

Emirati Journal of Applied Psychology
Vol 2 Issue 1 (2026)
Pages 4 - 19
Available at
www.emiratesscholar.com

Silent Symbols, Spoken Stories: Thematic Insights from an Art Therapy Program with Migrant Construction Workers.

Mariam El Halawani
MA, PhD Candidate, ATIC Psychological & Counseling center, United Arab Emirates

ARTICLE INFO

KEYWORDS

Migrant workers; art therapy; trauma-informed care; thematic analysis; trauma; relocation; mental health intervention; migration stress; marginalized populations; community-based program; resources; psychosocial support systems.

HOW TO CITE

Halawani, M. E. (2026). Silent Symbols, Spoken Stories: Thematic Insights from an Art Therapy Program with Migrant Construction Workers. Emirati Journal of Applied Psychology, 2(1), 4-19. https://doi.org/10.54878/mqxypv40

ABSTRACT

Migrant workers often endure complex psychological stressors stemming from relocation, cultural disruption, limited legal protections, and exploitative working conditions. This qualitative case study explores the inner emotional landscapes of 25 migrant construction workers through a short-term art therapy program. Participants engaged in structured and open studio sessions, producing a wide range of artworks. Primary data sources included the visual content of the artworks and participants' accompanying verbal reflections. Thematic analysis revealed recurring themes of vulnerability, loss of home, identity and culture, fragile sense of self, family, faith and others. These emerging themes offer insight into the psychological realities of migrant workers and underscore the importance of accessible, culturally sensitive mental health interventions. Art therapy served as a non-verbal, symbolic means through which participants could externalize internal conflicts, establish emotional distance, and reflect on personal meaning. The findings highlight the need for broader psychosocial support systems for migrant populations, particularly those living in restrictive or high-stress environments.

Double-blind peer review by independent reviewers.

Received: 12 Jan 2026, Accepted: 13 May 2026, Published: 01 Jun 2026

*Corresponding author: mariam@atic-me.com

Copyright: © 2026 by the author. Licensee Emirates Scholar Center for Research & Studies, UAE.
Open access under the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license
https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0

Introduction

Migration is often framed as a voluntary pursuit of improved living conditions and economic opportunity. However, for many migrant workers, this journey is marked by coercion, uncertainty, and hardship. The term "voluntary migration" fails to capture the intense psychological and financial pressure to provide for one's family, the lack of viable alternatives, and the exploitative systems that often await migrants upon arrival (Dokter, 1998; Kathiravelu, 2016). Rather than finding the promised security or prosperity, migrants frequently encounter hazardous labor conditions, unpaid wages, and precarious legal standing (Human Rights Watch, 2015b). In many cases, the absence of enforceable labor protections, restricted mobility under sponsorship systems, and limited access to justice result in sustained structural vulnerability and profound psychological consequences. (Human Rights Watch, 2015a; Kathiravelu, 2016).

Despite these adversities, some migrant workers draw upon internal coping resources, personal values, spiritual anchors, cultural identity, or interpersonal resilience, that help sustain their psychological well-being. Yet few avenues exist for these internal strengths to be explored or reinforced. This art therapy program aimed to offer a unique platform: a non-verbal, culturally adaptable modality that enables expression, integration, and emotional processing where words may fail or feel unsafe.

Reality of Relocation

Living under constant surveillance, with few opportunities for autonomy or expression, migrants often experience high levels of emotional suppression, disempowerment, and a gradual erosion of self-capacity (Horsham & Chung, 2013; Hertz, 2011). The trauma associated with these conditions is not only rooted in singular events but is compounded by ongoing loss, isolation, and betrayal of trust by systems that are meant to protect (van der Kolk, 2014; Herman, 1992). The emotional toll of such marginalization may manifest as anxiety, depression, inhibited behavior, and internalized stigma (McNaughton, 2008; Crabtree et al., 2010; Cook, Arrow, & Malle, 2011). For many migrant workers, cultural displacement also presents a psychological rupture. The transition from familiar cultural norms to an alien and often unwelcoming environment can intensify feelings of fragmentation and rootlessness (Dokter, 1998; Lazarus, 1993). The forced relinquishment of one's worldview and social identity frequently generates feelings of grief, loss, and disorientation (Dokter, 1998; Seguin et al., 2016).

Art Therapy as an Intervention

Art therapy is a mental health discipline that engages individuals, groups, and communities in creative expression to support psychological and social well-being (American Art Therapy Association, 2022). It integrates artistic processes with psychological frameworks to promote healing and personal growth within a trusting therapeutic relationship.

Fostering Authentic Expression through the Creative Process

One of the primary strengths of art therapy is its capacity to offer individuals a means of expression that bypasses language and taps into deeply embedded emotional material. For those who have experienced trauma or cultural dislocation, verbal articulation can often feel unsafe or inadequate. The art-making process provides access to unconscious content, such as fantasies, fears, and memories, that may be difficult to express through words alone (Heckwolf, Bergland, & Mouratidis, 2014). This is particularly relevant in the context of migration, where the individual may have been forced to suppress emotional responses in order to survive. By engaging in art-making within a safe and nonjudgmental environment, individuals begin to externalize their inner experience, which can foster insight, catharsis, and a sense of coherence. Kalmanowitz and Ho (2016) emphasize that art therapy facilitates the expression of emotions associated with trauma, including vulnerability, rage, grief, and even joy, thus providing a vital outlet for self-understanding and release. This act of creation positions the individual as both subject and observer, allowing them to gain distance from overwhelming experiences and cultivate psychological safety.

Creating a Holding Environment and Restoring Trust

In the context of art therapy, the therapeutic space itself becomes a "holding environment" a term introduced by Winnicott (1960) to describe the consistent, attuned presence that supports psychological development. When working with individuals who have experienced betrayal or exploitation, this sense of safety and predictability is critical. The therapist's ability to be consistent, boundaried, and emotionally attuned fosters trust, particularly for clients who have endured abuse by authority figures or systems (Herman, 1992; Robbins, 1987). Art therapists contribute to this secure environment by honoring the client's autonomy and pace, and by offering respect for both the person and the creative process. This dynamic reduces the risk of re-traumatization and empowers clients to reclaim agency. Kalmanowitz and Ho (2016) note that the therapeutic

ISSN: 3104-5200 - https://doi.org/10.54878/mqxypv40

alliance in art therapy helps clients regulate affect and explore previously unresolved psychological material in a supported way. In the case of migrant workers, many of whom have experienced systemic exploitation (Kathiravelu, 2016), the reliability and ethical stance of the therapist is essential in countering prior experiences of disempowerment.

Strengthening Coping through Symbolic Integration

Trauma can leave individuals trapped in repetitive cycles of thought, emotion, or behavior, often rooted in fear and inhibition (Kalmanowitz & Ho, 2016). In these instances, art therapy supports the emergence of more flexible and integrative coping strategies. By engaging with symbolic imagery, clients are able to hold complexity, representing the past alongside the present, and imagining a future shaped by resilience rather than helplessness. As Kalmanowitz and Ho (2016) explain, the dialectical nature of art allows for both reflection and distraction, both reality and imagination. Group art therapy can enhance this process by exposing clients to the diverse experiences and perspectives of others. Rankanen (2014) found that clients in art therapy groups often experience increased self-reflection and new emotional insights as they witness the artwork and narratives of their peers. This collective engagement helps broaden the individual's repertoire of responses and affirms that they are not alone in their experience (Punamäki, Qouta, & El-Sarraj, 2001). For migrant workers, who often live in socially and emotionally isolated environments, the group format offers vital opportunities for shared meaning-making and relational repair.

Reclaiming Meaning after Disruption

Migration, especially under exploitative or coerced conditions, often involves significant disruption of identity, worldview, and belonging (Dokter, 1998; Seguin et al., 2016). Art therapy offers a way to process both the losses and potential gains associated with such transitions. Through symbolic expression, individuals can begin to integrate previously fragmented parts of the self and reconstruct meaning from dislocated or painful experiences (Robbins, 2001). Grossman, Kia-Keating, and Sorsoli (2006) describe several mechanisms through which individuals make sense of trauma, including spiritual reflection, altruism, and cognitive processing. Art therapy provides space for all of these approaches, inviting clients to explore spirituality, memory, and imagination. Kalmanowitz and Ho (2016) describe the art process as a "ritual of transition," echoing Van der Hart's concept of re-integration after social separation (as cited in Dokter, 1998). In this sense, the creative process becomes a symbolic journey, bridging past and future, loss and potential, pain and transformation.

Ultimately, art therapy supports the restoration of personal coherence. It deepens self-awareness and situates the self in relation to broader systems of culture, society, and history (Kalmanowitz & Ho, 2016). For marginalized populations such as migrant laborers, this can be a radical act of reclaiming dignity, voice, and meaning in the face of systemic dehumanization.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to offer migrant construction workers a safe and supportive space in which to engage in creative expression and begin processing trauma-related experiences linked to their migration journeys. Through a culturally responsive group art therapy program, participants were invited to explore personal narratives surrounding displacement, identity, and resilience. The study aimed to examine the visual themes that emerged from their artworks as a window into their inner worlds, emotional landscapes, and lived realities. By interpreting these thematic expressions, the research sought to deepen understanding of the psychological needs of migrant laborers and to inform more effective, human-centered approaches to psychosocial support.

Methodology

Study Design

This research adopted a qualitative, case study design to examine the lived experiences of migrant construction workers through their artistic expressions in group art therapy. The primary objective was to identify and analyze recurring themes within participants' artworks, thereby gaining insight into their psychological realities, coping strategies, and unmet support needs. The main data sources included all artworks created by participants during the program in addition to participants direct verbalizations related to the artwork, which were noted down by the facilitator in structired session notes.

Data Analysis

A systematic thematic analysis was employed as the principal method for examining both the artworks and the accompanying session notes. This approach enabled the identification, analysis, and reporting of patterns and themes within the visual and verbal data collected. Thematic analysis is recognized for its flexibility and rigor in qualitative research, particularly when exploring patterns across diverse data sources (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis was selected for its capacity to capture both collective and individual experiences as

reflected in creative outputs, making it particularly suitable for research rooted in art-based inquiry.

The process followed established steps: (a) review of all available data, (b) generation of initial codes through visual features, symbols and motifs in the artwork, in addition to verbalizations linked to the artwork, (c) development of themes by grouping codes that represented recurring patterns and shared meanings across participants, (d) review and refinement of themes.

Triangulation and Rigor

To enhance the credibility and depth of the analysis, triangulation was achieved through:

Clinical supervision: Regular weekly sessions allowed for reflective processing, identification of potential biases, and maintenance of ethical rigor.

Integration of multiple data sources: Field notes including direct verbalizations by participants, artwork analysis, and contextual knowledge were synthesized to produce a comprehensive understanding of the data.

Program Setting

The art therapy program was conducted in a confidential site in one of the Gulf countries. The site was one of the migrant workers' vocational sites and was in close proximity to their housing. The sessions were conducted in a private room featuring a long communal table with ample seating. Although not formally designated for clinical use, the setting offered a supportive and confidential atmosphere conducive to creative exploration.

The researcher explained the purpose of the program and completed infromed consent forms with the participants prior to their participation. The participants were made aware of the purpose, duration, voluntary participation, risks and benefits of the study. Accessibility for participants was largely facilitated by the close proximity of the residential area to the session site, which enabled consistent attendance.

Participants

A total of 25 male migrant workers participated in the program, representing diverse backgrounds and nationalities: Pakistan (n=18), India (n=4), Vietnam (n=2), Egypt (n=1). The Participants brought a diverse range of vocational expertise, contributing to various operational areas within the organization, including construction, carpentry, agricultural upkeep, and facility maintenance. Their migration journeys often involved multiple visa applications, financial hardship, and significant relocation stressors, reflecting the complex realities of labor migration. Upon entry, participants completed a brief demographic questionnaire. Attendance was voluntary, with workers able to choose between two daily session offerings held twice weekly, accommodating varying work shifts and promoting agency in the therapeutic process.

Procedure

Two 50-minute art therapy sessions were offered per day, two days a week, over the course of three weeks. Each group was limited to a maximum of 13 participants to maintain a therapeutic dynamic. The first and last sessions encouraged free, unguided expression (open studio format), and the remaining sessions incorporated themed directives to facilitate exploration of thoughts, emotions, and lived experiences. Participants had access to a variety of materials, including pencils, colored pencils, crayons, watercolors, oil pastels, A4 and A3 papers in various colors, and assorted brushes.

At the conclusion of each session, the facilitator documented observations of verbal reflections, the art-making process, and group dynamics. These field notes, combined with the artworks produced by the participants informed the interpretive framework and supported the identification and refinement of themes throughout the study.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were carefully implemented throughout the study to ensure participants' safety, dignity, and autonomy. Informed consent was obtained, with clear communication that participation was voluntary and unrelated to employment status. Confidentiality was maintained through anonymized data and secure handling of visual materials. Given the participants' structural vulnerability, the therapeutic environment prioritized emotional safety, cultural sensitivity, and respect for individual pace. The facilitator remained attuned to power dynamics and potential emotional risks, adopting a trauma-informed approach to avoid retraumatization. Weekly clinical supervision supported ethical reflection, while care was taken to present participants' artwork and narratives with integrity, honoring their voices without imposing external interpretations.

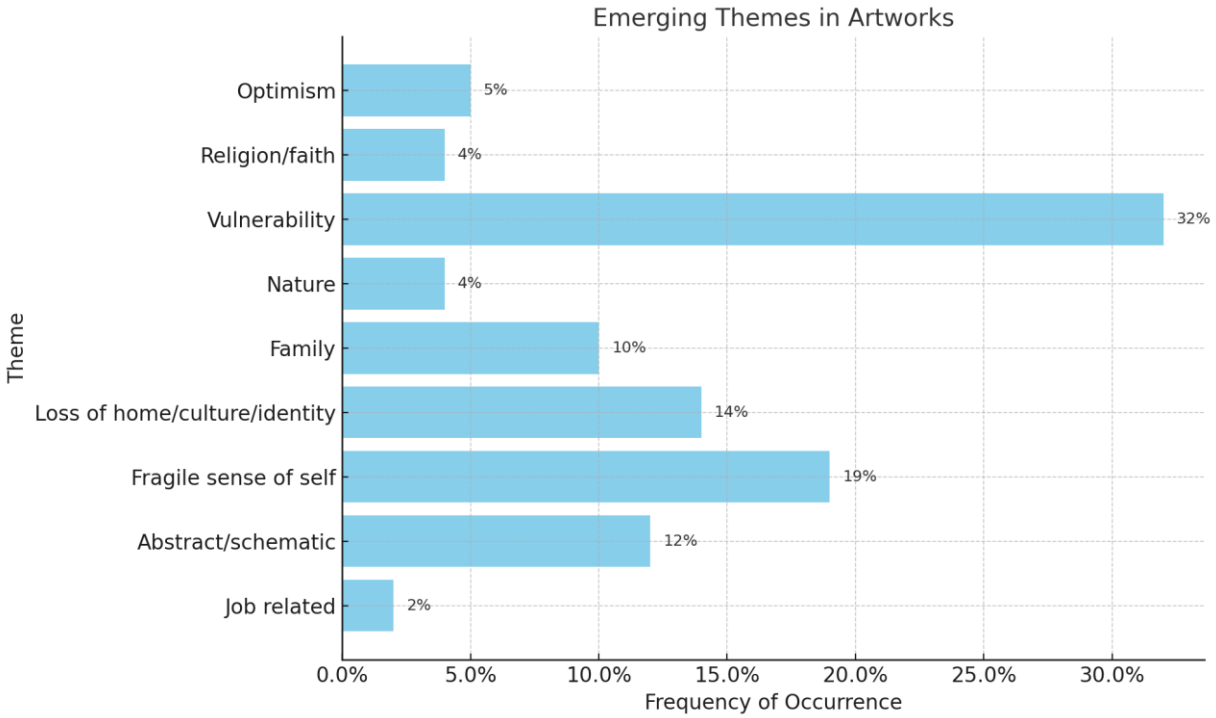
Results

The thematic analysis of the artwork revealed a range of recurring emotional and symbolic motifs, offering a powerful visual narrative of the inner experiences of migrant construction workers. The themes (Figure 1) were primarily drawn from the artworks produced by the

ISSN: 3104-5200 - https://doi.org/10.54878/mqxypv40

participants, and supported by clinical interpretation and contextual observation.

Figure 1. - Emerging Themes



Vulnerability (32%): The most dominant theme, appearing in nearly one-third of the artworks, was vulnerability. Participants frequently conveyed emotional exposure, impaired trust, entrapment, and a sense of lost control. This thematic prevalence reflects the psychological burden of forced migration, limited legal protections, and sustained exposure to exploitative labor systems, conditions known to foster chronic insecurity and a deep sense of powerlessness (van der Kolk, 2014; Kathiravelu, 2016).

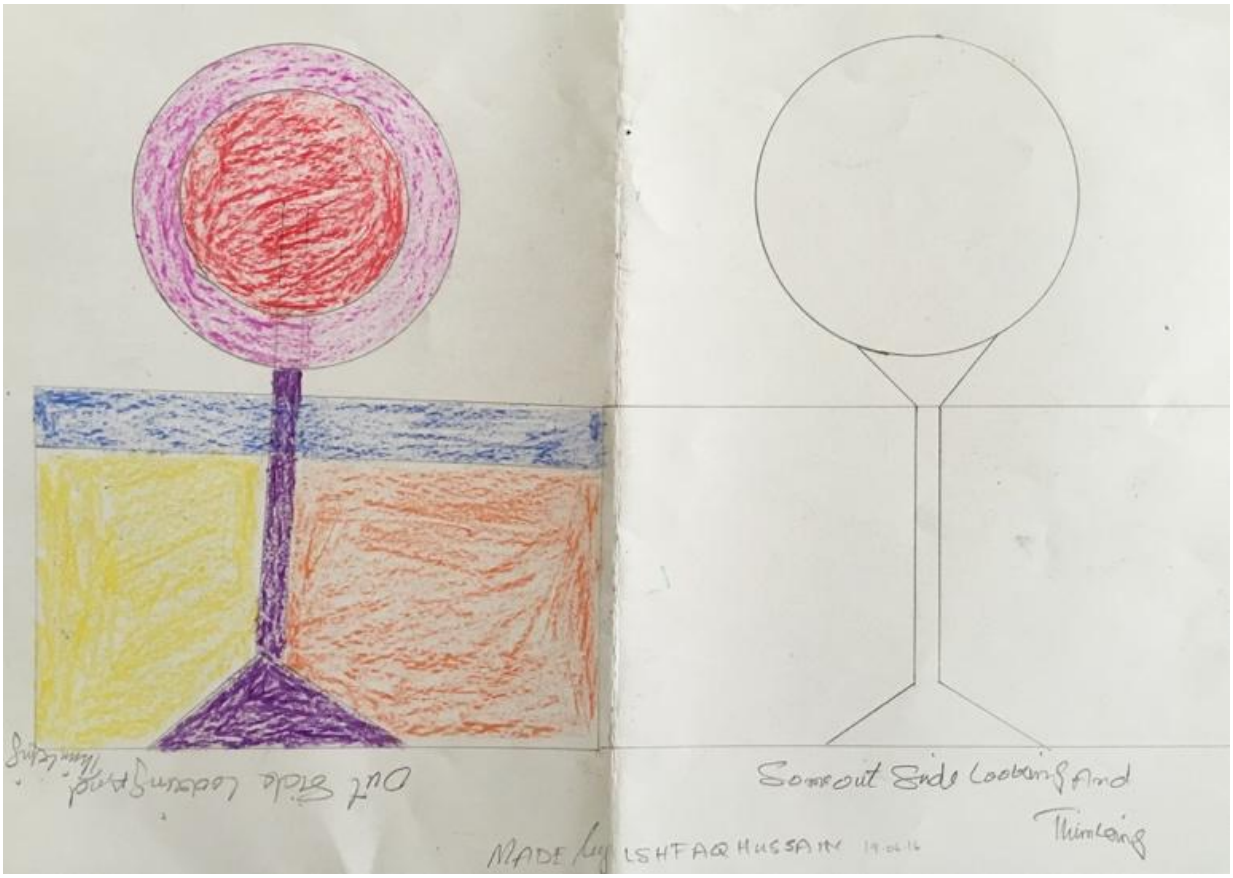
The artworks presented in Figures 2 through 4 exemplify this theme. These pieces were created in response to a structured art directive that invited participants to illustrate their external and internal emotional states. The external representation was intended to reflect what they present to the outside world, while the internal depiction aimed to reveal their private, authentic emotional experience.

In Figure 2, one participant depicted his external state as a heart surrounded by flower petals, imagery suggestive of warmth, calm, and perhaps a desire to appear emotionally composed. In stark contrast, his internal state featured a bleeding heart pierced by an arrow, conveying pain, emotional injury, and hidden suffering. The juxtaposition reveals the disparity between outward presentation and inner reality. Similarly, in Figure 3, the participant created a vibrant, abstract symbol to represent his external emotional state, while the internal counterpart featured the same symbol rendered as an uncolored outline. This visual contrast, between fullness and emptiness, may reflect emotional depletion or a sense of disconnection from one's inner vitality. The original symbol appears strong and whole, while the internal version seems diminished and fragile.

Figure 2. - External vs. Internal States

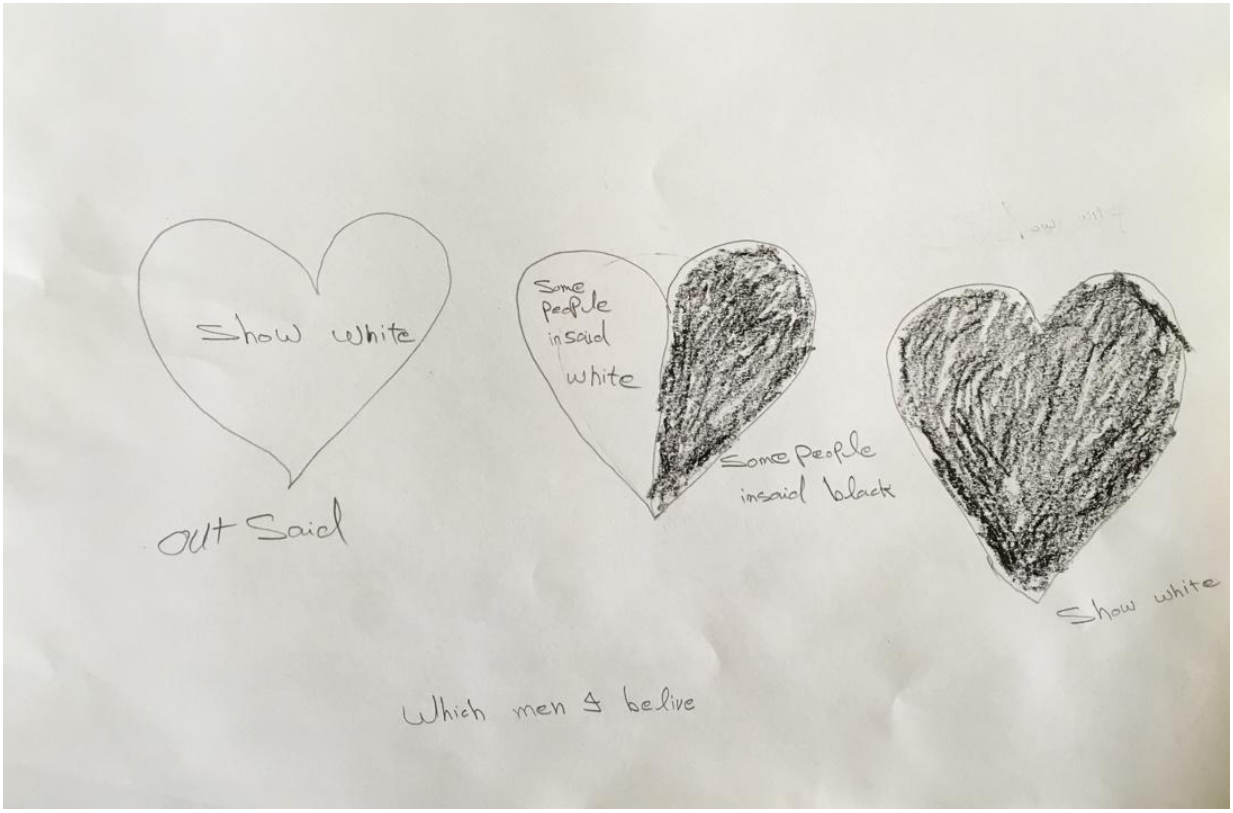


Figure 3. - External vs. Internal States II



Finally, Figure 4 offers a striking visual metaphor for impaired trust. The participant explained his drawing by saying, "some people inside white, some people inside black," further elaborating that those with "black hearts," representing bad intentions, often "show white on the outside." He concluded with the question, "which men I believe?" capturing a deep-seated uncertainty and vigilance in navigating human relationships. This statement poignantly illustrates the dissonance between appearance and intent, and the psychological toll of repeatedly encountering betrayal and exploitation.

Figure 4. - External vs. Internal States III

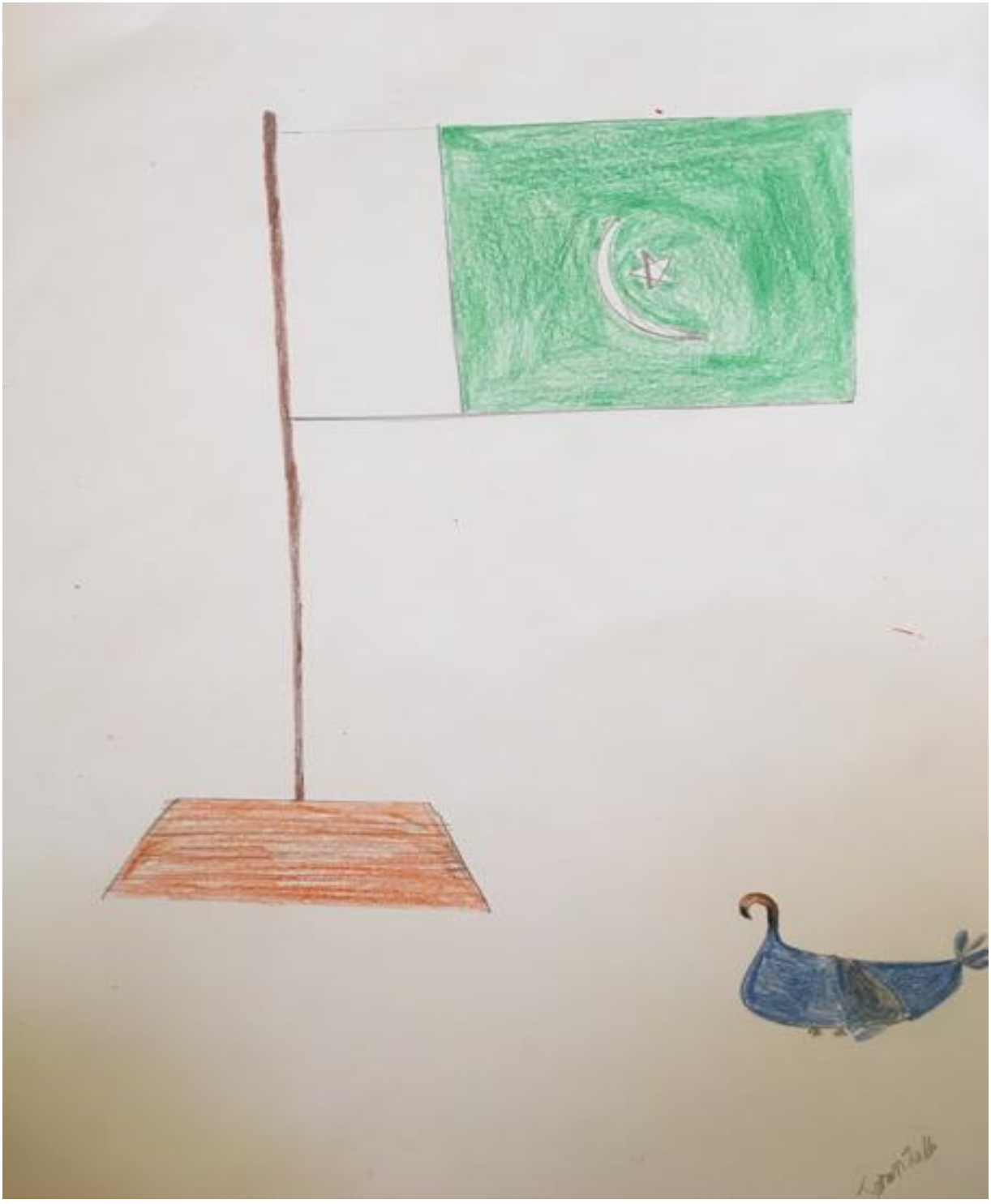


Fragile Sense of Self (19%): Themes related to identity confusion and a disrupted continuity of self were also common. Artworks in this category frequently featured ungrounded or broken figures, disjointed bodily forms, and imagery suggestive of psychological disintegration. Such visual metaphors are consistent with existing literature on trauma's impact on ego strength and self-organization. Hertz (2011) describes self-capacity as the ability to sustain a coherent, differentiated, and boundaried self, while Horsham and Chung (2013) argue that trauma can destabilize these functions, resulting in emotional dysregulation, avoidance, and fragmented identity.

Figures 5 and 6 provide compelling illustrations of this internal fragmentation. These artworks were created during an open studio session, where no directive was provided, allowing for spontaneous and self-directed expression. In Figure 5, the participant drew a human head attached to plant forms in place of a body. Surrounding these are floating flower-like symbols, disconnected from one another and ungrounded. The absence of grounding and bodily coherence may symbolize a dissociation from physical presence or an unstable connection to one's identity and environment. The blending of human and botanical imagery could also suggest a longing for rootedness or growth, despite feelings of being unanchored.

In Figure 6, the participant described the artwork as a self-portrait. The figure is rendered in an X-ray-like style, with internal organs visible, an unusual and intimate perspective that may reflect exposure, vulnerability, or a desire to be seen beyond the surface. However, the limbs are disconnected and disjointed, and the facial features are left incomplete. These omissions and distortions convey a fragmented embodiment and possibly a disrupted self-image.

Loss of Home, Culture, and Identity (14%): A number of participants created imagery that referenced their family homes, national symbols, or culturally significant motifs such as flags, birds, or landmarks. These artworks powerfully conveyed a deep sense of longing for home, belonging, and connection to familiar social and cultural networks. The theme of loss, particularly related to displacement, cultural fragmentation, and identity erosion, was salient across these pieces, reflecting participants' attempts to reconcile their past with their current realities where some cultural practices and familial connections are no longer accessible, leaving individuals with a dislocated sense of self and place. Figure 7 offers a clear example of cultural attachment and nostalgia. The participant depicted the Pakistani flag alongside a small bird at the bottom of the page. The bird, as explained by the participant, is commonly seen in his homeland but absent in the host country. In this context, the bird may reflect the participant's longing for the familiarity, and emotional landscape of his homeland, elements that are absent or inaccessible in his current life. The choice to draw the flag may also signal an



effort to affirm cultural identity in the face of marginalization and invisibility. This artwork was created in response to a

ISSN: 3104-5200 - https://doi.org/10.54878/mqxypv40

session exploring the theme of "self symbols."

Figure 7. – Self Symbol I

In Figure 8, the participant portrayed a person and a home separated by an body of water, with an empty boat. This artwork was created in response to the theme of "Goals." This visual composition articulates a sense of distance and inaccessibility, both physically and emotionally. The participant shared that he had recently relocated to the host country and deeply missed his family home. The boat, left unoccupied, may symbolize the barriers to reunion. His reflection on travel restrictions imposed by employers points to the structural limitations faced by many migrant workers, who often lack the freedom to visit family due to legal, financial, and organizational constraints (Human Rights Watch, 2015b; Kathiravelu, 2016).

Figure 8. - Goals



Finally, figure 9 illustrates the three Pyramids of Giza, a powerful symbol of Egyptian heritage and cultural pride. Though the participant did not provide extensive elaboration, the choice to draw such an iconic representation suggests a longing for cultural continuity, familiarity, and rootedness. The pyramids, massive, grounded, and enduring, may stand in contrast to the participant's current transitory and uncertain experience. This artwork, created in response to a session exploring the theme of "self symbols," evokes the psychological tension between permanence and impermanence, echoing the findings of Dokter (1998), who described how displaced individuals often grapple with preserving their cultural identity while trying to assimilate to the host culture.

Figure 9. - The Pyramids



Abstract/Schematic Expression (12%): A notable portion of the artworks embraced abstract or schematic forms, including geometric patterns, technical drawings, and patterns. While such imagery may appear emotionally neutral at first glance, these expressions can serve critical psychological functions. In the context of trauma and displacement, abstraction often may operate as a regulatory tool, enabling individuals to create order and control within the image when they may feel powerless in their external reality. As Kalmanowitz and Ho (2016) explain, such structured compositions can promote emotional distancing, containment, and a sense of predictability, particularly valuable for individuals coping with chronic uncertainty and disrupted self-continuity.

Figure 11. - Open Task III

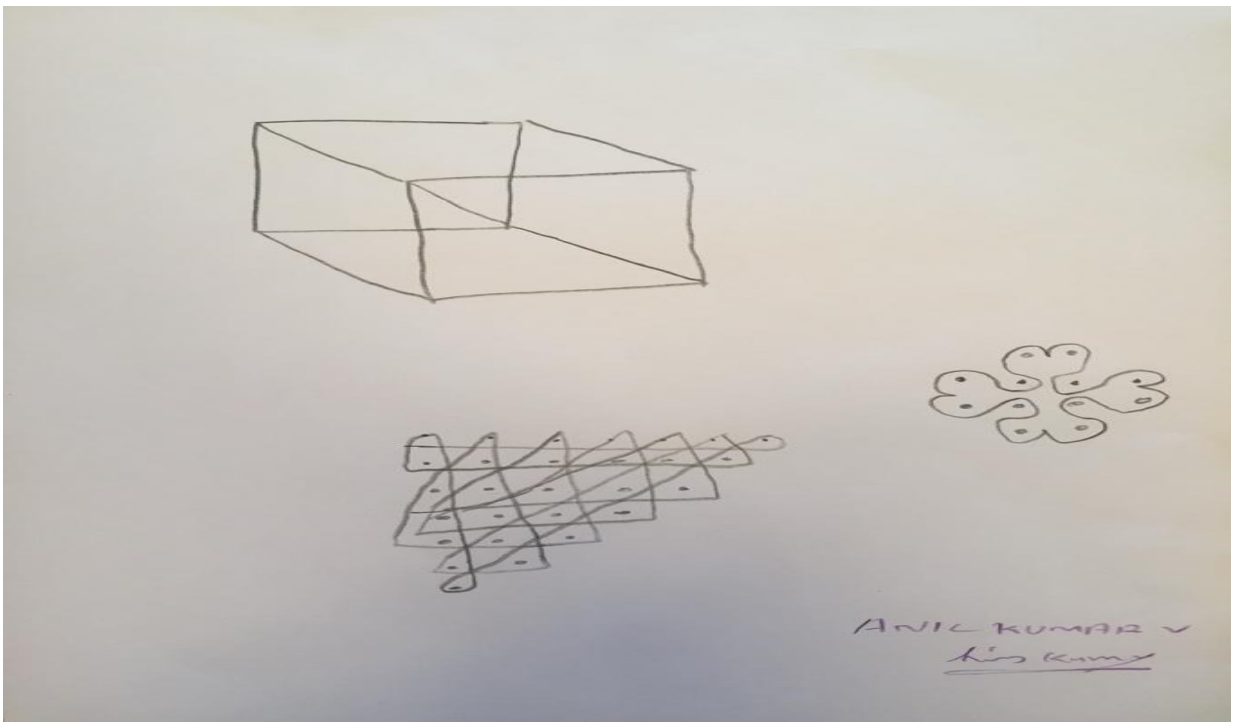




Figure 12. presents a written excerpt created during a session focused on envisioning life goals. The participant's message centers on the desire to make his family and life partner "happy" and to "love life," reflecting a future-oriented drive tethered to relational values. The simplicity and clarity of this message are emotionally poignant, it suggests that the participant's endurance of difficult working conditions is not solely for survival, but is fueled by a vision of familial fulfillment and emotional reciprocity. Figure 13 adds further nuance to the theme of family. Created in response to a directive contrasting external versus internal emotional states (described above), the participant illustrated a brightly colored window to symbolize how he presents himself to others. Behind that external façade, however, he portrayed his three daughters. The participant shared that he worries about his daughters' futures and hopes to marry them to good men, an aspiration tied to cultural values around parental responsibility

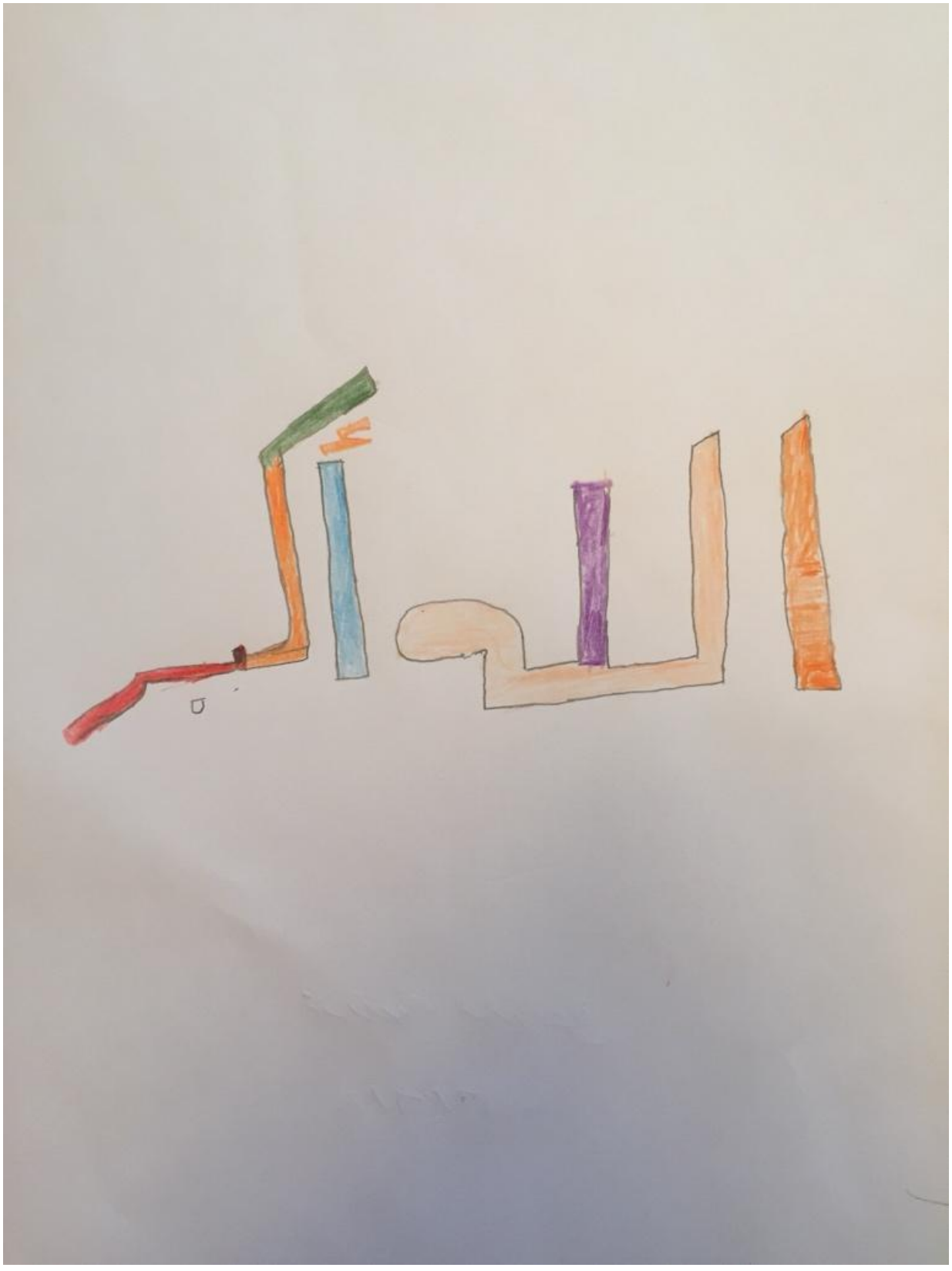
Family (10%): Themes related to family were a recurrent and deeply personal motif across many of the artworks. These depictions often illustrated the absence of loved ones, anxieties surrounding their wellbeing, and aspirational goals tied to familial duty. As some participants described, their families were a source of emotional support, and acted as a psychological anchor, grounding them amidst otherwise unstable living and working conditions. This emotional tethering to family aligns with trauma literature that emphasizes the critical role of relational bonds in maintaining psychological resilience and fostering recovery (Herman, 1992). In contexts of displacement and prolonged separation, participants endure hardship in hopes of securing a better future for their loved ones.

Optimism (5%): Despite the challenges reflected in much of the artwork, a small number of pieces expressed themes of hope, forward movement, and inner resilience. These images aligned with what Grossman, Kia-Keating, and Sorsoli (2006) describe as meaning-making through future-oriented thinking. Figure 14 features a ladder with encouraging words, symbolizing upward movement and the desire to rise above current struggles. Figure 15 depicts lit candles, which the participant associated with hope. Interestingly, after one participant introduced the candle motif, others began incorporating it into their work, suggesting a ripple effect of shared symbolism. This moment highlighted the quiet power of community within the group; how hope, when expressed, can inspire others and contribute to collective healing.

Religion/Faith (4%):

Spiritual imagery emerged in several artworks, featuring religious symbols, sacred phrases, and depictions of prayer. These elements appeared to serve as both coping mechanisms and sources of hope, offering structure and a sense of moral direction amid uncertainty. As Huss, Nuttman-Shwartz, and Altman (2012) observed, displaced individuals often anchor meaning through cultural and spiritual references. Figure 16 depicts a person with a camel journeying toward a mosque, evoking themes of devotion and direction. In Figure 17, a man is shown praying on a mat, with a speech bubble containing his supplication to be reunited with his family, as he explained. Figure 18 features the phrase "God is Great" in Arabic, symbolizing spiritual grounding. All three pieces were created in sessions focused on coping and internal resources.

Figure 18. - Coping & Resources III



Nature (4%): A small number of artworks featured natural elements such as trees, rivers, and mountains. While these images may not always carry overt symbolic meaning, they often appeared as schematic or decorative motifs, possibly offering participants a familiar and accessible visual language. For some,

ISSN: 3104-5200 - https://doi.org/10.54878/mqxypv40

nature may have served as a connection to landscapes from their countries of origin, as a few participants described scenes reminiscent of "home." Figure 19 and Figure 20 are examples of such imagery, both depicting calm landscapes, water bodies, and greenery.

Job-Related (2%): Only a small portion of the artworks referenced job-related content, such as tools, scaffolding, or construction scenes. When they did appear, these images were typically straightforward and illustrative, rather than emotionally charged. This may reflect how work is experienced as a routine or functional part of life, separate from participants' emotional and psychological selves. Rather than indicating detachment, these depictions could suggest the normalization of labor in their daily realities, or a focus on external environments over internal states. Figure 21, for example, shows a construction site with structural details, possibly portraying a familiar setting or daily visual landscape.

Figure 21. - Open Task VII



Discussion

The thematic analysis of artworks produced by migrant construction workers revealed rich, multilayered expressions of lived experience, emotional vulnerability, and psychosocial need. Though participants came from different national and cultural backgrounds, recurring symbols and visual metaphors pointed to shared psychological struggles related to displacement, disconnection, and marginalization. These findings align with the broader literature highlighting the complex emotional toll of migrant labor and the often-invisible psychological burden it carries (Hertz, 2011; Kathiravelu, 2016).

The most prominent theme to emerge was vulnerability. Participants' representations of exposed hearts, fragmented bodies, and mistrust in others suggest a deeply felt sense of emotional fragility and disempowerment. These images echo the realities of migrant workers who often face precarious legal protections, exploitative labor conditions, and forced separation from family. The artworks suggest that beneath outward resilience lies a landscape marked by anxiety, longing, and a struggle to maintain dignity under pressure (van der Kolk, 2014).

Themes related to identity disintegration and a fragile sense of self further illuminate the psychological toll of displacement. Participants' depictions of fragmented or abstracted figures reflect the disruption of coherent self-narratives and the erosion of stable identity markers, common psychological effects among individuals navigating unfamiliar environments and being treated

as replaceable labor (Horsham & Chung, 2013). These visual expressions underscore the need to attend not only to workers' material well-being but also to their internal experiences of fragmentation and dislocation.

Themes of loss, whether of home, culture, or relational connections, also figured prominently in the artworks. References to national flags, landscapes from countries of origin, or distant family members reflected a persistent undercurrent of grief and longing. These symbols, while sometimes overt, often conveyed unspoken emotional realities that may remain unexpressed in daily life due to stigma, isolation, or fear of vulnerability. The depth of this yearning reinforces what previous research has shown: that displacement often involves more than geographic relocation, it fractures emotional, social, and cultural anchors (Dokter, 1998; Kareem & Littlewood, 1992).

Equally significant were themes of hope and spirituality. While less frequent, these images functioned as psychological coping avenues, offering a glimpse of internal resilience, faith, or future-oriented thinking (Grossman et al., 2006). Depictions of ladders, candles, prayers, and sacred texts signified meaning-making strategies that helped participants frame their struggles within larger narratives of endurance and transformation. The act of drawing such symbols in a shared space also appeared to foster a sense of community, suggesting that group art therapy may offer opportunities for emotional contagion, not only of distress, but of healing.

Artworks related to family emphasized the central role of relational bonds as both a source of motivation and emotional burden. Participants often expressed concern for their children or partners, along with hopes of providing a better future for them. These images affirmed what Herman (1992) describes as the foundational role of relational connection in trauma recovery, family, even when physically distant, remained a powerful psychological anchor. A sentiment itirated by some participants.

The presence of schematic or job-related imagery, though less emotionally expressive, also offered insight into the coping strategies used by participants. These pieces may represent attempts to establish order or familiarity, functioning as affect-regulatory tools amid the unpredictability of migrant life. Whether through technical drawings or simplified renderings of daily environments, these images hinted at the layered ways individuals navigate their external realities while protecting their inner emotional worlds (Kalmanowitz & Ho, 2016).

Taken together, these themes highlight the immense psychological complexity embedded in the lives of migrant construction workers. While they may appear functionally integrated into their work environments, their artworks reveal deep currents of emotional distress, cultural split, and a yearning for dignity and belonging. This underscores the urgent need for trauma-informed, culturally attuned interventions that validate their experiences, promote emotional expression, and provide spaces for psychological restoration. Group art therapy in particular proved to be a powerful modality, not only as a form of expression, but also as a vehicle for connection, containment, and meaning-making. It allowed participants to visualize internal states, share unspoken stories, and witness the experiences of others in a nonverbal and non-threatening manner. As this study demonstrates, giving voice to the silent stories of migrant workers through art not only honors their humanity, but also provides critical insights into how best to support their well-being.

Limitations

This study was limited by its small sample size and the short duration of the intervention, which may not capture the full depth or evolution of participants' psychological experiences. As a volunteer initiative conducted within a worksite setting, the program lacked long-term follow-up and did not include formal clinical assessments. Additionally, language barriers and cultural differences may have influenced the interpretation of certain artworks, despite efforts to ground analysis in participant artistic and verbal disclosures, and contextual cues. Furthermore, inherent power dynamics between the facilitator and participants, particularly given their marginal status and the unfamiliarity of therapeutic settings, may have inhibited full disclosure or self-expression for some individuals. These limitations suggest the need for further research using longitudinal designs and expanded methodologies to deepen understanding of migrant worker mental health.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations can be made for both practice and policy. First, organizations employing migrant laborers should integrate accessible, culturally responsive mental health programs within vocational and residential sites, ensuring that psychosocial support is viewed as integral to worker well-being rather than an optional service. Art therapy, in particular, should be further developed as a trauma-informed, nonverbal intervention that

ISSN: 3104-5200 - https://doi.org/10.54878/mqxypv40

honors cultural diversity and provides safe outlets for expression where verbal disclosure may be limited. Second, employers and policymakers are encouraged to collaborate with mental health professionals to create sustained, structured programs that include follow-up sessions and ongoing community-building, thereby addressing not only acute distress but also long-term resilience. Third, given the centrality of family, identity, and cultural continuity in participants' artwork, future interventions should incorporate family-inclusive initiatives (virtual interactions), spiritual resources, and culturally grounded practices that resonate with workers' lived experiences. Finally, additional research employing longitudinal and mixed-methods designs is needed to evaluate the sustained impact of art therapy interventions, inform best practices, and advocate for systemic changes that safeguard the psychological well-being of migrant workers.

Conclusion

The findings of this study underscore the profound emotional realities that often remain unspoken in the lives of migrant construction workers. Through art, participants were able to externalize complex experiences of vulnerability, loss, identity disruption, and hope. These visual narratives reveal not only the psychological impact of displacement and exploitation but also the resilience and meaning-making capacities embedded within this population. The study highlights the value of trauma-informed, culturally sensitive art therapy as a pathway for expression, connection, and healing among marginalized groups. Supporting the psychological well-being of migrant workers is not just a compassionate endeavor, it is a necessary step toward restoring dignity and equity in global labor systems. It is important to clarify that the intention of this work is not to critique any particular sociopolitical structure, but to highlight the transformative potential of collaborative, inclusive mental health initiatives that extend care to marginalized populations.

References

American Art Therapy Association. (2022). About art therapy. https://arttherapy.org/about-art-therapy/

Cook, J., Arrow, H., & Malle, B. F. (2011). The role of power in social influence processes. Social and Personality Psychology Compass, 5(3), 178–190.

Crabtree, J. W., Haslam, S. A., Postmes, T., & Haslam, C. (2010). Mental health support groups, stigma, and self-esteem: Positive and negative implications of group identification. Journal of Social Issues, 66(3), 553–569.

Dokter, D. (1998). Arts therapies and clients with a refugee or asylum-seeking background: 'We are all in the same boat'. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Grossman, F. K., Kia-Keating, M., & Sorsoli, L. (2006). Support after sexual assault: How friends and family help survivors heal. National Online Resource Center on Violence Against Women.

Guasto, M. (2014). The trauma of betrayal: Understanding the impact of betrayal trauma on the adult survivor. Journal of Psychological Trauma, 12(2), 43–49.

Heckwolf, J., Bergland, M. C., & Mouratidis, M. (2014). Revealing the unconscious through art therapy: A theoretical and qualitative approach to understanding the impact of art therapy on client experience in a therapeutic setting. The Arts in Psychotherapy, 41(3), 329–339.

Herman, J. L. (1992). Trauma and recovery. Basic Books.

Hertz, P. (2011). Ego strength and self-capacity: Self psychology and trauma. Psychoanalytic Social Work, 18(3), 331–346.

Horsham, S., & Chung, M. C. (2013). Self-capacity and affect regulation in relation to trauma and PTSD. International Journal of Psychology and Counselling, 5(11), 278–289.

Human Rights Watch. (2015a). 'I already bought you': Abuse and exploitation of female migrant domestic workers in the United Arab Emirates. https://www.hrw.org/report/2014/10/22/i-already-bought-you/abuse-and-exploitation-female-migrant-domestic-workers-united

Human Rights Watch. (2015b). Building towers, cheating workers: Exploitation of migrant construction workers in the United Arab Emirates. https://www.hrw.org/report/2015/06/10/building-towers-cheating-workers/exploitation-migrant-construction-workers-united

Huss, E., Nuttman-Shwartz, O., & Altman, A. (2012). The use of art as a tool for resilience in refugees and displaced persons: Insights from research and practice. In L. A. Gerber & D. Kalmanowitz (Eds.), Art therapy in Asia: To the bone or wrapped in silk (pp. 39–50). Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Kalmanowitz, D., & Ho, R. T. H. (2016). Out of our mind. In Art therapy in Asia (pp. 55–74). Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

ISSN: 3104-5200 - https://doi.org/10.54878/mqxypv40

Kathiravelu, L. (2016). Migrant Dubai: Low wage workers and the construction of a global city. Palgrave Macmillan.

Lazarus, R. S. (1993). From psychological stress to the emotions: A history of changing outlooks. Annual Review of Psychology, 44(1), 1–21.

McNaughton, C. (2008). Transitions through homelessness: Lives on the edge. Palgrave Macmillan.

Naumburg, M. (1966). Dynamically oriented art therapy: Its principles and practices. Grune & Stratton.

Punamaki, R. L., Qouta, S., & El-Sarraj, E. (2001). Resiliency factors predicting psychological adjustment after political violence among Palestinian children. International Journal of Behavioral Development, 25(3), 256–267.

Rankanen, M. (2014). Witnessing moments of healing in art therapy with traumatized clients. The Arts in Psychotherapy, 41(2), 125–133.

Robbins, A. (1987). The artist as therapist. The Arts in Psychotherapy, 14(1), 51–62.

Robbins, A. (2001). The integrative art therapy model: A synthesis of the dynamic and behavioral approaches. The Arts in Psychotherapy, 28(1), 55–61.

Seguin, M., Robertson, M. J., & Luthra, R. (2016). Migrant health and social well-being: A literature review. Migration Studies, 4(3), 423–444.

Van der Kolk, B. A. (2014). The body keeps the score: Brain, mind, and body in the healing of trauma. Viking.

Winnicott, D. W. (1960). The theory of the parent-infant relationship. International Journal of Psycho-Analysis, 41, 585–595.