

ACTION THROUGH ART: HOW ARTS-BASED INITIATIVES PROMOTE GENDER EQUALITY

EVIDENCE BRIEF

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Acronyms

DRC	Democratic Republic of the Congo
FGM	female genital mutilation
GBV	gender-based violence
GIZ	Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbei
HIV	human immunodeficiency virus
LAWRS	Latin American Women's Rights Service
LGBTQI+	lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer and intersex (the plus sign represents people with diverse sexual and/or gender identities who identify using other terms)
NGO	non-governmental organisation
OYO	Ombetja Yehinga Organisation
PTSD	post-traumatic stress disorder
SRHR	sexual and reproductive health and rights
SOLA	School of Leadership Afghanistan
VSO	Volunteer Service Overseas
UK	United Kingdom
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
US	United States
USAID	United States Agency of International Development

Glossary

Artivism – term bringing together the words art and activism. It refers to the work of artists who pursue activism through their work and of activists who use art as part of their strategies.

Gender norms – socioculturally defined rules about how a person should behave and present themselves, as well as interact with others, in accordance with their perceived gender. They also inform social expectations of others according to their perceived genders.

Patriarchal norms – oppressive and harmful gender norms that are informed by, and uphold, gender inequality.

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1 Introduction

Art can help drive social justice and advance gender equality. By appealing to people's emotions, drawing attention to issues, stimulating critical thought, exploring solutions and fostering community, art can be used to challenge patriarchal norms, promote gender-equitable norms and strengthen feminist movements. This makes art an important tool for feminist movements and activists (activist artists), as ALIGN's report *The power of feminist activism to change gender norms* (Jiménez Thomas Rodríguez, 2024) shows.

This companion evidence brief focuses on how institutional actors – such as non-governmental organisations (NGOs), intergovernmental institutions and bilateral agencies (see Annex 1 for more details) – also leverage art's strengths to advance gender equality through their development initiatives.¹ This brief examines how these actors use art to advance gender equality – particularly by driving gender norm change – and what evidence there is of their success. In doing so, the brief calls attention to why funding these approaches can be important, especially in the context of growing backlash against the rights of women, girls and LGBTQI+ people (Khan et al., 2023; Browne, 2024; Holmes, 2024; Edstrom et al., 2024).²

The analysis in this brief is grounded in a database which identified 115 arts-based initiatives focusing on gender equality led by institutional actors.³ The database includes initiatives implemented between 2013 and 2023 in over 55 countries, the most prominent being the United States (US), Malawi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Nepal, the United Kingdom (UK), Mexico and Australia. The most prominent region is Africa, where 56 initiatives took or are taking place across 19 countries, followed by North and Central America with 23 initiatives (see Annex 2 for more details on the geographical distribution of initiatives).⁴

The initiatives included in the database span visual, performing and literary arts. Some of the initiatives included in the database may also be categorised as 'edutainment' – an approach that uses games and media to educate about a given topic through entertainment – as edutainment relies heavily on film, and arts-based approaches may also seek to entertain. The database excludes film-based edutainment initiatives when the educational or entertainment component is stronger than the aesthetic component and when initiatives use film to produce mass media and social media educational content. This excludes, for example, 'docu-dramas', a film genre that combines the re-enactment of actual events or a fictional story with documentary style interviews. The database also excludes instances where institutional actors have supported activist work, such as by providing expert insights or monetary resources, as the ownership of the resulting initiatives typically resides with activists. Lastly, the database does not include instances where institutional actors have solely used film to disseminate project results, nor, because of an anticipated high volume, where they have produced documentaries as a form of campaigning (see Annex 3 for more details on the brief's methodology and database inclusion criteria).

¹ For annexes, see separate file at www.alignplatform.org/resources/report-action-through-art-gender-equality.

² This distinction is for analytical purposes. Activism and arts-based initiatives can blur in practice, as movements formalise into organisations and institutions engage in activist work.

³ These include initiatives advancing gender equality within other thematic areas of work, such as migration.

⁴ Where projects occur in multiple countries, they have been counted as separate.

Section 2 discusses the aims institutional actors pursue when using art to promote gender equality. Sections 3-5 delve into the art forms used in these initiatives, their thematic focus and their target audiences, respectively. Section 6 reviews existing evidence on the impact of arts-based approaches to advance gender equality, especially to shift gender norms. The brief concludes by reflecting on the implications of this analysis for the use and funding of arts-based initiatives.

2 Aims pursued

The initiatives incorporated in the database use art to pursue one or more objectives related to gender equality and, thus, deploy art drawing on different theoretical approaches/frameworks.⁵ These can be categorised into the following groups for analytical purposes.⁶ As these objectives can be interrelated, the connections are discussed where relevant.

Amplify women’s and girls’ visibility and voices: as a form of communication, art can help express critiques and experiences of inequality and oppression, as well as demands for social justice (Lacy, 1995; Whittier, 2017; Latorre, 2019; Streeten, 2020). Art can be used, thus, to amplify women's and girls' voices and visibility (e.g. UN Women, 2023; GIZ, 2015). Amplifying women’s and girls’ voices can further their recognition and increase understanding of their perspectives, experiences and needs. In doing so, it can also help raise awareness about a topic and challenge gender norms – especially those around women's leadership and empowerment. A significant subset of the initiatives with this aim focuses on two specific groups: women in politics (including peace-building) and victim-survivors of gender-based violence (GBV).

Raise awareness and/or educate about a topic: literature on arts-based pedagogy and research highlights how art can effectively communicate information (Dewhurst, 2014; Mendonça, 2018; Tarr et al., 2018; Leavy, 2020). It can grab and sustain people’s attention through aesthetics and/or emotion. It can also improve information accessibility by using verbal and non-verbal communication, and by increasing public availability. Initiatives that use art to raise awareness or educate about a given topic harness this potential of art (e.g. Oxfam, n.d.; MHIN, 2018; Shearson et al., 2022). A subset of these initiatives may seek to prompt people into individual action by providing them with information that is critical to prevent, respond to or eliminate gender inequality (for example, how to identify and respond to GBV). Others aim to mobilise people or increase support for collective action, such as those working with power-holders (e.g. Imami Consultants, 2016; Omarshah and Navarrete, n.d.; SFC, 2014; Kabelka et al., 2023).

Art can call into question normalised beliefs, attitudes and behaviours.



Challenge patriarchal gender norms:⁷ art can call into question normalised beliefs, attitudes and behaviours. Art can prompt self-reflection by being, for example, a tool to explore the consequences of harmful beliefs or engage with more complex understandings of a given issue (Milbrandt, 2010; Finley, 2017; Collier and Eastwood, 2022). Initiatives with this aim also use art to elicit exchanges, either by providing content for people to discuss or by allowing them to explore and express their thoughts

⁵ Some of these overlap with those covered in ALIGN's report *The power of feminist activism to change gender norms*, which discusses how activism can support gender norm transformation (Jiménez Thomas Rodríguez, 2024).

⁶ Categorisation relies on stated project objectives, focusing solely on arts-based components in multi-faceted initiatives. Unstated outcomes are discussed in Section 6.

⁷ This and the next category include initiatives addressing gender-related beliefs and practices, even if they don't explicitly mention gender norm change. Initiatives in these categories may pursue gender norm change as a way of accomplishing other aims, such as increased use of sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) services (see Table 2, Ma'ana Fe Al-Dawar project).

non-verbally (e.g. TMI Project, n.d.; UNFPA, 2020a; IIH, 2023; Crisp and Taket, 2023). A few initiatives use art, more specifically, to support dialogue around difficult or sensitive issues. Speaking about a fictitious character can help people feel less vulnerable, less exposed to being 'called out' and less defensive (e.g. Rich, 2010; UNDP, 2022).

Explore, articulate and advance gender-equitable norms and other solutions: art can be a tool to imagine otherwise (Bell, 2020). It is a tool to explore possibilities; nurture feelings of hope and empathy; articulate these feelings into visions of social change; and communicate them to others (Quinn, 2006; Quinn et al., 2012; McKee, 2016; Borrillo, 2021). Art, thus, can be used to advance gender-equitable norms and other solutions (e.g. Rich, 2010; USAID, 2016; Rosete, 2024). Some initiatives with this aim also draw on how arts-based approaches, in particular participatory ones (see Section 3), can foster kinaesthetic learning⁸ by providing, for example, the space to discover and practise doing things differently (Forcer et al., 2022).

Support people's well-being: as literature on art and psychology highlights, art can be a tool to offer psychological support and aid recovery after individual or collective trauma (Talwar, 2018; Guerra et al., 2019; Bräuchler, 2022; Campbell and Jankowitz, 2024). The practice of making art may help validate feelings, process painful experiences, reduce anxiety and fear, and provide sensory relief (Malchiodi, 2011; Malchiodi and Miller, 2011). Initiatives of this type use art to provide an entry point to difficult conversations, help people express difficult and/or painful experiences – verbally and non-verbally – and help them regain a sense of agency (e.g. UNHCR, 2017). Most of the initiatives within this category focus on GBV victim-survivors.

Nurture skills: art can also be a tool for people to advocate for their rights – or the rights of others (Kabelka et al., 2023). Thus, some initiatives focus on supporting the ability of women, girls or other key stakeholders (such as teachers or youth) to use arts-based approaches (e.g. TfaC, 2018, 2019; Clark, 2019).⁹ Art can also be a tool to nurture skills that are central to gender-equitable norms, such as emotional literacy (e.g. Shearson et al., 2022).

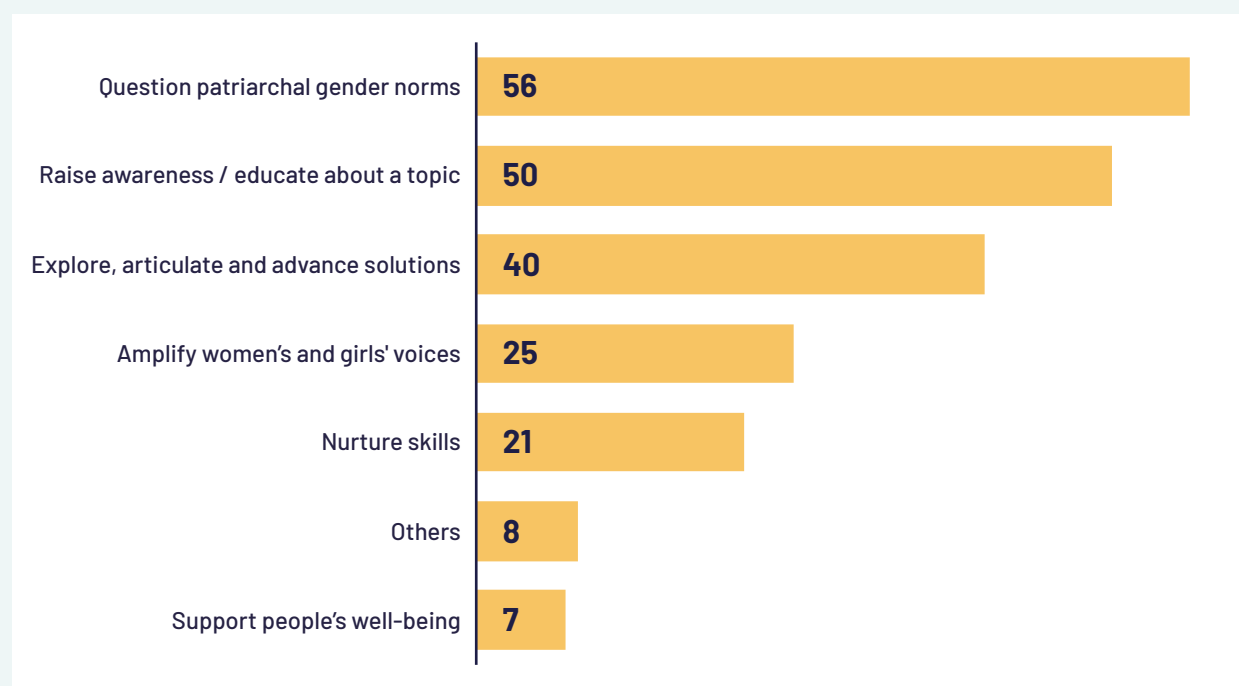
Others: art can also help re-appropriate spaces where GBV is common. Various initiatives have used art to symbolically occupy or reconfigure spaces (e.g. Long Walk Home, n.d.; Shearson et al., 2022). As art and peace studies highlight, art can bring people together across social divides, promoting understanding and empathy (Cohen, 2015; Guerra et al., 2019; Bräuchler, 2022; Campbell and Jankowitz, 2024; Niang et al., 2023). Initiatives aiming to work with power-holders may not only aim to raise their awareness, but also to strengthen their connection to community members.

Figure 1 shows the number of initiatives associated with each objective and Table 1 briefly discusses an example of each.

⁸ Kinaesthetic learning involves physical activity, such as touching, moving one's body or carrying out hands-on tasks.

⁹ Initiatives of this type may simultaneously contribute to amplifying the voices and visibility of women and girls.

Figure 1: Objectives pursued



Source: Based on database compiled by authors with a total of 115 initiatives. Initiatives may pursue more than one objective.

Table 1: Examples of initiatives per aim

Aim	Example
Amplify women's voice and visibility	Oxfam's project #WomensWall in the Solomon Islands in 2016–2019 sought to raise the visibility of women leaders by encouraging women to express their ideas of gender equality and/or experiences of gender inequality through a street mural competition. The project was part of Oxfam's ongoing Basta/ Say Enough campaign (Oxfam, 2020).
Raise awareness/ educate about a topic	A project between Honduran Filmmakers Collective and UN Women showcases the work of (mostly indigenous) female filmmakers that addresses GBV. The purpose of the project was to raise awareness of GBV from an intersectional feminist lens and prompt discussions (Spotlight Initiative, 2021a).
Question patriarchal gender norms	The Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) in Niger worked with local artists in 2023 to produce a feminist adaptation of Nāima's Adventure , a Nigerian fairy tale. The play, which also used music, dance, poetry slam, and interactive segments, aimed to subvert and offer a thought-provoking exploration of patriarchal gender roles (GIZ, 2023).
Articulate and communicate solutions and gender-equitable norms	Comprehensive Medical Response Clinics for GBV (2020), run by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), sought to prompt healthcare staff in Egypt to adopt equitable gender norms to improve the service provided to victims-survivors of GBV. In addition to running capacity-building workshops with doctors and nurses, the project used drama and films to pursue a 'values clarification for action and transformation' approach (UNFPA, 2020b).
Support people's well-being	The project Prevention and Response to Sexual and Gender-based Violence ran by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Egypt and CARE International aimed to strengthen GBV prevention and response for Syrian refugees. The arts-based component of this project – art therapy – aimed to help GBV victims-survivors process their experiences of violence, improve their self-esteem and break the taboos surrounding discussing GBV (UNHCR, 2017).
Nurture skills	Lead Girls Initiative was a project by Rise Up in Guatemala in 2013 that aimed to support girls' activism by teaching them how photography and film can be used for storytelling and how storytelling can be an advocacy tool (Rise Up, n.d.).

Aim	Example
Others	<p>Reclaiming spaces: South Gippsland Shire Council (Australia) and VicHealth developed Girls' Own Space in 2019. Responding to community concerns about GBV in four towns, the project aimed to enhance women's and girls' safety and visibility in public spaces. To reclaim these spaces, the project used street art in two towns, film in one, and urban architecture in another (Shearson et al., 2022).</p> <p>Community building: The theatre project You the Man of Deakin University (Australia) has been carried out since 2001. It aims to prevent and raise awareness of GBV by promoting bystander interventions among men, as well as end victim-blaming, strengthen communities and galvanise stakeholders to effect change. The play (30–35 min) is followed by a panel discussion including staff from local NGOs (Plourde et al., 2016; Crisp and Taket, 2023).</p>

- i. *A values clarification for action and transformation approach is used to explore and redefine personal and collective values, beliefs and attitudes in order to address the biases that may influence people's actions. The approach is based on critical and feminist methodologies (UNICEF and UNFPA, 2024).*

To pursue one or more of these goals, the initiatives included in the database used an arts-based approach by:

- **Encouraging art through calls:** organisations encourage artists or community members to produce an artistic piece as a way of reflecting on an issue, expressing their views and ideas, proposing solutions, etc. For example, UN Women and the Generation Equality Forum released a call in 2021 inviting artists to express what gender equality meant to them and their vision of a gender-equal future, making the submissions publicly available online (UN Women, 2021).
- **Supporting the creation of artistic pieces:** organisations collaborate with external artists to produce a standalone piece or an exhibition which becomes publicly available for a specific time or indefinitely. For instance, UN Women, in collaboration with over 100 feminist artists from Europe and Central Asia, published a collection of 28 children's stories that aim to inspire gender norm change (Walsh et al., 2022). Advocacy and commemoration campaigns often use art in this way. For example, in 2019, in the context of the 16 Days of Activism against GBV, UN Women and TSE Art Destination created an exhibition in Kazakhstan to raise awareness about GBV and contest the stigma of discussing it (UNICEF, 2019). The pieces produced in these initiatives may also be used to work with others (as discussed next).
- **Using art to work with others:** organisations use art as a tool to run workshops or similar spaces on specific gender-related topics and prompt reflections, facilitate discussions and/or explore solutions, in order to spur change at the individual or community level or to drive policy or legal change. For example, Sin Fronteras ('No Limits'), run by Latin American Women's Rights Service (LAWRS), employs visual art, dance, and music to bolster the self-esteem of Latin American girls in the UK and empower them to advocate for their rights as girls and migrants (LAWRS, n.d.).¹⁰

There is a tendency for calls and artwork initiatives to be very short, ranging from one day to a few months. Exceptions to this include street art and online campaigns, which often have indefinite lifespans. The initiatives that tended to last longer were those involving group/community work, running for up to 12 months. However, initiatives that had a longer time span usually involved multi-site initiatives and their length may not be indicative of time spent working with a particular group of individuals.¹¹

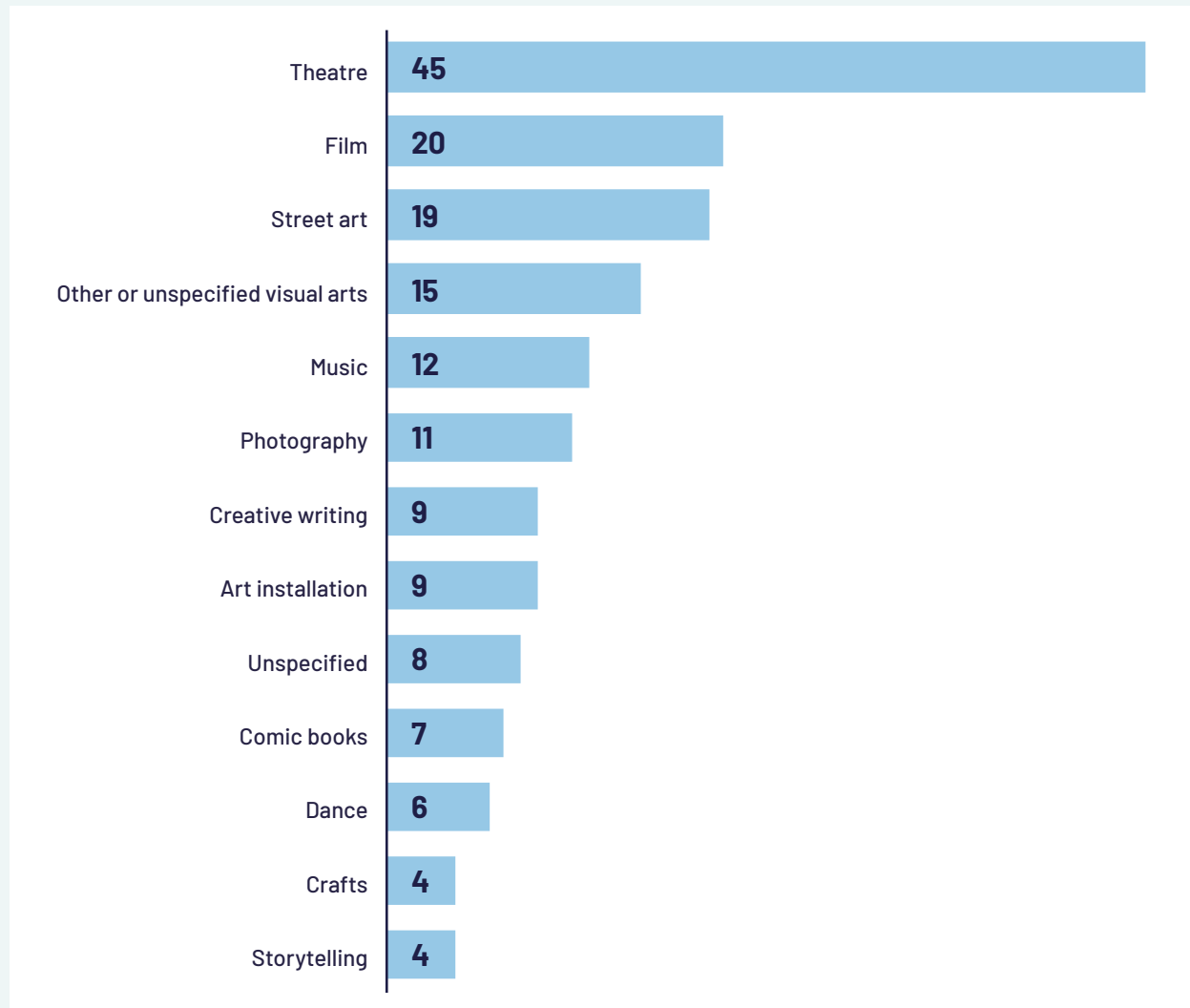
¹⁰ The project also includes sports activities, mental health support, personal development and leadership training, among other components.

¹¹ In many cases, there is a lack of information or inconsistency between sources regarding the duration of many of the arts-based projects documented.

3 Art forms used

The initiatives found use a wide variety of arts and, often, more than one art form. Theatre, film and street art were the most commonly used (see Figure 2).¹² When considering art categories, however, visual arts (film, photography, street art, installations, etc.) predominate over performing arts (theatre, dance and music), with visual arts featuring in 81 of the 115 initiatives. Table 2 discusses an example per art form.

Figure 2: Art forms used



Source: Based on database compiled by authors with a total of 115 initiatives. Initiatives may pursue more than one art form.

¹² While theatre strongly predominates, film may be under-represented in the brief's database, as it only includes projects using film for group work and thus excludes standalone film productions.

Table 2: Examples of arts-based initiatives by type of art used

Art form	Example
Theatre	Ma'ana Fe Al-Dawar was a 2019 initiative by Egypt's Ministry of Health and Population, UNFPA and the US Agency of International Development (USAID). It aimed to contest patriarchal norms through theatre in order to increase the demand and use of family planning and reproductive health services. The play was performed by local youth in nine governorates and expanded to other topics, such as positive parenting and male involvement in child development (JSI, n.d., 2022).
Film (short/long)	The mini-series C'est la Vie ('That's Life') was created by Circuit Pointe in Senegal. Between 2019 and 2020, it was screened in biweekly film clubs in various rural communities in two regions to increase knowledge on GBV and change gender norms surrounding female genital mutilation (FGM) and child marriage. The film clubs also included post-screening discussions and workshops to reinforce the series' messages (LePort et al., 2022).
Street art	The Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare of Roraima (Brazil), UNHCR, UNFPA and the International Organization for Migration aimed to raise awareness of GBV among Venezuelan migrant communities in Brazil through street art. The project, A Violência Contra a Mulher Não Tem Fronteira ('Violence Against Women Has No Borders'), implemented in 2017, invited Venezuelan and Brazilian women to create, guided by local artists, messages of empowerment on a wall near a migrant shelter in Roraima. Before creating the mural, Brazilian and Venezuelan women gathered to discuss women's rights and GBV (ACNUR, 2017).
Art installations	The installation What Were You Wearing? showcases 103 outfits worn by survivors at the time they were sexually attacked. Created by UN Women under the Spotlight Initiative, the installation aims to highlight the pervasiveness of GBV and contest victim-blaming, as well as ease the isolation often experienced by victims-survivors of GBV (Spotlight Initiative, 2022).
Comic books	Search for Common Ground worked in the Bidi Bidi refugee camp in Uganda with children and youth (ages 16–24) and healthcare staff to increase bystander practices, reduce the stigma around GBV and increase post-exposure prophylaxis knowledge. ⁱ The project, called Ngutulu Kagwero ('Agents of Change') and piloted in 2020, consisted of a peer-facilitated workshop that explored the social, sexual and psychological dimensions of GBV, bystander interventions, and post-rape clinical care. In the workshop, participants were asked to complete a participatory comic book based on the testimonies of refugee youth and victims-survivors of GBV (gathered through qualitative research in a previous stage)(Logie et al., 2021) ⁱⁱ
Photography	The project Art for a Better Democracy (2019) – run by the city of Bayside (Australia), VicHealth and Australian artist Ponch Hawke – selected 171 women through community-based nomination to recognise their leadership in sports, arts, politics, business, social justice and media. Their portraits showed them wearing fake moustaches and were placed in lieu of the predominantly male portraits in council chambers. The aim was to raise awareness of the low representation of women in local government, question gender prejudices of men as more capable/suited for political work and encourage more women to participate in government. The exhibition was accompanied by a workshop to support women to run for council and other dissemination events (Shearson et al., 2022).
Other visual arts (painting, drawing, print-making and sculpture)	Mujeres en las Artes ('Women in the Arts') in Honduras, supported by UN Women under the Spotlight Initiative, used drawing, painting, illustrations and theatre to engage young people in challenging gender stereotypes and norms that perpetuate GBV and in envisioning solutions (Spotlight Initiative, 2019).
Creative writing and storytelling	In 2017, the TMI Project and Call to Men held workshops with adolescent boys in New York (US) that used memoir writing and storytelling as a way of prompting boys to challenge ideas about masculinity and help them redefine it in more gender-equitable ways. The workshops are captured in the documentary Locker Room Talk (TMI Project, n.d.).

Art form	Example
Music	In 2017, Girl Effect supported the creation of Zathu , a Malawian music band that aims to inspire changes among adolescent girls and young women by contesting the separation between boys and girls, early marriage, and GBV, and raising awareness about teenage pregnancy and human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) risk. Their songs challenge stereotypical gender roles and aim to provide positive models for girls-boys relations. They also have a biweekly radio show, a magazine and a talk show (UN Women, 2018).
Dance	In 2021, the Ombetja Yehinga Organisation (OYO) in Namibia implemented the project OYO Dance Troupe: Girls in Schools , which sought to eliminate child marriage and reduce teenage pregnancy to encourage girls to complete their schooling. The project comprised the performance of three contemporary dance pieces: 'Maria', looking at forced marriage, and 'I have a choice' and 'Teacher', looking at teenage pregnancy. These were performed in schools in the Kavango East and West regions and followed by discussions with students (OYO, 2021). ⁱⁱⁱ
Crafts	Balit Bagurrk: Strong Aboriginal Women of the Yarra Ranges was a project implemented in 2019 by the Yarra Ranges Council and VicHealth (Australia). The project consisted of workshops with Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander women leaders to learn about their life stories and collect testimonies, poems, artwork and photographs. The workshops and material collected was published in the form of a book in order to increase the visibility and celebrate the stories of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander women leaders. The project included craft workshops as a way to provide an opportunity for women of different generations to connect and share their stories with each other (Shearson et al., 2022).

- i. Post-exposure prophylaxis knowledge is a short medical treatment to prevent HIV after a possible exposure.
- ii. The use of comic books with healthcare staff/students is known as 'graphic medicine'. It has also been adapted to street art (e.g. Lee, n.d.).
- iii. The project also consisted of community screenings of a film on child marriage, a magazine on teenage pregnancy, inter-generational community dialogues led by girl participants and facilitated through arts-based components (music, drama, poems, etc.), and individual counselling. Other components of the initiatives could not happen because of Covid-19.

The predominance of theatre compared to other art forms (excluding film, as this may be under-represented in the database) is probably related to Augusto Boal's work on participatory theatre.¹³ Participatory art approaches involve the audience in the creative process of making art (at any stage). While theatre predominates also within this group, numerous initiatives in the database use one or more art forms in a participatory format.

Boal proposed to use theatre as a tool to bring about social transformation, based on Paulo Freire's (1979) work on emancipatory pedagogies, which aimed to help marginalised groups and individuals contest injustice. Boal's *Theatre of the oppressed* (1974) presents a variety of models or ways in which theatre can be used for this purpose (see Box 1 for a discussion of one of them: forum theatre). Thus, the predominance of theatre-based initiatives is probably related to the existence of clear techniques with this art form and their relation to Freirean pedagogical approaches.

¹³ Participatory theatre can be known as interactive theatre or, more generally, as theatre of the oppressed.

Box 1: Forum theatre

Most of the initiatives using participatory theatre use forum theatre, one of the models or techniques developed by Boal.

As with the other techniques proposed by Boal, forum theatre blurs the boundaries between performers and audience, transforming the latter into what Boal calls 'spect-actors'. It involves performing the same play multiple times: first by the designated actors, and then by audience members in lieu of some or all actors. This aims to strengthen people's agency to address a given social problem, and to create a space to discuss, exchange and learn about different ways of addressing or responding to a situation.

Participatory theatre initiatives follow these same steps, in some cases adding a new component. They may involve the community, or group of interest, in the making of an initial script of the play; or a group of artists may create it based on preliminary qualitative research with the community or group in question. This creates space for the community/group to shape what the play will be about (to different degrees) and for it to respond to their needs and/or interests. For example, a University of Toronto team developed a participatory theatre project to reduce stigma and promote health equity among LGBTQI+ individuals in Eswatini and Lesotho in 2017. Interviews with LGBTQI+ communities informed the creation of a two-hour participatory theatre experience aimed at medical students, healthcare staff and community members. The performance featured three skits on stigma and discrimination in different settings: healthcare institutions, families and communities (McNeil et al., 2018).

Some initiatives may also include a space for discussion after the various iterations of the play come to an end.

The Interactive Theatre for Justice model created by Theatre for a Change also allows the community or group to decide who the audience will be – that is, whom the play will address – based on who the group wants to influence with their story (Borcherding, 2018).

This technique has been adapted to radio. For example, Theatre for a Change's *Tisinthe!* ('Let's Change!') is a radio programme that incorporates storytelling and participatory theatre. Listeners can call in after hearing a story, assume a character and test different behaviours to try to change the outcome of the story. The programme, which launched in Malawi in 2011 and remained on air as of 2024, aims to raise awareness about gender equality, sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), GBV and violence against children, and to transform the social norms sustaining these practices (Shutt, 2019; Kabelka et al., 2023, see Figure 3, p.16).

Initiatives may not only use arts-based methods but combine them with other activities, either to work with other constituencies, work with the same group in different ways, or provide services. For example, Search for Common Ground and the Abaad-Resource Centre for Gender Equality carried out a project in Lebanon between 2021 and 2022 that aimed to challenge the gender norms that sustain GBV and child marriage. The project, named Towards a Gender Equitable Society, included mobile units that provided mental health and psychosocial support through arts-based techniques (drama therapy, dance therapy, drawing/painting, sculpture) as well as support groups, information about GBV with women and girls, and self-defence workshops. The units, moreover, were complemented with GBV prevention and response services and training with media professionals to enhance their capacity to produce films that promote gender equality (Saungweme and Tayyar, 2022, see Figure 8, p.23).

Figure 3: A glimpse of Theatre for a Change's *Tisinthe!*



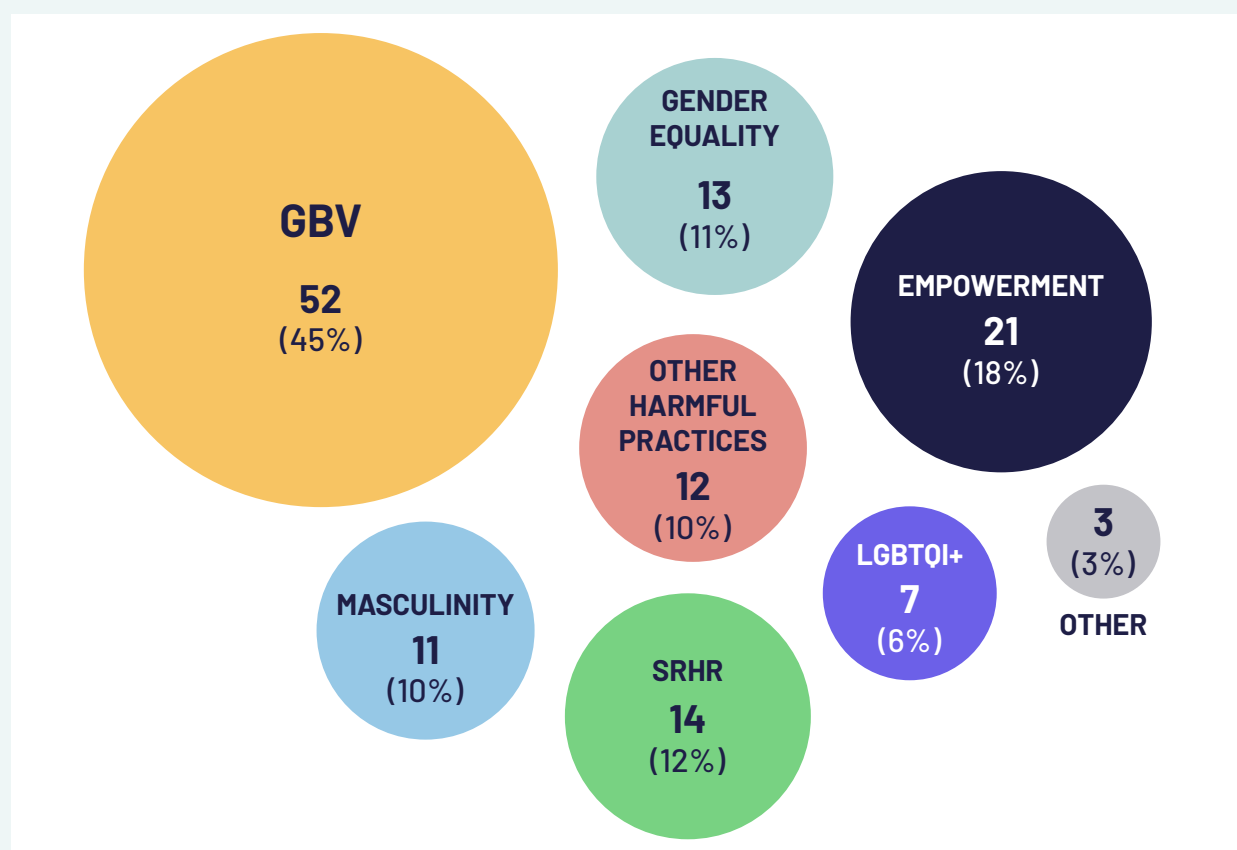
Credit: Courtesy of Theatre for a Change

4 Themes addressed

The initiatives included in the database focus on a range of topics: GBV, women’s (economic and/or political) empowerment, masculinity, SRHR, other harmful practices (i.e. child marriage and FGM), discrimination against LGBTQI+ people, and gender equality, more broadly.

As Figure 4 shows, 52 out of the 115 of the documented initiatives focus on and/or address GBV.¹⁴ Because of the relationship between masculinity and GBV, the majority of those focusing on masculinities do so with the (partial) aim of eliminating GBV and/or discrimination against LGBTQI+ people (Messner et al., 2015; Fahlberg and Pepper, 2016; Tereškinas, 2023).¹⁵

Figure 4: Thematic focus of arts-based interventions



Source: Based on database compiled by authors with a total of 115 initiatives. Initiatives may have more than one thematic focus. Values have been rounded.

¹⁴ Initiatives classified as ‘other’ focus on human trafficking (1), beauty norms (1) and unpaid care work (1). Those classified under ‘gender equality’ are initiatives that do not have specific topics or that cover a wide range of issues.

¹⁵ These are included in both the numbers under the GBV and masculinity categories.

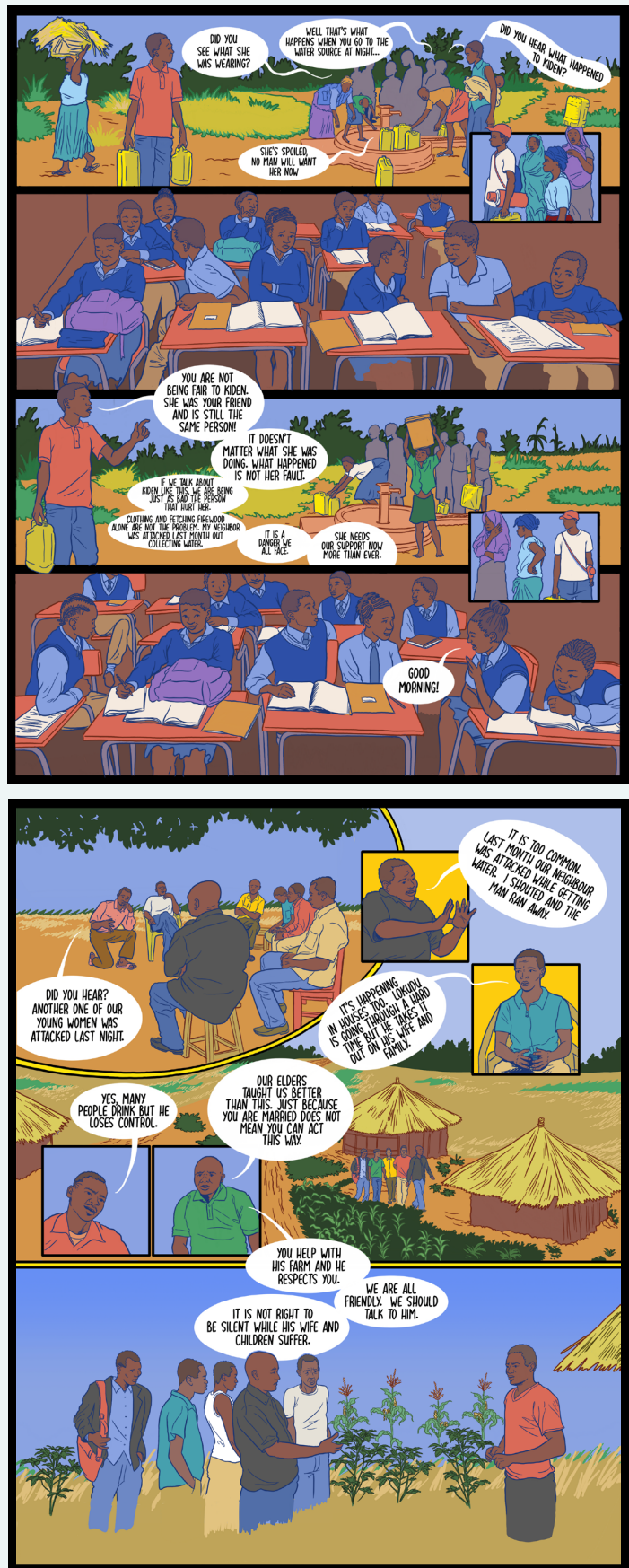
Theatre is the most common art form used to address these themes, with the exception of the use of film to address harmful practices. For the theme of women's empowerment, photography and street art is almost as prominent as theatre. The prominence of these two forms of visual arts is linked to their use or presence in public or symbolic spaces and their ability to increase women's visibility in a literal and tangible way.

Many of these initiatives approach these issues from an intersectional perspective – that is, from a lens that takes into account and responds to how gendered experiences are shaped by other social identities – such as race, class, sexuality and age. For example, Colors of Connection and the School of Leadership Afghanistan (SOLA) partnered in 2021, after SOLA relocated to Rwanda, due to the Taliban takeover of the country, to foster the well-being of Afghan girls. They used street art to support Afghan girls to process their recent experiences of displacement, to develop their communication and leadership skills, express and nurture their ambitions, and strengthen their sense of community (Colors of Connection, n.d.; see Figures 5 and 6). This can also be seen in various of the examples previously discussed – for example, the project *A Violência Contra a Mulher Não Tem Fronteira*, which focused on specific GBV-related needs in migrant communities, and *Ngutulu Kagwero*, which focused on the SRHR-related needs of refugee youth.

Initiatives with a participatory component are best placed to work with an intersectional lens, as this allows them to foreground the needs of specific groups or communities. Adopting an intersectional lens allows organisations, in turn, to fine-tune their initiatives (increasing the project's potential impact) and advance other social justice issues simultaneously. For example, in their ongoing GBV-related programme *Girl/Friends Leadership Institute*, which comprises a five-week activism training for girls to amplify their voices and visions, *Long Walk Home* addresses the specific needs of Black American girls by not only focusing on GBV, but also on police brutality and gun violence (Long Walk Home, n.d.).

An intersectional perspective is, however, notably missing from masculinity-focused initiatives. This may indicate a desire to design and implement initiatives with as wide an audience as possible, instead of limiting it to specific sub-groups of men and boys, and increase the project's potential impact. However, it may also indicate a limited understanding of the complex lives of men and boys and how other social identities interact with their gender, or a tendency to homogenise men and boys as (potential) perpetrators.

Figures 5 and 6: Search for Common Ground's Ngutulu Kagwero: comic book panels



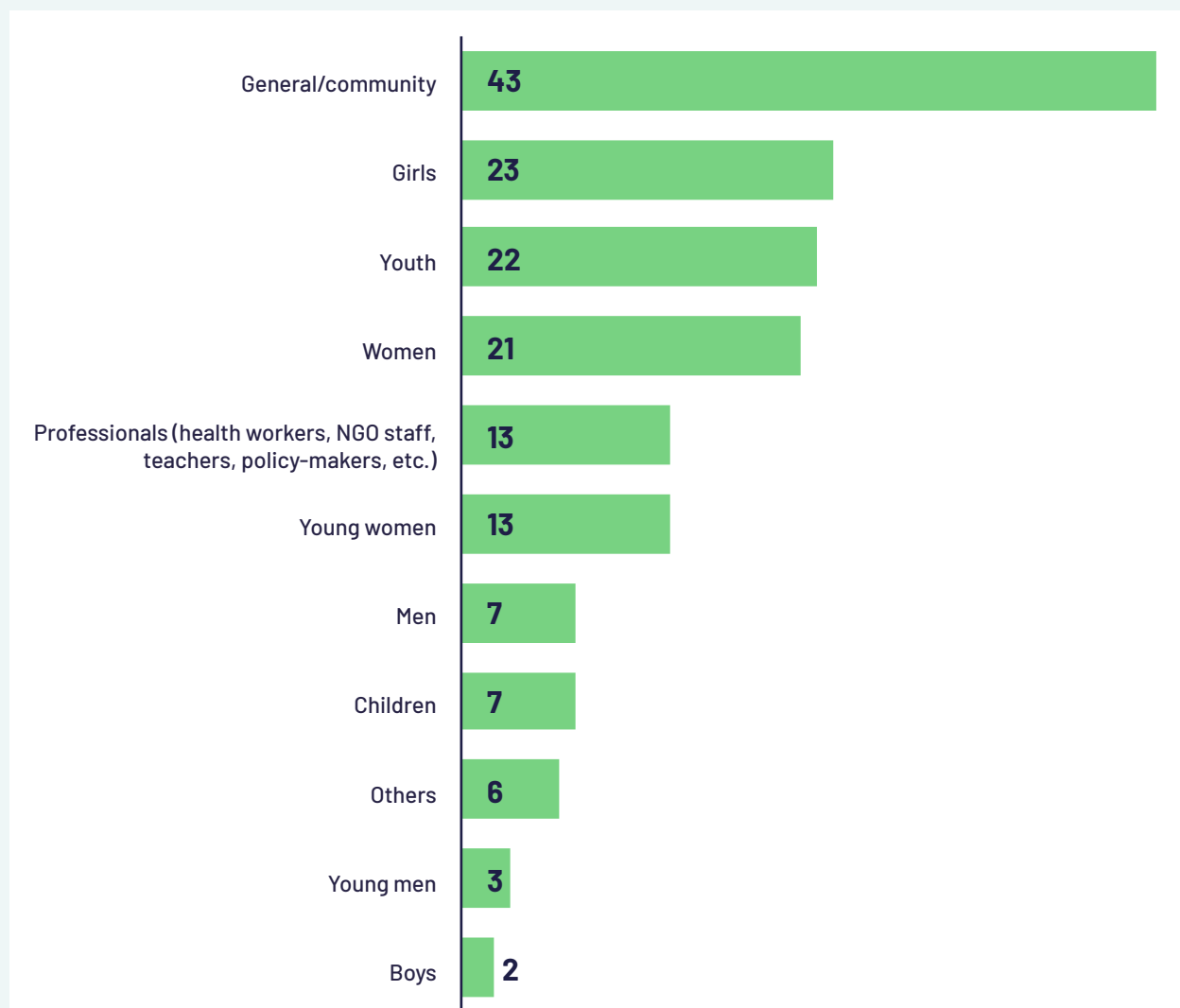
Credit: ©Carmen Logie (author) and Petroglyph Studios (artist). Source: Logie et al., 2023.

5 Intended audience

The initiatives included in the database are divided by those that work with specific groups or audiences (one or more) and those that aim to reach an unspecified audience at the community level or wider. Of the 115 initiatives, 93 had a specific audience in mind, while 22 did not.

As Figure 7 shows, most of the initiatives with particular groups in mind work with children (32, including initiatives working with only girls or boys) and with youth (38, including initiatives working with only young women or young men).

Figure 7: For whom are arts-based initiatives designed?



Source: Based on database compiled by authors with a total of 115 initiatives. Initiatives often had more than one target group.

Project webpages and documents provide limited insights into why organisations choose an arts-based approach. However, the numbers in Figure 7 could indicate a tendency to see art, and thus choose arts-based work, as a way of reaching children and young people – either because art might generate interest to participate in a project that otherwise would have not been appealing to these groups or because arts-based work might increase the project’s desired impact when working with them.

A significant subset of the initiatives aimed at a specific audience had a dual audience or group in mind. This usually entailed first working with a particular group to create or co-create an artistic piece as a way of prompting change within that group and then sharing the artistic piece resulting from that work with a different group (e.g. policy-makers, religious leaders, etc.) or a broader audience. This could also indicate that organisations see arts-based approaches as useful for working at multiple levels, targeting individuals, groups, communities and/or society as a whole.

As fewer initiatives worked specifically with men and boys (12 versus 57 aimed at women and girls), there is a potential gap in the use of art to challenge and transform harmful masculinity norms, a topic further examined in the conclusion.¹⁶

16 The categories of women and girls include two more specific groups: women and girls who are victim-survivors of GBV and women in sex work.

6 Impact evidence

Further research is needed to evaluate the impact of arts-based initiatives. Of the 115 initiatives documented, only 32 have been evaluated in some form, including through midline and/or endline reports.¹⁷

The geographical distribution of evaluated initiatives coincides with the overall geographical distribution of the database, as 16 of the 32 evaluations are of initiatives in one or more African countries, and as two of the countries that featured most in the database do so also within the subset of evaluated initiatives: Malawi (with 7 evaluated initiatives) and Australia (with 5). North and Central America, however, is not the second most prominent region in this group, but Oceania, given the number of evaluated initiatives in Australia.

This is also the case when considering art form and theme. Theatre also predominates within this subset, as 20 of the 32 evaluated initiatives use this art form, followed by film with 7 evaluated initiatives. Similarly, initiatives focusing on GBV also predominate among those evaluated, with 18 of them working on this issue. However, the second most prominent theme is other harmful practices rather than women's empowerment (see Annex 4 for more details).

However, as more than half of the evaluations come from a few organisations – mainly Theatre for a Change (12), VicHealth (5) and Search for Common Ground (4) – or universities (5), the existence of impact assessments is also clearly a result of institutional priorities, values and resources.¹⁸

Quantitative and mixed-methods evaluations dominate among available assessments, accounting for 20 of the 32 evaluations. Quantitative approaches, either on their own or as part of a mixed-methods approach, primarily entailed pre- and/or post-treatment surveys. Purely qualitative studies were less common, accounting for only nine studies.¹⁹

Box 2: Initiatives without evaluations

In initiatives without formal evaluations, impact is often measured by output-driven metrics like the number of people reached, the number of views (especially for online content) or anecdotal evidence. For example, Project Khel's ongoing Red Spot project in India, which uses arts-based methods and games to educate girls and young women about menstruation, assesses its impact primarily through its annual direct reach. This approach is common in initiatives that involve art calls or the creation of artworks (discussed in Section 2), as it can be challenging to quantify the extent to which these initiatives achieve their goals.

¹⁷ This number includes a pilot evaluation (Logie et al., 2021) but does not include any forthcoming evaluations. Of the 32 evaluations, 26 are available online. Details of the 6 other evaluations are available elsewhere – either on project websites or in Theatre for a Change's meta-evaluation (Kabelka et al., 2023).

¹⁸ The prevalence of these organisations among the evaluated initiatives influences their geographical distribution and the focus on theatre.

¹⁹ Three of these evaluations became unavailable after the project ended and methodological details could not be retrieved. The nine studies mentioned also include the evaluation of Nzotheke, as the participatory theatre component of the project was solely assessed qualitatively (see Annex 4 for more details).

6.1 Results

The robustness and relevance of available evaluations varies (see Annex 4 for a summary discussion of each and Box 2 for a discussion of initiatives without evaluations). Of the 32 project evaluations, 30 are useful when evaluating the impact of arts-based approaches.²⁰ Even when carried out with relatively small samples, available assessments provide overall positive evidence that speaks tentatively to how art can be used successfully to:

Amplify women's and girls' visibility and voices: 7 of the 30 evaluated initiatives aimed to amplify girls' and women's voices. All found positive impacts on this objective. For example, the evaluation of the Australian project *Balit Bagurrk* (see Table 2) found that 100% of respondents agreed that the project raised the visibility of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and 76.7% reported their knowledge about them increased (Shearson et al., 2022). The evaluation of *Framed by Gender* – a project by VicHealth and an Australian municipality that took place in 2019 and used music, storytelling and visual arts to challenge traditional gender norms and foster positive gender relationships – also found that 82% of respondents (44) felt that the project had increased the visibility of women in the community (ibid.). The mixed-methods evaluation of *La Voix de la Go* ('The Voice of the Girl') – a project in 2014 by Search for Common Ground in Côte d'Ivoire which used film to increase girls' and young women's self-expression, among other objectives – found that 87% of participants felt more able to express their concerns in public as a result of the project (Angbeni and Kanyatsi, 2014).

Raise awareness and/or educate about a topic: 15 of the 30 evaluated initiatives pursued this objective; all document overall positive impacts. The evaluation of *Girls Own Space* – a project by VicHealth and another Australian municipality that used street art and film (and urban architecture) to increase GBV awareness – found that 100% of respondents reported both increased awareness of gender inequality and increased knowledge of gender equality. Similarly, the evaluation of *Theatre for a Change and Women in Dignity Alliance's 2016 Sex Workers' Network Project* – which used participatory theatre (among other components) to improve the well-being of women in sex work and girls at risk of sexual exploitation – found the project successfully raised knowledge about SRHR, from 25% at baseline to 95% at endline, and dispelled HIV myths with 95% of participants (Kabelka et al., 2023).²¹ Various evaluations also underscored the effectiveness of arts-based approaches in raising awareness. The pilot evaluation of *Ngutulu Kagwero* found that using comic books generated particular interest among youth and healthcare staff to discuss GBV (Logie et al., 2021). The evaluation of OYO's dance-based project, *Girls in School*, highlights how using dance successfully expanded outreach by using non-verbal communication (OYO, 2021).

Challenge gender norms: 21 of the evaluated initiatives pursued this objective, with most reporting positive impacts (see Box 3 for a discussion of initiatives with limited outcomes). For example, the evaluation of *Towards a Gender Equitable Society* (discussed in Table 2) found that 79% of respondents said their

²⁰ While the project of *Theatre for a Change and partners, Transformational Empowerment for Adolescent Marginalised Girls*, has been assessed at midline, the assessment does not include data on indicators related to the project's use of interactive theatre (da Silva et al., 2022). While *Theatre for a Change's* project *Reducing GBV and Promoting SRHR Among Women and Youth in Palestine* has also been assessed, it is unclear who took part in the study and how the results should be interpreted (PFPPA, 2022).

²¹ Dispelled HIV myths included it being related to witchcraft, impacts on physical appearance and being contagious through everyday contact.

perceptions around gender norms had changed in the last 12 months. Of these, 55% said this was mainly and 45% it was in part because of the project. Participants not only mentioned gaining knowledge and awareness on gender issues but also developing more inclusive attitudes towards queer gender identities (Saungweme and Tayyar, 2022). Moreover, all of the Australian initiatives evaluated by Shearson et al. (2022) found positive impacts related to this objective. For example, their evaluation of Art for Better Democracy – a photo exhibition and workshop to raise awareness of women’s historically low political inclusion – found that 61% of respondents felt the project challenged their ideas on gender roles.

Figure 8: Search for Common Ground and Abaad’s Towards a Gender Equitable Society project poster



Credit: ©ABAAD

Various evaluations also underscore the effectiveness of arts-based approaches to prompt reflection. The evaluation of OYO's Girls in Schools also found that dance increased girls' openness and willingness to talk about child marriage and teenage pregnancy (OYO, 2021). The evaluation of Preventing Violence Against Women Through Storytelling, an initiative run by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in Laos, confirmed art helps elicit dialogue, especially around difficult topics, with less risk and vulnerability and thus with less likelihood of resistance (UNDP, 2022).²² This is also emphasised by Lambert et al. (2023) in their analysis of a film-based initiative that aimed to raise awareness and challenge sexual harassment in university campuses, highlighting how art's ability to evoke emotions is central to dialogue.

²² UNDP ran this project in collaboration with Laos Women's Union and the Korean International Cooperation Agency.

Explore, articulate and advance gender-equitable norms and other solutions: 11 of the evaluated initiatives pursued this aim. Most are positive. For example, Ahrens et al. (2011) carried out a quantitative evaluation of the interACT Sexual Assault Prevention initiative, which used participatory theatre to teach university students how to recognise early signs of GBV and how to engage effectively as bystanders (in particular, men). It found that the initiative led to gradual increases in participants' self-reported likelihood of engaging in bystander interventions. However, the rate of change differed across participants. Women and participants who already believed in their effectiveness, reported a high likelihood of engaging in bystander interventions but evidenced less change over time. Male participants and participants initially sceptical of bystander interventions reported an initial lower likelihood of engagement but this increased the most over time. Similarly, the evaluation of Theatre for a Change's project Improving the Ability of Teachers to Protect Primary School Children from Sexual and Gender-Based Violence in Flood-Affected Areas found that the percentage of teachers with positive attitudes to preventing and responding to GBV increased across all groups with the difference between base and endline ranging from 19% to 80% (TfaC, 2022).

Two evaluations stressed how art – especially participatory arts – can bring people together, nurture empathy and self-awareness, and create the necessary learning environment to explore alternative attitudes and behaviours (Shutt, 2019; SfC, 2021b).

Support the well-being of marginalised people/communities: while three of the evaluated initiatives used art for this purpose, it is only evaluated in two with positive outcomes. The qualitative assessment of the project Prevention and Response to Sexual and Gender-based Violence (discussed in Table 1) found that art therapy – one of the project's components – enhanced the well-being of Syrian refugees and victim-survivors of GBV, and increased their resilience and feelings of empowerment (UNHCR, 2017). The quantitative evaluation of the Common Threads Project, which uses craft-making as a therapeutic intervention for victims-survivors of GBV in conflict zones, revealed significant reductions in anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) among participants in Nepal and Bosnia. The qualitative evaluations in Ecuador and the DRC found that the project decreased stress and feelings of shame, stigma and self-blame and increased self-esteem and self-care. Participants in all studies spoke of the therapeutic character of sewing, as a self-soothing activity, as well as the therapeutic nature of non-verbal expression (Common Threads Project, 2019).

Nurture skills: eight of the evaluated initiatives sought to nurture skills in participants, most with success. The evaluation of a Search for Common Ground project Strengthening Young Women's Participation in Local and National Peace Processes found that the project effectively enhanced the skills and capacities of young women. It strengthened women's ability to collaboratively lead local and national-level peace efforts and peace-building initiatives, as 78% of women could cite one concrete example of how the project improved their ability to lead peace-building; 94% reported participating in at least one women-led peace-building initiative as a result of the project; and 94% mentioned their role as peace-builders was strengthened by the project (SfC, 2021b). All qualitative assessments of Theatre for a Change's projects designed to train NGO staff in interactive theatre for gender equality, too, have reported positive impacts (Clark, 2019; TfaC 2018, 2019).

Box 3: Initiatives with limited outcomes

A few evaluations suggest that the impact of various initiatives, though positive, were marginal or limited in scope.

C'est la Vie (2019-2020): Circuit Pointe's initiative in Senegal aimed to increase knowledge on GBV, FGM and SRHR through a film mini-series screened in biweekly film clubs, where they were followed by post-screening discussions. Le Port et al. (2022) evaluated an iteration of the initiative in a rural setting, using semi-structured interviews, focus groups and participant observation. The evaluation found that, while participants were responsive to the series and spoke of its awareness-raising capacity, the initiative did not succeed in breaking taboos around SRHR. Girls and young women continued to prefer not to discuss these topics, especially when older women or non-peers were around. The evaluation also documented less interest and participation from men, as they perceived these topics as less interesting (ibid.).

Warna-Warni Waktu (2022): Girl Effect's project in Indonesia aimed to prompt girls to reflect on beauty and race norms, self-esteem, body confidence, and online bullying, through six video mini-episodes (each accompanied by an interactive element to reinforce the message). Garbett et al. (2023) found, using a randomised control trial involving 1,847 girls (ages 15-19), that the project had a positive (but small) impact on reduced internalisation of appearance ideals, reduced skin shade dissatisfaction and increased body satisfaction (size of impact ranging from $\eta^2=0.005$ to $\eta^2=0.03$).

Strengthening Young Women's Participation in Local and National Peace Processes (2020-2021):

Search for Common Ground's project in South Sudan aimed to counter gender stereotypes and encourage women's leadership in peace-building through participatory theatre, among other components. While the evaluation found positive impact on women's skills and visibility, it found unclear effects on attitudinal and behavioural changes regarding the role of women and youth in peace-building. There was no improvement in the number of respondents who value women and youth as contributors to the sector, nor in civil society organisations' perceptions on the role of young women in peace-building, nor in their inclusion in their agenda (SfC, 2021b).

Tipunzhire! (2016): Theatre for a Change's initiative in Malawi aimed to improve the SRHR, self-esteem, numeracy and literacy skills of out-of-school or at-risk girls (ages 14-18). The initiative comprised 'Girls' Clubs' using interactive theatre and community outreach activities, among other components. The mixed-methods evaluation by Navarrete et al. (2016) noted that while girls' knowledge of their rights increased (from 65% at baseline to 90.2% at endline) their basic sexual and reproductive health knowledge reduced in this period. The authors suggest this may be due to the project's focus on rights over general sexual and reproductive health.

New Partnership Programme pilot projects: while Clark (2019) finds Theatre for a Change's pilot projects succeeded in equipping volunteers with interactive theatre skills, not all trainees achieved the level of confidence necessary to lead and implement initiatives with others. She found this was influenced by the participants' age and maturity. She also found participants with disabilities were at a disadvantage during the training as the methodology is physically demanding.

Moreover, one initiative evaluation also reported negative unintended impacts. The evaluation of **Man Up** – a three-day arts-based workshop with men and boys in the UK that unpacks the pressures and expectations of masculinity and promotes new models – found the initiative paradoxically and unintendedly legitimised some gender norms, such as men's role as the family's breadwinner (Blagden and Perrin, 2023b). In turn, the evaluation of the project **Towards a Gender Equitable Society** stresses how the project heightened competition between community members as a result of the project's limited resources (Saungweme and Tayyar, 2022).

Available evaluations also provide evidence of the potential of arts-based initiatives to produce positive changes besides those explicitly pursued. All the evaluations carried out by Shearson et al. (2022) found, for example, that the projects by VicHealth and different municipalities also increased people's sense of connection to others and/or empathy, despite not being aimed to nurture feelings of community. The evaluation of Safe Ground's project, Man Up (discussed in Box 3), in three UK prisons, also found similar positive impacts on participants' sense and perception of community (Blagden and Perrin, 2023a).

Some evaluations also emphasise how initiatives can have an impact not only with the target audience and/or group but also with facilitators/performers of the project. Tisinthe!'s evaluation indicates, for example, that facilitators of listening clubs experienced greater increases in knowledge and skills compared to those of participants. Furthermore, the initiative demonstrated stronger evidence of gender norm transformation (regarding SRHR and GBV) among performers of the radio theatre piece than among participants and listeners (Shutt, 2019). Similarly, the endline report of the Interactive Theatre for Justice for Gender Equality project in Eswatini, conducted by Theatre for a Change and Volunteer Service Overseas (VSO) in 2018, found that, besides training staff and volunteers in the use of interactive theatre to reduce GBV among teens and young adults, the project also fostered significant behavioural changes among the trainees. Participants gained increased awareness of their own SRHR behaviours and were more inclined to practise safe sex (TfaC, 2018).

Available evaluations, however, have two main limitations. Most evaluations were conducted immediately post-project, limiting their scope to short-term outcomes. Consequently, the available evidence provides insufficient knowledge of whether changes accomplished through arts-based approaches sustain over time. Box 4 highlights the sole long-term evaluation identified in this review.

Additionally, most evaluations of multi-component initiatives do not disaggregate impact by component, limiting understandings of the specific contributions of arts-based interventions. For example, the endline report of Theatre for a Change and Concern Worldwide's initiative in Malawi, Ending School Related Gender-based Violence (2014–2015), mentions the initiative was effective in increasing knowledge about GBV, changing related attitudes and preventing forced marriages. However, interactive theatre was not the only component of the project, and the evaluation does not break down the impact of specific components (Imani Consultants, 2016).²³



Participants gained increased awareness of their own SRHR behaviours and were more inclined to practice safe sex (TfaC, 2018).

²³ Of interactive theatre, the evaluation only mentions that participants often commented in focus groups how interactive arts-based methods, like plays, poetry and songs, were a good way to learn about GBV.

Box 4: Longer-term evidence: evaluation of You the Man

You the Man is a 35-minute theatrical production, followed by a panel discussion, that aims to raise awareness of and prevent GBV in communities. It aims to prompt an understanding of GBV as a shared responsibility and galvanise stakeholders to act. It is unclear who created the project, but it has been run in the US and Australia, where it has been evaluated by Plourde et al. (2016) and Crisp and Taket (2023), respectively.

Plourde et al. (2016) examined both the short- and long-term impact (over three years) of the initiative on US students. They looked at how it impacted their beliefs, attitudes and perceptions of GBV, as well as their intentions in responding to GBV concerns. They administered pre- and post-surveys with ninth grade students. Cohorts participated in post-survey annually and focus groups were also held in years two and three. Plourde et al. (2016) found that the initiative led to:

1) A partial better understanding of GBV (assessed by perceived instances of GBV). Differences in perceived instances of GBV were statistically significant when talking about dating violence but fell short of statistical significance in relation to sexual coercion. The impact increased post-project, collapsed in year two, but increased in year three. The finding was triangulated with focus group discussions.

2) Increased recognition of GBV as a serious topic (assessed by the perceived severity of various forms of GBV). The result was statistically significant, and the impact remained in the two years post-performance.

While at least 50% of respondents in all post-surveys reported increases in their ability to take bystander action and having the tools and resources to do so, this was not statistically significant.

Existing evaluations also provide some important insights into what might help the success of arts-based initiatives. These relate mostly to initiative design and apply across initiatives pursuing different objectives (discussed in Section 2):

- **Design based on people's needs:** echoing participatory approaches to development, various evaluations linked a project's success to its alignment with the specific needs of particular groups in a given context and the active involvement of those groups in its design (e.g. SfC, 2021b; Kabelka et al., 2023). Though not explicitly framed as a factor for success, various evaluations detailed how the given initiative was informed by previous qualitative research with the relevant community or social group (e.g. Logie et al., 2019, 2021; Garbett et al., 2023).
- **Design constant interaction:** the evaluations of Tisinthe! relate the success of the initiative to the creation of a space where people could interact on a regular basis (weekly, in this case) for a sustained period of time, as this allowed the gradual but continuous work needed to create gender norm change (Shutt, 2019). This is also emphasised in the evaluation of Tiphunzire! (Navarrete et al., 2016) and the meta-evaluation of Theatre for a Change's initiatives (Kabelka et al., 2023).
- **Include follow-up discussions:** the evaluation of C'est la Vie (LePort et al., 2022) and the meta-evaluation by Kabelka et al. (2023) of Theatre for a Change's initiatives also underscore the significance of incorporating follow-up group discussions alongside or after the arts-based component as they serve to unpack and reinforce the project's core message with participants. However, no evaluation assessed the differential impact of including or excluding follow-up discussions.

- **Engage multiple stakeholders:** some evaluations underscored the interconnectedness of gender norm change, emphasising the need for simultaneous work and change across various societal groups. They emphasise that it is important for initiatives to work with stakeholders at all levels – not only with community members but also with power-holders – in order to prevent changes at one level being blocked by the continuation of the status quo at another (e.g. TfaC, 2019; Saungweme and Tayyar, 2022). However, the effectiveness of initiatives in reaching power-holders or motivating structural changes has not been formally assessed and remains anecdotal.
- **Prepare for resistance:** several initiatives documented in the database encountered significant resistance from stakeholders, highlighting the need for proactive planning to assess and decrease risk as much as possible, as well as to build community support for the project.²⁴ However, only the meta-evaluation of Theatre for a Change’s initiatives discussed how an initiative can address concerns over backlash against a project. Kabelka et al. (2023) discussed how Theatre for a Change anticipated resistance to a project in Palestine, aimed at reducing GBV through radio interactive theatre, and involved a range of stakeholders in the design stage of the project (including government and civil society actors); trained participants on how to respond to push-back from community members or other actors; and worked with local organisations to make sure messages were tailored to the specific context and resonated with the target audience. However, as this was the only evaluation that mentioned risk of backlash, it remains unclear how other initiatives can proactively prepare for and mitigate such challenges. Further research and discussion are needed to identify effective strategies and best practices.

Lastly, in their discussion of UN Women’s project The Awake Not Sleeping Fairy Tale Collection, Walsh et al. (2022) emphasise the importance of ensuring aesthetic quality in arts-based initiatives. Strong aesthetics are not separate from, but rather essential to, audience engagement and impact. This may entail prompting reflection and/or dialogue while allowing audiences to reach conclusions on their own (see also Balfour, 2009).

²⁴ For example, the evaluation of Framed by Gender documents how the project met resistance and negative reactions from community members (Shearson et al., 2022). This is also documented anecdotally in the records of a project in Guatemala – Giant Sculptures – which sought to address GBV (Spotlight Initiative, 2021b).

7 Conclusion

Arts-based approaches are a tool to promote and work towards gender equality. As shown in this brief, organisations are already leveraging the potential of arts-based approaches in many ways to promote gender norm change, work with children and young people, engage multiple stakeholders, and work with sensitive or difficult issues.

However, there are opportunities to further expand the application of arts-based approaches to work on masculinity-related norm change. Art's ability to delve into beliefs, attitudes and behaviours, and its capacity to address difficult and sensitive topics and reduce resistance to reflection, make it an ideal tool for promoting change in masculinity norms. However, despite its potential, only 11 of the 115 initiatives in the database explicitly focus on this area, and do so without incorporating an intersectional lens.

Art's ability to appeal emotionally and to support kinaesthetic learning, and to foster unity and empathy among diverse groups, means art can be a valuable tool to counter the current backlash against gender equality. As discussed in Section 2, arts-based approaches – especially participatory ones – can create the space to reflect and rehearse alternative behaviours and support other ways of learning or discovery. Similarly, art also has the ability to engage people emotionally, which in turn can help prompt critical reflection and/or make conclusions more memorable (Forcer et al., 2022; Hanauer, 2010; Whittier, 2017). Moreover, the peace studies literature highlights how art can be used to bridge divides, foster understanding and empathy, and nurture a sense of community (e.g. Lederach, 2010; Cohen, 2015; Dahrendorf and Reichert, 2021; Campbell and Jankowitz, 2024) – with the latter also emphasised by some of the initiative evaluations discussed in Section 6. While no initiative has yet explicitly used art for this purpose, the use of art to counter the current backlash against gender equality is a promising avenue for future exploration.

While current evidence shows arts-based approaches can be effective tools to promote and work towards gender equality, more rigorous and longer-term evaluations are needed to fully assess their potential and impact. Long-term evaluations are particularly important for understanding gender norm change, as this is a long-term process that involves not only changing people's beliefs, attitudes and behaviours, but also the power dynamics that enforce them through social pressure and/or coercion. In the current climate of backlash against gender equality, it would also be important to assess whether and how advancing gender norm change through arts-based work increases its resilience compared to other methods. This resilience may stem from the unique ability of arts-based work to foster emotional engagement and alternative learning experiences, potentially making norm change more enduring and less likely to reverse.

Strengthening this body of evidence is particularly important in an impact-driven funding context. To do this, donors could provide organisations with the time and resources to rigorously evaluate the impact of their initiatives. It is also essential for organisations to invest in developing innovative methods that can capture the qualitative and quantitative outcomes of arts-based interventions. This would enhance understandings of the effectiveness of these approaches and generate valuable insights for improvement.

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ALIGN is a digital platform and programme of work that supports a global community of researchers, practitioners and activists, all committed to gender justice and equality. It provides new research, insights from practice, and grants for initiatives that increase our understanding of – and work to change – patriarchal gender norms.

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