

COLORS OF CONNECTION

TUNAWEZA PORTRAITS PROJECT BRIEF

GOMA, NORTH KIVU, DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO (DRC)
JANUARY-APRIL, 2019



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TUNAWEZA PORTRAITS

UTILIZING THE PUBLIC ARTS TO ENGAGE COMMUNITIES AND THEIR ADOLESCENT GIRLS IN SGBV PREVENTION AND GENDER ISSUES

The Tunaweza Portraits project was implemented by Colors of Connection from January to April 2019 in Goma, North Kivu, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). By working with adolescent girls and young women, community leaders and local partners, the project aimed to address gender dynamics and socio-cultural practices that contribute to sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV).

While the lack of data makes it difficult to ascertain the exact scope or scale of the problem in Goma and surrounding areas, it is clear that sexual violence disproportionately affects women and girls. Survivors face a plethora of debilitating effects or life-threatening conditions. Adolescent girls and young women face particular challenges in relation to the intersection of both their gender and age. Socio-cultural norms and beliefs in DRC dictate that once females have undergone puberty, pregnancy or marriage, they are viewed as adults no matter what their actual age. Transitions to adulthood therefore can be abrupt, and are not necessarily supported by appropriate cognitive, psychological and social interventions by peers, family or community members. Those that are out of school face additional challenges in terms of social isolation, as well as limited future economic opportunities. It is within this context and its related challenges that Colors of Connection aimed to intervene, targeting adolescent girls and young women as a specific sub-group of the population most impacted by SGBV.

Existing responses to SGBV issues in eastern Congo have excluded some of its critical socio-cultural dimensions, focusing more narrowly on conflict-related sexual violence. One unintentional yet harmful consequence of current SGBV prevention and response interventions in the region is the creation of a virtual and physical landscape populated by negative and violent imagery. In these representations, survivors, almost always depicted as women and girls cast as victims, powerless and without agency to address their own issues.



Participant Winnie painting the Women Artist Mural, March 2019.

To bridge this gap, the project focused instead on the civilian aspects of SGBV: its prevalence and pervasiveness in day-to-day life; and, the stark reality for survivors that the vast majority of perpetrators are not armed actors in the ongoing conflict, but rather members of their own families and communities. Founded on the concept of public and collaborative mural-making, the project aimed to redress the prevailing representation of women and girls through local advocacy, community sensitisation, and media exposure. In Kiswahili, “tunaweza” means “we are able/capable” and, as such, the project was inspired by the knowledge and capacity that communities and youth have the ability to make change for themselves. Tunaweza Portraits provided opportunities for women, girls and community leaders to create positive change by challenging stereotypes and representing women and girls as powerful agents of change.

The main goal was to **improve perceptions of girls and women**, particularly in relation to their role in society across four communities across Goma. It is envisaged that this shift in perceptions could lay the foundations for long-term positive change for women, girls and their communities. This work is grounded in the demonstrable success of **art as a therapeutic and transformative agent of change** for individuals and communities in distress and in the ability of community arts projects to shift perceptions and inspire further positive actions by the community.

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

The methodological approach adopted for the monitoring and evaluation of Tunaweza Portraits was focused on a qualitative analysis grounded in **Arts-Informed Community-Engaged Research (AICER)**. The selected methodology is in line with the specific objectives of the Tunaweza Portraits project as an arts-based model of intervention, as well as the broader organizational mandate of Colors of Connection.

Arts-informed research is designed to enhance understanding through alternative processes and representational modalities. It offers a framework of inquiry with expansive possibilities, infusing literary, visual and performing arts in various linguistic forms and processes, rendering it more accessible to multiple audiences. Combined with a community-engaged approach, this methodology facilitates progress towards equitable participation and decision-making processes. Research participants are enabled to identify problem areas or lines of inquiry themselves, fundamentally altering and redefining the conventional authority and power of the researcher to pre-empt or pre-determine the parameters of the study in question. Throughout the course of the monitoring and evaluation of Tunaweza Portraits, inputs from project participants as well as members of their families, households and wider communities were actively solicited at various phases of the research design and implementation.

KEY FINDINGS

While certain challenges point to potential areas for improvement, the project was on the whole widely appreciated by both the participants themselves as well as the various community stakeholders for the art-inspired innovations and new perspectives it brought to the existing programming around SGBV issues in eastern DRC.

"Both the process and the final product are important in showing what girls are really capable of." - Community stakeholder

ARTS-INFORMED PROGRAMMING:

Community members and local leaders, in particular, expressed appreciation for Tunaweza Portraits' methodological approach, instrumentalizing the arts. The project's high visibility showcased the ability of arts-inspired activities to incite and inspire people, particularly in a context in which the visual arts are not typically given much value (relative to musical and movement-related arts which are more commonplace and popular in the DRC). Over the course of the project, it was understood that the visual arts could offer a voice to adolescent girls and young women who would otherwise remain on the margins of society.

"These murals and messages, they help make sure that girls are listened to when they don't have sufficient voice within society. They make people think twice about what they think they know about girls and what they are capable of doing."

Community Stakeholder



Participants nearing completion of the Female Construction Worker Mural, April 2019.

BREAKING BOUNDARIES:

“Another success of Tunaweza Portraits for both participants and community-based stakeholders was the way in which the project broke with traditional boundaries and gender-informed rigid barriers within Congolese society. The widely held perception that painting as a commercial enterprise was solely within the purview of men was re-conceptualized. Both the product and process of public mural-making offered opportunities to challenge prevailing beliefs and attitudes about women in the workplace. The vast majority of passers-by were surprised and impressed to see first-hand young women working together as a team, using ladders and surmounting many environmental and operational challenges over a sustained period. For many community members, the participants constituted pioneers in their field given how atypical it is to see young women doing such work in the local context of Goma

“Women can do any occupation they please. Work is not dependent on gender.” - Participant

Community Arts Council member, Dunia Bakulu, was one of several community stakeholders who provided recommendations for the content of portraiture and messaging under development. Bakulu represented the government Division of Youth. March 2019.



FEMALE-FOCUSED INTERVENTIONS

While certain local leaders and community members expressed regret over the lack of implication of male participants in the project, the exclusive female-focus of Tunaweza Portraits was also a source of strength. It promoted the establishment of a safe space and positive environment in which female participants were able to express themselves and participate more fully. Free of the societal boundaries and power dynamics which often lead to male domination of discussions and decision-making, female participants were able to have more in-depth discussions on subjects of particular sensitivity such as the place and potential of girls and women in Congolese society. This provided a natural entry point into examinations of the meaning of female leadership and the identification of women role models in Congolese society from which to draw inspiration.



Right - Salima assists participant Florence in a drawing activity. Salima is one of two young female artists in the community who were selected and trained to co-lead activities and work as project assistants, providing mentorship and acting as role models for participants. March 2019..Left Natalie sharing her options with the group during an activity to build leadership skills, February 2019

Project participants themselves reported **improved social inclusion and socio-emotional development** over the course of the intervention. Participants consistently identified social isolation as one of the key challenges in their daily life prior to the project.

“My fellow participants have become more like my sisters than just my friends. Before starting the course, I only had two friends. Now I have so many.” - Participant

Participants also expressed great appreciation for the multitude of skills they were able to hone, and the greater likelihood of more economic opportunities in their future. Many participants cited how they drew inspiration from Colors of Connection staff, benefiting from their guidance and pastoral support throughout the project – both formally and informally. Project assistants proved to be positive role models, providing a living example of alternative representations of women in Congolese society, enabling participants to examine and question socio-culturally ascribed roles and responsibilities.

The innovations introduced by Tunaweza Portraits begin to address the drivers of structural and societal gender inequalities by turning conventional perceptions and interventions on their head, using the arts as inspiration to shed new light on the long-standing and extreme vulnerabilities of young women in Congolese society. The learning which has emerged from Tunaweza Portraits, if applied, could lead to more comprehensive outcomes in the future should this approach be taken to scale.



Aziza, in front of one of the completed murals, "Women are the pillars of education in society." Many participants reported taking great pride in their work and feeling like leaders, April 2019.