



Arts and  
Humanities  
Research Council



Policy Brief:

# Youth Mental Health and Gender in Rwanda - Learnings from the Picturing Past Present and Future (PPPF) project

## INTRODUCTION

The Picturing Past, Present, and Future (PPPF) project aimed to enhance dialogue between young people and policymakers through the photographic documentation of bicycle journeys, and the creation of Imigongo artworks (in Rwanda) and Mithila arts (in Nepal) by, with and for young women. It was supported and funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) and Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) in the UK, as part of the larger Mobile Arts for Peace (MAP) research project. The project aimed to support young women in communicating the social challenges they previously faced in their lives, their current lived experiences, and their future aspirations through indigenous visual art forms. Art forms were generated alongside the physical activity of cycling; traditionally an activity only considered appropriate for boys and men in both countries. The young female participants went on cycling journeys to help catalyse and find inspiration for their artworks. The project was implemented by two Civil Society Organisations (CSOs): the Janaki Women Awareness Society (in Nepal) and Uyisenga Ni Imanzi (in Rwanda).



Cycling activity in Nepal. Credit: JWAS

## THE POWER OF ART

Art can be an expressive and transformative medium through which young people can articulate their thoughts, emotions, and experiences. This not only facilitates self-expression but also plays a crucial role in promoting mental health and wellness. Metaphoric expression through visual arts can be particularly effective for externalising individual/shared problems. The sharing of artworks creates a collaborative environment that encourages empathy and support amongst peers, creating a network of shared experiences, as well as including policymakers, and stakeholders. In Rwanda, the project worked with 6 schools, 20 young women aged between 14-17 years old, 6 facilitators/teachers from MAP clubs within schools, and 7 YAB (Youth Advisory Board) members. Policymakers were able to understand the subtleties and complexity of lived experiences through visual arts/paintings.



Imigongo arts workshop in Rwanda. Credit: UNM

## MENTAL HEALTH CONTEXT

The Rwanda Mental Health Survey (2020) demonstrated that 10.2% of 14-18-year-olds suffer from mental health disorders, the majority of which begin during childhood or adolescence and may continue into adulthood. The Rwanda Biomedical Centre (2020) has invested heavily in providing effective mental health services, including a school-based mental health programme. Most of Rwanda's teenage girls confront a challenging reality. According to the Violence Against Children and Youth National Survey (2015-16), by the Ministry of Health in Rwanda, two out of every 10 young women are exposed to sexual violence before the age of 18. Thirteen percent of them have experienced sexual abuse at the age of 13 or younger. This traumatic experience may result in school dropouts and mental health issues. The World Health Organization (2022) states that adolescence is a period of transition from childhood to adulthood, spanning from 10 to 19 years of age. It is characterized by a plethora of changes, including biological, psychological, and social changes that can sometimes be stressful to adolescents. This critical period is recognized worldwide as a time of potential mental health problems, ranging from emotional disorders such as depression, anxiety disorders, trauma, and stress-related disorders. This is therefore the age group that the PPPF project targeted and worked with.



Imigongo artworks about past, present, and future. Credit: UNM

## FINDINGS AND IMPACT

Through the creation of Imigongo from Rwanda and Mithila from Nepal, the young women participating in the project covered issues such as living alone/isolation and being orphaned. They recognized that while the past can inform the present, there is also a place to consider the future, and ways this may diverge from the past – often through collective efforts and networks.

Here are some of the findings and impacts shared by MAP club students from PPPF:

1. Through Imigongo and Mithila arts-based practice they have gained different cultural perspectives, including how other cultures address their problems through arts. The exploration of Imigongo arts provided a lens through which they also learned about storytelling traditions, and artistic expressions, fostering a rich tapestry of global cultural understanding and appreciation.
2. Two young women explained how their life stories changed because of various network-building approaches within the project, such “as making friends, and teachers who regularly provide them with emotional support...a large umbrella that shields me from various issues”.
3. Future images/artworks conveyed not just hopes and dreams, but also values, and this was shown through drawings, such as dreaming of being in better places/gardens, having a job in the government as a young woman, wearing a crown as a queen, and being a strong woman that inspires and empowers others.
4. MAP club participants reflected on the impact of the project through art-based methods, noting that they have gained “emotional stability, expressed their feelings, gained friends, confidence, strength, skills, values, competencies and hopes for the future through arts, drawings, poetry, songs, and music”.
5. Young women were able to create their own safe spaces for sharing their painful stories, and hardships, discussing skills, knowledge, and values to help overcome mental health issues, as well as understand where they can seek psychosocial support.



Mithila artwork on gender equality. Credit: JWAS



**D.K said that “in this program, I have gained happiness, mind refreshment, self-exploration and the ability to share my own stories. I have also gained advice from my fellow MAP club students in the same group”.**





## RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are intended for the Ministry of Health (MOH); Ministry of Education (MINEDUC); Ministry of Family and Gender Promotion (MIGEPROF); and Ministry of Youth and Arts (MINI YOUTH) in Rwanda.

MAP club students recommend:

1. Providing more education/lessons regarding mental health to help young people recognise signs, reduce stigma, and seek help when needed.
2. Designating safe spaces within schools that can serve as places to promote open conversations in schools. These areas should be easily accessible and clearly marked, providing a comfortable and quiet environment for students who need a break, or a place to gather and share their life stories.
3. Increasing the number of schools working with MAP tools and resources. There are a lot of mental health issues presented by their fellow students in other schools where MAP is not operating.
4. Implementing and enforcing strong anti-bullying policies to ensure a culture of respect and kindness within schools. This includes educating students about the importance of treating others with empathy and compassion.
5. Reviewing curriculum policies to ensure young people:
  - Have access to clubs, and/or safe spaces in schools
  - Have sufficient/allocated time to share their wellbeing issues, taking a diversity and inclusion approach.
  - Ensure that materials, curriculum, and school events reflect the diverse backgrounds, experiences, and identities of students, especially considering gender.

The MAP Club students also acknowledge the role of partner organisations and facilitators or mental health leads at schools that can support youth mental health.

### Reference:

- Ministry of Health, Rwanda. (2017). *Violence Against Children and Youth National Survey, 2015-16*. Kigali, Rwanda: Ministry of Health.
- Rwanda Biomedical Center. (2020). *Rwanda Mental Health Survey*. Kigali, Rwanda: Rwanda Biomedical Center.
- World Health Organization. (2022). *Adolescent health*. Retrieved from <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/adolescent-health>.

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