

# Canvases N' Cookies: Starting A New Chapter

*By: Anjali Ravi and  
Gabriela Melgar*





RUTGERS-NEW BRUNSWICK

Institute for Women's Leadership

# IWL Statement

The Leadership Scholars Certificate Program is a two-year selective, interdisciplinary certificate program that prepares Rutgers undergraduate women to be informed, innovative, and socially responsible leaders.

Leadership Scholars design and implement social action projects to expand their understanding of issues and problems and to develop leadership skills.

This project gives Scholars the opportunity to apply the theoretical knowledge they have gained about leadership, advocacy, and social change with the practical and experiential knowledge they have developed about a particular policy issue or problem through the field site placement. It also further develops leadership skills by giving undergraduates the opportunity to practice leadership through action.

To find out more please visit the Institute for Women's Leadership's website at <http://iwl.rutgers.edu>.



# Background

- *Increased need for diverse mental health resources*
- *Women experience gender-based violence more than men*
- *Talk Therapy- a strong method to foster mental health outcomes, but there are various options for individuals*



*Statistics (Mental distress and associated factors among women who experienced gender based violence and attending court in South Ethiopia: a cross-sectional study by [Jerusalem Sewalem](#) and [Alemayehu Molla](#), 2022)*

- 1.77.3% experience multiple forms of violence*
- 2.4.7% reported poor social support*



# Intellectual And Conceptual Foundations

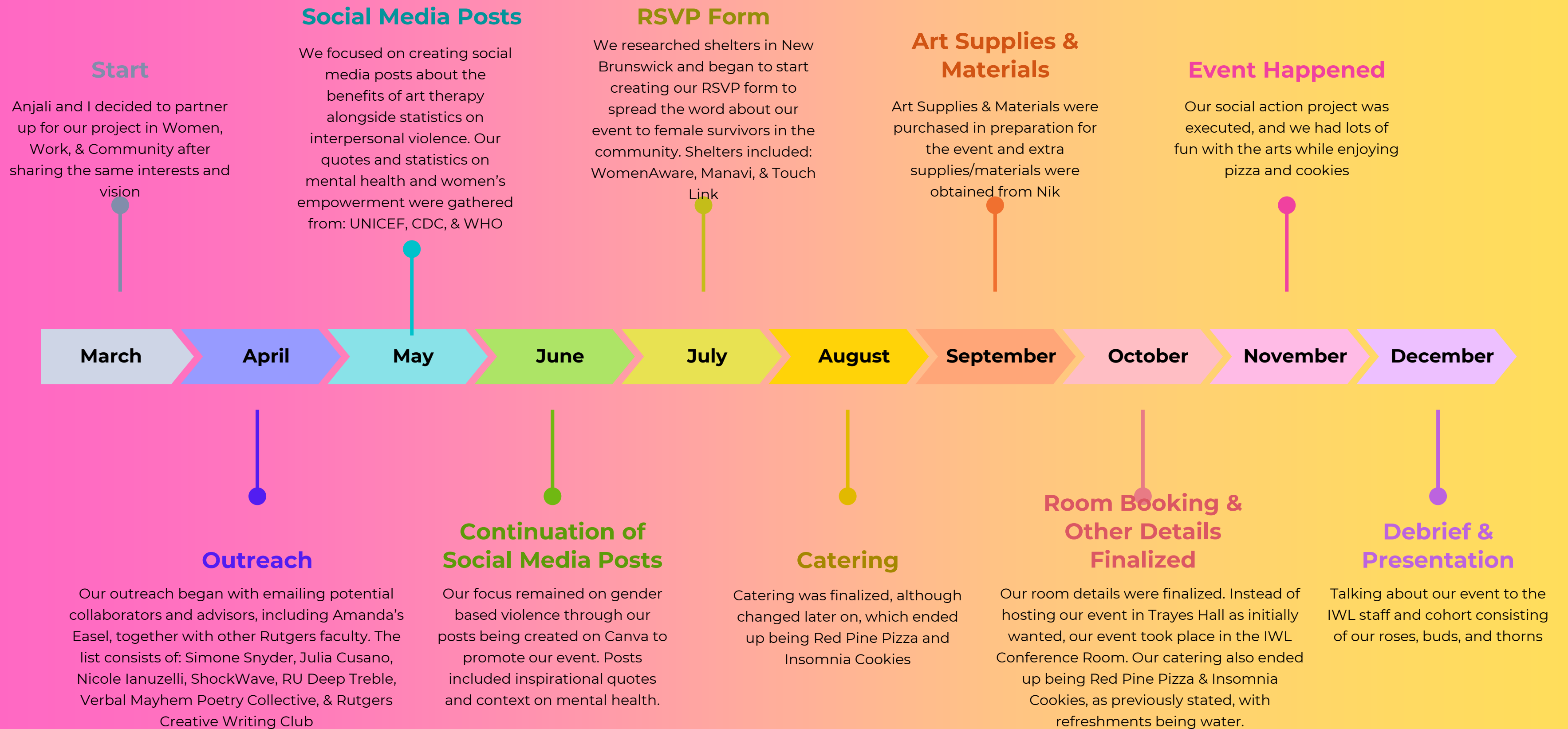
Source: Wheat, L., Advisor, H., & Hull, G.  
(2020). Feminist Informed Art Therapy  
Program for  
Survivors of Domestic Violence.

- **25% of women and 10% of men are experiencing intimate partner violence**
  - **Feminist therapy- no concrete methods**
  - **Goal of feminist therapy- personalized healing**
- **Art- a tool for empowerment, catharsis, and healing**
  - **Art therapy- self-exploration, personal reflection**

# SAP Scope, Purpose, Products

**Second-Year Leadership Scholar Gabriela Melgar and myself hosted an art therapy event for female survivors of gender-based violence, and our attendees arrived from Women Aware, a domestic violence shelter located in the heart of New Brunswick, NJ. The purpose of our event was to create a space where individuals could express themselves through art, promoting healing and the idea of starting a new chapter in their lives. Creating artwork allowed individuals to release their emotions in a safe, supportive environment, a judgment-free zone. We conducted musical performances, discovered art exhibitions about domestic violence, painted on our canvases, and ate delicious food. The event hosted a small number of people, but each individual had a big heart**

# Timeline





# Day Of The Event



**Domestic Violence Awareness exhibits to honor survivors and their stories.**



**Friends and family holding their paintings, proudly.**



**Tanaya, Nishi, and Susanne (Women Aware) painting and singing.**

# Lessons And Insights Gained Through The Process



- **Rejection is redirection**
- **Healing is not an overnight practice**
- **Perseverance and determination are critical in fostering social change**
  - **Never be afraid to ask for help**
- **Active listening promotes a diverse exchange of ideas and perspectives**

# How Does My Project Represent Feminist Leadership?



- **No right or wrong way to advocate**
- **The leadership pathway is not linear**
- **Fostering social change is completed with small steps**
- **Leadership does not simply involve talking, but doing**

# Project Impact



- **Attendance: 11 individuals**
  - **Focused on a vulnerable population**
    - **Quality over quantity approach**
- What Should Future Scholars Know?**
- 1. You have resources**
  - 2. Communicate with your partner**
  - 3. Set reasonable goals and expectations**

# Bibliography

1. Skop, M., Darewych, O. H., Root, J., & Mason, J. (2022). Exploring intimate partner violence survivors' experiences with group art therapy. *International Journal of Art Therapy*, 27(4), 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17454832.2022.2124298>

When it comes to domestic violence, art therapy contributes to the healing process, successfully promoting personal growth and overcoming difficulties. Maximizing art therapy is efficient in reducing stress, creating connections, and reclaiming resilience in safe spaces while always taking into account the mental health effects of gender-based violence. Our project provides a unique solution to exposure to violence through transformative healing, being an overarching theme that boosts mental health outcomes in women.

Group, U. M. (2025, January 9).

2. Using Art Therapy as a Tool for Healing and Self-Expression. Domestic Violence and Abuse Protection Inc. | Riverside. <https://dvapriverriverside.org/using-art-therapy-as-a-tool-for-healing-and-self-expression/>

One's physical and mental health is impacted by art therapy that heals them emotionally, evoking a significant rise in positive feelings along with self-expression, including narrative. The article addresses the broken silence made by art therapy, emotions are enhanced through the rise of joy and strength, restoring control and surpassing helplessness. Additionally, art therapy shifts one's focus from current thoughts, providing more tranquility for yourself and the brain, especially.

3. Wheat, L., Advisor, H., & Hull, G. (2020). Feminist Informed Art Therapy Program for Survivors of Domestic Violence. <https://scholarworks.indianapolis.iu.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/c003e60c-90e4-439c-8b5d-1b6ef3dd57ea/content>

Art therapy is a unique platform empowering survivors despite their experiences through the emphasis on focusing on the next chapter of their lives. As a research thesis, awareness about art Therapy is spread, addressing the importance of community and the formation of connections. Art therapy promotes healing, empowering female survivors.

4. Woollett, N., Bandeira, M., & Hatcher, A. (2020). Trauma-informed art and play therapy: Pilot study outcomes for children and mothers in domestic violence shelters in the United States and South Africa. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 107(1), 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2020.104564>

As is known, women are commonly impacted by domestic violence. However, children have suffered from these traumatic experiences as well, causing them to be at a heightened risk of disorders such as depression and anxiety. Art therapy is significant for improving mental health and strengthening well-being, prevailing over trauma. The mental health of female survivors is essential, as children are vulnerable as well, making mental health twice as important.

5. World Health Organization. (2024, November 25) Gender-based violence is a public health issue: using a health systems approach. [www.who.int](https://www.who.int/news/item/25-11-2021-gender-based-violence-is-a-public-health-issue-using-a-health-systems-approach). <https://www.who.int/news/item/25-11-2021-gender-based-violence-is-a-public-health-issue-using-a-health-systems-approach>

As public health and psychology majors, both fields intersect with gender-based violence, overlapping in its effects. This research article implements a public health strategy to combat gender-based violence through a health-systems approach. The well-being of women and children is emphasized, and our social action project will provide a space for both groups to heal, disclose, and restart their new lives through art therapy.

6. Sewalem, J., & Molla, A. (2022). Mental distress and associated factors among women who experienced gender-based violence and attending court in South Ethiopia: a cross-sectional study. *BMC Women's Health*, 22(1). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12905-022-01770-6>

Our project addresses the issue of domestic violence that falls within the topic of gender based violence. The article addresses diverse forms of gender-based violence, which are rape, intimate partner violence, sexual assault, and stalking. Mental health is a global concern for survivors of gender-based violence and poses a mental health-related intervention, inspiring readers to come up with solutions for the ongoing issue.

7. Giesbrecht, C. J., Jamshidi, L., LaVallie, C., Sasakamoose, J., & Nicholas Carleton, R. (2021). Assessing the Efficacy of a Cultural and Artistic Intervention for Indigenous Women Who Have Experienced Intimate Partner Violence. *Violence against Women*, 28(14), 107780122110582. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10778012211058220>

Domestic violence significantly affects indigenous women, much like in other cultures, leaving them to struggle with its aftermath. However, when these women participated in the practice known as nato' we ho win, a trauma-and-violence artistic and cultural intervention, their well-being improved, enhancing their sense of resilience. Artistic interventions, such as Art Therapy, in this case, provide immense benefits by empowering women and fostering self-awareness, enabling them to better manage their emotions and experiences for greater success in the present and future.

8. Arias, G., Dennis, C., Loo, S., Lazier, A. L., Moye, K. D., Moye, K., O'Connor, C., Rich, A., Weinberg, M., & Butler, J. D. (2020). A Space to Speak: Therapeutic Theater to Address Gender-Based Violence. *Violence against Women*, 26(14), 1771–1789. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801220942835>

When we think of the arts, we often envision visual arts that involve painting, crafting, and sculpting. However, art therapy encompasses more than just painting; it aims to enhance mental health by facilitating self-expression and creativity, offering numerous therapeutic benefits. Art therapy forms of performing arts, such as drama and dance, which promote open discussion and a sense of freedom. For instance, A Space to Speak is a project that uses real-life stories to address gender-based violence. It provides survivors an opportunity to share their experiences, expressing their emotions and evoking a deep sense of agency, while also building their confidence.

9. Jean-Berluce, D. (2024). Creative expression and mental health. *Journal of Creativity*, 34(2), 1–6. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.yjoc.2024.100083>

Creative expression is an effective coping mechanism that facilitates open communication and allows for creativity to be demonstrated through activities such as singing, drawing, painting, and other methods. This form of expression benefits mental health by fostering a creativity-mental health relationship. Regular engagement in creative activities serves as a daily gratitude practice, providing individuals with tranquility amidst the demands of daily life and other hectic events. Over time, creative expression helps regulate emotions and enhance cognition, offering numerous benefits, particularly for women survivors in need of healing.

10. Campa, G., & McKay, T. (2025). Mapping Violence: Police Use of Force and Gender-Based Violence in New York City. *Violence against Women*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10778012251369024>  
<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/10778012251369024>

In New York City, a study was conducted to assess whether areas with a high presence of police officers who used excessive force were associated with an increase in gender-based violence (GBV). The findings, based on statistical models, indicated that a greater number of police officers engaging in violent actions correlated with a rise in GBV, particularly in racially marginalized communities with a higher population of African Americans. However, these rates of violence can be reduced through police reform initiatives that address the negative impacts of violence on individuals and emphasize community engagement, especially within Black communities.