

Title	'I'm terrified of becoming a headline': an exhibition responding to GBV in Ireland
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Introduction

On 12 January 2022, 23-year-old Aisling Murphy was attacked and murdered near Tullamore, in the Irish midlands. There was a significant national response with vigils held across the country, a renewed national discourse around gender-based violence (GBV), and commitments from the government (Dunphy and Keegan 2022). However, Aisling was the latest of over 245 women who have died violently in Ireland since 1996, as recorded by Women's Aid (2024).¹ Our arts collective, the Hive, made up of alumni and staff of the Creativity and Change programme, engaged in a creative intervention to commemorate women and girls killed by men in Ireland, called We Remember. Creativity and Change is an Irish Aid funded global citizenship and development education creative engagement programme based in the Munster Technological University Crawford College of Art and Design which prioritises empathy, passion, and understanding to drive collaborative social and environmental action.² The project has been developed in conjunction with the Sexual Violence Centre Cork³ and the Reclaim Project⁴ to both improve its effectiveness and ensure our work was suitably informed by those working in the area and sensitive to the inherent complexities. While the project has multiple strands, this article is focused on an exhibition run in the Munster Technological University (MTU) Gallery in Cork city centre in April/May 2022.

Our 'I'm terrified of becoming a headline' exhibition used poetry and songs concerning coercive control, intimate partner violence, femicide, and other forms of GBV, alongside critiques of media representations to explore these issues and encourage action. We also hosted workshops over the course of a week exploring topics of GBV with related community organisations. We intended it to be a space for participants to consider words and performances from young artists while fostering conversation and momentum. The installation was considered 'artivism', a form of Socially Engaged Art (SEA) that deploys the creative expression of art with the action-orientation of activism to achieve social and political change, usually centred on social justice matters (Bishop 2012; Olsen, 2019). We found that in our context, this approach presented avenues to confront and progress larger societal conversations around GBV. This paper reflects on that process and how it was received by participants.

¹ Women's Aid Ireland's Femicide Watch, as of June 2024, stands at 265.

² <https://www.instagram.com/creativityandchange/>

³ Sexual Violence Centre Cork provides support to survivors of all forms of sexual violence, including rape, child sexual abuse and sexual assault: www.sexualviolence.ie

⁴ The Reclaim Project is an empowering community space for women and gender minorities who have experiences of power abuse within the arts: @ <https://linktr.ee/thereclaimproject>

There is a growing range of international cases deploying activism concerning GBV. Street art, counter-cultural publications, and online tools are being used to highlight the experiences of girls, women, and others, especially in contexts where patriarchal/misogynistic structures deny and suppress these realities. New cultural narratives around GBV elevate 'voices previously silenced or muffled, demanding change with a sharing of information that counters societal numbness and an unwillingness of those in power to educate societies about this epidemic' (Chhabra, Fiore, and Pérez-Villanueva 2020, p.1743-44). We discuss the exhibition in this setting to understand how it functioned as a GBV activism.

This paper is divided into four main sections beginning with an outline of the exhibition and accompanying photos. Next, a short literature review outlines the conceptual basis for the use of art as a tool in raising awareness and confronting GBV. A discussion of feedback received from visitors and participants to the installation and workshop offers different viewpoints on its impacts. Finally, our own reflections on the process prompt further questions concerning the creative approaches and GBV.

'I'm terrified of becoming a headline' Exhibition Design

The exhibition was a creative reaction to GBV that commemorated those who have died violently. Our understanding of this complex area was shaped by the work of Irish NGOs who defined GBV as including physical, emotional, or sexual violence, domestic abuse, coercive control, stalking/cyber-stalking, and femicide (Women's Aid 2016; Safe Ireland 2024). This helped shape the planning of the installation as a mechanism to consider the diverse ways in which this violence/abuse is perpetrated and experienced. We aimed to confront a culture of fear, shame and denial, while also calling for new approaches from the state and society. It involved a collection of artworks drawing on poetry and songs by young people that dealt with coercion and GBV, as well as pieces challenging media coverage of these themes. Interactivity was central to the process, with spaces for individuals to respond to the installation and a series of interconnected workshops held throughout the run time. In addition, there was a separate small room which remembered the names of the 254+ women who had died violently ~~in Ireland~~ between 1996 and April 2022.⁵ This was a quiet reflective space for individual reflection and for visitors to leave messages.

⁵ This number is collated by Women's Aid Ireland. The figure as of March 2024 stands at 265 (Women's Aid 2024)

Disrupting headlines was a unifying sensibility and aesthetic. We felt that an approach that both disputed and inverted standard representations of GBV would contribute to larger conversations. This disposition reflected our engagements with young writers who had produced poetry and lyrics on these themes. This included a poem Allie and the Paper Chain Girls by Emily Mellows, which inspired the exhibition title. Quotes from these pieces were created in large lettering to reproduce a headline effect that conveyed sentiments from the perspective of the authors. This approach can be seen in Fig. 1, which gives an impression of the monochromatic palette of the space – intentionally designed to not overwhelm the viewer or sensationalise the topics explored. At the same time, such large format was chosen for its visual impact. The quotes are reminiscent of newspaper headlines in connection with Mellows' poem, connecting with the fear of 'becoming a headline' and illustrating how devastating personal experiences become public property. A classic serif font was chosen to reference formal communication and the shadow of history and experience. Key words were highlighted in some quotes through use of scale. All rendering of quotes was done in consultation with the artists. Letters were projected and hand-painted by the project team. This labour was evident in the handmade aesthetic and again encourages the viewer to consider the effort and intent behind these pieces. (Fig. 1).

Fig 1: Installation of large format quotes taken from lyrics and poems written by survivors of GBV

Videos featuring live recordings of these and other pieces from young writers were available to watch and listen to directly connect with the artists and hear these words from their own mouths. In addition, some of the artists gave a live performance on opening night (Fig. 2) that further supported visitors to the exhibition in connecting with the topics in a very visceral and immediate way. During these performances, visitors sat on the floor in the space, creating an informal and intimate atmosphere while positioning the artist as a powerful figure.

Fig 2: A spoken word performance on opening night

Another section used examples from the #FixedIt campaign, run by the Sexual Violence Centre Cork, to highlight media headlines concerning GBV and sexual violence that blames victims,

and erases perpetrators.⁶ Unaltered reports were made available so that participants could make their own corrected versions. In addition, there were spaces for individuals to share their thoughts or creative responses (Fig. 3).

Fig 3: Cross-section of the exhibition space showing video pieces, large format hand-drawn quotes, #FixedIt workshop space and space to answer prompts in response to the exhibition

There was an accompanying workshop series throughout the exhibition, including live performances of pieces featured, an event on fixing headlines run by the Sexual Violence Centre Cork, and an introduction session from ByStander Intervention, University College Cork, a programme to help people support others in situations of sexual misconduct and violence.⁷ These extended the conversation beyond the opening night and involved our partners working with GBV in the city. The workshops offered increased opportunities for participation and more focused explorations of the topics presented. Connecting with community groups outside of our own on this topic was a desired outcome of the project and the workshops were instrumental in this.

Art and GBV

Our collective centres on the idea that collaborative creative methods can have transformative impacts in addressing social and environmental justice issues ~~on a variety of scales~~. While this principle is well established (Crawshaw and Gkartzios, 2016; Olsen, 2019), our approach is based on its articulation through the Creativity and Change programme that combines empathy, compassion, critical thinking, and the ability to take action. It aligns with the 'social turn' in the arts whereby works are understood and assessed on their social role rather than artistic criteria (Bishop 2012). As Vanina Serra, Mónica Enríquez Enríquez, and Ruby Johnson (2018, p.108) explain art can 'contribute to shaping social and cultural norms, determining political agendas, sparking dialogue, catalysing action and helping us imagine a more just world.' Activism, in particular, encourages social change by dissenting to the political/economic status quo, widening political participation, intentionally including and amplifying excluded and under-represented views (Weij and Berkers 2022).

⁶ The campaign replicates journalist Jane Gilmore's campaign started in Australia <https://janegilmore.com/fixedit-headlines/>

⁷ <https://www.ucc.ie/en/bystander/>

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Activism's role in generating awareness and action on GBV has been researched recently in different contexts illustrating how creative projects can contribute to larger political objectives in this area. Art is valued as presenting avenues for women and others to ~~tell their own story~~ reclaim narratives of abusive relationships and encounters, often as part of therapeutic or awareness processes (Allen and Wozniak 2011; Bird 2018; Giesbrecht *et al.* 2021). Jonna Tolonen (2021), for example, discusses street art as an important grassroots tool for confronting violence against women in Madrid and Valencia. She establishes how posters, murals, and other pieces can break 'stereotypes of women in society and allow mass communication outside the mainstream media' (Tolonen 2021, p.15). While Bonnie Zare (2020) shows how a group of Indian graphic artists created stories about women's realities and the microaggressions they experience in response to the 2012 'Nirbhaya' case in which a young woman was gang raped and murdered. This activism helps groups reclaim identity and agency, amplifying marginalised voices to challenge cultural-political norms that contribute to GBV. Crucially, activism and creative projects have a transformative potential that can redefine and shift the discourse around GBV (Corcoran and Lane 2018; Maria Alina Asavei 2019).

Engagements with expression also highlight issues of power dynamics in how GBV is articulated and discussed in media and online. Representation has a material effect on how women and girls are treated (McIntyre 2015). Dominant and historical cross-cultural discourses perpetuate patriarchal priorities through traditional media and social media, (re)generating social environments that enable GBV (Adams 2012). It is essential that those directly affected and excluded can speak for themselves and tell their own stories (Serra, Enriquez Enríquez, and Johnson 2017). The exhibition intentionally confronted this controlling scheme and inverted it. Accounts and words crafted primarily by young women presented visceral insights into their experiences and the effects of coercion and violence. Moreover, the 'Fixed It' section allowed for critical engagement with headlines and media reporting around GBV.

'I'm terrified of becoming a headline' centred on art as a tool for social transformation. It builds on international research that illustrates how creative methods can call attention to GBV and provoke progress (Fox *et al.*, 2020). Art has a powerful function in enabling people to represent themselves and their experiences (hHooks, 1995). This stands out as a key conclusion in the literature which we prioritised in ~~assembling the pieces~~ curating the work. These considerations are now applied to the exhibition using both the feedback given by participants and our own reflections on the process.

Engagements with the Exhibition

Our understanding of the exhibition ~~is~~was significantly enriched by responses from the public. Feedback forms were available throughout its run and participants in workshops were asked to fill them out. As well as presenting us with a range of assessments, the questionnaires provided metrics for partners and Irish Aid, the primary funder of the Creativity and Change programme.

The discussion draws from two open-ended questions that received most of the replies. Firstly, 'Why do you think it's important to talk about gender equality from a global perspective?' This question located the exhibition in a larger societal context while also reflecting the Creativity and Change programme focus in the Sustainable Development Goals. The second one was a more-standard 'What is the most significant thing you took from this exhibition or workshop?'. The response can be categorised into three thematic clusters: the effect of representing these issues, the significance of discussing them, and nourishing the need for action.

One group of answers foregrounded the effect of having a space that forthrightly acknowledges this topic and facilitates dialogue. The significance of the exhibition in raising domestic violence, coercive behaviour, and other GBV was repeatedly mentioned both in the formal feedback and in conversation with us. One participant emphasised:

It seems apparent there is a need to express our emotions/anger/frustration. We all have our experiences of GBV, while another wrote on 'Increase understanding and awareness. Create community and reduce undeserved shame for victims - show that you're not alone.

Having a space, in the physical and conceptual sense, to articulate and explore the realities involved was significant. It was clear in some cases that participants were deeply affected by the installation, and it was meaningful for them. Despite the attention GBV receives, there is a pervading social unwillingness to properly acknowledge and confront it and its prevalence. This disposition contributes to the structures that enable violence and protect perpetrators.

Art from women, girls, and others being thoughtfully acknowledged, listened to, and shared becomes even more significant and urgent (Corcoran and Lane 2018). The replies underlined the significance of fostering discussion and facilitating an environment where women and others can share their stories.

Reassuringly, many of the replies focused on the affective nature of the pieces and the events. GBV is obviously an emotive subject which can evoke very personal responses.⁸ Participants highlighted the positive dimensions of discussing this complex topic with statements such as 'The power the community can have'; 'The power of having a voice'; 'The power of spoken words in changing discussion. The connection with others here'. There was a clear impact on participants as the works conveyed meaning and resilience. The word 'power' resonated as it was repurposed from its negative form within abusive relationships to an act of solidarity for change. Significantly, this cluster of feedback supports our intention to employ activism as a connective process that can generate recognition of GBV, create empathies, and contribute to social change (Di Lellio, Rushiti, and Tahiraj, 2019). It was very encouraging that participants took away these empowering sentiments of solidarity and expression.

There was an action-orientation to the final cluster as participants interpreted the installation as a source of motivation. It was encouraging to find this position as a central rationale of the exhibition, and the overall *We Remember* project, is to help progress the movement addressing GBV in Irish society. A range of responses captured this sentiment: 'It is the only way to change things, to talk about it, to educate yourself and others'; 'Perspective and solidarity can support meaningful changes'; and 'It's important in order to change the culture and therefore also to facilitate effective interventions.' In these cases, individuals recognised the need for informed actions. Comparably, Bonnie Zare (2020) showed that a collection of graphic art works on street harassment and sexual violence in India, *Drawing the Line: Indian Women Fight Back*, was an exhortation, revealing the cultural architecture enabling GBV and women's capacity for resilience and boldness.

The feedback forms helped us understand how the exhibition was received. Supplemented by informal response, it was clear that the works resonated in different ways which underlined the art's underlined activism's capacity to explore and foster action on social issues. The space offered a means for visitors to engage with this fraught subject, while appreciating that these discussions were vital. It was also experienced as an impetus for change. The telling of stories and representations of GBV prompts action. Each of these underlined the role of the exhibition as a tool for discussion and activism.

⁸ Visitors and participants were informed of the exhibition's content before entering and relevant helplines/websites were signposted.

Reflections

Shortly after the completion of the exhibition and the collation of the feedback, we engaged in a reflective review. This involved examining the comments and identifying key themes, which we discussed and ~~added our responses~~expanded upon. The perspectives of participants and our partners ~~helped enhance~~informed our considerations. We reached three main points which have helped inform and refine our on-going work in this area: activism's role concerning GBV, the significance of authenticity, and the role of a shared process.

Firstly, the exhibition demonstrated how activism can offer a distinct avenue to consider, discuss, and respond to the multifaceted issues around GBV. Our arts collective emphasises activism as a tool for social change ~~and this was. However, we~~ cautiously deployed ~~it surrounding this to explore this~~ sensitive topic. The renderings of poems and songs, focusing on key quotes, and the 'Fixed It' materials analysing headlines aimed to balance creative expression and socio-political purpose. In the planning stages, we were concerned at ensuring the installation managed this attunement through pieces that respectfully engaged with experiences, fostered understanding and eschewed any graphic ~~or sensationalist~~ images of GBV. We used a monochromatic colour palette and the majority of the art was text-based, with the exception of a dot work portrait. ~~It~~ was reassuring that participants referenced the sensitivity of the work ~~and its merging of a broader~~ societal objective with lived experiences of coercive control, everyday aggressions, and GBV.

Responses to the exhibition reinforced our commitment to using activism to push for reform in government policy and to challenge misogynistic cultures and behaviours. Karen McIntyre (2015, p.65) frames feminist art as giving an 'aesthetic form to political discourse' that demands 'political change and offered pointed insights into the oppressive, personal realities of women's marginality'. Activism is a process that combines creativity and (radical) progressive agendas. It needs to remain grounded in these ambitions while being conscious and self-reflective in representing complex and emotive themes. In addition, 'I'm terrified of becoming a headline' was developed in conjunction with ~~coalface our partners-organisations who work directly with~~ victims/survivors to ensure it was both accurate and appropriate. Creative responses to GBV have a distinct role in pushing for greater action and calling state authorities, organisations, and men to account.

Our secondary main point on reflection was the scale to which the authenticity and insights from the artists resonated with participants. The works manifested and captured experiences and feelings. They illustrate ~~an essence~~ experiences familiar to most girls, women and gender minorities. This resulted in the feedback which referenced the power of the exhibition. It had an affective dimension through which people engaged with the pieces and discussion with others, especially in the programme of workshops. Artistic processes can be appreciated as a gathering and fostering of experiential knowledge that helps understand and reflect on violence against women (Asavei 2019). These types of knowledge were not only contained in the pieces but were generated in conversation and commitments towards action. 'I'm terrified of becoming a headline' was a setting that facilitated genuine and impactful examination of GBV.

We used our networks to collate and present poems, songs, and the headlines campaigns in a distinct and cohesive manner. It was foundational that the voices of these artists and campaigners were the substance of the installation. Vanina Serra, Mónica Enríquez Enríquez, and Ruby Johnson (2018), discussing activism, outline how 'it is crucial that women, girls, and trans and intersex people represent their own experiences'. The legitimacy of the collection derived from the sincerity and creativity of the artists who represented their experiences and emotions. This aligns with the first point to show how authenticity is an important strand in using activism to portray GBV.

The final take-away point concerns the role of shared practice in generating new insights and resolution for action on GBV. All actors played a role in adding to the activism orientation towards social progress. We set up the exhibition to be interactive with multiple opportunities for visitors to become participants adding their voices by drawing/writing their responses and partaking in facilitated sessions. Many people took up this invitation and contributed to the works often in ways that provide new insights and suggested changes to pervading cultures that protect and facilitate GBV.

The opportunity to add their voices to the work was mentioned as being significant given the strong emotions and ubiquitous nature of the issue. In the feedback, the chance to add to the installation was appreciated as a vehicle for individuals to express their feelings/experiences, strengthen solidarity, and further calls for action. The interactive aspects were more successful and impactful than we could have anticipated. This aligns with findings from other creative approaches that noted deeper awareness can be reached through individual and collective

engagements (Chhabra, Fiore, and Pérez-Villanueva 2020). We have re-examined our planned activities, as a result, to ensure they are as participatory as possible. These three key reflections have reinforced our understanding ~~for-of~~ how activism can assist in highlighting GBV and calling for systemic change.

Conclusion: Activism and GBV

Our exhibition 'I'm terrified of becoming a headline' aimed to foster discussion and push for action around GBV. The works disrupted representations of this issue by deploying a newspaper aesthetic in displaying excerpts from poetry and songs, and through the 'Fixed It' campaign which addressed misleading and incorrect headlines on GBV criminal cases. This article has enabled us to examine the installation as an example of how activism can be deployed to highlight coercive control, rape culture, and femicide. Feedback from participants revealed the power of creative responses to engage in this complex area in a sensitive manner that fosters solidarity and progresses calls for changes in policy and greater accountability. The success of the exhibition in achieving this aim suggest two points that can inform future activism and research in this area.

Firstly, there is considerable potential for more scholarship examining the role that art and activism can play in exploring and discussing GBV. Existing literature has established the power of art to confront public discourse and misogynistic cultures. Further examinations of these connections will support artists working on these themes and projects in ~~different~~ parts of the world aimed at raising awareness, nurturing change, and challenging power structures. Related to this is the second point that there is scope to build and enhance existing networks between activists, artists, support organisations, and researchers to generate social and politically oriented creative pieces. Art can and should be used as a means to focus public attention and strengthen campaigns that address GBV ~~on different scales~~. The strategic use of art has a distinct capacity to attract attention and highlight the types of changes required both in terms of policy and cultural norms. This will require aligned NGOs, groups, and individuals to work together for more effective and targeted activism.

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