

# Promoting gender equality through the arts and creative industries: a summary

**Throughout history, artists have been closely involved with, and influenced, social change. Today, art and creative pursuits are being increasingly used to promote gender equality and acknowledge gender diversity around the world – with great success.**

VicHealth's Action Agenda for Health Promotion (2016–2019) highlights the importance of gender equality as not only a fundamental human right, but also a key determinant of our health and wellbeing. To explore how art can be used to help promote gender equality in Victoria, VicHealth commissioned a research team from The University of Melbourne and Deakin University to review international, gender-related arts projects.

This is a summary of the full research report, *Promoting gender equality through the arts and creative industries: a review of case studies and evidence* available at [www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/-/media/ResourceCentre/PublicationsandResources/GenderEqualityArts/Promoting gender equality through the arts and creative industries report.pdf](http://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/-/media/ResourceCentre/PublicationsandResources/GenderEqualityArts/Promoting%20gender%20equality%20through%20the%20arts%20and%20creative%20industries%20report.pdf)

## Key findings

**The arts and creative industries provide opportunities to address gender equality issues that will promote better health and mental wellbeing outcomes. Art can:**

- provide a way to experience what it's like to be an 'other'
- disrupt gender stereotyping, e.g. the idea that someone must be a man or woman, and explore what it's like to be a man or woman
- help us tell stories about our past, present and future. It's crucial that these stories include diverse gender experiences to promote gender equality
- reveal aspects of culture and behavior that might otherwise be taken for granted or hidden, e.g. unhealthy and unsafe male-dominated environments and toxic masculinity
- provide a way for individuals and groups to express themselves and be heard, fulfilled and validated.

**Gender equality-based arts initiatives can have long-term engagement and impact:**

- Art can be designed, developed and delivered to engage with a specific audience or range of audiences.
- Art that engages with questions of gender can introduce people to new experiences and understandings of gender inequality.
- Art with high media exposure or 'durability' has a long lifespan, so can reach more and different audiences over a long period of time.
- Art can be upscaled, stretched or extended to increase its reach, durability, duration and partnership opportunities.
- Art can leave legacies, such as skills, infrastructure and cultural change, that can have a long-term impact on gender equality.

**Artists can develop partnerships with a wide range of organisations for financial and other support:**

- Artists can partner with universities, social change agencies and corporations to access their research and information for inspiration and content.
- Artists can seek financial and in-kind support and investment from corporate partners with similar gender equality interests.
- By partnering with different organisations, artists can access more resources to develop their work, to help them reach more people and have a greater impact.

In addition to these key findings, this research also found that not many of the projects evaluated their success. This may be for several reasons, including a lack of time, funding or planning for evaluation, or no goals being set. However, setting goals and evaluating the success of a project is important, so that future work can be designed, developed and improved to have an even greater impact.

## Background

The Victorian Government's Gender Equality Strategy, *Safe and Strong* (2016), outlines how the arts and creative industries can influence gender norms, challenge the expectations placed upon girls and women, and address the disadvantage and discrimination they face. The strategy also highlights how idealised depictions of women and rigid ideas of masculinity and femininity help to uphold a culture in which violence against women is rife.

*Promoting gender equality through the arts and creative industries* is one of VicHealth's investments to support this strategy. It identifies and reviews international gender-focused arts and creative projects that could inform gender equality initiatives in Victoria to contribute to better health outcomes for Victorian women and girls and create a safer and more respectful community for us all.

More than 100 gender-related art projects were considered during the research; 30 of these were reviewed in detail. The projects included local community-based activities, major art events and multi-site projects using digital technology.

The projects aimed to interrogate, question, disrupt and/or reform gender relations in different ways using different art forms and activities. They show how artists can use multiple avenues of support to engage in social change initiatives, and maximise engagement and impact.

The report forms a solid base for individuals, industry, funding bodies and governments interested in gender equality programs, investment and research.

## How art projects promote gender equality

This research found that art can be a powerful tool to promote gender equality for health and wellbeing and inspire cultural awareness, social connection and change. It can help people imagine what it's like to be someone else, and understand the issues around gender inequality.

The reviewed projects used several strategies and themes to engage their audience and share their gender equality messages.

### Empathetic experiences

In these projects, different art mediums, including workshops, storytelling, virtual reality and performances were used to help people experience what it's like to be female in male-dominated cultures. By helping people imagine what it's like to be an 'other', artists inspired their empathy for the other.

For example, in *De tu puno y tetra* (*By your own hand*) (2015) Ecuadorean men participated in workshops to explore their understanding of family violence. They 'adopted' a letter written by a woman in another project, *Cartas de Mujeres* (2011). Many of the letters outlined the woman's experience of family and sexual violence. The men worked with artists to produce an hour-long performance about the woman's experience of family violence that involved music, readings from the letters and personal testimonials.

## Filling gaps in the historic record and being seen and heard in the present

Women and their achievements are largely underrepresented in historical records. The research identified Australian and international art projects and organisations that tell the stories of remarkable but relatively unknown women, to make sure their lives, perspectives and concerns are considered and remembered.

In one example, artist Marc Quinn created a [sculpture of Alison Lapper](#), MBE, that was displayed at the Fourth Plinth (2005–2007) in Trafalgar Square, London. Alison is a renowned disabled artist and lecturer, and was pregnant when she modeled for the sculpture. The artwork aimed to celebrate her 'heroism' and the beauty of a different body, and question social norms.

Modern women are also often underrepresented and 'silent' members of society. This research found several projects that gave women the skills and opportunities to tell their own and other women's stories, helped amplify their voices, and increased their visibility. For example, [The Women's Mobile Museum](#) (2017–2019) is a residency program, apprenticeship and exhibition that supports emerging economically and socially disadvantaged female artists.

## Unpacking and contesting masculinity and gender binaries

Men and transgender people can be constrained by gender constructions of accepted ideas of what it is to be male or female. This research identified several projects that 'unpacked' and challenged ideas of masculinity and explored gender binaries and stereotypes.

Some projects touched upon 'toxic masculinity', which encompasses negative, socially regressive masculine traits, including domination, devaluing women, homophobia and violence. Toxic masculinity is seen in all-male environments, such as prisons, the military, and some sports and educational institutions. The project [Locker Room Talk](#) (2018) focuses on one of these environments: sport. During the project, high school footballers used writing and storytelling to confront the hyper masculine football culture and redefine what it is to be male.

Other projects explored the problem of male-dominated environments, which can make women and minority groups feel excluded, uncomfortable and intimidated. Some of these projects (e.g. [Women in Sound](#), [Women on Sound](#), [Key Change](#) and [Yours & Ours](#)) supported and encouraged women to participate in and experience these environments to address gender bias and inequality.

While not promoting gender equality explicitly, several art projects (e.g. [Gender Unbound](#), [Tilde](#) and [Museum of Trans Hirstory and Art](#)) also challenged the idea of gender being only male or female. They explored trans and intersex experiences, and illustrated what it's like to live outside the gender 'norm'. These projects gave the artists, who are trans or intersex, an opportunity to tell their stories and share their history and culture to improve understanding and awareness.

## How art projects engaged audiences and had impact

The reviewed projects had a variety of characteristics and strategies that contributed to their success. Some were planned, while others were unexpected. Together, they highlight the myriad ways that artists can reach people and have meaningful and wide-ranging impacts on mental wellbeing including gender equality and social connection.

### Scaling up, stretching or extending projects

A key characteristic common to all projects was the artist's ability to upscale, extend or stretch their work.

The artist started with a particular artwork and developed it to reach more people in a variety of interesting ways. For example, they may not have intended to write a book, go on speaking tours or create a political advocacy group when they conceived their original work. But they were open to upscaling, stretching or extending their work and successfully did so to make their gender equality messages more widely heard.

### Partnerships

Partnerships were also key to the success of these projects. By partnering with companies or organisations with similar brand and gender equality goals, artists could access more resources to engage with a wider audience for a greater impact.

Importantly, partnerships did not just involve money, but also included access to networks, technology, distribution outlets, materials, information and exhibition spaces.

### Investment

Additional investment – be that financial, time, publicity or prominence – allowed these projects the opportunity to grow or extend their reach and impact.

Added investment gave artists the resources to upscale, stretch and extend their projects, so they could reach more people and have more impact in the moment and for the long-term. This also helped to increase a project's durability, accessibility and legacy.

## Target audiences

The audiences, communities and public that these projects targeted varied considerably. They featured different nationalities, ethnicities, gender identities, class, literacy levels, languages, abilities, histories, ages and sexualities.

Arts initiatives always kept their audience in mind, and tailored their art to best engage and affect them. This often involved active audience participation, such as through virtual reality, games or workshops, to make the audience 'co-creator'.

### Legacy

In these projects, art was not only enjoyed or valued in the moment, but could also have a lasting impact on individuals and communities in the future. In this way, artists left a legacy of cultural change and an awareness of gender equality.

Some examples of these legacies include encouraging girls to enter male-dominated fields, and changing ideas around gender, masculinity and violence against women.

### Durability

Here, durability refers to the artwork's 'lifespan' – how long it lasts or has influence. Durable art has a long 'lifespan', so can reach and affect more people. Examples include books, film, paintings, recorded performances and screen-based art (e.g. online games).

These art projects were successful because they were durable – either from the outset or after they were upscaled, stretched or extended.

### Accessibility

These projects were widely accessible and gave people the opportunities for greater social connection and to engage in new experiences and understandings of gender equality that they may not have otherwise had. This significantly increased audience reach and impact.

The factors that made these projects accessible included location, delivery (e.g. physical/in-person or online/virtual access) and cost (e.g. free or affordable).



## One example of how art projects can engage and have strong, long-lasting impact

The Vagina Monologues is a good example of gender-related art being upscaled, extended and stretched, to have a stronger and wider impact.

First performed off Broadway in 1996 and published in 1998, *The Vagina Monologues* has been adapted hundreds of times, and performed by celebrities and transgender groups. The author, Eve Ensler, waves her rights to the play for one day (V-Day) every year, so activists around the world can perform it and hold events to promote its messages. These events raise money for groups that work to end violence against women.

After the popularity of *The Vagina Monologues*, Ensler created One Billion Rising. This movement started on V-Day in 2012, and seeks to end rape and sexual violence against women. It has a signature dance, holds flash mobs, attends protests, and has produced online videos to reach more people.

Note: Not all projects focus on the impacts on women after violence has occurred. The research reviewed projects that addressed a range of underlying gendered drivers of violence against women that shape and reinforce our culture. By highlighting and problematising drivers such as gender identity, rigid gender stereotypes, feminine and masculine norms, recognition, representation and isolation, such initiatives can contribute to a safer culture to prevent violence from occurring in the first place. For more examples of successful art and creative initiatives, visit: [www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/gender-equality-arts](http://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/gender-equality-arts)

To view the full report, visit [www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/-/media/ResourceCentre/PublicationsandResources/GenderEqualityArts/Promoting gender equality through the arts and creative industries report.pdf](http://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/-/media/ResourceCentre/PublicationsandResources/GenderEqualityArts/Promoting%20gender%20equality%20through%20the%20arts%20and%20creative%20industries%20report.pdf)

Deifferent Theatre, a company for deaf and non-deaf audiences presented the Vagina Monologues at the Melbourne Fringe Festival in 2017. Photographer Nikki Williams (NW Stills)

## Conclusion

Through art, we can explore and challenge social norms, encourage understanding and inspire change for greater health and wellbeing for women and more broadly across our communities. Governments, private business, communities, health practitioners and artists can play a significant role in influencing social change.

Based on the projects reviewed, the arts and creative industries, along with strategic partners from a range of settings across our communities, can be powerful catalysts to promote gender equality in Victoria, and achieve a safer, healthier, more socially connected and happier population.

## Making art that promotes gender equality: Ideas for future projects

The final report, *Promoting gender equality through the arts and creative industries*, suggests a range of activities for artists and investors who want to support and promote gender equality in their work. These include:

- Working with established artists or festivals to increase publicity and reach for art projects and their gender equality messages.
- Pursuing funding partnerships, pro-bono support or sponsorships (financial and/or in-kind) from corporations with similar gender equality goals. For example, legal, financial, media, public relations, science and technology companies; universities; councils; government; and research organisations.

- Developing project-specific partnerships. For example, with major construction companies or local councils/governments (street art); film festivals (short gender-related films or ads); art galleries (gender-related art installations); and sporting associations/teams (gender-related short films or talks at awards nights/meetings).
- Upscaling, stretching or extending existing gender-related art to help it reach a wider audience and have more impact. For example, featuring street art on YouTube or social media, filming performances to put online, or writing or speaking about the project.
- Crowd sourcing content by working with other artists involved in gender equality, to put together larger and wider reaching works (e.g. books, magazines, performances, shows).
- Creating screen/media content that can be shared widely, for example short pieces to play before movies in cinemas, at events, or on social media.

For the full range of recommendations, see pages 4–7 of the full report: *Promoting gender equality through the arts and creative industries: a review of case studies and evidence*.



Victorian Health Promotion Foundation  
PO Box 154 Carlton South  
Victoria 3053 Australia  
T +61 3 9667 1333 F +61 3 9667 1375

[vichealth@vichealth.vic.gov.au](mailto:vichealth@vichealth.vic.gov.au)  
[vichealth.vic.gov.au](http://vichealth.vic.gov.au)  
[twitter.com/vichealth](https://twitter.com/vichealth)  
[facebook.com/vichealth](https://facebook.com/vichealth)

VicHealth acknowledges the support of the Victorian Government.

© VicHealth 2018  
December 2018 MW-682

