Transform
NEW VOICES IN COMMUNITY MUSIC

Issue 2
December 2020
ISSN 2631-7583

Fran Garry
Guest Editor

Lee Higgins
Editor

Emerging Voices: Working with women in the UK criminal justice system

Catherine Birch

Est. 1841 | YORK ST JOHN UNIVERSITY

International Centre for Community Music

Emerging Voices: Working with women in the UK criminal justice system

Catherine Birch
York St. John University, UK
c.birch@yorksj.ac.uk

Abstract

Working effectively with women within the UK criminal justice system necessitates a sensitive and informed approach to working with participants within this challenging context. For community musicians working within such settings, adopting gender-responsive and trauma-informed practice is key in building constructive relationships within which creativity can flourish. This paper will examine the weekly singing and songwriting project, Emerging Voices, which has developed out of the York St John University Prison Partnership Project. The foundational concepts of trauma-informed community music practice are explored both as a set of values and as a basis for practice. Emerging themes from the first year of the project include improved emotional wellbeing, personal and creative skills development, and creation of positive social cohesion.

Keywords: trauma-informed practice, safe space, building trust in relationship, negotiated practice, creative collaboration, empowerment through songwriting

Introduction

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. As stated by Conlon, '[the] intention is that *both* communities are equally impacted by a transformative learning experience which emphasizes creative collaboration and addresses issues of social concern' (2020: 174). It is therefore important that 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.

Emerging Voices, the singing and songwriting 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.

Our weekly workshop sessions last three hours and involve physical warmups, exploration of vocal technique, singing together and songwriting. We leave plenty of space for reflection and create a group contract with the women entitled, 'Ways of Working', at the start of the project. This facilitates an agreement of how we will work together, specifically, what group values we decide we need to adhere to. An example of 'Ways of Working', in the women's words, and devised with one of the groups, is as follows:

- Be kind to ourselves and each other
- Confidentiality - what happens in the space stays in the space (unless anyone is at risk)
- Be supportive of each other
- Respect – working in agreement with each other
- Listen well to each other
- Encourage each other
- Try our best
- Commit to attending (if possible)
- To respect each other's opinions – try and understand differences
- Have a break
- Have fun!
- Opt out is there if you need

This contract is developed in conversation with the women during the first session of a ten-week project and is then reiterated weekly, with space to reflect on each aspect, and change or add to if appropriate. The final 'opt out' is generally instigated by either me, or one of the students leading that part of the workshop, so that it is clear to the women that the choice to participate is theirs. This has been an important feature of the project, where no questions are asked, and no judgements formed when the women need to step back from an activity and have some time out.

As a Prison Partnership team, we place value in the equality of the creative partnership, which helps us to maintain an openness in our weekly encounters and challenge our own preconceptions around the stigma of incarceration. As a small example of this, staff, students and women address each other using first names. In comparison, prison officers tend to use the women's surnames. With the emphasis on equality, showing mutual respect in this sense is critical, as women within the criminal justice system have been described as 'some of the most neglected and misunderstood individuals in our society' (Covington, 2016: 13).

In seeking to understand the immense challenges women in prison face on a daily basis, I have had to learn to acknowledge that both the prior life experiences of the women and their current circumstances are impactful. The importance of the role of creative engagement within this context is, therefore, juxtaposed against the backdrop of incarceration.

Methodology

While the practice of the Prison Partnership Project is an ongoing, weekly event, the data collected for this paper were collected in the first year of the project, between October 2018 and July 2019. The research methodology is based on three approaches:

1) Personal experiences of facilitating the singing and songwriting project, supported by weekly written reflections of YSJU staff and student practitioners

2) The women's pre- and post-project written evaluation forms for the three projects during the academic year 2018-2019
3) Use of the five values of trauma-informed care as a framework within which supporting literature can be contextualised

Facilitating the singing and songwriting project, 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). Staff and students from YSJU engaged in weekly written reflections following the sessions, as well as in-depth reflective conversation during the week. Findings for this paper have been based, in part, on both the personal experience of facilitating the weekly sessions, and the reflective process engaged in as a crucial part of this practice. My reflections and those of five student co-facilitators, were also used within this process.

The women write pre-evaluation forms at the start of each new ten-week project. These enable each participant to express their hopes, fears and expectations, to give an indication of any previous musical or vocal engagement, and to identify what they think their main personal challenges will be. At the end of the ten weeks, the women then write their responses in a post-evaluation form. The questions focus on how the women's experience and feelings might have changed from the start to the end of the project, how their expectations have been met, and what they thought worked well or not. Questions also focus on what they learnt about the creative processes, about working collaboratively with others, and about themselves. There is also a question asking whether the women have noticed positive changes in any other areas of their lives. The pre- and post-evaluation forms used in analysis for this paper are reflective of 24 individual responses from the women we worked with on three separate projects.

The data were analysed using inductive reasoning through the process of Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), whereby the data were coded, and emerging themes identified. Weekly reflections and pre- and post-evaluation forms were examined in

order to tease out comments and statements that, once coded, created three clear themes: improved emotional wellbeing; personal and creative skills development; and creation of positive social cohesion.

There have been several challenges in collecting data for this paper. Firstly, the ethical clearance process has not been straightforward. It was necessary to seek permission not just from the York St John University Cross School Research Ethics Committee but from the governor of the prison and the Ministry of Justice. During the first year of the project, permission was not granted from the Ministry of Justice to interview the women we had been working with, nor did I get permission to use the women's songs and song lyrics. The clearance for this came through in September 2019, after the end of the data collection phase.

Secondly, each of the ten-week projects started with ten women signed up to participate. However, due to a range of circumstances, this number inevitably tailed off, and we ended up with smaller groups. We had women who started the project and then were released on probation mid-way through. We had women who came midway through and stayed for a couple of weeks. The sample of 24 pre- and post-evaluation forms does not include the voices of those women and so it is important to acknowledge that this is a limited representation of all the participants who engaged in the project during that year.

And finally, it would be remiss not to mention the limitations of my positionality in this research. I bring a particular perspective to the work, ideas, opinions and experience that shape and form how I interact with participants and reflect on the sessions. It is immensely difficult to have an objective approach to the research, when I am so closely integrated into the practice – my subjective position and opinion is present and unavoidable. However, this can also be a strength, when used as a reflexive approach to research (Etherington, 2004).

As a final note, informed consent was obtained from all the women involved in the

first year of the project in order to use the content of their pre- and post-project evaluation forms. In protecting the anonymity of the women, I have used pseudonyms throughout.

Background and Context

Produced by the Prison Reform Trust[1], 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.
- 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

[1] 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).

system has been established. It is for this reason that the ethical obligation of adapting to women's needs is gradually being recognized as crucial to their ongoing health and wellbeing, their rehabilitation, and reduction in recidivism (Covington, 2016). 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 (Conlon, 2020).

The following section will unpack the notion of trauma-informed practice in relation to the singing and songwriting 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: 14).

Women within the criminal justice system are likely to have experienced trauma. According to the statistics cited above, at least 60 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 women we work with in Rowan House have all experienced trauma and (normally as a result) difficulties with their mental health.

Sessions facilitated by the YSJU Prison Partnership team are delivered using a trauma-informed approach based on the 'Five Values of Trauma-Informed Care'. These have been identified and developed based on the knowledge of what is known about common responses to physical, sexual and emotional abuse (Harris and Fallot, 2001, cited in Covington, 2016: 2).

The Five Values 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. The following paragraphs will explore each concept in turn, drawing on literature to support understanding of how these notions are conceptualized within community music research. Additionally, a reflective question is posed within each value, in consideration of the outworking in practice.

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. Stephen Porges, in his 2017 publication, *The Pocket Guide to The Polyvagal Theory: The Transformative Power of Feeling Safe,* unpacks the neuroscience behind our need for safety, and what happens when our safety is compromised, for example, in the face of ongoing traumatic experience. He states that, 'From a polyvagal perspective, deficits in feeling safe form the core biobehavioral [sic] feature that leads to mental and physical illness' (2017: xvi). The women we work with, who have experienced different forms of trauma, including sexual, physical and emotional abuse, have 'deficits in feeling safe'

and, as a result, are wrestling with ongoing issues with their mental, emotional and physical health. Porges goes on to explain that, 'Prosodic voices, positive facial expressions, and welcoming gestures, trigger through neuroception […] feelings of safety and trust that spontaneously emerge when the social engagement system is activated' (2017: 2). Within the PPP, we adopt a practice in which our physical presence conveys openness, warmth and welcome, in order to enable the women to have 'feelings of safety and trust' in our company.

For the women we work with, a safe space might mean one in which they can voice their fears and anxieties. Songs and themes brought into the space need due consideration and a flexible approach; the lyrics or emotional pull may trigger distressing responses, and we need to adjust accordingly. 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 achieve but is essential in the practice. As Porges states:

> Looking, listening and feeling the other in the therapeutic moment is an illustration of the dynamic bidirectional communication between bodily state and emotional processes during a social interaction. For the social interaction to be mutually supportive and to enable a co-regulation of physiological state, the expressed cues from the dyad's social engagement system need to communicate mutual safety and trust. (2017: 49)

As an example of how we might 'look, listen and feel' in the space, we have experienced moments in the project where a song that seemed well-chosen, has elicited an immediate, and sometimes extreme, response. One of the women reacted very strongly when we introduced the song, *This is Me,* from *The Greatest Showman*. She became withdrawn, which manifested itself as physically and emotionally

retreating, refusing to engage in eye contact, and contracting her core muscles, which enabled her to curl in on herself. In observing this reaction while continuing to engage the rest of the group, it became apparent that the woman was experiencing a deep-seated trigger reaction in response to what we were singing. The rest of the women had been enjoying the song, and it was one that had been requested from within the group. However, having sung through it once, I made the decision to stop working with that song and move quickly on to something else.

As an example of practice, this connects to the idea of engaging in 'working with' not 'working on' people (Higgins, 2012: 156). In the context of this project, this notion necessitates understanding that the workshop facilitator is the one unfamiliar with the space and, effectively, an outsider. This is the women's space and, as such, careful consideration and negotiation is needed, including around the repertoire we work on together.

In addressing issues of physical safety, we sit or stand in a circle, also reinforcing the sense of equality within the group (Higgins, 2012: 152-154), and are mindful of not initiating physical touch. 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. One of the women emphasized her feeling of safety in the workshop space, by stating that 'York St John projects are amazing. I love them so much. You're made to feel safe and the students/staff are so supportive' (Shelley, evaluation, July, 2019).

Trustworthiness

How can a relationship of mutual trust be developed?

One of the women, in response to being asked about the most challenging aspect of the project, stated that, '[…] I think my main personal challenge is being able to sing with other people, and in a group. I think the trust and being able to be comfortable

especially if I don't know the person' (Margaret, evaluation, July, 2019). This observation highlights the importance of feeling at ease within the group and how trust is impactful in working creatively in a group where the women have not previously met.

A space that offers the opportunity for hospitable encounters is one in which mutual trust can begin to 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: 159). In my experience, 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.

In Nigel Osbourne's (2009) chapter, speaking about working with children in Mostar in the 1990s during the Balkan war, he identifies working with song as a way to promote trust:

> But music also generates trust: if someone sings to you, they clearly mean you no harm; they make themselves vulnerable, 'bare their soul' and offer sympathy, empathy and a kind of care and love. Then there is the power of music to bring social cohesion - by consent - from chaos, and both to synchronize and to entrain. (2009: 343)

As well as understanding the importance of singing together in enabling trust, the interactions outside of the formal parameters of the session are vital. The initial conversations as participants arrive are as crucial to the work as any other aspect. These encounters are invaluable in establishing trust and enabling facilitators and participants to meet on common ground (Balfour, 2018), demonstrating the generosity

and hospitality that is essential for the underpinning of this work and reaffirming the social similarities in these moments.

Reflecting on the PPP, Conlon states, 'Facilitating a weekly arts practice enables us to develop a deep, respectful and relational approach, travelling alongside the women from week to week as they navigate the topography of imprisonment' (2020: 175). In developing a relationship of mutual trust, it is important also to acknowledge that, as human beings, the need to be in relationship with others, to belong, to have a sense of purpose, and, importantly, to be heard and valued are all vital to our wellbeing and survival. Porges states that:

> [The] need to connect with others is a primary biological imperative for humans. The theory emphasizes that through connectedness, physiology is co-regulated to optimize mental and physical health. The theory focuses on the role that the social engagement system plays in initiating and maintaining connectedness and co-regulation. (2017: 7-8)

Creating the 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, connectedness and positive social engagement. However, this can be immensely challenging. We work with women who have complex needs (emotionally, socially, psychologically, physically), who 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 regress in their personal journey and this can be challenging to observe. We can offer our support to an extent, but we have worked with women who have had to leave the project (often due to external circumstances beyond our control).

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?

In 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). One of the student facilitators, in her weekly reflections, commented on the importance of enabling the women's choices:

> Also, it was a lovely moment with S expressing how these sessions are based around the women having a voice in what songs they want to do and not having one strong leader choosing everything. It was great to hear that the women all know that they have a strong part in how the sessions run and to use their voice if they feel they want to. (Emerging Voices student facilitator, March, 2019)

Collaboration

What will enable effective collaboration to take place?

The collaborative process of songwriting is a key component of this project. By helping the women to overcome initial barriers 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. In this setting, the songwriting offers an opportunity for the authenticity of individual voices to be expressed. Women who have had their voices silenced (Belenky et al., 1997) are provided with a platform for both individual and group expression. One of the women commented on the collaborative process, stating that, 'I learnt about [the] construction of a song, how to create lyrics, the power of collaboration – how many minds were better than one, many voiced were better than one. (Cheryl, evaluation, July, 2019)

We use images, words and inspirational quotes as a starting point for creative stimuli. The women may choose to respond in reflecting through writing 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 but is one of the ways in which we are committed to enabling opportunities for self-development, building confidence and creating a platform for negotiation. As one participant stated, '[I've learnt that] 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, evaluation, July, 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. Interestingly, my reflections on one of the earlier songwriting sessions demonstrates the creative challenge I faced in enabling this level of autonomy:

> [I had to] really [let] go of creative control over the songwriting process and [enable] the women to make creative choices so that the song was truly their collaboration. It was very tempting to make suggestions, but I found myself

> waiting and making space, not rushing the process and helping the women find their feet with it. (Birch, author's reflection, June, 2018)

It is not always an easy process, and I have had to make personal adjustments in my facilitation of the songwriting workshops in order to ensure that the women's suggestions are heard and valued. As one of the students observed, 'It was great to see the women take ownership of their song and be proud of it' (Emerging Voices student facilitator, reflection, November, 2018).

Empowerment

How can participants experience personal empowerment and growth?

Based on the experiences of the workshop sessions, 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 et al., 2018: 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, evaluation, July 2019), certainly something that as facilitators we are continually working towards. One of the students also commented on her own experience of empowerment in engaging with the women:

> I really enjoyed working with the women, it empowered me as well as all the other women around me. There was a lot of encouragement and support amongst the women which was nice to experience. I liked the idea of women helping each other and singing together as a group which made them feel like they were all supporting each other. (Emerging Voices student facilitator, reflection, October 2018)

The use of our physical voices in song also seems to be a factor in greater discovery of enabling the women's individual voices. As a definition of voice, the following quote is one which seems to resonate with our intentions for the project: 'I would like to define 'voice' as 'the expression of personal and/or communal power [and] the courage to fill whatever space you choose to be in'' (Barnwell, 2000: 55). We certainly endeavour to enable space for expression and for the women to have the 'courage' to 'fill [the] space' that we work in.

Preliminary Findings and Emerging Themes

The themes emerging from the initial data analysis of both facilitator and student reflections, and the women's pre- and post-evaluation forms, revealed 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

In using Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to analyse the women's pre- and post-project evaluation forms, coding from the twenty-four responses revealed the Emerging Voices sessions to improve self-esteem and confidence, and to enable the women to experience a sense of belonging within the group.

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, evaluation, July, 2019). And another stated, 'I feel so much happier after our singing sessions' (Janet, evaluation, July, 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 between the beginning and the end of a session. As one of the student facilitators commented in their weekly reflection:

> 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, January, 2019)

The women also connect to themselves and each other, most especially through the breathing exercises we use. With a shorter in-breath and longer, sustained out-breath, anxiety and emotional tension can be released. In the following passage, Porges emphasizes the importance of this process on heart rate variability:

> Singing requires slow exhalations, while controlling the muscles of the face and head to produce the modulated vocalizations that we recognize as vocal music. The slow exhalations calm autonomic state by increasing the impact of ventral vagal pathways on the heart. During the exhalation phase of breathing,

> vagal motor fibres send an inhibitory signal (i.e. vagal brake) to the heart's pacemaker that slows heart rate. During the inhalation phase of breathing the vagal influence to the heart is diminished and heart rate increases. Singing requires longer exhalations relative to inhalations, which promotes a vagal mediated calm physiological state. (2017: 25)

We practice these exercises standing in a circle, emphasising equality in the space, and enabling a sense of trust and unity within the group. The women have spoken about practising these exercises during the week and how it has had physical as well as mental and emotional benefits. The act of singing together releases hormones, such as oxytocin, that produce a positive sense of social cohesion within the group (Osbourne, 2009: 341), and the women articulated the mutual encouragement and support they felt by being involved in the project.

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, evaluation, July, 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 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, evaluation, July, 2019). The 'feeling of accomplishment' is one which can be observed during a recording session or performance to the prison staff, governors and other invited guests. 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 learn how to develop 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: 49). To give the women an opportunity to develop their singing and songwriting 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 are not 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, evaluation, July, 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 both listen to and affirm each other's views and experiences. As an example of this, at the end of each session, we use 'Pat on the Back'. This is a moment where we come back into the circle and take turns

encouraging the person on our left. This could be an affirmation of their contribution to the session, a comment on a particular moment, the fact that they have focused particularly well or have maintained a positive presence in the space.

We have observed that at the start of a new project where the women may not know each other, they are reluctant to contribute to 'Pat on the Back'. However, as the weeks progress, it becomes a more and more important moment as the women see its value and are able to speak more boldly and openly with each other. You can sometimes see the women are visibly uplifted as group members speak to one another about what they have appreciated in that particular session. It is a precious moment.

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 themes emerging from the documented data collection 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 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. 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, evaluation, July, 2019).

Acknowledgements

I would like to express huge appreciation to Rachel Conlon and all those involved in the York St John University Prison Partnership Project. You are an incredible and inspirational group of women, and it is a privilege to work with you.

References

Adler, P. A. & Adler, P. (1987). *Membership Roles in Field Research*. Newbury Park: Sage.

Balfour, M. (2018). 'Music projects with veteran and military communities'. In B.L. Bartleet and L. Higgins (eds) *The Oxford Handbook of Community Music*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 555-572.

Barnwell, Y. M. (2000). 'The voice of African American women'. In F. Armstrong, & J. Pearson (eds) *Well-Tuned Women: Growing Strong Through Voicework*. London: The Women's Press Ltd, pp. 54-63.

Belenky, M., Clinchy, B., Goldberger, N., Tarule, J. (1986, 1997). *Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice and Mind.* New York: BasicBooks.

Bernard, H. Russell (1994). *Research methods in anthropology: qualitative and quantitative approaches* (2nd ed.). Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.

Burnard, P., Ross, V., Hassler, L., Murphy, L. (2018). 'Translating intercultural creativities in community music'. In B. L. Bartleet and L. Higgins (eds) *The Oxford Handbook to Community Music*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 229-242.

Conlon, R. (2020). 'The meeting place: collaborative learning in a university-prison partnership'. In C. McAvinchey (ed.) *Applied Theatre: Women and the Criminal Justice System*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, pp. 173-186.

Covington, S. (2016). *Becoming Trauma-Informed: A Training Programme for Criminal Justice Professionals*. UK: One Small Thing.

Etherington, K. (2004). *Becoming a Reflexive Researcher-Using Our Selves in Research.* London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Glaser, B., & Strauss, A., (1967). *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*. Aldine Publishing Company, Hawthorne.

Higgins, L. (2012). *Community Music in Theory and in Practice*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Hughes, J. (1998). 'Resistance and expression: working with women prisoners and drama'. In J. Thompson (ed.) *Prison Theatre Perspectives and Practices.* London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers Ltd, pp. 42-62.

Kawulich, B.B. (2005). 'Participant observation as a data collection method'. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, *6*(2), Art. 43. http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs0502430. Accessed 7 February 2020.

Lempert, L. (2016). *Women Doing Life: Gender, Punishment, and the Struggle for Identity.* New York: New York University Press.

Merriam, S.B. (1998). *Qualitative research and case study applications in education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Osbourne, N. (2009). 'Music for children in zones of conflict and post-conflict: a psychobiological approach'. In S. Malloch & C. Trevarthen (eds) *Communicative Musicality.* New York: Oxford University Press pp. 331-356.

Porges, S. (2017). *The Pocket Guide to The Polyvagal Theory: The Transformative Power of Feeling Safe.* New York: W.W. Norton & Company.

The Prison Reform Trust (2020). 'Why focus on reducing women's imprisonment? England and Wales fact sheet.' http://www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk. Accessed 13 August 2020.

The Prison Reform Trust (2020). 'There's a reason we're in trouble: domestic abuse as a driver to women's offending.' http://www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk. Accessed 13 August 2020.