



## ART BETWEEN WALLS Transforming Lives Through Murals in Kosovo

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| KEYWORDS                                                                                                                                                 | ABSTRACT                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
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| Correctional Facilities<br>Prison Rehabilitation<br>Women Prisoners<br>Mural Art<br>Participatory Art<br>Psychosocial Well-Being<br>Qualitative Research | <i>Transforming Lives Through Murals in Kosovo's Prisons is an innovative initiative launched by the artists of Mural Fest Kosova. Engaging incarcerated individuals in collaborative mural creation and artistic workshops transforms prison environments, fosters emotional healing, and equips inmates with skills to support their reintegration into society.</i><br><i>Qualitative methodology was applied, involving the voluntary participation of six incarcerated women out of a total of thirty-four inmates at the Lipjan Correctional Center for Women, and included three in-depth interviews as well as the analysis of three collaboratively produced murals. This paper advocates for creative rehabilitation programs to enhance the reintegration process.</i> |

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## 1. Introduction

Prison environments are often characterized by their harsh monotony, rigid routines, and the isolation imposed on their inhabitants. These settings, primarily designed for security and containment, can profoundly affect the mental, emotional, and psychological well-being of incarcerated individuals (Haney, 2002). The lack of opportunities for self-expression, creativity, and meaningful engagement exacerbates feelings of isolation, depression, and hopelessness, further hindering rehabilitation and reintegration processes. Consequently, innovative and human-centered approaches are urgently needed to transform these environments into spaces that promote healing, growth, and societal reintegration.

In response to these challenges, Mural Fest Kosova (2024), an organization renowned for its vibrant public art projects across Kosovo, launched the transformative initiative Art Between Walls. This initiative, created in partnership with Kosovo's Ministry of Justice (Shërbimi Korrektues i Kosovës, 2023), aims to integrate mural art into correctional facilities to improve prison conditions and address the holistic needs of inmates.

**Figure 1.** Signing of the memorandum of cooperation between the Kosovo Correctional Service and Mural Fest Kosova to establish a partnership in art-based inmate rehabilitation.



Source: Shërbimi Korrektues i Kosovës, 2023.

Before this project, Mural Fest Kosova focused on creating public murals across Kosovo, transforming schools Mural Fest Kosova, (n.d.-a), hospitals, and other community spaces Mural Fest Kosova, (n.d.-b). The program's extension into prisons began with a Memorandum of Cooperation between the organization and the Ministry of Justice. This partnership allowed access to correctional facilities, enabling professional artists and inmate participants to collaborate on large-scale mural projects. In 2024, the 9th edition of Mural Fest adopted the theme "Her Spotlight," focusing on promoting women artists and using art as a platform to amplify the voice for women's rights. This thematic focus was central to the festival's mission and informed the development of the Art Between Walls initiative. A key objective of this initiative was to expand the reach of art beyond traditional spaces to include women's correctional facilities, particularly the Women's Prison in Lipjan. Through this project, the initiative aimed to create a space for self-expression, empowerment, and skill-building for incarcerated women, integrating them into a broader cultural and social dialogue about their rights and potential. The initiative aligns with global trends advocating for creative approaches in correctional systems, emphasizing art's role in reducing recidivism, fostering identity transformation, and improving mental well-being (Brewster, 2014; Johnson, 2008). By introducing large-scale collaborative murals, the program provides a platform for incarcerated individuals to express their emotions, develop new skills, and connect with others meaningfully.

The primary objective of Art Between Walls is to harness the rehabilitative power of art to counteract the isolating and restrictive nature of prison life. It uses mural art as a medium to build a bridge between confinement and creativity, allowing inmates to actively participate in a process that fosters personal growth and emotional healing. The initiative replaces passive

incarceration with active engagement, encouraging inmates to take ownership of their contributions to the shared prison environment.

This program builds upon the growing global recognition of art as a tool for rehabilitation. Similar initiatives, such as the well-established Koestler Trust in the UK and the Arts-in-Corrections program in the United States, have inspired Art Between Walls to incorporate best practices while adapting its approach to Kosovo's cultural and institutional contexts ("About Us," n.d.; California Arts in Corrections, n.d.) In drawing comparisons with these initiatives, artistic styles used in these correctional centers have been considered, along with interviews primarily conducted with incarcerated women directly involved in the project. By focusing on creative collaboration and psychological well-being, the program transforms correctional spaces into environments of hope, resilience, and opportunity.

Overall, this initiative seeks to empower incarcerated women, transform prison environments and introduce sustainable models of rehabilitation through art. Female inmates benefit from this project by experiencing emotional healing and developing practical skills as well as shifting public perceptions around incarceration and reintegration.

### ***1.1. The Impact of Art and Color Psychology***

Central to the transformative power of the Art Between Walls initiative is the profound impact of art and color psychology. Studies have long established that exposure to certain colors and visual stimuli can influence emotional states, behaviors, and even cognitive functions. This knowledge has been applied in various institutional and therapeutic contexts, including healthcare facilities, schools, and workplaces, with significant success in improving outcomes. In prison environments, where monotony and bleakness prevail, the deliberate integration of vibrant colors and meaningful artistic motifs offers an antidote to the psychological toll of confinement (Cerrato, 2012).

Color psychology suggests that warm, bright colors such as yellow, orange, and green can evoke feelings of optimism, renewal, and connection, while cool tones like blue and violet foster calmness, introspection, and focus. The psychological effects of art and color played a critical role in the conceptualization and implementation of the murals. Color is observed as a fundamental quality of our visual perception (Ćurčić et al., 2019).

The murals created through Art Between Walls are thoughtfully designed to include a palette of colors that elicit these positive emotional responses. This conscious use of color serves to create an environment that mitigates stress and anxiety, fostering a more conducive atmosphere for reflection, emotional healing, and community building (Elliot & Maier, 2014; Kaya & Epps, 2004).

Moreover, the act of creating art, coupled with the communal nature of mural painting, enhances these psychological benefits. Research in art therapy underscores the role of creative expression in reducing symptoms of depression, trauma, and emotional dysregulation (Gussak, 2009; Stuckey & Nobel, 2010). For inmates, participating in such activities not only provides a sense of purpose but also helps to reframe their self-perception—from stigmatized individuals defined by their past actions to creators capable of contributing beauty and meaning to their environment (Brewster, 2014; Djurichkovic, 2011).

Through workshops and guided mural creation, inmates collaborate with professional artists to design and execute large-scale artworks that reflect themes of identity, renewal, and community. This collaborative process not only equips participants with practical artistic skills but also instills a sense of accomplishment and self-worth (Argue et al., 2009; Cohen, 2009). The murals, enriched with vibrant colors and meaningful motifs, serve as a daily reminder of art's transformative potential. They symbolize hope and a brighter future for those marginalized and stigmatized by society.

### ***1.2. Challenging Perceptions and Inspiring Change***

The Art Between Walls initiative also aims to challenge societal perceptions of incarceration and individuals within correctional facilities. By showcasing inmates' creativity and humanity, the

program reshapes public narratives and fosters empathy. The project emphasizes that rehabilitation is not solely about punishment but also about creating opportunities for growth, redemption, and reintegration into society.

This paper explores Art Between Walls's conceptual framework, methodologies, and outcomes, placing it within the broader context of art-based rehabilitation programs worldwide. It examines how the initiative aligns with global trends advocating for creative approaches in correctional systems and assesses its impact on participants, prison environments, and the wider community.

The success of Art Between Walls demonstrates art's transformative power in creating more humane and supportive correctional spaces. It illustrates that, through creativity and collaboration, prisons can become environments that nurture self-expression, emotional healing, and skill development. By providing inmates with tools to envision a brighter future, this initiative paves the way for similar programs in other regions, contributing to a global movement toward more compassionate and effective rehabilitation strategies (Djurichkovic, 2011; Gussak, 2009). The careful use of these colors aligned with the program's therapeutic goals, helping inmates achieve emotional regulation and psychological well-being (Cerrato, 2012).

As Kosovo's first structured effort to integrate art into its correctional system, Art Between Walls stands as a groundbreaking model of cultural relevance and transformative potential. Its success reaffirms the importance of art in fostering hope, resilience, and redemption, even in the most challenging circumstances.

### ***1.3. Art Between Walls: Murals in the Lipjan Correctional Center***

The project began with carefully selecting female inmates who either had a background in art or expressed interest in creative activities. This process was conducted in partnership with prison staff to ensure meaningful participation. By focusing on women who demonstrated enthusiasm for artistic expression, the initiative aimed to create a space for personal growth, teamwork, and rehabilitation through creativity.

The project unfolded in a series of collaborative phases, each designed to maximize engagement and skill development:

Professional artists from Mural Fest Kosova organized workshops where inmates learned foundational mural art techniques, including sketching, color theory, and composition. These sessions encouraged participants to contribute their ideas, creating a collaborative and inclusive design process.

Mural Fest Kosova has established policies designed to advance women in the arts since its establishment, creating spaces and opportunities for talented girls and women who, due to social, cultural, or economic constraints, have not been given an outlet to showcase their artistic creativity. Mural Fest Kosova believes passionate female artists deserve not to become lost to history but should instead become inspirational figures for future generations.

Art is widely considered an invaluable form of therapy, offering healing power that transcends aesthetic or cultural value. Art serves to mend inner wounds, build confidence in oneself, and open new lines of communication within society. Marginalized women--often the forgotten members in society--are particularly in need of art as a form of self-expression to rediscover themselves and forge new life pathways.

Mural Fest Kosova launched the project "Art Between Walls: Murals in Lipjan Correctional Center," with the intent to not only produce artistic works, but also to empower incarcerated women through art as a tool for rehabilitation, self-expression and collaborative creativity.

This project took shape through several collaborative stages designed to optimize engagement and skill development:

- Mural Fest Kosova organized workshops where inmates learned basic mural art techniques such as sketching, color theory and composition from professional artists from Mural Fest Kosova.

- During these sessions, participants were invited to share their own ideas and personal narratives in a collaborative, inclusive, and emotionally charged design process.
- Through this process, the mural became more than a simple decorative element; it served as a mirror reflecting emotions, memories and hopes of participating women.

This project not only brought art inside of a correctional institution, but also provided its participants with an engaging social experience - showing that art can be an empowering medium that transcends prejudices and limitations - drawing society's focus towards those often left in the background.

#### ***1.4. Execution of Two Collaborative Murals***

The first two murals were designed and executed under the guidance of professional artists, with inmates actively assisting throughout the process. This hands-on collaboration provided inmates with practical training in mural techniques while fostering a sense of accomplishment. The themes of these murals focused on hope, resilience, and transformation, using vibrant colors and uplifting imagery to inspire positivity.

#### ***1.5. Realization of a Mural Designed by Inmates***

The third mural marked a significant milestone, as it was conceptualized and created entirely by the inmates, with professional artists providing assistance as needed. This phase emphasized creative independence, allowing inmates to take ownership of their work while applying the skills they had learned.

## **2. Background and Related Initiatives**

Emotional expression through art has been widely addressed in the literature, which demonstrates that art is used as part of rehabilitative programs and has psychological, social, and spatial effects within correctional environments. This mode of employing art has been studied primarily within specific institutional contexts and prison systems, particularly in Anglo-American countries. In these contexts, various initiatives and dedicated organizations have developed artistic activities within prisons as part of rehabilitative approaches. The present study builds upon these existing experiences and bodies of knowledge by examining them within the specific context of Kosovo.

### ***2.1. Historical Context of Art in Correctional Facilities***

Art as a rehabilitative tool has a rich and impactful history in correctional facilities worldwide, offering significant transformative potential for incarcerated individuals (Johnson, 2008). Programs such as the UK's Koestler Trust and the U.S. Arts-in-Corrections initiative have set global benchmarks for integrating art into prison systems ("About Us," n.d.; California Arts in Corrections, n.d.). These programs demonstrate how creative expression can help inmates process emotions, develop self-worth, and acquire new skills that aid their reintegration into society (Brewster, 2014; Gussak, 2007; Johnson, 2008). Beyond individual benefits, these initiatives highlight art's ability to humanize prisons, foster empathy, and challenge societal stigmas about incarcerated individuals (Cohen, 2009).

### ***2.2. The Koestler Trust (UK)***

Founded in 1962 by Arthur Koestler, the Koestler Trust is the UK's oldest charity promoting arts in prisons and other correctional settings. Koestler's personal experiences of incarceration inspired the creation of the Koestler Awards, which encourage prisoners to channel their creativity through various art forms, including painting, sculpture, and poetry ("About Us," n.d.). The trust has expanded its reach through exhibitions, mentoring programs, and public art sales, with proceeds often benefiting both artists and victim support organizations. This approach has helped prisoners regain a sense of humanity and purpose while reshaping public perceptions of incarceration.



Similar initiatives have demonstrated the rehabilitative potential of art in correctional settings, as illustrated in Figure 2.

**Figure 2.** Duet, by John Banks, was displayed at the Arts by Offenders exhibition as part of the Edinburgh festival.

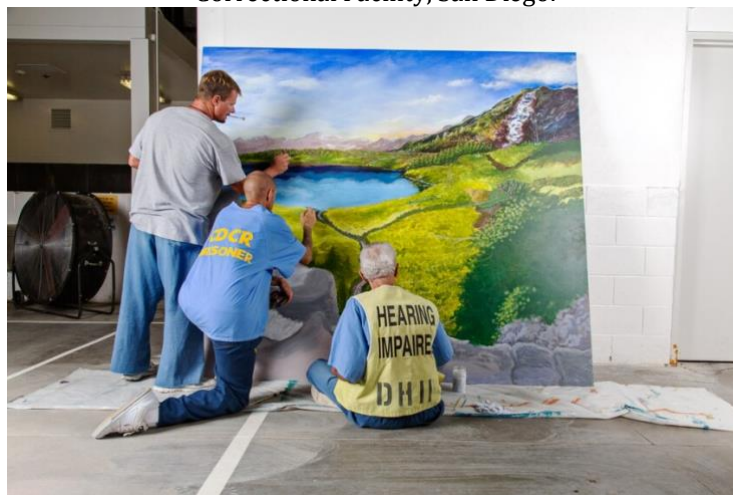


Source: Koestler Trust, 2010. Photograph by John Banks.

### ***2.3. Arts-in-Corrections (USA)***

In the U.S., the Arts-in-Corrections initiative, established in California during the 1970s, introduced structured arts programs to correctional facilities. These programs range from visual arts workshops to theater performances and have demonstrated significant outcomes, including reductions in recidivism rates and improvements in inmates' mental health. Studies have shown that participation in arts programs enhances communication skills, emotional regulation, and teamwork, preparing inmates for life beyond prison walls (Figure 3) (California Arts in Corrections, n.d.).

**Figure 3.** Inmates working on a mural as part of a Project PAINT art workshop at Richard J. Donovan Correctional Facility, San Diego.



Source: Photograph by Peter Merts, PBS SoCal, 2010.

### ***2.4. Case Study: Art Between Walls in Kosovo***

Although independent from prior models, Art Between Walls: Transforming Lives Through Murals in Kosovo stands out as a pioneering initiative that extends mural art's transformative powers in Kosovo. Led by Mural Fest Kosovo, Art Between Walls highlights the transformative potential of mural art within correctional facilities across Kosovo. The initiative employs collaborative mural creation as a method for addressing emotional and psychological distress during incarceration. (Cohen, 2009).

Murals from this initiative transform harsh prison environments into vibrant spaces that celebrate creativity, hope, resilience and identity. Studies have found that aesthetic improvement of spaces can positively impact mental well-being and social dynamics within carceral environments (Brewster, 2014; Johnson, 2008).

What distinguishes this initiative is its participatory nature: inmates are active co-creators in the artistic process rather than passive recipients, providing a sense of agency and purpose while opening up dialogue among inmates, artists, prison staff and prison management. Painting becomes both an act of therapy as well as a means for personal transformation through collectively selected colors and symbols that help participants express themselves while engaging in symbolic acts that support emotional healing and personal transformation.

As well, Art Between Walls serves to strengthen connections between those incarcerated and wider society by offering murals for public viewing - sometimes shared beyond prison walls through media coverage or community events - thus challenging dominant narratives about criminality and rehabilitation, while increasing empathy and recognition of shared humanity. Art Between Walls thus serves both individual recovery as well as collective reflection on justice, memory and social reintegration in post-conflict contexts like Kosovo.

### 3. Research Objectives

The main objective (MO) of this study is to examine the role of mural art as a psychosocial transformative tool within correctional environments in Kosovo through the involvement of incarcerated women in the mural creation process.

Specific objectives:

S01: To analyze how the active participation of incarcerated women in mural creation contributes to emotional well-being and self-expression.

S02: To document and interpret the qualitative experiences of incarcerated women through interviews and testimonial statements.

S03: To assess the impact of mural art on spatial perception within prison environments and on social interaction.

### 4. Methodology

This section describes the methodological approach, including participant selection, the collaborative mural process, and artistic execution.

#### 4.1. Participant Selection

Out of 34 inmates at Lipjan Correctional Center for Women in Kosovo (QKGL), 6 women chose to participate voluntarily in mural painting projects without institutional mandate, reflecting genuine interest and motivation to engage in creative activities, as summarized in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Sample and artistic activities overview

| <b>Activity</b>                     | <b>Number</b> |
|-------------------------------------|---------------|
| <b>Total inmates in facility</b>    | 34            |
| <b>Voluntary participants</b>       | 6             |
| <b>Interviewed participants</b>     | 3             |
| <b>Murals realized</b>              | 3             |
| <b>Artistic workshops conducted</b> | 3             |

Source: Author's Own Data.

The initial phase focused on selecting participants who would benefit most from the program. Female inmates from the Lipjan Correctional Center for Women were selected for the pilot project in line with the festival's theme, "Her Spotlight," which emphasizes women's empowerment (Mural Fest Kosova, 2024). The selection process involved assessing the inmates' interest in art and collaborating with prison staff to identify suitable candidates. This tailored approach ensured engagement and meaningful participation.

#### **4.2. Collaborative Mural Process**

The creative process involved close collaboration between professional artists and inmates, encompassing:

- Workshops on sketching techniques and color application.
- Collaborative discussions to determine themes that resonated with the participants.
- Implementation of designs in designated prison spaces, transforming them into visually engaging environments.

Three inmates participated in in-depth interviews using qualitative research methods (Creswell, 2013) and also provided short testimonial statements highlighting the significance of art as a transformative and healing tool within correctional institutions.

The Art Between Walls initiative was designed as a multidisciplinary methodology, comprising various interlinked dimensions that ensure holistic impact:

- Historical Context – Recognizing the longstanding role of public art and muralism as tools of social emancipation, cultural storytelling, and collective memory is critical.
- Artistic Analysis – participants learned the fundamentals of mural-making, including sketching, color theory, composition, and symbolic visual language, enabling active and creative contribution;
- Psychological Aspect – exploring art as therapy, with particular attention paid to how its creative expression can foster greater self-confidence, emotional wellbeing and communication skills in women incarcerated in prison settings.

#### **4.3. Artistic Execution**

This integrative methodology sought to maximize the transformative impact of mural art by making it more than just decorative. Instead, it became an interactive and reflective process which provided women with an opportunity to tell their own stories, collaborate meaningfully, and rediscover a sense of purpose and identity despite any obstacles in their environment.

Through a carefully orchestrated process, this project demonstrated that art has the power to open new channels of understanding, spark hope, and enable participants to reaffirm a sense of personal identity and purpose.

### **5. Prisoner's Statements**

The emotional effects of the murals are reflected in the statements provided by inmates involved in the project:

Inmate A stated: "I am so thrilled that we had this chance to participate. Art is something sacred for me—something spiritual even. Art allows people to show their true selves. Art helps me forget all my pain; dealing with murals all day helps a great deal. This art class helped so much that I almost fainted (begins crying)."

Inmate B: "For us it is essential that the environment in which we find ourselves be as supportive as possible. From its symbolic representation to our gaze--whenever I glance automatically for several minutes or the entire day, I find that looking out the windows doesn't just bring shuttered-looking shutters but instead opens my view toward the sky."

Notably, the idea for the mural originated within inmates themselves and reflected not only aesthetic aspirations but also symbolic needs. Their request for a galaxy symbolized yearnings for expansiveness; an escape into dreams, possibilities, and infinity. Essentially, it symbolizes longings for freedom that extend beyond physical release toward inner, spiritual, and imaginative freedom. Table 2 presents the main themes emerging from the interviews.



**Table 2.** The main themes emerging from the interviews

| Theme                     | Participant Statement (excerpts)                                                                       | Linked Objective                              |
|---------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|
| <b>Emotional relief</b>   | "Art helps me forget all my pain; dealing with murals all day helps a great deal..."                   | SO1: Emotional well-being and self-expression |
|                           | "The mural we painted gave us hope and confidence in ourselves."                                       |                                               |
|                           | "This art class helped so much that I almost fainted (begins crying)."                                 |                                               |
|                           | "Art is something sacred for me—something spiritual even."                                             |                                               |
| <b>Lived experience</b>   | "This art class helped so much..."                                                                     | SO2: Qualitative experiences and testimonies  |
| <b>Spatial perception</b> | "We should take from prison, not prison take from us."                                                 | SO3: Spatial perception & interaction         |
|                           | "For us it is essential that the environment in which we find ourselves be as supportive as possible." |                                               |

Source: Author's Own Data.

Equally powerful was the suggestion to depict women as lionesses—an iconic representation of feminine strength, dignity, and endurance in prison settings where identity is often suppressed. This image becomes an affirmation of resilience while simultaneously signaling solidarity across gender lines - affirming that even within institutions designed to isolate and dehumanize, human spirits continue to find ways of asserting meaning, dignity and beauty within us all.

Mural Fest Kosova's collaboration with the Ministry of Justice has not only enabled creative expression among prisoners but has also underscored their voices - making this project more than an artistic intervention; it serves as a model of participatory rehabilitation. Though drawing general inspiration from global trends, this initiative is tailored specifically for Kosovo ensuring both its impact and sustainability (Mural Fest Kosova 2024).

### 5.1. Symbolic Murals (e.g., "Hope in the Light" by Rema Salihu)

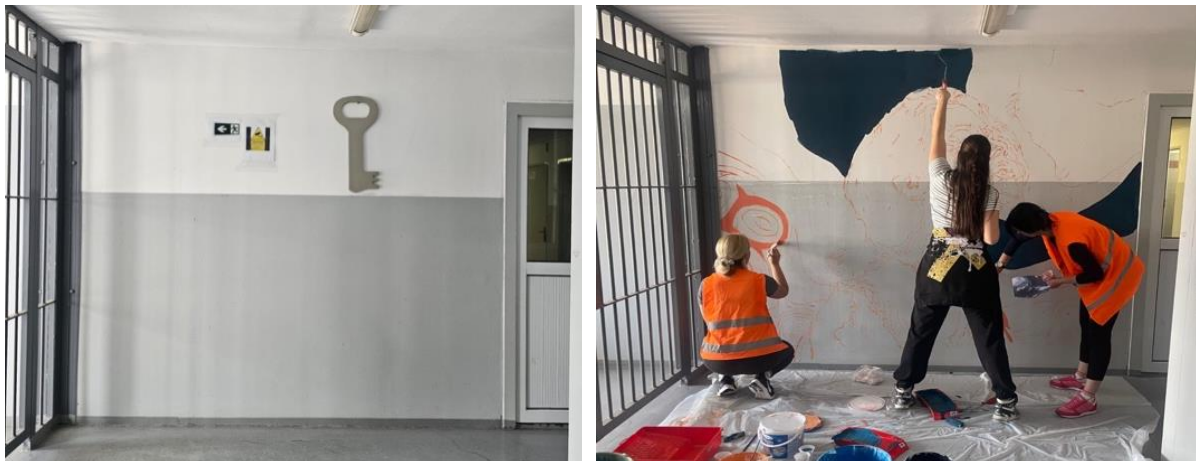
Symbolic designs, such as the image of a woman gazing toward the sun, emphasize themes of hope, renewal, and personal empowerment (Johnson, 2008). These murals, carrying a strong emotional weight, serve as daily reminders to incarcerated women that a brighter future is attainable despite the challenges of the past.

Artist Rema Salihu intervened with the artwork "Hope in the Light" in the entrance section of the corridor that connects this space to the prison yard—a daily passageway for female inmates—treating it as a significant element of visual and emotional communication aimed at positively influencing women's everyday experience along this route (see Figures 4 and 5). The artist utilized this liminal space to introduce hope and beauty into a routine that can often become monotonous.

The mural depicts the image of a woman gazing toward the sun, signifying an inner awakening and a future-oriented outlook; as an act of resistance against despair, its portrait function operates on multiple levels—as an affirmation of possibility in contrast to the gray gloom of imprisonment.

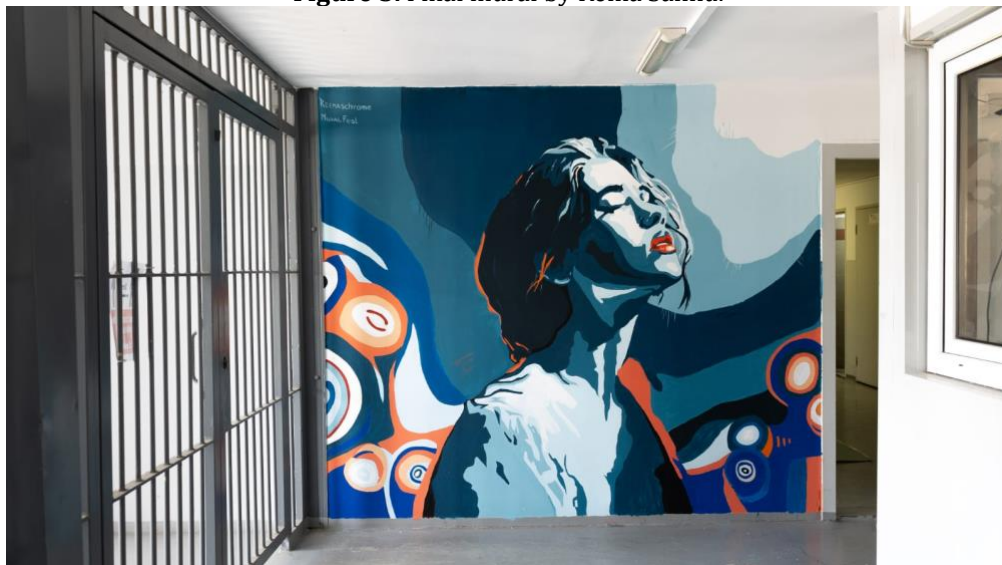
This mural becomes more than symbolic, assuming a ritualistic character; through its daily visibility, the imagery permeates the subconscious and quietly reinforce themes such as self-worth, healing, and possibility. In this context, the sun represents not only light but also aspiration.

**Figure 4.** Before and during the mural painting process led by artist Rema Salihu with the assistance of female inmates.



Source: L. Topalli, 2024.

**Figure 5.** Final mural by Rema Salihu.



Source: Doug Gillen, June 2024.

## **5.2. Abstract and Inspirational Designs**

Abstract murals, often incorporating vibrant colors and dynamic shapes, are used to stimulate creativity and break the monotony of prison life. These designs encourage inmates to find personal meaning and emotional release through their interpretation of the artwork.

## **6. Artistic Motifs and Their Symbolism in Correctional Spaces**

Murals created as part of this initiative were carefully selected to reflect themes of hope, resilience, and personal transformation. Each artwork wasn't just decorative either; each was intended to trigger emotional responses in those viewing it and reduce stress levels within correctional environments. Different motifs were selected for specific areas in prisons according to individual occupant needs and ensure an engaging experience for visitors and prisoners alike.

### **6.1. Nature-Themed Murals by Elba Gashi**

These murals incorporate natural elements like trees, rivers, mountains and open skies as symbols of freedom, renewal and organic growth--symbols of freedom in correctional settings where sensory deprivation and routine rule daily life. Exposure to such imagery has been shown

to reduce anxiety levels, lower aggression levels and foster feelings of connectedness (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989; Ulrich, 1984).

The Landscape was painted in a multi-functional common space designed for female inmates with greater internal freedoms to gather and interact freely, playing an essential role in maintaining social bonds and aiding informal rehabilitation through shared activities. By placing their mural in this location, artists amplified its social potential further; creating an emotionally restorative zone where both interaction and reflection coexisted peacefully.

Additionally, painting was conducted collaboratively with inmates to imbue the space with a sense of ownership and collective identity. As a result, not only was a visual escape created; rather it served as a product of lived experience, memory and emotional labor that restored agency and expression in an otherwise passive setting. The transformation process and the final visual outcome of this mural are illustrated in Figures 7 and 8.

## ***6.2. Abstract and Inspirational Designs***

Abstract murals provide interpretative freedom in prison settings where most aspects of life are controlled or monitored, offering inmates an outlet to use their imagination without restrictions. Not dictating any one narrative but inviting personal reflection and emotional exploration instead, these designs also serve to break up architectural uniformity while stimulating visual senses and encouraging emotional exploration - not to mention breaking monotony of architectural uniformity that often characterizes prison environments (Gussak, 2007; Moeller, 2007).

Inmates frequently reported how abstract murals prompted conversations, stirred memories or simply brightened their spirits. The forms gave them permission to project their own stories onto it—making it deeply personal while its lack of representation became liberating.

Abstract art subtly subverts institutional order by resisting fixed interpretation. By showing up in prison settings, abstract artwork subtly challenges rigid control systems by suggesting interpretation--and thus identity--is fluid and ever-evolving; these murals quietly restore some autonomy for inmates (Gussak, 2007; Haney, 2002; Johnson, 2008).

When combined, these nature-inspired, symbolic, and abstract motifs create an immersive aesthetic ecology within the correctional space--one which fosters emotional resilience, psychological well-being, and individual reflection. Murals don't just decorate walls; they act as tools of nonverbal communication, emotional stability and identity reconstruction. Based on Johan Galtung's theory of peaceful transformation through aesthetics, the project follows his principle that exposure to beauty, symbolism and co-creation can inspire inner change even in settings marked by trauma and social exclusion. Research in art therapy and environmental psychology corroborate this statement that participatory art can foster feelings of self-efficacy, reduce stress levels and help inmates express difficult to express feelings verbally (Galtung, 1996; Gussak, 2009; Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989; Malchiodi, 2010). Art Between Walls operates not just as an artistic intervention but as a soft mechanism of justice and healing--bridging gaps between institutional rigidity and human complexity, confinement and creativity.

**Figure 6.** “Lioness and a Woman” mural created by incarcerated women as part of the Art Between Walls project, with the assistance of artists Elba Gashi and Rema Salihu. Left image: presents the initial sketched idea; right image: completed mural after execution.



Source: Mural Fest Kosova, 2024.

**Figure 7.** Transformation of a mural created by Mural Fest artist Elba Gashi with the assistance of incarcerated women at the Lipjan Correctional Center for Women.



Source: L. Topalli, 2024.

**Figure 8.** After transformation mural by Mural Fest artist Elba Gashi (5 × 2.5 m) painted with ECOS paints.



Source: Mural Fest Kosova, June 2024.

## 7. Implementation Process

The Art Between Walls initiative employs a structured and inclusive methodology to ensure its impact on both the participants and the prison environment. The process combines careful participant selection, collaborative art-making, and phased execution to achieve its rehabilitative goals.

### 7.1. Phased Implementation

The project was divided into multiple phases to ensure gradual progression and sustained impact:



Phase 1: Professional artists, with the assistance of inmates, created two collaborative murals in communal prison spaces. These murals were designed to transform the environment into a more positive and aesthetically pleasing setting.

Phase 2: Inmates were empowered to design and execute their own murals under the guidance of the artists. This phase emphasized personal growth, creativity, and ownership of the art they produced.

Future Phases: Plans include expanding the project to male and juvenile detention centers, further broadening its reach and impact.

## 8. Discussion

This section discusses the findings in relation to the main objective (MO) and the specific objectives (SO1–SO3).

With regard to SO1, the findings of this study showed that the involvement of incarcerated women in creative artistic activities positively affects their emotional well-being and self-expression. This process provided them with the opportunity to express their emotions and to experience a sense of freedom within the prison environment. The murals and the process of their creation contributed to a visible transformation of closed correctional spaces, generating a more positive impact for those who use them. Although participation was limited in relation to the total number of incarcerated women in the institution, the murals were realized with the aim of offering hope and rehabilitative value both to the participating women and to others who experience them.

With respect to SO2, the interviews enabled the documentation and interpretation of the participants' experiences in the mural creation activity. This objective was fulfilled through the testimonies provided by the incarcerated women, which demonstrated the impact of their participation in mural creation, as discussed earlier in the paper.

In relation to SO3, the results suggest that this objective was also achieved, given that the placement of murals in key circulation areas within the institution—particularly in zones that connect the interior spaces with the exterior, such as entrance doors—had a positive influence on spatial perception and social interaction. The murals created in these areas fostered the social and psychological well-being of the incarcerated women to a meaningful extent.

The qualitative statements provided by the participants further support the achievement of the study's objectives. In particular, the reflections of Inmate A highlight the emotional relief and self-expression enabled through mural-making, while Inmate B's testimony underscores the symbolic role of murals in reshaping spatial perception and fostering a sense of autonomy within the correctional environment.

For Inmate A, painting becomes not simply a distraction but an outlet through which inner wounds can be expressed and soothed. Their words reveal a therapeutic dimension of mural-making that transcends traditional rehabilitation by enabling emotional agency and the confrontation of trauma through creativity.

By turning prison walls into visual portals filled with color, metaphor, and imagination, the participant subverts the psychological weight of confinement. Her comment that "we should take from prison, not prison take from us" serves as a powerful statement of autonomy, allowing her to reinterpret her surroundings by projecting hope and vision onto spaces typically associated with punishment and despair.

The implementation process not only transformed physical prison spaces but also had a profound impact on the emotional and psychological well-being of the participants. The collaborative and phased approach fostered a sense of community, reduced feelings of isolation, and encouraged teamwork. Through creative expression, inmates were provided with tools to process their emotions and envision a more positive future.

By creating a dynamic and inclusive framework, the Art Between Walls initiative demonstrates a model of rehabilitative practice that can be adapted and expanded across diverse correctional contexts. This process underscores the potential of art to drive meaningful change in the lives of incarcerated individuals while improving the broader prison environment.



## 9. Research Limitations

This study is subject to several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings, particularly those related to the voluntary nature of participation and the spatial constraints of the mural locations. Although participation was voluntary, it was limited in comparison to the total number of incarcerated women at the facility. The study did not aim to conduct quantitative research but was based on a qualitative approach through interviews. Furthermore, the execution of the murals took place in restricted spaces within the correctional setting, which influenced the selection of sites for their execution.

## 10. Conclusion

Art Between Walls: Transforming Lives Through Murals in Kosovo's Prisons demonstrates the powerful role of art within correctional settings, highlighting its capacity to transform prison environments and support inmate rehabilitation. By fostering creativity, collaboration, and emotional healing, the initiative illustrates how mural art can serve as a pathway toward individual growth and social reintegration.

The success of this project lies in its ability to humanize incarcerated individuals, challenge prevailing stereotypes, and create opportunities for skill-building and self-expression. Participants expressed appreciation for having an artistic outlet that disrupted the monotony of incarceration while allowing them to rediscover personal potential. The murals proved to be more than visual interventions; they functioned as tools for reclaiming identity, strengthening self-esteem, and fostering a sense of belonging within a restrictive institutional environment.

Art Between Walls is distinguished by its deeply participatory approach. Rather than receiving top-down programming, incarcerated women actively contributed to a collective artistic process that was both personal and communal. The murals embody participants' voices, aspirations, and resilience, embedding dignity, agency, and visibility within spaces where such expressions are often suppressed.

As the initiative continues to develop, it offers a transferable model for integrating creative programs into correctional systems in diverse contexts. Art Between Walls demonstrates that culturally responsive, participatory art initiatives—when supported by institutional collaboration—can generate sustainable rehabilitative impact. By reframing prisons not solely as spaces of punishment but as environments with the potential for renewal, this project affirms art's capacity to foster hope, healing, and pathways toward reintegration.

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