you know, so I suppose the, the idea of holding space is that, you know, you are, you know, that you

foster and facilitate trust, respect, recognition, you know, that we, and it's also a kind of ethical space as well. So you know that it's a safe space. And so it's, it's hard to describe in terms of structures or, or instructions. But I think it is a sensibility deeply rooted in taking a participatory approach and those values that underpin participatory research.

[00:46:45] **Maggie O'Neill:** And so it's a very far cry from a tokenistic way of doing participatory research to fit a case study that might be an impact case study that will bring money to the university. I mean, of course one can also do that, but you know, the sensibility is deeply rooted in, you know, a kind of, in a respect to trust, a recognition, a mutual recognition of the communities that we work with, you know, that the communities we live and work with and. And I suppose it kind of, you know, and that, that sensibility then affords us, because, you know, generally, it's, you know, the kind of research is led by one or two, or in our case, four people for the PASAR** Project. That kind of sensibility affords us a commitment and a way of doing research, which operationalizes an ethic of care, but it's really about care and trust and well-being and safety.

[00:47:42] **Maggie O'Neill:** So that people can, you know, share and feel safe to share the kinds of issues that are impacting them. And of course that leads us to another kind of whole line of analysis, thinking about ethics. But I think it comes back to that idea about participatory research as a philosophy of life, rather than a method or an approach.

[00:48:04] **Patricia Maguire:** Right, a way of being and doing, essentially.

[00:48:07] **Maggie O'Neill:** Yeah, a way of being and doing. That's much better. That's much more eloquent.

[00:48:12] **Patricia Maguire:** Well, I don't know about that, but well, I want to thank you so much for talking with me today and sharing some small slice of your work with our listeners. So, thank you so much for being with us today.

[00:48:23] **Maggie O'Neill:** Thank you, Patricia. I'm really happy to be with you. It's lovely to meet you. So, thank you.

[00:48:30] **Patricia Maguire:** Well, I want to thank our listeners. Also, you can help us expand our audience by sharing this episode link with your colleagues and networks. A transcript of today's podcast and additional information about Dr. Maggie O'Neill will be posted on our companion website parfemtrailblazers.net.

So that's it for Episode five, Season Two of Participatory Action Research - Feminist Trailblazers and Good Troublemakers. And, as civil rights icon John Lewis urged us, go make some good trouble of your own.

*POW Project - *Prostitution in Nottingham-a woman centered approach*

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