

# The Role of Artistic Expression in Social Movements for Health Equity

Kakembo Aisha Annet

Faculty of Education, Kampala International University, Uganda

## ABSTRACT

Artistic expression is increasingly recognized as a powerful tool within social movements, particularly in advocating for health equity. Art intersects with activism, amplifying marginalized voices and deepening public understanding of health disparities. Through visual art, music, performance, and storytelling, artists are effectively engaging communities to address systemic inequalities affecting health. By examining historical and contemporary examples, this paper highlights the potential of art to mobilize collective action, foster community solidarity, and challenge social injustices that underpin health inequities. Case studies, including the Postpartum Paint! initiative, demonstrate art's impact on policy dialogues and community health, emphasizing its role in shifting narratives and inspiring social change. However, challenges persist in integrating art within formal public health frameworks due to structural limitations and funding competition. Overcoming these obstacles requires resilient, innovative partnerships that transcend institutional barriers. This paper argues that expanding artistic practices within health equity movements can catalyze transformative change, fostering broader social impact and cultural resilience.

**Keywords:** Artistic expression, health equity, social movements, advocacy, community engagement.

## INTRODUCTION

Art transforms communities and people; when used as advocacy, it can shift social, environmental, and political injustices. The interrelationship of art and activism is mirrored in other social movements, such as the intersecting movements for social justice and health equity. Those whose voices are often marginalized or suppressed can communicate about these complex issues and health disparities and the need for social change through artistic expression. Because creativity fosters a deeper understanding of complex issues during dialogue, those involved in health communication, health education, health promotion, and even behavioral and social sciences can use different forms of art to advocate for change [1, 2]. Art as advocacy engages communities by blending multiple artistic forms into the work. A blend of visual, verbal, and non-verbal forms communicates with diverse audiences through literacy, language, and culture. Those involved in community mobilization, health, and human services agencies, or local or federally funded

research projects frequently incorporate artistic practices for use in local exhibits and/or within communities to raise awareness about and prevent suicide, build bridges of understanding among refugees, immigrants, and the American public, provide creative health-related workshops to women and transgender people, combat racism through art and public dialogue, or to educate five-year-old children about food security and early risk factors for obesity. Such work, although not explicitly labeled as art as advocacy or art as protest or social justice, is found throughout the fields of public health or behavioral and social sciences. In this essay, the operative terminology, art as advocacy, is used to describe health-equity artwork created by people at the community, university, state, or national level and intended to engage communities in creating social change through action or advocacy. Key themes in art as advocacy will be illustrated through several case studies focusing on environmental, health, and social justice issues [3,4].

### Historical Perspectives on Artistic Expression in Social Movements

Art has historically been a central and indispensable component of organizing and mobilizing social movements, playing a pivotal role in shaping and amplifying their messages. In the United States, various art forms such as visual arts, music, and performance have emerged as powerful tools, effectively conveying the struggle for human rights and social justice. Looking back to the early 20th century, we witness the tremendous impact of artists and activists affiliated with the New Negro Movement, who utilized visual art as a powerful means of countering the prevailing racist discourse of the time. Noteworthy among these influential figures is Aaron Douglas, whose remarkable illustrations vividly portrayed the social and emotional realities of Black life, symbolizing racial uplift and resilience in the face of adversity. These evocative images served as a source of inspiration and empowerment for marginalized communities, igniting a sense of collective identity and mobilization. Furthermore, the Vietnam War era witnessed the emergence of music as an essential and deeply resonant element within the anti-war sentiment. Songs became the soul-stirring anthems that expressed the frustrations, aspirations, and unity of those who opposed the war. Music had an extraordinary power to bring people together, fostering a sense of camaraderie and giving voice to their deepest convictions. In examining contemporary movements for social transformation, we can observe the multifaceted nature of art through mediums such as music videos and live performances. These forms of artistic expression not only capture the essence of the movement but also actively participate in shaping and influencing its direction. They transcend the role of a passive "window," becoming dynamic actors that contribute to the energy, momentum, and collective imagination of the cause. Moreover, when reflecting on the ongoing struggles for justice, equality, and health within Black communities, it becomes evident that art, particularly music, plays a critical role in understanding their experiences. The sounds and lyrics of music, deeply rooted in the discourses of Black trauma and resurgence, unveil the complexities of these struggles. Within the context of Black lives resistance, demonstrations, and the tireless pursuit of health equity, music acts as a powerful medium that resonates with the lived realities, providing solace, inspiration, and rallying points for change. In summary, art, in its myriad forms,

has proven to be an integral catalyst for social change throughout history. From visual arts to music and performance, artists have wielded their creativity as a potent tool for resistance, liberation, and the relentless pursuit of justice. By harnessing the power of artistic expression, communities have found meaning, unity, and hope in their collective struggle for a better world [5, 6]. In the context of community cultural development, arts, humanities, and collective expression of trauma have also been utilized to navigate and help transform the plethora of discourses on trauma-focused and resilience-focused frameworks. Collective Memory Work post-genocide in Rwanda, an artistic form of peaceful protest, and the earthquake and tsunami graffiti art in Berlin exemplify in vivid detail the use of the aesthetic dimension of art in conjunction with national historical and social memory works and cultural resilience. Art is therefore able to speak a language that verbal and numeric means of advocacy cannot. Acts of visual and performative resistance serve as tangible, valid, and measurable evidence of social harm. In mainstream advocacy work, mainstream narratives tend to blame victims. A counterhegemonic expression such as that found in art is a powerful argument against these negative narratives and a counterhegemonic form of counter-evidence. Furthermore, unlike many other forms of evidence, art can meld logos and pathos to depict actual lived experiences and emotions. The fusion of racial and sexual discrimination compels the lens of intersectionality, which views the coming together of all struggles as essential components of successful movements for equity. Early social movements for human rights, during the 20th and 21st centuries, utilized art to protest dehumanization and advocate for change. Specifically, visual arts, music, and performance were pivotal in communicating messages of struggle and resilience. Political and world events from 2010 to 2021 have elicited a rich tapestry of creative artworks aimed at sparking dialogue, transformation, and change. Artistic expressions of social justice, equity, and decolonized or post-colonial human rights reveal social media sites brimming with imagination and powerful rhetorical and visceral significance. Through adept counter-narrative and counter-hegemonic discourses that viscerally challenge trauma and violence, art-related advocacy aims to measure and reveal social harm and sow the seeds of peaceful

transformation and democratization. Its growing popularity in social science and arts research has established this genre of university

research at universities and arts institutions worldwide [7, 8].

### **Art As a Tool for Advocacy and Awareness in Health Equity Movements**

Art can serve many roles in the realm of activism, advocacy, and social change around health inequities. It is a tool for raising awareness within communities, instigating calls to action, and sparking dialogue and discussion. There is evidence that art can express abstract and nuanced forms of knowledge, such as the questions and philosophical concerns that belie the omissions and silences in our data. Art can explore questions of meaning and value while disrupting dominant perspectives and assumptions. It can provoke new lines of thought, going beyond what is generally comprehensible to expertise, and can connect current experiences to long, shared histories of struggle. Visual, performative, and narrative art are all ways of capturing and expressing a societal understanding of issues of inequality and justice. They are a way of representing experiences and arguments in a manner that strongly suggests outcomes deeply connected with human emotion [9, 10]. In the realm of health equity work in the United States, we can see the multifaceted roles that art plays in advocacy and awareness among a variety of movements seeking justice in healthcare. The

roots of telling stories as a strategy lie in the efforts made by individuals and people of color to assert their humanity in the face of entrenched racism and stigmatization. Stories can shift conversation; they work through emotional expression to transfer a story from teller to listener, creating the possibility of that story-passing listener themselves reauthoring and directing the story. We found in our analysis of calls on health social movements for justice that stories can also illuminate complex, interconnected narratives of intersecting oppressions. The stories of health injustice make manifest the structural inequalities and oppressive relationships that occur in these different domains. They express the ambient violence that flows through all these areas. Storytelling in a policy context acutely observes these relations and builds narrative power in order to make conceptual linkages between the community's less powerful shared stories and the policymaking audiences. Art, and the making and witnessing of it, can support these kinds of complex engagement. Art connects the abstract to the concrete, making it visible and emotional [11, 12].

### **Case Studies of Successful Artistic Interventions in Health Equity Campaigns**

#### **Case Study 1 - Postpartum Paint!**

Postpartum Paint was funded by a health initiative. In collaboration with a reproductive justice access network, artists, activists, and public health professionals organized two paint nights. The first event invoked lived experiences and artistic expression as a means to manifest the daily stressors of low-income mothers. The second event entailed a photo and video exhibit of the artwork, combined with a focus group to solicit public opinion and potential ideas about structural interventions for creating a less stressful social environment. The exhibit and the focus group, drawing from both photo and participatory action research methodologies, involved community members critically pondering the categories of what is affecting health and how to change it. The artwork and the community members' responses illustrated the relationship between the social determinants of health, chronic stress, and the reproductive capability of young Black mothers [13, 14]. Postpartum Paint! is significant because, given the racial disparities in maternal morbidity and mortality, there was an urgent need to raise public awareness about this issue

once and for all. This partnership between academic researchers, liaisons from a local grassroots organization, and regional artists and activists asks workers to unite their skills, creativity, and enthusiasm in an interprofessional partnership. Postpartum Paint! was envisioned and planned to build social networks between Black mothers, artists, activists, health professionals, public health researchers, and residents of the greater Macon area interested in reproductive justice. We argue that not only are the arts a means of social and spiritual renewal materially decreasing stress and other toxicities in concert with social and structural policies, but art is a scientific means of inquiry not unlike participant and photoethnography. Furthermore, the discussions and understandings that emerge from the learning circle and exhibit will expand knowledge about the potential of art and other expressions to move diverse publics to critical consciousness and action around pressing social issues, such as reproductive injustice, and finally make the racial disparities known and intolerable [15, 16].

### Challenges and Opportunities in Utilizing Art for Social Change

Art is a double-edged sword for social change, and in the realm of health equity, there are several perceived challenges to effectively utilizing artistic expression. Artists and activists desiring to work together may face barriers ranging from competition for funding and legitimacy to marginalization when challenging power structures in institutions. Institutions themselves frequently resist change in institutional norms or beliefs, and in the end, if art is commodified, the art and the social movement become unsustainable in their current forms. Within these challenges and limitations also come opportunities. Some opportunities are born out of resilience and adaptability. Collaboration, pooling resources, and embracing a common identity can help build a shared platform in which creative efforts generate greater reach. Creativity and access to resources can also generate artistic innovation. Combining these resources with people who understand social and behavioral sciences or public theory can further solidify and actualize these potential tangible outcomes. By embracing creative project design through all stages, there are opportunities to further increase widespread participation in our work. Furthermore, broader availability and the exploration and utilization of the arts through new media forms allow for

broadening and maximizing the reach of our work. Reviving the relevance of boundaries and borders of creative artistic work should be an ongoing form of resistance to generate institutional change. Expanding our ability to communicate inclusion through the use of new technologies is an asset worth prioritizing. Sovereign expression of resilience remains rooted in those who are impacted the most and downtrodden in our society. The adaptation and revitalization of our artistic practices may be acted upon with the challenging of some norms or cultural practices which systemic efforts have held as higher than the collective will of the people who struggle. Fundamentally, broadening definitions of art provides expanded boundary setting to the individual. Art does not have to fit the status quo of upper-echelon cultural practices to be of merit in public health. Indulging ourselves in understanding many art and health practices, where unique subsystems of communication exist outside of current public health dialect, we might better begin to break down their overlooked and unintentional silos. Participating, while including more practices as well as those whose practices are not frequently discussed, would inherently increase our inclusions through our inclusions [17, 18].

### CONCLUSION

Art's integration into health equity movements marks a pivotal advancement in advocacy. It bridges gaps between diverse groups, elevating the voices of those impacted by health inequities and mobilizing collective action for change. Historical and modern-day examples highlight how art has consistently served as a conduit for social dialogue, transforming public perceptions and challenging systemic barriers. Programs like Postpartum Paint! underscore the significant contributions of creative initiatives in articulating and addressing complex health

disparities. For art to fulfill its transformative potential, support from public health sectors, funding bodies, and community organizations is essential. Embracing artistic expression as a valid and valuable tool within health advocacy provides a unique avenue to humanize, communicate, and address the socio-cultural determinants of health. By broadening the scope and recognition of art within health advocacy, we can cultivate a more inclusive, compassionate, and resilient approach to achieving health equity.

### REFERENCES

1. Shelton RE, Eakin H. Who's fighting for justice?: advocacy in energy justice and just transition scholarship. *Environmental Research Letters*. 2022 Jun 7;17(6):063006.
2. Bowman B, Pickard S. Peace, protest and precarity: making conceptual sense of young people's non-violent dissent in a period of intersecting crises. *Journal of Applied Youth Studies*. 2021 Nov;4(5):493-510.
3. Bentz J. Learning about climate change in, with and through art. *Climatic Change*. 2020 Oct;162(3):1595-612.
4. Bryson JM, Barberg B, Crosby BC, Patton MQ. Leading social transformations: Creating public value and advancing the common good. *Journal of Change Management*. 2021 Apr 3;21(2):180-202. [uca.edu](http://uca.edu)
5. Pleyers G. The Pandemic is a battlefield. Social movements in the COVID-19 lockdown. *Journal of civil society*. 2020 Oct 1;16(4):295-312.

6. Yates L. Prefigurative politics and social movement strategy: The roles of prefiguration in the reproduction, mobilisation and coordination of movements. *Political Studies*. 2021 Nov;69(4):1033-52.
7. Heydari Fard S. The Transformative Power of Social Movements. *Philosophy Compass*. 2024 Jan;19(1):e12951.
8. Jones BL, Duncan KE. Creating pedagogical possibilities through media representations of “the talk” in civics classrooms. *Journal of Curriculum and Pedagogy*. 2024 Jul 11:1-28.
9. Schillinger D. The intersections between social determinants of health, health literacy, and health disparities. In *Health Literacy in Clinical Practice and Public Health 2020* (pp. 22-41). IOS Press. [nih.gov](http://nih.gov)
10. van Kessel R, Hrzic R, O’Nuallain E, Weir E, Wong BL, Anderson M, Baron-Cohen S, Mossialos E. Digital health paradox: international policy perspectives to address increased health inequalities for people living with disabilities. *Journal of medical Internet research*. 2022 Feb 22;24(2):e33819. [jmir.org](http://jmir.org)
11. Sharma R. Learning to recycle isn’t enough: Youth-led climate activism and climate change education in the UK. In *Curriculum and Learning for Climate Action 2021* Oct 27 (pp. 144-166). Brill.
12. Mehan A, Mostafavi S. Immersive Art and Urban Heritage: An Interdisciplinary Study of Socio-Environmental Justice in Houston and Amsterdam. In *Decoding Cultural Heritage: A Critical Dissection and Taxonomy of Human Creativity through Digital Tools 2024* Jul 2 (pp. 439-456). Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland. [HTML]
13. Sokol RL, Ammer J, Stein SF, Trout P, Mohammed L, Miller AL. Provider perspectives on screening for social determinants of health in pediatric settings: a qualitative study. *Journal of Pediatric Health Care*. 2021 Nov 1;35(6):577-86. [nih.gov](http://nih.gov)
14. Crielaard L, Nicolaou M, Sawyer A, Quax R, Stronks K. Understanding the impact of exposure to adverse socioeconomic conditions on chronic stress from a complexity science perspective. *BMC medicine*. 2021 Dec;19:1-20.
15. Solnes Miltenburg A, Kvernflaten B, Meguid T, Sundby J. Towards renewed commitment to prevent maternal mortality and morbidity: learning from 30 years of maternal health priorities. *Sexual and Reproductive Health Matters*. 2023 Dec 31;31(1):2174245. [tandfonline.com](http://tandfonline.com)
16. Chinn JJ, Eisenberg E, Dickerson SA, King RB, Chakhtoura N, Lim IA, Grantz KL, Lamar C, Bianchi DW. Maternal mortality in the United States: research gaps, opportunities, and priorities. *American journal of obstetrics and gynecology*. 2020 Oct 1;223(4):486-92. [nih.gov](http://nih.gov)
17. Celestin BN, Dorcas KD. Eco-innovation in Waste Recycling Industry in Ghana: Modeling the Upper Echelon Behavioral Drivers of Grass Root Innovation Among SEED Award Winners. *SAGE Open*. 2024 May;14(2):21582440231198151.
18. Fan X, Im J, Miao L, Tomas S, Liu H. Silk and steel: A gendered approach to career and life by upper echelon women executives in the hospitality and tourism industry in China. *International Journal of Hospitality Management*. 2021 Aug 1;97:103011. [hoasen.edu.vn](http://hoasen.edu.vn)

**CITE AS: Kakembo Aisha Annet (2024). The Role of Artistic Expression in Social Movements for Health Equity. IDOSR JOURNAL OF ARTS AND MANAGEMENT 9(2):16-21. <https://doi.org/10.59298/IDOSRJAM/2024/9.2.1621>**