



# MY BODY MY STORY

The Stories of 10 Brave South  
Sudanese Women's Fight for  
International Justice

Body Mapping Workshop  
Gulu, Uganda  
February 2025



International Coalition of  
**SITES of CONSCIENCE**

## BACKGROUND

Legal Action Worldwide (LAW) represents thirty-five brave South Sudanese women, survivors and witnesses of sexual violence committed during the conflict in Central Equatoria in 2016 and 2017. All parties to the conflict committed brutal acts of sexual violence, targeting women in their villages or as they came back to their villages for food, hid in the bush, or started fleeing to Uganda, often for the second time in their lives. Some of them were as young as ten or eleven years old. Ten of these women agreed to participate in a body mapping workshop organised by LAW and the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience (ICSC) in July 2024.

LAW has represented these women since 2018 in their fight for justice. LAW submitted the first communication against the Republic of South Sudan to the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) for breach of its obligations under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (the Convention) and requesting CEDAW to protect their identities from the State. In June 2024, at LAW's request, CEDAW made the groundbreaking decision to protect the women's identities from the State. This was the first time a UN Treaty Body agreed to transmit a communication to a State without disclosing the identities of the victims. Victims of conflict-related sexual violence rarely make complaints against their States out of fear of reprisals. This decision opens the door for survivors around the world to seek justice.



## BODY MAPPING WORKSHOP

Body mapping is an art-based therapy method that is also a form of memorialisation, where the focus is on personal stories. It dates back to the 1980s, when it was adopted and adapted by social workers, medical practitioners, and researchers in different parts of the world to suit their objectives for truth-telling and reconciliation. ICSC understands body mapping as a way to accompany survivors of conflict, struggle, and trauma through a process of remembering and expressing their experiences thereby creating a record that honours their life stories. It is a method open to anyone interested in processing their life experiences to move toward healing. Body mapping is a versatile tool that can be utilised to achieve a range of outcomes. The creation process can be cathartic and contribute significantly to participants' healing, while the final body maps serve as powerful instruments for raising awareness and advancing advocacy initiatives. With extensive experience in the process, ICSC has implemented several body mapping workshops in a variety of contexts with different survivor and victim groups, including previous workshops and a training-of-trainers with South Sudanese human rights documenters.



This workshop was residential and held over five days in Gulu, Uganda. The primary criteria for participation included previous access to psychosocial support and an ability to engage with their personal history without being severely triggered or retraumatized. Literacy was not a strict requirement, and assistance was available for those who needed it. The participants' ages ranged from 19 to 45 years old, with an average age of 32 years old. Five participants were illiterate, while another five were able to understand, listen and speak in English. The workshop was conducted in English as the main medium, and Arabic interpretation was provided.

The workshop was divided into **five main steps**:

*Ground rules, expectations and beginning the process with color associations, body and shadow outlines, and names*

Following the ground rules and introductions, the body mapping process began with unpacking the meaning of colors, revealing diverse cultural associations and interpretations. Notably, green emerged as a prominent color representing health and goodness, while participants faced challenges in differentiating between anger and sadness, as the local dialect uses the same term for both. Then, participants outlined their bodies and shadows by working in pairs, a technical process requiring oversight to ensure accurate representations. This step concluded with participants adding their names and dates of birth to their body maps, with allowance for variations in how they chose to represent this information, with some choosing to only add one name, while others were unsure of their birthdate.

*Self-portraits and life stories*

This step focused on creating self-portraits, with participants demonstrating remarkable skill and requiring minimal support. Facilitators provided blank sheets of paper and guided participants through drawing representations of early memories. This method proved effective, resulting in enhanced engagement.

### *Life stories through drawing and writing*

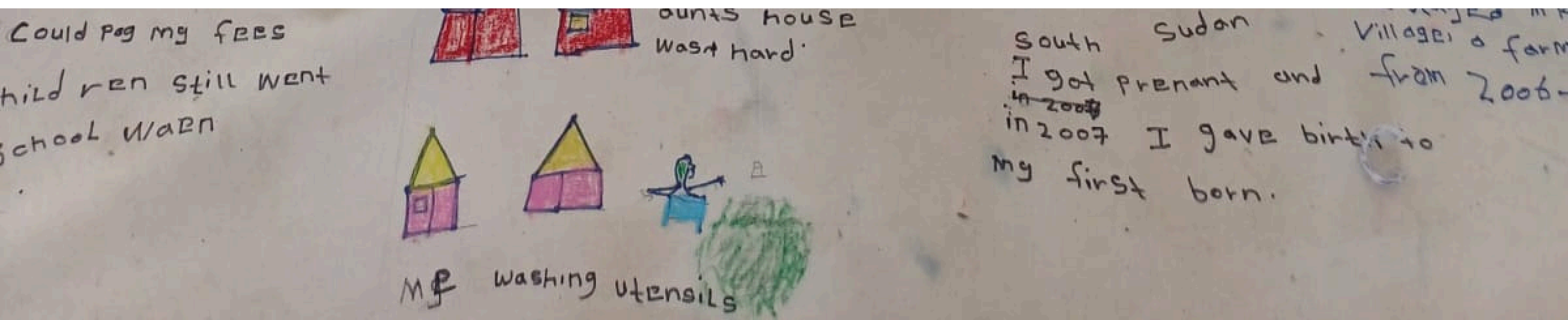
Participants were encouraged to think about their early childhood years into adolescent years more clearly, with many jumping from childhood to their current lives. They were encouraged to utilize coping tools provided to navigate the emotional process, and facilitators observed that some individuals would benefit from follow-up support.

### *Understanding impacts of life stories on physical, mental and emotional body*

Participants were invited to reflect on how these experiences affected them both physically and psychosocially. Using handouts depicting the human body and skeletal system, participants identified physical effects, such as high blood pressure and scars, on the blank female body outline they created. The discussion of psychosocial impacts involved identifying trauma responses, emotional dysregulation, and feelings of hopelessness. Then, participants began working on symbols, a concept that some found abstract and challenging to grasp. They were encouraged to think about things they enjoy, nicknames they received and use this to inspire a symbol of their lives.

### *Finalization of body maps and presentations*

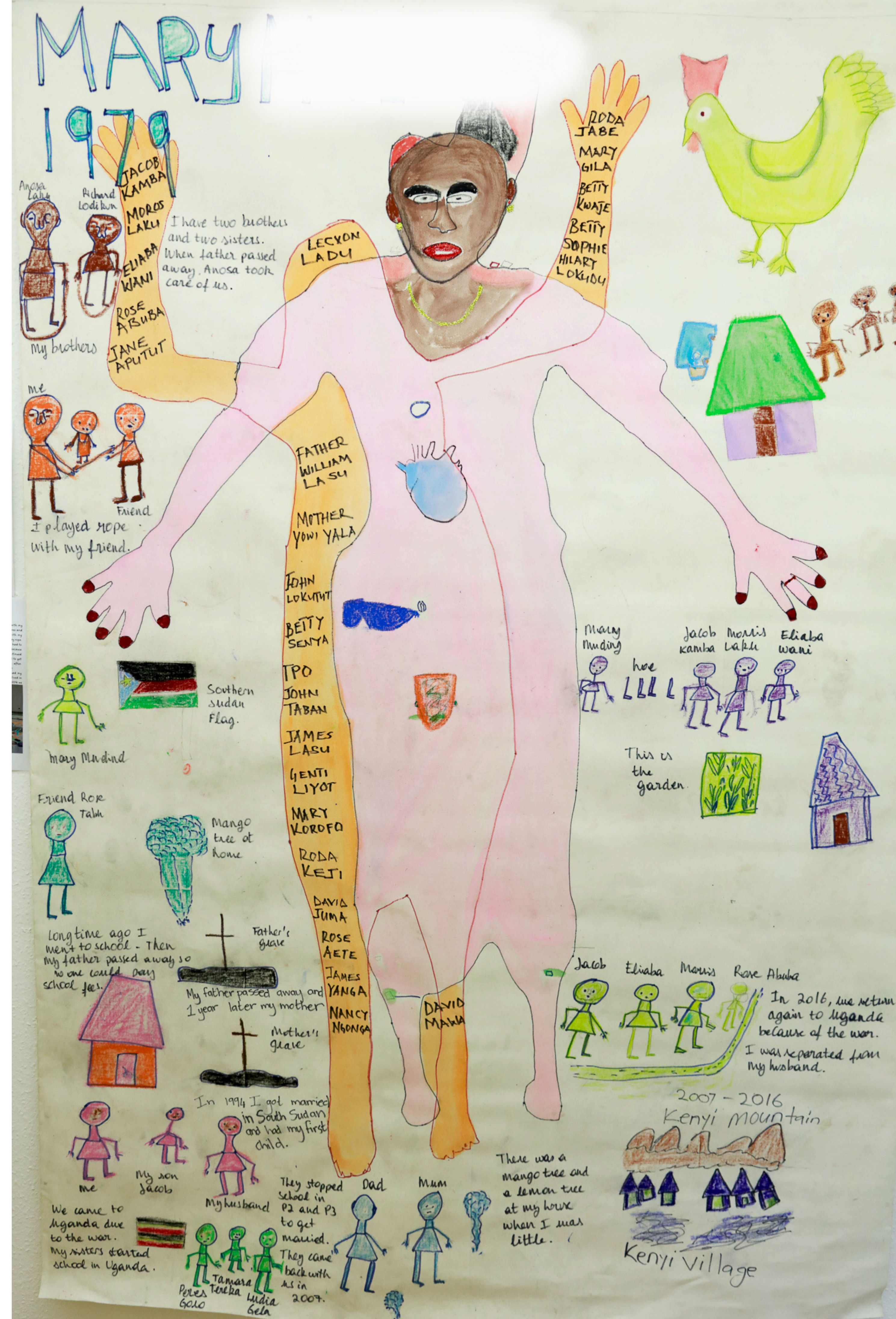
Completed body maps were displayed around the room to encourage group reflection. Participants then presented their creations, which led to a period of reflection on their experiences throughout the process. Participants were encouraged to talk through as much of their body maps as they chose and ask each other questions.



## MARY, 1979

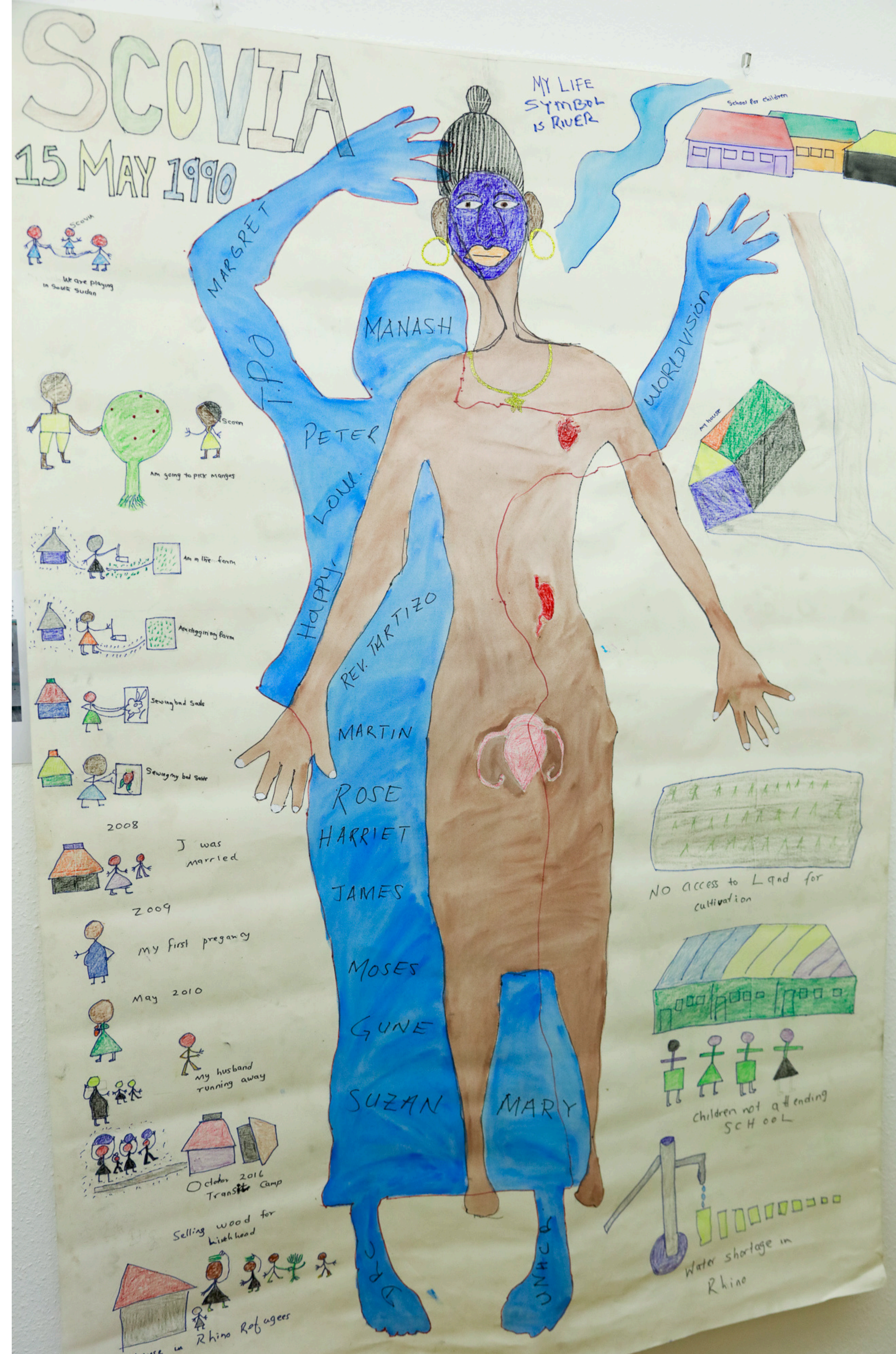
When I was little, we lived in Southern Sudan with my two brothers and two sisters. We had a mango tree and a lemon tree, and other trees. I played a lot with my brothers and sisters and my friends. I liked to play jump rope. When my father passed away, my brother Anosa had to take care of us. I had to stop going to school because nobody could pay the school fees. My sisters continued until Primary 2 and Primary 3 and then stopped to get married. My mother also passed away shortly after. Then we had to go to Uganda because of the war.

In 1994, I got married in South Sudan and had my first child, my son Jacob. From 2007 to 2016, we lived in the village in the Kenyi mountains, but then in 2016 we had to leave again because of the war. I took my four children, and we left. I was separated from my husband when we ran, and I have not seen him since. Now I live in the settlement in Uganda, with my sons. We have a small garden where we can cultivate. I dream of having a house and going to work so the children can go to school. My symbol is a chicken. It is a proud animal, and it represents wealth.



## SCOVIA, 1990

In 2008, I was married, and in 2009, I had my first pregnancy, and then a second child. In May 2010, my husband left us, so I had to take care of the children by myself. In 2016, we had to flee to the transit camp, and then we went to Uganda where we became refugees. I sell wood for livelihood since. Life is very difficult in the settlement. There are water shortages, the children cannot attend school because I do not have enough money, and I do not have land for farming like I used to. Now my dream is to have my own house. My symbol is a river, because it continues to flow, like my life.



## MAGRET, 2006

When I was little, we lived in South Sudan. We did not have a building for the school in the village, so we had the classes under the trees. I remember playing a lot with my friends at school. My mother used to tell me and my brother stories in the house, around the stove where she made fire to cook. She passed when I was little. Then one day there were men who came and started shooting, and people were running around and went to hide in the bush. The houses were burning, so we also went to the bush and stayed there a while.

Then we left for Uganda. Life is difficult there. I have to live with my aunt. I got pregnant and my brother kept fighting me, and I lost the child. I was chased from school this year because I do not have enough money to get a uniform, so I paint houses to get some money. My dream is to fly somewhere in the future. My symbol is a cow and maize, because they provide a living, if you can farm and raise animals.



## ROSE, 1992

I remember playing a lot with my best friend when I was little. We used to sit together in school and talk about our lessons and play ball. I still enjoy playing ball until now. I liked my mother and I liked going to school. I had two brothers and two sisters. Then we had to flee to Uganda in 1996; we stayed with my aunt there. I had to stop going to school there because my aunt could not pay for my school fees, so I had to help in the house, do the washing.

Then I got married in 2006, and we came back to South Sudan with my husband. I had my first child there in 2007. But then the war broke out again in 2016 and the soldiers started shooting. They were everywhere in the village. I had to run to the bush with my children and my sister's children. My husband did not come, so I am alone to take care of the children and my sister's children in Uganda, I get money whenever I can to pay their school fees. My dream is to have a car, then I can transport the children and work easily. My symbol is a chicken, it represents strength and wealth.



## JOYCE, 1987

I am the fourth of six children, we were happy with my mother and my father at home. We used to play a lot, people in the village would watch us, and my mother would sit us down and tell us a lot of stories. When I was three years old, we had to run away and hide in the bush toward the river because there was fighting. I was also helping in the garden to cultivate cassava (bottom left corner). I was eighteen years old when my mother passed away. I was pregnant with my first child, and I was very worried that my mother was not there to help. Life continued in the village until 2017, when I had to flee to Uganda, after traveling through Congo. It took us a long time to get to the settlement in Uganda where we are now. I support myself and my children by selling firewood in the market there. My dream is to have a home and a car, and for my children to go to school. My symbol is a tree. It is very strong, and it can continue to grow.

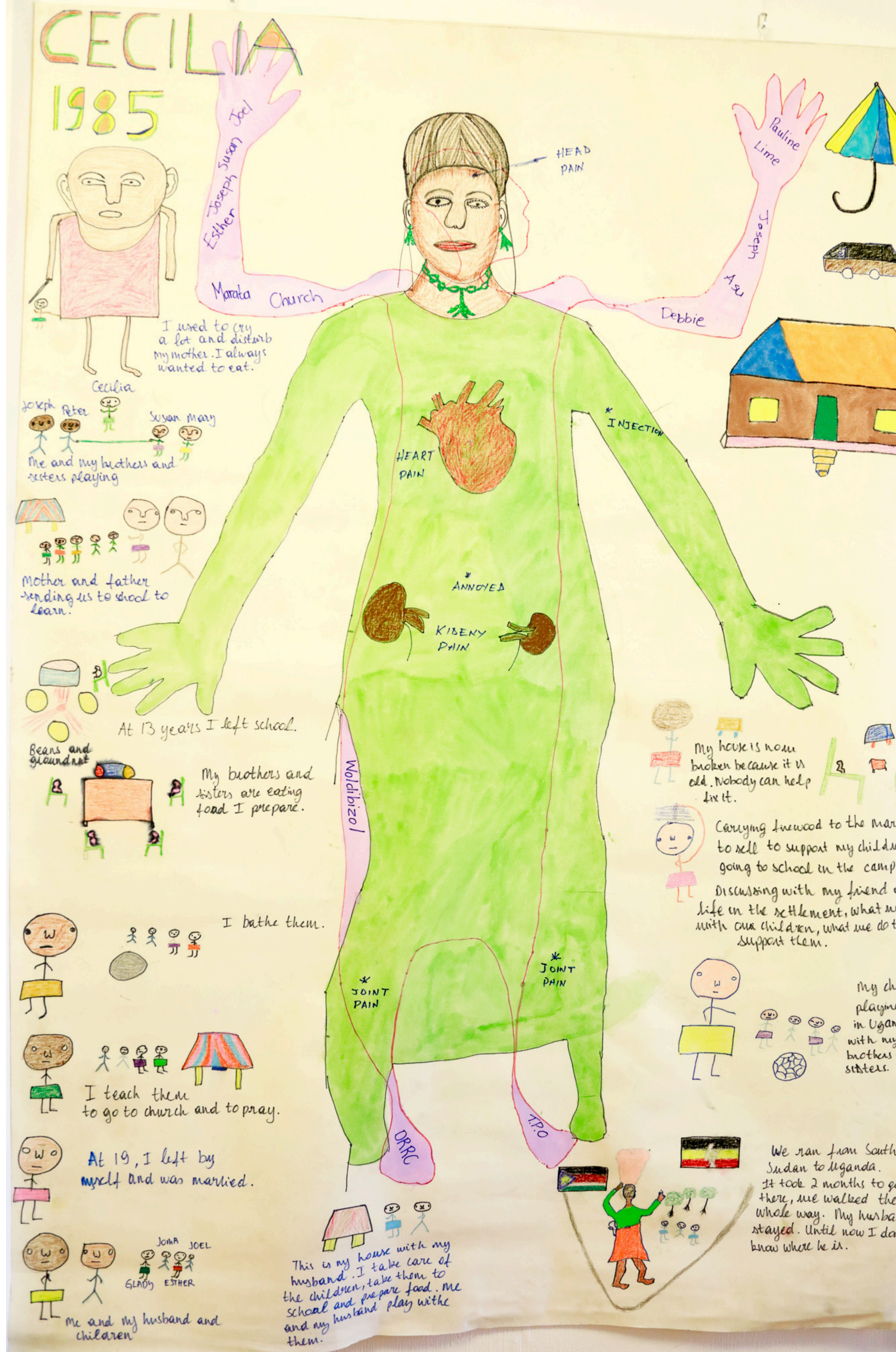


## CECILIA, 1985

When I was little, I used to cry a lot, I always wanted to eat. I had two brothers and two sisters, we went to school to learn and played a lot. At thirteen years old I had to leave school to support my mother to take care of my brothers and sisters. I cooked, bathed them, and took them to church.

At nineteen years old I left, and I was married. I had four children with my husband. We had a house, and we were able to send them to school, and play with them a lot. But then I had to take the children and leave the village, and we came to Uganda, without my husband.

Now I sell firewood to support myself and the children, but it is difficult to earn enough by myself. Life in the settlement is hard. My dream is to have a big house with my children, and a car. My symbol is an umbrella. People can come under an umbrella to be protected.



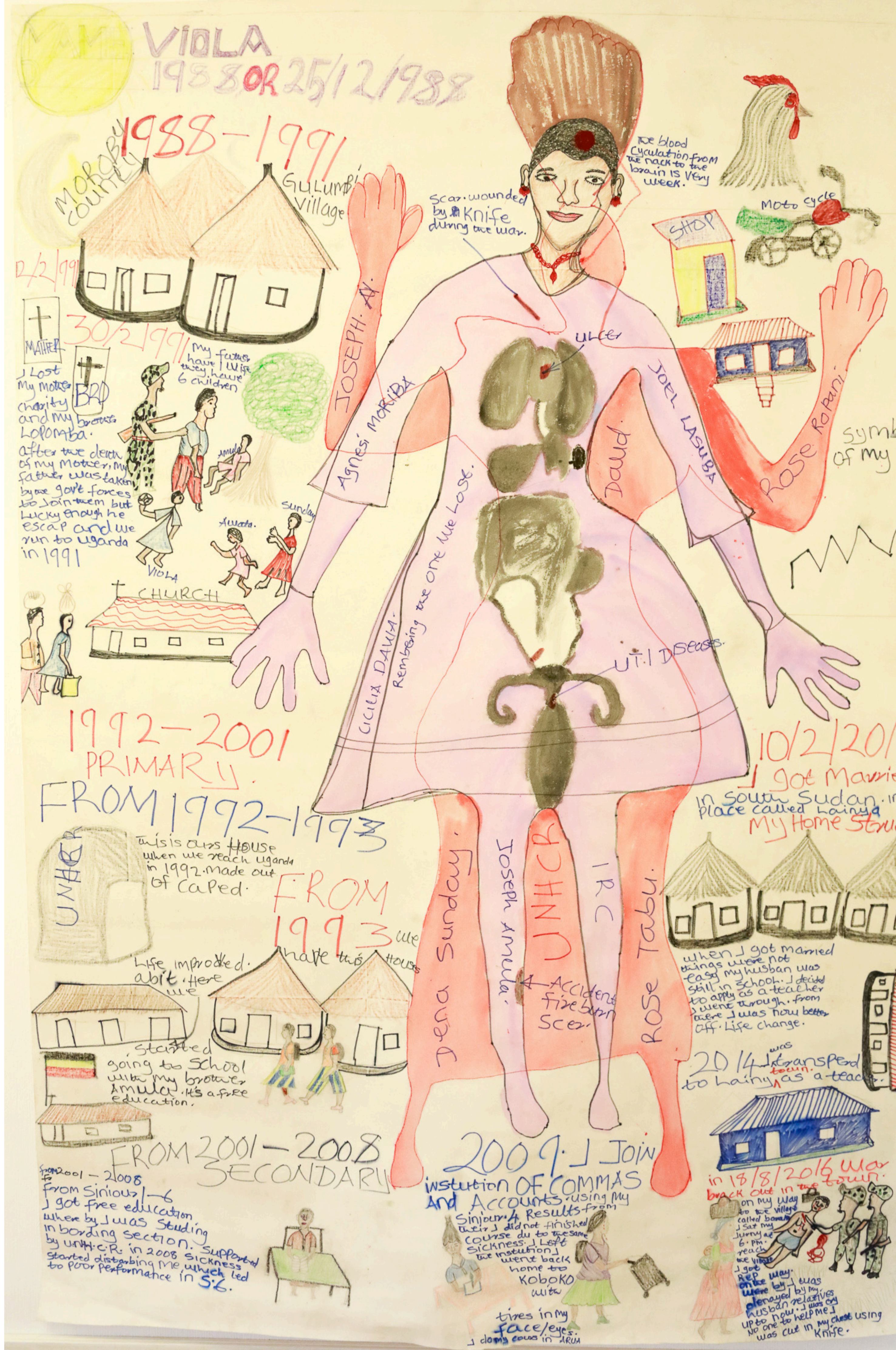
## MARY, 19 Years Old

I remember playing with my brother in the village, and my parents telling us stories. I used to help my mother to fetch water and to take care of the garden. We went to church and to school. One day, me and my sister were collecting firewood when we saw people starting to run to the bush, so we came home and saw that people were shooting in the market. We started running away and we reached Uganda after about two months, after going through the transit camp. In Uganda I could start school again, but I had to stop when I became pregnant. Life became very difficult then. I started collecting firewood to get money, and I was able to get back to school last year. In the future I want a very big house with several floors, and a car and a garden, My symbol is a tree.



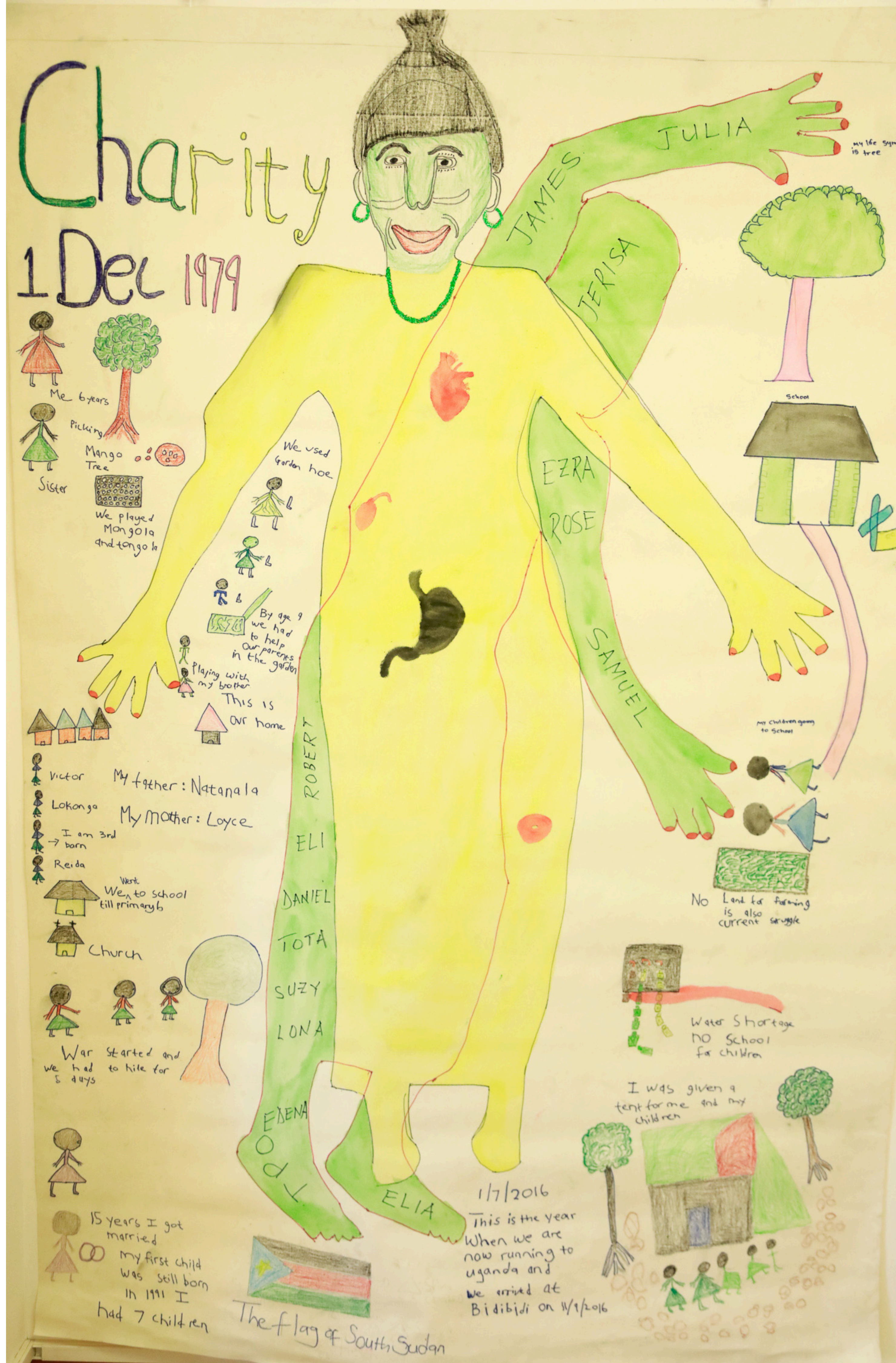
## VIOLA, 1988

Viola is one of the leaders of the survivors' group. She was trained to become a survivor advocate. She became a vocal representative of the other survivors to advocate for justice and economic empowerment. She was recruited by an NGO in the camp as a field officer this year and wants to have her own motorcycle and shop so she can be financially independent.



## CHARITY, 1979

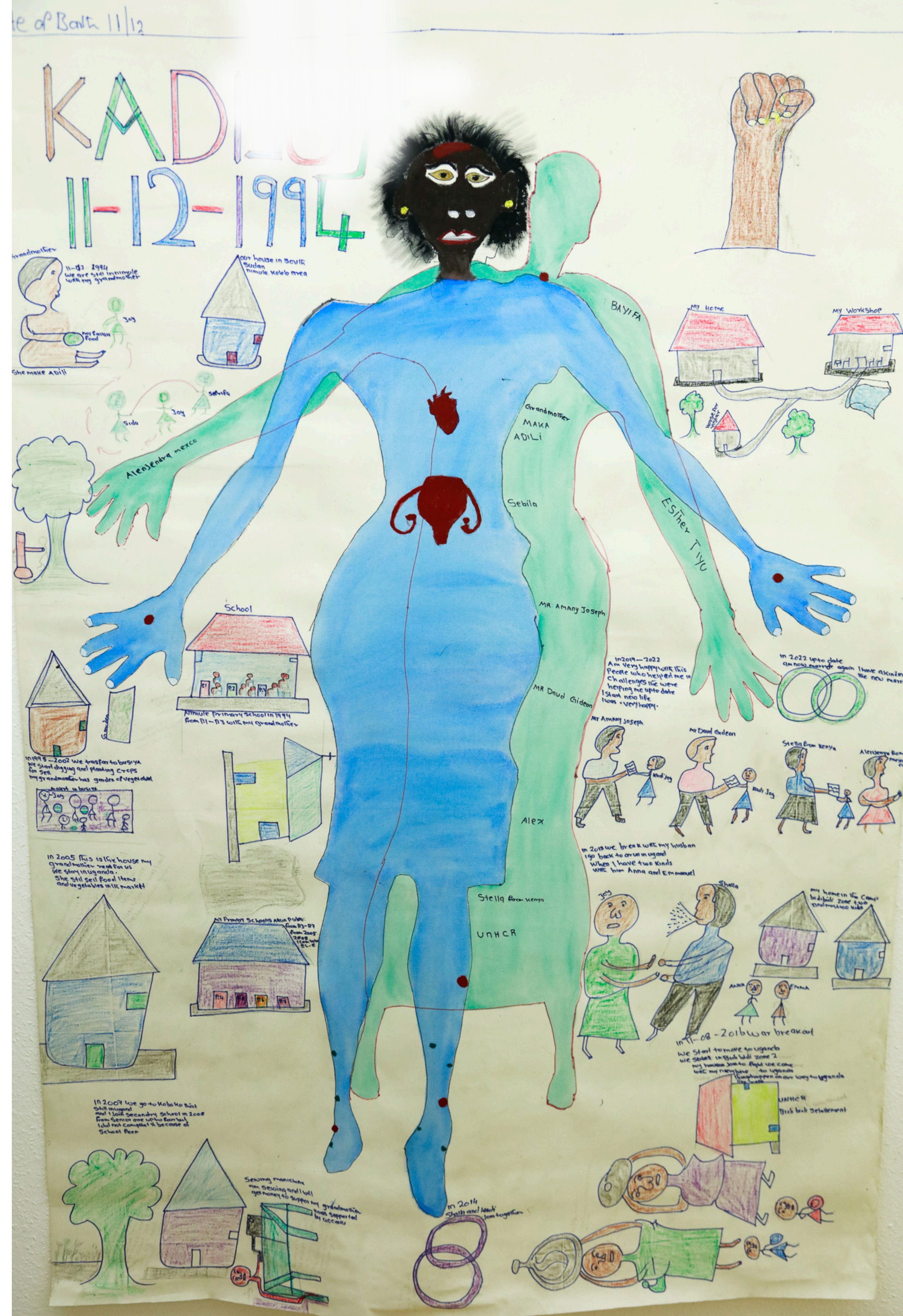
I chose green for my face because it is a beautiful color, it represents hope. When I was little, I was living with my parents and my brother and sister, we played under the mango tree, we went to school, and we helped my parents to cultivate. One day the war broke out and we had to hide for five days. Then I had to get married at fifteen, and I had seven children. I fled with the children when the war broke out in 2016. When we got to Uganda, we were given a tent, but life became even more difficult. There was no school for the children and water shortages, and there is no land for me to farm on. My dream is for my children to go to school. I also want to take the plane somewhere. I chose the tree as a symbol.



## KADI, 1994

I chose to do this shade of black myself for my face, because I am a dark woman and I am proud. This is why I also chose the symbol of a fist and the arm, because I am strong and I can fight.

Kadi is one of the leaders of the survivors' group. She does not live in the settlement anymore and has opened her own shop, and she also makes and sells backpacks for children to go to school.

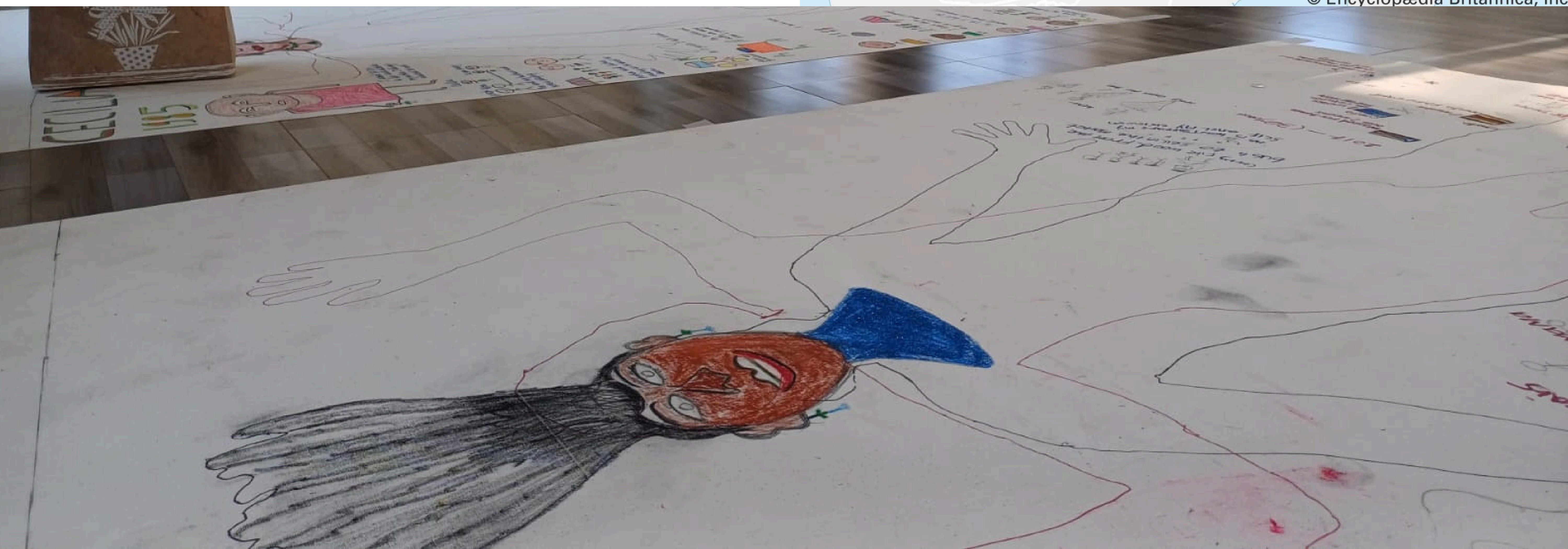


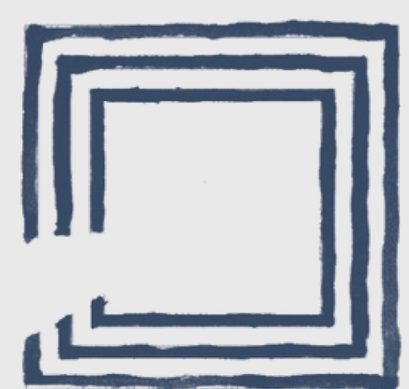
## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We thank International Coalition of Sites of Conscience and their consultants for organising this workshop and providing guidance throughout the process of producing this book.

But mostly, we are profoundly grateful to the ten incredible women who courageously revisited their past and allowed their stories to be shared.

Your bravery and trust are truly inspiring—thank you.





International Coalition of  
**SITES of CONSCIENCE**



**LAW**  
Legal Action  
Worldwide