

“I embroider the beauty that is my head and not the dead trees around me” art heritage and resilience in South Sudan: a gendered view

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Abstract

Purpose – The fundamental relationship between art and resilience is striking in this passage and in the reflections shared by other artists. This paper aims to piece together the fragmented and insecure realities in South Sudan through the lens of different artists. The paper argues that focusing on art is an important way into a deeper more nuanced picture of how women and men find and maintain resilience in humanitarian contexts.

Design/methodology/approach – The data is qualitatively collected through an innovative art-based creative method known as story circles. The circles consisted of artists who shared what their art form meant to them.

Findings – The picture that emerges contrasts starkly against the dark narratives that commonly portray South Sudan. Art making spaces and the outputs that come from them are cultural resources often overlooked by humanitarian stakeholders and yet, as the authors show, hold the potential to support more locally rooted and responsive approaches to resilience building.

Originality/value – Very little research has been conducted on the ways in which people in South Sudan draw on and find resilience in art and art making.

Keywords Gender, Violence, Art, South Sudan

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The eye is the strongest thing . . . You draw anything that comes to mind . . . every woman is doing embroidery, no woman is idle because it is important in the life of a woman, when you come to that age you start to draw meaning, the skill will come to your mind, whatever you want in life

This passage was shared by a married woman 33 years of aged living in Juba, South Sudan. She is a bed sheet embroiderer. The art form is known locally as Milaya. Here she describes how she draws on her imagination to create designs that are beautiful and allow those that make them and those that receive them, to imagine a different more secure life. The fundamental relationship between the art form and womanhood (as it is understood by many



women in South Sudan) is also very striking in this passage and in the stories captured in the research presented in this article.

This article attempts to piece together the fragmented and insecure realities of the lives of women and men in South Sudan through the making of art of different forms. The article will argue that focusing on art and its makers is an important way into a deeper more nuanced picture of how women and men find and maintain resilience in humanitarian contexts. The main art form explored in this article is the female only form Milaya, introduced above; two further examples are given, carpentry and basket weaving, in order to build evidence into how art gives deep insight into the intersections of gender, agency and resilience. The picture, this article hopes to show, through the narratives of the artists contrasts against bleaker images of the country. The prevailing negative image of the country emerges from stark prevalence figures on violence against women and girls and historical narratives detailing the brutal waves of conflict which have resulted in mass displacement and insecurities. The dominance of the humanitarian lens sits in opposition to the day-to-day experiences of resilience captured and shared through art and by its makers. This difference of insight generates critical questions for humanitarian stakeholders about what benefits closer engagement and application of an art heritage lens might bring for their work.

This article explores how men and women make use of art as a form of expression, a cultural resource and a means of generating an income. The article also shows what can be learned about gender and power through the relationships male and female artists have with their work and through it, with each other. A focus on violence against women and girls highlights a contradiction. The image of male and female artists working together, the way in which many men draw on the beauty they see in their wives as inspiration, contrasts with the high prevalence of violence against women and girls in South Sudan. Milaya artists through their narratives display strong images of female agency and a determination to survive. Milaya artists are not passive victims of gender-based violence but active change agents utilising the cultural resources available through their art and the wider cultural context. These images call for more nuanced representations of women as survivors of violence in South Sudan and not mere objects of male control. In taking a closer look at how the humanitarian sector responds to violence against women, the article points to a missed opportunity to build more effectively on art as a social and cultural resource. Men and women use the space in which they create art together to share problems and process trauma. Yet, as the article will come on to show, the humanitarian sector makes the facilitation of “imposed” safe spaces a core activity in responding to VAWG, perhaps not realising the extent to which art making already creates them.

The article will begin by detailing the innovative qualitative research method known as “story circles” as developed by a national arts-based organisation in Juba – “The Likikiri Collective” (www.likikiri.org). The article then goes on to set the broader historical context of South Sudan and consider how, within such a history of conflict, a diversity of art forms continues to co-exist. The third section offers a political-economy analysis of conflict in South Sudan which helps explain, in part, the high levels of violence against women and girls (VAWG). The article then moves to reflect on how violence against women and girls is responded in the common approaches deployed by humanitarian organisations. The rest of the article gives examples of different forms of art analysing the context in which it is made and what the artists themselves say about its significance to them. The conclusion draws focus on the divide between the insights gleaned through an art heritage lens with the technocratic model of humanitarian programming and suggests how a bridge might be built.

Introducing the research methods

The research presented in this article comes from a project exploring links between art heritage, dignity and humanitarianism in South Sudan (see genderfocus.org). The project used an innovative qualitative method called “*story circles*” to introduce open-ended discussions about the role of art in people’s lives. In a context as richly artistically diverse as South Sudan, art as an entry point can take us into an even deeper discussion on the impact of war. It can also help to facilitate fundamental reflections on what it is to be a man and a woman in South Sudan. The research drew on a network of art mentors from across South Sudan’s many ethnic groups and brought them together to train and teach a pool of researchers (graduates from the University of Juba and the Catholic University of South Sudan) about their art form. The students shared their memories of art growing up and what it means to them today. The process of sharing interactions and expressions of art in everyday life brought researchers from across ethnic divides together in a deeper conversation about their country’s past. The dynamic nature of the training process and the enthusiasm of our art mentors in passing on their knowledge, revealed yet again, the potential of art as a foundation for peaceful positive dialogues.

In total, 12 Story circles were conducted, and 22 life history interviews with our artist mentors. This data was then analysed through thematic hand coding. The narrative from the Milaya story circle will be given in most detail with additional exploration of two other circles conducted with carpenters and basket weavers. Before the article moves to the circle data, the historic context of South Sudan will be summarised. This will help to frame the central argument that art and the making of it provides resilience. This summary begins by exploring the country’s social and artist diversity before moving to a brief history.

Centrality of art in daily life in South Sudan

The historic context in South Sudan is undeniably troubled. This is arguably the product of 60 years of colonial mismanagement, which entrenched earlier patterns of conflict related to the slave and ivory trade, and subsequent decades of underdevelopment and regional civil wars (Young, 2017). Prior to independence in 2011, during the decades-long war of independence against Khartoum, South Sudan was severely aid dependent. The resumption of conflict means the country continues to rely heavily on external assistance.

Famine in South Sudan is partly attributable to the breakdown of the culturally mediated circulation of people, labour, livestock and grain (Johnson, 1986, 1988, 1989; Serels, 2013, Pendle, 2018). It is estimated that in 2022 8.9 million people in South Sudan required humanitarian aid. Two million people are internally displaced with a further 2.2 seeking refugee status in other countries; 7.7 million or two-thirds of the population experience extreme food insecurity and malnutrition. Levels of gender-based violence are also extremely high placing South Sudan at the top of global prevalence lists. Clearly, the dignity of most of the population has been severely compromised for a number of decades and with little sign of an end [1].

Most of the population is multi-lingual, and language groups do not neatly map onto the region’s major livelihood zones nor, necessarily, its broad divisions of political forms (Tuttle, 2014; Simonse, 2017). People’s success at coping with adversity and “shocks” often depends on their ability to make use of the region’s diversity by moving between livelihood, linguistic and socio-cultural categories through long- and short-distance trade and cultural exchange. These processes are poorly understood (Pendle, 2018; Stringham and Forney, 2017) and are sometimes undermined by humanitarian programming in South Sudan (Thomas, 2019; Hutchinson, 2012).

The lack of human dignity presented by conflict and gender-based violence outlined above and shortly in more detail contrasts starkly with the rich diverse cultural heritage

of South Sudan. South Sudan is not a monolithic entity, and this equally applies to its cultural and artistic output. With a population estimated at six million, 69 living languages, diverse and flexible social and political arrangements and a territory of approximately a quarter of a million square miles, South Sudan is vast and heterogeneous (Tuttle, 2014; Simonse, 2017) and it is difficult, if not impossible, in this context to make generalisations across different artistic and cultural forms. The tangible and intangible cultural heritage of South Sudan comprises a wide array of mediums, genres and forms, including storytelling, poetry, song, dance and other expressive and performance traditions, sculpture, architecture, pottery, woodwork, metalwork, painting, as well as beadwork, embroidery and other crafts. These precolonial practices and traditions, which have also been shaped by and adapted to colonisation, urbanisation and globalisation, did not occupy an autonomous zone of aesthetics but were rather woven into the daily and seasonal life of the community. Tradition then carries a community's values, beliefs and systems of knowledge across social domains and generations.

Scholars and practitioners have long recognised the power of traditional arts and cultural practices such as performance traditions (ritual, dance and theatre) and verbal expressive traditions (poetry, song and storytelling) in Africa as sources of healing, stability and regeneration as well as sanctioned vehicles for the critique of authority. The endurance of these forms, as well as their adaptability, make them particularly important sources of knowledge. This context arguably highlights the need for expanded arts and humanities in formal and informal settings, in a way that can support culturally appropriate resilience programming in the humanitarian sector.

Political economy of conflict in South Sudan

Before going further, it is important to briefly consider the history of South Sudan, that to some extent, helps to explain the high levels of VAWG as well as the challenges facing those trying to end it. The country gained its independence in 2011 after 50 years of civil war with what is now Sudan. The Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) signed the first Comprehensive Peace Agreement in 2005, providing the base for the arrangements for South Sudan's independence which was finally realised in July 2011. However, peace was short lived and in December 2013 a new wave of conflict, this time internal to newly independent South Sudan, broke out between the President, Salva Kiir Mayarditt, and the Vice President, Riek Machar. The dispute opened up along ethnic lines as the ruling presidential party is (and was) made up of the Dinka ethnic majority while the opposition consisted primarily of the second largest grouping, the Nuer. The conflict that unfolded saw tens of thousands killed and three million people displaced, both to neighbouring countries and also internally, with around 200,000 people being forced to move into UN "Protection of Civilian Camps" (PoCs) set up within South Sudan's borders. In its short history, the country has suffered from waves of conflict shifting from one peace agreement to another with little hope of long-term stability in sight. In August 2015, a new peace agreement was signed but was short-lived with violence breaking out again within a year. The July 2016 conflict saw Riek Machar flee the country, opening up an oppositional power vacuum, and the installation of a new Vice President Taban Deng Gai in August 2016 from the Juba-based faction of the SPLM in Opposition (SPLM IO). A further peace agreement was later signed in Khartoum in June 2018.

Cattle central to the economy

In addition to political conflict, the country is plagued by inter-communal tensions primarily fuelled by cattle wealth or rather the drive to accumulate wealth through cattle. This economic reality sees violence erupt through cattle raiding that in parallel results in women

and girls being abducted for marriage. The link between VAWG and bride-price relates to cattle being the preferred currency of bride-price. Men who cannot afford to buy cattle as bride-price may choose to abduct a young woman and force her into marriage. Thirty-three per cent of the 65% reported sexual violence by women and girls is said to be the result of non-partner abduction linked to cattle raiding and displacement (IRC report 2017). Additionally, and as covered in more detail below, women and girls are subjected to a number of other cultural practices that are in themselves violent or that lead to violence including child marriage, polygamy and wife inheritance (see Bradley, 2020).

While differences in prevalence and types of violent abuse can be seen across the country, VAWG is widespread and often predominantly linked to bride price (see the IRC, 2017 report). This is especially true among the majority Nuer and Dinka ethnic groups. Bride-price remains at the centre of much of the customary economy and effectively reduces women to commodities, to be bought and used and, therefore, abused by husbands who in effect feel ownership over them. Levels of abuse and violence suffered by women and girls became profound and entrenched during the conflicts that have been sustained almost constantly since the independence of Sudan in 1956. In particular, rape has been systematically deployed across warring factions as a weapon of war (although IPV is the most prevalent form of violence). The consequences for women and girls' health and well-being are considerable and largely unmet by the humanitarian response. The many years of conflict in southern Sudan (before it became South Sudan) allowed VAWG to become more widespread, and it left behind numerous long-term consequences for women, including health problems, psychological trauma and possible HIV infection.

It is important in this article to linger a little on these harsh realities, continued below, in order to be able to later emphasise the significance of applying an art heritage lens in drawing out deeper, more hopeful pictures of men and women expressing joy, beauty and resilience. In particular and as the female art form, of Milaya reveals, even in tragic contexts, the agency is expressed and resilience found. This argument can perhaps be made most directly by focusing on one of the most horrifying dynamics of social life in South Sudan – violence against women and girls.

Normalisation of VAWG in South Sudan and the humanitarian response to it

Arguably violence against women and girls could be described as an epidemic in South Sudan. Ellsberg *et al.* (2020) conducted the first prevalence survey in South Sudan and found that out of the 2,244 women between the ages of 15–64 they interviewed, 50% (in the Juba PoCs) to 65% (in Juba and Rumbek), had experienced either physical or sexual violence from a partner or non-partner in the course of their lifetimes. “Approximately 35% of respondents had experienced rape, attempted rape or other forms of sexual violence by a non-partner during their lifetime. For ever-partnered women, lifetime prevalence of physical and/or sexual partner violence ranged between 54% in the Juba PoCs and 73% in Rumbek” (Ellsberg *et al.*, 2020, p. 1). A report publishing the data prior to the Ellsberg article stated that:

While women and girls were often subject to sexual violence by armed actors, they also felt the impact of conflict in a number of other ways. Experiences of displacement, the breakdown of rule of law, increases in crime and the normalisation of violence also affect VAWG. These indirect experiences of conflict have an impact on violence in the home (IRC, 2017, p. 12).

Other research published by Care International (2014) documents that in South Sudan 65% of women and girls had experienced sexual violence at some point, putting the country at the top of global prevalence tables. The South Sudan Health Survey states that one in five women have experienced some form of violence. It also records that 79% of people interviewed (both male and female) felt that a man hitting a woman was normal, particularly when married. The

UN Mission in South Sudan Human Rights Report documents that violence against women during the ongoing civil conflict in South Sudan has increased and is widespread across all warring parties and factions. The 2014 report by Care International also noted that: “There are few places in the world where it is more dangerous or disempowering to grow up female than in South Sudan” (CI, 2014, p. 2). Research conducted by Averbach *et al.* in 2013 found that, across a number of sites, 69% of respondents knew at least one woman who had been beaten by her husband in the past month. The study also captured that 42% of respondents knew at least one man who had forced his wife to have sex with him.

The IRC (2017) report stated that:

Recent studies indicate that intimate partner violence (IPV) may be more common than conflict-related sexual assault; however, both IPV and conflict-related violence are under-reported in these settings. Though several studies have collected robust data on VAWG in humanitarian settings, many experts argue that our overall understanding of the issue remains limited (IRC, 2017, p. 6).

These figures evidence the undeniable scale of the problem, but how is it being responded to? This article will now shift to focus on the humanitarian and development responses to violence against women and girls in South Sudan. It is important to map the stakeholder response before moving to share insights gleaned from the story circles. It is the contrast between the humanitarian and art heritage approaches to understanding gender relations and resilience that this article seeks to demonstrate. Recently, resilience language has been featured in protection programming, for example, interventions that focus on gender equality and anti-sexual and gender-based violence. There are NGO-led programmes in South Sudan that attempt to address not only the overt, “conflict-induced” sexual violence but also the root causes of gender inequality. Programmes often frame their interventions with the objectives of fostering community-wide resilience to the threat of VAWG. This approach is in line with the Hyogo Framework introduced in 2005 at the World Conference on Disaster Reduction in Hyogo Japan. At the conference, the framework was launched as the global blueprint for disaster risk reduction. When applied to reducing VAWG in South Sudanese communities, the framework focuses on building the capacities of people at a grassroots level to mitigate the risks of VAWG (Valdes *et al.*, 2009; Seager, 2014). Despite this approach focusing on the local, it draws on a one-size-fits-all model for disaster response which does not first explore the complex and nuanced ways men and women already relate to and navigate the challenges they face (see Bradley and Gruber, 2021).

Resilience building is central in humanitarian approaches. Resilience is conceptualised in two popular components of VAWG programming: rights-based awareness campaigns and economic empowerment activities. In South Sudan, VAWG prevention and response focus on creating women and girls’ friendly spaces (WGFS), both in the Protection of Civilian (PoC) sites and in communities. Project documents often describe the WGFS primarily as a space for case management and psychosocial support, where emotional support is provided as well as skill-building and recreational activities. Social networks and community integration are also key areas of focus. WGFS are commonly described as being a place where women meet with other women and share their learning and experiences on how to cope with the conflict-related crises they face. The emphasis on providing psychosocial support is common, for example, World Vision states; “for people that have undergone trauma, psychosocial support and counselling are necessary for recovery by giving them support to help them meet their mental, emotional, social and spiritual needs.” [2]

The WGFS are also locations in which NGOs identify participants to support through economic empowerment activities. There is acknowledgement by some INGO stakeholders that “women by nature solve problems and gain life skills through interaction with fellow women. Safe spaces are instrumental in providing such an environment that promotes

interaction. The skills learned from this centre help the women pursue other economic activities that are beneficial to them and their families” (World Vision: *ibid*). While some awareness-raising campaigns occur in the community, the majority of “survivor-centred VAWG services” are delivered in WGFS. Together, peer support and income building are thought to promote the social and behavioural change needed for people to identify and mitigate risk for themselves, in other words, build resilience (see the Hyogo framework above).

Further indifference to the nuance of how people experience their lives emerges as a result of the architecture of humanitarian systems. Larger implementing partners subcontract all or part of their workload to “downstream” partners. Many argue that local downstream partners are particularly advantageous because of their proximity to the “target” community and thereby possess a better understanding of local norms. This insight is viewed by many as crucial for broaching sensitive topics such as VAWG (see [Bradley, 2020](#); [Day et al., 2019](#)). However, given the substantial geographic and cultural disconnect between implementing partners and downstream local partners tasked with the delivery of activities, the potential for misinterpretation of the ultimate goals behind a programme is huge (see [Bradley, 2022](#)). In the context of VAWG programming in South Sudan, this is certainly evident ([Bradley, 2022](#); [Day et al., 2019](#)). Feminist approaches to ending VAWG focus squarely on building the agency of women to recognise violence in all its forms and draw largely on a rights-based approach ([Mukhopadhyay, 2016](#)). The activities already described above are designed with the assumption that awareness raising on individual rights will promote a safer environment for women and girls and that economic opportunities will increase women’s decision-making power at the household level. This in turn will lead to communities that are empowered and resilient to the threats of VAWG (again mapping to the Hyogo framework). This article will go on to argue that women and men already create safe spaces and a focus on art making evidences this. The article will now consider how these spaces and the dialogues that take place in them serve to generate awareness between participants and facilitate open discussion on the challenges they face and how they may counter them. Art making spaces are culturally sensitive and sustainable outside of the resource and programme infrastructure created by INGOs.

Art as resilience in South Sudan

At the start of the article, a reflection was shared from one of the Milaya artists who participated in the research; “*I embroider the beauty that is my head and not the dead trees around me.*” The insights emerging through the story circle approach are rich, showing how a simple yet beautiful art form can do many things simultaneously. As outlined in a blog piece written on the art form ([Bradley, 2022](#)), the process of embroidering bed sheets creates spaces for women to come together to share experiences and train each other. The source then goes on to explore the quote above suggesting, the creation of patterns reflects beauty that often comes from the imagination and not the realities of the hardship of conflict. The creative process itself is beneficial, giving time to devise scoping and resilient strategies. Most importantly, bedsheets are also marriage gifts and fetch significant figures. Selling bed sheets has meant many women proficient in this art have been able to sustain themselves and their children when displaced from other family during the conflict. This article is not proposing bedsheet embroidery as an alternative response to VAWG but merely pointing to the insights and experiences of resilience that emerge because of this art form. The stories in the circle data contrast starkly with the current dominance (outline above) in humanitarianism of a psychosocial response. As already stated art creates safe forums, women, while they embroider, speak about their lives. As outsiders, observing the beauty in the patterns created, supports an understanding of the complexity of resilience. Financial independence is critical

to withstanding shocks, but so too is self-worth and dignity. Humanitarian responses to violence against women can be problematic for two reasons. Firstly, there is very little evidence that current interventions, that are adapted from westernised counselling trauma models, actually work. There is also no evidence that female survivors actually find them helpful (see the section below). Secondly, violence has to be conceptualised within a wider set of social and gendered relationships and woven within them are a number of different ways that women generate and sustain social and cultural capital. It is this capital that supports psychosocial healing as well as offering income opportunities.

As detailed in Bradley (2022), The Milaya story circle took place in September 2019 and consisted of seven women all active in embroidery, all married with children ageing between mid-twenties to fifty. Strong messages of resilience came through as the women shared their motivations for embroidering bed sheets, “I still do bedsheets for myself and for selling . . . I sell to help my children.” The view was clear; “*If you have a handicraft it can help your children.*” Another woman shared; “*In fact it rescued me, I had children who were doing exams, to me these boys are my life.*” “*I embroider for my future to build a house. This embroidery I do at home and it is my skill which I help myself with one day because if the man says he has nothing you cannot pressure him to bring but if you have bedsheets you can help your husband and children.*”

As already stated, there is an important link between income generation from selling bedsheets and marriage. Previously, the article referred to feminist critiques of bride-price and its undoubted link to women’s vulnerability and violence. However, in this story circle, a picture of women capitalising from the process of marriage emerges. “*Bedsheets are the first gift given to the groom’s family. The value of bedsheets is huge, they are expensive.*” Marriage, ironically, is a key market for the sale of bedsheets even though many of the participants had unhappy experiences of being married. The reflections shared in the circle revealed that more than income, bedsheets convey significant emotional expression. “*We women we don’t give to anyone, you have to give to someone who is dear and you value.*” Giving away bedsheets even through sale is also seen as an expression of love and affection.

The emotional dimension of bedsheets generates positive psychological feelings of self-esteem. “*I mean when you cloth the bed with this you will remind yourself that you are a woman, I mean when you cloth the beds with these you will find yourself changed in the house and your self-esteem goes high when your guests come you feel yourself, you are a woman, can you see how it is . . . and when guests come and see the sheets and marvel, you will be very happy.*”

The potential demise of the bedsheet market due to commercialisation came through. “*Machine embroidery is there like this one has been done but for us women of South Sudan we love the thing you do with your own hands that is why you see many do it, even if for example I have a daughter and she is getting married but if I do set to do embroidery they will know I have something of value with strong meaning, that is why we see that we are not going to leave even though a company comes and better and better comes the thing you make with your hands.*”

The sense of pride and dignity attached to being an embroidery is very clear in the above passage. The artistic skills are highly valued and seen as important to pass on to the next generation. “*And we will teach the children so our mothers did not fail they did what they are supposed to do and we should also do what we are supposed to.*” The women we spoke with clearly felt self-esteem looking at the sheets they embroidered. “*She values her bedsheets she looks on the bed clothed in her sheet and she demands more realisation of her own value, this is our value for the bedsheets we embroider.*”

The positive experiences of producing pieces of art should be seen as social capital. Social capital is generated through the process of art-making, “*So they are here as a group of women and they are good to each other and they chat.*” Feeling strong and motivated to continue despite hardship also emerges as an important form of psychological capital. “*I embroider things that link to mood, for instance a vase or ornament, a plant like you can see in this one. For*

me I will be in my dark room but looking at the flowers. I mean I love them; a human can live by this bedsheet.” Another woman shared; *“The bedsheet it will come out the flower you wanted . . . one day I sewed a bedsheet with colours and it was an elephant. I was in one night I covered my bed with the bedsheet I saw an elephant I liked it. I drew it immediately at night using a torch it was going well I drew it on a white bed sheet. You look for the drawings that go close to the one you have in your mind. If brown is out there it won’t be good and in its place you use red or green. Brown reminds us of violence which is not good.”* The processes of designing and sewing the sheets is a form of escapism, taking the artist away from the violence around them. The final product brings happiness and self-esteem. *“The tree now you cannot draw it as it is not beautiful, there are some beautiful trees you can draw yes like these.”* Clearly through this one-story circle and an incredibly rich and touching picture emerges depicting a variety of ways resilience is expressed and experienced.

Carpentry

The article now moves to explore, in a similar way, the value of other art forms that of carpentry and basket weaving. These additional examples are given as further evidence supporting the article’s main argument that an art heritage lens is critical in understanding how people navigate complex and challenging contexts. One of the artists in the carpentry story circle shared; *“Wood carving is for those people who want their love to remain forever, if you buy a piece for your lover and he/she puts it in her/his house even if you are no longer together, this ornament will remain at home and when you see it you will remember your lover and say aah this was my first friend.”* Carpentry is solely a male art form. A focus on exploring what this art form means to the men involved opens unique insights into masculinities that in many ways challenge the image of men reflected in the high levels of VAWG. The prevalence data already given in this article could easily translate into a homogenous image of men in South Sudan as overly aggressive and controlling of women. Many of the reflections shared in the carpentry story circle are deeply personal and touching, reflecting a gentle and respectful attitude towards women. For example, one of the artists was asked what motivated his carpentry.

“Songs are available to inspire, but in wood carving you work alone, you will remember a person and carve for them and then you will remember forever the person you were thinking about at that moment.”

The reflections shared during this story circle reveal messages of hope and a strong sense of pride in a cultural heritage that brings dignity and which the artists feel needs to be remembered and passed on. Art making in the eyes of the carpenters is clearly a form of emotional resilience that provides an important psychological anchor to a place despite its troubles. This strong sense of belonging that art provides is clearly central to resilience yet the technocratic humanitarian hyogo model does not reflect this. Stress is recognised globally as a key trigger for male violence against women (see [Bradley, 2020](#)). The passages shared here reveal how art making is a resource drawn on by male artists as a way of channelling positive emotions of love and dignity. Arguably art making is a means of reducing stress which in turn could contribute to reducing male aggression and IPV. Legacy, love and belonging, again are strong themes in the passage below.

In what I say, I can see in the time of all these things, I came here I am like a messenger I love encouraging others in the time of famine or in the time of lack, in the time of trouble you have to put in your mind these times of lack did not start with you it started with our ancestors, all this time I have been encouraging these children, those in Khartoum I am sending them a message, you people you are staying there in Khartoum we have enough things here come back to let us do something in the name of the South Sudanese so think of doing things like this so it will become our history.

In all this time, I have been happy with these children even those who went out they have their culture they are following at which level is Lusoba now, like now sometimes when I go out I see people who I don't know calling me with other names, children will call old man, uncle, so this thing is that I am with these people I want to encourage them I came like a messenger, and I have a period of time then I will go, I want to do something that can leave for them, even if we have difficulties I see that these difficulties will come to an end until peace comes even if I am not there, I want them to teach the people after them, I want to encourage them that if God gave you knowledge and wisdom you have to pass it to someone else.

I draw this picture I call paradise meaning God. For us South Sudanese if we are just going to remember the lost let us go back and discover the life of these people God left them if their life started and they gave birth to their children. I saw here if someone has a dream he will keep that dream for himself like he wants to sell it, selling it no, no it was given to you freely, God gave you freely so look for someone and give freely.

In this passage, we hear about the important legacy of art that holds the potential to tie generations together. Carpentry objects symbolise ancestral knowledge and emotional insight and as such can teach the next generation about the importance of having a voice. A voice built on the confidence of knowing who you are and where you come from. In contexts of mass displacement, this takes on an even deeper poignancy. The artist above ended by sharing *"let me discover by myself let me not wait for someone who will come to direct us on what to do."* This statement again contrasts against the negative humanitarian picture of South Sudanese communities as aid-dependent, without the means to survive and so requiring western assistance. Later this article explores some of the critiques of the humanitarian motivation describes as a "white saviour" mentality. This eurocentric lens is founded on the assumption that "others" need help and do not have the resources to do so themselves. The artists in this story circle challenge the image of dependency revealing instead a strong sense of agency and determination to utilise the skills of carpentry in order to survive in a holistic sense.

Basket making

So far, the article has reviewed Milaya which is female art form and carpentry the domain of male artists. Basket making is an art form that both men and women take part in. As with the previous art forms, by studying it, it is possible to learn more about the complexities of gender and also resilience. There is a gendered dimension in the type, size and use of baskets made in that day-to-day tasks are divided between men or women and therefore require specific woven products. For example, carrying the newly married woman's clothes to her marital village requires a particular basket. Baskets used by women for collecting groundnuts are clearly identifiable with that task. One artist shared; *"No man walks with Sokolobe women are the ones carrying it. If there are groundnuts it is used. But men don't carry this basket it is strictly for women."* Similarly, baskets are used to hold the ground sorghum, *"the pounding of sorghum is done by girls and carried in baskets."* As with bedsheets and carpentry, there is a strong sense of passing the skills down through generations and learning through watching. Basket making has developed and become more beautiful through the introduction of colours and income is again an important dimension of this art form. There is a fear among the artists that people increasingly do not want to use baskets and are turning to cheaper materials such as plastic. Some of the basket makers raised concerns over losing the tradition and the social-cultural capital it provides. As with the bedsheet embroidery, the process of making baskets is often accompanied by song or story-telling. For men, this storytelling sometimes focuses on tales of a girlfriend. *"The girl is remembered while braiding is happening. A lot of morale boosting and it also gives you an appetite for work."*

“There is a song we sing when young while braiding. There was a song sung for a girl, the girl of my companionship . . . you sing and remember the girl, you will have clear fantasies in your heart.”

Once again, as with carpentry and bedsheet embroidery, the reflections shared in the weaving circle are sensitive and reveal a deep emotional connection with the process of making art. The experience of making a beautiful basket is an expression of resilience as it emphasises identity and respect for human connections which are fundamentally gendered. Returning again to the shocking data on VAWG, the image of love and respect between male and female weavers reflected in pictures of them working side by side and in the songs and stories told, offers hope. The circles shared here each, in different ways, open up possibilities that the entrenched patterns of gendered violence can be de-normalised through a greater emphasis on the narratives of hope, respect and unity conveyed through art. These vignettes of artist reflections on their art-making offer a sense of optimism and convey positive images of agency. A sense of respect from men towards women is also present along with a determination to use the skills passed down to make an income and survive with dignity.

Current engagement with art by humanitarian stakeholders

The significance of art for many people in South Sudan is not lost on many actors in the humanitarian sector. Art is used to shape some end VAWG projects and interventions offering income for a few accomplished artists. However, many of the interventions that use art, tend to impose both the form and also the manner of engagement. For example, trauma painting workshops are common often culminating in an exhibition (Jones, 2018). During workshops, participants are taught painting techniques by an established artist and encouraged to produce a depiction of their trauma experience.

The value of art as a process through which positive and negative experiences can be reconciled is widely acknowledged across sectors including humanitarian. For example, Kalmanowitz states, “Arts-based approaches can offer a number of important avenues to enhancing and supporting the process of resilience. Art-making is action orientated and process focused, facilitating creativity, imagination, growth and group cohesion, and encourages communication.” (2014, p. 322) This article certainly supports this view, but the argument needs to go further. Art, in many forms, is part of the fabric of life for many in South Sudan, for many, it is an instinctive form of expression. The making of art does not need to be introduced or facilitated but rather observed for what it can teach outsiders about resilience and supported because it is intrinsically important to many. Central to the experience of making art is imagination (Allen, 1995, p. 3). It is the imaginative space created through art that allows makers to escape day-to-day insecurity and project back or forward to happier times. Art, as a vehicle to escape, provides resilience, art imposed as a means to depict trauma arguably reinforces negative paralysing experiences thereby reducing a person’s energy to survive (Ma and Penner, 2018).

This view is supported by Wessells who states “psychologists trained in North American and European universities lack the cultural, humanitarian, and other competencies needed to do responsible, contextually appropriate psychosocial work in large-scale emergencies.” (2009, p. 843) This argument is taken a step further by Carpenter; “Many humanitarian efforts globally are arguably grounded within a ‘white savior’ narrative that positions racial and cultural dominance as the source of technical knowledge in response to human needs. Research and reports of arts-based humanitarian efforts globally have neglected to consider the ways in which they reflect ‘white savior’ practices.” (2019, pp. 177–178)

The humanitarian engagement with art in South Sudan treats it as monolithic in that the type of art and the multiple processes of becoming an artist are not acknowledged. Art, this article has argued, brings psychological benefits both through the process of creating it but also the dignity found in the identity of being an artist and being part of a generational

lineage. Art is also a lens through which to learn about collective and individual experiences of conflict, survival and resilience. Lykes (2013) describes how EuroAmerican epistemologies determine the dominant models of trauma response and do not see it as having both individual but also a complex collective dimensions. When art is coopted by EuroAmerican centric practitioners they fail to situate art as a product of history or as a symbol of cultural particular realities, critically important to those whose lives are turbulent and unsure.

Conclusions

This article has shown how by viewing gender through an Art heritage lens a more complex, nuanced and positive picture of human relationships emerges. This picture also challenges assumptions around how and why VAWG happens and exposes seeming contradictions in how men and women understand and navigate their place in the world. An overriding sense of human resilience forms the central narrative of art making in South Sudan. Resilience, through an art heritage lens, is gendered but also reveals respect for the interdependency between men and women. We see how men and women often work together, inspire each other and create separate but mutually respected spaces. Within art making spaces dialogues emerge that offer comfort and escapism and in turn psychological resilience.

The insights provided by a focus on art making also challenge the humanitarian community's approach to resilience building. The insights presented in this paper urge stakeholders to engage in a more holistic way with the activities that offer people cultural capital from psychological, to the sustaining of historic ethnic legacy to income. Artistic expression can teach about how people navigate hardship and build resilience from the skills they have been given from birth and from the inspiration they find in each other and in their commitment and close relationships to the land around them. Conflict brutally disrupts fragile connections and brings stress and strain that undoubtedly leads to increases in violence. While art has not yet managed to transform the structural inequalities that lie behind violence against women and girls, this article has attempted to show that a more sensitive and close engagement, with not just the end art product, but those that make it, may yet present a more sustainable approach to resilience building and social transformation.

The article ends here with caution, in highlighting the value of art in people's lives in South Sudan there is a risk of inviting humanitarian stakeholders to actively seek out artist spaces. If caution is not expressed these spaces could be co-opted as forums for trauma therapy with ownership of them claimed by specific organisations (rather than the artists who created them). The arguments made throughout this article have focused on the value of inhabiting an art-heritage perspective through which to view how men and women navigate challenges and build resilience. Support can easily be given by outsiders in the form of art materials and expertise in how to create markets to sell art outputs (not to be marketed as poverty artefacts). We have shown that art offers outsiders the opportunity to learn about what it means to exist in fragility and uncertainty. Observing and interacting with art making is an opportunity to gain local knowledge and challenge outsider assumptions around why violence happens and how best to respond to it.

Lastly, and to return to where the article began, art is an expression of beauty, of experience and imagination. *"I embroider the beauty that is my head and not the dead trees around me"*.

Notes

1. https://civil-protection-humanitarian-aid.ec.europa.eu/where/africa/south-sudan_en#:~:text=It%20is%20estimated%20that%2072,Sudanese%20refugees%20in%20neighbouring%20countries
2. <https://www.wvi.org/stories/south-sudan/creating-safe-spaces-displaced-women-and-girls>

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