



# GENDER AND CREATIVITY

## A Report on the Relationship between Gender and Creative Group Activity

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# REPORT CHAPTERS

INTRODUCTION	1
LITERATURE REVIEW	4
CASE STUDIES	11
VOICEMALE	12
THE MEN OF LEITH MEN'S SHED	17
DADS ROCK	21
OVERDRIVE DANCE COMPANY	24
MOTHERSHIP WRITERS	28
BREATHE MELODIES FOR MUMS	33
SHARPEN HER: THE AFRICAN WOMEN'S NETWORK	38
CONCLUSION	43
RECOMMENDATIONS	47
BIBLIOGRAPHY	50



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Find out more about the work of Creative Lives at [www.creative-lives.org](http://www.creative-lives.org) and join in the conversation at @CreativeLivesCL.



# **INTRODUCTION**

*Gender and Creativity* is a research project by Creative Lives sponsored by the Scottish Graduate School for the Arts and Humanities. It investigates the relationship between gender and creativity in gender-specific creative groups across the UK. The project was initially conceived as a means to understand the role of women in the voluntary arts sector more generally, however, as the research developed it became clear that the landscape of gender-specific creative groups is evolving. In particular, this report will highlight the number of men's creative groups in operation. At the same time, it will show that some groups are questioning binary categories of male and female and are prioritising ways to be inclusive of gender fluid, non-binary and transgender people.

The research questions for this report are:

**1**

**What is the relationship between gender and creativity activity?**

**2**

**What is it that attracts individuals to gender-specific creative groups?**







**3**

**What more can be done to better support gender-specific creative groups in the UK?**

As will become evident in the literature review, there is a gap in knowledge in the relationship between gender and creative group activity. Therefore, to better understand the connection between gender and creativity, interviews with a variety of male and female creative groups were carried out to provide much-needed empirical knowledge.

The aim of the report was to have an equal number of male and female groups, however, owing to practical limitations (group availability, scheduling and research commitments) in total four men's groups and three women's groups were interviewed. All participants were offered the option of a virtual or in-person interview and all groups except Overdrive Dance Company were interviewed online via Zoom. Where possible, visits to groups were organised prior to the interview to allow familiarity with the groups' activities. Since the groups' activities ranged from music, dance and writing to woodwork, the questions were designed to be general.

All participants were given a consent form prior to interview and encouraged to speak for as much or as little time as they wanted to in response to the following questions:

-  What motivated you to get involved in your group?
-  How often does your group meet?
-  What kind of activities does your group organise?
-  Is it important to you that your group is specifically for men/women?
-  What does it mean to you to belong to your group?
-  Do you have suggestions for what more could be done to support groups specifically for men and women?



# **LITERATURE REVIEW**



At the time of writing (September 2022), there is not a field of literature dedicated to understanding the relationship between gender and creative group activity. However, there is much written about gender and creativity more generally. Since the 1990s, John Baer has written extensively on gender differences in creativity including in creative personality test scores, self-reported creativity and creative achievements.[1] Baer summarises that: “There is a consistent lack of gender differences both in creativity test scores and in the accomplishments of boys and girls”. [2] Still, he stresses that there has been considerable debate over the validity of these tests as measures of creativity.[3] Discussing self-reported creativity, Baer cites Barbara Forisha who found that creative production in women has often been associated with masculine characteristics defined as “competence” and “self-reliance”. [4]

Despite the fact that creative personality tests among children and adolescents do not reveal any significant gender differences, later in life, it is men rather than women who tend to achieve higher levels of creative accomplishment in the professional sector.[5] There has been much debate in both psychological and neuroscientific literature as how to explain this contradiction.[6] Essentially, the debate is divided between a biological versus a sociocultural explanation. Baer advocates sociocultural factors such as women’s standing in society and lingering sexist behaviour as contributing to the lack of women (compared to men) achieving creative greatness later in life. He argues that: “Girls and boys, and women and men, simply do not live in environments that are equally conducive to creative accomplishment.”[7]

Baer cites Baer and Kaufman's model of creativity:

1. Initial Requirements include things that are necessary (but not sufficient) for any type of creative production — notably intelligence, motivation, and suitable environments.
2. In General Thematic Areas there are skills, traits, and knowledge that promote creativity across many related fields but not all fields.
3. In Domains there are more limited factors that promote creativity only in a specific domain.
4. Finally, even within a domain such as biology there are Microdomains, each with its own very specialised knowledge that one must master to make creative contributions.<sup>[8]</sup>

Bear argues that the first level of the framework provides an explanation for the lack of female achievement (compared to male) in creative fields: “the Initial Requirement of a conducive environment in which to develop expertise and in which one's creative performance is judged to have been different for men and women. The relative lack of supporting environments — including the failure to nurture early talent, the demands and expectations of society (and especially of motherhood), and the control of entry into many fields and their resources by men — has hindered women's accomplishments in virtually all domains.”<sup>[9]</sup> In other words, women's creativity is almost always hampered owing to unequal caring responsibilities as well as the overwhelming majority of men holding positions of power in respective fields.

It is worth considering the relevance of these findings to the voluntary arts sector which, on the whole, is dominated by women. I would suggest that women do not experience the same kinds of constraints in the voluntary sector owing to the fact that its elective nature allows women to better combine their caring commitments with creative activity.

Riane Eisler et al's work on creativity, society and gender responds to the "virtual exclusion" of women in creativity discourses by re-defining creativity as an "everyday phenomenon".<sup>[10]</sup> In moving to an understanding of creativity that includes everyday domestic activities such as cooking and decorating, the authors argue that it is not only possible to revalue traditionally undervalued domains occupied by women, but it is also possible to broaden our understanding of creativity itself.<sup>[11]</sup> The re-definition of creativity as an everyday activity was also the focus of a project from 64 Million Artists and co-led by Creative Lives in 2016; the project saw artists, professionals, everyday artists as well as local groups and organisations investigating the role of everyday creativity in our wider culture landscape.<sup>[12]</sup> The report recommended that all forms of art and culture should be supported and to achieve this the existing funding infrastructure had to be democratised. The availability of funding will emerge as important for almost all of the gender-specific creative groups discussed in this report.

After gender and creativity, another popular area of literature is the value of creativity for health and mental well-being. In 2019, the World Health Organisation Regional Office for Europe published a lengthy report on the role of the arts in improving health and well-being.<sup>[13]</sup> The report highlighted that the arts play an important role in physical and mental health promotion and can help prevent age-related physical decline. Creative Lives have also been involved in promoting the benefits of creative activity for health and well-being in the 'Creativity and Wellbeing Week' in May 2022.<sup>[14]</sup> Creative Lives has additionally co-published reports on the value of musical activity for health and well-being.<sup>[15]</sup> However, this report, as well as studies cited by the report, do not consider gender.<sup>[16]</sup>

There are studies devoted to men and women's mental health respectively, but these studies do not include any discussion of the ways in which men and women's mental health could be improved by gender-specific creative group activity.<sup>[17]</sup> A common problem identified within the literature on creative activity and mental well-being is that although individual case studies suggest that creative activity improves mental well-being, for example by providing a social network and new skills, the empirical evidence supporting these claims is weak.<sup>[18]</sup> In her review of the literature in 2011, Jill Leckey suggests that developing working definitions of the terms "well-being", "mental illness/health" and "creative arts" would be a means to assess the value of creative activities on mental well-being."<sup>[19]</sup> While her suggestions are valuable, it would be worthwhile to consider how these definitions intersect with gender.

Some recent articles have focussed on creative activities for women as a form of mental health recovery. Julie McGarry's study involved female survivors of intimate partner violence (IPV) working with clay and writing poetry.<sup>[20]</sup> McGarry found that the medium of clay allowed women to share their experiences of surviving IPV; for example, one participant sculpted a cowering woman inside a cage covered in flowers to illustrate the illusion of a "normal married life".<sup>[21]</sup> McGarry summarised that creative activity provided women with the chance to create a 'persona' and open up about their experiences.

Rosie Perkins et al evaluated the value of musical activity for mothers with symptoms of postnatal depression as well as those facilitating these activities.[22] Importantly, the study found that the musical activity allowed women to talk about their struggles with post-natal depression that had previously seemed “taboo”. [23] The music professionals involved in the study also reported feeling appreciation in being able to use their musical training to help women with postnatal depression.

As issues facing gender fluid, non-binary and transgender individuals are becoming more and more visible in the public sphere, there has been discussion around gender inclusive practices in creative groups. Since the mid 2010s, there has been substantial research on accommodating gender fluid, non-binary and transgender persons in choirs. In the following case studies, the question of how to cater for non-binary, gender fluid and transgender individuals also emerges as a key organisational issue. Therefore, the literature around gender inclusive practices can provide suggestions for strategies to adopt to ensure all members feel not only welcome, but most importantly, safe.

Molly Rastin highlighted the types of issues transgender and gender fluid people may encounter in choirs including singing dysphoria, enforced gendering and the detrimental consequences of transitioning on the voice. [24] Since 2016, voice part assignment in choir groups has been recognized as a practical solution to some of these problems.[25] Rastin explains that choirs are typically divided by voice type for the sake of choral composition, but “the gendering of these voice types presents a dilemma for transgender singers. A transgender woman, for example, may have the range and passagio typically found in a tenor – but if she is placed in the tenor section of her choir, the male gender may be imposed on her.”[26]

Furthermore, “when a choir is separated into ‘men’ and ‘women’, how can an agender person be expected to find their place?”[\[27\]](#)

The solution proposed in research from Rastin, Joshua Palkki and Jane Rameseyer Miller is to assign voice sections for each singer depending on their voice range rather than gender to remove the gendered component of the voice parts; i.e., tenor and bass as male parts only and soprano and alto as female parts exclusively. Additionally, Miller has provided a 12-point guide for choral directors working with transgender and gender fluid persons. One of Miller’s suggestions is to have choral directors prepare music that is in a healthy range for transgender singers. Since many singers may be in different stages of the transition process, she stresses that each singer will have unique needs and capabilities.[\[28\]](#)

Although many of Miller’s recommendations relate specifically to gender inclusive practice in choir groups, the following suggestions are relevant for any creative group or organisation. Miller advocates gender neutral language in group activity, to ask new members’ preferred pronouns and she advises organisations to adopt a gender-neutral statement to advertise their work.[\[29\]](#) In adopting these guidelines, creative groups of all varieties can cultivate an environment where members feel able to express themselves in a space that feels safe for them.

Many of the themes in the literature review will also emerge as important in the following case studies. As we will see, a number of the gender-specific creative groups discuss the value of creative activity, the benefits of creative activity for mental well-being, the different ways to express creativity and the issues facing gender-specific groups in the future, namely, the need for greater inclusion of gender fluid, non-binary and transgender persons.



# **CASE STUDIES**

# 1 | VOICEMALE

**“Male bonding doesn’t have  
to be remotely toxic.”**

(Voicemale singing group)

*Voicemale* is a Glasgow based all-male singing group that meets weekly to sing a variety of songs traditionally sung by men, such as sea shanties, work songs, protest songs and soldiers’ songs. The group was founded in 2014 and has an exciting repertoire of songs from all over the world including Zimbabwe, North America, Italy and Scotland. The group does not require members to have musical experience or ability since its main aim is to encourage men to sing together in an informal environment. Speaking to the group, three important themes emerged:

- the benefits of men singing together informally
- *Voicemale*’s role in combating toxic masculinity
- the need for guidelines on gender inclusivity for male and female-only singing groups and choirs.

The creation of the group was related to the lack of opportunities available for men to sing together, which stood in contrast with the





Voicemale singing group. Photo by Helen Glassford

The group stated that:

**“There’s almost no instances I can cite in British society of men just informally singing together for fun without worrying too much about whether it’s producing a beautiful sound.”**

*Voicemale* was described by the group not only as a singing group, but also as a group that facilitates socialising and developing friendships:

**“These sorts of groups are as much about the social side and the bonding and the sort of fun in the moment as about any kind of performance.”**

Unlike choirs, which almost always have a performance in mind, Voicemale's priority is to cultivate an environment where men can sing freely. In this regard, the weekly meetings are unlike traditional singing groups or choirs where a set piece is practised with a performance in mind. Although the group does give performances, the spontaneity and sociability of the group seems to be the main attraction for its members.

*Voicemale* singing group stressed that all male-groups of any kind should not promote toxic masculinity. The desire to promote a positive, non-toxic masculinity related to the group's view that male-only groups often did not represent "good images of masculinity". *Voicemale* singing group referred to specific organisations which functioned only as places to "get away from the wife". In contrast, Voicemale is described as "totally friendly and not brutish in any way". Still, at one point during the interview, the group compared its activities to a "military unit": "You're in your vehicles with your people, you're all over the place, you do the job, you complete the mission, you bugger off and go to the next one [...] it's absurd in a way to compare the two."

In this comparison, it was hinted that some men might avoid male-only singing groups believing their attendance would be perceived to affect their masculinity. However, *Voicemale* singing group repeatedly advocated the value in male and female-only singing groups since they provided a space to express shared gendered experiences. While the latter is commonly accepted in regard to women's groups of all types, there is clearly still work to be done to encourage more men to join men's groups. There are many advantages for men coming together in this way; in the case of *Voicemale*, members have the opportunity to sing freely, learn about cultures from around the world through song and develop friendships.

While it was emphasised that *Voicemale* is important as a male-only space, the group discussed their fear of the “time bomb” facing male and female only singing groups and choirs. The group worried that groups like *Voicemale* may appear increasingly exclusionary to gender fluid and non-binary people. As discussed in the literature review, issues around gender inclusivity are particularly apparent for choirs and singing groups since voice parts are typically assigned by sex (defined as biologically male and female). An additional problem for *Voicemale* is its songs are typically categorised as ‘men’s songs’:

**“If someone came along who identified as male but [...] still had entirely a woman’s voice, it would be a challenge to work out musically [...] what to do with them.”**

*Voicemale* wants all members to be treated equally and, most importantly, to be treated with respect, but it is that clear practical support is needed, the group stated that:

**“I don’t know if anyone’s running any kind of workshops or training courses on gender issues for people running these sorts of groups.”**

It was suggested that there should be advice available for male and female-only singing groups and choirs that would not only refer to practicalities such as assigning voice parts, but would have recommendations for gender inclusive language and facilities, for example, toilets. By providing comprehensive guidelines on gender inclusive practices, groups like *Voicemale* would be able to ensure that the space it provides is accessible for all its members.

The word that was most frequently used to describe *Voicemale* was ‘team’, with a particular emphasis on the group’s sound depending on ‘team work’. These words summarise Voicemale’s activities; the group is a team of men who enjoy each other’s company and come together in a friendly environment devoid of toxic masculinity to produce beautiful harmonies.

For more information on *Voicemale*, please visit  
[www.glasgow-voicemale.weebly.com](http://www.glasgow-voicemale.weebly.com).

## 2

## THE MEN OF LEITH MEN'S SHED

**“Run by men, for men.”**

([www.leithmensshed.org](http://www.leithmensshed.org))

Since 2016, *The Men of Leith Men's Shed* has worked to prevent loneliness and isolation among men by providing a range of activities from woodwork and singing to Tai Chi and cycling. *The Men of Leith Men's Shed* has a volunteer committee of seven members who are responsible for the group's administrative tasks, but suggestions for activities come directly from the members. In my interview with Charlie Traylor, who co-founded the group, he spoke enthusiastically about the community he has helped to build in Leith. In both the interview and my visit to *The Men of Leith Men's Shed*, the following topics were identified as particularly important:

- the value of male-only settings
- creative activity as a way for men to have open conversations
- the need for greater recognition of men-only groups from local authorities.

The creation of the group was related to the lack of opportunities available for men to sing together, which stood in contrast with the British tradition of men singing together at work or in the pub.

When Charlie first heard about The Men's Sheds Association, which was in its infancy in Scotland at the time of *The Men of Leith Men's Shed's* creation in 2016, he was excited by the prospect. During his working life, Charlie had been a teacher and enjoyed making connections with people; indeed, he was concerned about losing these connections when he retired. Charlie was "sceptical" about forming a male-only group since he had always been an advocate for gender equality and was the chairperson of his school's women's equality commission. Still, Charlie believed that men, himself included, needed somewhere to relax that was just for men:

**"In female company, lots of other things come into play [...] an example is men will start playing up."**

Alongside his co-founder, Charlie imagined *The Men of Leith Men's Shed* as a space where men would feel comfortable to be themselves while participating in a variety of activities with other men.

They run a woodwork workshop three times a week, a repair shed once a week where members of the community bring items to be repaired, twice a week there is a music group and there is a monthly cycle club. In the past, they have run Tai Chi classes and are planning to launch a fortnightly 'Lunch Shed'. *The Men of Leith Men's Shed's* priority is to tackle loneliness and isolation among older men who are the most frequent attendees of the group. Charlie explains:

**"It was all about being with other people and that's what it means to me [...] it's the group of people that I can associate with or can ring up and I can go out for a pint with or a cycle ride."**





The Men of Leith Men's Shed

Therefore, the supportive, male-only environment goes beyond the physical space in fostering lasting friendships among the members. Charlie stressed the importance of creative activities in allowing men to open up and share problems:

**“It’s a big generalisation, but it has been proven [...] that men are able to open up and talk to other men about things that they would find challenging with women.”**

Once men were engaged in an activity, it was common for them to discuss individual health issues or hobbies, for example fishing or football. Similar to the findings of studies with women from Julie McGarry and Rosie Perkins, what was crucial for open conversations was creative activity which acted as a conduit for conversation. Charlie remarked that:

**“You talk about the job or can you help me do this [...] I’m doing this, can you hold that and that starts the conversation and maybe with people that you didn’t know very well.”**

He further explained that while men are working with their hands they do not necessarily have to look at each other, meaning they could share problems without feeling it was the main focus of the exchange.

The Men's Sheds Association's valuable work has received [research attention](#), but Charlie stressed the need for greater recognition of men-only groups from local authorities. Charlie stated that local authorities should "put their money where their mouth is". While The Men's Sheds receive support from the Scottish Government, the majority of *The Men of Leith Men's Shed's* funding is spent on rent; all staff are volunteers and activities are planned and run by volunteers. Charlie explained that recently men with severe mental health issues were being referred to the group by local health authorities despite the fact it is a voluntary organisation without skilled mental health practitioners.

Although a central aim of *The Men of Leith Men's Shed* is to combat loneliness and isolation among men, it is not a substitute for mental health professionals. Charlie stated that: "We're just a bunch of guys that get together once or twice a week". Ultimately, Charlie wants local authorities to better appreciate the work they do. He repeatedly used the word "recognition"; Charlie explained he received voluntary help from a range of experts, for example, a lawyer worked pro-bono to review the committee's business plan. Charlie stressed there should be practical support available to help men's groups like theirs which would recognise the vital work the group does for men in the community.

Discussing loneliness and isolation among men, Charlie stressed that: "We're not an answer to it by any means, but we're part of a solution and the idea is if there are spaces for men to be together and be able to communicate together while being involved in activity, then there's less chance of them going down that road." *The Men of Leith Men's Shed* is a lifeline for many of its members in providing a space to be creative, socialise and express individual problems. The creation of this close-knit community of men should be credited to Charlie who continues to work tirelessly for the group. For more information on *The Men of Leith Men's Shed*, please visit [www.leithmensshed.org](http://www.leithmensshed.org).



## 3

## DADS ROCK

**“Men need space, and they need something that feels safe and secure.”**

(Thomas Lynch)

Founded in 2012, *Dads Rock* supports dads in Scotland by providing a range of services including dads groups, dads trips, parenting and music workshops. Unlike other men’s creative groups, *Dads Rock* is specifically for dads rather than just for men. Still, in my interview with the group’s founder, Thomas Lynch, there was considerable overlap in the themes discussed with male-only creative groups. The following topics emerged:

- the need for a space just for dads
- the importance of activities for dads to foster a more active role in their children’s upbringing
- greater recognition that dads, like mums, need support.

Thomas’ motivation to start *Dads Rock* stemmed from the realisation there was a lack of spaces for men to come together to discuss their experiences of fatherhood. For Thomas, this was surprising considering the wide availability of mother and baby groups.

Thomas wanted *Dads Rock* to provide a full spectrum of support to dads that was ordinarily reserved for mums: “We’ve heard stories of dads being asked to not be part of antenatal groups [...] some midwives ask men to step out of the room because they’re going to talk about breastfeeding.” These exclusionary practices prompted Thomas to create a dads neonatal group as well as a mentorship scheme for young dads. Thomas explained:

**“There are still lots of situations where men, dads, don’t get asked how they are [...] and therefore that creates a picture that our opinion doesn’t matter.”**

While Thomas recognised the importance of mums’ groups emphasising that “we’re not for a minute trying to take anything away from mums”, he stressed that it was vital to have a space just for dads. To counteract the pressure men often feel to behave according to pre-conditioned ideas of masculinity, *Dads Rock* aims to cultivate a relaxed environment where dads can share experiences of fatherhood and develop friendships. The latter is reinforced through a *Dads Rock* WhatsApp group, Thomas stated that:

**“We’ve seen that happen through the groups, for example, last week one of the dads asked if anybody wanted to meet for a walk with their kids. It’s nice to see things like that happen.”**

Activities like ‘buggy walks’ and playgroups give dads the opportunity to have a more active role in their children’s upbringing. Thomas explained:

**“My experience shows that if you have a gender stereotypical family - or mum, dad, child - at an event, sometimes I think that it’s dads that automatically deselect, I think men step back [...] sometimes men don’t want to be seen to be doing things publicly.”**



Dads Rock. Photo: Thomas Lynch

In an all-dad environment, dads not only feel more comfortable, but they feel encouraged to play with their children since they are the only parent present. These experiences can be especially empowering for dads who doubt their abilities. When Thomas discussed possible recommendations for groups like *Dads Rock*, besides from more funding which has also been identified as important for male-only groups, he stressed the need for wider societal recognition of the problems dads encounter. In the area of healthcare for example, help for dads with postnatal depression is lacking. Thomas additionally referred to a member who, after separating from his partner, did not know that he too had parental rights:

**“When we know that somebody’s going to have a baby, I wish that we could start thinking that the whole family are valuable.”**

Thomas emphasised that *Dads Rock*’s aim is to “project a positive image of fatherhood”; he felt that society was changing and “systems and practices needed to catch up.” Thomas is proud of his group, but he stressed the need for greater societal support for dads in their role as fathers. *Dads Rock* has had, and continues to have, a lasting impact on many men’s lives; this is shown in the ‘families stories’ section on *Dads Rock* website. It is a testament to Thomas and the group as a whole that there are so many smiling faces and stories to inspire other dads seeking support.

4

## OVERDRIVE DANCE COMPANY

**“It’s more than just a dance group,  
it’s like a community.”**

(Ethem Bookham)

Since 2015, *Overdrive Dance Company* has provided a safe environment for boys and young men to express themselves through dance. Currently, the group has ten permanent members who vary in age from 14 to 21. In my interview with four of the group’s members: Adam Quinn, Luc MacDonald, Shaun McGregor and Ethem Bookham there was a real sense of belonging to each other and the group. The main themes from our discussion were:

- the importance of the physically expressive nature of the group’s dance style
- the benefits of dancing with other boys
- pride in the group’s achievements.

Prior to joining the group, all four of the boys came from a dancing background, and some knew each other from musical productions or musical theatre groups. All of them attributed the main attraction for joining the group to the “physically expressive nature” of the group’s dance style: Adam compared this to practising ballet which he felt was restrictive whereas *Overdrive* allows him to “freely express [himself] with movement”.





Overdrive Dance Company. Photo: Hayley Earlem

Shaun remarked that his first impression of the group was “quite physical”. *Overdrive*’s physically expressive dancing style allows its members to connect not only with their bodies but also with other boys in the group. All four boys reflected that before *Overdrive* they had been the ‘only boy’ in dance groups they attended; *Overdrive* offered the opportunity to dance with boys their own age which made all four boys feel more comfortable to practise this more expressive dancing. Ethem commented that:

**“When you come here, since there isn’t two separate genders, you don’t have the girls doing the light stuff and the boys doing the lifts, everyone is pretty equal.”**

Therefore, the all-boy environment additionally allowed all members to try all aspects of the dance style.

There is a close bond between the boys: Luc commented that “we’re all friends so it comes naturally.” Shaun joined the group relatively recently, whereas Ethem has been with the group for five years. Adam and Luc have been with the group for eight years – since its beginning. Adam, Luc and Ethem expressed a great deal of pride in the group’s achievements, Adam stated that:

**“I’m proud of what we made and I’m proud of everyone that’s in it for what they’ve contributed.”**

Luc commented:

**“I enjoy showing people what we’ve done.”**

The four interviewees varied in age from 15 to 20, meaning that they joined the group at a young age. It was clear then, that their close bonds could be attributed to the boys growing up together through the medium of dance. Ethem’s concluding comment summarised this feeling:

**“I think it’s really good because we all have close bonds, it’s more than just a dance group, it’s like a community you can talk to, I think it is something to really be proud of.”**

In my interviews with male-only groups, the problem of how to attract men to male-only groups was highlighted repeatedly. These groups also touched upon the ways in which perceptions of masculinity prevented men coming together to enjoy creative activity. However, my interview with *Overdrive* suggests this could be a generational issue. Adam, Luc, Shaun and Ethem did not at any point raise issues relating to masculinity; all four boys were completely committed to their group and felt bonded together by their love of dancing.



Overdrive Dance Company. Photo: Hayley Earlem

For more information on *Overdrive Dance Company*, please visit [www.overdrivedance.co.uk](http://www.overdrivedance.co.uk)

## 5 | MOTHERSHIP WRITERS

**“Writing was where I had freedom  
and control; two things that I didn’t  
feel I had a lot of as a new mum.”**

(Emylia Hall)

For over three years, *Mothership Writers* has invited new mums to share their experiences of motherhood while honing their writing skills. The group’s founder, Emylia Hall, herself a novelist, found writing an especially “precious space” while adjusting to life as a new mum. Based on her experiences, Emylia created the group as a “happy space” for new mums. In my interview with Emylia, she spoke passionately about the mother-writers community she had founded, and the following themes were identified as particularly important:

- the power of writing to express identity and shared experiences
- the value of the group as a space just for mothers
- the inclusive nature of the group.

When Emylia’s son was born, she was under contract for her third novel which meant she had to balance motherhood with her writing career. Rather than being a hindrance, Emylia stated that she was “grateful to have a space for [herself]” where she could maintain her identity as a writer. Emylia described writing as “empowering” since she used her novel, which featured a character who was also a new mum, to convey her feelings about motherhood.





Illustration credit: Esther Curtis

It was during this time that Emylia thought about a writing group for new mums, she stated that:

**“Even if you’ve never written before, the urge to share your experience is really strong I think, and powerful.”**

*Mothership Writers* began as an in-person writing programme in Bristol but following the COVID-19 pandemic, the eight-week courses now take place online with meetings every two weeks. Aside from teaching writing practice, Emylia describes her main aim for the group is for attendees to share their stories of motherhood:

**“There’s so much to gain here for anyone, regardless of whether they’re a seasoned writer or not.”**

Emylia stressed that the group's only prerequisite was having a baby; there was not any need to have any prior experience of writing. The power of writing as a vehicle to share common experiences is demonstrated in the group's published anthology, '[Dispatches from New Motherhood](#)', which Mothership Writers' website describes as proof of the "richly rewarding relationship between creativity and maternity." The act of writing together as a group of mothers allowed new mums to express often very intimate feelings about motherhood:

**"As I wait for you to fall asleep, the pendulum swings between the extremities of my motherhood. Your infinite need of me defines both ends. I feel suffocated and satisfied. I feel pained and peaceful. I feel alone and alive."**[89]

Emylia related the value of the group to its purpose as a space specifically for new mums:

**"There's a safety and comfort in a group of women being together in the same space and sharing their experiences in a very honest way."**

She further described the group as "the frontline of motherhood"; although attendees did not have to write about motherhood, most often they did and in doing so were able to process the experience of becoming a mother for the first time with others going through the same journey. Emylia characterised the writing sessions as "intimate" since new mums connected with each other without any ambitions of becoming novelists, but rather they wrote for their own well-being. It is clear that the group's unifying factor was the gendered experience of motherhood; indeed, this commonality allowed

attendees to feel comfortable enough to participate in a creative activity that invited them to share their most private thoughts.

Emylia doubted whether the group would be as open as a mixed gender group as she believed the space allowed women to “talk freely” about experiences that they might not wish to share with male partners or other family members. Emylia provided an example:

“It’s such a comfort when someone says they’re really struggling with something, one of the things that comes up sometimes is someone not necessarily feeling that rush of love when you first see your baby [...] Some people are saying that didn’t come straight away, I’m the same, it was like that for me, and that talk will come through in the writing and I absolutely love seeing these kind of connections happen.”

Since *Mothership Writers*’ beginnings, Emylia wanted to ensure the inclusivity and accessibility of the group. She reflected that she had made sure there was diversity among the participants and that people who might normally “self-exclude” from writing felt welcome to participate. Emylia wanted the group to be “super welcoming, super inclusive, and very relaxing (a place where) anything went.” Emylia laughed:

**“We didn’t care if the babies yelled their heads off, we just talked louder.”**

Now the group's meetings have moved online, Emylia believes accessibility has improved since new mums can participate in writing sessions from the comfort of their own homes with their children. Emylia stated that “anyone who self-identifies as a mother is welcome”, here, she referred to both birth and adopted mothers, but added that anyone, regardless of their given gender identity, was welcome if they identified themselves as a new mother. The lasting impression from Emylia was that the group had been a lifeline for her, and she hoped to share this lifeline with other new mums. Testimony from a member can summarise the group's overall significance:

**“Mothership writers was a huge pair of arms that held me tightly. I found my voice here. I found a passion here [...] It should be compulsory for all new mothers!”**



Illustration credit: Esther Curtis

For more information on *Mothership Writers*, please visit  
[www.mothershipwriters.com](http://www.mothershipwriters.com)

## 5

## BREATHE MELODIES FOR MUMS

**“I felt held and supported and like everybody was in a similar boat.”**

(Melodies for Mums attendee)

Breathe Arts Health Research programme, *Melodies for Mums* aims to help new mums de-stress and connect with other new mums and their babies through singing and music making. In my interview with a new mum who attended the group’s ten-week programme earlier this year, she spoke about the positive impact it had on her while adjusting to life as a new mum. In the interview, she stressed:

- the accessibility of the group
- feeling connected to other mums
- the importance of creative group activity for new mums.

*Melodies for Mums* is based in London, but during the pandemic the group moved online and welcomed new mums and their babies from across the UK to attend. The member stressed it was a “bonus” for her that the group met online. She explained:

**“It worked really well because it was just so unpredictable at that point. It was the depths of winter and in those early days leaving the house with the baby was such a massive deal.”**

With the group meeting online, she felt less pressure that her baby might fall asleep as soon as the session began:

**“It was really nice that I could sing and she could be there and she could wake up and join in if she wanted to.”**

Six months later, the member wanted to attend the group again and hoped to find similar groups for mums and babies. Her preference was still to meet online since this offered her the flexibility to balance work and her baby’s sleeping schedule. At the same time, she understood that many groups had returned to in-person meetings since these groups served as important places for mums to socialise. Still, she stated that:

**“The group was just about having a space to do something for me and as a by-product, singing.”**

The importance of online meetings to the member was not just limited to mum and baby groups; as a result of her positive experiences with Melodies for Mums, she hoped to join a choir, but found that this was often inaccessible for new mums:

**“I’m still tied to the bedtime routine, so I can’t leave the house.”**

To ensure accessibility for new parents, she stressed going forward it would be worthwhile for creative groups to consider having both in-person and online meetings.

Although the member stated that her motivation for joining the group was not just to meet other new mums, she still stressed the value of being connected to other mums through the group's activities. She referred to the isolation new mums felt, especially during the COVID-19 lockdowns. She found the weekly 'check-ins' at the start of sessions helpful in combating isolation, she stated that:

**“It was really nice [...] the checking in thing was really quite important, it just makes you feel like you're not on your own.”**

The member admitted she struggled with depression in the past and a motivation for joining the group was it was designed for women suffering from postnatal depression. She described the difficulties she had encountered while adjusting to motherhood and referred to the group as a “safe space” where she felt “held and supported”. She discussed the value of exchanging “tips” with other mums, she referred to a fellow mum who shared a song from her own childhood. During one particularly tough sleepless night, the member sang the song she learned to her baby; to this day, she still sings the song to her baby proving the lasting impact the group has had on her as a mother.

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The member stressed the benefits of the group in providing a space for mums to take care of themselves physically:

**“During check in, we stretched and did some breathing [...] That was really nice because physically I was in the depths of breastfeeding which was really difficult at the beginning for my back and posture [...] Having that space where you actually have to look after yourself, people can tell you to do that, to stretch every day, but unless someone makes you do it you probably won’t.”**

While she recognised the value in looking after herself physically, she believed that creative activity was an important way for new mums to look after their mental health:

**“I’ve seen that a lot, swimming for mums and babies, yoga and fitness classes but the mental side of things that’s got to be dealt with as well and I think being creative, it’s such a nice thing to open up conversations [...] having a thing to focus on that you can get absorbed in, then the conversations happen around that.”**



Being involved in a creative activity, in this case singing, was a positive experience for this member as she found a way to express herself. She also spoke positively about learning about cultures from around the world through the song choices. Although her profession was in a creative field, she stated that as a result of the group she had become even more creative:

**“It’s silly, but it kind of felt like I was doing something creative. I made the words up and I would sing a song.”**

The member reinstated that for new mums, flexibility and accessibility were vitally important. *Melodies for Mums* had provided her with both of these things; in being able to meet online, she found a way to express herself through music with her baby by her side.

For more information on *Breathe Melodies for Mums*, please visit [www.breatheahr.org/programmes/melodies-for-mums](http://www.breatheahr.org/programmes/melodies-for-mums)

5

## SHARPEN HER: THE AFRICAN WOMEN'S NETWORK

**“The main reasoning behind ‘sharpening’ her is to say that women should be able to support each other, to build each other up.”**

(Angie Mwafulirwa)

Since 2019, *Sharpen Her: The African Women's Network* (SHAWN) has provided a support network for African women in Scotland, including female refugees and asylum seekers. The group's aim is to help women navigate the often-traumatic asylum process in the UK, and in doing so provide women with a community. In contrast to other female-only groups, the unifying factor is not just that of womanhood or motherhood, but the shared experience of navigating the asylum process. The group's founder, Angie Mwafulirwa, created the group as a response to her own lived experience of the asylum process. She understands just how “oppressive” the system can be and the ways in which the process dehumanises people.[116] In my interview with Angie, and while attending SHAWN's ‘African Women in Scotland’ conference, the following themes emerged:

- the importance of women supporting each other
- storytelling as a means to bring women together
- the need for more resources for groups like SHAWN.



Sharpen Her: the African Women's Network  
Photo: Angie Mwafulirwa

Angie created SHAWN to encourage women going through the asylum process to not let their integration status define them:

**“I started it just to have a platform to motivate women to look beyond their situation [...] to remind somebody that you’re a human being and you’re capable.”**

While Angie described the asylum process as forcing people to be reliant on institutions, she stated that SHAWN’s aim was to encourage women “to build each other’s capacity, instead of expecting somebody else to do that for us.” In this way, the group empowered women by providing a self-reliant network of women that mutually supported each other.

Angie described her passion for the group's role in supporting women and providing a space for them to be heard:

**“In mixed circles, sometimes women’s voices are not heard. It can be due to how the platform or group is structured and sometimes it’s just to do with confidence and there can be cultural issues present where maybe women are not supposed to be out there, talking [...]. So this becomes a safe space where women can be amongst themselves and be free to talk.”**

During SHAWN's 'African Women in Scotland' conference, it was clear mutual support had fostered close bonds between many of the women. One member even remarked that she felt as though the group was like her family. Some of the women had formed these bonds in times of extreme hardship; one member was given an iPhone during the COVID-19 pandemic to prevent her isolation and to give her access to the group's WhatsApp group. The same member faced difficulties in providing for her new-born after her arrival in the UK; here too the group helped in providing much-needed necessities like food and nappies.

In turn, the member saw the group as her support network. Indeed, during the conference, women were invited to draw or write on a canvas to convey what being an African woman in Scotland meant to them. Of the six canvases, five included a combination of the words strong, love, together or togetherness and friendship. One of the six canvasses echoed similar sentiments but was written in a woman's mother tongue of Chichewa (Malawi's national language). For many women, having a shared language and culture was also an important means of forming friendships. SHAWN meets weekly online, and its sessions are designed as places to socialise.

Angie explained that:

**“The original idea was just a space with no agenda.”**

The group also organises more structured events for holidays throughout the year, especially those that celebrate women, for example Mother’s Day. While the group does not centre around a specific creative activity, a main component of the group is storytelling. This activity is a common occurrence in both the weekly meetings as well as the structured events.

At SHAWN’s conference, the theme of storytelling was at the forefront since this was also this year’s theme for Refugee Festival Scotland. However, Angie explained that storytelling had always been a part of the group’s activities:

**“From when we started our events, we’ve always had someone tell their story to motivate other women and to encourage other women.”**

The stories women shared at SHAWN’s conference were extremely personal detailing the struggles the women had faced in the asylum process, but these stories also motivated other women to share their stories. At the conference, storytelling was a way for women new to the group to make introductions and start conversations. Thinking about Riane Eisler et al’s work which redefines creativity to include everyday phenomena, in this group, storytelling is a means for women to express themselves in a safe environment. Unlike creative activities like woodwork or writing, storytelling does not have a specific end product in mind, but this does not mean that the activity is any less significant in bringing the women of SHAWN together.



Angie stressed the need for better financial support for groups like SHAWN who act as a vital lifeline for women in the asylum system. A pressing issue for SHAWN is it does not have a physical meeting space. Angie explained that:

**“We’re limited to online for everything and then just once in a while when we have money, we do something, but that’s not sustainable.”**

For Angie, a physical space would cement her vision of SHAWN as a safe space providing practical support to women in need. Angie also hoped the physical space could be a place to train volunteers. Angie works tirelessly to ensure she provides a nurturing environment for SHAWN’s members and spends a significant amount of time searching for funding; recently she obtained funding for a trip to the Royal Botanical Gardens in Edinburgh. Although this was a small amount of money it had allowed 25 women and their children to enjoy a day out with minimum contribution from the group.

The desire to be together and spend time as a community is at the heart of the group. Despite the financial challenges facing SHAWN, the group has helped numerous women through the asylum process and has supplied a meeting place for African women across Scotland to connect and develop friendships. It is worth considering how many more women could benefit from SHAWN’s activities if groups like SHAWN were better financially supported.

For more information on *Sharpen Her: the African Women’s Network*, please visit [www.sharpenher.org.uk](http://www.sharpenher.org.uk)



# **CONCLUSION**



Despite the difference in creative activities (singing, woodwork, DIY, music, writing, dance and storytelling) all of the interviewees placed great importance on their groups being just for men or women. The most prominent theme was that groups operate as ‘safe spaces’ to express gendered experience. For *Voicemale*, *The Men of Leith Men’s Shed* and *Dads Rock* it was important to have a space where men could come together to discuss a range of experiences from shared hobbies, mental health issues and fatherhood. The belief that the groups acted as refuges from toxic masculinity was evident in all three case studies. In all three groups, the interviewees stressed the importance of promoting a positive masculinity that encouraged men to ‘open up’ with other men and form lasting friendships. *Dads Rock* additionally emphasised promoting a more positive view of fatherhood where dads were equally involved in their children’s upbringing.

Similarly, the success of groups like *Mothership Writers* and *Melodies for Mums* was related to the cultivation of an environment where women felt comfortable enough to share their most intimate experiences of motherhood. In both interviews, the women stressed that it was important to have somewhere to express feelings of inadequacy as mothers and it was easier for the women to discuss these feelings without male partners or family members. *Sharpen Her: The African Women’s Network* differed from the other groups since it is not only gender and gendered experience that unites this group, but also the asylum process. Still, the group’s founder attributed the ability to make it through this process to the strength that came from a community of women working together. Gender was important for *Overdrive Dance Company* since most of the boys had experienced dance groups where they were the ‘only boy’, but, most of all, dance was the driving factor for bringing this group together.

Many of the interviewees referred to the power of creative activity to bring people together, find community and develop friendships. All of the interviewees referred to their groups as social places where members could find community based on their gender, but also owing to the commonality of a love for singing, dance or writing. *Voicemale*, *The Men of Leith Men's Shed*, *Overdrive Dance Company* and SHAWN all described their groups as places to form friendships. For *The Men of Leith Men's Shed*, socialising and forming lasting bonds was related to its main aim to combat loneliness and isolation in men. While a shared creative activity was a starting point for friendship, for SHAWN the shared (often traumatic) experience of the asylum process, alongside the commonality of being an African woman in Scotland was a vital part of their community. Indeed, many of the women developed strong friendships owing to the hardships associated with the asylum process as well as a shared language and culture.

Almost all of the interviewees described their groups as 'safe spaces'. While this was related to the ability to share problems and experiences, the safe space was also attributed to the ability to be creative while being supported by other men or women. For *Mothership Writers*, the value of writing did not appear to be that it provided women with solutions to problems they encountered, but rather having the space to be with other new mums was highly valued. For *Voicemale* and *Melodies for Mums*, singing ability was not a prerequisite, but only the desire to sing with other men or women was required. At *Voicemale*, first time singers appeared to be less daunted by singing with other men rather than women. For *Dads Rock*, the cultivation of an environment where dads felt comfortable to be creative with their children was a main priority.

What appeared to be the unifying factor for all groups was having a creative activity as a means to prompt discussion and ‘open up’ about individual problems. *Dads Rock* organised buggy walks and workshops which gave men a shared activity, but simultaneously a place to discuss any problems they encountered as fathers. The majority of the attendees of *The Men of Leith Men’s Shed* were older men who typically found it difficult to share personal problems. However, through working with their hands on woodwork and DIY projects, men found a way to talk to each other, initially about their work, but in time this could lead to conversations about personal problems including mental health issues.

A prominent theme in the interview with Voicemale was the need for gender inclusive practices in gender specific creative groups. Some of the other groups have already embraced suggestions discussed in the literature review; for example, *Overdrive Dance Company* employs gender inclusive language on its social media platforms stating that the group “offers a safe environment for boys, young men and male-identifying young people to explore their creativity through dance and movement”. Similarly, *Mothership Writers* emphasised that anyone who self-identifies as a mother was welcome to join the writing group. Unfortunately, none of the creative groups that specifically define themselves as for non-binary and transgender peoples were available to interview, but the fact that these groups exist show the desire to have their own space to be creative. Writing in 2022, we are privileged to live in a society that embraces free gender expression, but in regards to gender-specific creative groups, there needs to be more support to ensure that anyone that wishes to join these groups feels welcome to participate.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

This report recommends that greater support could be given to gender-specific creative groups in the following ways:

**1**

**In order to attract more men and male-identifying people to men's and dad's groups, funding could be provided for these groups to organise events in the local community to highlight the groups' work.**

**2**

**Relevant organisations could offer men's and dad's groups an online platform to dispel ideas about toxic masculinity in male-only environments through a dedicated social media campaign.**

**3**

**Relevant organisations could work with gender-specific creative groups to find (and where possible fund) physical spaces where members can build community and exchange gendered experiences.**

**4**

**Workshops and skills sessions could be organised with gender-specific creative groups to help them cater to post-COVID conditions, for example, providing a hybrid format.**

**5**

**Relevant organisations and groups could work together to produce a set of guidelines on gender-inclusive practices in gender-specific creative groups to ensure gender fluid, non-binary and transgender people feel welcome to participate.**

**6**

**An exchange of experiences could be organised to find out the types of problems gender fluid, non-binary and transgender peoples encounter in gender-specific creative groups to influence the guidelines on gender-inclusive practices.**

**7**

**All organisations and groups (gender-specific creative groups and partners) could ensure their websites, social media and public facing communication are written in gender-neutral language and encourage others to adopt similar language.**

**8**

**There could be a more democratised funding structure available for gender-specific creative groups in the UK, including separate funding calls in order to acknowledge the distinct requirements of gender-specific creative groups.**



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