

Cambridge Judge Business School

Critical Perspectives on Social Innovation 6:2026

Participatory musicking in refugee settings: five interconnected themes for trauma recovery

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Foreword

The Critical Perspectives in Social Innovation series of working papers is designed to provide rigorous and challenging analyses. The purpose of the series is to critically examine prevailing assumptions, practices, and narratives within social innovation. By bringing together academic research and practitioner insights, the series seeks to bridge the gap between theory and practice, encourage reflection, and support the development of a critically informed social innovation for a more equitable, inclusive, and sustainable world.

Marianne K Brown has dedicated over a decade to developing and delivering participatory music projects in women's refuges, work that forms the foundation of her ongoing PhD research at City St George's, University of London. Combining professional performance with scholarly inquiry, she investigates how music facilitates transformation, healing, and empowerment for survivors of domestic violence. A professional cellist trained at the Royal Academy of Music, Royal Northern College of Music, and Liszt Academy Budapest, Marianne has performed with leading orchestras including the Hallé, Welsh National Opera, and English National Ballet alongside solo and ensemble recitals. She holds an MA in Cultural Management (City) and an MSc in Psychosocial Studies (Birkbeck), teaches cello, and is a trained psychodynamic counsellor, bringing interdisciplinary expertise to her understanding of music's role in wellbeing and social change. She is currently Research Musician in Residence at a London Cancer hospital and has presented her research at conferences internationally.

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Participatory Musicking in Refuge Settings: Five Interconnected themes for trauma recovery

This essay explores themes from my doctoral research on music workshops for women and children in refuge settings. As a professional conservatoire-trained¹ cellist, educator, psychodynamic counsellor,² and doctoral researcher in music, I examine whether participatory music can function as a mechanism for change, leading to positive outcomes for women and children living in refuge due to domestic violence.

In this essay I examine how these experiences reveal the challenges of a one size fits all approach to social innovation,³ specifically, the difficulty of creating musical interactions that work for the group while still respecting each participant's individual musical choices, empowering them, and supporting their healing process. Drawing on my own experience as workshop leader, I argue that while this individualised approach is effective, it is not always practical or time effective. It is therefore important to identify ways of implementing it more efficiently. Five interconnected themes characterise the impact of musical interventions in trauma recovery contexts: empowerment, emotional responses, social identity, cognitive skills, and music pedagogy.⁴ These themes operate as a system rather than stand-alone categories, with each reinforcing and amplifying others throughout the intervention process. The themes provide a framework for maintaining human-centred approaches, ensuring that live musical experiences remain central to trauma recovery work in refuge settings. These benefits of live music interactions extend to other social and everyday settings.

This essay considers how social innovation interplays with transformative musical encounters, while questioning whose knowledge counts and who benefits from the transformation of trauma into fundable innovation. I argue for the essential existence of human-centred musical experiences such as the ones demonstrated in my music workshops in refuges. Through exploring the relevance of social innovations in this context, possibilities for delivering music and arts projects for hard-to-reach communities are considered, yet also critically examined for how they may reproduce the controlling power dynamics survivors have fled. In doing so I highlight insights on intersection of live musical experiences in contemporary society, identified through my ongoing doctoral research titled: "Participatory musicking⁵ and arts activities for women and children living in refuge: Impact, process, outcomes and mechanisms of change."

¹Conservatoire-trained: This refers to formal musical education received at a music conservatoire (or conservatory), specialising in the study of music and music performance to a professional level.

²Psychodynamic Counsellor: A therapeutic counsellor who uses psychodynamic approaches and the understanding of unconscious processes.

³Social Innovation: The development and implementation of new ideas, products, services, and models to meet social needs and create social change. European Commission (2013) *Social innovation research in the European Union*, Brussels: European Commission, p. 6.

⁴Music Pedagogy: The study and practice of music teaching, methods, theories and teaching styles.

⁵Participatory Musicking: Author Christopher Small uses this term to explain examples of musical participation, with a focus on music as an activity and social process. Small, C. (1998). *Musicking: The meanings of performing and listening*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.

Positioning power

As a young adult who struggled to get started in life, music and playing a musical instrument has been a key component in my personal development and resilience. With a cello always at my side, I can feel sure about many things, how everything has a beginning, middle, and end, like a piece of music, and therefore accept this is part of letting go and leading a fulfilling and hopefully compassionate life. This has led me to deep thinking and to listening to others around me as well as hearing my own inner voice, something also evident in the music workshops in the refuge.

The formative lessons learned through my emotional journey with music have resulted in my understanding of cause and effect, taking responsibility, problem-solving, and most of all personal expression and the psychological release this provides. Bringing my lived experience to social innovation projects has proven that music can make a difference, whatever the circumstances. Yet this personal conviction creates tensions when operating within social innovation frameworks. My belief in music's power positions me as expert arriving with predetermined assumptions about what music should do, potentially reproducing the very power dynamics that survivors have fled.

The refuge environment⁶ typically consists of hostel-style accommodation where women and children reside under the support and care of family support workers, supported by the local authority and external funding. Residency periods generally range from two to six months before they move to more permanent accommodation, although extended stays are not uncommon. These families are typically fleeing abusive environments.⁷

I have found that music can play an important part in their recovery alongside the family learning, educational, and cognitive benefits of music lessons in the refuge. However, refuges also function as sites of protective confinement, safe from immediate violence yet institutionally controlled. Women gain physical safety while potentially losing autonomy, even if temporarily.

An embrace and critique of the social venture model

In the summer of 2025, I attended the Cambridge Centre for Social Innovation's Social Venture Weekend. This experience reawakened my interest in developing social venture projects based upon my academic research and social consciousness about the importance of live music interactions.

One of the planned outcomes of my doctoral research is to form a socially innovative, a series of music projects that can be facilitated in the refuge environment according to need and created using the evidence generated by the research by blending live music and traditional instrumental tuition with technology. My research aims to provide possibilities for this socially aware technique, which is neither music therapy⁸ nor clinical in any sense, but can become a tool for healing and rebuilding lives. To utilise my research for social innovation I aim to create a portable product (musicking – music performance and workshops) suitable for a variety of hard-to-reach communities, therefore expanding the outreach to

⁶Refuge Environment: Accommodation facilities and support, providing temporary, safe housing for people (in this case women and children) fleeing domestic violence and abuse.

⁷Solace Women's Aid. (2025). About us. Retrieved June 2026 from <https://www.solacewomensaid.org>.

⁸Music Therapy: A clinical and evidence-based practice where music is used within a therapeutic relationship to address physical, emotional, cognitive, and social needs.

create maximum impact for vulnerable groups in society and hopefully strengthening the project's profile for my social venture and subsequent funding applications.

Yet to acknowledge portable products, maximum impact and expanding outreach, reveals the challenges faced when working with entrepreneurial social innovation models. This may traditionally imply that scalability matters more than cultural specificity, that broad reach exceeds deep local work, that what works in one refuge should replicate elsewhere.

UK refuges increasingly house women fleeing not only domestic violence but armed conflict worldwide. This heterogeneity, where musical traditions, linguistic capabilities, relationships to artistic expression, and experiences of displacement vary dramatically challenges the one size fits all logic pervading social innovation discourse.

In the next sections I outline five interconnected themes that characterise the impact of musical interventions in trauma recovery contexts. The themes form an analytical framework for understanding how creative practices support healing processes. These themes emerged from my work, case studies, and the literature review, with each illustrated by workshop examples. I examine how each operates within institutional contexts, and how practices from diverse cultural contexts challenge universal models.

Empowerment

Social theorist Paulo Freire's *Critical Pedagogy*⁹ offers essential insights into transformational impacts related to educational approaches, emphasising the importance of adapting teaching styles to social contexts and recognising power balances between facilitators and participants. This pedagogical awareness directly supports empowerment goals by countering the systematic undermining of women's personal efficacy through domestic violence experiences.

Yet "empowerment" itself requires critical examination. The social innovation sector uses empowerment language while often reproducing power dynamics it claims to address. Who empowers whom? When external facilitators arrive to "empower" survivors, they position themselves as possessing power to grant.

When I arrived at the refuge as conservatoire-trained musician, university researcher, white British woman, my expertise positions me as expert despite participants possessing personal knowledge about their own recovery. Empowerment in musical interventions encompasses both individual agency and collective power, specifically addressing how musical participation counters the control and powerlessness defining abusive relationships.

When asked about their emotional state before and after the session, music workshop participants reported positive changes: "I felt good today, and now I am feeling better," one stated. Another explained, "Before we were waiting for the sessions, kids were bored. After we feel good, and they enjoyed." Particularly telling was the comment, "Before the session, I was not going to come and then I listened and decided to come. I feel good and relaxed now." Participants expressed feelings of fun, relaxation, and peace. The power of listening enabled co-creation and a gentle approach. Those who thought they couldn't make music found they could, showing resilience and

⁹Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Continuum International Publishing Group. Critical Pedagogy is an educational philosophy developed by Freire that emphasises education as a practice of freedom, encouraging critical thinking about social and political conditions in oppressive structures.

determination. The group encouraged each other while some watched at a distance. The outdoor session was led by participants making instruments and then an active session consisting of participant's running around to the music and storytelling activity in the refuge garden.

Genuine agency includes the right to refuse. The women who watched "at a distance" rather than participating exercised agency through strategic positioning. The woman who initially did not want to come reveals how institutional pressure operates, refuge staff notice who engages and who doesn't. Freire warns that "the oppressed, having internalised the image of the oppressor and adopted his guidelines, are fearful of freedom." Women learn to anticipate what authority figures want and provide it. Distinguishing genuine agency from performed compliance becomes nearly impossible for facilitators embedded in institutional power structures.

Successful interventions must avoid dictated programming, instead prioritising participant autonomy in shaping musical experiences. This creates a challenge for potential funders in the field of social innovation.

Emotional responses

Emotional responses in musical interventions encompass both immediate affective experiences and longer-term emotional regulation¹⁰ capacities that musical engagement supports, recognising that these responses are not uniformly positive and require skilled facilitation. Emotional responses are characterised by complexity, with positive outcomes often accompanied by challenging emotions requiring skilful support. Empowerment activities often trigger complex emotional responses, which in turn support social identity reconstruction through shared processing experiences.

One child was intent on making a stick out of coloured paper and art materials we had provided. He appeared to feel powerful by holding this and it was soon replaced with a cello bow. His mother, who had been struggling with his restlessness since they had arrived in the refuge some weeks before, seemed relieved and proud that her son was engaging with the fragile cello in a gentle way. Once playing he was transfixed and did not want to give others a turn, and they were happy to continue creating while he played soothing long bow strokes. After I gave him a cello lesson, he felt powerful and had no questions about whether he could do it. His younger siblings and mother looked on in awe at his performance.

This activity demonstrates a low-threshold, high-impact intervention. Using simple, low-cost materials, including recycled coloured paper and art supplies, alongside instruments from my own collection, I was able to facilitate meaningful engagement in these workshops in the refuges. Crucially, the instruments can be used time and time again, making them a sustainable and enduring resource.

¹⁰Emotional Regulation: A person's ability to manage and respond to emotional experiences in socially appropriate and personally effective ways, therefore regulating own emotions.

With such a low threshold, the impact was both measurable and considerable. Through the lens of social innovation, this reinforces the principle that cost and complexity do not determine impact, relational skill and the right environment matter far more. This challenges resource-heavy models of welfare.

The broader implication is that music and arts programmes should be embedded as standard provision in refuges, temporary housing, and emergency services, not treated as luxuries or add-ons. This requires advocacy at policy level to shift how these settings are funded, what counts as essential support, and how high-impact outcomes can be achieved with limited financial resources.

Social identity

Social identity in musical interventions refers to music's capacity to facilitate individual identity reconstruction and community building, addressing the systematic isolation and identity disruption that characterise domestic violence experiences. Group cohesion and confidence-building through delegated roles in community music work¹¹ create opportunities for identity affirmation that counter negative self-concepts often internalised through abuse.

Yet cultural capital¹² operates unevenly.

When music workshops centre Western instruments, Western compositional structures, Western pedagogical approaches, they position non-Western musical knowledge as supplementary rather than central knowledge. This exemplifies precisely the "one size fits all" approach that social innovation discourse claims to avoid yet repeatedly reproduces.

One mother shared, "We listened to Bob Marley, and this music is in my blood. I enjoyed my children dancing to this music." Another noted, "I was enjoying, my son was playing music. I feel surprised and happy because there is so much for the children. I like dancing with the children." Several participants highlighted the therapeutic aspects, with comments like "This is good for adults too. It is good for stress" and in response to the cello sounds, "I find slow music relaxing." While one child commented "I found the cello boring, I like to run around," showing the range of personal choice within the group.

These responses reveal diversity. The mother for whom Bob Marley is "in my blood" speaks to diaspora experience where Caribbean music resonates with migration journeys. The child who found cello "boring" demonstrates honest resistance to Western classical music's assumed universality. These responses represent fundamentally different relationships to music shaped by culture, displacement, trauma, and personal choice. Each participant brings distinct cultural capital that shapes how they engage with creative practices.

¹¹Community Music Work: Musical activities and programmes designed to engage people in their local communities.

¹²Cultural Capital: Pierre Bourdieu's concept referring to non-financial assets such as education, knowledge, skills, and cultural competencies that enable social mobility and status within society.

Cognitive skills in musical interventions encompass both well-documented neurological benefits of musical engagement and practical problem-solving capabilities developed through collaborative music-making, supporting overall cognitive rehabilitation¹³ following trauma. Research demonstrates that musical engagement supports improved spatial reasoning, mathematical aptitude, problem-solving abilities, and communication skills, representing valuable outcomes extending beyond conventional interventions, with emphasis on how “active engagement with music can support the development of musical and other identities and impact on self-beliefs.”¹⁴

After the cello exploration, we transitioned to percussion instruments. I demonstrated various options placed on the mat, namely shakers, rhythm sticks, ukuleles, and other percussion tools. The session evolved into a more structured music education format as we explored concepts of rhythm, pitch differentiation, and tempo variation. By this point, participants showed readiness for this more formalised pedagogical approach. When listening to the live cello performance before the percussion session, one mother observed, “I find slow music relaxing. It was nice to have the cello, the children enjoyed it.”

While cognitive benefits matter, the emphasis on measurable cognitive outcomes reveals how social innovation frameworks privilege certain forms of knowledge over others. Improved spatial reasoning and mathematical aptitude satisfy funders wanting evidence-based intervention. Yet the cognitive work of navigating institutional spaces, managing trauma responses, maintaining cultural identity amid displacement, these forms of cognition remain unrecognised in impact metrics. The mother’s observation about finding music “relaxing” speaks to cognitive work of emotional regulation.

Music pedagogy – adapting teaching for trauma recovery

Composer and philosopher Zoltán Kodály’s work in music education receives particular attention for its emphasis on equality in music education, an essential principle for women and children in refuges. The Kodály method emphasises accessibility and immediacy, aligning with the transient nature of refugee cohorts, where interventions are required to produce meaningful musical outcomes quickly.¹⁵

¹³Cognitive Rehabilitation: Therapeutic approaches designed to improve cognitive functioning following trauma, injury, or illness. It focuses on restoring or compensating for impaired mental processes such as attention, memory, and problem-solving.

¹⁴Hallam, S. (2015). *The power of music: A research synthesis on the impact of actively making music on the intellectual, social and personal development of children and young people*. London: International Music Education Research Centre, p. 17.

¹⁵Kodály, Z. (1974). *The Selected Writings of Zoltán Kodály*. London: Boosey & Hawkes. The Kodály Method is a music education approach emphasising sequential learning, the use of folk music, moveable-do solfège, and making music accessible to all children regardless of background.

Music pedagogy in trauma recovery contexts refers to specialised teaching approaches required when working with survivors, emphasising trauma-informed¹⁶ practices that prioritise safety, choice, and participant agency over traditional skill acquisition models. Research emphasises the critical need for adaptable, participant-centred methodologies, arguing that building therapeutic relationships requires practitioners to avoid imposing predetermined frameworks that might inadvertently re-traumatise survivors.

Children's responses, comments collected on colourful paper with felt tipped pens, indicated positive engagement with the musical activities. One child reported increased emotional wellbeing through instrumental interaction, stating "I liked to play the instruments and the cello playing, to play it I felt happier." Cultural connection was also important, as the same child expressed a desire to play Bangladeshi music. Another participant's enthusiastic response, "I liked cello playing banging the drum and dancing", further demonstrated the children's enjoyment of the music workshop and the music pedagogy experienced that day.

Music workshops in refuge contexts must be culturally sustaining, as demonstrated by the requests for music from different cultures, in this case Bangladeshi music. There is always a risk of the facilitator bringing their own agenda regarding choice of music and songs, which is why the co-creative element of the workshop is so important: participants and workshop leader working together. Although a framework may be in place, the openness to change at any point is fundamental to the ethics surrounding work in an environment where participants may have lost agency and decision-making through domestic violence and the aftermath of rebuilding their lives for both mothers and children.

The composer, philosopher, and educator Zoltán Kodály held a core belief that music is a universal human right rather than a privilege, and that meaningful musical engagement must begin where the participant already is culturally, emotionally, and experientially. The children's responses, gathered on colourful paper in their own words, further illustrate that when pedagogy is genuinely participant-led, the outcomes extend well beyond musicianship. One child's simple statement that playing the cello made them feel happier is a significant one, offering evidence that the goal of music pedagogy in trauma recovery is potentially transformational and empowering, achieved by meeting participants where they feel comfortable and listening to their requests and responses to the music-making.

What must change

Each of the themes demonstrate how participatory music functions as a mechanism for change. Each theme offers specific pathways for understanding the transformative and healing power of live music in refuge settings, and furthermore an ideal framework to draw upon for other vulnerable communities.

Yet this language itself perpetuates problems this essay critiques. Music does not simply "transform" or "heal" but it offers space for testimony, resistance, cultural continuity, strategic refusal. The "framework" should not be imposed on "vulnerable communities" but co-created with them.

¹⁶Trauma-informed Pedagogical Approaches: Educational methods that recognise and respond to the impact of trauma on learning. These approaches prioritise physical and emotional safety, trustworthiness, peer support, collaboration, and empowerment.

Effective musical interactions must be conceptualised as comprehensive interventions addressing multiple aspects of human experience simultaneously.¹⁷ Future research should explore how music can result in empowerment and help create a better society through listening, learning, and considering others.¹⁸ The need to preserve live musical experiences becomes clear through this framework. Maintaining awareness of these fundamental human qualities through musical engagement remains critical for creating societal musicking¹⁹.

I observe that the training of musicians to work in refuges reproduces expert-delivery model. Alternative approaches require refugee women as co-designers, not just participants; practitioners acknowledging limited expertise; survivors compensated for their knowledge; flattened hierarchies eliminating distinctions between experts and participants; and recognition that leadership may look different culturally.

At the outset of this essay, I posed a fundamental question: Can participatory music function as a changing mechanism, leading to positive outcomes for the lives of women and children living in refuge due to domestic violence?

Participatory music functions not as a toolkit to fix or transform participants from a state of deficit to one of recovery, but rather as a mechanism for reclaiming agency, strengthening existing capacities, and creating spaces where power, voice, and belonging can be experienced in the present moment. This distinction is critical.

The change that occurs through musical participation in refuge settings is not linear progression toward a predetermined outcome, but rather the cyclical, relational, and embodied process of resistance against dehumanisation. When women and children in the refuge engage in creative self-expression, make choices about their musical participation, and experience their voices as valuable and worthy of being heard, they enact a fundamental rejection of the oppressive narratives that sought to silence and diminish them. This understanding positions music work not as intervention from outside but as a reclamation of identity from within.

What next?

Training the current and future generations of music students in the philosophy I embrace in is essential for future outcomes in this area. This could raise awareness of how powerful music can be not only as a distraction and for enjoyment but as a tool for healing people in the most challenging situations. This can only be so if the musicking takes place through those who are well-informed and with compassion and knowledge which could benefit the participants but also the musicians, therefore creating a

¹⁷Ansdell, G. (2014). *How music helps in music therapy and everyday life*. Farnham: Ashgate (now Routledge/Taylor & Francis).

¹⁸Stige, B., & Aarø, L. E. (2012). *Invitation to community music therapy*. London: Routledge.

¹⁹Small, C. (1998). *Musicking: The meanings of performing and listening*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.

Bourdieuian structure,²⁰ where participants, musicians, and staff alike embrace equality and non-judgement when participating in musicking in the refuge.²¹

Yet this requires funders relinquishing control, accepting that money supports processes whose outcomes cannot be predicted, measured, or replicated. Alternative approaches must fund processes not outputs; accept failure and uncertainty; allow participant-driven evolution; stop demanding universal scalability; and privilege lived expertise over professional credentials.

The central challenges of the five themes I have identified are captured by social theorist Freire, who reminds us that “the oppressed, having internalised the image of the oppressor and adopted his guidelines, are fearful of freedom.”²² This is why music work in refuge contexts (and in other social contexts such as prisons, hostels or hospitals for example), must move towards empowerment liberation and transformation within the structure of music and the processes of listening and participation. These elements may occur through people, real relationships with one another and then in turn the world around us, society inside and outside the refuge can show mechanisms of change as demonstrated in the words of Paulo Freire: “Liberation is a praxis: the action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it.”

²⁰Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital. In J. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*. Westport, CT: Greenwood, pp. 241–258.

²¹Small, C. (1998). *Musicking: The meanings of performing and listening*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.

²²Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Continuum International Publishing Group. The first quotation (“fearful of freedom”) is from p. 29; the second (“Liberation is a praxis”) is from p. 79.

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