Breaking the silent legacies of war: Exploring transnational feminist art activisms and conflict-related gender-based violence

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ABSTRACT

Creative arts are vital in helping to raise awareness of the ongoing phenomenon known as “rape as weapon of war”, which has been described by the United Nations (2024a) as one of the ‘greatest silences’ that ‘continues to be chronically underreported’, as sexual violence is systematically encouraged and tolerated during conflicts. In this article, I explore two installations that expose conflict-related gender-based violence to international audiences and advocate for the justice of women’s rights to a life free of violence: Alketa Jhafa Mripa’s *Thinking of you* (2015), first displayed in Kosovo’s football stadium, and Patricia Cronin’s *Shrine for girls* (2015), initially presented at the 56th Venice Biennale. By exploring artworks from different locations and different legacies of war, I argue for art’s vital role in giving voice to the greatest silence occurring during armed conflicts.

Keywords: Transnational feminist art activisms, conflict-related gender-based violence, sexual violence, social acknowledgement, solidarity.

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Introduction

There is a long history of the deployment of gender-based violence (GBV) as a strategic weapon during armed conflicts. October 2025 marked twenty-five years since the United Nations' (UN) Security Council agreed on Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security, which reaffirms women's protection in armed conflicts. Despite this international agreement, patterns of GBV have persisted and intensified in contemporary conflicts: the United Nations Programme for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, also known as UN Women (2024), verified that cases of conflict-related GBV had increased by fifty percent in 2023. In response to this alarming statistic, this article draws on existing studies (Flaschka 2017; Criado-Perez 2019; Almohannadi 2021) that highlight the impact of war as not gender-neutral: women are affected very differently from men during and after the war. Crucially, women and girls embroiled in conflicts are disproportionately affected by sexual violence, accounting for more than 95 per cent of the UN-verified reported cases (UN 2024b). According to United Nations Peacekeeping (2017),

> The term "conflict-related sexual violence" refers to rape, sexual slavery, forced prostitution, forced pregnancy, forced abortion, enforced sterilization, forced marriage and any other form of sexual violence of comparable gravity perpetrated against women, men, girls or boys that is directly or indirectly linked to a conflict.

Although GBV has been an ongoing issue throughout history, it was in the 1970s that representations of GBV became a prevailing theme in feminist art. Artists like Judy Chicago, Suzanne Lacy, Ana Mendieta, and Kara Walkers, among many others, have been instrumental in exposing experiences of violence and challenging socio-political norms.[1] In this article, I examine the installations *Thinking of you* (2015) and *Shrine for girls* (2015), which raise awareness about conflict-related GBV.[2] I chose these two installations for the similarities I identified when researching this topic. Initially, it was because they used similar media (clothing) and had been exhibited in different locations globally. Another similarity was that both installations were initially exhibited in 2015. However, the realisation that ten years have passed since the making of these artworks, and nothing has changed, became a catalyst for me to focus on this urgent issue. We live in a time where thirteen major global conflicts are ongoing (as reported by the Center for Preventive Action's Global Conflict Tracker) and peace talks are failing; each conflict is creating enduring gendered crises that affect women's right to work, education, and a life free of violence. As a result, women's experiences continue to be affected by a global pattern of gendered violence and injustice. Another important reason I chose the two artworks is that they avoid explicit visual representation of sexual violence. Rather

than presenting a graphic image of horrific violence, the two installations offer to the audiences, as I explain later in the text, an environment where they can observe, reflect, and be active participants if they wish. By closely reading the installations and referring to the artists' intentions, I analyse transnational feminist artistic interventions that address the systematic conditions experienced by women across global histories, geographies, races, ethnicities, sexualities, religions, and cultures.

Crucial to my analysis of the works is Marsha Meskimmon's (2020:4) description of "transnational feminisms" as practices 'capable of facilitating large-scale coalition-building *with and through* careful attention to local, concrete conditions, replacing centre-periphery hierarchies … with multidimensional dialogues that take place across transnational feminist networks'. My article builds on this idea and will refer to transnational feminisms as practices reinforcing solidarity against global GBV. I intend to provide a platform that highlights the artistic interventions of acting against the global erasure of women's experiences during conflict and the urgent need to end the cycle of violence.

Thinking of you

On 12 June 2015, the football stadium in Kosovo's capital, Pristina, was filled with forty-five washing lines that displayed over 5,000 skirts and dresses.[3] The installation, dedicated to survivors of sexual violence during the 1998-1999 war in Kosovo, was conceived by Kosovo-born artist Alketa Xhafa Mripa after watching a TV interview of a survivor in 2013. Hidden behind a curtain, the survivor talked not only about the atrocities she experienced during the war but also the stigma, shame, and isolation she was facing from her family and wider society; she was perceived as a woman without honour and was expected to remain silent so that her family would not feel embarrassment (Mripa 2015). Mripa immediately responded to the survivors' story: 'I wanted these women to break their silence. I wanted to fight the sigma. I wanted them to know I am "Thinking of You" – you are not alone'. Her attentive response reflects Meskimmon's (2020:4) description of transnational feminism as 'embracing a politics of vision, hope, and love' and 'inhabiting the world in solidarity and kinship with "other Others"'.

Following the interview, Mripa started the production for the installation *Thinking of you,* where she asked the public via social media to donate a dress or skirt that was special to them. The making of the installation resulted in a national solidarity initiative supported by the then-President of Kosovo, Atifete Jahjaga, who was the first person to donate a dress. She publicised her solidarity by saying, 'You are not alone in this. We are one, and we are all together. [Survivors] will always have my support, and the support of all the citizens of Kosovo' (Di Lellio *et al* 2019:1549). The one-month campaign during which

the former President's message was broadcast on local television and social media resulted in the donation of thousands of clothes from not only women survivors but also men who responded to the call for support and solidarity. The making of the work became an outlet for survivors to share their stories, the artist to listen to their stories, and for the wider public to acknowledge the stories of these experiences, which had been silenced for so long.

I wish to focus on "social acknowledgement", a term that I borrow from medica mondiale and Medica Gjakova's (2024) study, to analyse the activist approach of *Thinking of you* against the stigma and isolation experienced in the aftermath of the war. The term "social acknowledgement" is described as an 'umbrella term for the public recognition of survivors of war-related sexualised violence which seeks to redress the harms of the past and their consequences to the present' (medica mondiale & Medica Gjakova:88). Recognition is also key to my argument as it 'encompasses the significance of the experience being acknowledged' (McGlynn *et al* 2017:182). The recognition of the violence signifies that survivors are heard and embodies social acknowledgement of their experiences.

Applying a feminist perspective to the experiences of war is fundamental, as it provides a framing to understand heteropatriarchal power structures that still prevail in today's societies. Previous scholarly works[4] have addressed the link between war and rape committed by male perpetrators who are soldiers, friends, neighbours, or relatives. In times of conflict, a universal pattern of gendered power results in the systematic usage of rape as 'deliberate policy' (Niarchos 1995:658). This also results in the genocide of women, something perceived as the symbolic humiliation of the male opponents, who are not able to protect their women and are 'thus wounded in their masculinity and marked as incompetent' (Seifert 1994:59).

Focusing on the Kosovo war, an estimated 20,000 women and girls were raped during the conflict,[5] resulting in multilayered physical and mental consequences, where abused women were reluctant to speak about their experiences. As I argue in this article, war is a gendered experience where women's experiences are silenced during and after the war. Women activists have been fundamental in leading activities that support survivors of conflict-related violence. This is particularly important when we consider the prominence in Western countries of celebrating the legacies of wars via veterans' parades, and dedicating public statues and memorials to male heroes. In contrast to these glorified commemorations, women's histories and experiences have been largely ignored, especially in public spaces. Kosovo journalist Alma Lama, has, for example, acknowledged the crucial need for a change in Kosovo to redress the commemoration of women's histories, and this resulted in a revision of Kosovo's 2013 national budget to include the construction of a memorial dedicated to women (Ferizaj 2015). Two years later, on Kosovo's Liberation

Day (12 June 2015), the sculpture Heroinat (meaning heroines in Albanian), located in the centre of Pristina, was presented to the public. While at first sight the large sculpture looks like a woman's portrait in relief, a closer look reveals that the memorial is constructed of 20,000 medals, with each one dedicated to the female victims who experienced sexual violence during the war.[6]

In 2015, conflict-related GBV became the 'subject of a national conversation in Kosovo for the first time in the 17 years since the war' (Di Lellio *et al* 2019:1544). The impact of *Thinking of you* is evident in different ways. Most importantly, the art project provided the possibility to hear the experiences of survivors in a time when society was not openly speaking of GBV. As Meskimmon (2020:107) points out, the work did not '*speak for* or *represent* generalised others, but rather, opened a space in which the experiences of many, different situated and concrete others could be articulated and heard'. The making of this work is significant, as it provides agency to survivors to voice their personal and collective trauma.[7]

For the ones who had to remain silenced for over fifteen years, the making of *Thinking of you* was a catalyst moment, as not only did they share their stories and understand each other's pain, but also received, possibly for the first time, social acknowledgement of the violence they had experienced. That a person in power – the then-President of Kosovo – supported an initiative like the making of this installation, made survivors feel visible and empowered to share their stories. Donating a dress brought a sense of relief to survivors: some said to the artist, 'Here is this dress. Take it and with this dress, I'm letting it all go' (Mripa 2024). The artist reported that participants also shared their hidden stories while donating their clothing items.

> "This is my skirt. It's the dress I wore when I married, and also the dress I was wearing when we broke up," and then she told me she broke up with her partner because she had been raped … I just started crying. I couldn't contain myself. A second one gave me a dress she wore when she was pregnant. She said to me: "I was pregnant and they killed my baby." For 16 years she couldn't have any children anymore because they damaged her (Mripa cited by Marí 2015).

Each dress signifies a personal story of lived experience of GBV; by taking the dresses out of the private closet and bringing them into the public sphere, *Thinking of you* enables a 'personal and collective transfer of trauma' (Di Lellio *et al* 2019:1551).

The artistic approaches used by Mripa act as a powerful form of art activism in raising awareness and social acknowledgement of the violent crimes that had been silenced for nearly two decades. Importantly, Mripa designed the project as an 'inclusive space in which both survivors *and* those wishing to remember a victim or survivor, could come

together in offering an item of clothing' (Meskimmon 2020:108). Mripa's inclusive approach contributed to a wider social acknowledgement not only by women but also by men, who donated skirts and dresses that had belonged to their female family members. By creating a dialogue between survivors and the wider community (including men), Mripa challenges the culture of shame and silence surrounding the violence experienced by survivors of conflict-related GBV. By disrupting the traditionally male space of a football stadium, *Thinking of you* acts as a visual reminder of the marginalised stories that were silenced for so long in the public sphere.

As Mripa (2015) explains,

> I wanted to bring this issue into the man's world, to a public place. I decided to take this hidden private issue that no one wanted to talk about and place it in the main football arena in Pristina. … No longer would the voices be hidden behind a curtain. Across Kosovo, men and women, young and old, came forward to donate a skirt, to join this activist art installation. By making everyone part of the installation, by the very act of going to each city and collecting the skirts, and talking to the survivors, the piece took a life of its own. It became a journey of listening to the stories from all over Kosovo.

Using installation as a platform to address conflict-related GBV is a powerful approach, as viewers become active participants; they can walk around the clotheslines and experience each of the clothes closely. Using ordinary clothing items – skirts and dresses – is powerful, as this 'can be grasped by anyone, no matter what language they speak' (Mripa cited by Tran 2015).[8]

Mripa continues to forge global connections and solidarities against conflict-related GBV. Her commitment to enhancing solidarity to enact transnational change contributes to the 'global platform for feminist networking and activism' (Meskimmon 2020:109). In 2024, nearly a decade after the Kosovo installation, *Thinking of you* was developed into an international activist collaboration exhibited in The Hague, the Netherlands. In collaboration with the Dr Dennis Mukwege Foundation,[9] the Municipality of The Hague, and the Embassy of Kosovo in the Netherlands, the installation was presented in two venues: the The Hague City Hall and the Lange Voorhout, a street in the old city centre of The Hague.[10] Exposing the global impact of conflict-related sexual violence from countries like Ukraine, Colombia, Sudan, and Gaza, Mripa collaborated with Mukwege's Foundation's initiative SEMA, also known as the Global Network of Victims and Survivors to End Wartime Sexual Violence, to collect dresses across the globe. Through this collaboration, dresses from over twenty countries were collected, including the Democratic Republic of Congo, Colombia, Ethiopia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. The dresses were hung from red ropes as a symbolic intervention for raising awareness of Mukwege Foundation's Red Line Initiative, which advocates for ending conflict-related sexual violence.[11]

While opening the bags of collected dresses, Mripa and her collaborators found that some had the names of survivors on them. By including their names, survivors are voicing that they are not guilty for what happened to them, and they should not be ashamed and humiliated by their families and society. The survivors are challenging the power structure surrounding wartime sexual violence: they are conveying solidarity towards breaking the silence of wartime rape, and seeking justice and accountability from perpetrators. Executive Director of Mukwege Foundation, Katrien Coppens (cited by Mripa 2024), comments that for survivors, 'it's really a sign, [they are] ready to break the silence but want you to act … they hope that we will support them to end this cycle of violence'. Commemorating the International Day for the Elimination of Sexual Violence in Conflict on 19 June 2024, the official opening event of *Thinking of You* brought together survivors and members of SEMA who shared their experiences. Acknowledging the global impact of mobilising the wider public, one of the survivors thanked Mripa for the exhibition, saying, 'We want nothing more than to be heard, to be believed, and to be joined to fight, to end stigma. But most importantly, justice' (Mripa 2024).

Exhibiting *Thinking of you* in The Hague in 2024 is highly significant – known as the international city of peace and justice, it's home to the International Court of Justice. By presenting the installation in this city, Mripa's art activism enables the international community to reflect on the experiences of women who have endured GBV across different geographies and histories. By bringing these stories to the home of the International Court of Justice, the work acts as a reminder of this enduring neglected crisis and a call for recognition from the 'key decision-makers to draw a red line against the use of sexual violence and take stronger action in preventing and responding to conflict-related sexual violence' (Mripa 2024). The global impact of *Thinking of you* continues as it travels to other countries.[12] In providing a platform for the experiences of the survivors to be heard within an international setting, Mriba enables 'cross-cultural affinities and global commonalities to emerge across and between specific instances and intimate personal narratives' (Meskimmon 2020:110). This is a powerful approach of a global solidarity that works towards ending the silence, stigma, and shame experienced by the survivors.

Shrine for girls

Responding to three appalling events of GBV that happened in India, Nigeria, and Ireland, artist Patricia Cronin created a series of site-specific sculptural installations titled *Shrine for girls*. Originally exhibited during the 2015 Venice Biennale (9 May to 22 November) as a solo collateral event, the work then travelled internationally, including to the United States, Ireland, and the Netherlands.[13] The making of *Shrine for girls* was influenced by two significant events that came to Cronin's attention in 2014: the gang rape and hanging

of two teenage cousins in India, and the abduction of 276 female schoolgirls in Nigeria. While travelling to Italy for a site visit following the invitation from curator Ludovico Pratesi, Cronin watched the 2013 film *Philomena*, which was about the religious institutions in Ireland known as Magdalene laundries, where girls were incarcerated and abused up until the late 1990s. The three events influenced Cronin to create a shrine that acts as a transnational feminist platform that brings visibility and acknowledgement of the systematic GBV experienced by women across global histories and cultures to the broader public.

FIGURE **Nº 1**

Patricia Cronin, *Shrine for girls*, Venice, 2015. Installation view. La Biennale di Venezia – 56th International Art Exhibition. Photo: Mark Blower. Courtesy of the artist, © 2025 Patricia Cronin / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Exhibited at the Chiesa di San Gallo,[14] Cronin staged the installation to expose the ongoing violence experienced by women (Figure 1). The central altar displays a pile of brightly coloured saris to represent the horrendous abuse of the two teenage girls in India. The right altar presents a pile of monochromatic aprons and uniforms that represent the exploitation and abuse experienced by girls and women at the Magdalene laundries in Ireland. The left altar shows black and violet hijabs representing the mass abduction of the Nigerian schoolgirls. Accompanying each pile of clothes is a small photograph that acts as a critical element to the installation: a photograph taken of the Indian girls' bodies when they were discovered; a black and white photograph of women working in a

Magdalene laundry; and a photograph of the Nigerian schoolgirls as shown in a video released by their abductors, the Islamic militant group Boko Haram.[15] The photographs allowed viewers to recognise each of the events and reflect on the conditions of violence experienced by the women and girls across the world. As Cronin (quoted in Reilly 2015:38-39) explains,

> I lure my audience into the church by elegantly arranging the chromatically rich saris on the central altar, they move closer out of curiosity and then notice a small framed photograph to the side and all becomes clear. With such disturbing content I thought it was important not to beat them up with it, but to let their own individual emotional/psychological arch take place.

FIGURE Nº 2

Patricia Cronin, *Shrine for girls*, Venice, 2015. Installation View La Biennale di Venezia - 56th International Art Exhibition. Photo: Mark Blower. Courtesy of the artist, © 2025 Patricia Cronin / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

An accompanying panel with the phrase 'Shrine for girls' written in fourteen languages (Figure 2), was placed outside the church. This is significant as thousands of people from across the world visit the Venice Biennale.[16] By offering a translation in fourteen of the most spoken languages, Cronin calls for a global social acknowledgement of the enormity of this ongoing issue and the urgent need to end gender-based violence. By using different languages, she wanted to convey two things: first, to welcome visitors by speaking their language and invite them into the Church; and second, to communicate the global impact

of the GBV problem. As Cronin (quoted in McNay 2015) points out, 'as global citizens of the world we have a responsibility to pay attention to what is going on'.

FIGURE Nº 3

Patricia Cronin, *Shrine for girls* (Chibok), Venice, 2015. La Biennale di Venezia - 56th International Art Exhibition. Photo: Mark Blower. Courtesy the artist, © 2025 Patricia Cronin / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

I am specifically focusing on the *Shrine for girls (Chibok)* (Figure 3) installation because the abduction of the 276 female students reflects the heteropatriarchal power structures that prevail in today's Nigerian society (and beyond). On the night of 14 April 2014, Boko Haram attacked the boarding school where the schoolgirls, aged 16 to 18, were staying to attend their final year exams. This was not the first attack on schools conducted by Boko Haram. Two months prior, on 25 February, Boko Haram attacked the Federal Government College Buni Yadi in Yobe State, killing 59 boys. That event revealed Boko Haram's gendered approach: 'Teachers at the school in Buni Yadi said the gunmen

gathered the female students together before telling them to go away and get married and to abandon their education' (BBC 2014). Temitope Oriola (2017:103) elaborates on Boko Haram's approach: 'in the organization's mind's eye, attempts to educate females constituted a waste of time; it was irreligious and a forbidden deployment of women's reproductive energies'.

Boko Haram's approach of 'gendered kidnapping' (Oriola 2017:104) reflects their strategy to deny girls' right to education. In fact, the name "Boko Haram" translates to "Western education is forbidden", a belief that has been used to systematically terrorise girls in Nigeria from obtaining education. Although before the Chibok raid, the school was closed for four weeks due to deteriorating security conditions, girls were encouraged by their parents and the school principal to take their exams. On the night of the incident, the girls were asked to follow armed Boko Haram soldiers and climb into their trucks. Out of the 276 girls, 57 managed to escape.[17] Following the Chibok violence, Boko Haram's systematic abduction of women and girls received global attention via social media. A 2014 study commissioned by Human Rights Watch following the Chibok incident illustrated that the Chibok schoolgirls were the biggest single incident of abductions by the terrorist group. The study also highlighted that, 'The relative ease with which it carried out the Chibok abductions appears to have emboldened Boko Haram to carry out more abductions elsewhere'.

The Chibok violence also brought to attention how Boko Haram's abduction methods were tolerated by the wider Nigerian society, highlighting 'a cultural climate in which women and young girls are perceived as expendable material and burdens to be rid of' (Oriola 2017:105). This was particularly prevalent among poor families, where some fathers were "donating" their daughters and wives to Boko Haram for cash. This tolerance resulted in a pattern of abducting girls and giving money to the parents as dowry in exchange for their silence. I would argue that this pattern has reinforced what Oriola describes as a 'gendered performativity' of Boko Haram's practice of abducting women and girls, which consequently reflects Nigerian society's heteropatriarchal power structures that discriminate and objectify women. This gendered exchange resulted in the establishment of a strategic tool for the procreation of the next generations of Boko Haram fighters through the mass rape of women and girls.

The global attention to the Chibok abductions was brought about by the #BringBackOurGirls Movement on social media, initiated in April 2014 by the girls' parents, who demanded action from the Nigerian government. Within a few weeks, the hashtag was retweeted almost two million times, resulting in solidarity protests worldwide. This included endorsement by Amnesty International, UNICEF, and politicians including Hilary Clinton and David Cameron. Cronin (2025) recalls when she first heard about the Chibok

abductions: ‘I was horrified when I heard it on the breaking news when it happened. It was shocking and I could not get it out of my head’.

FIGURE **Nº 4**

Patricia Cronin, *Shrine for girls*, hijabs and photograph, Venice, 2015. La Biennale di Venezia - 56th International Art Exhibition. Photo: Mark Blower. Courtesy of the artist, © 2025 Patricia Cronin / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Responding to the systematic sexual violence, Cronin used 276 hijabs[18] for *Shrine for girls*, with each hijab symbolising each abducted girl (see Figure 4). The entire project is thought-provoking, as it creates a space to stage a homage to what the artist calls a ‘global bereavement’ for the women and girls who experience violence. Thinking about the global impact of gender-based violence, Cronin (cited by Reilly 2015:42) explains,

> We tend to accept the idea of violence against women as ‘just the way things are’—part of the status quo. Our 24-hour news cycle delivers such tragedy and devastation all the time that it becomes easy to numb yourself to the reality of relentless human cruelty. My goal here is to ‘un-numb’ people, to get them to see what is really happening to women and girls all around the world.

The setting up of *Shrine for girls* at the Chiesa di San Gallo offered multiple experiences for viewers, such as reflecting on the international impact of GBV, grieving for the murders and tortures experienced by women, and praying at the altars. Engaging with the religious aesthetics, Cronin presents the three female groups as ‘secular martyrs’. As Cronin (cited by Reilly 2015:39) explains,

> Since their bodies weren't treated with dignity while they were alive, and their bodies are missing or murdered, I consider the girls as martyrs and their clothing as relics. Unlike religious martyrs, however, there is no glory in their death, no otherworldly triumph.

Significantly, religions across the world (such as the three major ones Chronin engages with in her installation: Christianity, Islam, Hinduism) are interconnected with the patriarchal systematic discrimination against women.[19] Looking at female martyrs from early Christianity, records reveal that most of them were virgins and persecuted for their faith (Glahn 2022). The symbolic (re)construction of the three altars at the Chiesa di San Gallo contributes to the acknowledgement and recognition of women's right to self-determination and women's struggle to exercise agency of their own bodies due to enduring heteropatriarchal power structures. Through the use of empty garments to represent the missing and murdered women and girls, Cronin contributes to social acknowledgment of the continuing GBV that affects women internationally. This was evident by the public's reaction when visiting the installation: 'so many cried, openly wept when experiencing the work. From the wealthy art collectors to tourists to school children' (Cronin 2025).

The evocative installation brought recognition of the silence surrounding women's violent experiences across different geographies, cultures, and religions. Recognition by the public who visited the exhibition resulted in active transnational solidarity to help survivors. Some tried to give money to the exhibition attendant, who directed them to the text that contained information on how they could be involved. This was a significant strategy of Cronin's (2025), who had anticipated the audience's reaction to her work: 'because of the raw emotions I knew the work could evoke, people would answer my call to action and want to do something to act, to help'. Cronin's art activism provides a platform for the audience to support three non-profit organisations that advocate for the specific issues explored in *Shrine for girls*: CAMFED, a pan-African grassroots-led movement that supports education for girls in rural Africa; the Gulabi Gang, a female activist group in India that fights for gender equality and justice; and Justice for Magdalenes Research, which supports survivors in Ireland. Crucially, solidarity requires consistent work. As Ayesha Vemuri (2022:5) points out, 'it requires an active, inward, introspective gaze into one's own political and social location, and an acknowledgement of one's own implication within the systems against which one is resisting'. Within this context, *Shrine for girls'* transnational art activism continues its pedagogical agenda via the dedicated digital platform, which showcases the exhibition and raises awareness of the international impact of GBV and the urgent need to act against it.

The exhibition's accompanying visitor guestbook became a powerful outlet for the audience to share their reflections on the absence and silence of men: 'This is their fight too! To where did they run? If this was your sister, your mother, your daughter, what would you

do, what should you do' (Cronin 2025). As Meskimmon (2020:116) highlights, 'responsibility for breaking the silence and building transversal solidarities does not belong solely to women, despite the disproportionate effects of sexual violence on women and girls worldwide'. Redefining masculinity is fundamental in ending the cycle of violence (Cronin 2025). Standing in solidarity with survivors requires a collective resistance against GBV:

> The men who rape and violate women count on other men's solidarity; they expect men [who do not participate] to keep quiet. This is what is missing, the positive male models who will stand next to women to address the issue of violence in society and violence against women. (Swiss Peace Foundation 1995, cited by Pillay 2001:41).

Shrine for girls invites us to reflect as global citizens on our own responsibility and 'response-ability' (Meskimmon 2014:148) to the ongoing injustices. We can collectively work towards transforming our societies, both within our families and our societal encounters, and reflect on how we resist heteropatriarchal power structures. Meskimmon (2014:148) explains that 'neither response-ability, nor responsibility can be obliged, but they can be engendered, fostered and compellingly performed in and through the sensory registers of art'. Cronin (2025) talks about a significant contribution that reflects the response-ability and social acknowledgement of the issues explored in *Shrine for girls*:

> a group of Indian women tourists were passing through the campo and read 'Shine for girls' in Hindi and saw the saris on the central altar. They went back to their hotel room, went through all their luggage and found the one black sari they were traveling with for mourning, came back and gave it to me to add to the shrine.

Similar to Mripa's *Thinking of you*, Cronin's installation contributes to global solidarity and recognition of the systematic silence of GBV experienced by women across global histories and cultures. Their common strategy of using clothing as mementos to represent the missing women and girls brings global acknowledgement of the extreme vulnerability women face during conflict. Mripa's and Cronin's ongoing efforts to exhibit their installations around the world act as ongoing reminders of women's silenced experiences of gendered violence.

Since the 2015 Venice Biennale, *Shrine for girls* has been exhibited at several international venues, including New York, Dublin, and Utrecht. The exhibition setting for all three iterations changed, and the clothing and photographs were now positioned on top of industrial shipping crates instead of altars. Each crate was labelled to indicate the fragility of the contents, including the umbrella symbol to signify that the contents should be kept in a dry environment. Cronin employed this powerful strategy to raise social awareness of GBV. As she explains, it was 'the perfect metaphor about trafficking women and girls, and a poignant reminder of how well we treat objects in the art world and how poorly

FIGURE Nº 5

Patricia Cronin, *Shrine for girls*, 2015. Installation view. The FLAG Art Foundation, New York. Courtesy of the artist, © 2025 Patricia Cronin / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

we take care of people' (Cronin 2025). Cronin also points out that all labels are visual reminders that the contents are precious and should be treated with care. The crates used to transport the clothing from one location to another become a powerful vessel to expose the experiences of murdered women and survivors. As Cronin (2025) explains:

> Each work travels in its own crate, and with each trip, the crates accumulate more labels, stickers, boot prints, scuff marks, damaged corners as it travels around the world, all becoming the living archive of the work, the visible evidence of shipping the relics of these gender martyrs around the world.

Focusing on *Shrine for girls (Chibok)*, the work acts as art activism against the ongoing systematic violence in Nigeria, where girls are abducted, forced to abandon their education, and forced to marry Boko Haram soldiers. Although these experiences are situated within Nigeria, they reflect the ongoing global violence against women. Eleven years after the event, in April 2025, the #BringBackOurGirls Movement issued a statement on the 112 Chibok girls still missing, demanding accountability from the Nigerian Government: 'We demand urgent, intensified efforts to rescue all remaining captives, provide comprehensive support for survivors, and hold perpetrators accountable. Education must never be a death sentence' (cited by Nzeshi 2025).

I would argue that *Shrine for girls (Chibok)* also raises awareness of the post-conflict impact of the abduction on the 107 girls rescued by the Nigerian army. Their long-awaited return was not easy, and they experienced new challenges. Like the Kosovo survivors, the influence of Nigeria's heteropatriarchal society reinforced the isolation experienced by the girls, who were neglected by their families and communities. Their communities rejected the girls and failed to provide them with a supportive environment. Instead, they considered them outcasts and referred to them as "wives of Boko Haram". Yemesi Adegoke (2024) writes on the lack of support offered by the Nigerian Government that a survivor experienced: 'Basic provisions like food and soap are not enough, her movements are closely watched and restricted by security guards, and she has been subjected to verbal abuse from staff'.

Conclusion

Through their powerful installations, Mripa and Cronin call for collective solidarity to acknowledge and recognise the impact of conflict on women and support for survivors. Their artistic interventions emphasise the urgent need to address conflict-related GBV and provide a platform to build solidarity towards preventing this phenomenon. Their strategies align with the UN Women's ([sa]) agenda on 'enacting and enforcing policies and legislation that protect women and girls from violence, ensuring access to justice, and holding perpetrators accountable'. Contributing to this ongoing development, *Thinking of you* and *Shrine for girls* shape a powerful transnational transformation to shift societal heteropatriarchal attitudes and promote gender equality as a vital foundation for peace. The audience's participation in each initiation of the works increases social acknowledgement and recognition of conflict-related trauma. This global solidarity offers a supportive platform where the experiences of survivors are destigmatised and demarginalised: we are collectively "thinking of them".

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Notes

1. See Principal (2019).

2. Several other transnational activist artworks raise awareness of conflict-related GBV. For example, Pritika Chowdhry's *What the body remembers* raises awareness of the mass rape during the Partition of India in 1947, and Yoshiko Shimada's ongoing work on the "comfort women" systematic sex slavery phenomenon that occurred during the Japanese Imperial occupation of the Asia Pacific region.

3. Images of *Thinking of you* can be found on Alketa Xhafa Mripa's website: https://www.alketaxhafamripa.com/thinking-of-you.

4. See Brownmiller (1997) and Niarchos (1995).

5. According to medica Mondiale & Medica Gjakova (2024), "I am not guilty for what happened to me." A study on the long-term consequences of war rape in Kosovo. The study also points out that no estimate exists for how many gender-queer, non-binary, or men were raped during the Kosovo war.

6. For more information see Archello ([sa]).

7. It is important to note that *Thinking of you* was supported by the National Council for Survivors, set up in 2014 by former President Jahjaga. One of the Council's aims was to raise public awareness of wartime sexual violence. For more information, see Di Lellio *et al* (2019).

8. *Thinking of you* is not the first feminist activist installation to use dresses in public spaces. In 2010, Jaime Black-Morsette created the REDress Project, an art installation exhibiting red dresses in solidarity and in response to the missing and murdered Indigenous women in Canada and the United States. Since 2010, this project has been exhibited in more than thirty locations around Canada and the United States.

9. Dr Denis Mukwege is a Congolese gynaecologist and activist. In 2018, Mukwege received the Nobel Peace Prize together with Nadia Murad for their efforts to end the use of sexual violence as a weapon of war. In 1999, he founded Panzi Hospital in Congo, which specialises in the treatment of conflict-related sexual violence, and in 2016, he founded the Mukwege Foundation to support survivors.

10. Images of *Thinking of you* (The Hague) can be found on Alketa Xhafa Mripa's website: https://www.alketaxhafamripa.com/thinking-of-you-the-hague.

11. For more information on the Red Line Initiative, see https://www.endcrsv.org/.

12. Mripa presented *Thinking of you* at the 48th session of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe in Strasbourg in March 2025.

13. For more information, see https://www.shrineforgirls.org/.

14. Chiesa di San Gallo is a de-consecrated church and, since the 1980s, is no longer a place of worship but functions as a cultural space.

15. Since their 2002 establishment, the Islamic militant group Boko Haram has led numerous terrorist acts that have caused the displacement of more than 2.5 million people and killed an estimated 50,000. For more details, see https://www.dni.gov/nctc/terrorist_groups/boko_haram.html.

16. According to the Venice Biennale, the 2015 edition attracted over 501,000 visitors. For more information, see https://www.labiennale.org/en/history-biennale-arte.

17. For more details, see https://bringbackourgirls.ng/.

18. Cronin bought the 276 hijabs from Maktaba Dar-Us-Salam, Inc. on Atlantic Avenue in Brooklyn, New York, where she lives.

19. For more on this, see Obiwuru *et al* (2021).

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