

# “We make something with the flower, but feel like I make with myself something”: The role of a community arts project supporting women who have experienced human trafficking

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## Abstract

Human trafficking can have multiple adverse effects on a victim's mental and physical health. The study explored how a small UK community arts project was experienced by individuals post-trafficking and the impact it had on well-being. Community-based participatory research was employed to increase understanding the experiences of six female participants taking part in a community arts project. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Themes of Authentic Care, Building Confidence, and Creative Expression were developed. Findings suggest the community arts organization played a vital role in supporting women to build trust and social connections, as well as to feel valued. Artistic activities helped participants express individuality, had therapeutic benefits, and provided motivation, routine, and space from worries. The role of community arts organizations is important in supporting individuals in the context of limited post-trafficking services.

## KEYWORDS

community arts, community psychology, human trafficking, participatory research, post-trafficking

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## 1 | INTRODUCTION

The most widely used definition of human trafficking (HT) is that adopted by the United Nations (2000), where it is described as a process involving:

1) an act, which may include recruiting and transporting, 2) through a particular means, which may include use of threats, force, abduction and abuse of power, 3) for the purpose of exploitation, which may include sexual exploitation and forced labor (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2018).

However, researchers argue that discourses of HT can situate the phenomena as a crime isolated from the global structural forces which underpin it (O'Connell Davidson, 2015). Such forces, including global inequalities are likely to be exacerbated by the economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, which Interpol (2020) suggests are likely to further drive vulnerable communities to migrate.

The mental and physical consequences of experiencing HT can be severe (e.g., Abas et al., 2013; Zimmerman et al., 2008) and enduring (Ostrovski et al., 2011). Oram et al. (2016) found that out of 150 trafficked individuals surveyed, nearly 80% of women and 40% of men reported high levels of depression, anxiety, or posttraumatic stress disorder. Oram et al. suggest that women are particularly at risk of poor mental health when they have experienced violence before trafficking, and have higher levels of unmet basic needs post-trafficking. Higher levels of mental health problems among women therefore, should be seen within a context of wider gender inequalities before and after trafficking.

Qualitative research has found that trafficked women struggle with their view of themselves and sense of identity (Evans, 2021). Such consequences are theorized to occur through a “multistaged process of cumulative harm” (Zimmerman et al., 2011, p. 327), before, during and after the trafficking experience, where harmful experiences accumulate to increase future risks and compound the effects of previous harm. Therefore, environmental factors post-trafficking, may interact with the psychological consequences of being trafficked, impacting the individual's well-being. The importance of basic needs being met is frequently highlighted in the literature as fundamental for post-trafficking well-being. However, achieving financial stability, housing and personal safety is often fragile, with accommodation moves, changes in immigration status, and other factors disrupting this (Angelis, 2014; Zimmerman et al., 2006). Thus, understanding the complexity of experiences among trafficked individuals is key to developing effective approaches for support (Katona et al., 2015).

In the United Kingdom, post-trafficking support has been described as “failing victims” by the Anti-Slavery Commissioner in a letter to the Home Office (Hyland, 2017) and “placing trafficking victims at further risk of exploitation” by a report by three major charities (Red Cross, 2019). Individuals often encounter multiple difficulties with housing, lack of access to support and advocacy, worries about deportation and poverty (Ferrell-Schweppenstedde, 2016; Hibiscus Initiatives, 2020). A major London charity supporting victims reported that only 2% of their clients were allocated to safe houses and that 98% were housed in temporary or insecure accommodation or identified as homeless (Hibiscus Initiatives, 2020), with frequent accommodation moves cited as a major barrier to building connections within communities, and accessing mental and physical health services (Domoney et al., 2015; Hibiscus Initiatives, 2020). The Helen Bamber Foundation (2017), another London charity supporting victims suggested that services from statutory agencies are limited and lack consistency. The independent support organizations that do support this population are, they suggest, few in number, overstretched and unable to cope with the high demand for services.

Despite the high incidence of psychological distress experienced by this population, individuals often do not come to the attention of mental health services (Zimmerman et al., 2011), with barriers to access including difficulties developing trust, unstable circumstances, lack of documentation, language barriers, and cultural differences in the understanding of mental health (Angelis, 2014; Westwood et al., 2016; Zimmerman, Yun, et al., 2003).

When psychological therapy is accessed, literature suggests it is valued by some individuals (Zimmerman et al., 2006), but may not be relevant for all (Domoney et al., 2015). Clinic-based interventions may be of limited value in addressing displacement related factors (e.g., loss of community, meaningful roles, and socioeconomic status), which are a significant cause of distress (Hom & Woods, 2013; Zimmerman et al., 2006) and may contribute toward a vulnerability to reentering the trafficking situation (Wilson & Butler, 2014).

Some authors (e.g., Miller & Rasco, 2004) have suggested that interventions such as social support, resource building, and skills training are more helpful in addressing displacement related losses and these are noted as important for post-trafficking well-being (Le, 2017; Zimmerman et al., 2006). Indeed, such interventions may have further reaching benefits, as the theory of conservation of resources (Hobfoll, 2001) suggests that resources accumulate. A resource gain (such as social support) may therefore predicate further gains of resources (such as increase of self-esteem), causing a “gain spiral.” Such interventions may also have therapeutic benefit. Engaging in meaningful activity helps disrupt a cycle of low mood and reduced activity, and is useful for disengaging from negative ruminative thoughts (Kennerly et al., 2007). These benefits may be particularly helpful to people who have experienced HT, as not having an ability to work and lack of financial resources means that meaningful activity is harder to access.

## 1.1 | Community arts as a mechanism for intervention

The term “community arts,” refers to practising art inclusively with the community. It first came into use in the 1970s alongside the community development movement and is concerned with how art can challenge power structures (Matarasso, 2013), encouraging cultural democracy and inclusion (Clements, 2007; Newman et al., 2001). Benefits of community art include self-confidence, social cohesion, community empowerment and self-determination, local image and identity, and health and well-being (Matarasso, 1997; Ramsden et al., 2011). Arts and cultural practices may also be “profoundly important in processes of inclusion” (O'Neill, 2013 p. 53) for refugees. Gould (2005) found that such projects helped promote well-being and increased refugee access to public services in the United Kingdom. Furthermore, The Helen Bamber Foundation advocates the use of creative arts stating, “through self-expression, the process of creating increases one's self-esteem and sense of identity... Art seems to have a unique power to help us make sense of past experiences” (“Integration Programme”, n.d.).

The connection between arts and well-being are well acknowledged (e.g., Arts Council England, 2007; Burt & Atkinson, 2011), however there is a lack of research into the role of the grassroots organizations that commonly deliver these interventions (Ramsden et al., 2011). The only published account of using art with this population was conducted in South East Asia and suggested it may help individuals to express their experience, overcome shame and guilt, reflect on posttraumatic growth, process some traumatic experiences, and gain solidarity (Tan, 2012). Understanding the role and impact of such interventions for people who have experienced HT in the United Kingdom is important, particularly given the increasing function that voluntary and community groups have in providing services to vulnerable populations amongst cutbacks in UK public services (McGovern, 2016). Thus, the aim of this study was to understand the experiences of women who have been trafficked who were attending a small community arts project, and the potential impacts on their well-being, using a qualitative, participatory research approach.

## 2 | MATERIALS AND METHODS

### 2.1 | Design

Researchers have suggested that issues of voice and empowerment should be central to working with people who have experienced HT (Chung, 2009). In line with values of community participation and in recognition of

the damaging experiences of power that people may have experienced this research uses a qualitative and participatory approach. Epistemologically, it was underpinned by critical realism, which acknowledges that while there may be an objective reality, our experience of it is always structured by our concepts about it (Bhaskar, 1989).

The research development phase involved Flower Press (the organization where the arts project was delivered) members and the project organizer helping to define the research questions and deciding data collection methods. Based on this information, the researcher finalized the study design and interview/focus groups questions and sought further feedback from the participants on these.

The data collection phase consisted of a focus group to enable discussion of the topics between participants, followed by individual interviews with each participant and the project organizer. Feedback from participants was sought during the analysis, see below.

## 2.2 | The arts project

Flower Press social enterprise is a small community organization, engaging women who have experienced HT. It takes a collaborative approach to support women to develop networks and increase confidence through arts workshops (e.g., creating a hat out of flowers) and training opportunities, including gaining floristry qualifications. Women can attend as many or as few sessions as they like. The project is run by volunteers, with funding coming from grants, as well as from sales of art from the workshops. More information can be about the organization can be found at <https://www.ellaphillips.co.uk/flower-press>.

## 2.3 | Participants

To recruit participants, the researcher joined several Flower Press events and discussed the research with members, with six agreeing to be interviewed. Since Flower Press does not ask, or have criteria, for types of trafficking experience, it was deemed unethical and not ecologically valid to recruit participants based on this experience. Inclusion criteria therefore included: being female; being over 18 years old; self-identifying as having experienced HT; and experience of engaging in the Flower Press project. There were no additional exclusion criteria.

Four participants took part in the research development phase, and six different participants in the data collection phases, all recruited from the Flower Press project. The project organizer took part in both phases. Focus group/interview participants had an age range of 35–62 years old, and had nationalities from geographical areas of Africa, South America, South East Asia, and South Asia. Experiences shared by participants with the researcher included domestic servitude ( $n = 4$ ), restrictive and/or abusive relationships ( $n = 2$ ), sexual exploitation ( $n = 2$ ), and experiences of torture ( $n = 1$ ). The Flower Press project organizer was an artist with a background in educational outreach and was known to the lead author.

## 2.4 | Procedure

### 2.4.1 | Consultation with Flower Press organizers

The Flower Press organizer was approached to discuss the feasibility of a research collaboration. They then discussed this possibility with Flower Press members and reported some interest in the research.

## 2.4.2 | Building relationships

The lead author was invited to join Flower Press for a day at a community farm and a lunch event. During initial relationship building the lead author began informal conversations about participatory research, noting that members were open to sharing their experiences, but were reticent about taking on additional involvement in the research process, citing demands on their time. These early discussions led to the decision that each phase or meeting should be stand-alone, meaning that participants could take part in any phase without being required to contribute to another.

## 2.4.3 | Research development phase

The first meeting continued the building of a “communicative space,” highlighted by Bergold and Thomas (2012) as a central principle in participatory research. Four Flower Press members plus the organizer attended. Different methods of data collection were considered, with the group settling on one group discussion, followed by individual interviews. Research aims were constructed by the lead author and organizer directly after the group meeting, trying to draw on what the women had discussed. The following aims were then produced as a result:

1. How do women who have experienced HT experience being part of a community arts project?
2. How does a community arts project impact the post-trafficking well-being of women who have experienced HT?

Draft semistructured interview questions were emailed to 10 Flower Press members who had given their agreement to be contacted about the research, and three provided feedback. Interview questions for the organizer were developed by the researcher following interviews with Flower Press members to explore the themes that emerged.

## 2.4.4 | Collecting data

The focus group of seven participants (six Flower Press members and one organizer) was conducted at a UK charity's office, frequently used by Flower Press, and lasted approximately 90 min. Seven individual semistructured interviews with the same participants were then conducted and lasted between 30 and 90 min. Topics for the focus group and individual interviews covered post-trafficking challenges and the experience of taking part in Flower Press. Although women were not asked about their trafficking experiences the organizer was available in case any became distressed. Focus groups and interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

## 2.4.5 | Analyzing data

- Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was chosen for data analysis due to its flexibility and accessibility, aligning with the participatory nature of the research. The data was coded inductively, emphasizing participants' own understanding of their experiences, thoughts, and feelings.
- Throughout the research phases, a reflective diary was maintained by the lead author to document impressions of participant experiences and personal reactions. This facilitated awareness of and challenge to assumptions, and contributed to the iterative reflective analysis.

- Initially, a broad analysis of the data was conducted. Emerging findings were shared with participants for feedback. Two participants provided feedback, confirming the accurate capture of their experiences, with one participant remarking, “this is me!”
- Detailed analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase method. Transcripts were thoroughly read and reread, and inductive codes were developed using Nvivo software. These codes were transferred to a document and grouped into themes across the entire data set. Theme organization and new interpretations were continuously revised through reflection and rereading of transcripts.
- Themes were rigorously reviewed for coherence and distinction, resulting in the identification of final subthemes and main themes. To ensure inclusion of important themes, two transcripts were independently coded by a research supervisor, following Boyatzis (1998) recommendation. Consistency in code development between the supervisor and the lead author was observed.

## 2.5 | Ethics

Ethical approval was gained from Salomons Institute for Applied Psychology (V:\075\Ethics\2016-17). British Psychological Society (British Psychological Society, 2010) guidelines and World Health Organisation (WHO) ethical guidelines for interviewing trafficked women (Zimmerman & Watts, 2003) were followed. For example, questions which may potentially retraumatize were avoided and a list of support organizations were provided. Consent was fully explained, and throughout the research process it was continually highlighted that participants could take breaks or withdraw from the research at any time. The organizer of Flower Press granted permission for the project to be named in the report.

## 3 | RESULTS

Results are organized into three main themes: Authentic care, building confidence, and creative activity, see Table 1.

### 3.1 | Authentic support

All participants frequently highlighted times that they had felt genuinely supported whilst taking part in the project. This feeling of being cared for was often discussed in contrast to feeling dehumanized and isolated during the trafficking experience, as well when dealing with statutory services post-trafficking. Two key themes emerged that facilitated this authentic care: trust and a community of care.

**TABLE 1** Table showing main and subthemes.

Main theme	Subthemes
Authentic support	Trust A community of care
Building confidence	
Creative activity	Creativity and self “Being little busy”

### 3.1.1 | Trust

Most participants spoke of feeling initially shy and afraid to attend the project meetings, connected to a lack of confidence in speaking English or doing the activities, or lack of social confidence and self-worth. Several participants connected these initial worries to how they were feeling at the time, including feeling depressed, bad about themselves, “lazy,” confused, and afraid of people.

“They say, ‘when we met [P1] for first time. She just doesn't talk too much. She was quiet and she just looking, and er, she do laugh but she doesn't talk too much’ and sometime they think I'm a bit rude! I don't talk to them” –P1

Developing trust and feeling safe in the group was mentioned by most participants. The organizer noted allowing this process of trust to occur at the person's own pace and not forcing individuals to be “someone that they're not.” Trust developed through seeing that other group members had also gone through difficult times, as well as participants building confidence in speaking to others in a “safe environment”:

“... our experience, we can't work with the people, or you can't trust them.... When... someone you can trust then our fear came less, you understand?... you feel yourself, in safe environment” –P6

Trusting the organizer of Flower Press was mentioned frequently throughout all the interviews. This seemed to be developed through trusting her responsiveness and willingness to try to find practical support for the participants, which contrasted from the participants' perceptions of the lack of support from public services. The organizer herself also noted consciously being responsive to issues and reflected that continuity was important in developing trust.

“Knowing that if they've got a problem, you will respond to it, even if you don't have the answers, you're not just going to ignore... Everything's in flux with them so... I think probably the continuity, is quite important, and ... being friendly” –The organiser

### 3.1.2 | A community of care

The Flower Press group feeling “like family” appeared numerous times in almost all the interviews. This seemed to be related to instances where the participant received or showed genuine care toward another or where there was an experience of emotional connection and understanding between group members or with the organizer. In the following quotation, one participant describes calling another Flower Press member to encourage her to attend the session.

“[P5] I call her ‘wake up!’ I call her.

[P4] ah yeah, that look like family.

[P5] I say, ‘okay, I look after you’” –Focus Group

Experiences of empathetic connection were also highly valued by participants. In the following extract the participant describes the impact of other group members crying in response to her sharing her experiences with them.

"...They cry for me and I just thinking 'oh my god, they cry for me, they (yeah), I feel the pain, they can feel my pain' that's why they crying, so that's why care." -P1

The joy that the participants experienced at being able to support another group member was common across all the interviews. This may have represented a sense of close connection, as well as the ability to offer something of value to another. Being able to support others also improved participants' self-perceptions.

"Helping other people make me feel proud yeah... Oh yes, I'm tired but I'm proud [after helping an anxious group member to the station]. After this time with bad health, going to (station)... From my house, is far, then from, going to (station) then go back. I'm tired but I'm proud" -P5

### 3.2 | Building confidence

All the participants discussed how the group helped them challenge negative self-perceptions, which resulted in building their confidence. Teaching members of the public what had been learned in workshops, supporting each other, sharing skills, and doing good deeds in the community seemed to challenge feelings of worthlessness or dehumanization, which had occurred within the trafficking situation, as well as afterwards. One participant described how being able to teach children about gardening challenged what she had been told by an abusive partner.

"I can't speak English word well, and one day you feel everything down (but then), 'Ah! I can explain to children then' and children believe me... And that made me 'oh! I'm not down, same thing he told me'" -P4

Through her observations the organizer was able to describe the process through which group members sharing their individual knowledge and talents had a direct impact on increasing confidence:

"Where we're doing something that that woman particularly feels confident in or has prior experience to. She will suddenly become this focus point for the group because she can show everyone how to do it and then she becomes almost like a teacher and she'll know more than I know about how to do it and then, you just see, stature, posture change, like that sort of confidence to speak and articulate" -The Organiser

Learning new skills was emphasized by several participants as helping them gain confidence to do other things outside of the group such as work experience and voluntary roles in church.

"Sometimes I feel very sad, but especially, I coming this group I very happy because flower, flower is very important for us and saw flower and I very... my heart is open. I learn flower, I set up flower for my church, for my church, I set up flower, very important" -P2

The opportunity to practise English in a supportive environment was also highly valued, as most participants described a lack of confidence in English as a limiting factor in traveling, navigating public services and immigration processes and making friends. This opportunity was particularly valued by participants in the context of reduced funding for English classes—which had resulted in some feeling devalued and depressed:



"That make me depressed and I say, 'what I can do? Nothing' like you, you want to go again, and the law change and you can't learn, you can't do anything... because I problem, I can't speak English, no, no, no money to pay" –P4

Most of the participants highlighted how increased confidence occurred gradually over time "little by little," perhaps highlighting the importance of the regularity of the group, where trust and confidence were able to build. Changes, which occurred within a context of support and encouragement, were contrasted with experiences where participants felt pushed to achieve therapeutic goals by key-workers, without feeling that they had the support to do so. Several participants spoke about the organizer encouraging them whilst providing support and motivation. In the following extract, a participant who had struggled with anxiety when going out of her immediate surroundings described how she was able to start expanding her world.

"I can improve my life a lot... before to go somewhere, you can't do anything but now look like, she (the organiser) push me" –P4 in Focus Group

### 3.3 | Creative activity

Engaging in the activity of creating art was mentioned by all participants as helpful, and is split into two themes "being little busy" and "creativity and self."

#### 3.3.1 | "Being little busy"

Half the participants discussed how engaging in meaningful group activities helped them gain space from negative thoughts, low mood and difficult memories, as well as through providing motivation and routine:

"Today, you say 'yes, I'm going to group today, oh my god, thank you very much, and what time is it? I wake up, I wash, I eat my breakfast and then I make my dress, blah, blah, blah and then I feel happy, I'm busy, but, if not, then I stay home (yeah) oh! No job, no nothing, no school, uck! Make me stress... Today, I'm going to somewhere, I'm going to do this one, there is this one (yes) yes, I'm going to see my friends and group, I feel happy'" –P2

The group activity supported interaction with others, and some participants discussed how meeting different people provided excitement, stimulation and distraction, countering feelings of depression and isolation. This was particularly important as participants lacked meaningful activity and social contact due to not being able to work and lack of financial resources. Participants discussed how they "love all the character" and how "I learn for people. Makes me good, because different, different." This perhaps also points to appreciating expressions of individuality, which may be particularly salient to the participants given past experiences of suppression of individuality during trafficking.

"Too many people, lot, one room, 12 people, 15 people... you feel better, crowd, noise... cos talk, talk, talk, talk, laughing, laughing, ah too many! (Laughing)... where are you? Where you from?" –P5

### 3.3.2 | Creativity and self

In addition to the diversity of the social group, artistic activity enabled a visual representation of the group members' unique characters. Indeed, there seemed to be a sense of individuality expressed through the unique art pieces. This perhaps points to a sense of agency, in being able to create something unique through following a personal creativity. The prevalence of these reflections on creative individuality may point again to the important role of creative expression and agency after experiences of suppression during the trafficking experience.

"She (the organiser) gives lot of ideas hat making. But normally, no one follow that idea, which is she's giving the pictures. Everyone making their own flower hat (laughs)" –P1

Working with beautiful things, particularly flowers, was noted by participants as making them feel "happy," bringing "beautiful things in your mind," and "forgetting you're scared." Four participants used flower metaphors during interviews to communicate their experiences, describing how each flower had its own story—like the different members of Flower Press, or to describe beginning to open up like a flower, growing like a flower and being recognized as having value and beauty. It seemed that using this metaphor helped participants understand something about themselves, and gave participants a language to express feelings to the interviewer. In the following extract, the participant makes a comparison between her own sensitivity and the sensitivity with which she handles the flower.

"When we make, I feel like, I not holding flower, I holding myself to doing something. Flower is like person, people are also sensitive. Flower also is very sensitive, so we make something with the flower, but feel like I make with myself something" –P1

Another participant compared herself to a flower, as a way of appreciating her own beauty after being subject to abuse. These poetic reflections seem to indicate the value of working creatively with something outside of the self, as a way to understand and express the self.

"sometimes you think you can't do anything, and you pick one (picks a leaf up off the grass) and you go 'ohh'... look like me flower very beautiful and (not what) he did to me....okay I can stand up again... I can come to school cos I don't talk to people for nearly two years" –P4

## 4 | DISCUSSION

This study used a participatory, qualitative approach to increase understanding of the experiences of women who have been trafficked, attending a small community arts project, and the potential impacts on their well-being. Findings suggest the importance of authentic support for women who have experienced HT, as well as the value of building confidence and engaging in creative activities.

The research highlighted the project's value in providing a genuinely supportive environment where participants felt safe to develop trusting relationships and to participate in a community of care. Such experiences were particularly powerful as they appeared to challenge previous experiences of broken trust and not feeling worthy. Within this environment, personal confidence increased through developing English language proficiency, and sharing and developing skills. Increased self-efficacy and confidence were particularly salient after previous experiences of abuse and marginalization and enabled participants to further expand their social roles outside of the project. Additionally, findings suggest that the project enabled participants to engage in regular meaningful activity,

which helped increase mood and provide weekly structure. Creative expression through art activities seemed to have a particular impact for the trafficked women, enabling them to express and witness their own and others' individuality, and to communicate their experience through metaphor.

Flower Press seemed to create a safe domain within which its members could develop skills and confidence. This instigated a "gain spiral" (Hobfoll, 2001) enabling participants to develop networks outside of the group, which can facilitate further increases in confidence and connection. A "scaffolding" (Wood et al., 1976) of support and learning seemed to occur, where members felt encouraged to develop, within their "zone of proximal development" (Vygotsky, 1978). This differed from experiences where participants felt pushed to become independent, without having first developed the confidence, or gained the resources, to do so. The findings align with the Helen Bamber report (Katona et al., 2015), suggesting that interventions ideally should address both personal and environmental factors influencing well-being. Understanding this interaction seems important, as not appreciating this interplay may result in individuals feeling expected to achieve milestones, without feeling that they have the resources to do so.

Feeling like "family" seemed particularly meaningful for participants, highlighting the value of support that felt genuine and reciprocal. The findings corroborate research suggesting that building social networks are important in recovering from the negative consequences of HT (Angelis, 2014; Zimmerman et al., 2006). Being in a position to offer help to others was also highly valued by participants, aligning with research suggesting that "extending self to others" (Kinsel, 2005, p.23), can serve to strengthen social ties and develop a sense of purpose (Kinsel, 2005). This may be particularly valued by trafficked women who may have experienced a disrupted sense of personal purpose and been isolated from social networks. Post-trafficking, opportunities for meaningful activity and sense of purpose are limited due to commonly not having the right to work (Angelis, 2014).

The findings also suggest that participants developed trust through experiencing a sense of safety in the group. Characteristics of the group aligned with trauma-informed approaches which emphasize responsiveness and adaptability in the context of consistent relationships (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration SAMHSA, 2014), and HT research highlighting the importance of practical assistance and continuity of care in enabling trust (Angelis, 2014; Zimmerman, Yun, et al., 2003). Indeed, consistency is a key feature of a secure base (Holmes, 2001), and something that the organizer of Flower Press consciously aimed to create. This contrasted with a lack of continuity in many other aspects of the participants' lives, as reported in other qualitative literature on post-trafficking experiences (Angelis, 2014; Domoney et al., 2015). Open-ended groups may have benefits over short-term participation, as this longevity allows trust to be built in the context of consistent relationships. This may enable a sense of belonging to develop, and a secure base from which individuals can explore links with their community and further build resources. Further research should investigate the impact of such group structure on well-being outcomes.

Group activities offered both specific and nonspecific benefits. Participants expressed that engaging in meaningful activities increased motivation by establishing a routine and fostering anticipation. Moreover, it allowed for mental respite from difficulties, aligning with the advantages emphasized in therapeutic models like CBT (Kennerley et al., 2007).

Specific benefits to taking part in arts activities were also reported. Chen (2015) proposed that the act of creation supports a discovery of sense of self as it reflects the mirroring process integral to early development. Making marks on paper and creating therefore can be an affirmation of self and findings suggest that this creation helped participants express their individuality. This may be particularly relevant post-trafficking, as research suggests that individuals can experience a sense of lost personhood and value during trafficking (Evans, 2021).

Flowers as art objects came to symbolically stand for aspects of the self that the participant was grappling with. This accords with psychoanalytic theories highlighting self-discovery as inherent in artistic creation (Wright, 2009). For the participants, these aspects of self included sensitivity, individuality, growth, opening up, and value. Noticing and valuing these properties in the flower, seemed to help participants notice and respect them in themselves. This is perhaps most aptly expressed by one of the participants: "we make something with the flower, but feel like I make

with myself something.” These findings suggest that community groups supporting trafficked women could consider creative activity to support personal expression and the regaining of individuality.

This research is the only known exploration of the impact of a community arts group for women who have experienced HT, and findings suggest the positive impact that such projects can have. However, a self-selection bias of participants with positive views of the project may have occurred and the presence of the organizer in the focus group could have discouraged the expression of negative experiences and views. Attempts to involve project members in the research process could have been improved through the use of creative research methodologies. Further research could qualitatively examine similar interventions across various settings and quantitatively assess the impact of community arts groups on well-being outcomes.

## 5 | CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this research adds to current literature suggesting CA projects have a valuable role, alongside clinic-based interventions, in positively impacting post-trafficking well-being. The findings suggest that consistent relationships provided by an open-ended group and responsive facilitators are important factors in achieving this. Further research exploring the interaction of psychological and environmental impacts of HT on well-being and the mechanisms of how services can provide a sense of a community of caring is warranted.

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### CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

### DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared.

### PEER REVIEW

The peer review history for this article is available at <https://www.webofscience.com/api/gateway/wos/peer-review/10.1002/jcop.23095>.

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