

## **Human Rights Issues Through the lens of Art**

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### **Abstract**

This research article aims to explore several human rights issues and how they have been depicted in various art forms. According to the United Nations, Human Rights include rights to life, liberty and freedom which should be permitted to every human being regardless of their race, sex, gender, nationality, religion and other aspects of their identity. A violation of this is deemed as a human rights violation. There are several mediums of communicating the significance of these human rights as well as for bringing attention to the issue of violation of human rights and art is one such medium. The advocates of Human rights utilize art as a medium to put across their ideals and spread awareness. This study explores the ideas of a relationship between art and human rights and aims to understand the significance of the relationship with artistic creations that have been created in lieu of human rights issues through the years.

### **Introduction**

Art has played a prominent role in society for as long as civilization has existed. From the cave paintings curated by the stone age man to the various modern art forms that exist today, art can be perceived as more than just a form of self-expression. Art tells a story that reflects society including the way of living, the culture, the norms and the livelihood of people in general. This is one of the reasons that makes the role of art in society so significant.

Another way in which art has been utilised is for the purpose of advocacy. Art is used to depict the realities of society however; these realities are not always positive or do not always focus on the good aspects of society. A lot of the times art is used to convey that which is lacking in society or that which is wrong. Artists use the medium of art to convey the faults of the world in order to bring attention to these faults through their expression of the same. This explains why sometimes under dictatorial regimes restrictions are imposed on art as a way of restricting peoples' abilities to express themselves or portray the realities of the regimes that govern them. Art is therefore really important as it can change people's perspectives about the realities of the world with its widescale influence and appeal.

Human rights issues refer to the violation of the basic human rights which are bestowed upon human beings by the virtue of them being humans regardless of the other aspects of their identity. These include rights such as the right to education, the right to justice, the right to access to food, equality and such. While in theory these rights apply to all human beings, in practise they are often violated or not met. It is essential to advocate for these rights as many individuals, especially those who are oppressed by the systems that exist in today's world, do not always have a voice or a platform to convey their grievances. Individuals have been using art as a means to convey the issues of violation of human rights as is seen in the world today and to bring attention to these issues using their work. Thus, art plays an important role in the subject of human rights issues by acting as a medium of expression as well as a medium of advocacy for the same.

The two subjects can also be linked from a different perspective resulting in the question of what can human rights do for art. The question can be answered with the statement that creating, admiring or critiquing art is a human right ("Exploring the Connections Between Arts and Human Rights", 2017). Every individual has the right to express themselves through art as well as the right to admire or critique art that exists. However, these rights are often curbed by government regulations under the guise of censorship laws. Thus, artistic freedom can be viewed as a basic human right and should be advocated for.

However, on the contrary art can also be utilised as a way for violating human rights. Art has been used in history as a way of degrading people belonging to certain ethnic or minority groups. For example, the depiction of Jewish people in Nazi newspapers like *Stürmer* during World War II was considered as extremely derogatory ("Exploring the Connections Between Arts and Human Rights", 2017). There have also been instances of derogatory representation of people of colour in art works that portray them in an extremely stereotypical manner. Art work has also been used in the past to propagate the ideas of war, this can be viewed as harmful to human rights as war leads to widespread breach of human rights.

This contradiction also brings to light a conflict of interest pertaining to the censorship of art. Advocating for artistic freedom advocates for the removal of censorship from art. However, art can be used in a manner that can be deemed as harmful towards a specific community of people. This leaves the question of censorship lingering with no specific answer. Thus, we can see that while art benefits the case of human rights issues it can also act as a threat to the same.

## **Literature Review**

This section of the paper explores the various works of art created by artists in order to understand better the role that art plays pertaining to the issues of human rights.

One of the first pieces of art that is brought up while discussing human rights is *Guernica* by painter Pablo Picasso



### Guernica by Pablo Picasso, 1937.

*Guernica* is an art piece that was created by Picasso to depict the horrors of the Spanish civil war. Guernica was a town in Spain that was bombed by the Nazi forces in the year 1937. The attack is deemed as controversial because of the fact that it was carried out on a town of civilians rather than a military base. Picasso created *Guernica* after he was asked to do so by the Spanish Republic as a response to the attack. He did not use any colours in this painting to demonstrate the bleakness and the absence of humanity at the time of the incident (Jackson, 2019). War is an act that is deemed to cause widespread human rights violations and an art work depicting the horrors of the same is an advocacy against war in order to preserve human rights. Guernica is thus perceived as a statement against war and the human rights violations it causes.

Another significant illustration to study while studying the role of art in human rights is *The Hand That Will Rule the World* by Ralph Chaplin



*The Hand That Will Rule the World—One Big Union.*

### *The Hand That Will Rule the World* by Ralph Chaplin, 1917

This illustration by Ralph Chaplin was made with reference to the Industrial Workers of the World or the IWW. This art work depicts the workers coming together, which is symbolic of unionisation. This illustration was created at the backdrop of monopolization of industries to which the labourers

retaliated by forming unions. These unions also played a prominent role in advocating for better working conditions for the labourer ("The Importance of Art in Human Rights – UAB Institute for Human Rights Blog", 2018).

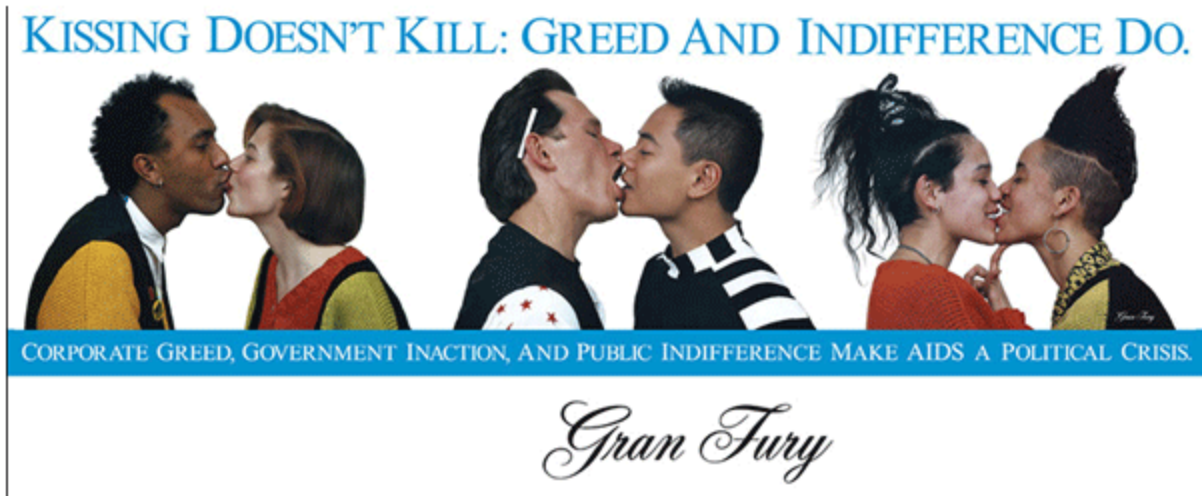
Another prominent artist whose work should be looked at while discussing human rights is Joan E Biren



*Gloria and Charmaine* by Joan E. Biren, 1979

Joan E Biren is a photographer and a filmmaker who uses her work to convey political messages pertaining to the female liberation. Her work *Gloria and Charmaine* is one of her many photography projects that she undertook to depict the relationship of lesbian women using her art. She stated that her purpose for doing this was for advocating for female liberation as well as for rights for queer women. She believed in visibility as there is no community without a visible identity and if there is no community there is no support network and no movement for equality (Burk, n.d.). Thus, Joan Biren took upon herself the identity of a 'lesbian photographer' to promote a positive image of lesbian women as well their livelihood. Her work thus played a prominent role in advocating for the equality of queer women.

Another artist whose work was prominent in advocating for the rights of the LGBTQ community was Gran Fury



*Kissing Doesn't Kill* by Gran Fury, 1989

Gran Fury was an artist who advocated for the Government to take the AIDS epidemic seriously. AIDS is a disease caused by immunodeficiency virus that are sexually transmitted. While this disease can affect anybody, who engages in unprotected sexual activities with an infected person, it became an epidemic by infecting mainly queer men who engaged in sexual activities with other men. This led to AIDS being viewed as a 'gay disease' which created a stigma around it due to the prejudice against gay men at the time. However, during the epidemic gay men did not receive proper medical attention and care due to the inequality that existed in society. Thus, Gran Fury decided to spread awareness about the same by plastering photographs of queer and interracial couples kissing with the caption kissing doesn't kill greed and indifference do, at busses as well as in public places to spread more awareness of the epidemic and to reduce the prejudice around it as well (Burk, n.d.).

Another community that has been marginalised and faces discrimination till date is the transgender community. Not only do trans individuals face discrimination but they are often denied access to other basic amenities as well. Artists Drucker and Ernest utilised the medium of photography to bring awareness around issues surrounding the transgender community



*Relationship* by Zackary Drucker and Rhys Ernest, 2016

Transgender artists Drucker and Ernest released a series of 26 photographs in 2016 documenting their lives as transgender individuals. These photographs also accumulated their experiences including their journeys as well as their environment. Their work is essential in advocating for and bringing awareness to individuals who identify as transgender.

Coming to the subject of feminist art there have been several well-known artists throughout history that have advocated for feminism and equal rights of women through their art. Prominent artists include Frida Kahlo, Georgia O'Keeffe, The Guerilla Girls, Sarah Lucas and many others who have used their art work to advocate for women's rights and to bring attention to issues faced by women in the world till date. Another notable feminist artist is Luzene Hill whose prominent work, *Retracing the Trace*, brings attention to the subject of sexual assault of women.



*Retracing the Trace* by Luzene Hill, 2012

*Retracing the Trace* by Luzene Hill is an art installation that represents visually the number of cases of sexual assault against women that go unreported in the United States of America every 24 hours, which is 3780. The installation begins with the artist lying down in the middle of the gallery with bent limbs following which 3780 red threads are placed on her body. She then moves away leaving an imprint of her body between the threads, the imprint is similar to her actual imprint from a park in 1994 where she was sexually assaulted. After rising she pins all the threads to the walls in the room to form a red ring around the room. It is important for her to touch and feel each and every knot. She describes this as ‘the gradual removal of a violent trace, into a reckoning’ (Armani, 2017). Hill’s piece is a crucial depiction of sexual assault against women.

Another artist who used an installation to address a significant human rights issue is Molly Gochman.



*The Red Sand Project* by Molly Gochman

*The Red Sand Project* by Molly Gochman is a worldwide art installation that brings awareness to the issue of human trafficking. Human trafficking is a gross violation of human rights. Molly Gochman encourages people of all communities to fill the cracks of the pavements and roads in their communities with red sand. This is symbolic of all the overlooked populations that are at a risk of becoming victim to human trafficking including refugees, immigrants and such. According to Molly Gochman the red sand in the cracks is a reminder to the people to not walk over marginalized communities ("The Importance of Art in Human Rights – UAB Institute for Human Rights Blog", 2018). This art work is thus significant in advocating against human trafficking.

Another major human rights issue is that of racism and there have been several prominent artists who have used their work to advocate against discrimination based on race. One such artist is David Hammons



*The Door* by David Hammons, 1969

*The Door* by David Hammons is a work that brings attention to racial discrimination that is seen in the world till date. The art work depicts an imprinted body on an admission's office door. This is

to convey the discrimination against people of colour who were denied entry into institutions such as colleges on the basis of their skin colour ("Six Black Artists Depict Race and Discrimination - MC Llamas - Artlyst", 2020). This art work is thus meant to ignite a conversation of the subject of segregation and racism that exists in the society till date.

## Methods

This article utilises the method of secondary research as it analyses pre-existing art to understand the depiction of human rights issues in the same. The significance of the art in advocating for human rights is analysed. This study also looks at several existing studies to understand the significance of art with respect to Human Rights issues.

## Discussion

The various works of art discussed previously in the paper showcase how art through the ages can be linked to human rights.

The first artwork is *Guernica* by Pablo Picasso created in the year 1937 at the backdrop of the Spanish war. The painting depicts the aftermath of the bombing of the city of Guernica and sends across a strong message conveying the destruction caused by war.

Similarly, *The Hand That Will Rule the World*, an illustration created by Ralph Chaplin in 1917 plays a significant role in advocating for the fair treatment of labourers by providing rights to the labourers.

*Gloria and Charmaine* by Joan E Biren, photographed in 1979 is the part of a series of photographs that bring visibility to queer women in order to advocate for more rights for them.

*Kissing Doesn't Kill* by Gran Fury, a series of photographs that were plastered on buses in the United States during the 1980s were significant in raising awareness for AIDS, a disease that was often neglected despite of being an epidemic due to the stigma around gay men which led to the patients not having access to proper health care.

*Relationship* by Zackary Drucker and Rhys Ernest is an important piece of work, published in 2016, that advocates for the transgender community by bringing attention to them and depicting their everyday lives and journeys.

*Retracing the Trace* by Luzene Hill an art instillation from 2012 is an extremely important piece as it brings awareness to sexual assault, especially sexual assault cases that go unreported.

*The Red Sand Project* by Molly Gochman an art instillation which is worldwide brings attention to marginalized communities that fall victim to human trafficking. Marginalized communities are often overlooked in conversation pertaining to human rights violations and that is what makes this piece so significant.

*The Door* by David Hammons, art instillation from 1969 depicts the harsh realities of racism and segregation where people were denied access to basic amenities such as education on the basis of their skin colour.

Thus, we can see that all these various art forms depicted on different mediums created by artists of different races, genders and sexual orientations advocate for human rights issues and bring awareness to human rights violations. The art work analysed in this paper was created by artists

who were victim to the human rights violations. Therefore, when they created their art, they told their own story. They conveyed their pain and experiences to garner awareness to human rights issues. Their art was impactful as it was a visual depiction of gross human rights violations and these visual depictions were successful in conveying their message to those who witnessed these art works. Therefore, it can be concluded that art plays a powerful role in advocating for and spreading awareness about human rights.

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