

# EMPOWERED BY CREATIVITY: THE INTERSECTION OF ART AND FEMALE EMPOWERMENT IN ESWATINI

MASTER THESIS  
INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT STUDIES  
BY LIA SWEETMAN DE CLAR - 6803032



UTRECHT UNIVERSITY  
FACULTY OF GEOSCIENCES  
SUPERVISOR: DR. MUCAHID BAYRAK  
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## **Abstract**

This qualitative thesis explores the intersection of art entrepreneurship with feminist empowerment among female artists in Eswatini. By challenging the dominant neoliberal framework that views empowerment merely through an economic lens, this thesis adopts a critical feminist perspective to study empowerment as a complex and transformative process. The focus of the research is on understanding how Swazi female artists navigate and redefine empowerment in the socio-political and economic landscape of Eswatini. The research process consisted of participant observation and semi-structured interviews with 11 Swazi female artists, where these women's experiences revealed art as a tool for personal and societal change. The results identified five prominent themes: economic empowerment, community engagement, heritage revival, self-expression and healing, and challenging gender constructs. These themes showed the diverse ways in which art can foster empowerment beyond economic aspects. The discussion highlighted the artists' dual engagement with neoliberal dynamics, where they balanced navigating the neoliberal system while resisting its pressures through creativity. Beyond a means of livelihood, art emerged as a medium for reflection, resistance, healing, and advocacy. Through creativity artists were able to challenge social norms and reclaim their identities.

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## 1. Introduction

*“Invest in women to accelerate development for all”*

Title of an article published by the UN for Women’s Day 2024 (UN-CTAD, 2024)



Figure 1 - Women making and selling crafts to tourists (UN-CTAD, 2024; edited for this thesis – faces blurred)

At the front of this UN article, a photo of a woman who is a familiar figure. Her face, although now blurred, is looking directly at the camera, smiling (Figure 1). Even though her ethnicity, location and livelihood may vary, she embodies the concept of women’s empowerment. Her face, along with the ones of many other women in the Global South, is used by media and development agencies as a symbolic narrative of empowerment through her work as an entrepreneur (Roy, 2010). Her image is often accompanied with catchphrases such as “Invest in women”, focusing on economic statistics as “closing gender gaps in employment could boost GDP per capita by 20%” (UN-CTAD, 2024).

In articles like this, dominant development narratives view economic empowerment of women as a “solution” to poverty (Calkin, 2015). The issue of gender equality has become highly prominent in international development agendas, such as in the Sustainable Development Goals, or in the World Bank’s “Gender Equality as Smart Economics” plan (UN, 2023; Zuckerman, 2007). On the one hand, achieving gender equality as a central topic in development discourse can be seen as a major accomplishment for feminists, who have long

fought to persuade policy makers of the importance of gender equality for development (Parpart et al., 2000). However, these development approaches have faced significant critique, as they are closely intertwined with neoliberal economic policies that push market deregulation and corporate-led development (Calkin, 2015). These neoliberal agendas have a tendency to apply “one-size-fits-all” solutions that do not take into consideration the social and political contexts (Mohanty, 2003).

Since the 1990s, dominant development agencies have been promoting “empowerment” frameworks to achieve their gender equality goals, where empowerment has become a widely used but non-binding term, diluted from its original meaning (Cornwall & Brock, 2005). The concept of female empowerment originated in the 1980s in the Global South within feminist discourse, aiming to challenge patriarchal systems and foster profound social change (Radhakrishnan & Solari, 2015). What began as a politically engaged transformative movement has now shifted to an individualistic framework in neoliberal policies, viewing empowerment merely as economic participation (Boyd, 2016). These policies that aim to eradicate gender inequality do not implement a transformative approach, and depend on the premise that neoliberal capitalism can eliminate gender imbalances (Walby, 2011).

To challenge this neoliberal view of empowerment, I adopt a critical feminist approach to redefine empowerment and reclaim its transformative potential as envisioned by early feminist movements. The thesis is centred on art entrepreneurship beyond the neoliberal economic empowerment lens, and examines the cultural, social and political dimensions of art within the broader systems of power and inequality in Eswatini. In this context, empowerment is not viewed merely as economic participation, rather, as an ongoing process of challenging patriarchal structures and social injustices (Kabeer, 2008). Empowerment is redefined through Zimmerman’s (2000) framework on psychological empowerment, which criticises the simplistic neoliberal understanding of empowerment, and focuses instead on individuals’ understanding of their capacity to influence socio-political systems around them, and their power within their environment (Zimmerman, 2000). In line with critical feminist development scholars, understanding women’s experiences of empowerment involves deconstructing the many stereotypes and assumptions that prevail in discussions about gender and development (Cornwall, 2007; Kabeer, 2008).

This thesis addresses a significant gap in the current literature on empowerment beyond neoliberal frameworks and offers a comprehensive analysis of empowerment through the lens of female artists that incorporates social, cultural and political dimensions. By concentrating on a small group of female artists in Eswatini and discussing their experiences as art entrepreneurs in the localised socio-political context, it provides a counter-narrative to the one-size-fits all solutions frequently promoted by dominant development agendas. Instead of seeing art entrepreneurship merely as a means of livelihood, the role of art is recognised in challenging normative narratives, amplifying marginalised voices and fostering alternative forms of empowerment.

Focusing on Eswatini, a small landlocked country in Southern Africa, provides a critical background for this study, as patriarchal structures and gender inequalities strongly persist, deeply rooted in colonial legacies and post-colonial governance (Forrester & Laterza, 2015). Eswatini's traditional and colonial power structures have perpetuated inequalities, which are reinforced by the strong absolute monarchy (Laterza & Golomski, 2023). When it comes to gender dynamics, pervasive patriarchal norms limit women's access to resources, legal independence and leadership roles (Mavundla et al., 2020; Dlamini, 2023). Although laws on gender equality were officially approved in the Constitution of 2005, a large gap remains between the constitutional clauses and the practical application of these principles (PeaceWomen, 2015).

Traditional gender norms in Eswatini have isolated women from socio-economic and political activities and confined them to domestic spheres. This is deeply rooted in the country's patriarchal structures, influenced by British colonial rule (Ako-Nai, 2013). However, in recent years, these norms have begun to see a shift towards women stepping into professional roles (Mosomi, 2019), challenging the conventional gender structures. In development studies, this shift has mainly been studied through a lens of economic empowerment (Williams et al., 2022; Bercaw, 2012), which fails to depict the pervasive inequalities that still remain. Within this complex socio-political context, art emerges as a nuanced lens to study critical feminist empowerment due to its inherent political and transformative nature (Esche, 2007).

As I study the narratives of women who have embraced art in the evolving socio-cultural landscape of Eswatini, I aim to amplify their voices and shed light on their experiences often side-lined in broader discourses. This thesis aims to enrich the global conversation on



empowerment through a critical lens. The central research question guiding this thesis is: *"In what ways does art entrepreneurship empower women in the socio-politico-economic context of Eswatini?"* This overarching question leads to several sub-questions that aim to unpack the dynamics of art entrepreneurship within the specific context of Eswatini:

- 1. How do Swazi female artists navigate the evolving social, political, and economic context of Eswatini?*
- 2. In what ways are Swazi female artists empowered economically by their creative work?*
- 3. Beyond economic aspects, how do Swazi female artists subjectively experience and define empowerment through their creative endeavours?*

To answer these research questions, I first present a chapter on the theory that frames my thesis, by reviewing literature on empowerment, entrepreneurship, and the power of art, all through a critical feminist lens. Thereafter, I display the methodology used in this research and elaborate on the research process. The following two chapters then present and discuss the research findings, and finally, a concluding chapter answers the main research question and synthesises the core insights of this thesis.

## **2. Theoretical framework**

The theoretical framework of this thesis is grounded in critical feminist theories that challenge the dominant neoliberal narratives of empowerment. The chapter explores the theoretical foundations of empowerment and entrepreneurship, and examines the transformative potential of art as a form of resistance and empowerment for women.

### **2.1. Feminist critiques and theoretical foundations of empowerment: moving beyond neoliberal constructs**

Female empowerment, as a concept deeply rooted in feminist discourse, originated in the 1980s within the Global South as a pivotal instrument for challenging entrenched patriarchal systems and fostering profound societal change (Batliwala, 2007). Southern feminists critiqued prevailing development approaches to gender, such as Women in Development (WID), Women and Development (WAD), and Gender and Development (GAD) models, for their tendency of being apolitical and economically centred (Jahan, 1995; Raju, 2002; Batliwala, 2007). Through the concept of 'women empowerment', a collective effort emerged to engender a more politically engaged and transformative movement. This involved adopting an intersectional perspective to examine how various factors, including class, race and ethnicity influenced the lives of women in the Global South (Cornwall & Rivas, 2015).

However, the trajectory of empowerment took a notable shift as it became appropriated by development agencies and neoliberal institutions (Parmar, 2003; Wilson, 2015). This appropriation led to the depoliticization and dilution of empowerment, embedding it as a widely used concept within development agendas (Cornwall, 2007). The original transformative intent of empowerment, rooted in collective action and systemic change, was replaced by individualistic interventions aimed at achieving narrowly defined economic outcomes (Jahan, 1995). As a consequence, empowerment was redefined through a neoliberal perspective where it became synonymous with economic productivity and market integration in the dominant development discourses, overshadowing its broader implications for social justice and gender equality (Batliwala, 2007).

The neoliberal framing of empowerment leads to development interventions that fail to address the underlying power dynamics, social norms and historical injustices that perpetuate gender inequality (Wilson, 2008). This reductionist view overlooks the relational dimensions of power

and the complexities of women's lived experiences, neglecting the intersections of gender with additional forms of oppression such as race, class, and sexuality (Cornwall & Rivas, 2015). Using a variety of gender stereotypes, dominant development discourses often portray women as indispensable assets for development—showing a woman as a diligent, community-driven, nurturing figure whose empowerment supposedly holds the key to lifting her family, community, and nation out of poverty (de la Rocha, 2007). The UN, for example, often uses language such as the following: “*Invest in women to accelerate development for all*” (UNCTAD, 2024), a phrase which oversimplifies a complex issue and risks reinforcing existing power dynamics rather than challenging them. Consequently, women are reduced to mere instruments, stripped of their autonomy and confined as tools for fulfilling the objectives of development agendas (Parpart, 1993; Raju, 2002).

Despite the critiques of neoliberal empowerment narratives, it is important to acknowledge that these policies have not been uniformly negative for women. For some women, particularly those who have gained access to new forms of work facilitated by market liberalisation, neoliberal policies may have contributed to pathways of empowerment (Afshar & Dennis, 1992). Markets do not always operate against the interests of women, and there are cases where women have mobilised for labour rights within newly globalised industries (Afshar & Dennis, 1992). However, focusing primarily on economic interventions will not challenge the narratives that uphold gender disparities. Economically-centred interventions tend to merely distribute resources, but not alter existing norms of resource allocation and control that systemically perpetuate unequal power dynamics (Wilson, 2008).

In this thesis, I move away from the neoliberal conceptualization of empowerment, and adopt a critical feminist approach. Feminists have consistently contested that empowerment can be “done to” or “for” women (Cornwall, 2007; Rowlands, 1997). Rather, empowerment is seen as a process of growth in women’s consciousness, grounded in the feminist motto “the personal is the political”. This implies that while personal empowerment for women may manifest psychologically at an individual level, it is crucial to recognize that it is interlinked with a larger societal framework encompassing cultural norms, systemic inequalities, historical legacies, and power structures (Colebrook, 2021). This perspective underscores the idea that empowerment should be seen as an ongoing process rather than a fixed destination, echoing Naila Kabeer's concept of a “journey without maps”. This journey emphasises discovery, where perspectives shift with changing circumstances (Kabeer, 2008). Understanding women's experiences of

empowerment involves unravelling the presumptions and stereotypes prevalent in discussions about gender and development (Chant, 2016). By tracing these individual journeys across various contexts, valuable insights emerge regarding the pathways to achieving meaningful social and gender equality. Prioritising women's lived experiences challenges the simplistic narratives often propagated by mainstream empowerment efforts and reintroduces a nuanced understanding of power dynamics into the conversation.

In contrast to the neoliberal conceptualization of empowerment, Zimmerman's psychological empowerment theory offers a more comprehensive framework for understanding how individuals seek to navigate and transform their socio-political environments (Zimmerman, 2000). Although not a feminist theory in itself, the core of Zimmerman's empowerment theory aligns with critical feminists' call for a contextually oriented conception of empowerment (Grabe, 2011; Zimmerman, 1990). Psychological empowerment involves individuals' understanding of their capacity to influence the social and political systems relevant to them, their perception of control, and their power within their environment (Zimmerman, 2000). Additionally, Zimmerman (1995) has articulated three key assumptions about the contextual nature of psychological empowerment. Firstly, psychological empowerment manifests differently from one individual to another, influenced by their unique characteristics. Secondly, it varies based on context, with settings and environments shaping its form. Lastly, psychological empowerment is dynamic, fluctuating over time rather than remaining static.

Zimmerman (2000) delineates how psychological empowerment operates through intrapersonal, interactional, and behavioural components. The intrapersonal component addresses individuals' self-perceptions, including perceived control and self-efficacy (Zimmerman & Zahniser, 1991). On the other hand, the interactional component assesses how individuals understand and engage with their social environment, and involves a critical analysis of power dynamics, their sources and the mechanisms through which they operate (Peterson et al., 2006). Lastly, the behavioural component includes participatory and coping behaviours aimed at fostering community and broader socio-political change (Zimmerman, 2000).

## **2.2. Women's entrepreneurship: a critical examination and feminist intersectional approach**

The concept of entrepreneurship is increasingly recognized as a social and economic phenomenon shaped by diverse contextual factors (Zahra et al. 2014; Welter et al. 2019). These contexts, covering social, cultural, and economic dimensions, significantly influence the perception, practice, and outcomes of entrepreneurship (Dodd et al. 2013; McKeever et al. 2014). The views on entrepreneurship, including who can engage in it and how, vary across regions and cultures, underscoring the social embeddedness of entrepreneurship. (Ramirez-Pasillas et al. 2017; Bastian et al. 2018).

In development discourse, women's involvement in entrepreneurship is often linked with narratives of economic empowerment, driven by economic development initiatives such as microcredit and microfinance, rooted in neoliberal ideologies (Chant, 2013; Staudt, 2010). This discourse reflects a broader global trend towards neoliberal individualism, emphasising the actions and merits of individual entrepreneurs (Ahl & Marlow, 2012). Yet, initiatives like microfinance may not universally benefit women and could perpetuate the very issues they aim to address (Calás et al., 2009). These programmes often operate under gendered assumptions, portraying women as lacking agency and needing external assistance (Marlow & McAdam, 2013). Consequently, the idealised image of the entrepreneur as a competitive innovator does not align with the realities faced by many women entrepreneurs, especially those in marginalised contexts (Marlow & Patton, 2005).

In order to move away from a neoliberal entrepreneurship, a sociological perspective on entrepreneurship should be adopted, as this challenges conventional economic views by highlighting entrepreneurship as a multifaceted, contextually influenced social and economic phenomenon (Thornton, 1999). This perspective acknowledges the role of cultural values and beliefs in shaping entrepreneurial behaviour, recognizing entrepreneurship as a practice embedded in cultural and social contexts (Eroglu & Picak, 2011).

Understanding entrepreneurship from a sociological lens means considering context-specific processes that influence how entrepreneurs perceive and engage with entrepreneurship (Thornton, 1999). Moreover, critical entrepreneurship research advocates for a broader recognition of diverse entrepreneurial experiences, particularly those marginalised in traditional discourse (Essers et al., 2017, Aggarwal & Jonal, 2021). It is important to recognise,

however, that critical perspectives on entrepreneurship have primarily emerged from Western contexts, with limited representation from regions such as sub-Saharan Africa (Marlow, 2014; Al-Dajani et al., 2019). The underrepresentation of such contexts in entrepreneurial discourse perpetuates a one-sided narrative and overlooks the nuanced experiences of female entrepreneurs in institutionally constrained environments (Kiggunda, 2002; Ndemo, 2016).

In response, there is a call to advance entrepreneurship research by incorporating evidence from non-Western contexts and employing intersectional analyses to amplify the voices and experiences of marginalised entrepreneurs (Verduijn & Essers, 2013). Thus, this thesis contributes to this critical discourse by examining the influence of context on art entrepreneurial activity in Eswatini through a feminist intersectional approach, shedding light on the often unheard stories and potentialities of entrepreneurship in the Global South.

### **2.3. Art entrepreneurship as a form of female empowerment**

Art entrepreneurship serves as a captivating avenue for delving into the intricacies of female empowerment, given its profound entanglement with culture and politics (Esche, 2007). Beyond the conventional economic lenses through which empowerment is often examined academically, the interplay of art, culture, and politics provides a rich landscape for exploring empowerment, particularly on psychological levels (Lippard, 1995; Caruso, 2005). From celebrating cultural heritage to challenging systemic injustices to fostering psychological well-being, art emerges as a powerful catalyst for empowering women to reclaim their voices, identities, and agency within society (Luycx, 2020; Scerbo, 2024).

Art is not a neutral form of expression, rather it is inherently of politicised nature (Esche, 2007). Embracing a decolonial lens, art emerges as a potent force challenging visible and invisible forms of coloniality, navigating rationalities shaped by race, class, and gender (Garrido Castellano, 2021; Buechler and Hanson, 2015; Resurreccion and Elmhirst, 2008). This creative context becomes a medium to construct and deconstruct alternative worlds, offering a unique perspective on experience and expectations (Buechler and Hanson, 2015). Forgacs (2000) describes how art, culture, and politics intersect, emphasising the importance of art being part of popular culture in order to start driving cultural change and spreading to wider society. He stresses that effective societal transformation requires art criticism to merge with social critique. By critically engaging with art as a tool for social change, artists and activists seek to

challenge established norms, disrupt power structures, and advocate for justice and equality in society.

In the realm of feminist art, women artists can portray the various facets of female existence, addressing societal norms and ideologies that perpetuate gender inequality (Osborne et al., 1982). Through their creative endeavours, women challenge entrenched cultural values and power structures, thereby engaging in a form of political resistance (Caruso, 2005). Collins (2006) emphasises the transformative potential of artists expressing lived experiences through art, enabling individuals to empower themselves through the reinterpretation of personal experiences. She underscores the importance of consciousness-raising, where women learn to perceive their lives through a political lens, pointing out the intersectionality of personal and political realms. Furthermore, according to Danto (1998), even when politics is not the explicit subject matter of art, its impact inherently carries political significance. Art possesses the persuasive force of rhetoric, which in itself has the potential of altering attitudes and beliefs, and therefore cannot be regarded as neutral or innocent.

In addition to its political influence, art is recognized for its capacity to empower individuals culturally, by providing artists with a platform to reclaim, celebrate, and perpetuate their cultural heritage. Through craft and artistic endeavours, individuals assert their cultural identities, affirming the richness and diversity of their traditions. Uzoagba (2000) highlights the intrinsic connection between art and societal virtues, emphasising art's role as a reflection of a community's culture and values. By engaging in artistic practices, individuals not only preserve their cultural legacies but also actively contribute to their transmission to future generations.

In many Indigenous communities, artistic expression is deeply intertwined with cultural revitalization efforts (Smith & Ward, 2020). Art becomes a channel through which cultural knowledge is shared and cultural pride is fostered. The process of creating art becomes a means of cultural empowerment, allowing individuals to assert their identity and strengthen their sense of belonging within their community. Moreover, artistic practices facilitate intergenerational learning, as elders pass down traditional techniques and stories to younger generations, ensuring the continuity of cultural heritage (SCRGSP, 2014).

Furthermore, artistic engagement extends beyond the preservation of cultural traditions to encompass the exploration and reclamation of cultural narratives. Post-colonial contexts often

see an increased interest in Indigenous art forms as a means of asserting cultural sovereignty and challenging dominant narratives (Franklin, 2017; Grieves, 2009). Through art, marginalised communities reclaim their voices and challenge oppressive structures, promoting a sense of agency and empowerment.

The cultural domain of art intersects with its capacity to strengthen individuals' sense of self-identity. Lippard (1995) contends that engaging in art-making enables individuals to connect deeply with their identities, allowing suppressed aspects to resurface and reinforcing pride and self-esteem. Participation in art activities fosters feelings of achievement and self-confidence (Caruso, 2005). Eisner (2002) also emphasises the transformative power of art, asserting that it awakens individuals to their surroundings and enhances their understanding of the world. By providing a unique lens through which to perceive reality, art facilitates increased self-awareness and a deeper connection to one's environment.

When it comes to self-esteem and empowerment, art has been proven to have a positive impact on individuals' well-being, with the potential to reduce stress and anxiety, and enhance positive emotions when engaging with art (Walsh et al., 2004). Additionally, art serves as a means of communication for vulnerable individuals, allowing them to externalise their thoughts and feelings, thereby mitigating feelings of isolation and alienation (Haslam, 1985; MacLeod et al., 2016). Through the process of art-making, individuals develop competence, enhance communication skills, and increase self-awareness, ultimately having the potential to empower people to cope with life's challenges (Burpee, 1997; Lawson, 2001). The expressive nature of art helps foster self-perception change and capacity-building, which transcends verbal language and allows for the communication of complex emotions and experiences.

## **2.4. Conclusion**

To summarise, the theoretical framework of this thesis presents art entrepreneurship and its interplay with female empowerment through a critical feminist lens. Unlike neoliberal ideologists, I am not presenting art as a standalone solution to empowerment. I study art as a broader, transformative process that aims to dismantle patriarchal structure and foster social and gender equality. Art serves as a medium for social critique, political resistance, and cultural expression, and can be a tool for women to reclaim their voices and challenge injustices. By emphasising empowerment as rooted in systemic change, I move away from neoliberal narratives that view empowerment as mere economic productivity and overlook the



complexities of women's lived experiences. Integrating Zimmerman's (2000) theory of psychological empowerment, the theoretical framework's focus is on individual's capacities to influence their socio-political environment. This holistic framework prioritises women's individual stories, offering a view on empowerment that goes beyond simplistic one-size-fits-all economic interventions.

### 3. Geographical context

Eswatini is a small landlocked country situated between South Africa and Mozambique (see Figure 2), with a population of 1.2 million people. The country operates under an absolute monarchy, ruled by King Mswati III since 1986 (Welle, 2014). Formally known as Swaziland, the country was renamed Eswatini by the king in 2018, to celebrate fifty years of independence from British colonial rule and to return to the original name in siSwati language (Ngoepe et al., 2020). Widely perceived as a harmonious society with minimal political and civil unrest, this portrayal masks the nation's underlying social and economic disparities, which are deeply rooted in its historical trajectory (Forrester & Laterza, 2015).



Figure 2 - Eswatini's geographical location (Masson, 2024)

#### 3.1. Colonial times

Eswatini was designated as a British Protectorate in 1903 (Masson, 2023). Under this rule, Eswatini was governed by colonial administrators appointed by Great Britain, who imposed various laws and regulations to assert British authority and exploit the territory's resources. The colonial administration facilitated the extraction of natural resources for the benefit of British companies and the colonial government. Land was taken from Indigenous communities and allocated to European settlers or used for commercial agriculture, displacing local populations and disrupting traditional livelihoods (Forrester & Laterza, 2015). Social and cultural dynamics

were also influenced by British colonial policies, with the imposition of Western education and Christianity having a profound impact on Indigenous cultures and identities (Matemba, 2021).

Colonisation had an impact on gender relations, stripping women of their traditional roles and authority. Men were given access to Western education and became more integrated into class structures, occupying working roles, while women were excluded from work and remained financially dependent on men (Adu, 2013). In pre-colonial times, both men and women were involved in farming. However, British colonisers removed women from crop farming that was exported to England, and left women to farm solely for family consumption, thus reducing their financial income (Ako-Nai, 2013). This deliberate gender segregation in colonial times positioned men in more powerful positions, entrenching male dominance. This marginalisation permeated to many aspects of life, with men gaining the dominant role in all institutions, including the home (Adu, 2013). This was a significant change from pre-colonial times, where women in southern Africa were not confined to the domestic sphere, and were involved in production, religion and politics. The gender division of labour was more flexible, and women had more control and independence (Moagi & Mtombeni, 2019).

### **3.2. Post-colonial Eswatini: political context**

In 1968, Eswatini emerged as an independent nation, ending the British colonial rule. Under the leadership of King Sobhuza II, Eswatini navigated the complexities of decolonization (Laterza & Golomski, 2023). However, the legacy of colonialism shaped the structures of power and governance that emerged in the post-independence era.

The political landscape of post-colonial Eswatini was based on the British colonial system of indirect rule, which relied on local elites to administer colonial policies on behalf of the colonial power. This perpetuated a centralised form of authority that stifled political pluralism. Under this system, the king has in essence absolute power. The monarchy's influence extended beyond politics to encompass land tenure systems, cultural practices, and social norms. Customary law, deeply rooted in colonial legacies of legal pluralism, served as the foundation for governance, often at the expense of individual rights and freedoms (Laterza & Golomski, 2023).

Along with the king, the king's mother who is referred to as the Queen Mother, has the role of spiritual leader of the country. Despite her elevated status, this leadership position as a woman

does not extend to the general population of the nation, as all the true political power is in the hands of males (Marwick, 1973). According to customary law, women cannot have property in their own right. Although constitutional laws are evolving to allow women to purchase property, chiefs have been known to still refuse land to women (Adinkrah, 1990). Furthermore, when it comes to marriage, many Swazis marry under customary law and rely on traditional courts for conflict resolution. These courts are permeated by patriarchal values and male officers who take male-centred perspectives on conflict resolution, allowing domestic violence to persist (Simelane, 2011). This shows the lasting influence of customary law on women, and how it perpetuates their subordinate positions in society.

The year 2021 witnessed a dramatic escalation of tensions in Eswatini, as protests and civil unrest erupted across the nation, challenging the entrenched authority of the monarchy and demanding meaningful political reform. The trigger for these uprisings was the death of Thabani Nkomonye, a government critic who was allegedly killed by police forces in May 2021. Protests initially centred around calls for justice for Nkomonye, however, it evolved into broader demonstrations against the monarchy and the political status quo (Amnesty International, 2021). Fuelled by widespread frustration with corruption, lack of political freedoms, and difficult economic times exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, the protests gained momentum and quickly spread across the country. The government's response was swift and heavy-handed; at least sixty protesters were reportedly killed by the army, with as many as 1,000 injured. Smaller protests continued throughout 2022 and 2023 (Cabrita, 2021). As of early 2024, the unrest in Eswatini has subsided, even though the current government continues to face significantly low approval rates (Eligon & Silva, 2024).

### **3.3. Race and Ethnicity**

When it comes to race and ethnicity, the lasting impact of colonialism on society is evident. Unlike in the bordering country of South Africa, discussions about race in eSwatini are often subdued. Across various social and ethnic groups, there is a tendency to downplay the significance of racial differences, with narratives emphasising harmonious interracial relations and the absence of racial tensions compared to South Africa (Laterza & Golomski, 2023). However, despite these narratives, racial discrimination against black Swazi citizens remains prevalent (Bezuidenhout, 2004; Laterza, 2016).

The relationship between the royal regime and white interests has been complex and ambivalent. During Sobhuza II's reign (1921-1982), there was a political alliance with white settlers and the South African apartheid state to limit the influence of black activists who were fighting for universal suffrage and multi-party democracy. This alliance dissolved after the monarch's reign was over, but subsequent monarchs maintained close ties with white capital, especially in industries like sugar production, shaping the country's social and economic trajectory (Laterza & Golomski, 2023).

In terms of language, Malambe & Harford (2021) explore the current situation of siSwati, the primary language spoken by black Swazi citizens. They shed light on its marginalisation in various spheres including governance, business, journalism and higher education, in comparison to English, Eswatini's other official language. The prevalence of English is attributed to historical factors such as the lack of development in general education in siSwati during colonial times (Motsa et al., 2019). The national government does not currently push for siSwati to be more integrated into everyday practices or institutional policies, therefore perpetuating the idea that English, the colonisers' language, is of a higher status than siSwati (Malambe & Harford, 2021).

### **3.4. Gender**

In Eswatini, gender dynamics are deeply entrenched in both legal frameworks and cultural norms. Despite the approval of the Constitution in 2005, where principles of gender equality were explicitly inscribed, the practical application of these principles remains limited, representing a significant gap between constitutional provisions and real-world implementation (PeaceWomen, 2015). Traditional patriarchal beliefs and practices, enforced by Swazi traditional authorities and leaders, persist in rural communities, where intimate partner violence against women is often justified (Simelane, 2011). Throughout history, women in Eswatini have been confined to subordinate roles resembling minors within the context of marital unions, which has restricted their ability to access resources, own property, and exercise legal independence. The incorporation of colonial law into Eswatini's legal system in 1907 perpetuated these inequalities by legally enforcing marital power structures favouring husbands. This legal framework meant wives were legally unable to make independent decisions regarding legal matters without their husband's consent (Mavundla et al., 2020).

Despite recent legal advancements, such as the abolition of discriminatory marriage laws in 2019 (OHCHR, 2020), the legacy of gender discrimination remains deeply ingrained in Eswatini's culture. Women continue to be underrepresented in leadership positions, holding only 17% of seats in the House of Assembly, and face pervasive violence and discrimination rooted in patriarchal norms (Dlamini, 2023). A significant proportion of girls and women report experiencing sexual violence, and many fear criticism, harassment, or family problems if they aspire to enter political leadership (Afrobarometer, 2023). The coexistence of Eswatini's dual legal system, a legacy of colonial rule, has resulted in infringements upon women's rights, as the convergence of two legal frameworks often gives rise to conflicts and contradictions (HRW, 2020).

### **3.5. Conclusion**

To conclude, the geographical context of this thesis shows a country marked by a complex historical and socio-political background. Eswatini has deeply rooted social and economic disparities that were influenced by colonial times and perpetuated by the current absolute monarchy. These colonial legacies also influence gender dynamics, where traditional norms and customary law maintain patriarchal structures that limit women's freedom. Understanding these historical and current factors allows for a better contextualisation of the backdrop of this thesis.

## **4. Methodology**

This section provides the qualitative methodology to structure this thesis. I employed qualitative research methods, including participatory research practices and semi-structured interviews, to engage with female Swazi artists. Qualitative methods are appropriate for empowerment studies, as they allow to study the complex process of empowerment that involves changes on an individual level, as well as possible structural and institutional changes (Nazneen et al., 2014). The primary objective was to explore the reciprocal relationship between art entrepreneurship and female empowerment among Swazi women. I made use of a feminist methodology approach, recognising my positionality in this research.

### **4.1. Data collection methods**

To collect data for this research, participant observation in Eswatini spanned eight weeks in February and March 2024. As defined by Dewalt & Dewalt (2011), participant observation involves researchers moving between active participation in the community and observation of said community. This ethnographic method immerses the researcher in the community's daily routines, fostering relationships and documenting the insights gained. By being fully immersive, participant observation ensures the researcher's life becomes intricately entwined with her research, providing unique first-hand insights into the lives of the participants.

Furthermore, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 11 female artists. These semi-structured interviews took on a conversational, fluid form, adapting to the interviewees' interests, experiences, and views on female empowerment through art entrepreneurship, prioritising dialogue over interrogation (Dearnley, 2005). The flexibility of these interviews allowed for a dynamic conversation, with recordings and transcriptions employed after receiving consent from the research participants. To facilitate the semi-structured interviews, an interview question guide was compiled, drawing directly from concepts outlined in the theoretical framework (see Appendix 1).

### **4.2. Recruitment and data collection process**

To find participants for the research, I employed a 'snowball' sampling technique, leveraging one contact to assist in the recruitment of another, and this process continued as each introduced

me to additional participants, creating a cumulative effect or 'snowballing' (Naderifar et al., 2017). The recruitment strategy gained momentum as layers of contacts built up. I aimed to include women from diverse age groups, engaged in different occupations, with distinct family structures, and residing in various locations within Eswatini.

During my time in Eswatini, I performed participant observation research by actively engaging with female artists in various art spaces over the course of eight weeks. Gaining access to the art spaces required building relationships and obtaining permission from the artists. I introduced myself, explained the purpose of my research, and sought their consent to observe and participate in their activities. Once access was granted, I fully immersed myself in the art spaces, attending exhibitions, workshops, and social gatherings alongside the female artists. Throughout my participation, I engaged in discussions and observed the dynamics and interactions within the art spaces. Detailed notes were taken during each interaction and activity, capturing insights, behaviours, and any other pertinent information. In addition to this, I used photography to enrich the research. While respecting ethical considerations and ensuring no faces were shown, I captured images of the art spaces, artworks, and various activities. These visual representations served as a valuable addition to my observations, providing context and visual documentation of the environments and artistic processes.

Complementing the participatory observation, semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather insights directly from the women engaged in art entrepreneurship. These interviews were designed to be guided by the theoretical framework of this thesis. The formulation of interview questions was tied to the three components of empowerment —namely, intrapersonal, interactional, and behavioural empowerment (Zimmerman, 2000), as well as the contextual socio-politico-economic factors outlined in the framework. For intrapersonal empowerment, questions researched into the individual perceptions, motivations, and self-defined markers of empowerment that these women attribute to their artistic endeavours. Interactional empowerment was explored through inquiries into the social dynamics within and outside the art workshops, investigating how collaborative efforts and community interactions contribute to their sense of empowerment. Lastly, behavioural empowerment was assessed by examining tangible changes in behaviour and actions resulting from their engagement in art entrepreneurship.



### **4.3. Data analysis**

For the semi-structured interviews, the primary source of data for this thesis, the analysis was based on the principles of grounded theory to explore the complex experiences of the Swazi female artists. In line with grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), data collection and analysis took place side by side, allowing for key themes to emerge directly from the data. Although I used theories from my theoretical framework to create my interview guide, I remained open to the emergence of new concepts in the data analysis, rather than imposing preconceived categories. I followed Strauss & Corbin's (1990) three-step process of coding, through open, axial and selective coding. I transcribed the interview recordings, and through Nvivo software I began by open coding, where I identified initial themes and concepts that appeared with frequency throughout the data analysis. Thereafter, I employed axial coding to categorise the initial open codes into broader related categories. Finally, through selective coding, final core categories of empowerment were identified, which creates grounds to build theory on female artists' experiences of empowerment through their artistic processes.

For the participatory observation data, rather than conducting a detailed, systematic analysis, I used the data to add contextual depth to the primary data of the interviews. The insights from the participatory observation add a broader perspective to the lived experiences of the female artists, and allow for a better understanding of their social dynamics. This ensures that the interpretation of the interviews is grounded in the actual socio-cultural environment of the artists. It therefore helped to guide the identification of primary themes throughout the data analysis of the interviews, and additionally support these findings.

### **4.4. Positionality in my research**

Feminist scholars have long emphasised the importance of acknowledging one's positionality in research, challenging masculinist notions of research objectivity (Haraway, 1988; Richa & Geiger 2007). The concept of feminist reflexivity asserts that knowledge is inherently situated and partial, as knowledge is always produced under a context which will shape it in a certain way (Rose, 1997). It is imperative to recognise the power structures we may inadvertently perpetuate as researchers, which are often endowed with privilege (for instance, in my case, being a cis, white, able-bodied woman). In this thesis, in an attempt to challenge these power

dynamics, a strong focus is given to the voices of participants and attention is placed on establishing trustful relationships with the artists.

Being a white European woman, my positionality is entangled in colonial legacies, potentially leading to perceptions of wealth, colonial power, and privilege that could influence my relationships with the artists. I acknowledge the power dynamics that are present when I conduct fieldwork as a researcher, where I am gathering data about participants' lives and have an authority to portray their experiences in a certain way. Simultaneously, I value the agency of the artists who participated in my research, recognizing their own influential role in this thesis.

#### **4.5. Ethics**

As highlighted by Diener and Crandall (1978), ethical considerations in social research typically fall into four main categories: potential harm to participants, lack of informed consent, invasion of privacy, and deception. To address these issues, before starting the research, participants were required to provide explicit consent through an informed consent form (see Appendix 2). Moreover, the interview questions were formulated to ensure clarity and avoid any potential misinformation. Participants maintain anonymity throughout the study, where only initials were used as opposed to their real names. Additionally, all photos of the art included in this thesis are used with verbal permission from the artists. I do not claim ownership of any of these art works. Furthermore, overt participant observation research methods were employed, meaning that participants were fully aware of the research process and their role within it. This transparency minimises the likelihood of deception, ensuring that ethical standards are upheld throughout the research (Li, 2008). Finally, to mitigate any risks of fraud or plagiarism, all literature is diligently cited using platforms such as Zotero and APA Scribbr.

## 5. Results

The results section begins by unpacking the theme of powerlessness experienced within the local art community of Eswatini, examining how patriarchal norms, economic constraints, and governmental neglect intersect to shape artists' experiences. Despite these challenges, art emerges as a potent tool for empowerment and resistance, offering a platform for artists to reclaim agency and encourage societal dialogue. The following subsections cover five prominent themes of empowerment that emerged from the interviews: economic empowerment, community engagement, heritage revival, self-expression and healing self-identity, and challenging gender constructs. Each theme is explored in detail to provide a comprehensive understanding of the empowering potential of art within the Swazi context.

I present the findings by using the words of the artists themselves, incorporating many quotes to show their perspectives. Furthermore, I incorporate some of the artists' art pieces, after having received permission. To maintain anonymity, the names of the painting are not disclosed. In the table below, an overview of the artists is given to contextualise the results. In terms of class, due to certain limitations in accessing artists, all interviewed artists belong to a relatively upper class.

**Table 1 – Artist overview**

<b>Artist</b>	<b>Art form</b>	<b>Income source</b>	<b>Age Bracket</b>	<b>Interview date</b>
M	Painter	Full time artist	40-50	01-03-2024
L	Handcrafter - Bags and pencil cases	Full time crafter	30-40	05-03-2024
Q	Handcrafter - Jewellery and pottery	Full time crafter	50-60	05-03-2024
S	Painter	Full time artist	40-50	06-03-2024
N	Painter	Has other sources of income besides art	30-40	11-03-2024
P	Drawer	Full time artist	20-30	14-03-2024
G	Handcrafter - Weaving	Full time crafter	50-60	19-03-2024
R	Handcrafter - Weaving	Full time crafter	30-40	19-03-2024

X	Painter	Has other sources of income besides art	20-30	19-03-2024
W	Photographer	Has other sources of income besides art	20-30	23-03-2024
Y	Photographer	Has other sources of income besides art	30-40	08-04-2024

### 5.1. The context: Powerlessness

This section explores the theme of powerlessness as experienced by artists within Eswatini's art community. Drawing from the socio-politico-economic context outlined in the geographical context section of the thesis, powerlessness refers to the numerous challenges that artists confront due to entrenched patriarchal norms, economic constraints, and governmental neglect. These systemic forces intersect to shape the experiences of artists, particularly women, within the local art spaces. Through their stories, the artists illuminate the complex dynamics of power and agency within the context of Eswatini's societal structures.

Many artists articulate the pervasive influence of patriarchy, drawing parallels between the absolute authority of the king and the dominance of men across various societal domains, including art spaces. N explain the following: *“Men are generally viewed as the head and that kind of seeps into everything. Everything like religion, church, I've seen men dominating in every space. So that has seeped into the art world as well.”* X expresses a similar opinion, adding that patriarchal views are deeply ingrained in the country's culture, and has therefore become a generational curse. However, she has observed a trend where artists are attempting to challenge this curse, herself included. X describes the difficulty in effecting cultural change, as patriarchal structures remain prominent among influential figures: *“You see them in the government, you see them in the royal family, it doesn't help, and it doesn't help that there's no freedom of speech as well, so it's hard to talk about it. It's hard to spread the word.”*

These unequal gender structures are reproduced in the art world, as highlighted by P who underscores its male-dominated nature. N echoes this sentiment, expressing the challenges she encounters in asserting herself as a woman in artistic circles largely dominated by male artists: *“A lot of male artists are dominating those spaces. So it is difficult to assert myself in the art space. I'm trying to navigate that and figure that out.”* Y further contributes to this discussion, highlighting how intersecting identities of race and gender increase the obstacles faced by black

women seeking entry into art spaces, showing the lingering post-colonial racism in Eswatini. She explains:

*“Intersectionality adds layers of complexity to [black female artists’] experiences and challenges, as they may face compounded discrimination and marginalisation. [...] Black female artists often struggle with representation and visibility in mainstream media and artistic spaces. There is a lack of diverse representation, which can limit opportunities for recognition and exposure”.*

The male dominance in creative spaces became clear throughout my fieldwork, when I conducted a systematic examination of various art spaces with the specific aim of assessing the representation of female artists within these contexts, as detailed in Table 2 below.

**Table 2 - Representation of female artists within art spaces**

<b>Female representation</b>	<b>Gallery description</b>	<b>Art by females</b>	<b>Art by males</b>
<b>Art gallery 1</b>	Small gallery space with many different artists’ work displayed on a permanent basis	0 paintings	52 paintings
<b>Art gallery 2</b>	Art space for exhibitions and events, with a photography exhibition on display at time of visit	4 pieces	15 pieces
<b>Art gallery 3</b>	Contemporary art gallery with rotating exhibitions where different artists are chosen by a female curator	23 paintings	33 paintings
<b>Handcraft Market 1</b>	Market in prosperous neighbourhood where different crafters can sell their work, mostly woodcraft	0 full pieces (only finishing touches)	All pieces
<b>Handcraft Market 2</b>	Market in the capital city with permanent stands displaying a variety of crafts	8 stalls	4 stalls

The first location I visited was Art Gallery 1, one of the main art galleries in Eswatini. Here, I found a collection of 52 paintings, all created by a variety of male artists, highlighting a glaring

gender imbalance in representation within the gallery. This disparity underscores the systemic challenges faced by female artists in gaining visibility and recognition in art spaces. Transitioning to Art Gallery 2, which featured a photography exhibition, the trend persisted, with 15 male artists and only 4 female artists exhibiting their work. However, Art Gallery 3 presented a more nuanced picture, with 23 out of 56 paintings attributed to female artists. Engaging in a conversation with the female gallery curator provided valuable insights into the philosophy guiding the selection of artworks. The curator emphasised a commitment to prioritising artistic quality while also actively seeking to create opportunities for female artists to exhibit their work. This deliberate effort to address gender imbalances within the gallery reflected a proactive approach towards fostering inclusivity and diversity within the local art community.

Moving beyond visual art gallery settings, I explored artisanal spaces, where gender dynamics were evident. At Handcraft Market 1, woodcraft was exclusively dominated by male artisans, while a singular female individual was in charge of applying finishing painting touches to the final products. This division of labour highlighted entrenched gender norms within the craft industry. In contrast, Handcraft Market 2 revealed a more diverse landscape of artisanal production, with both male and female artisans selling their pieces. However, the types of crafts on display still reflected traditional gendered divisions, where women sold mainly woven products and jewellery, historically associated with female craftsmanship, and men sold mainly wooden crafts and paintings. This observation underscored the intersection of gender, tradition, and artistic expression within the local artisanal community, wherein cultural and societal norms shape the production of handcrafts.

These prominent gender inequalities impact women in their daily lives. N expresses how she feels restricted by little things such as not being able to wear the clothes she wants to wear, and these limitations build up and make her feel like she can't do anything as a woman. Unfortunately, she also sees that progress towards gender equality is slow: *"It is a bit more progressive, but still very, very, very conservative. I think that's something very consistent over the years."* A number of artists also expressed feeling restricted within romantic relationships. M touched upon this topic when discussing challenges she faced within her marriage: *"[My ex-husband] said I must not go to work. I have to sit down and take care of the kids. Because he will provide everything. [...] He refused to let me work."* This left her feeling trapped in her relationship. M went on to explain how although her husband had promised to provide for the

family, one day he took off and left with another woman; *“He left and took everything. It was very difficult. [...] He said, ‘Did you buy it? Because I was the one who was working. Did you buy this?’ He took everything, even the blankets.”*

The husband left and told M he would not help take care of the children. The artist added that she has seen other women go through similar struggles. *“Every time I see the life of women, women are struggling. Because they abuse women, because they have no power. [...] Abuse is very high in Swaziland, I grew up seeing all these things.”* She explains how this is what pushed her to focus on women’s rights in her art, in order to spread the word on these issues of gender.

When it comes to the influence of the government, many artists discuss the lack of support they receive in the art world. Q expressed that the government does not support handcraft. She believes the government is taking a lot from them, but they receive no support in return. She emphasises the high levels of corruption, lamenting *“Here in Swaziland what’s killing us the most is the corruption in the government.”* W further discussed the lack of economic support from the government in the art community, stating *“I don't know where the money is being held, but it's not making it to the art spaces.”* X voices a similar frustration:

*“I think I just blame Swaziland because the resources are there to pour into pushing the creative scene in general [...] but not enough attention is in that area. It's in other areas, Lord knows where it is. I think it's just going into people's bellies, but it's just not [in the art sector].”*

These systemic barriers can make it difficult for women to pursue art due to the lack of resources and governmental neglect.

This oppressive socio-political climate is difficult to discuss openly. X stresses the lack of freedom of speech in Eswatini, and how it can be dangerous to address injustices publicly, saying: *“There are repercussions [when you try and speak out]. Funny things happen”*. M, W and S have all expressed experiencing a sense of fear when releasing some of their art pieces. S is currently working on a painting that addresses the 2021 uprisings against the government (Figure 3). She explained:

*“A lot of people died on the day [of the uprising] and too many buildings and shops got burnt. [...] People wanted to choose their own prime minister which has never been done in the country. The prime minister is always chosen by the king.”* She goes on to describe the painting: *“There’s a lot that’s happening here. Kids are worried. It’s just too dark. It is too bright. It is too bloody. There is hope. There is no hope. It’s just mixed emotions. So that is presented by the colours. Swaziland is crying, red tears.”*

Despite the risks, artists like S bravely use their art to protest and shed light on difficult truths in a climate repression.

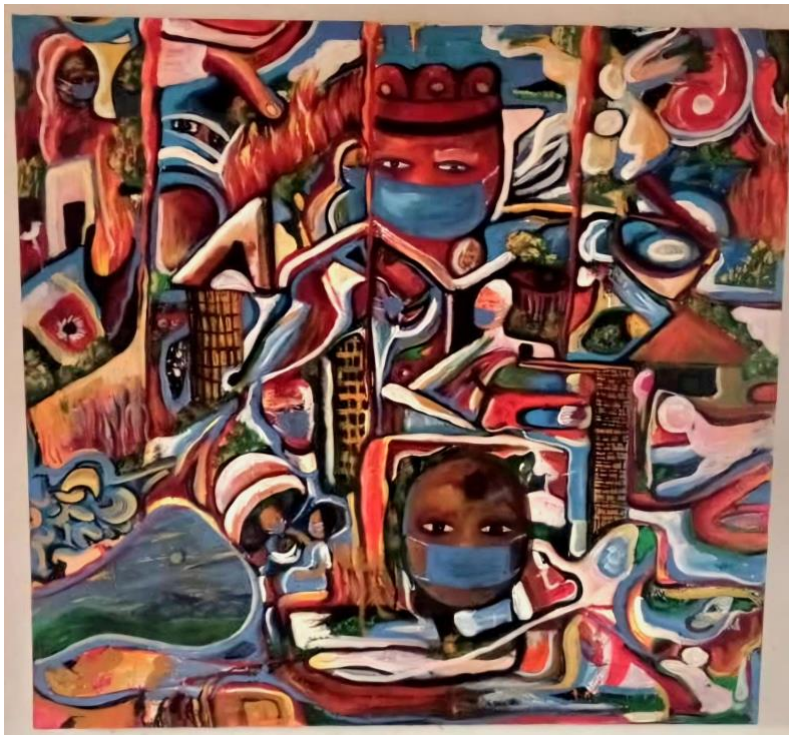


Figure 3 – S’s artwork (added in the thesis after receiving permission from the artist)

Against this tumultuous political landscape, many of the women expressed how art helps them take the power back. Through art, artists can discuss topics that cannot be spoken about verbally. S recounts *“As an artist we have freedom of expression, because everyone can interpret the painting in their own way.”* N explains how addressing social issues through art makes her feel empowered:

*“It’s such a unique form of expression. I feel very empowered because there are certain areas that I’m able to touch on and speak to in my work. So in terms of*



*perspectives about women that men don't really understand, you are able to express that and show that type of perspective through art.”*

X expresses how art is a way for her to navigate the lack of freedom of speech, and how she can express her emotions, thoughts and ideas best when she can show them visually through painting. She believes that art has a special power to change social norms:

*“Sometimes it's painting the most simple thing, but it puts people in an uproar. Art is very powerful in that sense. I think it definitely plays a large role in disrupting norms. Whether the situations are fixed at the end or the solutions are made I think that's rare, but the message was sent. People talked about it, which was the whole point of it.”*

The narratives presented underscore the multifaceted challenges faced by female artists amidst a patriarchal and politically charged landscape. Despite the pervasive challenges, art emerges as a potent tool for empowerment and resistance. Through their creative expressions, artists navigate the constraints of their reality and discuss topics that are often not touched upon in Eswatini. Throughout the interviews with the artists, five themes emerged with the highest frequency, each deserving dedicated exploration: economic empowerment, community engagement, heritage revival, self-expression and healing self-identity, and challenging gender constructs.

## **5.2. Economic empowerment**

The theme of economic empowerment within Eswatini's art landscape presents a notable contrast between handcrafters and visual artists. While handcrafters emphasise the significance of economic autonomy, visual artists face distinct challenges in achieving similar levels of financial stability. Furthermore, the effects of economic empowerment extend beyond individual livelihoods, influencing intrapersonal gender dynamics within Eswatini's socio-economic landscape.

Q, a handcrafter working alongside an earring and homeware social enterprise (Figure 4) expresses her appreciation for earning a fair wage. She explains how minimum salaries are too low in Eswatini: *“The scale of the salaries is not enough for us to live these days. It's too low.*

[...] *But luckily for us, here [in this enterprise] we earn more than that.*” That being said, she noted that some of the handcrafters she works with have extra jobs on the side, as their salaries are not always sufficient to meet all their living expenses. G and R, two handcrafters who work with a social enterprise specialising in woven baskets (Figure 5), both express contentment and security in their jobs. G elaborates on how handcrafting enables her to afford utilities such as electricity and gas, as well as provide quality meals for her family. R believes “*Money is everything. You will have a better life if you have money*”. She further explains how the more she works, the more money she earns, as her income depends on how much she is able to produce. She says this encourages to work hard.



Figure 4 - Products made in Q's enterprise



Figure 5 - Products made by G and R's enterprise

Apart from the monetary benefits, economic empowerment has positively impacted many women within their relationships. G explained how men in Eswatini often get angry when their wives ask them for money. By earning her own money, G feels more independent, and does not depend on anyone to buy what she wants. R voiced her belief that relying on someone for financial support in Eswatini can be risky. *“These days, it's dangerous. They are just abusing us, beating us, just because we just need money. Even if I'm just looking at my partner for money for [sanitary] pads”*, she says. R explained that having her own source of income reduces conflicts in her relationship. She holds the belief that increased employment among women would lead to a decrease in levels of abuse and contribute to a more peaceful and loving atmosphere in the country. L, an independent handcrafter who makes pencil cases and bags, shares a similar story. She explained:

*“I tried to stay at home at some stage. It didn't really sit well with me. Because now you have to go and ask your partner for money, then they'll talk and shout and shout. And by the time you get the money, your head is spinning. So that financial independence, somehow, it helps a lot. And it was a struggle. It wasn't easy because he didn't want me to [earn my own money].”*

She described overcoming her husband's opposition and emphasised how being able to financially support her children is an important source of empowerment for her.

On the other hand, economic empowerment is less pronounced for the visual artists. M, for instance, relies on her art as the primary income source to support her three children, yet she voices concerns about the unpredictable nature of selling paintings, which induces stress due to the absence of a fixed payment schedule. Similarly, visual artists N, X, and W all describe their inability to solely depend on their art for financial support, necessitating them to seek alternative income elsewhere. Y stresses the importance of having several streams of income, as it provides her with a higher sense of security. She explains how she has experienced both good and bad economic times throughout her art career, and although she cannot fully rely on art for her livelihood, she is positive it will be possible someday.

In contrast, visual artist P, who specialises in creating personalised portraits, shares how she generates substantial income from her art. Nonetheless, she reveals feeling a sense of limitation in her creative expression. The constrained format of portraits offers little space for creativity or emotional expression. P found herself exclusively producing portraits because of their commercial success. While she values the ability to financially sustain herself, she believes true success will come when she can pursue the art that truly fulfils her. She has now decided she wants to move in this direction:

*“I think I want to start painting. Go all the way out and go back to being creative. I’ve been doing portraits for a while. Yeah, it’s really exhausting. I mean, I enjoy it for the money, but my creativity is now all the way down there. [...] I just want people to see my work and actually feel some type of way. But for now, if seventy percent of the time I’m doing it because I need money, you know, it’s not for me. That’s my personal thoughts on success with art.”*

This desire for creative fulfilment illustrates that empowerment through art extends beyond economic gain.

In summary, the topic of economic empowerment reveals diverse experiences between handcrafters and visual artists in Eswatini. Handcrafters demonstrate a strong sense of

contentment and security in their roles, deriving both financial stability and personal autonomy from their craft. Conversely, visual artists deal with uncertainties surrounding income generation, yet persist in their artistic endeavours driven by alternative forms of fulfilment it offers.

### **5.3. Community engagement**

While studying the experiences of female artists in Eswatini, a diverse range of perspectives emerged concerning community support and its impact on the artists. From encountering both negative and positive feedback, the artists' experiences show the complex dynamics at play within the local art scene and its intersections with societal norms and individual expression.

Several artists expressed that their work is frequently seen as radical, which sometimes resulted in feelings of marginalisation or being misunderstood. Particularly, men seem less receptive to their art. W described feeling like an outsider, and said:

*“I can read people's faces. People will say something different than what their faces tell me. So I can tell there's obvious discomfort. But you know, people are going to be nice and say it's beautiful.”*

X shared similar sentiments, noting a lack of education about contemporary art in Eswatini. She recounted uncomfortable encounters with individuals who felt entitled to make inappropriate remarks to her, which they felt were justified because her work often features nudity. Such experiences are frustrating for X, as they reinforce the very stigma she is striving to dismantle.

In contrast, the artists have also detailed numerous occasions where the community has responded positively to their art, and most feel they have made a beneficial impact on many women. M frequently receives feedback from other women expressing that she inspires them to advocate for themselves. M said: *“Through art I can explain to the women that we have to fight for our rights. Sometimes we don't have to listen to men, if they are pushing us somewhere we don't want to go.”* Through these messages, M has received respect from many women. She has become a trusted confidant within her community, sought out by many facing relationship challenges. Women in her community believe that with M's guidance, they can move away

from abusive dynamics within their relationships. The artist finds fulfilment in helping others, recognizing the tangible impact of her art through this support.

X and W, both artists in their twenties stated that the younger generation is more receptive to their artwork. X explains the following: *“People in the creative scene and younger people, people who are still growing up, they get it.”* W expresses how receiving positive feedback about her artwork makes her feel less isolated:

*“In some instances, I do see hope because some people say things that surprise me and [they are] agreeing with my perspective and what I'm saying. And I tend to be very isolated in my perspectives. [...] Through art I feel like I'm part of something bigger than myself. When I'm creating art, it doesn't feel as isolating or I don't feel as isolated as I always do.”*

This highlights the significance of community support in fostering empowerment.

When it comes to cultivating a sense of community within the art sphere, the handcrafters emphasised their positive relationships with one another. Q highlighted the fulfilment she receives from engaging with fellow women in her field: *“[I like] learning different characters of other women. Get more ideas from women. And ideas that help me to move.”* R echoed this sentiment, expressing satisfaction with the supportive environment among the female handcrafters. *“We share ideas and just relax”*, she says. She elaborated on the comfort of working alongside familiar women rather than strangers, creating a relaxed and collaborative work environment.

Regarding visual artists, opinions on community support in art spaces were more diverse. Some artists felt a strong sense of community within the art world. N expressed how she feels empowered by participating in a collective art space:

*“It's empowering in the sense that as a female artist we can share our challenges with entering the art space. We can share experiences with our processes as well. So it's been empowering in terms of being able to connect with other people who are on the same journey as you and [who are] also creating as well.”*

Y shared a similar story, where she explained how being part of a creative community provides her with a sense of belonging, camaraderie, and shared passion. Other artists, however, have expressed that the art world can be highly competitive, leading to a lack of mutual support among fellow artists. X explains: *“We can't all hype each other up and all move into industry as successfully as we all would like. There's always going to be a push down somewhere.”* Consequently, they perceive their journey as more individualistic.

To conclude, the artists' stories show the mixed reception of their work within the community, encompassing both discomfort and stigma alongside empowerment and inspiration. The absence of cohesive community dynamics can potentially limit the empowerment of certain artists.

#### **5.4. Heritage revival**

Various artists express a profound connection to their heritage, finding empowerment in embracing ancestral traditions and cultural legacies. Through their art, they honour familial influences, celebrate Indigenous practices, and confront the impacts of colonialism.

Multiple artists recount learning about art from their parents or grandparents. G acquired the skill of weaving as a child from her mother. The handcrafter explains that weaving has been a longstanding tradition among the women in her family and homestead, passed down through generations. She has continued this tradition by teaching her daughter the cultural practice, who now joins her in their weaving social enterprise. Y also discussed acquiring her interest in art from her grandparents and mother:

*“[My grandparents] were both fine fashion craftsmen, a seamstress, and tailor. They were my inspiration. I learnt how to sew from the age of 8 from them. I guess in the back of my mind I always knew working with my hands was inevitable. [...] So my career was just about carrying the family legacy forward and the evolution into art was definitely inevitable.”*

For S, it is important to use her art to show the beauty of Eswatini. She explains how although she touches on difficult social issues through her art, she also wants to show the positive sides of Eswatini. In the painting below (Figure 6), S painted an Indigenous Swazi village, where



people can be seen living in traditional beehive huts. She describes daily activities that are still typical for many people in Eswatini:

*“They still go and collect firewood if they want to cook. You have to work before you cook. There's just a lot of activities where people are busy at home, children are playing. The men are always sitting under the tree and doing nothing. The women are busy. [...] They have a lot more responsibilities than men.”*

This description illustrates the beauty of traditional Swazi culture, with its emphasis on community and the simple habits of daily life. However, it also sheds light on some potentially problematic traditional gender norms, where women bear the bulk of household responsibilities while men are portrayed as having less responsibilities.



Figure 6 – S’s artwork (added in the thesis after receiving permission from the artist)

Moving on to discuss the influence of colonialism, W and Y express the importance of tapping into Indigenous ways of being and practice. W explains how she learns about African history and pre-colonial times, and integrates this into her art. She expresses the following: *“My ancestors were really brutalised, for just doing things the way they did them. And so that's why I carry those things with me in my art and also try to resist the structures that are currently*



here.” Similarly, Y integrates post-colonial narratives & African spirituality into her art, highlighting the experiences of people of colour and advocating for equality and inclusivity. She says:

*“I’ve integrated African spirituality into my work, creating visually captivating narratives that blend heritage and spirituality. [...] Whether through vibrant colours, intricate patterns, or motifs inspired by my heritage, I aim to honour and celebrate the rich cultural traditions that have shaped me.”*

She describes how growing up and navigating the world as a woman of colour has provided her with a unique perspective and a deep inspiration to draw from. She states: *“These artworks may feature powerful imagery, symbolism, and messages that provoke thought and encourage dialogue.”* Through art, Y tries to create a space to reclaim narratives, and celebrate the beauty and resilience of blackness.

Through Y’s art piece entitled *Water heals* (Figure 7), the artist explores Indigenous healing practices. In particular, this piece focuses on the healing power of water, a symbol deeply entrenched in Indigenous Southern African traditions. She describes the work as follows:

*“This work teaches on reasons why we need to cleanse, who we connect to when we connect with water, the importance of respecting & preserving water bodies and sacred spaces. We need to take care of the vessel that is our body and the portals in the waters. We need to be cognisant of how we treat the waters after everything it does for us. Water Heals; it is ever gracious and giving in its nature. We shall always be grateful.”*

Y invites people to reconnect with ancestral knowledge and embrace the healing power of nature. In doing so, she not only honours her cultural heritage but also fosters a sense of empowerment grounded in reclaiming Indigenous ways of knowing and healing.



Figure 7 – Y’s artwork (added in the thesis after receiving permission from the artist)

In conclusion, the artists' narratives highlight their deep connection to their heritage, finding empowerment in embracing ancestral traditions. By integrating post-colonial narratives and exploring Indigenous practices, these artists advocate for equality and inclusivity. Through their creative expressions, they not only honour their cultural heritage but also foster empowerment rooted in reclaiming Indigenous ways of knowledge.

### **5.5. Self-expression and healing self-identity**

Art consistently demonstrated its empowering potential through the avenues of self-expression and healing. Through art, many artists are able to channel their emotions through visual form and feel liberated through it. Y explains how her personal journey and experience influence her art with themes of empowerment, self-discovery and healing: *“Through my work, I strive to create spaces for self-expression, catharsis, and empowerment, allowing both myself and my audience to navigate the complexities of identity and find strength in our shared humanity. [...] The ability to express myself creatively has been deeply fulfilling.”* X defines art as a form of escapism, something that allows her to escape from the current political circumstances: *“When you're painting, you're not thinking about the kind of things that stress you out. You're just spaced out.”* M describes art as magical in the way that it can heal her pains: *“When I take the*

*thing which is paining me inside to the canvas, I'm relieved from the stress. I don't know what, it's magical. It's magic.”*

Art can be particularly empowering for women who struggle to verbally express how they feel. P explained how she has always struggled to express her emotions and considers herself very shy. After going through a difficult emotional experience a few years back, she felt as if her emotions were killing her. This is when she first took up art and found it to be a powerful outlet. X echoed this sentiment, stating that she felt most able to express her emotions when painting alone at home. W describes art as a form of catharsis, allowing her to express anger, an emotion that she struggles to handle as it was not nurtured in her household growing up. She goes on to discuss the power of expressing this emotion through art:

*“I think my art is the avenue for me to release that rage. And I think rage, especially feminist rage or assumed femme rage along with LGBT+ folk, is some of the most revolutionary emotion that we could ever have in this society, the catalyst for change. Those emotions, those thoughts, those feelings of those people, is what is needed to change this world. To make it more habitable and liveable.”*

Furthermore, art has empowered women by allowing them to heal from past experiences. X shared how her first painting allowed her to work through some insecurities she had acquired growing up. She explained how when she was younger she had negative perceptions about her body, since she could not see herself represented in the media. However, when she started exploring her art style, she painted a portrait of herself (Figure 8), and it shifted the way she viewed her body. She noted:

*“It was so strange to me because you see the same body on a canvas. But now it's not... The negative thoughts are gone. You're not thinking of it the same way you thought of it. You never thought of the cellulite here. I never thought of the rolls my stomach makes when I sit down. It was just a beautiful painting.”*



Figure 8 - X's artwork (added in the thesis after receiving permission from the artist)

W expressed having a similar experience growing up, noting the pervasive whiteness of media that influenced her self-image. However, art provided W with a pathway to reclaim beauty. *“I didn't feel beautiful. So I think [art] is a way for me to reclaim things that I didn't have the chance to claim when I was a kid. So just reclaiming blackness is something that's really beautiful in all the aspects and facets that it comes in”*, she says. She went on to describe how her self-portrait photography shoot (Figure 9) makes her feel empowered and beautiful:

*“It's just me, the room that I'm staying in, and I felt inspired to capture myself because I thought I was beautiful. And I felt good in my body and my vessel. I saw the art in it and I was tired of being objectified and sexualized. It's just nice to capture myself existing as I am.”*



Figure 9 – W’s artwork (added in the thesis after receiving permission from the artist)

Aligned with the mission of reclaiming black identity, N utilised art to empower black girls by creating a series of art pieces where different women are shown expressing themselves freely through their hairstyles (Figure 10). N explained how growing up certain institutions such as schools limited the hairstyles she was allowed to wear. This confinement to her self-expression made her feel disempowered: *“For me, it’s a big part of my identity, the way I do my hair, express myself with my hair. [...] It didn’t feel good to be limited by these rules, as it kind of takes away from your identity.”* Through her art series, she was able to take back the power, and show the uniqueness of black hair and how it cannot be limited.



Figure 10 – N’s artwork (added in the thesis after receiving permission from the artist)

In conclusion, artists' personal narratives vividly demonstrate how art enables healing, self-expression, and the reclamation of identity. Artists find liberation through their creative endeavours, addressing societal issues and advocating for change.

## 5.6. Challenging gender constructs

Throughout the interviews, the artists consistently discussed gaining empowerment through the disruption of traditional gender norms and roles. Amidst the complexities of navigating a deeply patriarchal society, art emerges as a powerful instrument for confronting and challenging these established norms. Through their diverse expressions, these artists illuminate not only the challenges but also the transformative potential of art in reshaping societal perceptions and fostering gender equality.

To begin, the simple act of working as an artist in Eswatini challenges the predominantly male-dominated art sphere. As Y insightfully illustrates:

*“One of the ways art can challenge traditional gender norms is by creating spaces for alternative narratives and representations of gender. Through visual imagery, storytelling, and symbolism, artists can depict diverse expressions of gender identity, roles, and relationships, highlighting the fluidity and complexity of gender beyond rigid binaries.”*

She goes on to explain how inclusive art spaces can engage communities in discussions about gender equality and other relevant topics. Y describes how art has the power to foster empathy, understanding, and solidarity. She believes that art possesses the capability to provoke emotions, stimulate critical thinking, and drive social change. Ultimately, increasing female representation within the art sphere not only challenges traditional gender norms but also fosters a society where diverse voices and perspectives are valued and represented.

The artists recounted instances where their ownership of their work was questioned due to the assumption that women lack the capacity to create art with the same proficiency as men. Although this causes frustration for the female artists, they discuss turning it around and reframing it as a form of personal empowerment and as a powerful example for other women. P explains how she takes people’s scepticism as a compliment, and rather than getting offended, she sees it as a good challenge. P gives an example of the interaction she has with men when she is painting murals on the street. She explains: *“I kid you not, every time we were out painting the mural, men would come and ask us the same question. ‘Is it really you guys who are doing this?’”*

S recounts a similar experience while painting murals. She was always the only woman among other male painters. Although this shows the male domination within the art scene, this gave her a sense of empowerment: *“I feel powerful, Oh, I feel powerful. I feel like I’m doing this thing that other people can’t do. I can do it, I feel powerful.”* S explains how she gets satisfaction from doing tasks that are commonly associated with men, fighting to be treated as an equal while working with male artists. *“I would climb the ladder, I would do all the things that they do. And I didn’t want them to make me vulnerable, I just wanted to be. We’re just equals.”* She adds that she feels comfortable with male artists, since artists tend to be open minded, and therefore treat her the same way as they would any other artist regardless of gender.

When it comes to integrating themes of gender inequality into their art, multiple artists address different aspects of the issue. For M, besides demonstrating that women can be artists just like men, she tries to convey the message that women must stand up and advocate for themselves. At the same time, she endeavours to educate men to treat women as equals: *“I want to show men that they must treat women equally. Because they must not treat women like slaves. They must treat women like friends.”* Unfortunately, at times she receives negative feedback from men, who tell her she is a *“bad woman”*. However, she receives appreciation from fellow women who express gratitude for her work. The positive praise from other women, and M’s strong willpower to fight for women’s rights keeps her painting: *“When I want to do something, I do something. Whether you complain or you do what, but I do it. Yeah, I trust myself. They can talk about anything they talk, but to me, I’m passing this message.”* M tries to send women the message that they too can be leaders, and encourages them to not accept being mistreated by men. Through her painting below (Figure 11), she wanted to convey the following idea: *“I was trying to send a message to women that when they are giving you tough times, you must not sit in the pot listening to the fire burning you. You have to stand and try to do something to free yourself.”* M discussed how the pain inflicted by the father of her children when he left them fueled her anger and determination. She expressed her desire to stand up and fight, not only for herself but also for other women.





Figure 11 – M’s artwork (added in the thesis after receiving permission from the artist)

Turning to another artist, the primary focus of X’s work centres around empowering black women. Her art is primarily focused on normalising sensuality and celebrating the beauty of the black female form. She discusses how over time, the black female body has been degraded, diminished and overly sexualized. In recent years, she believes this has been accentuated by mass media. “[My art] involves a lot of nudity and the black female figure, but I’d like to think that I’m sort of taking it back, taking our power back in a sense”, she explains. Talking about her painting below (Figure 12), she explains how the muse encapsulates the concept of empowerment, radiating confidence. Despite the societal backlash against women showing their bodies, X expresses how it is important to distinguish between expressing confidence and self-assurance versus inviting objectification. By painting women being connected to the physical senses of their body, X attempts to reclaim the power back. X further discusses a question she has received on multiple occasions regarding the black colour of the drape in the painting. Although black is often associated with sorrow or negativity, she explains how she sees it as an opportunity to reclaim the colour:



*“When you see [the muse] covered in that black drape, you're not thinking she's sad. You're not thinking she's ashamed. She's still strong anyways. She's taking it back and making it into her own.”*

Despite the negative stigmas associated with the colour black, the muse radiates strength and resilience.



Figure 12 – X’s artwork (added in the thesis after receiving permission from the artist)

Similarly, W also tackles the issue of the hypersexualised female form in her art. *“A lot of the work I make is explicit, but I say explicit in air quotes. I think nudity is not something that should always be sexualized or objectified. It's just my body, I see it artistically”*, she explains. W discusses the dichotomy between societal acceptance of nudity in traditional cultural events, such as the reed dance in Eswatini, and its disapproval in non-traditional settings. She believes this dichotomy has Christian and colonial roots:

*“Christianity comes into the play. The crux between religion, colonialism and white supremacy, all that is just amplified. [...] A lot of my work pushes up against the crux of those three things and the violence with which those things were brought into the*

*continent with. [...] I like to tug at core wounds that our people have. And just to make people think.”*

W went on to talk about one of her art pieces where she aimed to blur the lines between the Madonna/Whore dichotomy. The photography piece depicts Madonna as a black woman with a cross and a veil (self-portrayed by W), wearing sheer clothing, face piercings and unshaved. Through this portrayal, W challenges the traditional representation of Madonna as a modestly dressed white woman. It served as a commentary on the legacies of colonialism and Christianity, and the impact of these legacies on the black female body. In this artwork, W reimagines and challenges the traditional portrayal of women in Christian iconography. Through rejecting the oppressive structures of Christianity and colonialism, W empowers historically marginalised people. The artist expressed how although this piece pushes boundaries within conservative culture in Eswatini, there were people that recognised it as a symbol of female empowerment. Women found a sense of representation and valued the normalisation of certain physical features within the artwork.

To conclude, the artists' narratives reveal how art becomes a potent tool for challenging gender norms in Eswatini. Despite patriarchal barriers, female artists defiantly reclaim their agency through their work, addressing themes of inequality, body positivity, and black identity. Their resilience underscores art's transformative power as a means of advocacy in the face of entrenched gender inequality.

## **5.7. Conclusion**

The results section of the thesis answered the three sub-research questions through the insights gained by participant observation and interviews with 11 different artists. In terms of the first sub-question ‘*How do Swazi female artists navigate the evolving social, political, and economic context of Eswatini?*’, Section 5.1. on powerlessness addressed the different ways in which the artists have learnt to navigate the complex socio-political and economic landscape of Eswatini. Although they lack governmental support and often face difficulties in asserting themselves as women in a male-dominated art world, art still emerges as a pathway to challenge and discuss these obstacles. For the second sub-question ‘*In what ways are Swazi female artists empowered economically by their creative work?*’, Section 5.2. on economic empowerment discussed the disparities between handcrafters and visual artists. While handcrafters found economic stability in their work, most visual artists faced more difficulties in achieving a stable

income. Furthermore, financial independence influenced intrapersonal gender dynamics and gave these women more freedom in their relationships. Finally, the third sub-question '*Beyond economic aspects, how do Swazi female artists subjectively experience and define empowerment through their creative endeavours?*' occupied the bulk of the results, with main the themes of community engagement, heritage revival, self-expression and healing self-identity, and challenging gender constructs addressed from Sections 5.3 to 5.6. These themes showed how art allowed individuals to imagine alternative avenues for personal empowerment beyond economic terms, fostering a transformative space where women can redefine their roles and express their identities.

## **6. Discussion, limitations, and future outlook**

### **6.1. Discussion**

The results section of this thesis demonstrated the interplay of art with feminist empowerment, where neoliberal constructs were challenged. The stories shared by the artists showed how empowerment involves transformative processes that go beyond narrow economic outcomes. The discussion highlights the artists' dual engagement with neoliberal dynamics, where the artists navigate existing in a neoliberal system while attempting to resist its pressures. Moreover, creativity emerges as a key force for transformative empowerment, by enabling artists to envision and strive for alternative realities and systemic change.

As detailed in the sections above, art proved to be a powerful tool for artists when it comes to self-expression, healing, and identity reclamation. These empowering outcomes challenge traditional views on empowerment. As discussed throughout the theoretical framework, feminist discourse critiques traditional approaches to empowerment for their lacking political nature, and their narrow focus on individual economic empowerment (Batliwala, 2007; Cornwall & Rivas, 2015). The artists' experiences demonstrated how art was used to navigate the complexities of personal identities, and in turn fostering a deeper sense of empowerment. For example, artists discussed the importance of being able to use art as a space for self-expression and catharsis, where these women embraced the feminist motto of "the personal is the political" (Carroll, 1989). Through their work, the artists could share their personal experiences to challenge and shift social norms and prominent power structures. Apart from being a source of income, art becomes a medium for reflection and a starting point for societal change.

Furthermore, the discussion with the artists underscored the intersectionality present in their empowerment journeys, aligning with feminist discourse's focus on the interaction of gender with other identities such as race and class (Cornwall & Rivas, 2015). For example, W and X both shared the influence of predominantly white media representation on their body image perception. Through their art, these women attempt to reclaim their black identity, and push a new narrative that challenges negative stereotypes of black women. As argued by Hooks (1996), cultural identity remains deeply rooted in past experiences of colonialism which have obscured black identity. Therefore, the process these artists embark on to challenge the negative

or absent representation of the black female body is an empowering process of decolonisation of the mind (Bhola & Thiong'o, 1987) in the perception of the body. Studying empowerment through an intersectional lens allows us to move away from the one-size-fits-all solutions often launched by neoliberal development agencies (Kagal & Latchford, 2020). When it comes to intersection of gender and class, it is important to note that it was not studied in depth throughout this thesis, and therefore constitutes as a limitation to the scope of the analysis. Class is an influential aspect in women's experiences and opportunities, and therefore can play an important role in empowerment and marginalisation for artists.

In terms of confronting gender norms and constructs, the artists challenge neoliberal empowerment by exploring the underlying power dynamics and social norms that are at play in their lives (Wilson, 2008). By challenging traditional gender identities in their art, and by creating art spaces that are inclusive, the artists play an important role in pushing a change in societal perceptions of gender. Rather than focusing merely on economic productivity, the artists are able to advocate for systemic change. In line with Kabeer's (2008) concept of "journey without maps", where empowerment is defined as an ongoing and dynamic process, the process of creating and sharing art serves as a powerful pathway of discovery and transformation.

Although the artists discuss a variety of empowerment aspects, tensions regarding the reproduction of neoliberal values can still be identified. The reproduction of these values is particularly evident in the stories of the handcrafters, who frame empowerment primarily through an economic lens. Gaining financial independence allows these artists to lessen their dependency to their male partners, therefore potentially mitigating domestic abuse and creating more peaceful relational dynamics. However, these benefits also come with the emphasis on individual productivity and responsibility, perpetuating neoliberal principles of individualism. For example, R's statement of "The more I work, the more money I earn" clearly captures the neoliberal concept of self-reliance through hard work. This sentiment resonates with Petersen & O'Flynn's (2007) argument that the neoliberal entrepreneurial self is fuelled by the voluntary competition with oneself to perform to the highest standard. Through this concept, economic empowerment is viewed as achievable exclusively through individual effort and does not take into consideration potential systemic barriers or inequalities that women may face (Ahl and Marlow, 2012). Additionally, the handcrafters collaborate with social enterprises that are led by Western designers who target the products at western markets. These initiatives therefore

impose Western tastes on Indigenous crafts, which risks perpetuating a form of cultural colonialism (Tseëlon, 2011; Black & Burisch, 2021).

When it comes to the visual artists, several neoliberal tendencies were also observed. Certain artists felt the pressure of fitting into the neoliberal market, which caused them to tailor their work to be marketable. For P, for example, this led her to sacrifice the pursuit of art forms that were most empowering for her, as she prioritised economic gains over artistic satisfaction. This prioritisation of economic gains is consistent with the recent cultural shift in the art world identified by scholars such as Haynes & Marshall (2017), where economic dimensions of artists' work come at the detriment of the cultural ones.

Furthermore, although some artists detailed the art spheres they worked in as powerful communal spaces, others described their work as largely individual, emphasising the competitive nature of the art world. This focus on individualism and competition is in line with neoliberal values that encourage individuals to be rivals instead of collaborators (McNay, 2009). This individualistic culture gives little importance to collective well-being, and prioritises personal gains. Instead, feminist scholars believe empowerment must involve collective action in order to be truly transformational (Cornwall et al., 2009). These scholars underscore that although individual achievements are important, it is essential to foster collective action to challenge systemic inequalities (Kabeer, 2012; Wilson, 2008; Rowlands, 1997). Creating a collaborative environment will help create space for changing the social, economic and political conditions that perpetuate marginalisation.

Although it is important to acknowledge these internalised neoliberal tendencies and how they may hinder transformational empowerment, the artists showed many aspects of empowerment that also actively resisted neoliberal values. For many of the artists it appeared that these values were mainly adopted when necessary and opposed when possible. Irrespective of economic gains, for the majority of the artists the main focus was on gaining personal or societal healing through the creation of their artwork. As explained by Ruderman & Hynie (2023), these artists produce art in a neoliberal system, while escaping the internalisation of multiple facets of the neoliberal self. In this way, the artists manage to exist in and at the same time resist the neoliberal system. This can be compared to Page's (2020) interpretation of how academics can challenge the neoliberal system by embracing an alternative subjectivity. Page suggests that it

is possible for individuals to use the current system in creative ways to serve their own purposes and create their own meanings as a form of subjective resistance.

To move beyond viewing art as merely individualistic work, Alacovska (2020) proposes viewing art through a sociological lens of care and compassion. This framing aligns well with the artists' dominant focus on healing (whether personal or societal) throughout the interviews. Alacovska (2020) describes how the creative spheres are bound together by "such apparently minor but actually immensely significant caring acts of repair geared towards fixing broken industrial infrastructures" (para. 31). When artists are motivated by genuine care, there is powerful potential for societal change. Feminist scholars have advocated for care to be decoupled from the narrow gendered care sphere of work, and integrated into other fields such as the creative one (Alacovska, 2020; Ruderman & Hynie, 2023), with the aim of recentring care in both political and economic aspects of life. By viewing creative work through a lens of care, we move away from individualistic artistic passion, and move towards societal compassion. At the same time, it allows for self-care to emerge as a necessary component to sustain community engagement as well as a fulfilling career (Alacovska, 2020).

Expanding on the lens of care, it is essential to recognise the role of creativity in fostering transformational empowerment. When intertwined with care, creativity enables artists to create art pieces that challenge the existing norms and power structures. When conversing with handcrafters who had little creative freedom, or visual artists who prioritised financial gains over creative satisfaction, the topics of empowerment were mainly economic ones. However, with artists who had larger creative freedom, the interview conversations lead to a wider variety of empowerment topics. Zittoun et al. (2013) argue that creativity and imagination enable artists to relive past experiences, explore the current social contexts, and envision future possibilities that can empower their own lives as well as lives of others. Through creative art, individuals can go against oppressive structures and imagine alternative avenues for personal empowerment and collective action towards achieving equitable change (Comas-Diaz & Torres Rivera, 2020). As expressed by Glăveanu (2017), art allows us to see that we are not locked into a fixed position, instead, we can move between positions, whether it be physically or imaginatively, empowering us to visualise ourselves in a desired reality. For example, when N creativity depicted an alternative reality where women are free to express their hair in any way they may wish (Figure 10 in Results), she was able to find empowerment in position herself in the desired reality through her art.

Creativity is not only a powerful intra-psychological tool for individual empowerment, on the contrary, creative art can play an important role in channelling social change and empowering others through the process of wonder. Glăveanu (2017) defines the experience wonder as the “active exploration of the possible” (p. 21), referring to the journey observers experience when viewing the work of an artist. The process of wonder can bring viewers new understandings of the social context and the role they can play in it. In this way, creative art can foster political imagination, even if it may be in minor or somewhat unobservable ways. The creativity of the artists can trigger imagination and reflexivity in the viewer, as well building a sense of connectivity with the audience. For example, by challenging patriarchal structures through her art, M received much praise from other women who feel inspired by her work to reject the status quo, in particular in regards to how they are treated within their romantic relationships. As illustrated by Boros (2012), the feeling of connectivity fostered by creative art is a first step in participatory engagement, as art has the power to allow viewers to experience wonder together. And although wonder and creativity may not always be sufficient for social action to actually take place, they are not without reason. Creativity is an empowering experience that can leave a powerful impression on people and society. Even in the cases where creativity does not set social change in motion, it still broadens the imagination of others, therefore leaving open the potential for transformation (Boros, 2012).

As a final point of discussion, it is important to address how art has the power to break silences and create spaces to represent the underrepresented. In a country where freedom of speech is limited, art serves as an empowering tool to navigate structural silencing. By addressing taboo or politically charged topics, the artists are able to deconstruct stigmatised ideas and move beyond stereotypes. This can be an empowering journey not only on a personal level, but also on a broader societal level, as it helps the marginalised feel more represented. Through the individual self-expression of artists, a mirroring effect is created where others see their stories represented in the art (Maurício, 2022). Art allows individuals to visualise the realities that they want, and not the one imposed by society. Through creativity, artists do not merely create representations of the existing social context but can reimagine it in ways that empower them.

To conclude, this discussion has explored the complex intersection of art with feminist empowerment. Beyond economic empowerment, the artists were able to foster a deep transformative process of empowerment through self-expression, healing, identity reclamation



and challenging of gender constructs. Despite the tensions with neoliberal values, this thesis underscores the important role of creativity in fostering empowerment and social change. Creativity allows artists to not only navigate the current societal context, but to also reimagine and redefine the power structures that are imposed on them.

## **6.2. Limitations of research**

It is important to address certain limitations to my thesis research. To begin with, the recruitment process of the participants may have led to a sample that was not fully representative of the broader Swazi community. The participants that I was able to engage with were artists that were easily reachable, and who I could communicate with in English, which inadvertently skewed the sample to artists who belong to a relatively upper class. Therefore, the experiences and insight that were gained through this research reflect a certain socio-economic segment and potentially ignore more marginalised groups within Eswatini. As mentioned in the discussion, even within the recruited participants, a limited emphasis on class was given. The intersection between class and gender, an important component of intersectionality, could have added to the depth of this study.

Furthermore, this thesis focused on artists resisting neoliberal values, and through their art challenging inequalities and pushing social change. However, focusing on individuals as responsible for this change, can be seen as perpetuating the neoliberal idea of individual responsibility, which risks perpetuating feelings of self-blame, anxiety and burnout (Ross, 2009). Neoliberalism tends to shift the burden of care onto individuals and promotes self-care as the responsibility of the individual (Brown, 2003). Relying on individuals for social change can be seen as symptomatic rather than systemic change (Ruderman & Hynie, 2023), with some scholars viewing individual resistance to neoliberalism as self-defeating (Hewitt & Rose, 1991). However, it can also be argued that when artists focus on the caring of others and of their community, using their art as a subtle tool for positive transformative societal change, it still offers significant potential for resistance.

## **6.3. Future outlook**

When it comes to an outlook for the future, my research is exploratory in nature, and I do not aim for the findings to extend beyond the experiences of the 11 artists who participated in my thesis. As argued by the feminist theory of situated knowledge (Haraway, 1988), the findings remain situated in the particular social, cultural and personal context of these specific artists.

Although I do not aim for my research to be generalised into broader contexts, I hope that the framing of my thesis can serve as inspiration for future research to critically evaluate empowerment in development discourses and its entanglement with neoliberal tendencies. The nuanced position that many artists navigate of simultaneously existing in and resisting the neoliberal system could be an area for more in-depth future research, studying the duality of creative resistance within the neoliberal structures of today's capitalist society.

As elaborated upon in the discussion section, care is an important topic of feminist theory which, when related to artistic empowerment, can help foster a powerful potential for social change. To delve deeper into this topic, future research could investigate how care-centric environments contribute to empowerment. This could include studying interactions in artistic communities and how they embody care, and exploring the interpersonal relations between artists and the influence of support in fostering empowerment. Furthermore, future research could examine how collaborative creation may promote empowerment, with a focus on collective agency. This could allow for a more in-depth study of how collaborative community art can further resist neoliberal values of self-reliance and competition, offering alternative models that are rooted in collective care and support.

Finally, while my thesis focused primarily on the experiences and perspectives of artists and their pathways to empowerment through art, it is important to acknowledge the reciprocal nature of the relationship between artists and their audiences. As explained in the discussion section, art can serve as a tool to channel social change and empower not only the artists, but also the viewers that engage with their work. Therefore, this opens the possibility for future research to delve into the impact of art on the empowerment of the audience. This could entail studying how art evokes wonder among its viewers and through which mechanisms does art have the potential to inspire action. Researching artistic empowerment among viewers opens an avenue for exploring the broader socio-cultural significance of art and its potential for social change.

## **7. Conclusion**

By exploring the empowerment narratives of female artists in Eswatini, this thesis researched the intersections of art entrepreneurship with feminist empowerment. Through examining artists' lived experiences, empowerment was studied beyond conventional empowerment frameworks, uncovering the multifaceted dimensions of agency, resistance, and transformation.

Throughout dominant development agendas, women's empowerment is often deeply tangled in neoliberal values, reducing empowerment to narrow economic metrics. The stories of the female artists in Eswatini, however, showed a more nuanced and deep understanding of empowerment. Economic empowerment, although important, was only one of the many empowerment themes that emerged throughout the findings. Themes such as heritage revival, self-expression and healing of self-identity, community engagement and challenging gender constructs all played an important role in fostering transformative empowerment for the female artists. At the centre of this exploration was the transformative power of art, which served as a tool for female artists to navigate their identities and struggles within the socio-political context of Eswatini. Through their art works, the artists went beyond the boundaries of neoliberalism, imagining alternative realities and advocating for systemic change.

However, certain neoliberal values persisted amongst the artists, with many of them experiencing the pressures of market demands, commodifying their artistic expression and prioritising economic gain over creative fulfilment. Having said this, although the artists were still existing within a neoliberal system, they still showed a capacity to resist and reimagine neoliberal norms. Many of the artists' focus remained on gaining personal or societal healing irrespective of financial gains. Furthermore, creativity stood out as central to fostering transformational empowerment. Creativity and imagination enable artists to create art pieces that challenge inequalities and power structures, and allows artists to imagine alternative avenues for personal empowerment and collective action. This possibility of imagining a desired reality can not only empower the artists, but also foster a sense of representation and inspiration for the art audience. The feeling of connectivity is a first step in participatory engagement, and although this may not always be sufficient to lead to social action, it still leaves a powerful impression.

Moreover, the findings reveal the importance of intersectionality in understanding empowerment. Gender intersects with race, class and other axes of identity to shape the lives of the female artists in Eswatini. By studying empowerment through an intersectional lens, the thesis moves beyond simplistic narratives of empowerment and recognises the complexity of the topic. However, it is important to acknowledge certain limitations of the research, such as the sample being composed of relatively privileged participants, which may have blocked out the experiences of more marginalised groups and overlooked certain structural barriers that perpetuate inequality. Looking forward, this thesis leaves the door open for future research on empowerment through a critical feminist lens, challenging neoliberal values. By delving deeper into creative resistance, collective empowerment and the role of the audience, it is possible to explore new avenues of art empowerment.

In conclusion, this thesis contributes to a broader conversation on empowerment, exploring its diversity and nuance. By focusing on the voices and experiences of female artists in Eswatini, it becomes clear that art has a transformative power in guiding women through the complexities of their socio-political and economic contexts. Art functions far beyond a mere means of livelihood, but as a vehicle for social critique and personal liberation.

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## **Appendix 1 - Interview guide**

### **Introduction:**

- Can you tell me a bit about yourself and your background in art?
- Can you tell me about a specific moment or experience that sparked your interest in art and led you to pursue it as a passion?

### **Intrapersonal Empowerment:**

- How do you perceive your involvement in art has impacted you personally?
  - Can you share a particular instance where creating art has made you feel more confident or empowered?
- How has your involvement in art influenced your sense of identity or self-expression?
- How do you define success in your artistic journey, and have you achieved your own markers of success?

### **Interactional Empowerment:**

- How has the community responded to your engagement in art?
- Can you share any instances where collective efforts within or outside the artistic environments have contributed to a sense of empowerment?
- Do you feel interacting with the community is an important aspect of your involvement in art?

### **Behavioural Empowerment:**

- In what ways do you think your art has influenced your relationships or interactions within your family and community?
- Can you discuss any challenges you've faced in asserting your role as a female artist within the community?
- Have you noticed any changes in the perception of women's roles within the community throughout your involvement in art?

### **Artistic Expression and Empowerment:**

- How have your personal experiences or cultural background shaped the themes or styles present in your artwork?
- Have you created any art pieces that directly address social issues or concerns within your community?
- How do you perceive the role of art in challenging traditional gender norms or societal expectations?

**Closing:** Is there anything else you would like to add or share regarding your experiences as a Swazi woman involved in art?

## **Appendix 2 - Interview consent form**

### **Consent form**

**Student name: Lia Sweetman de Clar**

**Utrecht University**

**Thesis subject: Art as a form of empowerment for Swazi artists**

### **Purpose of interview**

This interview is being conducted as part of a Master thesis with the intent of investigating how art the potential of empowering women and how this occurs in the context of Eswatini.

### **Length of interview**

The interview is expected to last 45 minutes.

### **Location of interview**

The interview will be conducted in person when possible, or through the preferred online platform of the interviewee.

### **Recording**

With the interviewee's permission, the interview will be recorded with the purpose of being analysed for the thesis project. The recording will only be used as part of the research and will be deleted within six months of the moment of recording.

### **Participant's rights**

The participation in this interview is voluntary; if at any point the participant wants to withdraw from the interview, this is possible. All participant's information is confidential.

### **Consent**

I understand that by participating in this interview, my responses will be kept confidential and will be used for the purpose of Lia Sweetman de Clar's thesis project.

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_