

An exploration of the Nasc Women's Programme: it's impact and potential



Community researchers:

Elvira Espinoza Ahumada, Maram Algharbi, Fadya Ali Ibrahim Alsalam, Soumya Anane, Wendy Chibeka Chimfwembe, Sweety Dlamini, Najma Emhemad, Belan Himdad, Kiren Khalid, Nahla Hamdy Mohammed, Muna Mohammed, Shanaz Murad, Edith Bustoed, Jeddah Desmond, Conach Mairead Gibson Feinblum, Susana Rivera Gonzalez, Ruth Hally, Laura-Jane McCarthy, Kimsor Oeng, Paula O'Leary, Catherine O'Mahony, Marta Pagliuca Pelacani, Emmy Racine, Jeanne Marie Spillane, Rachel Tobin, Neng Wang, Ruija Wang.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

About the Project Partners	2
Introduction to the Collaboration	3
Key Stages of the Partnership	5
1: Group formation	5
2: Collage: “A community I would like to live in”	6
3: Emergence and development of themes	8
4: From discussion to action	10
Conclusion	14

About the Project Partners

This project brought together the participants in and coordinator of the [Nasc Women's Programme](#) with PhD research students in University College Cork to reflect on its strengths, impact and potential.

Each year postgraduate students in University College Cork partner with a community organisation in a module called “Community Based Participatory Research”. The module has been running since 2016 and this year was coordinated by three UCC staff members [Ruth Hally](#) (Centre for the Integration of Research, Teaching and Learning - CIRTL), [Emmy Racine](#) (PPI Ignite) and [Catherine O'Mahony](#) (CIRTL). The module is co-run with [Community Academic Research Links](#) an engaged research initiative at UCC which links community groups with students and staff to explore a research question or challenge of interest to the community group. In 2025, twelve PhD students from across the University signed up to engage in the collaboration. For the duration of the module, the students attend participatory sessions with the community partner one week, and the following week they attend classroom-based sessions with the module coordinators on campus.

The Nasc Women's Programme is an initiative for migrant and refugee women who need support to access education, integration and employment opportunities. The broader organisation Nasc (from Irish word for link) is a non-governmental migrant rights centre based in Cork. The Nasc Women's Programme emerged from an identified need to support migrant and refugee women to find a place in their communities after their arrival in Ireland and to enable them to share their skills and knowledge with the broader community.

Participants in the Nasc Women's Programme met weekly in the South Parish Community Centre and can avail of the following:

- English classes
- Sewing Classes
- Women's Empowerment Project focused on self-advocacy and rights
- Women's Financial Literacy course focused on self-employment, taxation, banking systems, entrepreneurship, social welfare, and cultural differences around bank account access

In addition to the classes provided through the Women's Programme, each participant receives a package of support tailored to her own specific needs and goals.

This report provides a record of what occurred in the collaboration in support of future Nasc Women's Programme activities. It also may be of use to other community groups. A

digital copy of this report can be downloaded from the [Community Academic Research website](#) (scroll to completed projects 2025).

Introduction to the Collaboration

This collaboration emerged from a desire for the Nasc Women's Programme to ensure its offerings and programmes are responsive to participants' needs, ambitions and strengths. The following questions for the CBPR partnership were identified by participants in the Nasc Women's Programme. These questions became the starting point for the partnership and were returned to regularly during the collaboration.

1. What does integration into Irish society look like for you?
2. How could employment or paid work experiences support migrant women to consider themselves a part of Irish/Cork society?
3. What paid opportunities are attractive to migrant women; opportunities that are considerate of their unique circumstances, skills, expertise, and knowledge

The Nasc Women's Programme coordinator recruited a group of women who regularly interact with and access its activities, to take an active part in the collaboration. The group already meet in the community space, so it was familiar to them. UCC had twelve students enrolled on the module and the three module lecturers, bringing the combined group to about **25** people.

The group met on Wednesday mornings for four 2.5-hour sessions from February to March. In these sessions, the large group engaged in a series of exercises to encourage discussion on people's experience in participating in the Nasc Women's Programme and living in Cork. On the 2nd of April 2025, the group came together for a close-out event where final recommendations were shared back to the full group including representation from Nasc management. All participants received certificates at this celebratory event to reflect their role as community researchers.



Figure 1: Presentation of certificates at celebration event marking end of collaboration.

Key Stages of the Partnership

1: Group formation

The first meeting began with a general introduction by Kiren Khalid, Programme Officer in Nasc with responsibility for the coordination of the Nasc Women's Programme. The group was reminded of the broad questions informing the collaboration. This was followed by an ice-breaker activity focused on hobbies and interests to introduce the PhD Students and community partners to each other and begin to forge trust within the group. Following the ice-breaker, the participants engaged in a group activity.

A common point of connection between the Nasc Women's Programme (WP) participants and the PhD students is that of migration. The majority of the members of both groups are not from Cork. Participants were asked to select an image to represent their 'home' country (with the understanding that 'home' can be interpreted differently) and to choose another image reflecting their current country. The selected images were discussed in small groups.

By focusing on shared identities (e.g., migration experiences), power imbalances between students and community members were subtly reduced. The visual activity was an effort to bridge language and cultural barriers and enable equal participation.



Figure 2: Group standing around a round table selecting images for the exercise.



Figure 3: Two contrasting images reflecting home country and new country.

2: Collage: “A community I would like to live in”

The second community session began again with an ice-breaker activity to further strengthen relationships and to reconnect after our time apart.

The participants then moved into an individual activity where they were encouraged to respond to the prompt “*a community I would like to live in*”. The participants were provided with collage making materials and invited to create a collage using words, images, objects etc.

Participants were asked to consider the following sub-prompts as they worked on their individual collages:

- 1: How would you enjoy this community?
- 2: What would you and your loved ones be doing together?



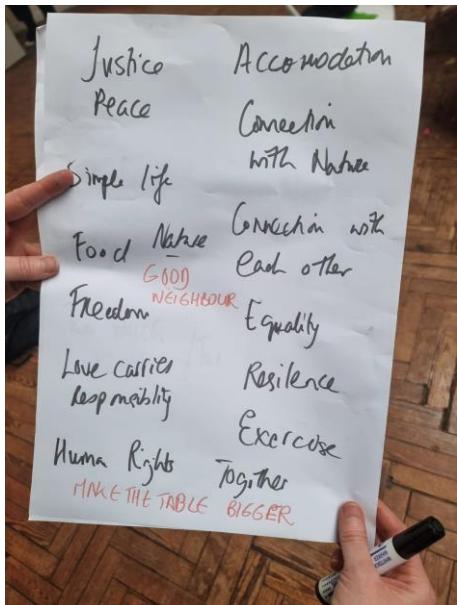
Figure 4: Collection of materials on a table for collage making. Group of people seated at a table making collages.

Participants were seated in larger groups while working on their individual collages. This set up led to organic conversations about the developing collages such as querying what was emerging for people or what certain symbols, phrases or words meant, joking over some of visual choices, expressing frustration with gluing or cutting of images, and similar interactions. The resulting atmosphere strengthened connections between the group participants. Each participant was then invited to share their individual collage with the larger group and to speak briefly about what the various collage elements represented for them.



Figure 5: A collection of colourful collages gathered together on a wooden floor.

In the large group, people suggested what topics were emerging from the collages from what they had seen and heard. These themes were grouped as “What we want” and “What we don’t want” in response to the initial prompt “A community I would like to live in”.



WHAT DO WE WANT	WE DON'T WANT
Justice	Blocked green spaces
Peace	Inequality
Simple Life	
Good Neighbour	
Ability to share and make food	
Nature	
Freedom	
Love carries responsibility	
Connection with nature	
Connection with each other	
Accommodation	
Resilience	
Exercise	
Together	

Figure 6: A list of the key themes as a product of the collage activity.

The collages were collected at the end of the session with the intention of returning to these in the subsequent community meetings.

3: Emergence and development of themes

The third session began with a reminder about the purpose of the collaboration. This return to the central purpose of the collaboration was important as it was the mid-point. Participants engaged in a playful ice-breaker activity to re-energize the group and reconnect.

The participants then spread out between three tables into smaller groups. Each table took 2-3 collages developed by the Nasc Women's Programme (WP) participants and asked questions to gain deeper understanding of these collages and identify themes coming up in the collages. Sticky notes were used to gather together the themes and topics emerging from the collages.



Figure 7: Two images of people engaged in discussion in groups while reviewing collages.

Attention was paid to specific quotes and imagery, and these were carefully transcribed. For example, the quote below was included in one collage which sparked a discussion about the roles of mothers in different cultures.

الجنة تحت أقدام الأمهات

“Paradise sits under the feet of mothers”

The quote and subsequent conversation was interpreted by one participant into a detailed sketch to convey the multitude of roles and identities provided by the mother.



Figure 8: Drawing of female outline with words denoting different roles: hospital, kitchen, school, teacher, country, support, guide, love. These words are translated into Arabic in the second image.

The small groups posted their summary notes on a large board, and these were collected into summary themes.

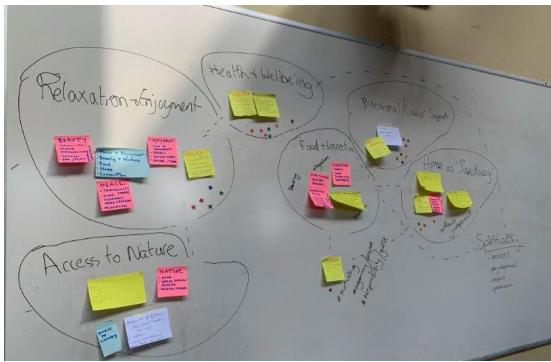


Figure 9: The themes are collected from each group into summary themes on a white board.

Following discussion amongst the larger group, the following 7 themes were identified as being important. The perspectives and preferences of the Nasc Women's programme were to the fore in this decision-making step.

1. Relax/ Peace/ Enjoyment
2. Health, mental health
3. Connection/ Expectations
4. Home
5. Mother
6. Beauty/ Nature/ Access to luxury
7. Job opportunities, professional mentoring/development

4: From discussion to action

The final session with the Nasc Women's Programme and PhD students was focused on moving from discussion to action. Again, the session began with a shared activity, this time a guided meditation. Following this activity the participants moved into smaller groups with the ambition to agree on what topics or themes the Nasc Women's Programme could focus on and to suggest concrete actions to realize these.

The following tables summarize the three main themes arising from this activity. These were agreed to by all participants as being the findings of the collaboration. The group considered the findings from two perspectives, one as actions for the Nasc Women's Programme to pursue or continue developing, the other as actions for the Nasc WP

participants to shape and help develop. The latter is denoted by the symbol in the below table. 

The intention is that these actions act as helpful indicators for Kiren and the Women's Programme when developing a strategic plan and when identifying what funding avenues to pursue.

The second action set reaffirms the Nasc WP women desire to better harness their knowledge and expertise to shape the future of the Nasc WP, and to support others as they themselves were supported as members of the Nasc Women's Programme.

Table 1: Summary of actions proposed in relation to the theme 1.

Theme 1: Home as Sanctuary	
Housing: support with applications and general information	<p>Finding/locating or accessing the correct information relating to housing is difficult. The women welcomed the idea of a housing champion within Nasc while also suggesting information packs in different languages that could be provided to women who have recently arrived in Ireland.</p> <p> ACTION Set up a buddy/mentoring system featuring WP members. Those with experience in accessing housing could guide those who are experiencing difficulties.</p>
Community kitchen	<p>Access to cooking facilities was strongly communicated as a barrier to having a sense of home. The women expressed frustration not being able to gain access to kitchen. The women spoke highly of a previous project and believed a community kitchen has the potential to enable them to cook food they would like, but also provide a sense of community and more agency.</p>
Family events	<p>More social family events e.g. coffee mornings, children's entertainment, storytelling's and festive celebrations. One participant mentioned having somewhere to go with their family to mark the end of Ramadan and spend the evening celebrating with friends and family after fasting was over.</p> <p> ACTION Create opportunity for more social events.</p>

Table 2: Summary of actions proposed in relation to the theme 2.

Theme 2: Relaxation and Well-being* <i>*lack of access to appropriate spaces to pursue activities is a barrier for this theme</i>	
Social Events/ Clubs	A strong desire for more social get-togethers. Tea/coffee once a month, shared meals. Also, clubs or meetups for books, art, film, dance or music (women only). Female- exercise activities, e.g. Zumba and Yoga.
Courses	Nasc WP already runs some language, sewing/crochet, financial courses – they WP participants would like more of these as well as cooking courses, gardening spaces/opportunities, and information sharing events.
Fieldtrip Journeys	A desire for organised days out – for example exploring historic or cultural landmarks; some including families and others for WP participants only
Peer Support	Better access to information around well-being, and physical and mental health. Nasc WP participants would like to share their own experiences with others encountering similar challenges.

Table 3: Summary of actions proposed in relation to the theme 3.

Theme 3: Professional/ Career Support <i>*inadequate childcare support is a barrier for this theme</i>	
Interactions with businesses	Nasc has organised tours to various organisations and businesses, as well as one-on-ones with companies to provide advice. More opportunities like these and visits to locations such as gardening centres/cafes to explore further education and employment options.
Mentorship Programme	This could take the form of a call-out, where Nasc engages with (smaller) businesses and provides information on a website. Building on the outcomes of conversation cafés.
	<p> ACTION</p> <p>WP participants assist in creating a webpage and collecting work and CV advice. This initiative would provide the women with work experience for their own CVs, including skills such as Excel and Word, interview preparation, translation, and</p>

	soft skills like group collaboration, website creation, and PowerPoint presentation.
Volunteering Programme	A volunteering program that would provide both work experience and opportunities for language improvement. However, they emphasized the importance of flexibility, allowing them to participate in their own time. For instance, they suggested volunteering at a charity shop.
Social Enterprise	The idea of using Nasc WP to start a social enterprise, or work in Nasc WP to gain real work experience, so that they can move out into the world having already been employed in Ireland – approaching their own experience and CV with a greater sense of agency and value emerged as a clear need for the Nasc WP participants.

These three themes coalesce into a proposal to create a women-led Nasc Women's Programme advisory/ action group. Such a group would meet on a monthly basis, and participants would have dedicated roles. The group would select key themes to advance such as those emerging from the partnership and also emerging topics of interest.

The purpose of the group would be both social and strategic and enable the WP women to share their experiences, generate ideas regarding the future direction of the Women's Programme and have a role in decision making. This would need to be balanced with unpaid work and opportunities to gain new skills and potential future paid work. One immediate action proposed is to organize "*I wish I knew...*" sessions as a way for established migrant and refugee women to share their learning and insights with newcomers.

While a more concrete terms of reference would need to be drawn up some potential actions for the advisory/action group would include:

- Act as a sounding board and support for Nasc and Kiren
- Advance and initiate core ideas/passions
- Lend organisational support for projects and events e.g. social gatherings
- Help others in the migrant community
- Enable self-actualisation for the WP leaders
- Gain professional and English language skills through volunteering

Conclusion

The collaboration between the UCC PhD students and Nasc Women's Programme provided a creative and reflective space for both groups to connect and learn a little more of each other's lived experiences. The project uncovered the depth of knowledge and leadership potential amongst the Nasc WP women and has suggested actionable next steps in support of reenergising the Nasc Women's Programme and ensuring it is responsive to its participants' knowledge, needs and ambitions. The project also suggested activities that the Nasc WP women could lead on while providing support and community for newer migrants and refugees.