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ArtEMi Project

Art and Education for social inclusion of Migrant women

ArtEMi Support Practices

ART & EDUCATION FOR SOCIAL INCLUSION OF MIGRANT WOMEN

ART AND EDUCATION FOR
SOCIAL INCLUSION OF MIGRANT WOMEN

Psychological Support Practices

The project

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Partners

- Associazione DUN - Onlus
- Associacao recreativa, cultural e social de Silveirinhos
- Storie di mondi possibili
- Mobilizing Expertise AB
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Index

Introduction 4

Partners' voice 5

Psychological problems of migrant women 11

Art therapy in the psychological support of migrant women 13

Autobiographical writing in a group as psychological support 15

The importance of mutual help 19

Ideas for a Mutual Aid Project for Migrant Women Victims of Trafficking and Abuse 21

Experiences of intervention through art therapy and mutual aid for the psychological support of migrant women 24

The therapeutic effect of art therapy and storytelling activities in the group, in Greece – DAFNI 24

The therapeutic effect of art therapy and storytelling activities in the group, in Portugal - ARCSS 28

"Breaking Barriers: Using Art to Speak What Words Cannot" -Reflections of the Workshops in Sweden - Mexpert 29

Introduction

ArtEMi project, Art and Education for Social Inclusion of Migrant Women, is an Erasmus Plus funded project, KA220-ADU-7D59318B, addressing the difficulties faced by migrant women and other marginalised social groups, particularly during the COVID-19 era, aiming, at the one hand to promote resilience, creativity and social inclusion in order to overcome psychological distress through art therapy, autobiographical storytelling and activities that increase self-esteem and entrepreneurship and offer them educational training and employment prospects, and at the other hand to involve a wide range of relevant organisations at local, national and European level.

ArtEMi Toolkit is on of the ArtEMI Project final products. This Toolkit is a guiding tool for educational activities based on art therapy for social inclusion through artistic-craft approaches, autobiographical narrative techniques and digital storytelling to support migrant women in self-awareness and planning for emancipation, in presence and distance. The kit, based on dedicated experimental laboratories, describes the preparation of activities and necessary materials, offers models for the evaluation and self-evaluation of the activities carried out and the results achieved and photo/video documentation of the laboratories, to facilitate the operational use of the tool and the replicability of the proposed activities.

At the beginning of this toolkit we described the usefulness of therapeutic art as a tool for the inclusion of migrant women.

Next, the art therapy domains used in the ArtEMI Project are described.

And, in Point 5, you can find suggestions for activities to use with Migrant Women in order to promote their inclusion in a sustained and full way.

Partners' voice

Associazione DUN-Onlus

DUN's participation in the Artemi project was extremely positive and enriching. As practitioners, we had the opportunity to observe first-hand the beneficial impact of art therapy on the participants. We achieved significant results in terms of empowerment and confidence. The women involved in the project developed a greater awareness of themselves and their abilities. Many of them reported increased confidence both in themselves and in the community, testifying to a positive impact in their daily lives.

As far as we DUN practitioners are concerned, the encounter with the other project partners was productive and stimulating throughout. Collaboration with professionals from different European countries enriched the project by sharing experiences, methodologies and best practices. Cross-cultural exchanges allowed us to share knowledge, we learnt new art therapy techniques and intervention strategies that we could then apply in our sessions.
The collaboration facilitated the creation of support networks and lasting partnerships that will benefit future projects and initiatives by fostering intercultural understanding and respect.

Participating in this project has strengthened our awareness that art therapy is a powerful tool to foster social inclusion. The participants showed a remarkable improvement in their ability to express emotions and tell their stories. Furthermore, we observed that the combination of craft activities with digital storytelling techniques and visual arts can facilitate the process of self-awareness and strengthen the sense of belonging to the community. Many of them reported increased confidence both in themselves and in the community, testifying to a positive impact in their daily lives.

ARCSS - Associação Recreativa Cultural e Social de Silveirinhos

For ARCSS (Associação Social de Silveirinhos), participation in the ARTEMI project was extremely enriching and remarkable.

Working with migrant women allowed us to understand their reality, their potential and difficulties.

Each migrant woman is unique, brings personal and cultural baggage, and that her origin must be taken into account when organizing activities and projects. Openness to activities and their prejudices varied according to culture and country of origin.

This project reinforced the skills of the institution and our technicians in order to adapt to different cultures, approach people in different ways and gain their trust.

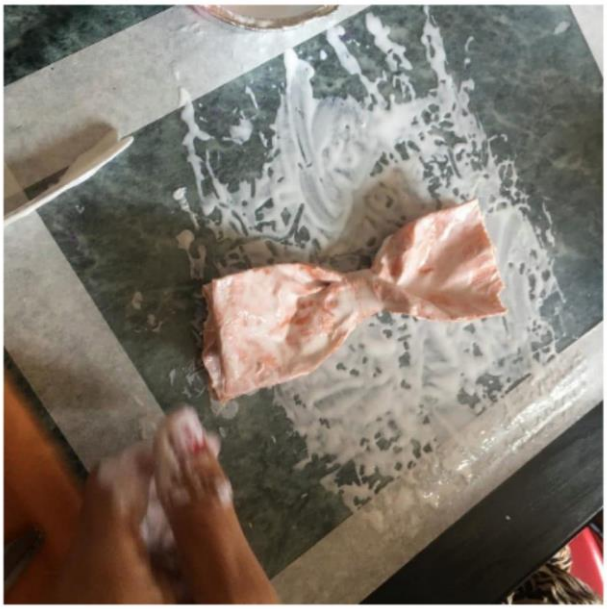
Working with stakeholders reinforced community work skills, further expanded the work we were already carrying out with vulnerable audiences and gave us more information about different realities, allowing us to adjust our intervention strategy.

The piloting workshops were very important to understand which activities and strategies were most appropriate to reach migrant women and help them with their inclusion. It allowed us to test different methodologies and create a safe and trusting environment with migrant women.

At the end of the project, we reinforce the idea that all work with migrant women must always address three axes that mark these women's lives:

- Memory and identity;
- Integration difficulties;
- Life Projects

SMP - Storie di Mondi Possibili



The ARTEMI project provided our association "Storie di Mondi Possibili" with valuable insights into the reality of migrant women in Italy and Europe, shedding light on the challenges and opportunities they face. The women involved in the project come from diverse backgrounds: some have skills and knowledge not fully acknowledged in Italy, while others had limited access to education before their arrival. Despite time constraints and cultural barriers, these women displayed remarkable determination to improve their circumstances, particularly young women from Afghanistan and Iran, driven by a desire for change both for themselves and for the women who stayed back in their home countries.

The project offered a safe space where these women could meet, acknowledge their potential and enhance their skills, highlighting the importance of initiatives like ARTEMI. Collaboration with other

European organizations enriched everybody's methodology, resulting in innovative educational activities, such as incorporating self-storytelling into workshops on crafts and cooking.

Finally, our project emphasized the value of solidarity networks among women, involving Italian volunteers and local associations in Rome. It also showed how migrant women are a vital part of Europe's social change process, contributing to a movement for transformation and improvement.

MEXPERT - Mobilizing Expertise AB

Having worked with migrants and professionals for years, our team became well-acquainted with the various social and psychological challenges faced by migrants, particularly migrant women, in their home countries. Our experiences led us to recognize the importance of addressing these issues through an Erasmus+ project. Thanks to the support of our Italian coordinator, SMP, our idea evolved from a mere concept into a selected Erasmus+ project.

Before the project began, we anticipated some of the challenges migrant women face and believed that creating a space for them to express themselves through art would be beneficial. However, as the project unfolded, we witnessed firsthand the profound loneliness many migrant women experience, their tendency to hide their unhappiness from their partners, and the significant obstacles they encounter in finding employment. It was a pivotal moment for everyone to realize that nearly all of them shared similar struggles and that it was not “strange” to feel bad about it.

The workshops within the ArtEMI project were well-received, with participants expressing a strong desire for more opportunities to connect with fellow migrant women who understood their struggles. As Mexpert, we organized a total of 15 activities and workshops on a weekly basis to address these issues and promote their well-being. Workshops such as River of Life, Handy Crafts, Paint & Sip, and Mindfulness Week garnered the most interest from migrant women. The River of Life workshop, in particular, was a day of sharing, with participants often recounting sad stories, which led to powerful moments of support and healing. ArtEMI underscored the importance of

providing a platform for migrant women to connect, listen, and offer support, while emphasizing the value of simple gestures like a hug.

The success of our workshops and the relationships built with participants throughout the ArtEMI project have left us with cherished memories. We are grateful for the strengthened bonds and lasting friendships that have extended beyond the project's conclusion. We hope that all migrant women worldwide can experience the transformative power of a project like ArtEMI.

DAFNI Kentro Epaggelmatikis Katratisis

On behalf of the DAFNI KEK team, being a part of the ArtEMi project has been an insightful and transformative journey. Through the use of various art therapy methodologies such as photowalks, autobiographical narration and storytelling, creative writing, poetry, and drawing and the development of various activities based on these methodologies, we aimed to promote resilience, creativity, and social inclusion among our target group. Our activities showed interesting indicators and can be deemed effective in overcoming psychological distress, boosting self-esteem, and fostering an attitude of self-entrepreneurship and we observed firsthand their transformative power. We learned that combining these creative expressions provides therapeutic benefits and empowers women to reflect on their experiences, share their stories, and envision brighter futures.

Our observations from the piloting phase have been encouraging; participants have shown significant improvement in their emotional well-being, self-confidence, and social connections. During our Multiplier Event, a number of the participants confided in us that they had started to see themselves as capable individuals with valuable stories and skills. This gave us the confidence to continue our project's activities and to complete the publication of our PRs, the ArtEMi Toolkit, the ArtEMi Occupability Guidelines and the ArtEMi Support Practices. However, there is still much to achieve. We aspire to expand our reach, involving more organisations at local, national, and European levels and get them acquainted with our methodologies, to address the multifaceted challenges faced by migrant women. Our ultimate goal is to offer comprehensive educational, training, and employment opportunities to diverse groups of educators in need, ensuring their full integration and active participation in society.

Psychological problems of migrant women

To address the issue of migrant women's mental health, it is important to consider several geographical and socio-anthropological factors. The country of origin is important for understanding the cause of the migratory movement (poverty, war and religion), which in itself can lead to psychological fragility.
The migration journey itself, especially for women, can be a further source of fear and stress due to the highly traumatic characteristics of the experience (physical violence, sexual abuse and trafficking). Moreover, the migration policies of host countries can aggravate women's vulnerability.
The fear of not being accepted because of the colour of their skin and their culture and religion, and gender discrimination create in them a difficulty in recognising themselves as persons with rights. Separation and distance from one's country of origin and family affections, the sense of isolation and sadness that cannot be verbalised, the difficulty in learning the language and thus expressing oneself creates a difficulty in relating to others.

Added to these difficulties are the problems of adaptation linked to the cultural, social and geographical characteristics of the host countries. Think of the countries of Northern Europe, very different from the countries of origin of many of the migrants.
The Swedish context can be an example:
1) SAD - People have different type of psychological problems due to long winters, less sun light and long dark days.
2) Most of the immigrants are from Muslim countries where the community is really important while in Sweden people prefer to have isolated lifestyles.
3) Due to the lack of social touch and community, women find it harder to integrate and also find friends and make a social environment for themselves.
4) This led to networking problems where finding a job gets even harder.

In Southern European countries, such as Italy and Greece, the difficulties of migrant women are aggravated by the lack of services and opportunities.
For example, migrant women in Italy face a range of complex issues that affect various aspects of their lives, from safety and health to employment and social integration.
Migrant women are often exposed to domestic violence, sexual abuse and human trafficking. Their vulnerable situation is exacerbated by a lack of legal support and adequate protection.
They suffer labour exploitation. Most women work as carers or domestic caregivers. In these settings they often suffer harassment, abuse and emotional violence from employers.
Often due to lack of knowledge of their rights and laws for their protection and the need to work, they accept underpaid and exploitative situations.

Poor knowledge of the Italian language limits access to essential health services, education and the labour market, creating social isolation. Migrant women still face multiple discriminations based on gender, ethnicity and migration status, which hinder their social and economic integration. Another problem is related to housing conditions, which are precarious, in overcrowded and insecure accommodation. In general, bureaucratic procedures to access social services, obtain residence permits and other documentation are often complicated and slow.

The sample of women who participated in Artemi's DUN groups came from different countries: Eastern Europe, North and Central Africa, South America and Asia. The major symptoms that DUN professionals were able to diagnose in this sample fell into anxiety disorders, psychosomatic disorders and depressive stages. Specifically, it was observed that female political refugees from war-torn countries manifested strong anxiety about the future, accompanied by states of anxiety and sleep disturbances, linked to the anguish of not being able to return and see their loved ones. Women from South America have suffered trauma in their countries related to repeated family sexual abuse, abandonment of the mother figure at an early age. They manifest depressive disorders, emotional dependency and drug addiction.

The problems faced by migrant women in Italy require a multidimensional approach that includes inclusive public policies, legal support, access to essential services and social integration programmes. Art therapy, as discussed above, can be an effective tool to address some of these challenges, promoting emotional well-being and social cohesion.

Migrant women in a host country are among the weakest segments of the population, marginalised and hindered in their path to social inclusion.

The accumulation of all these traumatic factors can, in the most fragile cases, aggravate psychological conditions to the point of creating serious splits. Manifestations of this cleavage are schizophrenia, psychotic disorders and self-harming behaviour that can degenerate to the point of suicide.

The intertwining of therapeutic work, the mutual aid group, art therapy and creative work with the craft workshops offered to the women in the Artemi project constituted a valid intervention model to help the participating women also improve their mental health condition. This intervention model proved effective in providing psychological, emotional and practical support to the participants, contributing significantly to their healing and integration journey. We could call it an integrated model offering comprehensive psychological support that addresses both the individual and collective needs of women. This multi-level approach ensures that participants receive appropriate and personalised support, which we have found creates an improvement in mental well-being. Participants reported a reduction in symptoms of anxiety and depression, increased self-esteem, and improved ability to cope with stress.

In summary, migrant women face a number of complex psychological challenges that require interventions that are targeted and sensitive to their unique experiences.

Art therapy in the psychological support of migrant women

Art therapy constitutes an important integration between art and psychoanalysis, as specifically demonstrated by the studies conducted at the Pratt Institute in New York in the 1970s on theories of creativity and object relations. In the 1990s, attachment and neurobiological theories valorised the sensorial aspect of non-verbal languages as a central experience in the treatment of many psychophysical discomforts.
"The bodily experience activated by the use of artistic materials generates affects that can be mentalised and allow for a recovery or repair of primary experiences" (Art therapy, M. Della Cagnoletta).

Particularly with patients who have difficulties in symbolisation - the creation of a concrete object conceived within the relational field - can be a fundamental lever for the therapeutic process. For example, participants loved the River of Life and Tree of Life thanks to this. Symbolisation made it much easier to handle and share with each other. Through art, the traumatic experiences became much easier to share and handle.
The therapist with his artistic sensibility facilitates the patient's 'creative pulsation', in some way he has the function of activating and accompanying the phases of the process that lead to the construction of the object/work.
"Mediators between the subject who creates and the external reality constituted by the created object are the artistic materials, of which the specific language and its characteristics will be taken into consideration (objective level), as well as the perceptive experience and the capacity to connect it with emotions and memories (subjective level)". (Art therapy, M. Della Cagnoletta).
Sometimes the patient creates in the presence of the therapist as if he were alone, the object may be perceived as part of himself, so much so that it is difficult to distinguish and separate from his creation. The work becomes a screen for projections and even opposing feelings, such as from love to hate.
The psychodynamic approach of art therapy aims to activate the creative processes of the individual insofar as they favour his emotional and cognitive development, unlocking crystallised and symptomatic situations.
The creative action elaborated in the space of the setting with the migrant women allows for the integration of the different levels of experience that are given form through gesture.Therefore, the creative skills expressed through play and fantasy gradually restore a feeling of security over time (J. Sandler, 1980).

The various phases passed through by the therapy group should be connected to each other, because they proceed according to certain movements, composing in their temporal whole a chain of meaning that needs to be consciously visualised. For example, when asked by the therapists - in a group aimed at processing the traumatic experience - to represent themselves through creativity within a 'safe place', each of the participants portrayed themselves in a solitary relationship with

the environment, using highly imaginative landscapes (e.g. the composition of the 'river of life' both as a drawing and as a sartorial artefact). This representation, as it is conceived, symbolically reflects a separative movement from the mother figure, also understood as one's own origins, and a contact with the outside world. The creative process makes it possible to relate interiority with the other, making it shareable with the outside world. Each step of the experience leads to the next in an uninterrupted succession of externalisations-feedback-reinternalisations (Rose G. (1987), Trauma and Mastery in Life and Art).

In essence, this dynamic can also be summarised by three levels: expression/creative activation/communication, i.e. getting excited, communicating and sharing and finally developing new thoughts about oneself. All different moments that are, however, in close connection with each other to provide that 'healthy basis for life' of which Winnicott speaks.

Autobiographical writing in a group as psychological support

Autobiographical writing within a group can offer significant psychological support to migrant women in various ways. Let's see how:

Self-expression and re-elaboration of experiences

Writing about one's own story allows migrant women to express emotions, experiences and traumas that may have been repressed or not shared. Autobiography offers a safe space to re-elaborate often painful events such as forced migration, separation from family and difficulties in integration. This narrative process helps to make sense of one's experience and to better manage emotional pain.

Recognition and validation of the experience

Sharing one's story within a group creates an environment in which personal experiences are heard and recognized. For migrant women, who are often subject to social invisibility and isolation, the possibility of being seen and heard is extremely important for strengthening their self-esteem and

sense of belonging. The group becomes a community in which empathy is exchanged and a bond is created between similar stories.

Strengthening identity and building a new narrative

Through writing, women can reflect on their identity, which is often put to the test during the migration process. Writing allows them to reconnect with their roots, review the changes they have undergone and redefine who they are in the new context. This favors the construction of a new personal narrative that can include both the past and future prospects, contributing to a greater sense of continuity and personal integrity.

Processing trauma and therapeutic support

Autobiographical writing, especially in a group context, can have a cathartic function. Talking about traumatic and painful experiences such as violence, discrimination or racism helps to externalize difficult feelings and manage them constructively. The group offers an emotional container, allowing a form of mutual support that can accelerate the process of psychological healing.

Creating a sense of belonging and community

Migrant women often experience isolation and loneliness in new societies. The writing group becomes a safe space where they can bond with other people who share similar experiences. Sharing autobiographical stories builds a sense of solidarity and belonging, promoting mutual support.

Empowerment and self-awareness

Writing one's own story can give migrant women a sense of control over their lives. Expressing one's thoughts, emotions and experiences through writing is a way to regain control of the narrative of one's existence. This process is particularly important for women who have experienced marginalization or social exclusion.

Comparison with other experiences and collective reflection

Writing and sharing stories in the group allows migrant women to compare their experiences with those of other women, offering a broader vision of the difficulties and resources related to the migratory experience. This exchange of stories and reflections not only enriches the individual journey, but also helps to create a collective awareness that can be transformative on a psychological level.

Integration and construction of a future

Through writing, women can work on their migrant identity, finding a balance between the past (country of origin) and the present (host country). This process helps to build a narrative of hope, promoting social integration and the ability to imagine a positive future for themselves and their families.

Autobiographical writing, especially if done in a group, therefore offers migrant women a powerful tool to reflect on themselves, to give meaning to their life journey and to find emotional and psychological support through comparison with others. It contributes not only to a personal healing process, but also to building a network of solidarity between women who share similar experiences, promoting resilience and integration.

The therapeutic power of autobiographical writing combined with art therapy

The integration of autobiographical writing with art therapy creates an even deeper and more complete therapeutic experience, combining the power of the word with that of visual and creative expression. Let's see how this combination works on a therapeutic level:

Multidimensional exploration of the self

Autobiographical writing allows you to express and rework thoughts, memories and emotions through language, while art therapy allows you to explore these same experiences on a deeper and non-verbal level. Often, what cannot be expressed in words finds a way through art. The union of the two forms allows for a more complete and multifaceted understanding of one's experience.

Trauma reprocessing

For those who have lived through traumatic experiences, such as migrant women or people who have gone through difficult situations, the written word and visual art can have a powerful effect on reprocessing trauma. Writing allows you to verbalize emotions and painful events, while art therapy can offer a non-verbal way to express deep emotions, difficult to put into words, but which can be represented visually through colors, shapes or symbolic images. This helps to release the trauma and transform it into something workable and less threatening.

Connection between mind and body

Art therapy includes the use of the body and physicality through drawing, painting, modelling or other creative techniques. This physical component helps to create a more integrated connection between body and mind, stimulating somatic awareness, or the ability to listen to and understand bodily sensations. The act of creating through art allows you to express emotions that may be anchored in the body, such as tension or anxiety, which through writing can be initially revealed.

Greater access to the unconscious

If autobiographical writing can bring out conscious memories and thoughts, art therapy is able to access parts of the unconscious that often remain hidden in the verbal narrative process. Art can allow people to express aspects of themselves that are not immediately evident or conscious, allowing for greater exploration of the inner world. The integration of writing then allows for conscious reflection on what emerges through art, thus combining unconscious intuitions with a rational narrative.

Emotional liberation and catharsis

Autobiographical writing combined with art therapy can generate a profound emotional **catharsis**. Writing about one's life can be liberating, as it allows one to structure one's experience in a narrative that gives meaning to the chaos of experience. At the same time, art offers an expressive channel free from the rules of language, where intense emotions can be "discharged" through the use of creative materials. This double channel of expression allows for an even more complete and profound form of emotional liberation.

Development of new perspectives

Combining autobiographical writing with art therapy allows one to observe one's own story from multiple perspectives. Writing a story and then representing it graphically or symbolically through art can lead to a new understanding of oneself. The act of translating words into images (and vice versa) allows us to grasp new nuances of lived experiences, promoting insight and the discovery of aspects that were not considered.

Stimulation of creativity and increased well-being

Art therapy stimulates creativity, which is a powerful resource for psychological well-being. Creativity allows us to explore new ways of thinking and problem solving, promoting greater adaptation to life's challenges. The combination with writing allows us to reflect in a structured and creative way on our own path, creating a space for personal growth and for improving psychological well-being.

Creation of a visual narrative

In addition to written narration, art therapy offers the possibility of creating a "visual narrative" of our life path. Through collages, drawings, paintings or sculptures, people can build a visual story of their personal journey, integrating symbolic images that represent key moments in their existence. This strengthens the integration process and makes the therapeutic path tangible.

Promote internal dialogue and reflection

Writing and art complement each other by creating a richer space for internal reflection. After writing an autobiographical episode, for example, the person can translate it into images, and then reflect on what has emerged, both through writing and through reading and interpreting their own artistic creations. This facilitates internal dialogue, promoting greater self-awareness.

The combination of autobiographical writing and art therapy therefore amplifies the therapeutic benefits of both techniques. While writing offers a narrative and verbal structure to rework the experience, art allows one to explore deep emotions and unconscious aspects, providing a free and creative mode of expression. Together, these two practices promote emotional well-being, psychological healing and greater self-awareness.

The importance of mutual help

We know that the mutual aid group is a very valuable social support tool for strengthening integration, cohesion and identity. Using mutual aid and active listening between group participants, both individual and collective empowerment can be pursued. This was the outcome in ARTEMI activities. After women realized that they were all going through similar problems, they felt the immediate connection and they realized that they were the heal for each other.
This mutual aid effect was a strong motivating factor for the participants in ARTEMI activities.
For example, after the first workshop, in Sweden participants wanted to keep meeting outside of the activities as well. Also after workshops ended, they wanted to keep the activities. That is why we had 15 activities in total. It was all thanks to the participants who wanted to keep the connection.

This mutual aid group modality in ARTEMI tailoring and cooking workshops was fostered by the creative activities themselves. In fact, the participants' search for the cultural imprints of their countries of origin, both through the discovery of fabrics and tailoring traditions, and through the knowledge of typical dishes and specific ingredients, enabled them to enhance their original cultural

identity through the gaze of the Other, allowing a feeling of richness and recognition, which then predisposed them to welcome new experiences and new cultural cues.

The presence of the facilitators was important in guaranteeing a safe, welcoming environment that was attentive to managing the more problematic dynamics that at times arose among them (in some cases this allowed the demand for individual therapeutic psychological support to arise). In order to guarantee this fundamental aspect for the constitution of the mutual aid group, the therapists communicated the main rules: confidentiality, mutual respect, voluntary participation, equality between members, speaking turns, not giving advice unless requested, commitment and participation, conflict management, welcoming new members.

The women in the group were able to express their feelings without shame. They received from the other group members the support they needed to narrate and partly process the traumas they had suffered, helping each other to find hope and motivation.

In the course of time, as the women saw the products of their creative handicrafts develop, and each became better and more qualified, the exchange in the group took on new forms, beyond that of emotional, affective support. In fact, ideas of collaboration between them also developed from a professional point of view, which helped them feel more empowered, taking a more active role in their healing or improvement journey. We reiterate that this strengthening of self-esteem in the group, which went hand in hand with the development of craft skills, in our opinion stemmed precisely from the successful combination of the craft learning experience, the storytelling experience aimed at cultural knowledge of the tailoring and cooking traditions of each person's country, and the birth of the mutual aid group supported by the professional reference figures.

In conclusion, we can say that applying the mutual aid tool in the group of migrant women victims of trafficking and abuse benefiting from DUN who participated in the Artemi Project, represents an innovative model of intervention that further combines psychological care with creativity . Through psychological support and creative activities, women can embark on a path of healing and regain their lives. The supportive community that is created within the group fosters a sense of belonging and solidarity that is indispensable for overcoming trauma and building a better future.

Ideas for a Mutual Aid Project for Migrant Women Victims of Trafficking and Abuse

What is a Mutual Aid Group

A mutual aid group is a form of social support in which people who share similar experiences meet to offer and receive mutual support. These groups usually consist of individuals facing common challenges such as illness, addiction, bereavement, trauma or other personal difficulties.

Aims of a Mutual Help Group

1. Experience Sharing: People can share their own stories and listen to those of others, recognising that they are not alone in their difficulties.
2. Emotional Support: Members provide emotional support to each other, helping each other cope with difficult emotions and find hope and motivation.
3. Exchange of Information and Resources: Participants can share useful information, resources and strategies they have found effective in dealing with their problems.
4. Strengthening Self-Esteem: Through the support and recognition of other members, people can develop greater confidence in themselves and their abilities.
5. Creation of a Support Network: Mutual aid groups create a sense of community and belonging, which can be particularly valuable for those who feel isolated or marginalised.
6. Personal Empowerment: Participating in a mutual aid group can help people feel more empowered, taking an active role in their own healing or improvement journey.

How a Mutual Aid Group Works

1. Open and Informal Structure: Mutual Aid Groups tend to have an open and informal structure, where members participate voluntarily and contribute according to their possibilities.
2. Regular Meetings: Meetings are held regularly, usually once a week or a month, and may take place in person or online.
3. Facilitators: Some groups have facilitators or moderators who guide discussions and ensure that the environment remains safe and respectful.
4. Confidentiality: Confidentiality is essential to create an environment of trust. What is shared in the group stays in the group.
5. Equal Approach: All group members are considered equal. There are no professional leaders, although some groups may have facilitators who have received specific training.

Benefits of Mutual Help Groups

1. Reduced Sense of Isolation: Sharing similar experiences can alleviate feelings of isolation and loneliness.
2. Increased Psychological Well-being: Emotional support and mutual understanding can improve psychological well-being.
3. Gaining New Perspectives: Listening to the experiences of others can offer new perspectives and strategies for dealing with one's own problems.
4. Developing Social Skills: Participating in discussions and supporting others can help develop social and interpersonal skills.
5. Health Self-Management: Members learn to better manage their health and well-being through the exchange of knowledge and resources.

In summary, mutual aid groups are a valuable resource for anyone facing personal difficulties. They offer a safe and supportive space where people can find understanding, support and hope.

Project Objectives

The Mutual Aid Project for Trafficked and Abused Migrant Women aims to provide psychological and creative support to those who have experienced significant trauma. This project focuses on psychological care and creativity, fundamental tools for the rehabilitation and social reintegration of the participants.Specifically:

1. Psychological Support: Offering a safe environment where women can express their feelings and receive the support they need to deal with the trauma they have suffered.
2. Creative Exploration: Using creative activities such as art, writing and music as means of expression and healing.
3. Strengthening Self-Esteem: Helping participants regain confidence in themselves and their abilities.
4. Creation of a Supportive Community: Fostering the building of support networks among women, promoting a sense of belonging and solidarity.

Methodology

1. Weekly Meetings: Meetings are held once a week in a protected and welcoming environment. Each session is facilitated by psychologists and therapists with experience in trauma treatment.
2. Art therapy sessions: Art activities include painting, sculpture, collage and other forms of visual expression. These sessions allow women to express emotions that are difficult to verbalise.
3. Creative Writing Workshops: Participants are encouraged to write their own stories, poems or letters. Writing helps to reframe traumatic experiences and develop a personal narrative of healing.

4. Discussion Groups: In these groups, women can share their experiences and offer mutual support. Discussions are moderated by professionals to ensure a safe and respectful environment.
5. Empowerment Activities: Workshops are organised on issues such as women's rights, access to social services and economic self-sufficiency.

Expected Outcomes

1. Improvement of Mental Health: Reduction of symptoms of anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder.
2. Increased Self-Esteem: Women gain more confidence in their abilities and personal worth.
3. Development of Creative Skills: Participants discover new talents and interests, which can become tools for self-expression and potentially sources of income.
4. Strengthening of Social Networks: The creation of bonds of friendship and mutual support contributes to greater social integration.

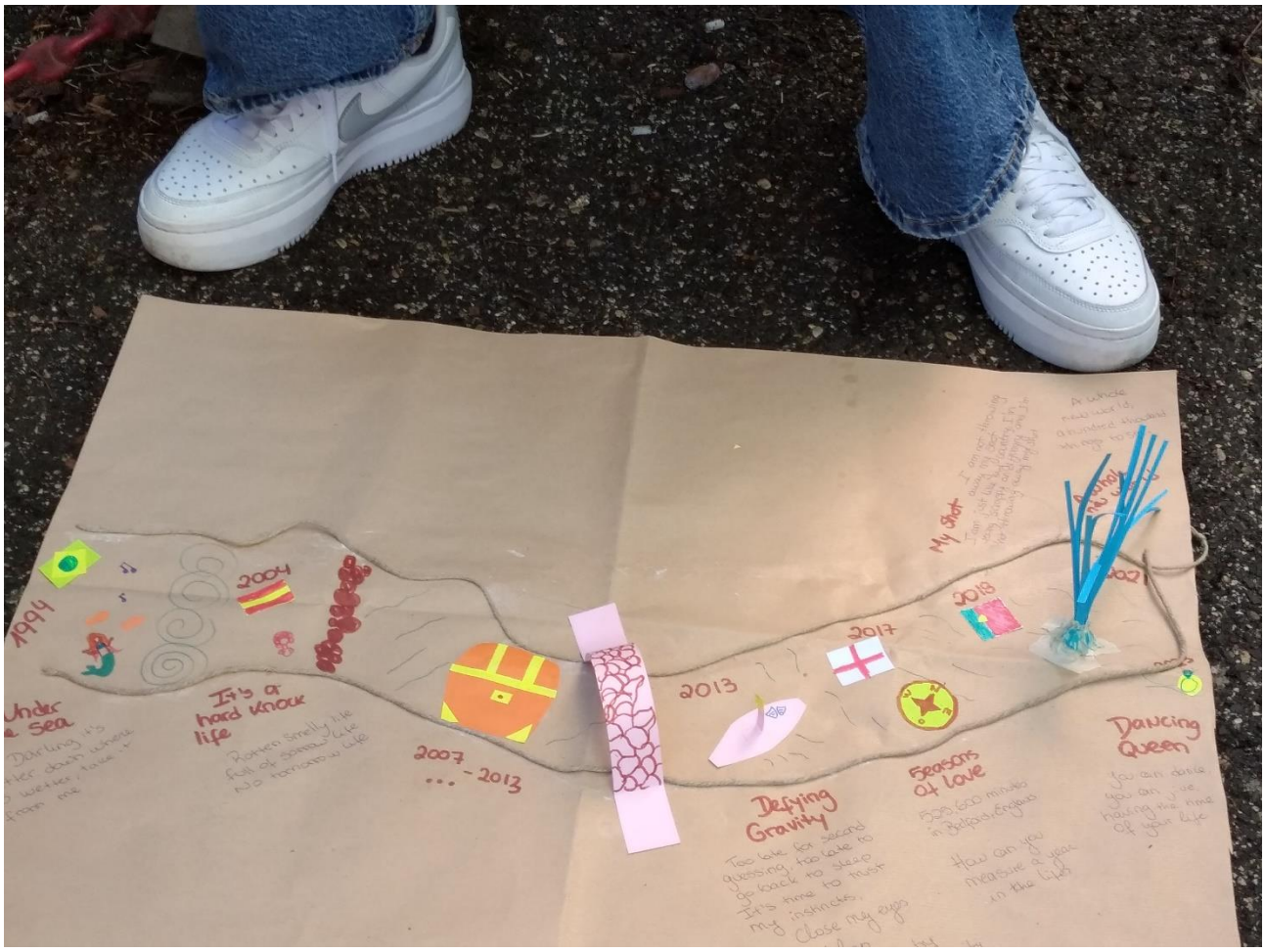
Conclusions

The mutual aid project for trafficked and abused migrant women represents an innovative model of intervention that combines psychological care with creativity. Through psychological support and creative activities, women can embark on a path of healing and regain their lives. The supportive community that is created within the group fosters a sense of belonging and solidarity that is indispensable for overcoming trauma and building a better future.

Experiences of intervention through art therapy and mutual aid for the psychological support of migrant women

In the following pages we report the observations that arise from the laboratories carried out by ARTEMI in different countries, to highlight the impact of these laboratories from a psychological point of view, also thanks to the importance of the group.

The therapeutic effect of art therapy and storytelling activities in the group, in Greece – DAFNI



During the piloting phase of the ArtEMi project, DAFNI KEK organised a series of workshops in Greece aimed at migrant and refugee women, utilising a variety of creative methodologies and educational approaches. These workshops incorporated several techniques, including photowalks,

storytelling, poetry, creative writing, drawing, self-reflection, autobiographical writing, autobiographical storytelling, fairy tales, and self-reflection through self-portraits. Comprehensive descriptions of all the workshops can be found in ArtEMi Toolkit and ArtEMi Occupability Guidelines. The facilitators and educators overseeing the workshops made the following key observations:

➔ **Personal and Social Reflections:**

- **Motivational Themes:** The workshops emphasized motivational themes, using personal and group photos to represent the community.
- **Emotional and Creative Impact:** Participants were encouraged to reflect on their emotions, resulting in creative and therapeutic benefits.
- **Personal Time and Relaxation:** The workshops provided a relaxing environment, helping participants to focus on themselves and "be present."

➔ **Participants' Emotional Expression and Self-Reflection:**

- **Emotional Challenges and Support:** Participants initially struggled with self-disclosure but felt supported by the group, leading to deeper emotional exploration.
- **Nostalgia and Hope:** Participants expressed nostalgia for their homeland and hope for peace, with some drawings depicting the normalization of war. A great number of the participants were Ukrainian female refugees.
- **Creative and Therapeutic Writing:** Writing exercises allowed participants to express themselves creatively, often serving as a therapeutic outlet.

➔ **Photography and Personal Items:**

- **Photography as a Medium:** During the photowalks, photos captured the creative, vivid elements of the city, connecting participants to their home country.
- **Choice of Personal Items:** Participants chose items with emotional significance, reflecting their self-identity and experiences.
- **Expression of Nostalgia and Hope:** Personal items and drawings were used to express nostalgia for the homeland and hopes for the future.

➔ **Facilitator's Observations and Workshop Adaptations:**

- **Workshop Adjustments:** The facilitator made adjustments based on participants' feedback, refining the workshop structure and content.
- **Role of the Facilitator and Therapist:** The presence of a therapist created a safer space, aiding in deeper reflection and emotional exploration.
- **Creative Writing Techniques:** The use of metaphorical cards and fairy tales facilitated communication and self-expression.

➔ **Workshops' Environment and Activities:**

- **Location and Setting:** For the photowalks, the workshop's proximity to the city and natural environment was appreciated, with participants enjoying the hike and outdoor activities.
- **Group Dynamics and Challenges:** Participants expressed happiness in sharing tasks, though challenges were noted in managing larger groups and encouraging deep sharing.
- **Structure and Process:** Insights on balancing creative activities with discussion time, and the need for multiple creative exercises to engage participants.
- **Contrasts and Changes in the City:** During photowalks, participants observed the contrasts in neighbourhoods, the juxtaposition of modern and old, and the impact of industrialisation and archaeological sites.
- **Repurposing and Upcycling:** During photowalks, participants noted the upcycling of old factories for new purposes.
- **Philosophical Reflections:** During photowalks, participants reflected on the city's dual nature ("all bad and all good, form the city") and the idea that each person leaves a lasting impact.

➔ **Outcome and Future Initiatives:**

- **Inspiring Discussions:** The workshops led to inspiring discussions, with participants expressing a desire to organize similar gatherings.

- **Impact and Reflection:** Participants felt the workshops provided a valuable space for self-expression, creativity, and emotional support.
- **Future Aspirations:** Participants reflected on their future aspirations, with some planning to apply workshop techniques in other areas of their lives.

The therapeutic effect of art therapy and storytelling activities in the group, in Portugal - ARCSS

During the pilot workshops phase, ARCSS developed 6 workshops with different methodologies. This phase allowed experimenting with activities and themes in working with migrant women.

Little by little, migrant women began to give more of themselves and share.
For many, it was a journey of self-discovery that resulted in their empowerment. We were able to conclude that the arts are a really powerful means of intervening with this public, because it is a universal language.
Women, through the arts, could and did express themselves in a conscious way, reflecting on their life path and projecting themselves into the future.
Some women shared that the exercises made them reflect on the different stages of their lives like never before. They realized what women they were like now and how they had the power to make choices in their future.
We realize that these activities can contribute to healing trauma and promoting women's mental health.
Women are not used to having a voice in our society, especially migrant women who face discrimination and often isolation. Intervention activities using the arts give women that voice.
Another important aspect, at this stage, was the testimony of women in gaining a sense of belonging, in a country that is not theirs. This feeling is essential for the psychological well-being of these women

In parallel with women's self-knowledge and empowerment, we also wanted to work on practical aspects with workshops that developed useful skills for their professional integration.
These more practical themes and workshops aroused a lot of interest among migrant women, especially when they realized that they could combine this new knowledge with their identity and culture. Very interesting results emerged.

"Breaking Barriers: Using Art to Speak What Words Cannot" -Reflections of the Workshops in Sweden - Mexpert

At the Artemi workshops in Malmö, the power of imagery took centre stage as women from diverse backgrounds came together to share and reflect on their lives. Many had faced challenges—be it migration, adaptation, or navigating societal roles—and the workshops provided a safe space to explore those experiences visually. The act of creating through pictures became a profound tool for these women, allowing them to translate emotions that words might struggle to convey. This concept ties deeply to **Visual Narrative Theory**, which suggests that images can communicate complex narratives more effectively than words, especially when language barriers or trauma impede verbal expression (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006).

One participant, a young woman from Syria, used vibrant colours and abstract forms to express her journey of fleeing war and building a new life. She explained how painting her memories gave her clarity and peace, offering a way to process emotions she had previously bottled up. Through her

art, she told stories of loss, hope, and survival, and it became easier to share these stories aloud with others. For her, the picture was a bridge to finding her voice. This aligns with **Narrative Identity Theory** (McAdams, 1993), which posits that storytelling is essential to how individuals construct and understand their identities. By visualizing her journey, this participant was able to take control of her narrative and articulate her identity as a survivor and creator.

Another woman, a mother from Eastern Europe, sketched images of her children, mixing moments of joy and anxiety. The act of capturing these feelings on paper empowered her to reflect on her dual role as a caregiver and a provider in a foreign country. She explained that while language had sometimes felt like a barrier, the use of images broke down those walls, allowing her to communicate across cultural and linguistic divides. Her experience touches on **Multimodal Learning Theory**, which emphasizes that using multiple forms of expression—such as visual, linguistic, and kinesthetics—can enhance understanding and communication (Jewitt, 2008). By using images to express complex emotions, she was able to bridge the gap between different cultural and linguistic backgrounds, creating a shared understanding with others.

As these women shared their creations, a collective understanding emerged. They realized that the process of storytelling through images didn't just help them understand themselves better—it also gave them the courage to speak openly about their experiences. The workshop discussions, framed by visual storytelling, brought the women closer, enabling them to form connections beyond language, culture, or individual backgrounds. This reflects **Social Learning Theory** (Bandura, 1977), which suggests that individuals can gain confidence and learn from observing and interacting with others. The act of sharing images allowed participants to model vulnerability and openness, which, in turn, encouraged others to speak and share their own stories.

Images became their tools for reclaiming narratives, giving them agency over stories that had sometimes been overshadowed by external perceptions or societal expectations. For many, these workshops were a revelation—proof that creativity could transcend language and act as a form of power. What they couldn't explain in words, they captured in shapes, colours, and forms. And once the pictures were created, speaking about them felt easier, more liberating, as though the imagery had done the hard work of explanation. This aligns with **Feminist Art Theory**, which argues that art, particularly visual art, is a crucial medium for marginalized voices to reclaim their narratives and challenge dominant social discourses (Pollock, 1988).

The Artemi workshops, in their essence, became more than a series of artistic exercises—they became a vehicle for empowerment, where women found strength not only in their voices but in the images that gave rise to those voices. Through these visual stories, participants not only healed but also found ways to articulate their lived realities with authenticity and power.

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ArtEMi Project

Art and Education for social inclusion of Migrant women

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