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# **Emerging Voices: Working with Women in the UK Criminal Justice System**

## **Abstract**

Working with women within the UK criminal justice system requires community music practitioners to adjust their facilitation methods in order to work effectively and with sensitivity towards participants within this challenging context. Adopting gender-responsive and trauma-informed practice is key in building constructive relationships within which creativity can flourish. This chapter will examine the singing and songwriting project, Emerging Voices, that has developed out of the York St. John University Prison Partnership Project. The foundational concepts of trauma-informed community music practice will be explored both as an ideology and form of practice. In conclusion, emerging themes include; improved emotional wellbeing; personal and creative skills development; and creation of positive social cohesion.

**Keywords:** Trauma-Informed Practice

Safety

Trustworthiness

Choice

Collaboration

Empowerment

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## **Introduction**

Established in 2013<sup>1</sup>, the York St. John University (YSJU) Prison Partnership Project (PPP) was originally set up as a theatre-based practice, working collaboratively with women at two local prisons. It was designed with the intention of facilitating a workshop space in which creative and educational exchange can flourish. Staff and students from YSJU work alongside prison staff and women in a way that encourages social and artistic equality, aims to build confidence and self-esteem and provides an open space for dialogue around the complexities of life for the women within the criminal justice system.

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<sup>1</sup> By Rachel Conlon, Theatre Practitioner, Drama Therapist and current Subject Director of Theatre at YSJU.

Emerging Voices, the singing and song-writing project within the PPP, was piloted during the Autumn of 2018 and is now a weekly provision at HMP New Hall. As a community music practitioner and vocal leader, I facilitate these sessions supported by undergraduate Music students from YJSU. We work in Rowan House, a space within the prison that has been specifically set up to creatively support women who have experienced abuse and trauma and have difficulties with their mental health. Aesthetically the polar opposite of much of the rest of the prison, the décor is colourful and welcoming, with displays of the women's artwork and writing on the walls, comfortable furnishings and facilities to make tea and coffee in the break. Our weekly workshop sessions last three hours, and involve physical warmups, vocal technique, singing together (often songs at the request of the women) and song-writing.

The underpinning philosophy of equality in the creative partnership necessitates an openness in the weekly encounters, and challenges preconceptions around the stigma of incarceration. As an example of this, facilitators and students will address the women using their first names. In comparison, prison officers will tend to use the women's surnames. With the emphasis on equality, showing mutual respect in this sense is critical, as "Some of the most neglected and misunderstood individuals in our society are the women in the criminal justice system" (Covington, 2016, p.13). In seeking to understand the immense challenges women in prison face on a daily basis, practitioners on the Prison Partnership Project acknowledge that both prior life experiences of the women and their current circumstances are impactful. The importance of the role creative engagement can play within this context is therefore a juxtaposition against the backdrop of incarceration.

## **Methodology and Limitations**

As the main facilitator of the Emerging Voices singing and songwriting project, my role as a participant observer of the project on a weekly basis has enabled a deeper level of knowledge and understanding of both the participants, the context and the creative processes (Adler & Adler, 1987; Bernard, 1994; Merriam, 1988; Kawulich, 2005). The staff and students from YJSU engage in weekly written reflections following the sessions, as well as in-depth reflective conversation during the week.

As a PhD researcher with the International Centre for Community Music (ICCM) based at

YSJU, the PPP is one of my case studies. However, the ethical clearance process for the research has been challenging, with permission to be sought not just from the YSJU Ethics Panel but from the Governor of the Prison and the Ministry of Justice. At the point of writing this chapter, I am still waiting for permission from the Ministry of Justice in order to interview the women we have been working with. This has undoubtedly created limitations for the research to date, and the explorations of this chapter are based on my weekly reflections as a participant observer, reflections from the students who have worked on the project, and the project evaluation forms that the women complete, which I have permission to quote from. I analysed both the facilitator reflections and the women's evaluation forms in order to identify emerging themes.

As a final note, in order to protect the anonymity of the women we work with, I have used pseudonyms.

## **Background and context**

Produced by the Prison Reform Trust<sup>2</sup>, the following statistics give a selective overview of some of the unique circumstances and challenges faced by incarcerated women in the UK:

- Women represent less than 5% of the prison population in England and Wales.
- An estimated 17,240 children are affected by maternal imprisonment each year.
- 48% of women in prison committed their offence to support someone else's drug use, compared to 22% of men.
- 82% of women's prison sentences were for non-violent offences, compared to 67% of men's.
- 28% of women's offences were financially motivated, compared to 20% of men's.
- Nearly 60% of women in prison who have had an assessment have experienced domestic abuse. The total figure is likely to be much higher.

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<sup>2</sup> Founded in 1981, the London-based charity, Prison Reform Trust, seeks to "build a just, humane and effective penal system [by reducing] the use of prison, [improving] conditions for prisoners [and promoting] equality and human rights in the criminal justice system" (<http://www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk>). With a specific Women's Programme, "The Prison Reform Trust has long called for a reduction in women's imprisonment in the UK and a step change in how the criminal justice system responds to the needs of women" (<http://www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk>).

- There was a 20% increase in the number of self-harm incidents in women's prisons in England and Wales, between 2017 and 2018.
- The rate of self-harm incidents for women in prison is nearly five times higher than for men (<http://www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk>)

To understand the implications of these statistics is to understand that women in the criminal justice system need to be treated differently than the men for whom the system has been established. It is for this reason that the ethical obligation of adapting to women's needs is gradually being recognised as crucial, to their ongoing health and wellbeing, their rehabilitation, and reduction in recidivism. The implementation of gender-responsive and trauma-informed practice provides a framework within which both prison staff and external practitioners can operate effectively and with appropriate sensitivity to the women's needs. The following section will unpack the notion of trauma-informed practice in relation to the singing and song-writing workshop sessions we run.

### **Trauma-Informed Practice – Key Concepts**

The terms violence, trauma, abuse and PTSD are often used interchangeably. One way to clarify these terms is to think of trauma as a response to violence or another overwhelmingly negative experience. Trauma is both an event and a particular response to an event. (Covington, 2016, p. 14)

Women within the criminal justice system are likely to have experienced trauma. According to the statistics cited above, at least sixty per cent of women in prison have experienced domestic abuse, as one example of prior trauma. The impact of trauma on the emotional, physical and mental health and wellbeing of the women is long-lasting and is, in part, responsible for their high levels of anxiety, depression and rates of self-harm (Lempert, 2016). The importance therefore of being trauma-informed (as a community music practitioner working within this context) cannot be overestimated.

The Five Values of Trauma-Informed Care have been identified and developed based on the knowledge of what is known about common responses to physical, sexual and emotional abuse (Covington, 2016). These are:

Safety  
Trustworthiness  
Choice  
Collaboration  
Empowerment

What is immediately evident is that these values align closely with those of community music practitioners working across a multiplicity of contexts world-wide (Burnard, 2018; Cohen and Henley, 2018; De Quadros, 2016; Higgins, 2012; Higgins and Willingham, 2017; Howell, 2018; Lamela and Rodrigues, 2016). The key to understanding these values within the PPP is the focus on trauma, and the following paragraphs will explore each concept in turn.

## **Approaches to Practice**

### **Safety**

What needs to happen in order for the workshop space to be safe?

This is a question regularly asked by community music practitioners, conscious of the responsibility they have in creating a safe space for their participants. However, in a context where participants have past experience of trauma and abuse, I would argue that the issue of safety is of paramount importance.

For the women we work with, a safe space might mean one in which they can voice their fears and anxieties. The ability to opt out of an activity or session is a necessity, without any need of explanation. The women may not always want or be able to articulate their emotions, so as practitioners we learn how to 'read the room'. This involves sensing the emotional undertones, reading body language, looking at facial expressions and observing group interactions, with the understanding that unspoken emotions can still be visible, therefore reflexivity and responsiveness are crucial. This can be complex and difficult to do accurately but is essential in the practice.

Additionally, giving space and time for reflection and understanding potential triggers are vital in creating a positive environment within which the women can feel safe enough to take risks and be vulnerable in the creative process.

## **Trustworthiness**

How can a relationship of mutual trust be developed?

“As an expectation of hospitality, trust and respect are significant ideas. In synergy with an ethics of care [...] I observed community music facilitators consciously cultivating environments of trust and respect through an overarching desire to ‘hear’ the others’ ‘voices’” (Higgins, 2012, p. 159). A space that offers the opportunity for hospitable encounters is one in which mutual trust can begin to be developed. The women can be hostile in new environments and with practitioners they have not worked with before. We work hard to alleviate potential fears and misgivings by offering respect, openness, warmth, hospitality, and the opportunity for the women to be ‘heard’, without judgement, pressure or exposure.

## **Choice**

How do we enable creative exchange in a situation where the social barriers are immense and the participants are, at this point in time, no longer free citizens?

Working with participants who have had many of their rights taken away, the gift of choice is one which a workshop facilitator can generously give. Life for the women outside of the workshop space is hugely complex, and external factors can potentially make it impossible for fully engaged participation. This calls for the facilitator to develop responsiveness and a heightened sensitivity to both the intricacies of the group dynamics and the individual needs of participants.

Choices around the songs we sing are vital for the women. They can share their musical tastes and preferences and we do our best to be responsive to these. Occasionally songs requested by the women are problematic; the lyrics are inappropriate for the setting or could be a trigger for someone else in the group (issues of romantic relationships and motherhood, for example, are best avoided in this context).

## **Collaboration**

What will enable effective collaboration to take place?

The collaborative process of songwriting is a key component of this project and is an opportunity for the authenticity of individual voices to be expressed. Women who have had their voices silenced (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, 1986, 1997) are given the platform for both individual and group-expression. Out of mistrust and a lack of confidence, perseverance and sensitive guidance have enabled the women to be amazed and delighted at what they have created together.

We use images, words and inspirational quotes as a starting point for creative stimuli. The women may choose to respond in writing, reflection or conversation and as we capture their ideas, we work together as a group to shape and refine the individual offerings until we have a text that is representative of the whole. Working together in this way can be immensely challenging for some of the women and as one participant stated;

[I've learnt t]hat I do not do conflict well. This is a skill I am continually working on and also asserting myself. [I need to] be confident with my ideas but in a way so as not to upset other people. (Christine, participant evaluation, 2019)

To acknowledge the need to change was a big step forward for this particular woman, and we saw adjustments in her attitude and cooperation within the group as a result.

## **Empowerment**

How can participants experience personal empowerment and growth?

Offering choice, enabling the women to take ownership in the collaborative songwriting process, giving them the freedom to voice opinions or concerns and express themselves in a non judgemental space, all aids in the development of their internal emancipation.

“Concurrently there is a further realization, as identified by Martha Nussbaum (2000) that care-related factors such as love, empathy, collaboration, reflexivity, power, empowerment,

and voice, are central human capabilities that practices of and for social justice need to promote” (Burnard, 2018, p. 230). Working alongside the women on a weekly basis, we strive to create an environment where each individual can experience that sense of care, support, value and opportunity for self-expression. One of the women stated that, “Everyone was treated as an individual and encouraged to be the best of themselves” (Cheryl, participant evaluation, 2019), certainly something that as facilitators we are continually working towards.

As human beings, the need to be in relationship, to belong, to have a sense of purpose, and, importantly, to be heard and valued are all vital to our wellbeing and survival. Creating opportunity for the women to build positive relationships within the group, both with us and with each other, is one way in which we endeavour to reinforce these ideas of belonging, value, purpose and being heard. However, this can be immensely challenging. We work with women who have complex needs (emotionally, socially, psychologically, physically), can struggle in their personal interactions both with us and each other, and are often intensely vulnerable. Sometimes, the women can only take tiny steps forwards but each one is valuable and to be celebrated. On occasion, the women will regress in their personal journey and this can be challenging to observe. We can offer our support to an extent, but we have had women who have had to leave the project (often for external circumstances beyond our control).

## **Preliminary Findings and Emerging Themes**

The themes emerging from the initial data analysis, reveal that the singing sessions enable:

Improved emotional wellbeing

Personal and creative skills development

Creation of positive social cohesion

The following paragraphs will examine each of these in turn, using specific examples from the practice and conceptual reflections in order to highlight the potential significance of the findings.

### **Improved Emotional Wellbeing**

The women have stated that the Emerging Voices sessions; are therapeutic; are beneficial to their mental and emotional wellbeing; improve their self-esteem and confidence; and enable them to feel like they belong.

As one of the women commented, “It has lifted my spirits and increased my self-value. It has also increased my confidence in my own abilities singing and non-singing” (Sarah, participant evaluation, 2019). And another, “I feel so much happier after our singing sessions” (Janet, participant evaluation, 2019). While this does not mean that this is a consistent reaction from the women, as a facilitation team we are aware that the atmosphere in the room can tangibly shift from the beginning to the end of a session, as one of the student facilitators commented on:

It has been great to see the women develop positively in their mental health and singing from my first visit. You can see their moods lift after every session they have been to and it is vital that this project keeps going to help other individuals express themselves and be part of a group that has always been supportive, safe and positive. (Emerging Voices student facilitator, reflection, 2019)

### **Personal and Creative Skills Development**

Reflecting on the sessions in their evaluation forms, the women have stated that the sessions; have specifically given them confidence in singing; have encouraged their individual abilities and love of singing; and have given them opportunities to be creative.

One of the women expressed that:

Singing alone would freak me out I think, even knowing all the girls in the group. I might come across as brave and nothing phases me, but I’m quite shy and suffer with anxiety, just being in the group is a challenge for me. (Rianne, participant evaluation, 2019)

Working with women who often suffer from high levels of anxiety, we do our best to ensure that the opportunities for the women to develop their personal and creative skills are there but are offered in a way that does not seek to expose their vulnerabilities.

Creating group songs has become an immensely important part of the project. As one woman commented, “Most memorable moment? Listening to our recordings and the strong feeling of accomplishment” (Anna, participant evaluation, 2019). The ‘feeling of accomplishment’ is one which can be observed during a recording session or performance with the Theatre Project to the Prison Staff and Governors. Despite potential anxiety around a recording session or performance, there is a clear sense that the women are growing in confidence in these moments and that in the risk-taking, they are learning how to develop in perseverance and resilience.

The power of song is intensified in an environment where “The general deadening routine and intrusiveness of prison life [...] can all work to de-motivate, shut down and shut off women from themselves, others and their environment” (Hughes, 1998, p.49). To give the women an opportunity to develop their singing and song-writing skills is one of the ways in which we are trying to enable a way of positively navigating the immense challenges of their daily circumstances.

### **Creation of Positive Social Cohesion**

The women have commented that the sessions; give them space to be themselves and on an equal footing within the group; have given them a sense of normality in their week; and have offered a non-judgemental space where their previous experiences or crime aren’t relevant to the creative process and sense of equality.

One of the women commented that, “The girls really supported each other. The energy was positive” (Sharon, participant evaluation, 2019). This gives a sense of the encouragement the women offer each other during the sessions. We have witnessed this on many occasions where the women will both listen to and affirm each other.

### **Conclusions**

Within the complexities of working with women in the Criminal Justice System in the UK, the use of trauma-informed community music practice is key. The five values of safety, trustworthiness, choice, collaboration and empowerment act as a solid foundation on which to build an inclusive and equitable workshop space. These values weave together and inform our planning, decisions, reflexivity, and creative delivery.

Working with the voice in singing and songwriting is powerful for the participants who engage in the practice. They develop in skill and confidence, learning to relate to themselves and others in a more positive and constructive way. The act of singing together releases hormones that produces a positive sense of social cohesion within the group (Bonshor, 2018), and the women articulated the mutual encouragement and support they felt being involved in the project.

The themes emerging from the data suggest that the sessions have the potential to improve emotional wellbeing; develop personal and creative skills; and create positive social cohesion. Our emphasis on being gender-responsive and trauma-informed in the practice is critical to these positive findings.

The biggest surprise for me as a facilitator on the project has been how much fun we have and how much we laugh. The fact that singing together can not only enable a profound crossing of social barriers, but it can bring release and internal freedom even in the context of a prison, is powerful. These women can lift up their voices in song and be heard.

Finally, the following quote from one of our participants encapsulates the heart of the motivation behind the Emerging Voices project: “I feel stronger in myself and so positive about my future. I have found my voice in so many ways!” (Anne, participant evaluation, 2019).

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## **Author Biography**

Catherine Birch is a Senior Lecturer in Music: Education and Community at York St. John University, UK. She is a regular practitioner for the York St. John Prison Partnership Project, heading up the singing and song-writing sessions, Emerging Voices. As a community musician, Catherine works primarily as a vocal leader, and has worked with all ages across the education sector as well as in community settings. Catherine is currently a PhD researcher through the International Centre for Community Music, supervised by Professor Lee Higgins. The central research theme explores the use of vocal music as a means of promoting social

change for women. Initial explorations seek to unpack the processes by which participants can find their voice and the impact this can have on a renewed sense of identity, belonging and self-worth.

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