

**Exploring Good Vibrations projects with vulnerable and challenging women  
in prison**

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## Executive summary

Research suggests that Good Vibrations projects have a positive impact on male participants, but there is a need for further research to investigate how women experience Good Vibrations projects. This research sought to provide a voice for the women who had successfully completed a Good Vibrations project: women who were labelled either vulnerable or challenging.

Taking a qualitative approach, the research investigated Good Vibrations projects in two women's prisons in England. 26 participants took part in focus groups immediately after taking part in a project and 19 women took part in one-to-one semi-structured interviews at a three-month follow-up.

The findings suggest that:

- for women in prison, taking part in a Good Vibrations project can reduce anger, worry, and levels of unhappiness, and improve social skills
- the findings from previous research with men are applicable to women too
- reductions in anger, worry, and unhappiness may be sustained in the weeks after the project, but not in the long-term
- The involvement of prison staff, and the performance in front of an audience, appear to be important factors in any lasting impact of these projects
- A particularly notable finding is that completing the project positively changed the way some of the most 'difficult' women were viewed by prison staff

The particularly challenging and vulnerable nature of the women in this sample means they are likely to have greater issues with aggression and emotional/mental health problems than other women in prison and in the community. Given this, any positive impact on anger, worry, and levels of happiness is valuable.

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# 1. Good Vibrations

Good Vibrations presents an example of a charity providing a service beyond the remit of 'traditional' education and training providers, using a unique form of music training and group work. Good Vibrations uses gamelan percussion music from Indonesia that has been identified as suitable for community or group settings; it has an informal and inclusive approach; and includes a variety of instruments that can be played without any prior musical training or knowledge of musical notation. It is a particularly communal form of music-making where participants are compelled to work together (Henley, 2009).

Good Vibrations projects typically run over one week for around fifteen-to-twenty participants, on average. As well as learning how to play traditional pieces of gamelan music, participants create their own compositions as a group. They also learn about Indonesian culture and associated art forms (e.g. shadow puppetry, Javanese dance). At the end of the week, participants perform a concert to which staff, peers, family members and others are invited.

A number of reviews of Good Vibrations have been carried out (Caulfield, 2010; Caulfield, Wilson, & Wilkinson, 2009; Digard, Graf von Sponeck, & Liebling 2007; Henley *et al.*, 2012; Wilson & Logan, 2006). Digard *et al.*, (2007), suggested there were positive impacts on those who participated in a Good Vibrations project, including increased insight and reflection, and also stronger cohesion in groups of prisoners.

Research by Wilson and Logan (2006) suggested that taking part in the gamelan sessions and successfully completing the whole week empowered prisoners to seek further education and training opportunities. This was attributed to the 'uniqueness' of Good Vibrations and the inclusive approach of the tutors, which enabled prisoners to develop social skills to work together and also discuss wider issues during the sessions. Wilson and Logan also suggested that Good Vibrations projects removed the barrier of intimidation towards engaging in education for many prisoners. Prisoners' self-esteem and confidence were also reportedly increased, to the extent that many talked of not just wanting to change but also feeling they had the capacity and ability to do so.

Caulfield, Wilson, & Wilkinson (2009) conducted a longer-term study with men in prison and in the community and found many individuals who had taken part in a Good Vibrations project experienced sustained positive, emotional, psychological, and behavioural improvements. Caulfield (2010) reports data from an initial exploration of one Good Vibrations project with a group of women in prison, finding that taking part could have an impact on attitudes, behaviours and coping skills. However, this work was based on only one project and a follow-up data collection stage was not possible.

The findings highlighted above suggest that Good Vibrations projects have a positive impact on some groups. However, Caulfield (2010) draws attention to the need for further research to investigate how women experience Good Vibrations projects. This research aimed to explore the experiences of women during a Good Vibrations project and three months after taking part.

## 2. Methodology

### 3.1 Participants

Projects in two English women's prisons were involved in this research: one closed prison in the south of England, and the PIPE unit (Psychologically Informed Planned Environment<sup>1</sup>) at one prison in the North of England.

Participants ranged in age from 20 to 43 years (mean age 30), and were completing sentences between 2.5 and 12 years (mean 5.9 years)<sup>2</sup>.

#### **PIPE unit**

The project began with 18 participants, and 13 completed the week. Women placed in PIPE units have been identified as likely to have a personality disorder, although a formal diagnosis is not required. Eight women who completed the project were from the PIPE unit and five from elsewhere in the prison. All 13 women who took part in focus groups at the end of the project (led by the project facilitators), and ten were available to take part in interviews. One woman had been released from prison prior to the researcher's return visit to conduct interviews. The researcher was unable to ascertain why two other women could not or did not wish to take part in the interviews.

#### **Closed prison**

The project began with 19 participants and ended with 13. There had reportedly been some difficulties between group members at the beginning and some women had left on the first day. All 13 participants who completed the project took part in the focus group, but only six participants in the closed prison were unable to take part in the interviews three months after the project. One had been released, one transferred to another prison, two were currently in the segregation unit, one had leave to be at the gym, and one was attending outside work.

A total of 26 participants took part in the focus groups. 19 women took part in the interviews.

### 3.2 Data collection

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<sup>1</sup> For information on PIPE units, see this web page:

[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/211730/enabling-pipe-research-report.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/211730/enabling-pipe-research-report.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Age and sentence length data was collected during interviews, so does not include women who took part in only the focus groups.

This research sought to explore the experiences of women taking part in a Good Vibrations project, using qualitative methods to document the voice of the participants.

The researcher attended the performances, arriving early to informally speak to each group as they practised and prepared for the performance. Focus groups were conducted with all participants immediately after the performance on the final day of the project, and these were led by the project facilitator. The researcher recorded notes from each focus group. Before the focus groups began the researcher explained the nature of the project and the intention to return and conduct one-to-one interviews in three months.

The researcher returned to each prison three months after the project to speak to participants individually about their memory of the project and experiences since taking part in the project.

A semi-structured interview schedule was designed and asked participants to discuss: their introduction to and experience of the project; any creative or musical background/experience; prior relationships and developing relationships with other group members; role and behaviour within and outside of the group; engagement with other projects/education/work; reaction of others to the project (participation & performance); any impact of the project (probing feelings, thoughts, behaviours, coping); experiences after the project. Interviews ended with questions about sentence length and participant age.

The researcher interviewed one officer in each establishment, both of whom had been directly involved with the organisation and running of the project.

### **3.3 Data analysis**

The interview data was analysed through a process of thematic analysis (Caulfield & Hill, 2014). Analysis began with a coding process involving working line-by-line through the entire body of data, initially led by themes identified through the literature. Subsequent to this a data led approach was applied to the transcripts. The initial themes acted as a basis for coding, supplemented by new themes emerging during the in-depth coding process.

Notes from observation of the performance day and focus groups are also summarised in the findings sections.

### **3.4 Ethics**

The research was led by a highly trained researcher who is experienced in conducting research in the criminal justice system and with vulnerable populations. The research proposal was granted ethical approval by Birmingham City University and adhered to the [ethical guidelines of the British Psychological Society](#).

### 3. Findings

To begin, it is useful to note the observed and reported differences in the groups, group dynamics and performances.

#### **Closed prison group**

The group at the closed prison were described by the prison officer who had facilitated the project as having 'a very bad reputation'. She reported security concerns from other staff about this group of women being involved in the project, but this was appropriately managed by the prison staff and project facilitators. After some women left on the first day, the facilitator facilitated listening and sharing among the group, rather than attempt to oppress anyone's thoughts and opinions. The prison officer was particularly excited about seeing the audience reaction to the project, given the concerns and expectations that this was not a group who were likely to do well in group settings.

The project facilitators reported that the group as a whole were very confident. Despite this, on the morning of the performance the group reported feeling very nervous and asked one of the facilitators to introduce each song.

The performance was highly energetic and professional, with group members singing and dancing as well as playing the gamelan (traditional songs and group compositions). After the performance the women explained how they had enjoyed learning about another culture and how the facilitator had done an excellent job in bringing together some 'big personalities'.

#### **PIPE group**

The group from the PIPE unit were described as both 'vulnerable and hard to treat' by the prison officer. Overall the group was focused on precision in practice and the performance, and demonstrated high levels of cooperation during the final practice session before the performance. The group were very focused in both the practice session and the performance, displaying high levels of concentration.

The audience at the performance was large, but those women who had agreed to introduce songs did so without excessive evidence of nerves.

After the performance the women spoke of feeling 'tearful its over' and that they 'didn't want it to end'.

Thematic findings from the interviews with all participants are presented below.

#### **Project facilitators and prison staff**

Two key sub-themes emerged relating to staff and project facilitators.



The role of the project facilitators was crucial to the success of the projects. Approximately two-thirds of the women spoke about the ability of the facilitators to bring the group together and overcome the difficulties many of the women thought they would face in working with one another:

*'I loved the facilitators. They were so patient.'*

Both groups reported the pride and sense of achievement they experienced in completing a performance in front of staff and other prisoners, and this supports previous findings from research on Good Vibrations projects. However, eight women from the closed prison – noted as a very difficult group of women to manage, and where the project was almost stopped due to concerns about security – spoke about how the completing the project and the performance had an impact on how prison staff viewed them. Most of these women explained that it allowed staff in the prison to see their potential and view the differently, and that this had continued three months after the project:

The staff *'are more open to me now'*.

The prison officer who was closely involved with the project running was *'so affected by the women being able to prove staff wrong, and behave for the week.'*

### **Confidence building**

It is clear from all previous research on Good Vibrations projects that many participants see an increase in confidence levels after taking part. The group here was no exception, and seven women stated that this had an impact on them still, three months after the project:

*'I'm now not so scared to say what I think.'*

Although several women reported that despite already being confident, the project had enabled them to become more confident with things like public speaking. The performance in particular was important in cementing the achievements throughout the week.

Both officers reported obvious improvements in confidence from participants. Both prison officers also described feeling concerned about quieter members of the group and how they would cope during the project. One officer explained her surprise when other a *'particularly challenging'* participant had gone over to help a quiet member of the group.

### **Learning to understand one another and work together**

Noting the particularly challenging, vulnerable, and 'hard to treat' nature of the women involved in this research, coming together to work as a group was likely to present significant challenges. The security concerns with one group are noted above, and for the group in the PIPE unit, working together as a group is an important part of the focus of the unit in developing more appropriate social and life skills.

Some women already knew one-another and others did not. In the PIPE unit the women from other areas of the prison were new to the group. In the closed prison there was a group who already knew one-another, with a number of women to whom everyone in the project was new.

In the closed prison, the beginning to the project presented significant issues:

*'I wanted to quit on the first day because of some of the troublemakers'*

However, the group reportedly began to calm by the end of the first day as a result of the work of the facilitators. Over the week both groups bonded and became able to work together.

*"There were some arguments at first, but we quickly "went from 'I' to 'we'"*

The social skills developed through the project are particularly significant for the women in these two groups, who have histories of poor relationships, aggression, and problematic interpersonal skills. These findings support previous research, but what this research sought to explore was whether these findings were sustained three months after the project. Almost half the women said they had either made new friendships, continued to speak to others they met during the project, and/or become more open to 'different types' of people:

*'I realised that if I actually speak to these girls, one-on-one, they're ok.'*

## **Therapeutic**

The calming effects of participation in Good Vibrations projects have been documented in all previous research. Women who took part in this research were no exception, and spoke about the calming nature of the music, feeling less angry during the project, and the music and instruments providing an outlet for feelings of anger and frustration. All participants spoke about things aligned to this theme. Participants spoke about how taking part in the project helped them '*feel free*' and feel happier.

However, many women reported feelings of sadness in the days after the end of project. Some reported taking a few days to settle back into their usual prison routine, after such a change. None reported any problems after three or four days.

The supportive and absorbing nature of the project has been found in previous research to explain why participation reduces anger and worry and increases happiness. As one participant stated, '*I felt as if I was at home*'. At the three month interviews, nine women spoke about reduced feelings of stress, anger, and unhappiness lasting for a short-time after the project:

*'I've got children and the project took my mind off worrying about them as I was concentrating and enjoying it.'*

The above participant reported that she maintained reduced levels of worry about her children '*for a while*', but by the time of the interview this had returned to pre-project levels. Another participant reported feeling less stressed since the project, but stated there had been '*no life changing effect*'.

## 4. Conclusion

This research sought to provide a voice for the women who had successfully completed a Good Vibrations project: women who were labelled either vulnerable or challenging. The research did not seek to make inferences about the potential impact on future offending and desistance from crime, or indeed on their futures more generally.

The findings suggest that for women in prison, taking part in a Good Vibrations project can reduce anger, worry, and levels of unhappiness, and improve social skills. This supports findings from Good Vibrations projects with other groups and suggest the findings of previous research with men are applicable to women too.

The particularly challenging and vulnerable nature of the women in this sample means they are likely to have greater issues with aggression and emotional/mental health problems than other women in prison – and women in prison typically have much greater emotional and mental health needs than other women. This research found some instances of reductions in anger, worry, and unhappiness in the weeks after the project, but these were not sustained long-term.

The involvement of prison staff, and the performance in front of an audience, appear to be important factors in any lasting impact of these projects. For women described as 'difficult and challenging' to complete a project and performance, changed how they were viewed in the prison. A particularly notable finding is that completing the project positively changed the way some of these women were viewed by prison staff.

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