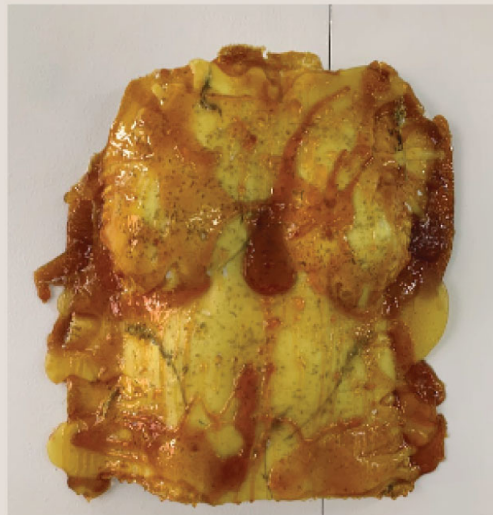
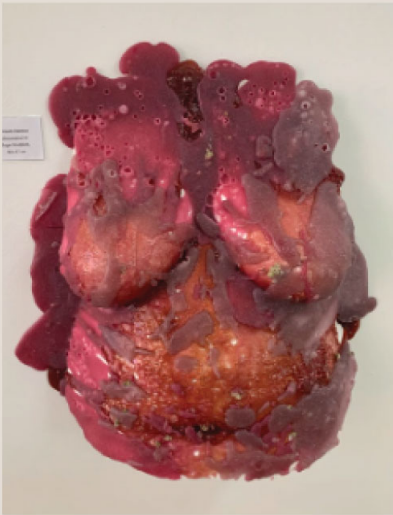




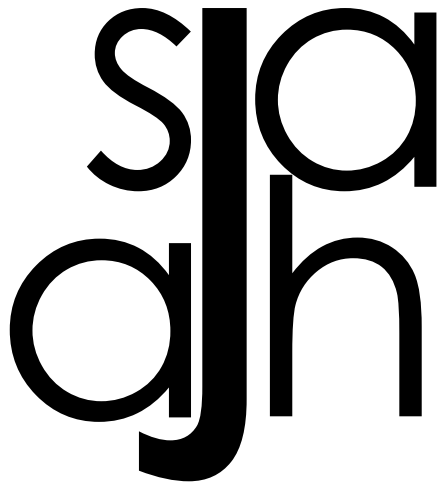
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Activism: eradicating
gender-based violence



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Archives of Flesh: Exploring embodied societal memory of gender-based violence through choreographic practice

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While gender-based violence (GBV) research has addressed individual trauma and its social and psychological effects, scholars in memory studies have noted that methodologies focused on embodied approaches to remembering, remain methodologically underdeveloped in comparison to narrative and textual methods. In the South African context, this article explores how embodied inquiry situated within a choreographic process may offer ways of exploring how bodies orient themselves and respond to the lived social context within a society where GBV is prevalent, specifically for individuals who have not directly experienced GBV. The research was conducted with six dancers and the author, who collectively explored how bodily patterns, gestures, and movement responses emerged through choreographic tasks that invited reflection on living in the South African context. The article attends to movement responses that arise beyond conscious narrative and considers how these responses may be read interpretively, in relation to what is termed embodied societal memory. Movement responses were analysed through Laban Movement Analysis (LMA) to attend to Body organisation, Effort dynamics, spatial orientation, and Shape change as forms of embodied data. Interpreting movement as an expression of embodied societal memory is not presented as an empirical fact but as a situated and interpretive reading informed by the choreographic process. Working within a practice-as-research framework, the embodied inquiry unfolded through choreographic tasks, improvisation, rehearsal, and reflective practice, generating embodied data in the form of individual movement responses. These insights were later articulated through a paper performance, *Archives of Flesh*, presented at the Faculty of Arts and Design Second Annual Gender-Based Violence Symposium as an embodied mode of research dissemination. The article contributes to debates on embodied research and activism by offering choreographic practice as a method for generating and interpreting embodied data in relation to socially mediated experience, and by reflecting on the paper performance as a way of articulating embodied inquiry within academic contexts.

Keywords: gender-based violence, embodied societal memory, embodied inquiry, activism, choreographic practice

Argiewe van vlees: verkenning van beliggaamde maatskaplike geheue van geslag gebaseerde geweld deur choreografiese praktyk

Hoewel navorsing oor geslag gebaseerde geweld (GGG) individuele trauma en die sosiale sielkundige gevolge daarvan aanspreek, het akademië in geheue-studies opgemerk dat metodologie wat op beliggaamde benaderings tot onthou fokus, in vergelyking met narratiewe en tekstuele metodes, metodologies onderontwikkel is. In Suid-Afrika is GGG wydverspreid. Hierdie artikel ondersoek hoe beliggaamde navraag in hierdie geleefde sosiale konteks, binne 'n choreografiese proses maniere kan bied hoe liggame hulself oriënteer en reageer, en is veral gemik op individue wat nie direk deur GGG geraak is nie. Die navorsing is met ses dansers en die skrywer uitgevoer. Hulle het gesamentlik verken hoe liggaamlike patrone, gebare en bewegingsreaksies ontstaan het deur choreografiese take, wat nadenke oor die lewe binne die Suid Afrikaanse konteks uitnooi. Die artikel bespreek bewegingsreaksies wat buite bewuste narratief ontstaan, en oorweeg hoe hierdie reaksies interpretatief gelees kan word met betrekking tot sogenaamde beliggaamde maatskaplike geheue. Bewegingsreaksies is ontleed deur middel van Laban Movement Analysis (LMA) om aandag te skenk aan liggaamsorganisasie, *Effort*-dinamika, ruimtelike oriëntasie en vormverandering as vorme van beliggaamde data. Om beweging te interpreteer as 'n uitdrukking van beliggaamde maatskaplike geheue word nie voorgelê as 'n empiriese feit nie, maar eerder as 'n gesitueerde en interpretatiewe lesing, ingelig deur die choreografiese proses. Die beliggaamde

navraag het ontvou binne 'n praktyk-as-navorsing raamwerk, met die gebruik van choreografiese take, improvisasie, repetisie en reflektiewe praktyk, en beliggaamde data is gegenereer in die vorm individuele bewegingsreaksies. Hierdie insigte is later verwoord in 'n opvoering, *Archives of Flesh*, aangebied by die Fakulteit van Kunste en Ontwerp se Tweede Jaarlikse Simposium oor geslag gebaseerde geweld, as 'n beliggaamde manier van navorsingsverspreiding. Die artikel dra by tot debatte oor beliggaamde navorsing en kuns-aktiwisme deur choreografiese praktyk aan te bied as 'n metode om beliggaamde data relatief tot sosiaal-bemiddelde ervarings te genereer en te interpreteer, en deur te reflekteer op die opvoering as 'n manier om beliggaamde navraag binne akademiese kontekste te artikuleer.

Slutelwoorde: geslag gebaseerde geweld, beliggaamde maatskaplike geheue, beliggaamde navraag, kuns-aktiwisme, choreografiese praktyk

Research on gender-based violence (GBV) has revealed that violence affects bodies in multiple and interrelated ways, particularly for survivors (Idrees *et al.* 2024; Murray 2017; Papoutsi *et al.* 2022). These effects include psychosocial, psychological, and health-related consequences. A wide range of scholars have examined GBV in relation to individual trauma, social and psychological impact, structural inequality, socio-cultural and political contexts, and cultural norms, amongst other areas (Burke *et al.* 2023; Davis 2022; Farooq 2022; Yesufu 2022). While this research has generated crucial insights into the effects of violence on those who have experienced GBV directly, it pays limited attention to how living in a society where GBV is prevalent may shape adaptive self-regulatory¹ bodily responses in others, and how these responses, repeated over time, become habitual and carried as embodied memory. Scholars in memory studies, such as Julia Giese and Emily Keightley (2024: 444) argue that embodied approaches to remembering remain methodologically underdeveloped in comparison to narrative and textual methods. This gap matters in contexts such as South Africa, where the prevalence of GBV may shape how people regulate movement, anticipate risk, and orientate themselves physically in the world. Such bodily responses, possibly informed by anticipatory fear and social awareness of GBV, are not easily translated into narrative descriptions due to their embodied and tacit nature. This translation challenge suggests the need for research methods that can attend to embodied modes of knowing and remembering (Giese and Keightley 2024: 447).

Movement patterns, posture, gesture, and ways of embodied regulation may generate embodied data that offers insight into how individuals live within social contexts shaped by violence, even where they have not experienced violence directly. Embodied regulation refers to the ways in which the body organises, modulates, and adjusts posture, movement, muscle tone, breath, attention, and spatial orientation in response to internal states and external conditions (Tantia 2021: 45-7). These regulatory processes operate below conscious awareness and shape how individuals maintain safety and manage social and environmental contexts through bodily action (Sutton and Williamson 2014: 6). This article approaches such bodily orientations cautiously as an interpretive indicator rather than an empirical fact of how social experience may be carried through the body over time (Fuchs 2012: 11).

These bodily orientations can be understood as forms of body memory as they reflect how past and ongoing social conditions inform present bodily orientation and action (Koch *et al.*

¹ Michelle Maiese (2016: 4) argues “the living body...depends on self-organizing processes of adaptive self-regulation...affectivity, bodily responsivity, and movement...as they help a [person] navigate and adapt to its surrounding”.

2012: 2). As Thomas Fuchs (2012: 19) suggests, body memory reveals the past through embodied behaviours and “accumulated experiences are actively embodied in actions” (Sutton and Williamson 2014: 1). Conceptualising memory as embodied suggests that memory is not stored somewhere in the brain, but rather that memory includes the totality of the embodied subjects’ dispositions, senses, experiences and perceptions that enable individuals to react to present situations based on past experiences (Koch *et al.* 2012: 2). As John Sutton and Kellie Williamson (2014: 1) argue, embodied memory is “firmly embedded in complex and idiosyncratic cultural settings, with unique social and historical backgrounds and norms”. From this perspective, embodied memory is enacted through bodily actions as individuals move, perceive and relate within specific socio-cultural contexts (Iani 2019: 1762). Embodied memory therefore acknowledges the embodied nature of individual existence in the world, situating bodily experience and action within broader social, cultural, and historical contexts (Fuchs 2012: 20).

If memory is understood as multimodal, lived, enacted, and relational, then exploring embodied memories requires methodologies that can attend to bodily experience and actions as a mode of remembering (Fisher 2011: 98). This article therefore adopts embodied inquiry as Jennifer Leigh and Nicole Brown (2021: 22) describe, which is as a research method that positions the body as integral to knowledge production and meaning-making. Embodied inquiry is an “approach to the whole research process” to collect data and analyse “embodied lived experiences” (Leigh and Brown 2021: 1). The research included six dancers² and the author, situated in dance in a choreographic process in which movement responses emerged as embodied data generated through choreographic tasks, improvisation, and reflective practice. Dance in this context is conceptualised as an “open-ended creative and artistic and expressive (and inquiring) mode of movement” (Welch 2022: 7). Movement can be understood as an embodied epistemology, as it is a “mode of thought and a way of thinking” as well as a process of meaning-making through individuals’ lived experiences (Welch 2022: 2). The movement responses generated in the choreographic process are interpreted with attention to posture, gesture, and embodied regulation that may emerge beyond conscious narrative and are approached as situated and provisional readings rather than empirical claims. Using embodied inquiry, the research explores how dancers’ bodies respond through movement to choreographic tasks that invite reflection on their lived experience in a South African context where GBV is prevalent.

GBV and femicide³ in the South African context are systemic and entrenched crises that extend beyond the individual experience of harm, leaving “enduring scars on the fabric of society as a whole” (Farooq 2022: 45). While the immediate trauma of GBV is experienced individually, its effects reverberate through generations, communities, and public spaces, “seeping into communities” (Farooq 2022: 45). Due to this diffuse nature of trauma and the reverberating effects of GBV, it can be suggested that trauma imprints itself on the collective

² This research did not seek formal ethical clearance as it was conducted as an exploratory practice-as-research inquiry within a choreographic context. It did not collect biographical information on the dancers. The study did not involve the collection of personal data or specific autobiographical accounts of gender-based violence. Instead, the research focused on dancers’ movement responses to choreographic tasks that invited reflection on social context rather than personal experience of violence.

³ Femicide refers to the gender-related killing of women, often perpetuated by intimate partners or known men and is embedded within broader structures of patriarchy, inequality and gender-based violence (Weil *et al* 2018: 1).

bodies of society (Pain 2021: 974). This insidious ripple effect could shape how bodies move, are perceived, and relate to one another in the South African context.

As Shaka Yesufu (2022: 90) argues, GBV and femicide are a “scourge” plaguing South Africa and are woven into the socio-political and historical landscape of the nation, shaped by intersecting legacies of colonialism, apartheid, and persistent social inequality, and are further described as an “epidemic” (Tshilongo 2023: iii). This socio-political and historical framing of GBV reveals a need to explore how violence operates not only through institutions and public discourse but through everyday socio-cultural practices and embodied experience. Burke *et al.* (2023: 117) argue that GBV is a “socio-cultural phenomenon” that takes shape through various social structures in which it is embedded. If violence operates through these structures, it therefore engages bodies as the sites through which such norms are lived and reproduced.

This perspective aligns with Giese and Keighley (2024: 448), who argue that researchers should consider the “socially embedded body as shaped by past experiences and active in the creation, articulation and reproduction of mnemonic meaning”. This framing positions the body as a meaning-making system and as a living archive of collective histories and shared embodied knowledge that may be carried in and through the body (Idrees *et al.* 2024: 2; Parker 2020: 113; Tania 2021: 43; Welch 2022: 2). From this socially embedded body, embodied memory extends to encompass socially patterned ways of moving and responding that emerge within specific contexts (Fuchs 2012: 20). Building on this the article approaches embodied societal memory as a way of naming how embodied memory becomes collectively shaped through shared exposure to social conditions such as pervasive violence. Embodied societal memory therefore refers to the socially mediated dimensions of embodied remembering where bodily orientations reflect broader socio-political environments in which bodies are situated.

The interpretive lens of embodied societal memory refers to forms of memory shaped by cultural, political, class, race, ability and gendered conditioning that are carried and expressed through bodily practice. In memory studies, such memory has been described as “implicit collective memory”, referring to “myriad possibilities of the past affecting the present in ways that most people remain unaware of” (Erl 2022: 2). From this perspective, the body then emerges as a “central site of meaning-making” where social histories are lived and expressed through movement and action (Idrees *et al.* 2024: 2). In this research, embodied societal memory functions as an interpretative framework for reading how socially mediated experience may become visible in individual movement responses.

As a South African embodied researcher, choreographer, dancer, teacher, and arts activist, I continue to explore intersections of embodied memory in choreographic practice and performance. I am a certified movement analyst in Laban Bartenieff Movement Studies (LBMS), which informs how I observe and interpret movement in and through the moving body. This training shapes my understanding of embodied knowing, where the body functions as a site of epistemological knowing through the multisensory affordances it offers in embodied research. As a co-leader of the Research Niche area on GBV, I explore the intersections of socially informed choreographic practice and research that engages with lived social realities in and through the body.

This specific research does not claim that GBV produces uniform bodily effects across society. Rather, it uses embodied inquiry to explore how dancers’ individual movement responses may offer insight into embodied memories shaped through living within the South

African context.⁴ The focus remains on subjective, situated bodily responses interpreted in relation to social context. Within this framing, the research problem is how the effects of GBV can be engaged at an embodied experiential level for individuals who have not been directly affected by it. This research is necessary as it proposes an embodied practice-based approach to engaging embodied memory, offering methodological tools for attending to bodily responses. The study aims to explore how dance, through a choreographic process leading to a paper performance,⁵ can engage with what is termed embodied societal memory, which is the socially mediated dimensions of embodied memory shaped through shared exposure to socio-political conditions. Guided by this aim, the study asks: How do dancers' movement responses reflect embodied memories shaped by living within a GBV-prevalent society? What roles can choreographic practice and performance play in exploring and articulating these embodied memories?

Framed in this way, the research requires a conceptual framework that can reveal the relationship between the bodyminded being, embodiment, and embodied societal memory. The basic assumption on which this research is based, is that individuals are bodyminded beings, meaning that perception, action, memory and meaning-making emerge through integrated bodily and cognitive processes (Bergen 2019: 11). This article lays out the conceptual framework, followed by the methodological framework detailing the relationship between practice-as-research and embodied inquiry, and then moves on to describing the choreographic process through which embodied data was generated. The article concludes by reflecting on the contributions of choreographic practice to embodied research and activism, and on the potential of a paper performance as a mode of articulating embodied inquiry within academic contexts.



Figure 1
Embodied Resistance: The Clenched Fist, Archives of Flesh 2025,
The paper performance: Rostrum Theatre, Pretoria
(photograph by Didintle Morudu).

⁴ The dancers in this research are not direct victims of gender-based violence.

⁵ A paper performance is a performative research format in which academic argument and embodied practice are presented together through live movement and spoke text.

Conceptual framework

Bodymind as a meaning-making system

Mariam Fraser and Monica Greco (2005: 5) argue for understanding the body as part of the ongoing process of becoming a body. In this view, embodiment is simultaneously a state of having, being, and becoming a body, in which sensing, perceiving, moving, remembering, and reflecting are always in process in the bodymind (Totton 2010: 23). Individuals are conceptualised as bodyminded beings in the environment, navigating the world through their sensorimotor systems (Stevens 2017: 42). Individuals make meaning through their sensorimotor processes as a means of understanding the world they are situated within (Johnson-Glenberg *et al.* 2016: 1). Meaning-making arises through these sensorimotor processes as individuals interpret and respond to the environments in which they are situated (Block and Kissell 2001: 8). This positions individuals as constantly in a process of becoming and emerging, constantly shifting through embodied engagement with the world (Totton 2010: 21). This bodymind perspective grounds being-in-the-world as a continual meaning-making process that emerges through lived, sensorimotor engagement with social and environmental contexts through embodiment (Maiese 2016: xvi).

Embodiment

Nancy Krieger (2005: 251) defines embodiment as “a multilevel phenomenon” that entails constant interplay between bodies and the worlds in which they live. Similarly, the lived experience of embodiment is where sociality, history, culture, and corporeality mutually inform one another (Munro and Coetzee 2007: 103). Embodiment is pivotal to understanding how individuals exist within and are shaped by their environments and socio-cultural context. Embodiment, as shown, then recognises the bodymind as socially and historically situated, engaged in a dynamic network of connections (Featherstone and Turner 1995: 2). This perspective situates individuals as agents who are both shaped by and shaping the environments they inhabit, which results in developing specific habitual body patterns.

Habitual bodily patterning

Humans are pattern-forming beings, developing habits through repeated embodied behaviours (Abbott and Wilson 2015: 58). These “patterned actions” (Grove *et al.* 2014: 386) can support functional efficiency but also constrain behaviour through their repetitive and predictable nature (Proctor 2016: 251). Habits carry a “two-fold temporal structure” in which the habitual body is simultaneously orientated towards the past, through sedimented repetition, and toward the future, through its availability for action in similar contexts (Proctor 2016: 251). This temporal structure arises because habitual actions are formed through past repetition while simultaneously being available to the bodymind for future action in response to similar contexts as habitual body memory.

Habitual body memory then is an “active immanence of the past” in the body that informs present bodily experiences, directly influencing present movement patterns and actions in an “efficacious, orienting, and regular manner” (Casey 1984: 149). Therefore, past bodily experiences directly influence present movement patterns, shaping how individuals inhabit and navigate space, social interactions, and movement dynamics. These traces of past embodiment,

whether consciously remembered or not, are revealed in posture, gesture, and movement choices (Maiese 2016: 39). When individuals move in space, traces of their past embodiment, socio-cultural context, and lived experiences become visible through their bodily expression and relationality (Haskins 2023: 165). When such habitual bodily patterns develop in response to shared social conditions, they move beyond the personal and begin to reflect socially patterned ways of moving, sensing, and orienting in the world (Maiese 2016: 44).

From habitual body memory to embodied societal memory

While habitual body memory accounts for the influence of personal past experiences on present bodily actions, it does not fully address the ways in which these bodily patterns may also be socially and culturally inscribed, as discussed earlier. Habits are not formed in isolation; they develop within specific socio-political and historical contexts that shape the body's movements, postures and gestures (Pedwell 2017: 110). These contexts are shaped by ideology, including socially produced norms, values, and power relations, which often operate implicitly (Coelho-Lima *et al.* 2021: 2). Through repeated social practice, ideology is enacted and reinforced through the bodymind in habitual ways of moving, sensing, and relating. Over time, such socially and ideologically shaped habits can form a layer of embodied memory that extends beyond the personal (Niño 2024: 96-7). This study conceptualises this layer as embodied societal memory: a form of embodied memory shaped through shared exposure to social, cultural, and political conditions and carried through habitual bodily organisation. In this way, habitual bodily patterning provides the mechanism through which adaptive self-regulatory responses shaped by social context may become carried as embodied memory at a societal level.

From memory to embodied societal memory

Building on the understanding of habitual bodily patterning as socially situated, this article draws on an emergent conceptual framework of embodied societal memory. This framework approaches memory as multimodal embodied dispositions through which social conditions are lived and negotiated in bodily action. From this perspective, embodied societal memory refers to the lived imprint of social and historical conditions as they are carried through embodied practice over time. These imprints shape how bodies move, react, and relate within everyday contexts as patterned ways of being-in-the-world.

This conceptualisation resonates with scholarship that describes how collective pasts become sedimented in bodies through social life. As Rafael Narvaez (2006: 54) suggests, “collective pasts become sedimented in individual and ‘collective bodies’, so that the past thus becomes vivified in shared presents”. For Narvaez (2006: 54) The past is “organically anchored within the collective and thus within the present”, becoming “actualised, acted out, and represented by the person”. In this sense, memory operates performatively; it is enacted through bodily action in the present as discrete representations of the past.

It is important to distinguish embodied societal memory from concepts such as intergenerational trauma. While intergenerational trauma focuses on the transmission of traumatic experiences across generations (Rosenthal 2021: 81), embodied societal memory is not concerned with trauma inheritance. Instead, it offers a socio-cultural lens for considering how bodies may carry traces of social conditions, such as vigilance, guardedness, or spatial

awareness, through habitual movement, posture, and embodied regulation. This distinction allows the research to attend to bodily responses without making claims about trauma transmission or crossing the line into therapeutic explorations through dance-based methodologies.

Dance-based methodologies in particular have been identified as having significant potential to engage “embodied ways of knowing and communicating the past” (Giese and Keightley 2024: 445). This is precisely because they operate through sensations, gestures, affects, spatial relations, and the dynamics of the body in motion (Giese and Keightley 2024; Rosenthal 2021; Tantia 2021). Within memory studies and performance research, embodied remembering is a “social form of doing that can serve to create, preserve, and negotiate shared pasts” (Giese and Keightley 2024: 444). From this perspective, embodied societal memory is not consciously remembered as explicit recollection but is enacted through bodily practice. Memory studies distinguish between declarative memory, which can be verbally recalled, and embodied implicit forms of memory, which are expressed through action, habit and bodily orientation rather than conscious reflection (Connerton 1989; Sutton and Williamson 2014).

Figure 2 reveals this distinction revealing how embodied societal memory emerges through collective gesture, spatial orientation and relational movement. The performers’ upward gestures function as embodied testimonies demonstrating how memory is enacted kinaesthetically and relationally. Embodied societal memory, therefore, becomes visible through how bodies move, orient themselves in space and regulate themselves in the present rather than through deliberate remembering. Such forms of memory are often accessed when bodies are placed in conditions that invite movement and sensory engagement, making choreographic practice an appropriate mode of inquiry for exploring embodied societal memory.



Figure 2
Embodied Testimonies: Memories in Motion, Archives of Flesh 2025, Rostrum Theatre Pretoria
(photograph by Didintle Morudu).

Methodology

This research is situated within a practice-as-research (PaR) framework where the choreographic process functions as the central research practice, providing the space through which the research questions are explored. Robin Nelson (2022: 18), a leading scholar in practice as research (PaR), suggests that research “can be undertaken through a practice and where the practice (praxis) itself [...] serves as primary evidence of the research”. In PaR the act of creating (such as choreographing) is not a secondary byproduct of the research process but rather the primary means by which research questions are interrogated, and knowledge is produced (Nelson 2022: 3). Knowledge emerges through moving and reflecting, revealing embodied and tacit understandings that arise from each dancer’s subjective engagement with the choreographic tasks (Kershaw 2009: 106). The choreographic process becomes an epistemological site in which individual embodied responses are explored and reflected on (Welch 2022: 3). The study does not generalise bodily responses or claim shared embodied effects of GBV, but rather attends to the individual, subjective movement responses to choreographic tasks that invite reflection on living within a South African context where GBV is prevalent potentially leading to embodied insights.

Within this PaR framework, the study draws specifically on embodied inquiry as a research methodology that informs how the choreographic process was designed and facilitated. Embodied inquiry is a participatory, experimental, and reflective practice that centres sensory and affective experiences in and through the body (Leigh and Brown 2021). PaR considers that the body and its multimodal sensory experiences are pivotal to understanding, being, and interpreting the world, with a continual emphasis on reflexivity (Leigh and Brown 2021: 1).

Drawing on Jennifer Tania’s (2021: 40) embodied research design, the choreographic process is the site for generating embodied data, defined here as the movement responses that emerge through the dancers’ engagement with their own bodily sensations, postures, gestures, and movement choices. As Tania (2021: 40) suggests, embodied data may be generated through “attention to one’s visceral sensations, posture, or movement”, and emerges as “unconscious information brought to consciousness” by attending to the body in motion in the present moment.

The choreographic process functioned as the primary site of data generation through structured movement tasks and observation. These tasks were designed to elicit bodily responses rather than verbal accounts and included: body mapping, in which dancers traced sensations and areas of tension on drawn body outlines; postural excavation, where dancers explored habitual postures present in public spaces; gestural inquiry, which focused on repeated everyday gestures and how they are held in the body; and Effort unlearning, which involves exploring and altering habitual movement dynamics. Each task was followed by reflection allowing dancers to articulate what they notice in their bodies and movements, which influenced movement development for the paper performance. The choreographic process was structured to focus on individual, subjective responses within a shared training environment. All participants were trained within the same contemporary dance programme and worked together in the same studio space. Each dancer was invited to respond to the tasks by drawing on their own embodied histories, sensory awareness and lived experiences within the South African context.

The participants in this study were six dancers, who volunteered and expressed interest in taking part in the paper performance, from the Tshwane University of Technology Performing Arts Dance Stream, and the author. All dancers were trained at the same institutional dance programme and share a common dance training vocabulary. The participants brought different lived experiences to the choreographic process from their personal histories and lifeworlds, shaped by diverse racial, cultural, gendered and personal histories within the South African context. All participants provided verbal informed consent and willingly entered the choreographic process in the expectation of performing in the paper performance.

The choreographic process culminated in a paper performance created for the Faculty of Arts and Design Second Annual GBV Symposium at Tshwane University of Technology in August 2025, under the Research Niche Area: *Artivism as a Tool to Combat GBV*. The paper performance was intended as an embodied mode of dissemination of the choreographic process to reveal the embodied data.

Choreographic process towards a paper performance

The choreographic process was designed as a series of tasks that invited dancers to attend to the “whole-body experience” (Tantia 2021: 43). The line of inquiry of the PaR invited attention to how living within a South African context marked by GBV may be registered in the bodymind through movement, posture, gesture, and bodily regulation. The process began with questions designed to attune performers towards embodied reflection, such as: How does your body respond to living in South Africa, where GBV is widespread and systemic, and how is it shaped by that reality? Where does the weight of this violence sit? Where do you sense vigilance, holding, or tension? In what ways are your gestures, postures, or silences shaped by social norms around safety and risk? The performers responded through structured improvisation and written and spoken reflections.

Following the framing, the process unfolded through a series of task-based explorations designed to generate individual movement responses. Body-mapping⁶ tasks invited performers to locate sensations of alertness, guarding or where they withdraw within their bodies, tracing how vigilance might be felt beneath the skin (Idrees *et al.* 2024: 4). Postural excavation focused on habitual stances or “postural configurations”⁷ (Fernandes 2015: 268) adopted in public spaces, exploring how bodies organise themselves (Wahl 2019: 32) in relation to perceived safety or exposure. Gestural⁸ inquiry asked performers to repeat everyday gestures, attending to how inherited or socially learned gestures are part of their habitual movement patterns

⁶ Body-mapping is an arts-based method that allows participants to express embodied experiences, explore their lived histories, subjective meanings and socio-cultural contexts by creating and working with an outline of the body on paper (Idrees *et al.* 2024: 4). Participants in this research worked with drawing on their outline of the body and then moved those responses.

⁷ Postural configurations refer to “body part deviations or specific alignment situations, such as head held forward and shoulder lifted, as well as the relation between the Centre of Weight and the Centre of Levity” (Fernandes 2015: 268). Fernandes (2015: 268) refers to three types of torso: concave: curved forward from the pelvis and chest, convex: curved backwards from the pelvis and chest, and mixed: chest concave and pelvis convex.

⁸ A gesture is considered a movement of the limbs that does not impact the whole body and is “often seen as indicative and revealing of an inner understanding” (Wahl 2019: 32).

(Fernandes 2015: 133). These explorations were followed by Effort⁹ unlearning, which invited performers to soften habitual movement dynamics or patterns to notice how certain patterns are held or released (Hansen 2022: 28). Due to the sensitive thematic focus of the research,¹⁰ care was taken to support¹¹ the dancers throughout, where debriefing occurred after each rehearsal session by the author, where time was allocated for verbal reflection and grounding practices, including breathing exercises.

Each task was approached individually, allowing the dancers to generate movement material from their own bodily experience. The process emphasised noticing rather than interpreting in the moment, where the dancers were encouraged to attend to sensation, rhythm and their spatial orientation. The process progressed through cycles of improvisation, repetition, and modification, in which movement material was continually explored and reframed. Reflection was integrated into the process through verbal discussions and written notes. This iterative structure aligns with Tania's (2021) approach to embodied research, in which sensation, movement, and interoception are valid epistemologies. In this way, choreography functioned as a research method and a way of articulation, allowing embodied responses to surface through kinaesthetic engagement. The choreographic process aimed to make visible how the performers' individual bodies responded to living within a shared social context, working with embodied data that could contribute to an interpretative exploration of embodied societal memory through movement.

Analysing embodied data through Laban Movement Analysis

The embodied data, including movement patterns, postures, gestures, and embodied regulation, generated through the choreographic process was analysed using Laban Movement Analysis (LMA). LMA provides a systematic way of observing how bodies organise movement through Body, Effort, Space, and Shape (BESS) (Wahl 2019; Fernandes 2015). The Body category aims to explore what moves and how the body organises itself spatially, which includes information on various parts, actions, and organisation of the body (Bradley 2008: 92; Fernandes 2015: 90; Studd and Cox 2013: 90). Human movement occurs in “constant expressive variation” (Fernandes 2015: 143), and within LMA, this variation is understood as Effort, which attends to how movement is executed. Effort reflects an individual's inner attitude, making internal states visible through the qualitative patterns of movement that emerge and repeat over time (Van Koningsveld 2011: 18). The Space category attends to how a mover relates to their surroundings, including where movement occurs in relation to the body and how it travels through space. This includes pathways, levels, directions and the use of the kinesphere, understood as the three-dimensional space surrounding the body defined by the reach of the limbs (Melzer *et al.* 2019: 3). The Shape category refers to the ability of the body to change its

⁹ Effort is how an individual moves and refers to dynamic qualities that express the individual's internal attitude in relation to the four motion factors of Flow, Space, Weight, and Time (Fernandes 2015: 143).

¹⁰ The research explored in this article can be seen as a starting exploratory phase and included participants who have not subjectively experienced GBV. If the research should continue and invite dancers who have experienced GBV to participate, a registered psychologist would have to be present as an objective observer in each of the content sessions.

¹¹ It was not deemed necessary to have a registered psychologist in the session as none of the participants had experienced GBV directly, however the TUT Arts Campus has a gender desk and wellness centre which is available to each student.

volume and form through movement and explores the inner space of the body and how, through Modes of Shape Change and specific qualities, the bridge between inner and outer is facilitated (Fernandes 2015: 181).

The BESS categories do not function in isolation as Body organisation influences Effort expression, Effort shapes spatial intention, Space and reach in the kinesphere inform Shape change and Shape in turn reflects how the body adapts and responds to its environment. It is through this interrelationship that movement patterns become visible as embodied organisation. Movement analysis occurred during and after the choreographic process in line with PaR research methodologies that combine reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action. During rehearsals reflection-in-action took place as movement was observed, repeated and adjusted within the studio. Following rehearsals reflection-on-action was undertaken through the review of rehearsal notes and documented movement motifs.

Using the BESS framework, movement was analysed to attend to how each dancer organised movement in relation to: postural configuration and recurring gestures; Effort in relation to Space, Weight, Time and Flow; Spatial orientation and relationship to dancer's kinesphere and reach space; and changes in bodily shape and volume. Rather than establishing a baseline of individual movement style, the analysis remained grounded within-process observation. Recurring tendencies were identified through specific movement qualities that reappeared for each dancer across multiple tasks and rehearsals. This approach allowed attention to each dancer's idiosyncratic movement signature. The analysis remained attentive to individual movement signatures while also noticing patterns that emerged within the shared choreographic process.

Embodied data and discoveries

Throughout rehearsals, certain movement tendencies emerged in individual dancers' material at different moments. These included postural contractions, inward folding of the torso, wrapping or folding arms around the torso, gestures of clenched fists, heightened spatial scanning, and what has been described as a state of "high-alert neuromuscular readiness" (Johnson 2023: 10). Movement motifs emerged around protective self-enclosure, withdrawal, and moments of hypervigilance (see figure 3 as an example). Hypervigilance, as defined by Smith *et al.* (2019: 1), is a "state of heightened awareness and watchfulness" and can be seen as a consequence of being exposed to high levels of violence. These movements were approached as recurring movement patterns that surface through embodied inquiry within the choreographic process.



Figure 3
Postural Excavation, Archives of Flesh 2025, Rostrum Theatre, Pretoria
 (photograph by Didintle Morudu).

The focus of this research was on attending to how individual bodies responded to the choreographic prompts around living in a society where GBV is prevalent. Where similar movement patterns and qualities appeared across the dancers, these recurrences were approached cautiously as possible indicators of how social context might inform bodily orientation and attitude. The movement material was read interpretively as embodied memory in action, where past and ongoing social conditions may shape present movement tendencies. These embodied responses emerged through kinesthetic engagement, aligning with Michelle Rosenthal's (2021: 85) observation that individuals may not have explicit access to the experiences shaping them, yet “will feel the imprints of the past on a very basic somatic level”. Within the choreographic process, the movement motifs became choreographic material available for reflection and choreographic structuring.



Figure 4
Somatic Imprints of Violence, Archives of Flesh 2025, Rostrum Theatre, Pretoria
 (photograph by Didintle Morudu).



Figure 5
A Field of Listening, Archives of Flesh 2025, Rostrum Theatre, Pretoria
 (photograph by Didintle Morudu).

At moments of collective engagement in the paper performance, as seen in figures 4 and 5, the dancers created what can be described as a field of listening and acknowledgement of GBV in the South African context, where individual movement responses were held in relation to one another. These moments aimed to make individual embodied responses visible for the audience within the performance space. Table 1 includes an accumulated LMA observation and analysis that documents examples of embodied data emerging from the choreographic process. It does not reveal uniform bodily responses but rather documents recurring movement tendencies across the individual dancers at various moments in the choreographic process.

Task	Body: Postures and gestures that emerged	Effort (Space, Weight, Time and Flow)	Space: Kinesphere	Shape: volume change	Breath	Possible interpretive reading (embodied societal memory lens)	Variability among participants
Body-mapping	Raised shoulders and tension	Sustained time, a holding Strong Weight, Bound Flow	Near-reach, a small kinesphere	Shrinking and enclosing	Upper chest breathing	Neuromuscular readiness, watchfulness	Appeared across some dancers, varied in intensity
Body-mapping	Hands covering torso and stomach	Sustained time, Bound Flow, Strong Weight	Near-reach, a small kinesphere	Shrinking and enclosing	Held breath	Embodied guarding of vulnerable areas	Present in different forms across dancers
Postural excavation	Torso folds inward, head slightly lowered (concave)	Sustained time, Bound Flow, Strong Weight	Narrowed kinesphere	Shrinking and enclosing	Reduced breath volume	Withdrawal in public spaces	Emerged in some dancers, absent in others
Postural excavation	Transferring weight forward while scanning; head scanning, and quick gaze changes	Quick time	Increase in kinesphere size	Advancing and rising	Interrupted breath	Constant environmental monitoring, a readiness	Expressed differently across bodies
Gestural inquiry	Fists raised up	Shifts between Quick and Sustained Time	Shifts between larger and smaller kinespheres	Rising and advancing	Quick outbursts of breath	Protection, habitual protective posture	Appeared in some dancers
Gestural inquiry	Quick, darting glances and head shifts	Shifts between quick and sustained time	Small kinesphere	Advancing	Interplay between quick and slower breathing	Hyper-awareness of surroundings	Appeared in all dancers at different points
Effort unlearning	Releasing shoulders and opening chest	Sustained time	Increase in kinesphere size	Rising	Longer and deeper breath	Counteraction to defensive embodied guarding	Not all dancers accessed this with ease
Effort unlearning	Slow grounded weigh shifts	Sustained time	Increase in kinesphere size	Rising and advancing	Fuller exhalation	Embodying presence to counteract guarding	Expressed differently by dancers

The embodied data described above was developed as choreographic material towards the creation of a paper performance entitled *Archives of Flesh*. *Archives of Flesh* emerged as a metaphorical framing where the phrase refers to the idea that movement, posture, and gestures can be approached as sites through which lived social experience is carried and expressed through the body. This metaphor draws on a longer genealogy within memory studies, dance and physical theatre, where scholars have examined how bodies function as carriers of memory and emerge as archives (Connerton 1989; Lepecki 2010; Taylor 2003). Within memory studies, the body has been understood as a medium through which social memory is enacted, particularly through ritual and performance. Building on this, Alan Parker (2020: 113) proposes “the body as an archival source”, a generative living repository where conversations, gestures, and embodied acts become sites of memory and re-enactment. In this view, the embodied present does not reproduce the past but engages with its residues through movement, allowing memory to be activated and reworked in performance (Giese and Keightley 2024: 446). In this research, situating the moving body as a medium of memory does not suggest that the body emerges as a fixed archive, but rather the metaphor foregrounds how embodied inquiry and choreographic practice allow movement responses to be encountered and articulated within an academic performance context. *Archives of Flesh* therefore operated as a performative articulation of the research process that makes embodied memory available for observation by the audience.

The final paper performance emerges as not a representation of the research, but rather as a creative artefact or an aesthetic crystallisation that is a material and embodied distillation of the research process itself (Haseman and Mafe 2009: 226). In line with PaR, the paper performance operates as both a mode of inquiry and a form of knowledge production. The paper performance brings into form an aesthetic distillation of explorations through the performer's body, gesture, and co-presence. As such, the paper performance enacts the research rather than reporting on it, allowing the audience to observe the performers' embodied societal memory.

Discussion

This research suggests that choreographic practice can generate embodied data through the lived experience of the bodymind that makes socially mediated experience available for reflection. In *Embodied Activism*, Rae Johnson (2023: 105) argues that the “lived felt experience of the body in the world is never politically neutral”. This claim suggests that the body is a site through which social norms, power relations, gender and historical conditions are lived and negotiated. In this study, dancers’ movement responses can be read as situated bodily orientations negotiated through gendered social life, spatial regulation, and everyday awareness of safety and risk. From this perspective, bodies are shaped by and respond to socio-political realities in which they are situated.

This framing supports the idea of dance as a personal practice and a political act. When movement is approached as a situated response to social conditions, dance can be positioned as a form of activism, understood as a process-oriented collaborative way of engaging in artistic practice with activist intent (Danko 2018: 235). Dance as an activist act mobilises embodied ways of knowing through sensation, affect, posture, gesture, and movement patterning within a shared performance space. Here, mobilisation refers to the activation of embodied knowledge

in relation to others, allowing audiences the space to observe movement as a mode of social reflection.

The embodied data and specific movement tendencies in Table 1 emerged through task-based explorations. These tendencies are interpreted through the understanding that “bodily articulations of memory [are] socially and culturally constructed, and the body itself [is] relationally embedded in wider cultural ecologies of remembering” (Giese and Keightley 2024: 446). From this perspective, the recurrence of vigilant and protective movement responses across the dancers may be read as a possible surfacing of embodied societal memory. Johnson (2023: 10) notes that such embodied patterns are often “experienced and held in the body – particularly in the nervous system – and expressed in our embodied relationships and interactions with others”. The choreographic process made visible how embodied regulation may appear in posture, gesture, and spatial behaviour.

A theoretical question raised by this research is how embodied memory may appear as collective. This study approaches the collective as a set of socio-political conditions that shape embodied experience over time. In the South African context, the residue of the effects of GBV emerges through public discourse, cultural norms, spatial practices and everyday anticipatory awareness, amongst other forms. These social conditions could form patterned expectations expressed through movement, proximity, and risk, which may register as embodied orientation and habitual regulation in the body. This aligns with Giese and Keighley (2024: 449), who observe that “the body that moves physically can also move politically, culturally, socially, affectively, imaginatively, and kinaesthetically”, allowing memory to be negotiated through embodied action.

However, a central methodological tension in this research lies in differentiating between movements that reflect embodied societal memory and those that arise from the performers’ habitual movement languages. However, habitual bodily movements are themselves socially and culturally shaped, making the boundary between the personal and the collective porous (Tewes 2018: 3). This means that the personal and collective are entangled in ways that make embodied societal memory interpretive rather than conclusive.

Interpreting movement as an expression of embodied societal memory is not presented here as an empirical claim but as an informed, context-sensitive reading shaped by embodied inquiry and movement observation. This reading aligns with practice-as-research methodologies, where ‘findings’ are “likely to be always already provisional” (Kershaw 2009: 123). The contribution of this study is demonstrated in how choreographic practice can function as a method for generating and interpreting embodied data in relation to socially mediated experience and how creating a paper performance can articulate such an inquiry within academic contexts and future embodied research, as seen in figure 6.



Figure 6
Acknowledgement of Embodied Societal Memory, Archives of Flesh 2025, Rostrum Theatre, Pretoria
 (photograph by Didintle Morudu).

Conclusion

This study approached the bodymind as embedded within a socio-cultural and historical landscape, shaped through habitual bodily patterns, and lived experience. From this perspective, the choreographic process functioned as a site for exploring embodied societal memory, understood as the socially mediated imprint of living within a context marked by pervasive gender-based violence. The research attended to how movement, posture, gesture, and embodied regulation emerged as situated responses to social conditions.

Within the choreographic process, the dancers' bodies emerged as archives in process, which were continually reshaped through task-based exploration and reflection. As the dancers engaged in choreographic prompts, their embodied archives were reconfigured as movement patterns that surfaced and were re-examined. In this sense, the archive was re-activated and negotiated in multimodal ways in time and space through embodied inquiry. The paper performance provided a space where these archives of flesh were recontextualised and reconfigured in the present moment for the audience to observe.

Positioning the research within embodied activism, this study understands dance as a practice through which embodied knowledge can be mobilised in relation to social realities. Movement functioned as a way of engaging dancers' subjective embodied perception of GBV, without directly experiencing GBV, in and through their bodyminds. The paper performance

created a shared space of attention in which embodied societal memory could be encountered through sensation, relation and co-existence. Within this space, bodily patterns associated with vigilance and protection were held as lived movement responses shaped by social context.

For other researchers, this study offers methodological value in demonstrating how embodied inquiry can be explored within a practice-as-research framework to generate embodied data without making claims of generalisability. The research contributes as a way of working with movement as interpretive data, allowing plurality and provisional meaning-making. It also demonstrates how a paper performance can function as a mode of embodied research dissemination, making socially embodied experience perceptible. As such the study positions choreographic practice as a method for engaging the embodied dimensions of living within a GBV prevalent society, not as an intervention that resolves violence, but as a means of acknowledgement and critically attending to how violence is carried and made visible through bodies in motion.

Future research could extend this inquiry through various choreographic processes with diverse participant groups to further explore how embodied memories of living within GBV prevalent contexts are shaped by social positioning and lived experience. The line of inquiry in future research and dance making might support processes of embodied awareness and critical reflection around GBV in educational or community contexts.

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Empowering silenced voices: art education as a tool for social justice and GBV awareness

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An activist - artist and activist - uses art as a tool to fight against injustice and oppression. Artists are voices for the marginalised, oppressed and silenced. This article explores how South African third-year Visual Art Education students engage with art as a means to illuminate and challenge social and cultural structures perpetuating societal ills, particularly Gender-Based Violence (GBV). I focus on visual meaning-making processes of students by critically exploring their contemporary artworks (2019-2025) created for their final year-project addressing lived experiences of injustices. By embracing the turmoil of a post-Covid-19 global context, student-teachers drew from personal experiences and observations of injustices. Many addressed gender-related issues in a South African society, using their art to raise awareness, encourage dialogue and empower silenced voices. Positioned in the interpretivist paradigm, this qualitative study carefully discusses selected artworks and is situated within a hermeneutical and phenomenological approach. Findings highlight the transformative power of creative expression and students' strong sense of accountability and social justice. I conclude that art education has the potential to bring agency to silenced voices and create awareness of GBV and social injustices.

Keywords: art education, activism, gender-based violence (GBV), social justice, social injustices, social transformation, visual meaning-making processes

Bemagtiging van stilgemaakte stemme: Kunsonderrig as 'n instrument vir sosiale geregtigheid en geslagsgebaseerde geweld (GGG)

'n Artevis – kunstenaar en aktivis – gebruik kuns as 'n instrument vir teenkamping van ongeregtigheid en onderdrukking. Kunstenaars is die stemme vir gemarginaliseerde randfigure, onderdrukte en diene wat se stemme stilgemaak word. Hierdie artikel ondersoek hoe Suid-Afrikaanse derdejaar Visuele Kunsonderrig-studente met kuns omgaan as 'n middel om sosiale en kulturele strukture wat sosiale ewels, veral geslagsgebaseerde geweld (GGG), onder die soeklig te plaas en uit te daag. Ek fokus op die visuele betekeniskeppingsprosesse van studente deur hulle kontemporêre kunswerke (2019-2025) krities te analiseer. Die betrokke kunswerke is geskep vir hulle finale jaarprojek wat beleefde ervarings van onregmatighede aanspreek. Die studente se inspirasie het voortgespruit uit hul persoonlike ervarings en waarnemings van onregmatighede binne die teenswoordige onstuimige post-Covid 19-konteks. Heelwat van die studente het geslagsverwante kwessies in 'n Suid-Afrikaanse samelewing aangespreek en hul kuns gebruik om sodanige bewustheid te verhoog, dialoog te bevorder en stilgemaakte stemme te bemagtig. Geselekteerde werke word deurgaans bespreek. Hierdie kwalitatiewe navorsing is gesitueer binne 'n hermeneutiese en fenomenologiese benadering. Bevindings beklemtoon die transformerende invloed van kreatiewe uitdrukking en studente se besondere begrip van aanspreeklikheid en sosiale geregtigheid. Ek kom tot die gevolgtrekking dat kunsonderrig die potensiaal het om agentskap aan stilgemaakte stemme te gee en bewustheid van GGG en sosiale onregmatighede te skep.

Slutelwoorde: artevisme, geslagsgebaseerde geweld (GGG), kunsonderrig, sosiale geregtigheid, sosiale onregmatighede, sosiale transformasie, visuele betekeniskeppingsprosesse

“In the beginning, there was Art. How else was the world created?” These were the words spoken by Professor Tinyiko Maluleke at the opening of the 2024 Inaugural Global Artivism conference, themed *Artivism: Embracing Cultural Activism for a Safe and Just World* held in September 2024 in Pretoria, South Africa.¹ They serve as a stark reminder of art's primordial role in shaping human understanding and experience. Throughout history,

¹ The conference was hosted by the Tshwane University of Technology's Faculty of Arts and Design in collaboration with the Riky Rik Foundation, Community Arts Network (CAN) and the Global Commons Alliance (GCA).

from the earliest mark-making on cave walls, the exploration of Humanism in the Renaissance to contemporary visual expressions through digital means, art has been fundamental in how we interpret our world, negotiate identity, and respond to our socio-political environments. An activist, artist activist, uses art as a tool to fight against injustice and oppression, by any means necessary. Artists give form to the unseen, voice to the silenced and space to the marginalised. Alimen, Isidro and Alimen (2023: 42) assert that “In activism, the experience of art becomes transformative. This drive is to change the individual’s psyche and propel them to change the collective mind”. Within this framework, art education becomes a powerful tool to educate society and bring urgency to addressing its social ills. Art not only serves as a means for societal reflection, but also as a vehicle for healing, particularly in the context of suppressed trauma and ingrained systemic social, cultural and gender injustice and a call to change and social transformation. This article focuses on the latter, while acknowledging how the project under discussion has aided the involved student-teacher artists in their personal journeys of healing and dealing with trauma.

Gender-based violence (GBV) manifests in multiple intersecting forms. While generally implying overt physical or sexual harm based on one’s gender,² mostly directed towards the most vulnerable in society, including women and children, related forms of GBV, such as emotional, psychological, economic, structural and symbolic violence, often evade visibility and accountability. These forms of violence, often left unspoken, are embedded and normalised within dominant narratives of social, cultural and institutional frameworks, making them difficult to confront through traditional modes of discourse alone. I argue that art education, especially within a socially engaged pedagogy, offers a platform to challenge these embedded violences.

In this article, I present an ongoing arts-based research project that I have conducted annually with groups of third-year Visual Art Education students since 2019 at a tertiary Higher Education institution in South Africa. While the broader project explores visual meaning-making processes in the work of art education students, in this article I specifically focus on works created that relate to themes of GBV and social injustices against marginalised and vulnerable groups in society. The following sections provide an overview and contextualise the project. Thereafter, various artworks and how these visuals created by third-year Visual Art Education students are used to raise awareness of social inequalities and may affect social transformation in societal attitudes and mindsets, are discussed.

Project overview

Visual Art Education is inherently transdisciplinary, intricately marrying visual and fine arts and education, while simultaneously transcending boundaries that often constrain a holistic understanding of social and political societal issues. Visual analysis and art-making practices have long intersected with multiple fields, including but not limited to the political, religious, legal, economic and historical spheres. However, within academic research, Visual Art Education continues to advocate for arts-based research methods to be recognised as legitimate data collection and analysis methods. In their 2015 publication *Seeing how it works: A visual*

² GBV occurs when various “complex, contextual, and power differentials” are at play (Christensen, Bladwin-White and McMahon 2023). According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) 17 November 2022 (in Christensen *et al.* 2023), GBV can be understood as “violence perpetuated against a person due to their sex, gender identity/expression, or perceived adherence to social gender norms... [GBV] is grounded in power relations due to gender inequities”. (See Ending gender-based violence globally, *Global Health*. Retrieved from: <https://archive.cdc.gov/#/details?url=https://www.cdc.gov/globalhealth/topics/gbv/index.html> on 29 August 2025).

essay about critical and transformative research in education, Naydene de Lange, Relebohile Moletsane and Claudia Mitchell (2015: 151) emphasise that “the value of visual participatory research in contributing to social change is often unrecognised”, and illustrate “the possibilities of using the visual, not only as a mode of inquiry, but also of a representation and communication in education and social science scholarship”. Similarly, through this project, I aim to demonstrate the transformative power of the visual through visual literacy and meaning-making processes to raise awareness of social inequalities and GBV and affect concrete change and social transformation in societal attitudes. As Suzanne Nossel (2016: 103) affirms: “the experience of art is transformative. Art can change our minds – inspiring us to take on different perspectives and to reimagine our worlds”. The primary research question that drives this article is: How can visuals created by third-year Visual Art Education students be used to raise awareness of social inequalities and GBV? A secondary question is: How can these visuals affect social transformation in societal attitudes and mindsets?

In addition to learning various skills, knowledge and values, Visual Art Education university student-teachers need to be visual and critical thinkers, creative problem-solvers, and most importantly, activists, educating not only their learners, our future leaders, but the world, on the importance of visuals and their real-world impact. Preparing them adequately for the realities of an ever-changing, twenty-first century global educational landscape and multi-religious, cultural, racial and gendered South African classrooms is, however, an ongoing challenge. South Africa, for example, has twelve official languages,³ each saturated with its own rich cultural history. Traditional heritage shapes how new content is both taught and understood, as meaning-making depends on each individual’s “situatedness” in the world, what Hans-Georg Gadamer (1960) describes as *Sitz-im-Leben* (site-in-the-world) or also known as prejudices and lived experiences (see also Human 2019: 132-40, and Chandra and Human 2025). Therefore, educators should not only be aware of their own biases but also consider each learner’s contextual Being-in-the-world (Heidegger 1962). These aspects influence how individuals understand themselves in relation to others. Our world is saturated with visuals, holistically embedded in everyday experiences, promoting targeted social, political, religious or other agendas. How, then, is meaning made, understood and internalised in this cacophony of visibility, not only by its creators (artists), but also by those who view them? How can these visuals in turn be used, not to promote propaganda, but instead to question it and raise awareness of social inequalities? As future Visual Art educators, it is important to firstly understand how to make meaning of these visuals and secondly, how to use visuals to communicate experiences to an audience to affect change. The audience in this context is two-fold: firstly, the works created by these tertiary Visual Art Education student-teachers are exhibited to the public, which includes family members and friends, various community members (peers, schools, university and immediate communities). Secondly, the audience can be understood as the students’ own future school learners, who are, or will become, contributing members of society. Experiencing these processes of embracing visuals to change perspectives first-hand equips these future educators to guide their own learners effectively. These students have thus not only engaged in the art-making process through their practical project, but also engaged in various visual meaning-making processes, such as those suggested by John Berger (1972), Roland Barthes (1972) and Nicholas Mirzoeff (2023), discussed in their Visual Art Methodologies lectures.

Additionally, content taught in the Creative and Visual Arts classrooms (at school and tertiary levels), traditionally based on Western notions of what visual art education entails,

³ The eleven official spoken language in South Africa are: isiZulu, isiXhosa, Afrikaans, English, Sepedi, Setswana, Sesotho, siSwati, Tshivenda, Xitsonga and isiNdebele. The twelfth official language, South African Sign Language (SASL) was instated in 2023.

needs to be critically re-evaluated, particularly in contexts where power relations and knowledge production shaped by the global North-and-South divide determine whose histories, traditions, knowledge, epistemologies and perspectives are prioritised. While this article does not focus on curriculum reform nor South African schooling ecologies, it is vital to acknowledge that often classrooms still rely on Western curricula with strong patriarchal undertones (Heleta 2016) enforced through visuals inside and outside the classroom. This not only reinforces notions of patriarchal behaviour in society but also creates a disconnect between what is taught and South African learners' real-world experiences. As noted by Rachel Nyaradzo Adams (2011: 150), the "current schooling system has failed (and continues to fail) in critically engaging learners on the realities of their own continent in a way that empowers them to be agents of transformational change". Let us not forget our fast-changing, digital world, marked by the Fourth Industrial Revolution and influences of Artificial Intelligence on all aspects of daily life and where simultaneously global and local challenges, such as health pandemics, global resources scarcity, electricity and water shortages, and GBV, are persisting realities. To address some of these challenges, I restructured the previously existing project-based approach in the third-year Art Practical module, shifting from a term-based approach focusing on different mediums and art-making methods each term, similar to the structure of the South African Curriculum and Policy Statement document (CAPS) (2011) for Creative and Visual Arts respectively, to a single year-project, in 2019.⁴ This article does not primarily focus on pedagogy nor trauma experienced by students i.e. how art can be used as a form of therapy in the Visual Arts classroom, but instead on how visuals created by student-teachers, based on their own real-world experiences and observations, can be used to raise awareness of social inequalities and consequently transform mindsets.

At the university where this project is implemented, the Art Education modules in the Faculty of Education include Art Practical (years 1-3), Art History (years 1-3) and Art Methodology (years 2-4), alongside various other education modules, including second and/or third school subject specialisations. The overall group of Visual Art Education students comprise student-teachers for the Intermediate Phase (Grades 4-6), Senior Phase (Grades 7-9) and Further Education and Training (FET) Phase (Grades 10-12). The third-year Art Practical group who forms the cohort for this project, are mostly FET phase students (since only FET phase students are required to take Art Practical up to this level), attending five lecture hours for Art Practical per week.

Focusing equally on process and final products and rooted in real-life experiences of students, this ongoing year-project comprises various components. Using both traditional and non-conventional and/or alternative materials, students must create a body of work, culminating in a final end-year exhibition, comprising both 2-dimensional and 3-dimensional works, in which they critically and creatively have to identify a challenge or issue prevalent in their real-life context. Through introspective discovery, students choose a topic with which they can identify, either in their own lives or a topic they observe within a contemporary, preferably South African context, which somehow impacts their life. Customary themes (previously provided by the lecturer, based on the school curriculum) are thus replaced by themes developed by students themselves, based on their own real-life situatedness.

The project brief is adapted annually to reflect current societal circumstances, such as the global Covid-19 pandemic in 2020. In 2025, for example, the project introduced the notion of "Home", inspired by the Cooper-Hewitt Smithsonian Museum's exhibition *Making Home*—

⁴ This adapted approach was implemented at the beginning of 2019, before the Covid-19 pandemic changed the educational landscape as we knew it. This change, however, was beneficial during the lockdown period, allowing students prolonged periods to work on a single project.

Smithsonian Design Triennial in New York City, USA,⁵ asking students to consider the brief within a local South African context of “Making home, seeking home, building home, going home, leaving home, homecoming, *heimweh*”.⁶ The core task, namely to identify a challenge or issue prevalent in their own real-life contexts, however, remains consistent.

Over the years, students have explored sub-themes ranging from economical and political challenges (e.g. loadshedding or governmental elections) to animal abuse or religious and cultural customs. Students are encouraged to choose themes with which they are comfortable and willing to explore. An initial brainstorming session requires students to consider at least three different initial ideas, before choosing their final theme for the year. Each year, a wide range of themes are prevalent. Yet annually I observe a significant number of works addressing GBV and/or other systemic injustices. For this qualitative article, I have purposefully selected examples for discussion, focusing on observation and interpretation rather than statistical analysis. The selected examples comprise works created between 2019 and 2025. Many other examples exist that were not included, and various other works created do not focus on GBV or systemic social injustices. The project did not start out as a research project, nor is its primary focus on GBV. However, my observations and experiences show that GBV is a recurring and pressing theme.

Accordingly, students were not recruited as participants from the start of the project. Instead, informed consent of the students whose works are discussed, was obtained after the development of their concepts and/or completion of their works. This ensured that there was no researcher bias in the themes students choose, nor in the assessment of the works. Power dynamics between lecturer and student will always exist. To minimise any potential biases, final assessments included a moderation process and various assessors. I was one and other assessors stemmed from the Art Education division, at least one of whom does not lecture this group during their third year when this project takes place. This process ensured quality control and objectivity during the marking process. There was no differentiation in how students were assessed based on the theme(s) they chose for their project. Instead, clear criteria were formulated and followed.

Understanding various ethical challenges within the context of this project contributes to the power of activism and visual texts. How these are addressed may contribute to understanding the scholarship of how to ethically employ activism in the Visual Arts classroom and beyond. Andrew Clark (2013: 68), in *Haunted by images? Ethical moments and anxieties in visual research*, unpacks some ethical challenges that emerge when working with visual materials and “demonstrate[s] how research ethics invariably play out differently depending on context and situation.” Informed consent obtained at the beginning of a project, for example, does not specify what will happen with visual materials, such as photographs (Clark 2013: 70). Anonymity and confidentiality similarly cannot be guaranteed through visual depictions (Clark 2013: 71). Clark (2013: 68) notes that “By reflecting on the anxieties and emotions evoked in doing visual research we can begin to see how power, trust and emotion underpin the ethical decisions we are required to make”.

As De Lange *et al.* (2015: 173) highlight, visual essays can challenge researchers to reconsider anonymity in work intended to amplify voices and engage policy makers. Since

⁵ This exhibition showcased 25 site-specific installations, which explore the role of design in shaping the physical and emotional realities of home across the United States, US Territories, and Tribal Nations from 2 November 2024 until 10 August 2025 (Cooper Hewitt. 2024. Making home – Smithsonian Design Triennial. Retrieved from: <https://www.cooperhewitt.org/channel/making-home/> on 10 February 2025).

⁶ Many students interpreted the human body itself as “home”, while others approached the theme literally or considered home as a person or part of their identity.

“anonymising data can defeat the purpose of gathering explicitly visual data and ‘disguising’ images can ‘dehumanise’ those represented in them” (Clark 2013: 71), and also “...hide, marginalise or silence the voices of groups and individuals for whom engaging in research may be intended to be an emancipatory experience”, keeping participants anonymous may defeat the intention of giving agency to certain groups of people. Similarly, anonymity proved an interesting challenge in this study. Since the works form part of a public art exhibition held at the end of each academic year, the works and artists’ details form part of the public domain. Furthermore, artists generally seek recognition for their work. Activism is impactful precisely because it engages audiences through artists’ personal narratives, which both draw individuals in and serve as catalysts for social transformation and change. Accordingly, the informed consent form allowed students to choose whether they would like to receive recognition for their work through the inclusion of their names (in addition to whether they would like to participate in this study). Although most of the students whose works are discussed here opted for recognition, due to the sensitive nature of the topics addressed, I still elected to preserve anonymity. In instances where artists are physically depicted in their works, I have opted to keep the images unaltered and inform the participants that these images will be published. All the participants whose works are discussed in this paper have been informed about the nature of this article and were allowed to withdraw their inclusion without any repercussions. All assessments for these works were already concluded, and most of the included artists are no longer students. Consequently, power dynamics between the researcher and participants was reduced, as both aimed to demonstrate how visuals can be used to raise awareness of social inequalities and GBV. What is presented here are my interpretations and observations, supported by artists’ statements and process documentation.

The annual cohorts generally comprise between eight and fifteen students, with numbers declining in recent years.⁷ The majority of students are female, from a mixed demographic aged around 20 or 21 years. Various reasons can be given for the predominance of female students in Visual Art Education. As Stina Wikberg (2013: 577) observes, Art Education is often “femininely gendered” due to its strong association with emotional expression. This expressive quality is perhaps precisely why art is such a powerful tool to change attitudes. While not suggesting that activism is exclusively for women, I emphasise that its capacity to evoke holistic emotional responses makes it a powerful tool in confronting GBV and systemic social injustices. Nalini Moodley (2025: 9) similarly expresses that alternative modes of responses “that move beyond the abstract language of policy into the terrain of human experience” are urgently needed, and that activism, a “powerful intersection of artistic practice and activism”, is a “viable” and “deeply resonant” alternative. Activism, she continues, not only “illustrate[s] injustice”, it also “activates audiences emotionally and viscerally, enabling them to imagine new realities” (Moodley 2025: 10).

Since this project forms part of the third-year Art Practical module’s final examination, and this group mainly comprises FET phase students, it is structured according to the three topics found in the Grades 10-12 Visual Arts South African Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS):⁸

⁷ This decline could be attributed to various factors, such as the introduction of set subject packages at faculty level or consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic.

⁸ Department of Basic Education (DBE). 2011. National Curriculum Statement (NCS) Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement: Further Education and Training Phase Visual Arts Grades 10-12. Cape Town: Department of Basic Education: 9.

Topic 1: Conceptualising through the development and realisation of creative ideas

Topic 2: Making of creative artworks, management of process and presentation, following safe practice

Topic 3: Visual culture studies: emphasis on visual literacy

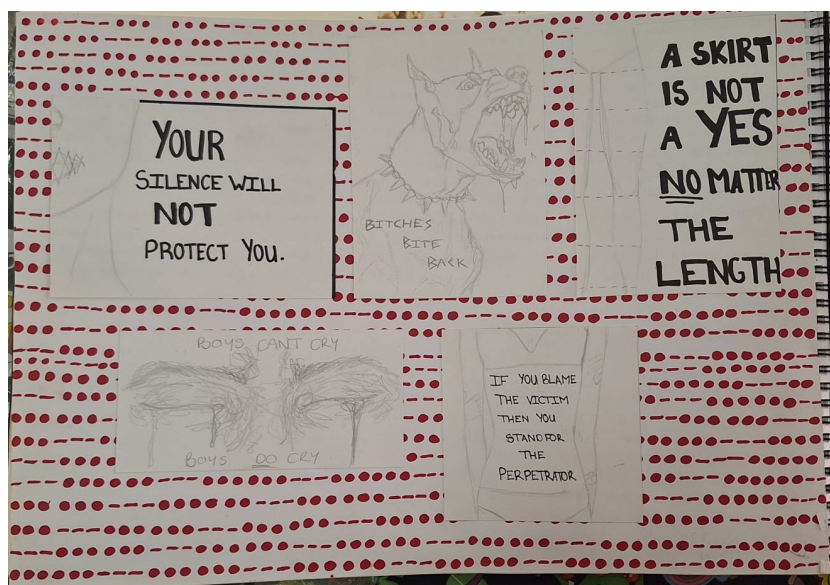


Figure 1

Example of a student's workbook: Conceptualising and planning, 2024.

First, the project is conceptualised, thoroughly researched and developed in students' workbooks (sourcebooks/visual diaries) (Topic 1) (figure 1) and often happens alongside the making of the works (Topic 2). In Topic 2, students create their work throughout the year, both in studio and at home.⁹ They need to manage their space and resources¹⁰ and present their final body of work at crit sessions and the final exhibition, organised as a group. Visual culture studies (Topic 3), generally addressed in their Art Methodologies modules, emphasise visual literacy, art history and contemporary visual culture alongside the other two topics, often culminating in powerful and relatable messages. This is seen for example in *Silence of the Privileged* (2020) (figure 2),¹¹ where a student drew on how Artemisia Gentileschi's *Judith slaying Holofernes* (1620-1621) influenced Kudzanai Chiurai's *We live in silence XIV* (2017)¹² to create the artist's own parody addressing current issues, including the Black Lives Matter movement, the Covid-19 pandemic and domestic violence. At a time where curated moments are posted online, yet various violences remain out of sight, the work foregrounds this tension through conceptually layered references and a palimpsest of implied meanings. By drawing on both art history and contemporary work, in this case inspired by political and colonial, as well as gender and feminist theory and debates, students ground their own work in contemporary

⁹ Students have five hours contact time per week (x 28 weeks). The module comprises 320 notional hours, which means they need to spend roughly 12 hours (11,85) a week on this module.

¹⁰ The aim is not for students to spend money, but rather upcycle and recycle materials in an alternative manner. Seeing that many schools, at which these students will be teaching, are not financially equipped to support the arts, it is important for students to explore materials and techniques that they can use at schools with limited resources at their disposal. Thus, while it is important to understand certain limitations within the field of Creative and Visual Arts, students are expected to push the boundaries and consider new and alternative art-making methods, which may include technology.

¹¹ This work was created by a third-year student in 2020 during the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown for the third-year Art Methodology module. This illustrates a holistic integration of modules, where content and outputs from one inform and influence the next.

¹² <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/kudzanai-chiurai-we-live-in-silence-xiiii>

politically, socially and/or culturally charged contexts. The ever-present influence of (social) media and its power to draw attention to social inequalities is highlighted in this work, while the violences behind closed doors remain hidden.

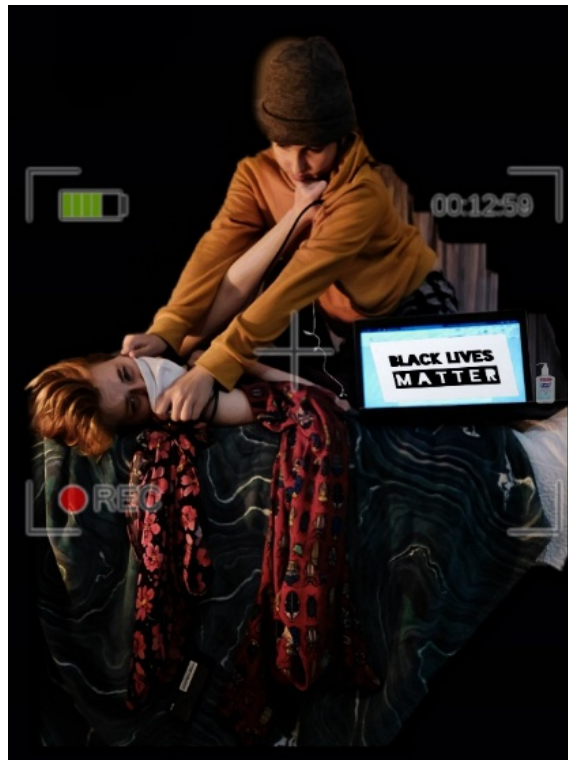


Figure 2
Silence of the Privileged, 2020. Digital photograph.

As students prepare for a future with jobs and challenges that often do not yet exist, the aim is to equip them with transdisciplinary critical thinking and creative problem-solving skills. Experience shows students learn best by doing. Active engagement in solving real-life challenges nurtures deeper involvement in the learning process and encourages more creative, practical solutions. Throughout this project, the process is as important as the final outputs. Therefore, assessment of this project places equal weight on the process (captured in their workbook and through the quarterly crit sessions) and final product.

In addition to deep research on their themes, influential artists, mediums, art-making techniques, and the development and process of the project captured in their workbooks (Topic 1), they have to develop their own professional digital footprints and visibility by creating a social media presence, such as websites, catalogues, Instagram pages and business cards. Furthermore, they synthesise this entire process in a production video. During the opening night, the videos are streamed to encourage audience engagement. While the workbooks are generally hard copies, all other components are displayed in hybrid formats, including QR codes and URL links. This project has shown that technology and online platforms are vital in reaching larger audiences. Virtual exhibitions and teaching and learning spaces are increasingly moving to online platforms, including YouTube, TikTok and Instagram. With the rise of generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools, it is vital that students learn how to ethically and responsibly engage with such tools, preparing and equipping them with skills for an unpredictable future. While it could be argued that the measurability of audience reach and engagement through social media and online platforms is unreliable and inaccurate, the

possible impact that these platforms have on affecting societal attitudes and behaviours is undeniable.

See no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil

Online platforms and exhibitions showcasing powerful visuals and messages offer both benefits and risks. While our exhibition during the Covid-period reached a record number of audience members and engagements, one student reflected on its negative impact:

I took my video down as it had negative engagement on the video. Things like, ‘why would anyone want to do this’ appeared in the comment section. It was great that the video had engaged people all the way from America, but as I was hunting for jobs, I didn’t feel comfortable having that video displayed.

Her roughly 8-minute black and white video, *Suffocation* (2020) (figure 3), created during lockdown, was later removed from social media. It depicts a figure visible only by the arms covering the artist’s face with gladwrap, as breathing slowly became more difficult. It illustrated the vulnerability that many experienced at the time. Despite negative remarks, engagements with this work shows how art, especially work displayed online, can reach and affect international audiences.



Figure 3
Suffocation, 2020. Performance video, screenshot at 8:04:6 minutes.

Miguel Ángel Rogue (2024: 2) explains that through activism “artists seek to raise awareness, challenge assumptions and encourage critical thinking on important issues that affect our society and the world in general”. Media activism can reach broad audiences, through “various digital platforms such as social media, websites and digital art installations (Nossel 2016: 103-5 in Rogue 2024: 2). Zengin and Ütkür-Güllühan (2025: 744) state that “Beyond conveying information, media messages encompass normative values, cultural representations and ideological perspectives”. These visuals play an important role in shaping society’s perception of reality. Furthermore, “Critical media literacy developed through art education is a process that embodies cognitive and social responsibility”. As they note “...art education is positioned as a pedagogical tool that enables individuals to adopt a critical stance towards media messages through aesthetic expression”. This means that those involved do not merely accept the purported messages as fact, but question them and develop alternative perspectives. Thus, through activism, conversations take place that may promote transformation and changed mindsets. Negative responses from viewers may not be desirable, however, they indicate that audiences are engaging with the work. Perhaps, however, deeper critical viewer engagement

and enhanced public visual literacy are needed to promote greater insights and deeper critical thinking.

The same student created a photographic series titled *Innocence* (2020), also developed into drawings (figure 4), that alluded to the saying “See no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil”. This series critiques governmental corruption and inaction regarding unhygienic circumstances, especially during a global health pandemic, drawing attention to its ignorance of “the outcry of the vulnerable”. In the image covering her eyes with a plastic bag, the artist writes that she “want[ed] to create a sense of vagueness ... because if you can’t see or are told not to see evil, it is ironic that the government can’t see their own shortcomings [sic]”. Her overall body of work questioned “Hygiene as a right or privilege”. While especially vulnerable communities, including women and children, are affected by limited access to hygienic products, underlying symbolism, nonetheless, also alludes to other circumstances, such as GBV, where society chooses not to see, hear or speak of the injustices happening behind closed doors. The work questions the viewers’ actions when faced with social injustices, placing responsibility on each member of society: whether they choose to pretend they do not see what is happening around them, choose to ignore the silent cries for help, or perhaps choose to speak up when it truly matters.



Figure 4
***Innocence*, 2020.**
Coloured pencil drawings based on photographic series, 420 x 297 mm. each.

Uncontained

Students are not required to share personal and private stories. Instead, they are urged to develop their own artistic voices. As art educators, they have to consider how they can visually present their views, feelings, thoughts, possible solutions, or awareness-creation of a specific situation to the public – therefore, to be activists and stand up for what they believe. Yet, as it turns out, many of the works were, in fact, very personal.

One student shared her journey of unexpectedly becoming pregnant and having to deal with student-pregnancy, sharing the news with family members and experiencing societal stigma. Her overall body of work, however, does not solely focus on the pregnancy, but rather societal gender roles and expectations, especially those of women. In her first set of works (figure 5), she created three busts of women who have experienced the pressure of presenting

as feminine or who have their own story related to sexual abuse, made of a sweet sugary substance. In her artist statement she writes:

I work with sugar, as it is a sticky substance and hard to clean. Creating busts from sugar illuminates both the desirability as well as disgust integrated within female bodies. We need to look a certain way, smell a certain way, be sensual. Yet we bleed, we sweat, and we cry. Our bodies are natural and beautiful all at once, and I aim to challenge societal beliefs that women should be ashamed of themselves. I have always had a strange relationship with my sexuality as a woman. The sugar is also a symbol of how our bodies are consumed. As a little girl I was sexually abused, 'eaten like something sweet'. I aim to reclaim my sensuality and my body, without being reduced to sin and shame.

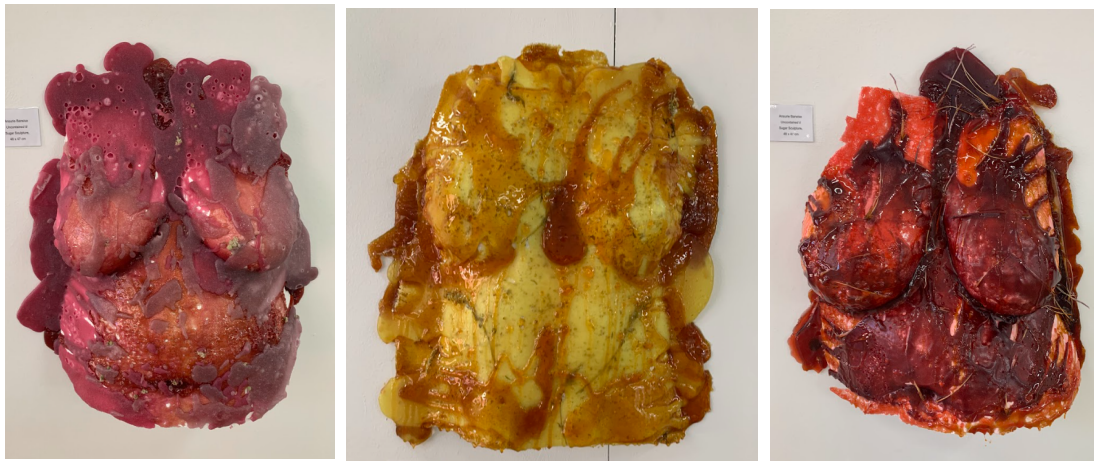


Figure 5
Uncontained I, II and III, 2022.
Sugar sculptures, approx. 410 x 400 mm each.

A plethora of literature exists on the containment of the female body (Lynda Nead, Kenneth Clark, Sandra Lee Bartky, Griselda Pollock), the abject (Julia Kristeva), the gaze (John Berger, Laura Mulvey, Jacques Lacan, bell hooks), the disciplined body (Michel Foucault) and gender performativity (Judith Butler), and artists whose works challenge notions of body politics, beauty standards, identity and gender (e.g. Zanele Muholi, Berni Searle, Claudette Schreuders, Mary Sibande, Marlene Dumas, Nandipha Mntambo, Gabrielle Goliath, Kiki Smith, Sethembile Msezane, Tracey Rose, and many others, all of who either appear in the FET phase curriculum or are known for their work in South African art discourses). Choosing this theme not only draws attention to inequalities found in society and an attempt to affect societal attitudes and mindsets, but also relates to the school curriculum and real-life contexts of learners and society as a whole. Student-teachers are thus acutely aware of various contemporary discourses surrounding gender and body politics, identity, and feminist debates and how their own work may relate to these themes, as well as the work of other contemporary artists, placing their work in contemporary and art historical contexts. Furthermore, accepting one's changing body, whether due to aging, pregnancy, health-related or other reasons, is part of the human experience, and hence the work reflects not only a specific situation, but creates a space for those that can relate to it to feel seen.

Nesting

Little Homes, Little Nests (2022) (figure 6) considers fertility and a woman's role as mother. The notion of "nesting" relates to the preparation, often by expecting mothers, of a safe and welcoming environment, which may include cleaning and organising a room for their baby, decorating the nursery, collecting baby items, etc. This developmental transition, or *rite de passage* into motherhood, is what Dana Raphael (1975: 66) terms "matrescence". She describes this "critical transition period" as "the time of mother-becoming, the period when a woman changes from girl and wife to mother". This stage is marked by physical changes, changes that occur "in her status within the group, in her emotional life, in her focus of daily activity, in her own identity, and in her relationships with all those around her" (Raphael 1975: 66). This process, as also experienced by the artist, prepares the individual for a life altering event, i.e. the birth of a child. It may be argued that nesting forms part of innate maternal instincts, while feminist scholars, such as Sharon Hays in *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood* (1996) may argue that certain behaviours and actions expected by women and mothers are rather socially and culturally produced. By creating little nests that serve as little homes out of felt and other materials associated with femininity, the artist prepared for a new stage in her life. Spread across the gallery space, the nests were hung at different heights, inviting viewers to physically manoeuvre through the space, peeking into and obtaining glimpses into the intimate spaces of possibilities.



I work with various pieces of fibre and materials to create interesting little nests, or homes. These creations mean many things, but especially relate to fertility, and the woman's role as mother. Women are constantly judged for having children at the wrong time or for choosing not to have children at all. When you fall pregnant, people cross boundaries by touching your belly and invading your privacy. In my case, when I became pregnant in May this year, I had to work through the shock of an unplanned pregnancy while being a student and still living with my parents. And as soon as I accepted my baby and started to get excited, I had a traumatic miscarriage at 17 weeks.

Figure 6
Little Homes, Little Nests, 2022.
Installation view and detail, and partial artist statement.
Material and fibres, ranging between 150 and 600 mm each.

After accepting her situation, and starting to be excited about the prospect of a child, the artist prematurely gave birth and consequently lost her baby. The subsequent trauma of the sudden loss was captured in an installation work, as well as a video performance (figure 7).



After my miscarriage, I realised how little I knew about miscarriages, and how often it happened, and how often women kept quiet. I started creating art to help me cope with the trauma. Recreating the bloody scene of my hospital bed, writing down every single detail I could remember of the day, to stop the flashbacks. It is a traumatic experience and a loss that I will carry, as many other women do, for the rest of my life.

Figure 7
***Hospital Bed*, 2022.**
Still of performance video, and partial artist statement.

In the performance video titled *Hospital Bed* (2022),¹³ the artist silently re-enacts the trauma she has experienced. This video, which can be understood and interpreted in various ways, speaks to the experiences of numerous women globally. Its impact is undeniable. After having shown (a short snippet of) the video to different audiences, I observed ensuing silence and, in some women, silent tears. The power of the visuality of these works in the meaning-making process emphasises the universality of certain signifiers, such as the female body, blood and the impact of the colour red. It further highlights how multiple women can identify with the experience and that this gender-based stigma and consequent silence throws a deafening echo. While exemplifying the function of activism, this work also encapsulates what Mirzoeff (2023) terms “visual activism”. Visual activism, according to Mirzoeff (2023: 3) “activate[s] the visible”. It intervenes in that which is visible by bringing to the fore a real-life story that is relatable. It emphasises visible relations between the survivor and the public. Mirzoeff (2023: 3) writes:

It [visual activism] clears the visual field of all ... clutter to create visual relation. In such visual relation, the conditions between among people, or between people and nonhuman life, or between human and nonhuman life and machines, becomes visible. It is not that they suddenly become equal, but that the means by which dispossession and hierarchy are created must be acknowledged. In visible relation, it is possible to claim the right to look, the right to be seen, or the right to opacity... In order to sustain and expand visible relation, visual activism does its groundwork in the visual field to remove obstacles, to repair damage, and to make restitution of that which has been taken.

¹³ See full video: <https://youtu.be/ttAey2E8UiQ>.

While Mirzoeff focuses on public statue and monument removals, political destabilisations and racial relations, the essence of visual activism is relevant here in how the images and signifiers in the works discussed are not neutral, but that the visible is activated to challenge power relations (even if it is to take the power away from that which has a hold over an individual's life) and encourage change through voicing that which is stigmatised and seldom spoken aloud.

As a way to deal with her loss, the student also created what she termed “grieving jewellery” from the breastmilk she started to produce shortly after the loss of her baby. As seen in her artist's statement below (figure 8), this was her way to create a memento through which she could remember her stillborn child. This process possibly draws inspiration from the Victorian use of mourning jewellery. During late seventeenth and early eighteenth-century England, mourning jewellery, often made out of hair, became a common phenomenon (Holm 2004: 139). These pieces of jewellery served as *memento mori*, using hair of the deceased, or in the case of this student's work, breastmilk, to create broaches and bracelets, so that the deceased may be remembered. Holm (2004: 140) describes that “the material medium of remembrance marks the act of remembrance as the very moment when its natural status was transformed into a cultural status, and when the present presence of the body is anticipated as a future absence”. While these pieces of jewellery will of course not bring her child back, they can serve as stark reminders of not only her baby, but also the experiences she underwent. By wearing these pieces, that may result in conversations with those who encounter them, awareness is created of not only remembering a loss, but also the frequency of this experience among many women. By talking about such incidents, the stigma surrounding them may be slowly broken down, thus affecting social change and transforming mindsets and attitudes.

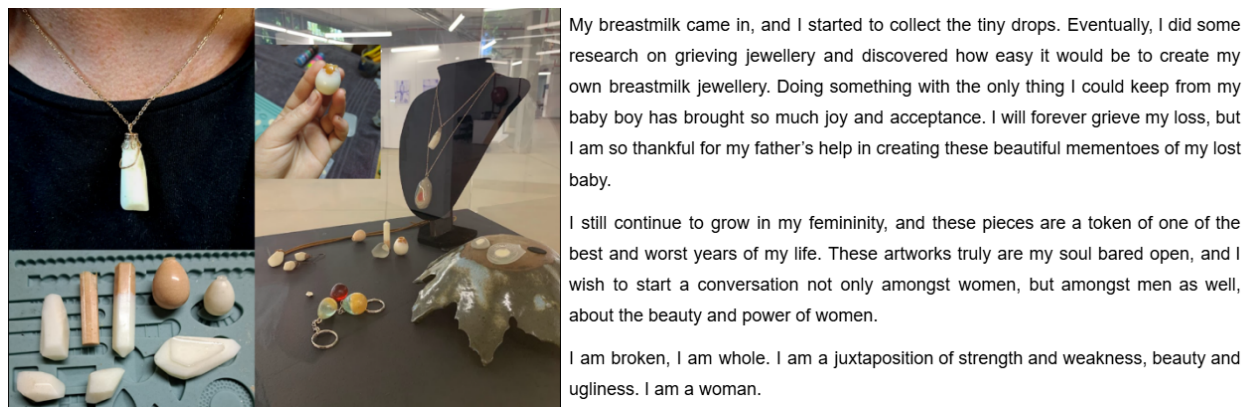


Figure 8
***Grieving Jewellery*, 2022, and partial artist statement.**
Breastmilk and Resin, ranging between 17 and 55 mm each

A body reclaimed

Using the human body to address issues related to gender and gender-based violence is not uncommon. Fabian Saptouw and Sianne Alves (2018: 67) highlight the body as “the primary site for discourse related to gender-based violence”, showing how “disempowering certain social narratives are regarding the body. Ideas related to authority, power and claiming a position on how one is perceived” become important sub-themes, “both in relation to the body as a potential site of trauma and the body as a vehicle through which we can process that trauma and experience a healing process” (Saptouw and Alves 2018: 67). This is not surprising, as the body becomes an object onto which violence is projected. It is what remains after the violence has occurred, serving as a constant reminder with and within which one must continue to live.

Another student, who created a protruding female body lying in a foetal position, using Plaster of Paris, fully covered underneath a soft, organza fabric, writes that: “The whole idea of working with fabric and human form is to depict the process that one goes through after sexual abuse and sexual violence. The fabric representing one’s fragility and ability to tear so easily”. The work is placed flat on the floor, forcing the viewer to look down onto it from a standing position. She continues that the position and the top-down view allows the viewer to see “her powerless and vulnerable self, lying helplessly on the floor”. She contends that “One may even feel like they[the viewers] are in the position of the perpetrator”, while the intention is, however, to show “the need to hide, the guilt and powerlessness after the sexual abuse”.

Related to the notion of the body as a site of both trauma, but also healing, is a TikTok video work¹⁴ (figure 9) created by a student who directly addresses issues of body shaming, particularly related to the female body, although not exclusively directed towards a specific gender. In this work, the artist confronts her own insecurities while inviting the public to participate by celebrating what they may perceive as flaws. The video opens with audio of publicly available derogatory social media comments targeting women’s bodies, particular those that might be considered overweight by certain societal standards. By drawing on the Japanese notion of *kintsugi*, an art form in which broken pottery is repaired with a substance containing gold, leaving a golden trace along the fractures, the artist traces her own stretchmarks with gold.



Figure 9
Worth, 2020.
 TikTok Performance video, screenshots taken during
 the first minute of the 3:42 minutes video.

In his seminal text *Ways of seeing*, John Berger (1972: 46) writes that “Men survey women before treating them. Consequently how a woman appears to a man can determine how she will be treated”. He continues that, “men act and women appear. Men look at women.

¹⁴ The full video work, titled *Worth* (2020) is available here: <https://youtu.be/9jZfSmNMb8o>.

Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves” (Berger 1972: 47). In his quest to describe how women are represented in European art, Berger highlights that images, especially those of women, are shaped by patriarchal social structures. Women (and men) are thus conditioned how they should appear. In twenty-first century post-apartheid South Africa, this still seems to be true. However, as an act of defiance and through activist actions, this student-teacher artist addressed how humans should treasure their own bodies and appearances. In the video, members of the broader public were invited to share their own stories and bodily insecurities, which were weaved into the narrative reflected, which reframes so-called imperfections and celebrates all parts of the human body, claiming that “all these imperfections is[sic] what makes us perfect”. In her reflection, the student writes:

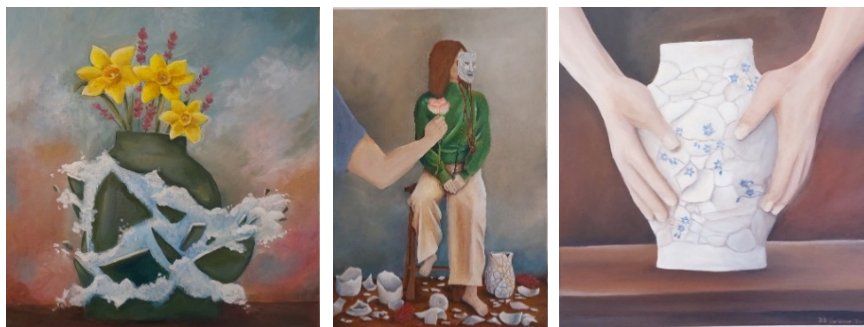
I received five thousand people engaging with the initial video and was able to plant the seed of loving yourself unconditionally into their feeds. I got told by a few people that my video directly impacted their views and I am so grateful to have been given the privilege of influencing people by helping them on their journey of loving themselves... I wish to continue to spread the message for as long as I possibly can.

The student created painted plates (figure 10), which were shattered and pieced back together using *kintsugi*, showcasing various body shapes, both male and female. She notes that “This piece taught me an important lesson that not only applies to my art, but to my life – sometimes you need to let go and work with whatever happens...this piece was just as much about the process as it was about the actual pieces themselves”. The use of *kintsugi* and the notion of repairing broken pieces is a recurring theme in the work of the different cohorts of students.



Figure 10
***Fragmented Identity*, 2020.**
Painting on broken ceramic plates.

Beneath the surface (2024) (figure 11) comprising various paintings depicting broken vases and women who conceal their identity, directly addresses GBV as a multifaceted reality that affects many individuals. The student depicts different “perspectives women show and hide from the world. The idea of one’s identity being stripped and taken away from one and the mask women put on for the people around them...The feeling of inner destruction while maintaining composure and then having to put oneself together again in order to continue living”. She hopes that “the audience can gain visual insight into what happens behind closed doors”, emphasising that many violences, subtle or overt, are often left unspoken, essentially affecting survivors’ behaviour and identity. Furthermore, the work signals that such violences can happen to anyone, anywhere.



Gender Based Violence is one of the biggest problems in South Africa. Both men and women suffer at the hands of the abuser but unfortunately, women bear the brunt of this specific type of violence.

As women, we are often ridiculed, abused and attacked for our looks, our manner of dress, our intelligence and even for simply existing. Throughout history we can see how women were seen as the inferior sex and were thus treated as such. As the centuries progressed, violence against women seemed to be one of those things that was not taken seriously enough to change for good.

For this exhibition, I wanted to draw from my own experience of being emotionally abused by a partner. I wanted to show what it was like for me to live like everything was alright when it really was not: Having people tell you or predict the outcome of the relationship based on what they see and what they are told; Hiding behind masks of other emotions to conceal my true feelings and my pain; The stripping of my identity; My once strong sense of self broken down into little pieces which I had to put together again piece by piece.

Figure 11
Beneath the surface, 2024.
Oil on canvas, various sizes.

Shoulders broad enough to bear the blame

In an educational context, subtle violences directed at physical appearances, gender or identity can already be observed at primary and secondary school level. In her interactive work depicting the broad shoulders one needs to develop at an early age, one student addresses bullying, prompting the audience to write down hurtful words and phrases that were directed at them. Many responses foreground hate speech related to individuals' gender or physical appearance, with words and phrases such as "pimples", "whale", "*uwondile*" (you are thin), "short/dwarf/hobbit", "you are not a real man", "FAG" or "Fat Hoe" (figure 12). Some were so offensive that I had to censor it from this image. Others reveal deeper concerns: "Jy is 'n fokkop" (you are a fuckup), "You're not enough", "you don't belong", "I wish you could get raped and die" and "who will they believe". When realising that these words are spoken to and by children, we, as a society, should be alarmed, not only about the potential long-term effects on mental health and identity, but also the more dire and urgent consequences to which these words might lead.



Figure 13

Left: *Bully or victim?*, 2022. Barbed wire, 1980 x 950 mm.

Middle top: *The Road ahead*, 2024. Rope, 630 mm.

Top right: *Tree of Life and Death*, 2024. Charcoal and ink, 5590 x 450 mm.

Bottom right: *Untitled*, 2025, charcoal, 297 x 420 mm.



Figure 14

***Reaching through Silence* and *The Weight of the Walls*, 2025**

Mixed media on paper, 594 x 420 mm each.

Man or bear: eaten alive or beaten to death

Having to contemplate their own involvement in perpetuating certain social ills or myths, especially those related to GBV, becomes especially potent when viewers are required to engage with the work and leave a mark behind. One student placed a full-length mirror in her exhibition space, forcing viewers to look at the reflection of themselves, as they respond to a question on sticky-notes around the mirror. When asked whether they would rather be stuck in a forest with a man or a bear¹⁵ as part of this interactive work, most female audience members chose the bear, reasoning that the animal is more predictable than a man. The confusion shown by men in the audience and among students, showed the contrast in women's experiences of safety compared to those of men. This concept was drawn from a social media trend in which responses from London citizens sparked a larger debate regarding male predatory behaviour and violence towards women in society.

In the background of her other works, including paintings (figure 15, left) and another installation piece (figure 15, right), the phrases “You are hurting me”, “See Me”, “Please stop”, “no”, Be quiet”, Save me”, “Don’t say anything or else” and “help me” are repeated in red morse code.

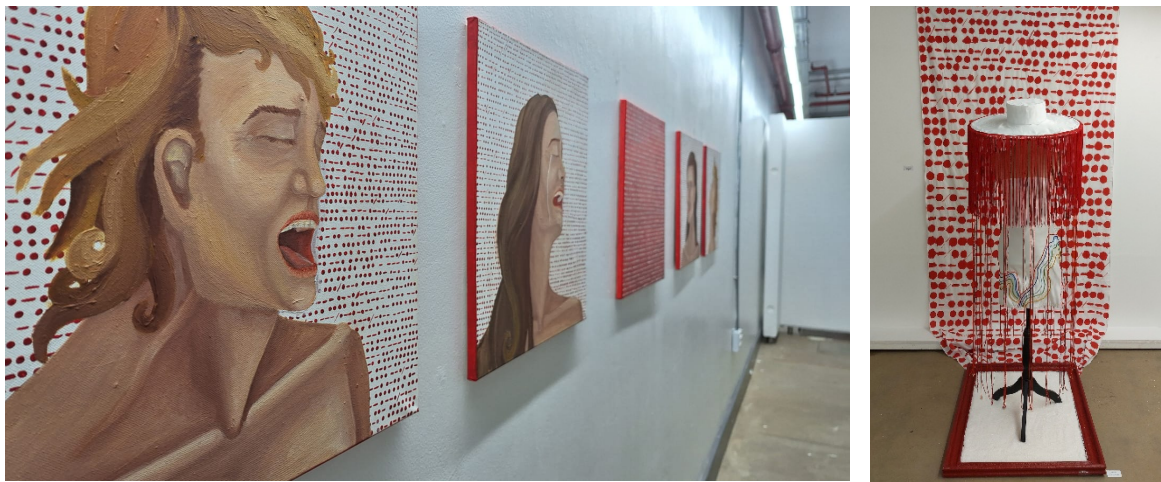


Figure 15

Left: *Please stop; You are hurting me; Help me, save me, see me; Don't say anything; Be quiet*, 2024. Oil and acrylic on canvas 550 x 550 mm each.

Right: *Haven't I given enough?* and *Gilded cage*, 2024. Fabric paint and cloth; satin and glass beads, installation.

In her artist statement she writes:

We are taught from a young age that if we see something, we should say something. I have found that people's words seldom match their actions. ... through my own experience of being pale, clumsy and low in iron which would often result in suspicious bruises[,] I have found that more often than not people would ignore signs of something potentially sinister and it showed me that if I had actually needed help from an outside party, I would be devastatingly alone to suffer in silence.

¹⁵ This interactive work is based on a viral social media debate that originated from a TikTok video in April 2024 in which ordinary Londoners were asked the same question. The original video can be viewed at: <https://www.tiktok.com/@screenshotshq/video/7356208240008498465?lang=en>. Sawyer, Charlie. 1 May 2024. “Would you rather be stuck in a forest with a man or a bear? Unpacking our viral TikTok video.” *Screenshot*. Online at: <https://screenshot-media.com/culture/internet-culture/man-versus-bear-viral-question/> Accessed: 18 August 2025.

The integration of morse code in the work draws attention to the conundrum of asking for help and being heard. Often cries for help are silent, silenced or even ignored. In a class discussion, the student asked how often peers have seen or suspected something sinister, but remained silent. General responses indicated that often out of fear for one's own safety, one would rather not get involved. This powerful body of work places the onus on each of its viewers to act and not remain passive bystanders. It uses visuals not only to raise awareness of GBV, but also to plead for changed mindsets and attitudes which may lead to social transformation.

Red, the colour of danger, violence, blood and ... love?

The colour red is an important signifier throughout this project, especially in the works related to GBV. Saptouw and Alves (2018: 71) note that the colour red often symbolises “blood, passion, violence, injuries and other intense emotional experiences”. It represents danger, violence and blood, a universal signifier that points towards something that one should avoid. It is therefore ironic that it is also universally known to depict love. This contradiction is foregrounded in GBV, where perpetrators are frequently known to the survivors (and victims), often their intimate partners or family members. Seen in the three works below (figure 16), red is used to serve both as a warning (*Bitches bite back*) as well as an urgent call to be heard (*Not the skirt*). It is also a cry (*Still not enough*), mourning all those who continue to fight for their lives.

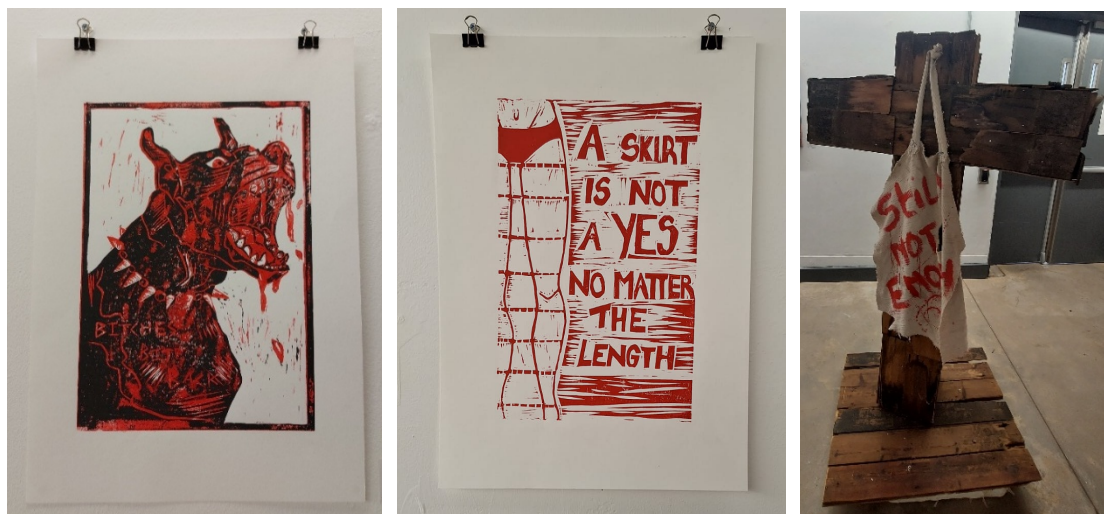


Figure 16

Left: *Bitches bite back*, 2024. Linoprint on Fabriano, 420 x 295 mm.

Middle: *Not the skirt*, 2024. Linoprint on Fabriano, 420 x 295 mm.

Right: *Still not enough*, 2024. Wood, cloth, red paint.

In *Still not enough* (2024), the male student hung a torn apron, representing women and their historic gendered role in the home as belonging in the kitchen with the words in bright red bold letters “still not enough”. Inspired by Ronald Harrison’s *Black Jesus* (1962) and Jani Leinonen’s *McJesus* (2019) that formed part of the Art Methodology lectures on visual literacy, the student showed how women are often “crucified” despite giving their everything. His gender reveals that not only women are affected by GBV against women and children. In fact, GBV in the home affects everyone, including young men who are forming their own identities.

The cross, which is another recurring symbol observed throughout the years, whether used to reference murder statistics, the role that strong women play in the students' lives, a symbol of resurrection and renewed strength, or death, shows not only the role of faith in the lives of these future art educators, but also deeper questions related to life, death and life-after-death.

Due to limitations of this article, deeper discussions are not possible. Nonetheless, it becomes evident that the works created for this project, especially those related to GBV and social injustices, are laden, emotional and impactful. I am of the conviction that these works are impactful precisely because of the emotional reactions elicited from viewers. Recurring motifs, such as the colour red, *kintsugi*, the female body, and rope, carry inherently powerful connotations, often contextually determined. Many of the chosen recurring themes or symbols grapple with deeply emotional, and sometimes even disturbing imagery. The imagery ranges from situations surrounding students' identity, such as body or self-image; addressing eating disorders that many individuals face, due to social and cultural expectations of what they should look like; considering racial, gender or sexual identity with which they might be struggling, and for which they are discriminated against; GBV experienced through home invasions; mental-health related challenges, often caused by the burdens of both male and female gender expectations; sexual assault or the burdens of simply being female. What became clear to me was that targeted verbal, sexual and gender-based violence and abuse were more common than I anticipated. These violences are not only of a sexual nature, but instead take on many forms, overt or hidden, often directed at individuals, either because of their gender, race or sexual orientation. Annually these themes seem to be repeating and increasingly students share their personal narratives related to GBV. It is perhaps time that the curriculum, at tertiary and secondary school levels, needs to be adapted and reconsidered to directly address how visual arts and activism can be used to combat social injustices and GBV. In order to achieve this, it is vital to recognise the immense power that visuals carry. Transdisciplinary approaches and hermeneutical and phenomenological interpretations combined with semiology are vital to understand how activism can be used as a tool to not only create awareness of social injustices, but to transform attitudes and mindsets. By considering the lived experiences of the artists, learners, teachers, and all communities and audiences involved, and the inherent meanings certain visuals and materials carry, it is possible to influence how those involved think and (re)act, ultimately affecting social transformation in societal attitudes and mindsets.

Is there hope?

Despite their heavy themes, most works also carry messages of hope and encouragement, highlighting the student-teachers' ability to embrace leadership roles and take responsibility for their actions, as well as their own sense of accountability and social justice. Their engagement with the self-chosen themes indicate that these issues matter to them and that they realise something needs to be done soon.

While traditional projects, generally required us to meet in the art studio, spend hours together to develop concepts, and experiment with new-found skills and techniques (which we still do), this project is taking on a life of its own. New and hybrid ways of teaching and learning are becoming the norm. I am not only referring to the digital impact on and of the project, but also emphasise how students engage with various communities in-and outside of the university, leaders and experts from different fields, to create art beyond the canvas. By immersing themselves in the community and with challenges they deem important, students visually formulated their concerns, and presented these to multiple audiences. The final products became secondary to the messages and how they are communicated. We realised that this form of engagement is what often makes Art Education and activism different from traditional fine

arts. There is a deep engagement with the audience in an attempt to give recognition, and to understand and educate. It has become evident that activism possesses “educational potential and a new strategy for accomplishing social engagement using innovation and artistic creation. Activism has become a new paradigm integrating art criticism and social transformation through artistic empowerment” (Alimen *et al.* 2023: 40).

These works were presented to parents, community members, peers and institutional leaders, laying bare deeply personal narratives and removing the shields from viewers’ eyes. These works are screaming that GBV affects all of us: male, female, young and old. Nobody who truly pays attention can say that they are not affected in one way or another, even if they have not experience GBV themselves.

Sharing the message and using activism as a tool to create awareness of social injustices and GBV, can only be achieved by moving beyond the boundaries of traditional art-making methods and tools, and instead use trans and inter-disciplinary approaches to develop ideas and techniques, while addressing various SDGs. Many of the works, such as the installations, performance pieces or interactive engagements with the audience, would perhaps not last physically, but they definitely left a lasting impression. As Nossel (2016: 105) states: “To move an individual makes social change possible. We should not shy away from the effect of art but embrace and harness it”.

This project set out to empower students to “maximise their human potential through facilitating authentic lifelong learning [drawing attention to and advocating real-life challenges] to create a safe sustainable and prosperous future for all” (Slabbert, De Kock and Hattingh 2009: 117). Numerous values and virtues were addressed throughout the process. The project has taught the students, and me, how to be patient, supportive and empathetic. I was grateful to witness the kindness and positive encouragement that students showed one another. I had to grow with the students through their journeys as they grappled with who we are: as humans, as individuals and as a collective, and with what makes us vulnerable, while also making us human. This is reflected in the exhibition titles of the last few years: *In progress* (2019), *Multifaceted* (2020), *Solemnly Censored* (2021), *Power in Fragility* (2022), *Human Nature* (2023), *Voices Unveiled* (2024), and *Within her walls* (2025).

Throughout this process, I too needed to confront my own secondary trauma. I am not a trained mental-health practitioner, but the university’s support systems were available to students when needed. I too grappled with the weight of the issues and concerns raised and their lasting impact, not only on the students’ lives, but also my own. At the same time, these challenges have opened avenues for collaborations and further engagement with partnerships across disciplines and departments. Furthermore, modes of exhibition and public engagement have expanded to include interactive and hybrid spaces, artists’ walkabouts, panel discussions and a social media presence.

Conclusion

Student reflections and my observations show that this project prepares them for real-life challenges as future educators. They were learning to stand their ground and be assertive; be brave and take risks; communicate serious issues; and make society care about social injustices. Many students addressed taboo topics that our society often ignores, demonstrating courage. Consequently, we see how art, the visual, especially in collaborative spaces, serves not only as a means to cope with devastating realities, but also to communicate and educate the public. Change and the eradication of GBV and other social injustices starts with these future art educators and those who encounter their works.

The works discussed here demonstrate that visuals are often more powerful than words in the meaning-making process. Art is a tool that establishes common ground for communication and understanding, while also serving as a means to heal and address trauma, emphasising that the process is more important than the final product. Through direct involvement, social awareness is created and through participation, inclusion takes place.

This project shows how visual art education can be used as a tool to address social, cultural, political and other disputes, fight against injustice and reinforce our efforts to understand and truly know each other. Authentic learning takes place through not only applying new-found knowledge and skills, but actively working towards changing the world, one artwork at a time. In a world where so many other forms of communication are breaking down, we should use this universal means of communication to reach out, really listen to each other and change our own behaviour accordingly.

The students' works highlight the significance, effect and power of creativity and innovative thought, reflecting their commitment to social justice and accountability. Ultimately, art education has the potential to bring agency to those whose voices are silenced, affirm our shared humanity and to highlight the human within all of us, while advancing social transformation.

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(Dis)identification and mobilisation in a community arts project on GBV

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This article presents a self-reflexive analysis of a community-based arts education (CBAE) project on gender-based violence (GBV) in Hammanskraal, South Africa. The project (from July to September 2024) was a collaboration between Tshwane University of Technology and the Greater Hammanskraal Arts and Culture Forum (GHACF). Drawing on the personal and professional experiences of two university academics involved in the HELLO Community Arts Programme (HELLO Project) in Hammanskraal, this article offers a self-reflexive analysis of university-driven CBAE practice in the context of GBV-focused activism. The analysis examines how concepts such as disidentification, community mobilisation and critical pedagogy were used to negotiate questions of mutual vulnerability, power relations and empowerment within the project. The authors use a self-reflexive approach to juxtapose the project's strengths and weaknesses, avoiding a celebratory tone often found in literature on CBAE. Using journaling and observation, in this article we explore the subject positions of two groups: university practitioners and GHACF members. It analyses how these positions may have impacted the project's ability to foster a common purpose in using arts to address GBV. We use the lens of critical pedagogy to open a self-reflexive dialogue revolving around questions such as: how liberatory are CBAE projects, and what are the inherent limitations and the basic and non-basic contradictions? Are notions of emancipation and empowerment real or illusory, and how are answers to these questions rendered more complex in contexts where university-based practitioners work in partnership with non-university artists?

Key Words: HELLO Community Arts Programme, Greater Hammanskraal Arts and Culture Forum (GHACF), critical pedagogy, Gender Based Violence (GBV), community-based arts education (CBAE).

(Dis) boitsebiso le ho bokella morerong oa sechaba oa bonono ho GBV.

Ena ke boithlahlobo bo iponahatsang bo mabapi le morero oa thuto ea bonono ea sechaba (CBAE) mabapi le tlikefetso ea bong (GBV) Hammanskraal, Afrika Boroa. Porojeke eno (go tloga ka Phukwi go fitlha ka Lwetse 2024) e ne e le tirisano mmogo magareng ga Yunibesithi ya Thekenoloji ya Tshwane le Foramo ya Botsweretshi le Setso ya Greater Hammanskraal (GHACF). Ho ipapisitsoe le boiphihlelo ba motho ka mong ba barutehi ba babeli ba univesithi, tlhahlobo e hlakisa maikutlo a (dis) boitsebahatso le khotatso kaha a amana le ho ba tlokotsing, matla a matla, le matlafatso. Bangoli ba sebelisa mokhoa oa ho ithlahloba ho kopanya matla le bofokoli ba morero, ho qoba molumo oa ho keteka hangata o fumanoang libukeng tsa CBAE. E sebelisa boqolotsi ba litaba le ho shebella, pampiri e hlahlola maemo a lihlopha tse peli: litsebi tsa univesithi le litho tsa GHACF. E sekaseka ka moo maemo ana a ka 'nang a ama bokhoni ba projeke ba ho khotlaletsa sepheo se tsoanang sa ho sebelisa bonono ho rarolla GBV. Re sebelisa lense ea thuto e hlokolosi ho bula moqoko o ithlahloba o likolohang lipotsong tse kang: na merero ea CBAE e lokoloha hakae, le mefokolo ea tlhaho le likohlano tsa mantlha le tseo e seng tsa motheo ke life? Na menahano ea tokoloho le matlafatso ke ea 'nete kapa ke boikaketsi, 'me likarabo tsa lipotso tsee li rarahanane joang maemong ao litsebi tsa univesithi li sebetsang ka kopanelo le litsebi tseo e seng tsa univesithi?

Mantsoe a Bohllokoa: HELLO Lenaneo la Sechaba la Bonono, Foramo e Khōlō ea Bonono le Setso ea Hammanskraal (GHACF), thuto e hlokolosi, Tlikefetso ea Bong (GBV), Thuto ea Sechaba ea Bonono (CBAE).

This article is based on a community-based arts education (CBAE) project as a form of entrepreneurship focusing on Gender-Based Violence (GBV) that was undertaken by staff and students at the Tshwane University of Technology, in collaboration with the City of Tshwane and in partnership with the Greater Hammanskraal Community Arts Forum

as part of a fourth-year module in creative industries. The project was implemented between July and October 2024.

Community-based arts education (CBAE) refers to arts-based learning and creative practice that takes place within community contexts and is often used to facilitate dialogue, participation, critical reflection, and social awareness. J. Ulbricht (2005: 6) explains CBAE as an approach to art education that extends learning beyond formal school or university settings and situates artistic practice within the cultural, social, and political life of communities. In theatre and performance contexts, CBAE overlaps with applied theatre, theatre for development, community theatre, activism, and other forms of arts-based social intervention that use creative processes to engage communities around lived social concerns (Nicholson 2005; Prentki and Preston 2009). In this sense, CBAE is not merely an artistic activity, but a participatory pedagogical process through which communities can explore difficult social issues, represent lived experiences, and imagine alternative possibilities for social transformation (Boal 1979; Goldbard 2006; Nicholson 2005).

Although GBV is a social scourge and CBAE is a redemptive and therapeutic practice, there is, in fact, a nexus between the two (Boal 1979; Nicholson 2005; Prentki and Preston 2009; Skop 2022; Magwegwe 2024). The nexus is that both GBV and CBAE are experienced (and practiced) at a social level. In other words, as a therapeutic social practice that is rooted in critical pedagogy, CBAE is well primed to address the scourge of GBV when GBV happens in communities. As a result, the relationship between GBV and CBAE is significant for scholars and practitioners interested in how community-based artistic practices can facilitate dialogue, critical reflection, and consciousness-raising around gendered violence. This article does not claim that the arts can simply solve GBV. Rather, it contributes a self-reflexive account of how a university-community CBAE project in Hammanskraal used performance-making to engage GBV, while also exposing the tensions, limitations, and power relations that shape such interventions. What follows is a brief contextual background on the historical scourge of GBV in South Africa followed by a brief discussion of the general practice of CBAE as a form of development communication.

The United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) defines GBV “as any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering of women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life” (Holt and Birchall 2023). While GBV broadly refers to forms of violence in which one gender perpetrates or inflicts harm and trauma on another, the aspect of the UNGA definition that is most relevant to this study is its explicit reference to women. This emphasis is important because, both globally and in South Africa, GBV disproportionately affects women, young girls, and children, a reality that is shaped by deeply rooted cultural and historical inequalities.¹ It is both cultural and historical because women in South Africa are/were historically the victims of a dual patriarchy which placed white (men) at the apex of society because of the colonial presence (Walker 1990; Gasa 2007; Hassim 2006; De la Rey 1997). These were followed by black men who also subordinated the female gender based on a culturally patriarchal and patrilineal form of social organisation (Sultana 2010). As a result, urbanisation and the colonial influence entrenched the gradual and systematic subordination of women at all levels of society, promoting the pre-eminence of a male working class as principal breadwinners to whom the womenfolk looked up for sustenance. This social arrangement was also shaped by black men’s historical position as an exploited and underpaid workforce within the colonial economy. Despite this exploitation, men

¹ South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC). 2017. *Research Brief on Gender and Equality in South Africa 2013–2017*. Johannesburg: South African Human Rights Commission.

were still expected to provide for both nuclear and extended families. Such expectations were reinforced by patrilineal assumptions that located social organisation, family authority, and economic responsibility under male control. In other words, there gradually arose, in the urban areas of South Africa, a largely exploited and generally underpaid male working class, with a historical and cultural duty to provide sustenance to its womenfolk, despite the economic and social pressures (sometimes leading to violence) that came with the responsibility.

In a contemporary society, statistics show that GBV affects one out of every three women in South Africa with most cases directly traceable to physical, emotional, and financial challenges and stresses of its victims/survivors (Diko 2023). The most cases of GBV happen in contexts that are characterised by poverty and deprivation, often manifesting as physical, emotional, mental, and sexual violence (reference). GBV in South Africa is so pervasive that according to recent statistics, an average of one woman is raped every three hours in South Africa (Govender 2023). Also, domestic violence and trauma are still among the most common reasons for women in South Africa to seek healthcare.²

Against this background, this study observes that theatre and development communication practitioners have increasingly turned to community-based arts education as a means of creating dialogue, awareness and critical reflection around GBV in South Africa. The project that we have conducted and present in this article is one such project.

The adoption and use of theatre as a form of social and community engagement enjoys a long history in many parts of the Global South such as Africa, Southeast Asia, and South America (Epskamp 1998). The practice of CBAE as community engagement and social intervention is widespread. Across the world critics and scholars have used various nomenclature to refer to the practice of CBAE. In theatre contexts, this nomenclature has ranged from terms such as community-based theatre and theatre for development to theatre for development communication, applied theatre and theatre for community engagement (Hagher 1990; Kerr 1995; Epskamp 1998; Breitingner 1994; Barnes 2013). Lately, a new nomenclature and a new catchphrase called “artivism” has evolved (Nossel 2016). The term “artivism” is a neologism that derives from a combination of the two words “art” and “activism.” It refers to the use of art for raising awareness leading to social transformation. Like applied theatre in its various designations and iterations, it also belongs with the general principle of art in the service of critical engagement for social transformation. Using artistic practices such as theatre, performance, storytelling, music, dance and visual art to help communities reflect on social issues. However, whatever term and designation CBAE may have assumed along the way, the operative principle and principal point of departure in the practice has been a fervent belief in the power of art and representation to transform reality for the betterment of society (Ngo, Lewis and Leaf 2017).

The amount of descriptive and critical writing on applied theatre practice and other forms of community-based arts education is limitless (Epskamp 1998; Prentki and Preston 2009). A substantial body of scholarship describes and theorises community-based arts practices as valuable forms of social and pedagogical intervention. While some of this literature adopts a critical perspective, it often still affirms the efficacy and continued relevance of CBAE. By contrast, fewer accounts focus specifically on the limitations, contradictions, and shortcomings that may emerge in CBAE practice. In those instances where a case is made for community-

² World Bank Brief. 2019. Gender-Based Violence (Violence Against Women and Girls). Retrieved from <https://www.saferspaces.org.za/understand/entry/gender-based-violence-in-south-africa#Whatisgender-basedviolence> on 3 August 2025.

based arts education, the adopted position is often hortatory and self-evidently celebratory (Hagher 1990; Barnes 2013).

Therefore, mindful of the general paucity of self-reflexive writing which attempts a juxtaposition of the strengths and the weaknesses of community-based arts practices, in this paper we use personal experience as university academics working on a recent project in GBV to critique the practice for its strengths and weaknesses.

The context – Community engagement through HELLO

Our self-reflexive conversation in this paper is based on the analysis of a recent community-based arts education project (CBAE) on gender-based violence (GBV). The project was undertaken in collaboration with the City of Tshwane (CoT) and the Greater Hammanskraal Arts and Culture Forum (GHACF). Hammanskraal is a relatively low-income small dormitory town located about 50km north of Pretoria. Previously a so-called “homeland” town of Bophuthatswana during South Africa’s apartheid administration, Hammanskraal is resident to a largely low-income working-class population some of whom work in Pretoria (Van Huyssteen 2001; Peu 2008).

The project that we analyse here was part of a much larger community arts initiative called HELLO, that was undertaken by students in cultural and creative industries in the Faculty of Arts and Design at Tshwane University of Technology since August 2014. Now in its twelfth year, the HELLO project started as a community-based inter-artistic arts festival targeting amateur and semi-professional township companies based in various townships in the city of Tshwane. Because of its thrust in community engagement, the HELLO project works closely with the City of Tshwane’s Department of Community and Social Development as principal partner. The original purpose of HELLO project was to create a platform for university students in creative arts and creative industries to interact and share practical skills with semi-professional practitioners from less privileged contexts even as they identify niche areas for post-school investments in creative arts. All this was to be achieved in a spirit of mutual exchange and sharing, hence the adoption of the moniker “HELLO.” On a much grander scale, the project was implemented in line with the Tshwane University of Technology’s self-avowed motto to be a “people’s university” a motto that is subsumed within the general sentiment to bridge the perceived gulf between the ordinary citizen and the academy.³ Therefore, the HELLO project was meant to serve as a notable case of university-based community engagement in creative industries as seen through its gradual metamorphosis from an interactive arts festival to a capacity building project through community-based arts education (CBAE). The thrust towards CBAE using HELLO project was enhanced by incorporating the HELLO project as a unit in a fourth-year core module in creative industries, which brings together students from different specialisations in music, acting, dance, directing, vocal art, theatre for community engagement as well as design and technical theatre.

At this point we hasten to add that perhaps some of the weaknesses and contradictions that inhere with university-driven community-based arts projects lie in what appears to be unilateral and paternalistic approaches to the agendas and execution of projects in CBAE. We view this to be a basic contradiction in CBAE practice.

Although this discussion foregrounds the weaknesses and contradictions within CBAE practice, it also recognises the value of the arts and creative industries as tools for social engagement, critical reflection and consciousness-raising. Viewed through the lens of critical

³ Tshwane University of Technology. n.d. *About*. Accessed June 2, 2026. <https://www.tut.ac.za/about/>.

pedagogy, cognitive and behavioural transformation through the arts happens when the participants are introduced to alternate perspectives and re-imaginings of reality (Duncan-Andrade and Morrell 2008). Therefore, when universities embark on projects in CBAE such as HELLO, they do so from a position of awareness about the potential symbiotic relationship between “affect” and “effect.” Here, affect refers to the emotional, sensory, and embodied responses generated through artistic participation, while effect refers to the possible social, pedagogical, and dialogic outcomes that may follow from such participation. This distinction is useful because CBAE does not only communicate information about GBV; it also creates an experiential space in which participants and audiences can feel, reflect on, and critically discuss the social relations that sustain gendered violence.

Mobilisation through (dis)identification

For reasons already outlined in our introductory section, the project’s implementation in 2024 was centred around the theme of Gender Based Violence (GBV). Coincidentally, cognisant of the endemic prevalence of GBV in contemporary South Africa’s social fabric, in 2024 the Faculty of Arts and Design at the Tshwane University of Technology established a research niche area in GBV under the name: *Artivism as a tool to combat gender-based violence*. Therefore, the project that we undertook through HELLO project was meant to complement the wider faculty initiative on artivism as a tool to combat GBV.

One of the reasons why it is difficult to fight GBV is that GBV is an insidious practice which for the most part occurs in private and intimate family settings. Because of its social stigma, both victim/survivor and perpetrator often hide the practice. Jose Esteban Muñoz (1999: 4) has suggested that when using the arts to fight stigmas among marginalised groups of people in society, such as women and children, who, in the case of South Africa, are the main victims of GBV, the technique of disidentification offers a viable liminal strategy. According to Muñoz (1999: 4), disidentification is a protective mechanism through which individuals distance their personal identity from negative experiences and identities that may invite stereotyping, ridicule, pity, or scorn. Disidentification affords both the perpetrator and the victim of GBV a mask behind which to portray personal experience in a liminal and safe space of anonymity. While activist and applied theatre practices often derive their force from personal narratives, testimony and affective identification, they may also provide forms of aesthetic distance through which participants can engage difficult experiences without direct self-exposure (Boal 1979; Prentki and Preston 2009). In the context of GBV, this tension is particularly important. On the one hand, personal narratives can humanise structural violence and generate empathy among audiences/participants. On the other hand, fictionalisation, role-play, characterisation and collective storytelling can create a mediated space in which participants confront GBV indirectly, thereby reducing the risks associated with public disclosure. In this sense, narrative performance does not necessarily remove personal involvement; rather, it can transform personal experience into a shared, symbolic and negotiated form of expression.

The HELLO project on GBV that took place in Hammanskraal in 2024 was conducted with grassroots members of arts and theatre groups affiliated with the Greater Hammanskraal Arts and Culture Forum (GHACF). According to the *Moretele Times* (2020),⁴ which is an online community newspaper, in national statistics, Hammanskraal ranks among ten of the

⁴ Moretele Times. 2025. *Hammanskraal one of the top 10 gender-based violence hot spots*. Retrieved from <https://moreteletimes.co.za/2020/09/25/hammanskraal-one-of-the-to-10-gender-based-violence-hot-spots/> on 3 August 2025.

topmost 30 Gender-Based Violence hot spots in South Africa. With this statistic of prevalence in mind, including the location of Hammanskraal as a relatively low-income small town, we decided to develop an inter-artistic or multi-disciplinary performance on GBV using the technique of disidentification. In this study, the terms inter-artistic and multi-disciplinary performance refer to performance practices that bring together more than one artistic form within a single creative event. These may include theatre, music, dance, poetry, visual art, projection, lighting, sound and other media-based elements. The term is not used here to suggest a fully integrated transdisciplinary methodology, but rather to describe how HELLO project draws on different artistic languages to facilitate community dialogue, participation and reflection around GBV.

We believed this approach would assist to create an effective and thought-provoking narrative on GBV by shifting content in such a way as to mask specific subjectivities for both victim and perpetrator. We began the process by benchmarking personal experience and closeness to the occurrence of GBV among all participants (facilitators, university students, and participating GHACF group members) using an anonymous ballot where each participant indicated by means of a simple “Yes” or “No” their personal experience(s) with GBV or the occurrence of GBV within their immediate family (that they are aware of). Through disidentification, we avoided and discouraged the deposition and use of personal testimony. As facilitators, we were mindful that working with grassroots and underserved communities requires sensitivity, careful planning and ethical awareness, particularly in order to avoid reinforcing stigma. This was especially important given existing reports that identify Hammanskraal as one of South Africa’s GBV hotspots. CBAE often happens alongside and finds legitimacy in social labelling where social ills such as GBV are easily attributed to poverty and viewed as a gendered crime.⁵ This leads to the inscription of specific identities on certain genders and classes of people in ways that can only worsen the problem. When normative labels and identities are routinely and pejoratively thrust at people, these labels are re-layered and re-inscribed in ways that reinforce those very labels and perceptions. In the context of GBV, this may produce simplistic moral binaries that position men and women as either “bad” or “good” subjects. Although such framing may generate social engagement, it risks reducing the complexity of GBV and obscuring the structural and cultural conditions that sustain gendered violence.

Although this paper does not analyse the devised performance in detail, it is important to note that the project culminated in a performance titled *What Went Wrong*, rather than *Who Is Wrong*. The title was intended to move the discussion away from blame and towards a critical examination of the conditions that enable GBV. The performance, *What Went Wrong*, followed a community-based narrative in which experiences of GBV were explored not through a search for a single perpetrator or victim, but through a series of interrelated scenes showing how family structures, peer pressure, silence, economic hardship, harmful masculinities and community complicity contribute to gendered violence. We hoped that this would enable both victim and perpetrator among us to play in a safe and anonymous space. Right from the outset, we all agreed that for far too long, projects in CBAE have tended to adopt an approach where interventions are meant for people “out there” who are external to the artist. In other words, the project sought to move away from an interventionist model based on an “us and them” relationship. Instead, it approached CBAE as a reciprocal process in which university facilitators, students and community participants were positioned as co-learners and co-creators of knowledge. This allowed different forms of knowledge, including lived experience, artistic skill, cultural insight and critical reflection, to be brought into dialogue. Conducting the

⁵ South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC). 2017. *Research Brief on Gender and Equality in South Africa 2013–2017*. Johannesburg: South African Human Rights Commission.

project in Hammanskraal required us to approach GBV not as a problem located solely within the participating community, but as a shared social concern that implicated students, facilitators and community participants alike. Therefore, through disidentification specific subject positions were masked to become generic and cosmopolitan. Rather than presenting the narrative as belonging to a single individual or fixed social category, the performance used disidentification to create a more complex field of recognition. The characters were constructed as socially recognisable figures through whom participants and audiences could negotiate proximity and distance: they could recognise aspects of themselves, their communities or their social worlds without being required to identify directly with any one character. This resonates with Muñoz's understanding of disidentification as a strategy that allows subjects to work on and against dominant representations, occupying a position of partial identification and critical distance simultaneously (Muñoz 1999). In CBAE, disidentification can function as both an inward and outward process of critical reflection. It enables participants to question their own assumptions while also engaging collectively with others through performance, dialogue and interpretation. Rather than reproducing simple binaries of good and bad subjectivities, disidentification opens a space in which identities can be examined as complex, relational and socially produced.

Re-reading critical pedagogy through self-reflexivity on the project in Hammanskraal

Earlier we identified awareness-creation and social transformation as the central cornerstones of CBAE and activism. In pursuing these aims, activism and CBAE often draw on critical pedagogy as a theoretical and pedagogical framework. This framework foregrounds dialogue, participation, reflexivity and critical consciousness as central to processes of learning and social transformation (Ngo, Lewis and Leaf 2017; Kwon 2020). Critical pedagogy is a theoretical construct that calls for the liberation of grassroots populations who are marginalised based on class, race, and/or gender. As a theoretical and pedagogical framework, critical pedagogy is commonly associated with the work of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (1993, first published in 1970), particularly his writing on conscientisation, dialogue and education as a practice of freedom. It was later developed further by critical education scholars such as Henry Giroux and Peter McLaren (1986), who extended its relevance to schooling, culture, power and social transformation. Critical pedagogy “aims to expose, critique and challenge unequal power relations, hegemonic values and taken for granted conceptions” (Zembylas 2013: 34). Therefore, critical pedagogy is underpinned by a desire to liberate victims of unfair socio-economic processes and negative social practices such as GBV. It also recognises that victimhood and social deprivation are a direct result of class, race, age, and gender.

As citadels of intellectual engagement that can lead to change and social transformation, projects in CBAE that emanate from university contexts are almost always driven by the need to evoke critical consciousness leading to emancipation among target populations (Ulbricht 2005; Morris 2008). The analysis that follows critically examines the assumption that university-driven CBAE projects are inherently emancipatory. Using the HELLO project in Hammanskraal as a reflective case, the discussion considers how such initiatives may unintentionally reproduce hierarchical relations when university facilitators are positioned as bearers of knowledge and community participants are constructed as recipients of consciousness-raising interventions. This constitutes a central contradiction in the project under analysis. Although CBAE is premised on participation, reciprocity and community-based knowledge production, the initial planning and research for the project were conducted externally by the university team. The HELLO project was subsequently positioned within the faculty's broader activism initiative, which sought to use arts-based practice as a means of

addressing GBV. This was in addition to a quest by us to fulfil our own curriculum demands in creative industries. In the analysis, neither our students nor the Greater Hammanskraal Arts and Culture Forum had much to say about the project nor its preferred timelines. The project emerged from the convergence of three factors: reported concerns about the incidence of GBV in Hammanskraal, the City of Tshwane's interest in partnering with the university on social development initiatives, and the Faculty of Arts and Design's decision to foreground GBV as a strategic niche area. Together, these conditions shaped the development of HELLO as a community-based arts education project. This arrangement produced clear power dynamics within the project. Because the initial agenda, planning and institutional framing were largely determined by the university and its partners, the initiative operated primarily as a university-driven project rather than as a grassroots intervention generated from within the community itself.

In our opinion, all this came with a troubling presumptive point of departure in which the university staff and students approached the project from the standpoint of an educated, erudite, and middle-class elite whose positionality was exacerbated by all of us being exogenous to the lived experiences of our partners in Hammanskraal. We feel that our approach and execution of the project was determined by a rather bureaucratic, top-down approach where the dates, activities and cut-offs were somewhat cut-and-dried, determined as they were by other curriculum considerations that had nothing to do with the external partners. Instead of adopting a rhizomatic and horizontal approach, as demanded by the dictates of good practice in critical pedagogy, the project assumed a largely vertical inclination in its praxis and execution. A case in point is when a decision was made to abandon the GHACF generated working script and hand it over to two university students in scriptwriting for finalisation after it was deemed that to redevelop the script continuously would interfere with the available timelines. The critical potential of pedagogy is weakened when participants cannot shape the terms through which their identities and experiences are represented. In the context of CBAE, this means that a project may become less emancipatory when the politics of representation are controlled primarily by university facilitators rather than by the community participants themselves. Here then was an instance where empowerment became somewhat largely debatable if not altogether illusory. In retrospect, the project would have been more consistent with the participatory principles of CBAE if the subjectivities represented in the final performance text had emerged more fully from the participants' own experiences, perspectives and creative contributions, rather than being partly shaped by external institutional agendas. To address this tension, the concept developer and the two scriptwriters were acknowledged as joint copyright holders. However, this compromise also exposed a key contradiction in the project: although CBAE is premised on collective participation and shared authorship, institutional and legal frameworks still required creative ownership to be assigned to specific individuals.

From its genesis to planning and execution, the GBV project in Hammanskraal sensitised us to the extent to which university driven CBAE projects can quite easily and unwittingly set the parameters for who sets the agenda and what and who largely defines normative practices. This imbalance can perpetuate unequal power relations when community participants have limited influence over key decisions, including scheduling, project priorities and the creative direction of the CBAE process. This imbalance can persist even when the university-based animator has not personally experienced the forms of victimhood, deprivation or social vulnerability encountered by some members of the participating community. Sadly, when this happens, it is often glossed over with limitless self-congratulatory platitudes about having achieved empowerment which comes as a feel-good default position when projects are reviewed.

To mitigate the valorisation of power dynamics which may have privileged the university, we decided to avoid using terms such as “grassroots” and “under-privileged” to refer to the community participants in Hammanskraal. We therefore referred to the participating organisations and community representatives as partners in all official correspondence and founding project documents. This choice was informed by community engagement literature, which cautions against hierarchical models of engagement and instead foregrounds reciprocity, mutual benefit, shared decision-making and the co-production of knowledge between universities and communities (Bringle and Hatcher 2002; Hart and Northmore 2011). In addition, we were also aware that although to name the world is a central cornerstone in CBAE projects, in practice this can be challenging because to “name the world” in the context of GBV can also imply re-inscribing certain negative gendered identities through representation. Having established that GBV in South Africa inordinately affects women, young women, and children more than men, we resolved to make the project performance (*What Went Wrong*) a domestic drama that presents Salamina and Chillies, a married couple who are trapped in a mutual cycle of emotional and psychological conflict. Rather than present a Manichean situation of bad men on the one hand, and good women on the other, the play presents gender roles, generational trauma, suppressed truths, and abuse on both sides as possible sources of GBV. Briefly, in *What Went Wrong*, the central plot unfolds around Salamina who wrestles with unresolved trauma from her childhood, particularly the abuse and secrets surrounding her parents’ marriage. This culminates in a harrowing revelation about her father’s sexuality and the tragic death of her mother. As tensions escalate, Salamina's emotional volatility leads to acts of violence and confrontation. The narrative ends with a glimmer of hope as Salamina and Chillies acknowledge the need to confront their past with honesty for the sake of their only child.

Drawing on our previous self-reflexive analysis of the Hammanskraal project, this article reflects on the tensions and contradictions that emerged during the CBAE process. Although the project attempted to use disidentification, careful nomenclature and more inclusive forms of representation to avoid reinforcing unequal power relations, it nevertheless revealed that CBAE is not automatically a safe or neutral space. Following Michalinos Zembylas (2015) and Michelle Bae-Dimitriadis (2016), we realised that once intervention projects are set in motion, the discourse of critical pedagogy can easily create a binary division between body and emotion on the one hand, and mind and reason on the other. In this binary division, practitioners in critical pedagogy tend to privilege mind and reason over body and emotion in their quest to achieve behavioural change. Therefore, the strength of CBAE is said to lie in the ability to enable target audiences to separate themselves from body and emotion and focus only on mind and reason so that they can contemplate and transform their condition. Put differently, in critical pedagogy mind and reason are associated with the rational being who can change based on the capability to rationalise things and make the right choices. Unfortunately, when critical pedagogy privileges mind and reason, it can occlude body and emotion and fail to acknowledge the emotional dimension of participants altogether. As we worked on the project in Hammanskraal, sometimes we could not help but feel that perhaps some of the participants may have experienced a palpable sense of discomfort discussing and sharing conversations about GBV in a public group context. We felt that when projects in CBAE ignore or undermine body and emotion, some participants can easily suffer in silence especially when a CBAE project is based on a sensitive subject like GBV. Given the high prevalence rate, low-income levels and limited social amenities in Hammanskraal, it is very likely that some participants may have experienced GBV at a personal level leading to feelings of shame, guilt, and resentment by participating in the project.

Critics and advocates of CBAE practice advise that ethical and participatory projects should not be conducted as once-off interventions. Rather, they must be a springboard for sustainable mobilisation through follow-up. That way CBAE becomes a catalyst for critical pedagogies and conversations that are informed through self-reflexivity and evaluation. Mindful of this requirement, the three collaborating partners (TUT, City of Tshwane and the Greater Hammanskraal Arts and Culture Forum) agreed to continue the project in 2025.

In our self-reflection on the Hammanskraal project, the first basic contradiction that we identified is that CBAE can be negatively paternalistic when it routinely claims to be a process of empowerment and awareness-creation using critical pedagogy. This assumption is closely aligned with what Freire (1993) describes as the “banking” model of education, where knowledge is transferred from those who supposedly know to those who are presumed not to know. In CBAE, this becomes problematic when community participants are treated as passive recipients of conscientisation rather than as co-producers of knowledge with their own critical awareness, lived experience and interpretive agency. Such a stance reproduces a deficit model of engagement and contradicts participatory approaches that emphasise reciprocity, shared authority and community ownership (Cooke and Kothari 2001; Wallerstein and Duran 2006; Tuck 2009). In any case the very notion of empowerment implies the prior existence of “power” and “powerlessness” in ways that privilege the external animateur who sets the project agenda. Therefore, although CBAE projects are much celebrated, they only have the potential to raise latent awareness without addressing underlying structural causes as alluded to in our introduction. The second weakness of the project relates to our positionality as relatively privileged university academics working alongside partners with fewer institutional and material resources. Although the project was framed as participatory, this positionality sometimes resulted in the university team exercising greater influence over the agenda, timelines and key decisions surrounding the project. In many instances, this led to situations where the agenda, timeliness and most of the key decisions surrounding the project were settled by us. As indicated earlier, the university participants occupied a different positionality from some of the community participants, particularly in relation to lived experience, social vulnerability and proximity to GBV. In that event, there was real danger that the university complement was focused on mind and reason to the detriment of body and emotion on the part of the other participants.

Thirdly, although Hammanskraal had been identified as an area significantly affected by GBV, our self-reflection raised concerns about the tendency for CBAE projects to focus primarily on less privileged communities. Such an approach risks reproducing a deficit-based view of these communities as natural sites of intervention, while obscuring the fact that GBV is not confined to poverty-stricken areas. It also exists within universities, workplaces, families and other socially privileged spaces. CBAE should therefore be understood not only as a tool for community intervention, but also as a reflexive practice through which institutions examine their own implication in the social problems they seek to address. Another weakness of the project concerned the limited time available for performance-based CBAE work. Because the project had to operate within university calendars, student schedules and institutional deadlines, the process allowed limited time for sustained community dialogue, trust-building, collaborative devising and post-performance reflection. Despite our best efforts to achieve a lot in a short space of time, in the end we had to resort to a largely dialogue play that may not have appealed to our target audiences who are much happier and more invested in inter-artistic forms.

Alongside the basic contradictions we have outlined above, we also identified one major non-basic contradiction to the project. Unlike basic contradictions, which have to do with general CBAE practice, non-basic contradictions relate to the design and execution of specific

projects. In Hammanskraal, the non-basic contradiction pertained to the project's general reach and target population. The project initially aimed to engage Hammanskraal residents and secondary school learners through performance and post-performance discussion. However, the planned engagement with learners was limited because the opening performance coincided with the start of the 2024 mock Matric examinations. In our planning, we had identified high school learners as our primary target audience. The only recorded public performance took place at TUT's Arts Campus during the annual Arts Festival, where it may have been received as part of the broader festival programme rather than as a distinct CBAE intervention addressing GBV.

Conclusion

This article has attempted a self-reflexive analysis in CBAE practice using a recent project on the prevalence of GBV in South Africa. The project that forms the basis of our reflection took place in Hammanskraal, South Africa sometime between July and October 2025. It brought together students and staff from the Tshwane University of Technology, the City of Tshwane and members of the Greater Hammanskraal Arts and Culture Forum.

Unlike numerous other writings, reflections, and accounts in CBAE practice as critical pedagogy, our reflexive analysis has tried to avoid a hackneyed celebratory approach. Rather, we have problematised our positionality as university staff who were the central instigators and drivers of the project to explore some of the contradictions, weaknesses and power dynamics that may have impacted the project in some negative ways. In the same way, we also critically assessed the project's strengths to identify insights that may inform future CBAE projects of a similar nature. Our discussion has foregrounded the concept of critical pedagogy, assessed against university-community collaborations in CBAE practice, highlighting issues such as power dynamics, empowerment, and mobilisation.

Our self-reflexive analysis has attempted to open a conversation on how liberatory CBAE projects could be, and what their inherent limitations as well as basic and non-basic contradictions are. Are notions of emancipation and empowerment real or illusory, and how are answers to these questions rendered more complex in contexts where university-based practitioners work in partnership with non-university communities?

In this self-reflexive analysis, we were troubled by the realisation that university-led CBAE projects can easily come across as condescending and paternalistic, where it is assumed that target communities lack awareness to social problems immanent to them, and therefore require professional external intervention. These top-down approaches are then driven by university timelines and curriculum demands, in ways that potentially hinder genuine problem-solving and empowerment. We also realised that although it is inherently efficacious, critical pedagogy tends to place inordinate focus on mind and reason (the intellect) to the detriment of body and emotion (feelings) potentially leaving affected participants to deal privately with sensitive topics like GBV without support.

Our reflections suggest that future CBAE projects should be grounded in reciprocal partnership, shared agenda-setting, sustained engagement and ethical representation. In this regard, the article contributes to CBAE literature by arguing for a more self-reflexive model of practice in which university facilitators, students and community participants are positioned as co-creators rather than as separate categories of interventionists and beneficiaries.

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Breaking the silence with reggae

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Music plays a dual role in society's discourse on gender-based violence (GBV), acting both as a mirror of cultural norms and a tool for resistance. Reggae, with its foundations in justice, love, and liberation, offers a profound space to break the silence surrounding GBV. This paper explores how selected songs – Bob Marley's *One Love, No Woman, No Cry*, Queen Ifrica's *Daddy (Don't Touch Me There)*, and Carlos DjeDje's *Don't Touch Her* – illustrate reggae's capacity to disrupt silence, amplify survivors' voices, and support healing. Carlos DjeDje, the father of South African reggae, provides a critical link between African struggles for liberation and gender justice through music. Grounded in the emerging framework of Urban Cultural Resistance Music Pedagogy (UCRMP), the article argues that reggae can function as a critical pedagogical and activist tool for transformation. It also reflects on the future of reggae as a medium of gender justice across global contexts.

Keywords: reggae music, gender-based violence (GBV), Urban Cultural Resistance Music Pedagogy (UCRMP), Activism, Bob Marley, Queen Ifrica, Carlos DjeDje

Разчупване на тишината с реге

Музиката играе двойна роля в обществения дискурс за насилието, основано на пола (GBV), като действа едновременно като огледало на културните норми и като инструмент за съпротива. Реге музиката, със своите основи за справедливостта, любовта и освобождението, предлага дълбоко пространство за нарушаване на мълчанието около GBV. Тази статия изследва как избрани песни – *One Love* (1977) и *No Woman, No Cry* (1974) на Боб Марли, *Daddy (Don't Touch Me There)* (2007) на Queen Ifrica и *Don't Touch Her* на Карлос ДжеДже – илюстрират способността на реге да прекъсва мълчанието, да усилва гласовете на оцелелите и да подкрепя процеса на изцеление. Карлос ДжеДже, бащата на южноафриканското реге, осигурява важна връзка между африканските борби за освобождение и борбата за полова справедливост чрез музиката. Опирайки се на развиващата се рамка на Педагогика на урбанизираната културна съпротива чрез музика (UCRMP), статията твърди, че реге може да функционира като критически педагогически и артистично-активистки инструмент за трансформация. Тя също така размишлява върху бъдещето на реге като средство за постигане на полова справедливост в глобален контекст.

Ключови думи: реге музика, насилие, основано на пола (НПО), Музикална педагогика на градската културна съпротива (UCRMP), активизъм, Боб Марли, Куин Ифрика, Карлос ДжеДже

In the year 2000, the British Broadcasting Corporation declared Bob Marley's 1977 song *One Love*¹ the Song of the Millennium. This was not merely a reflection of the song's global popularity, but a symbolic recognition of reggae music's ascension to the realm of universal cultural expression. In this moment, reggae emerged as a musical genre capable of conveying aspirations of peace, love, and human dignity on a global stage. However, this celebratory proclamation stood in stark contrast to the realities faced by many individuals whose experiences remained shrouded in silence, particularly survivors of gender-based violence (GBV). While *One Love* called for unity and togetherness, millions of women and children continued to live in fear, lacking platforms to articulate their pain or challenge their abuse. This article considers the implications of entering a new millennium with such a song

¹ Bob Marley. 1977. *One Love*. Exodus. Kingston: Tuff Gong Studios.

at its helm, and questions how reggae music might be reclaimed as a force to confront rather than obscure the difficult realities of GBV.

The origins and evolution of reggae

Reggae music emerged in Jamaica during the late 1960s, evolving from ska and rocksteady. It distinguished itself through its syncopated rhythm, bass-heavy instrumentation, and spiritually infused lyrics. Rooted in Rastafarian beliefs and the experiences of the marginalised, reggae developed as a voice for the oppressed (Barrett 1997, Clarke 1994). The socio-political conditions of postcolonial Jamaica, marked by poverty, inequality, and political violence, provided fertile ground for this genre to flourish (Chevannes 1994). As reggae travelled across continents, it retained its core themes of justice, unity, and resistance, making it an influential force in global liberation movements (Davis and Simon 1992; Gilroy 1993).

Why reggae? Cultural specificity and global power

Reggae holds a distinct place in global music history as a genre that is both rooted in local Jamaican culture and resonant across the world. Its capacity to speak to marginalised experiences makes it an ideal platform for tackling subjects like gender-based violence. Reggae's authenticity arises from its historical emergence among the oppressed. It grew not from privilege, but from the need to survive, protest, and connect. This gives reggae an ethical dimension that surpasses aesthetic considerations. It speaks with a voice that is both personal and political, both spiritual and streetwise. When survivors of GBV hear reggae lyrics that reflect their pain or affirm their dignity, they encounter not only sound but solidarity.

The importance of reggae rhythm and sound

Beyond lyrics, reggae's rhythms hold emotional and spiritual significance. Its offbeat or skank guitar stroke, the steady bassline, and the one-drop drum pattern create a distinctive soundscape that is meditative yet energising. These elements slow down the pulse, allowing the listener to enter a state of contemplation. The repetition in reggae, rather than dulling the senses, opens space for healing. For survivors of trauma, rhythm offers a non-verbal mode of communication and release. The predictability of reggae's beat can restore a sense of control, while its flow invites movement and emotional expression. This rhythmic foundation makes reggae particularly effective in music therapy, community gatherings, and healing rituals.

The stylistic features of reggae

Reggae is defined not only by rhythm but by a set of stylistic choices that distinguish it from other musical genres. The use of minor keys, syncopated melodies, and call-and-response structures make reggae inherently dialogic. It invites conversation. Its instrumentation, featuring bass guitar, rhythm guitar, drums, organ, and horns, creates layers of sound that carry cultural meaning. The production quality often emphasises warmth, echo, and spatial depth, mimicking the open air of community spaces. Vocally, reggae artists often employ chanting, spoken word, and melodic singing, making each track a form of storytelling. These stylistic decisions are not incidental, they contribute to reggae's role as both an art form and a tool for engagement.

Reggae as a communication tool

Communication in reggae extends beyond words. It is encoded in sound, gesture, performance, and ritual. Reggae artists act as *griots*, or oral historians, transmitting knowledge from one generation to the next. In this way, reggae functions as a living archive of resistance. Its language, rich in metaphor, proverb, and biblical allusion, enables it to speak across boundaries of age, class, and education. When addressing GBV, reggae avoids didacticism. Instead, it uses parable, emotion, and rhythm to draw the listener into reflection. Whether through the lament in *No Woman, No Cry*² or the indictment in *Daddy (Don't Touch Me There)*,³ reggae teaches by evoking empathy, rather than prescribing behaviour. This indirect pedagogy makes it especially powerful in communities where direct speech about abuse is still taboo.

What makes reggae unique in addressing GBV

Among musical genres, reggae stands out in its sustained engagement with injustice. Unlike pop, which often individualises emotion, or hip hop, which can at times glorify dominance, reggae foregrounds collective healing and responsibility. Its emphasis on community, roots, and consciousness aligns with the needs of GBV discourse, which seeks to unearth not only individual trauma but systemic harm. Reggae's spiritual foundation in Rastafari also adds a sacred layer to its messages. Songs become prayers, chants, and affirmations. When an artist like Queen Ifrica⁴ says "You supposed to be ma father", it is not only a personal outcry but a societal reckoning. Reggae allows pain to be spoken, heard, and transformed. This transformative potential is what makes reggae indispensable to anti-GBV work.

The cultural and historical roots of gender-based violence

Gender-based violence (GBV) is deeply embedded in historical, cultural, and social structures that privilege male dominance. In many societies, including Jamaica and South Africa, colonialism institutionalised gender hierarchies, embedding patriarchal control within legal, religious, and familial frameworks. GBV manifests in many forms, physical, sexual, emotional, economic and is perpetuated through silence, stigma, and normalisation. Music, as a reflection of society, can either reinforce or challenge these structures. Reggae's role in this discourse becomes critical when we consider its global platform and its traditional engagement with themes of resistance and human rights.

Reggae and the problem of silence in GBV

Gender-based violence is frequently enveloped in silence, either through social stigma, victim-blaming, or institutional neglect. Victims are often discouraged from speaking, either implicitly or explicitly, by families, communities, or even legal systems. Music has the potential to serve as both a reflection and a rupture of this silence. Reggae, in particular, is rooted in traditions of resistance and testimony. It draws from Rastafarian spiritual consciousness, postcolonial critique, and Afrocentric philosophies that honour dignity and collective well-being. Yet reggae's relationship with gender is not unambiguous. While some of its strands reproduce

² Bob Marley. 1974. *No Woman, No Cry*. Natty Dread. Kingston: Tuff Gong Studios.

³ Queen Ifrica. 2007. *Daddy (Don't Touch Me There)*. VP Records.

⁴ Queen Ifrica. 2007. *Daddy (Don't Touch Me There)*. VP Records.

patriarchal tropes, others, especially those shaped by female voices, confront gender violence directly, forging new vocabularies of survival and justice.

Theoretical anchor: the emerging framework of Urban Cultural Resistance Music Pedagogy (UCRMP)

Urban Cultural Resistance Music Pedagogy (UCRMP) is an evolving framework that understands music not simply as entertainment, but as a site of struggle, learning, and community formation. It is informed by Freirean notions of education as liberation, and African oral traditions. The proposed theory defines three key principles: first, music serves as critical pedagogy, offering counter-narratives to dominant ideologies; second, it embodies rhythmic resilience, allowing for emotional and spiritual healing; and third, it enables trans local solidarity, creating connections across communities, regions, and histories. Within this framework, reggae is not merely a genre, it is a curriculum of resistance.

Case Study I: Bob Marley's *One Love* (1977)

At first glance, Bob Marley's *One Love* (1977) may appear an unlikely candidate for gender critique. Its message is celebratory, inviting people to unite in a spirit of compassion and mutual care. However, the absence of any reference to gender or justice raises questions. If love is indeed the cornerstone of human solidarity, then silence in the face of suffering contradicts the very essence of that message. From a critical perspective, *One Love* can be reinterpreted not only as a plea for harmony, but as a demand for an ethics of responsibility. Unity must include justice; love must involve listening to and uplifting those whose voices have long been ignored.

Case Study II: Bob Marley's *No Woman, No Cry* (1974)

Released in 1974, *No Woman, No Cry* occupies a complex space in Marley's discography. On the surface, it appears as a comforting ballad addressed to a woman enduring hardship. The lyrics recall shared struggles and evoke a sense of solidarity: "Everything's gonna be alright." Yet the refrain, "No woman, no cry," has drawn criticism for potentially encouraging silence rather than resistance. Does it mean "don't cry, because there is hope," or does it imply that the absence of women results in peace? Interpretations vary, and therein lies its richness. What matters is the space it creates for dialogue. The song becomes a vessel through which questions about pain, memory, and gendered resilience can be explored. Through the emerging UCRMP lens, this ambiguity is not a flaw, but an opportunity for pedagogical reflection.

Case Study III: Queen Ifrica's *Daddy (Don't Touch Me There)* (2007)

In stark contrast to Marley's 1977 veiled metaphors, Queen Ifrica's 2007 *Daddy (Don't Touch Me There)* provides a direct and harrowing confrontation with GBV. It is a song that refuses euphemism. It narrates a young girl's experience of incest and betrayal, declaring in no uncertain terms that abuse must be named, condemned, and resisted. Lines such as "You supposed to be ma father" and "Everyday a wonder why ma daddy had to be the one" pierce through cultural taboos. The song also critiques institutional complacency, warning mothers and communities against ignoring signs of abuse, even when the perpetrator holds social authority. Importantly, the final verses offer a vision of healing and resilience. Queen Ifrica reminds listeners that survival is possible, and that self-love is a path to liberation. This is reggae as pedagogy, as healing ritual, and as political intervention.

Carlos DjeDje: voice of South African reggae

Carlos DjeDje, often regarded as the father of South African reggae, has played a seminal role in shaping the genre within the region. Emerging from Mozambique and later settling in Pretoria, DjeDje began recording reggae music in the 1970s, long before the international success of Lucky Dube. His discography, which includes albums such as *Ahoy Afrika*⁵ and *Remember Them*,⁶ combines pan-African consciousness with a unique focus on women's struggles under oppressive systems (Pashkevitch 2024: 333-50). DjeDje's (1988) music reflects his unwavering commitment to justice and education through song, continuing reggae's tradition as a form of cultural resistance.

***Don't Touch Her*: lamenting masculine helplessness and systemic brutality**

One of Carlos DjeDje's most compelling contributions to gender discourse through reggae is the song *Don't Touch Her*.⁷ This ballad tells the story of a man unable to protect his partner from state violence and societal racism under apartheid.⁸ Lyrics such as "She did nothing wrong, but they took her anyway" and "How can I be a man if I cannot shield her?" highlight the emotional torment and emasculation caused by systemic oppression. This track complicates the focus on male perpetrators in GBV discourse, shedding light on how men, too, can be disempowered within broader structures of violence. DjeDje offers a narrative of accountability and sorrow, not of defence or denial, thus contributing to a more layered understanding of gender violence in African contexts (Pashkevitch 2024: 333-50).

Carlos DjeDje and the pedagogy of Pan-African reggae

Carlos DjeDje has repeatedly described reggae not as entertainment but as a form of education. He viewed his music as a tool to teach young people discipline, history, and dignity. In interviews, DjeDje insisted that music should reflect social realities and promote healing through understanding (Pashkevitch 2024: 333-50). His lyrics often emphasised the liberation of women as a precondition for national emancipation. In *Free the Woman, Free the Nation*, he sings, "Chains on her soul mean chains on us all", invoking a collective moral duty. This Afrocentric feminist message resonates with contemporary theories of intersectional justice and aligns with emerging UCRMP's emphasis on educational resistance through music. His work laid the groundwork for incorporating reggae into GBV activism and pedagogy in the South African context.

Bob Marley: prophet of peace and paradox

Bob Marley remains the most iconic reggae artist globally, known for transforming the genre into a worldwide movement. Born in rural Jamaica in 1945, Marley's lyrics often articulated spiritual and political consciousness. Songs like *War* directly quoted from Haile Selassie's speech to the United Nations, advocate against racism and inequality (Barrow and Dalton 1997). While his message of *One Love* symbolised unity, critics have observed the lack of explicit engagement with gender justice in many of his works (Cooper 2004). Nonetheless, his

⁵ DjeDje, Carlos. 1988. *Ahoy Afrika*. Johannesburg: Black Talent Music.

⁶ DjeDje, Carlos. 1989. *Remember Them*. Johannesburg: Umkhonto Records.

⁷ DjeDje, Carlos. 1986. *Don't Touch Her*. Live performance, Breytenbach Theatre, Pretoria.

⁸ DjeDje, Carlos. 1990. *No Apartheid*. Johannesburg: RPM.

legacy continues to influence conversations on oppression and remains foundational for reinterpreting reggae through a gender-conscious lens (White 1990).

Lyrical exegesis: *One Love* and collective ethics

The song *One Love* opens with an invitation: “One love, one heart / Let's get together and feel all right.” At face value, the lyrics suggest communal peace and spiritual harmony, but when contextualised within a world of gender violence and inequality, the call to “get together” takes on a deeper urgency. What does it mean to feel all right in a world where women are not safe in their homes, streets, or institutions? Marley’s line, “Let’s get together and fight this Holy Armageddon,” can be interpreted as a metaphorical confrontation not just with political oppression but with the moral decay that permits GBV. This reading invites us to consider *One Love* not merely as a utopian hymn, but as an ethical blueprint for solidarity.

***No Woman, No Cry*: a song of survival and ambiguity**

No Woman, No Cry was released on the 1974 album *Natty Dread*. It has since become one of Marley’s most enduring songs. The chorus, “No woman, no cry”, has been interpreted in multiple ways. Some hear it as reassurance: “Don’t cry, everything will be fine.” Others critique it as potentially silencing. In a world plagued by GBV, telling women not to cry may inadvertently uphold the very silence survivors are forced into. Yet the verses, “I remember when we used to sit / In the government yard in Trenchtown”, recall shared hardship and resilience, rendering the song a collective memory of endurance. Marley evokes not pity but dignity, suggesting that despite suffering, survival is possible. This paradox is precisely what makes the song a meaningful site of feminist and anti-GBV reinterpretation.

Queen Ifrica’s *Daddy (Don’t Touch Me There)*: lyrical weaponry against abuse

Released in 2007, Queen Ifrica’s *Daddy (Don’t Touch Me There)* is among the most explicit musical confrontations of child sexual abuse in reggae. It begins with a chilling invocation: “Daddy don’t touch me there / I’m gonna tell on you one day I swear.” The song continues: “You’re supposed to be ma father / Look at what you do.” These lines expose incest not as a private matter but a public crime. Ifrica calls for accountability: “Give a listening ear / Pay attention even if di man a pastor.” She condemns both perpetrators and enablers, breaking through community silence and moral hypocrisy. In its closing verses, the song offers survival: “Love yuh self / It will help yuh fi get ova.” In this way, the track transcends testimony to become a source of healing and empowerment for survivors.

Bob Marley’s revolutionary love: towards a deeper reading

Many of Marley’s songs engage with forms of love, not romantic love alone, but agape, solidarity, and revolutionary love. *Redemption Song*,⁹ for example, urges listeners to “emancipate yourself from mental slavery”. Though not directly about GBV, the song resonates with survivors’ journeys to reclaim autonomy and voice. *Concrete Jungle*, *Them Belly Full* and *War* all speak to conditions of deprivation and injustice that intersect with gendered experiences. In Marley’s worldview, oppression is multifaceted, and liberation must be holistic. Therefore, interpreting his work through the lens of GBV does not distort it, it

⁹ Bob Marley. 1980. *Redemption Song*. Uprising. Kingston: Tuff Gong Studios.

completes it. It brings to the fore the very individuals most often excluded from narratives of resistance: women, girls, and queer bodies.

The role of women in reggae

Despite being historically dominated by male voices, women have made critical interventions in reggae music. Artists like Marcia Griffiths, Judy Mowatt, and Queen Ifrica have challenged both external oppression and internal patriarchy. Their music often explores themes of motherhood, self-respect, survival, and protest against sexual violence. Queen Ifrica, in particular, has broken taboos with songs like *Daddy (Don't Touch Me There)*, addressing child abuse with clarity and conviction. Women in reggae are not only performers but also educators, healers, and revolutionaries. Their contributions push the genre toward a more inclusive and gender-conscious direction. In doing so, they affirm that reggae can serve as a platform for both feminist critique and communal renewal.

Global reach and trans local resonance

One of reggae's most remarkable features is its global adaptability. Though born in Jamaica, it has taken root in Africa, Europe, the Americas, and the Pacific. In South Africa, artists like Lucky Dube and Carlos DjeDje localised reggae to confront apartheid, corruption, and gender inequality. In France and Germany, reggae is used in migrant communities to articulate experiences of marginalisation. This global circulation allows reggae to forge what Paul Gilroy (1993) calls a “Black Atlantic” soundscape, a shared cultural and political language of resistance. Through its rhythms and messages, reggae enables activists and educators across the world to build coalitions, challenge injustice, and sustain movements. It is precisely this trans local flexibility that makes reggae an effective tool in anti-GBV advocacy, capable of resonating across linguistic, ethnic, and national boundaries.

Reggae as activism: sounding justice

Activism, the fusion of art and activism, finds a powerful expression in reggae music. Reggae's protest traditions have always challenged entrenched systems, whether they be colonialism, racism, or economic inequality. As a genre rooted in oral storytelling and prophetic witness, reggae artists often assume the role of social commentators and moral guides. Bob Marley's *Get Up, Stand Up* (1977) is an anthem of human rights, while Peter Tosh's *Equal Rights*¹⁰ makes a compelling demand for justice. The concept of “chanting down Babylon” reflects the commitment to dismantling oppressive systems through lyrical resistance. Reggae thus functions not only as entertainment but also as a form of sonic activism, capable of shifting consciousness and inspiring change. In contexts where silence around issues like GBV persists, reggae's forthrightness provides an alternative narrative that empowers survivors and calls communities to action.

Reggae as activism and resistance

Throughout its history, reggae has served as a tool for both spiritual and political resistance. Figures such as Carlos DjeDje, known as the father of South African reggae, have used the

¹⁰ Peter Tosh. 1977. *Equal Rights*. New York: Columbia Records.

genre to address issues beyond race and class. DjéDjé's music links women's emancipation with national liberation. His lyrics suggest that when women are oppressed, the entire nation remains unfree. Songs like *Free the Woman, Free the Nation* advance the argument that justice must be intersectional. DjéDjé's insistence on discipline, education, and the moral role of the artist reinforces reggae's capacity to inform, uplift, and organise. Art becomes a form of advocacy, and the musician a cultural worker responsible for community transformation.

Pedagogical implementation: using reggae in GBV education

Music education programs that incorporate reggae can raise awareness of GBV in culturally relevant ways. Scholars have argued that lyrics offer more than aesthetic value, they function as tools for consciousness-raising and resistance (Cooper 2004; Ayinla and Amenaghawon 2021: 16559–70). Reggae's accessibility and emotional resonance make it a powerful pedagogical tool. Using tracks like *No Woman, No Cry* and *Daddy (Don't Touch Me There)* in classroom settings invites students to explore themes of trauma, resilience, and justice through sound and narrative. This approach aligns with the emerging UCRMP framework, with emphasis on dialogic learning and critical reflection. Moreover, community-based reggae workshops have been successful in facilitating conversations about GBV among youth and survivors alike (Madimabe and Zulu 2024: 87–104.).

Reggae's future: education, community, and healing

The potential of reggae music extends far beyond its lyrical content. As a cultural form, it can be used in workshops, classrooms, and public campaigns. When incorporated into curricula through the forthcoming UCRMP framework, reggae offers young people tools to understand gendered violence, reflect on their own experiences, and imagine alternatives. Healing through music is not new. In community settings, survivors of trauma often engage in songwriting, performance, and lyrical interpretation as pathways to reclaim agency. These practices reflect ancient African traditions where music served both as medicine and memory. Reggae's slow pulse, hypnotic repetition, and spiritual cadence make it particularly suited for this work. Its rhythms hold space for mourning, while its lyrics kindle hope.

Conclusion: beyond silence, toward solidarity

Breaking the silence surrounding GBV requires more than policy; it requires cultural transformation. Reggae music, in its finest expressions, participates in this transformation. It provides language where there was none, empathy where there was indifference, and solidarity where there was isolation. As this article has demonstrated, artists like Bob Marley, Queen Ifrica and Carlos DjéDjé, have laid the groundwork for a reggae-informed pedagogy of gender justice. The future of this work lies in interpretation, education, and collaboration. When songs become syllabi, and concerts become classrooms, we move closer to a world where love is not only sung but lived.

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