

MAMA SING

An arts-based participatory project



Doras
Promoting and Protecting Human Rights



IRISH WORLD ACADEMY
OF MUSIC AND DANCE
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IRISH RESEARCH COUNCIL
An Chomhairle um Thaighde in Éirinn



School of
Medicine



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ABOUT MAMA SING

The aim of **MAMA SING** was to support the mental health and emotional wellbeing of mothers living in refugee accommodation. The project explored the use of arts-based participatory methods. We utilised singing and music as tools for self-care, empowerment and community building. The project was co-developed and co-facilitated by mothers living in Direct Provision, thereby increasing participation, ownership and inclusion.

WHAT ARE ARTS-BASED PARTICIPATORY METHODS?

Participatory methods can be summed up with the slogan “nothing about us without us”. This approach to research and community work is grounded in the ethos of equality, mutual respect and power-sharing. Participatory projects are developed and conducted *with* community partners rather than *for* them.

Arts-based methods in research use the arts as a way of gathering, analysing and disseminating data. This can include visual methods such as photography, collages and murals, performing arts such as community theatre, and – as in the **MAMA SING** project – music and singing. Arts-based methods can facilitate the inclusion of non-academic community partners in the research because they offer creative ways of engaging people from different backgrounds in democratic research processes.



Warm-up exercises

WHY DOES THIS MATTER?

MAMA SING addressed two of the key challenges of our time: **(1)** the meaningful inclusion of asylum seekers and refugees in all areas of Irish society, and **(2)** the wellbeing and mental health of pregnant women and new mothers. With Ireland becoming a major destination for migrants from all over the world in the past decade, the health care system has been under pressure to respond to the growing diversity of people seeking care. National and international research shows that asylum seeking women and refugees are doubly disadvantaged in regard to perinatal mental health: experiences of violence, displacement, exclusion and racism can contribute to poor perinatal mental health, but minority populations are often not adequately reached by social support services.

The focus on arts-based participatory methods in the **MAMA SING** project serves a dual purpose:

- (1)** to harness the power of music-based interventions as effective ways of emotional recovery through self-expression and self-care, fostering empowerment and inclusion, and creating community through social support networks;
- (2)** to increase the participation of marginalised groups in research and health decision-making. Despite best practice guidelines that stress the importance of involving service users in the development of research, policies and interventions, minority populations are often left out of such initiatives.

The project was funded by the Irish Research Council's New Foundations with the aim of creating new partnerships. It forged a new research relationship involving asylum seekers and refugees, community organisations and academic researchers in the Mid-West.



Singing in harmony

THE TEAM AND THE PROJECT PARTNERS

MAMA SING brought together a new network of project partners with expertise in:

- Participatory research involving arts-based methods (University of Limerick)
- Empowerment of refugee communities (Doras, MASI)
- Music-based community projects (University of Limerick, Wellmama Ireland)
- Psychosocial support for pregnant women and new mothers (Wellmama Ireland)

DORAS Doras is a migrant advocacy organisation with long-standing experience of working with asylum-seeking and refugee communities in Limerick. They have a keen interest in further developing their services through the use of arts-based methods.

Website: <https://doras.org/>

MOVEMENT OF ASYLUM SEEKERS IN IRELAND (MASI)

MASI are the only national forum for the self-representation of asylum seekers and refugees. As a **MAMA SING** project partner, MASI contributed an in-depth understanding of the lived realities of refugee communities in Ireland ensuring that the project spoke to these needs.

Website: <https://www.masi.ie/>

WELLMAMA IRELAND Wellmama is a non-profit organisation offering psychosocial support and doula services to women through pregnancy, birth and the postpartum period. Two of the Wellmama doulas are also experienced musicians and singing teachers.

Website: <https://www.wellmama.ie>

ACADEMIC PARTNERS The project was led by Dr Susann Huschke (PPI Research Unit, School of Medicine, University of Limerick) and supported by Prof Helen Phelan (Irish World Academy of Music and Dance, University of Limerick), Dr Hala Jaber (Irish World Academy of Music and Dance, University of Limerick) and Dr Helen Basini (PPI Research Unit, School of Medicine, University of Limerick)

Websites: <https://www.ul.ie/medicine/public-and-patient-involvement-ppi-research-unit> <https://www.irishworldacademy.ie/>

AIMS

AIM 1: Build a new research partnership involving asylum seeking and refugee women, researchers, and community organisations to guide future research activities grounded in the ethos of participatory health research.

AIM 2: Model the use of arts-based participatory methods throughout the project by involving all project partners, including asylum-seeking and refugee women, in the co-creation of the workshops.

AIM 3: Expand the Doras service through a co-created project with and for asylum seeking and refugee mothers that can be rolled out nationally beyond the completion of this project.

WHAT WE DID

There were three stages to the **MAMA SING** project: the pilot, the workshops and the dissemination of the findings.

PILOT

We ran a pilot of the **MAMA SING** project in order to explore the use of music and singing with a group of refugee mothers and women living in Direct Provision, asking for their input and feedback. The pilot took place in January 2022 online due COVID-19 restrictions. The session focused on the sharing of songs and stories that related to people's lived experiences of motherhood. The pilot was evaluated by Prof Helen Phelan.

The feedback showed that the online format worked surprisingly well. Participants were highly engaged, happy to sing and share their stories, and motivated to take part in future workshops. Participants expressed varied views on whether future workshops should be in person or online. Online sessions can be easier to access, particularly for women with small children, as they don't require travel to the location. At the same time, online sessions do not generate the same level of engagement between participants. Considering that a key aim of **MAMA SING** was to bring people together and create lasting connections, it was decided to run the next **MAMA SING** workshops in person (as originally planned) to facilitate more direct engagement between participants.

WORKSHOPS

We ran three in-person workshops in May and June 2022. We invited women living in Direct Provision and refugee mothers via our project partners Doras and MASI. We also opened up the workshop to non-refugee mothers through the network of women using the Wellmama services, responding to the participants' desire to meet women from different backgrounds.



Singing outside in the People's Park in Limerick

The first workshop took place on 7th May 2022. Unfortunately, due to logistical issues outside of the control of the research team, the venue that had been arranged for the workshop was no longer available. Therefore, at very short notice the workshop was relocated to the People's Park in Limerick City. It was a beautiful day and the team found a secluded area to run the event. Over the course of the workshop 14 women and their children arrived to take part. These came from many countries including Sudan, Nigeria, Malawi, Ireland and Brazil. The women enjoyed the warm-up exercises and engaged with ease, participating wholeheartedly from the start. As the workshop progressed, the women were asked to share songs from their childhood or of being a mother, and it was striking how freely they expressed themselves. The atmosphere was very joyful, culminating in one participant singing the popular kids' song "Baby Shark" which resulted in everyone dancing and singing wildly including the children. As the event finished women naturally chatted about the joys and challenges of being mothers. Everyone who attended signed up to come again.

When asked to reflect about the workshop the women said things such as:

"It was therapy and laughter."

"I enjoyed meeting different people and cultures."

"Joy and sunshine."

"Freedom."



Having fun with the children's song "Head, shoulders, knees and toes"

The second workshop took place inside the Hunt Museum in Limerick City. There was another great turnout with 9 women in attendance from various parts of Africa with many having attended the first workshop. Most brought young children so the space was busy with toddlers. Interestingly it was not just refugee women who live in Direct Provision that attended. There were women who might have been in Ireland a number of years but still welcomed the opportunity to meet new people and connect to other mothers, clearly demonstrating that **MAMA SING** met a need. Participants sang songs from their home or songs that were meaningful to them. The session ended with a sound layering exercise where each person added a sound, creating a unique, special piece of music. The women who attended reflected on the day saying:

"Thank you, so nice to meet you all and being with such amazing women. It brings me a lot of joy singing in a community."

"Thank you for letting me come and see everyone. I am happy, so happy."

"Lovely day, good day. It was nice to see different people. Everyone is happy, it's good."



Co-facilitator and gospel singer Christina Mkwanda

The final workshop was held in a music rehearsal room of a local marching band in Limerick City. It proved to be an ideal space for the workshop as it was large enough and private so that the seven participants could really feel uninhibited.

After warming up their voices the women took part in a sound healing exercise. They were asked in turn to lay on the ground and the rest of the group sang over their bodies bathing them in sound. This was done in larger and smaller groups and had a significant effect on all the participants with many women asking to have multiple turns to lie down in the sound bath. Afterwards, some women shared how it had help them to release heavy emotions and feel energised. This exercise allowed all women to take part freely as they only had to make sound rather than having to sing words and the experience made a number of women quite emotional. Some of the women reflected after the exercise:

"It's a new experience. I could catch each voice when I was lying there."

"It was beautiful, it took me back home. It sounded like what we would hum to call people to church."

"It's very interesting, I love it. I like lying down, let's do it again!"

"A nice experience. I feel relaxed. I didn't think I had a nice voice like that."



Sharing food and laughter

After lunch the women sang together again, sharing songs, singing in groups and in harmony. The energy was high and the enjoyment of the women filled the room. The exercise where participants added a sound to create a new piece of music was repeated which once again resulted in a wonderful group experience creating a totally novel piece of music that was continually evolving.

Of the three workshops the final one was the most profound. It was not insignificant that the space it took place in was more suited to the exercises. In addition, the fact that there was only one (very quiet) child present meant that the women could fully engage without worrying about their children. As most of the women had been before they knew what to expect but were also familiar with the facilitators and research team so could relax as soon as they arrived in the space.

DISSEMINATION

The final part of the project was the dissemination of the findings. In addition to this booklet, a short video was created in the final workshop which showcased the methodology and captured the beautiful songs and sounds that were shared as well as reflections from the women.

The video is accessible online:

<https://media.heanet.ie/page/dcb94796445044c39693d403a92cbf57>

WHAT PARTICIPANTS THOUGHT OF MAMA SING

The feedback from the participants – combined with the fact that many returned for the next session – clearly showed that **MAMA SING** addressed a need and offered a positive experience to mothers.

JOY AND FREEDOM

Some women were grateful to get out of their accommodation to meet with other women to sing. Overall the workshops spaces were light, fun and free although they had the potential to be more serious and reflective if needed as was evidenced in the third workshop. Talking to the women many of them are in difficult living conditions, including emergency accommodation as well as homelessness, and having this session was very welcome, a chance to escape. The workshops resonated joy and a chance for women to let go and forget their difficulties for a while.

*“It’s very good to get contact with people and release tension.
I feel happy from the inside when I sing and dance.
When I’m at home I feel stressed and bored.”*

*“It’s very interesting. I like it as it makes me go out.
I’m always at home so it’s a chance to meet people.”*

“It’s lovely, happy, a very positive energy.”

“MAMA SING gives me lots of joy.”



Positive energy



Creating community through singing together

CONNECTION

The women shared the commonality of motherhood that resonated across backgrounds. The concept of sisterhood blossomed because despite different ethnicities, nationalities and living conditions all the women shared a bond as mothers.

"I really enjoy getting to know people from different parts of the world. Motherhood binds us. Thank you."

"I really like it as I am full of spirit. I feel a connection."

"We don't know how important it is to integrate as migrants. It's an opportunity to meet other women who share the same struggle. When we mix our experiences and background it creates magic."



Co-facilitator Owodunni Ola Mustapha

EMOTIONAL RELEASE

In later workshops some of the exercises gave the chance for emotional release. Through sharing sound many women expressed a sense that they had been cleansed and were lighter in spirit and more relaxed when leaving. The workshops offered a chance to release tension and heavy feelings if that is what was needed.

"Thank you so much, it was a good experience for me. I've been going through a lot and have released a lot. It was exactly what I needed, I feel renewed today."

"It was healing, it felt good emotionally. It gave me strength and it encouraged me. When you are singing it's healing."

"I loved the sound bath. During the experience I had a huge buzz down my arms. I have issues with my arm and I received the healing."

WHAT DID WE LEARN?

Through collaborative learning, critical reflection and external evaluation, we were able to take away a number of lessons that can inform future projects.

- The space where the workshop is held is critical. Ideally it needs to be inside and private. While running the first workshop in a park had its own benefits (we got to spend a day in the sunshine), it is not ideal for confidentiality and safety purposes, especially if children are present. When held indoors, the 'feeling' of the room and the size can influence the overall atmosphere of the workshop.
- Ideally, these workshops should be run without children present. If required, childcare needs to be provided so that the mothers can fully engage with the sessions and enjoy the full benefits of the healing aspects of singing.
- Sharing food/drink informally is a bonding experience and a chance for women to share their culture. Providing lunch to all participants was an important part of the workshop. Food needs to be appropriate for the group, e.g. halal/vegetarian.
- Workshops need to be led by a trained and skilled music facilitator with experience of working with marginalised communities to ensure that the potential of collective singing and music can unfold fully. While everybody can sing, not everybody can facilitate a music-based project.
- For participatory decision-making in a diverse project team that includes community members, community organisations as well as academic researcher to really be possible, a significant amount of time is needed. This can be difficult to organise if members of the coordination team are giving their time to the project on top of their working lives and family responsibilities. To ensure that this level of commitment is possible in a participatory project, all team members need to be paid appropriately for their contribution and aware of the time commitment required.
- Project time frames can put pressure on the team to 'get on with things' rather than really ensure that all voices are heard and decisions are made in a participatory, inclusive way. Ideally, funding for participatory projects should allow for flexible times frames in response to arising needs.
- Long-term funding for projects like **MAMA SING** would be crucial to reap the full benefit of this kind of intervention in regards to community-building and mental health support. Many of the participants stated that they would love to continue singing together.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

The intention of the **MAMA SING** workshops was for women to connect to others and have a positive, uplifting experience. In this regard the project was a resounding success. All women who were interviewed about the project expressed they enjoyed it and would like to take part in a singing workshop going forward once or twice a month. Most women welcomed not having their children with them but suggested if they would like to bring them to be looked after by someone in another part of the room whilst they took part.

The workshops highlighted the need for facilitators who are trained in certain techniques. Knowing a range of vocal exercises meant that the workshops were varied and kept the women engaged. It would be valuable to build capacity among community musicians to work with migrants and NGOs to expand the resources for projects like this. In parallel, it would be ideal if music-facilitation would be taught to women in Direct Provision/refugee mothers so that they can run their own workshops from within their centres. This would allow **MAMA SING** to grow internally and in a participatory format allowing for more buy-in from the women leading to greater sustainability. It would also allow new refugees arriving into Ireland to have a group to join so that they can integrate more easily and find new friends and support. Creating a network of **MAMA SING** groups across the Direct Provision centres nationally would be an impactful extension in the future.



Participants and facilitators of the second **MAMA SING** workshop

PROJECT TEAM

Project coordination:

Dr Susann Huschke, School of Medicine, University of Limerick

Workshop facilitation:

Natasha Sinclair, Wellmama Ireland

Dr Hala Jaber, Irish World Academy of Music and Dance, University of Limerick

Owodunni Ola Mustapha, Movement of Asylum Seekers in Ireland (MASI)

Christina Mkwanda, Movement of Asylum Seekers in Ireland (MASI)

Supported by:

Dr Helen Basini, School of Medicine, University of Limerick

Prof Helen Phelan, Irish World Academy of Music and Dance, University of Limerick

Ewa Zak-Dyndal, Irish World Academy of Music and Dance, University of Limerick

Venues:

Hunt Museum Limerick

Garryowen Community Development Project Limerick

St John's Brass and Reed Band Limerick

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