



# Amies Choir Collaboration

## with Happy Baby Community Project Report

### January 2024 to June 2024

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The Amies Freedom choir was set up in 2014 as a natural extension from Amies London, drama workshops for women survivors of trafficking. The choir uses the power of communal singing to assist these women in their journeys of recovery. Happy Baby Community was founded in 2013 by a group of new or expectant mothers who had fled to the UK to seek asylum and protection for their babies.

From the Happy Baby Community website, they describe their work as the following:

*“From the mums that have been there from the start, to those who have just arrived, we protect each other through shared knowledge, friendship, and understanding. Whilst our babies play, we get much-needed time to concentrate on our mental and physical well being, making us feel strong, supported and, most importantly, normal.”*

Happy Baby Community runs from five locations, four across London and one in Sussex near Gatwick Airport. They provide welfare advice, listening & counselling, ante-natal support, post-natal support, new baby bundles, lunch & food parcels, English lessons, activities for under 2's, birth support and a range of wellbeing activities.

Pan and Happy Baby Community were put in contact by both of our connections with Lifelines, which offers both organisations funding and support. Adwoa Dickson, the Amies Project Director, met with representatives from Happy Baby Community, where they agreed that Pan's work would be a wonderful addition to the activities that they provide for their participants.

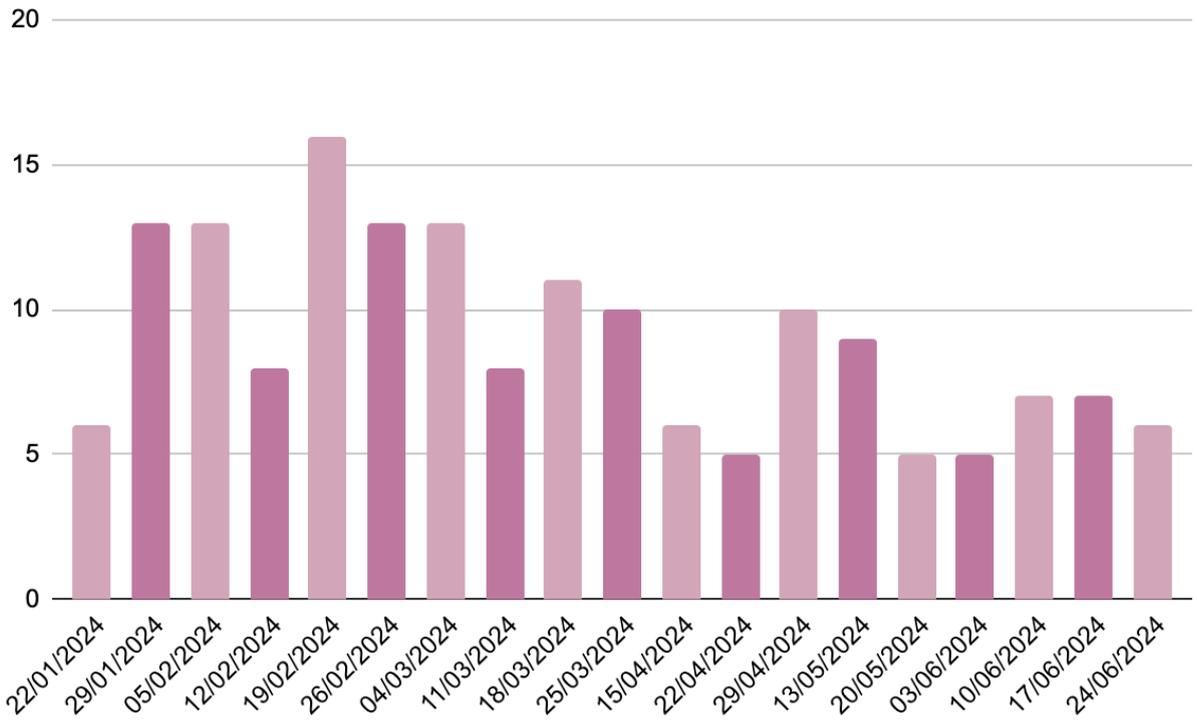
## Throughout the Year

Sessions:

- We delivered 19 sessions, once a week, during term time (22/01/24 to 24/06/24), on Mondays between 11am and 12pm in Hackney.
- We provided creative sessions for a total of 52 participants, with 25% of these participants attending 5 or more sessions.
- The majority of the participants had their children with them for the sessions, who would also join in with the singing and dancing.
- In all we delivered 171 participant hours of workshops.

Attendance:

- Due to the nature of Happy Baby Community, attendance was not consistent. Many of the participants would not attend the centre every week.
- Some participants would not attend or only partially attend the sessions due to looking after their babies/children. We did provide childcare every session, but some of the participants were not comfortable being separated from their children, even in the same room.
- As Happy Baby Community provided many activities at once, it could be hard to bring people to the singing sessions.
- There was a core group of participants who would attend every week with their children.

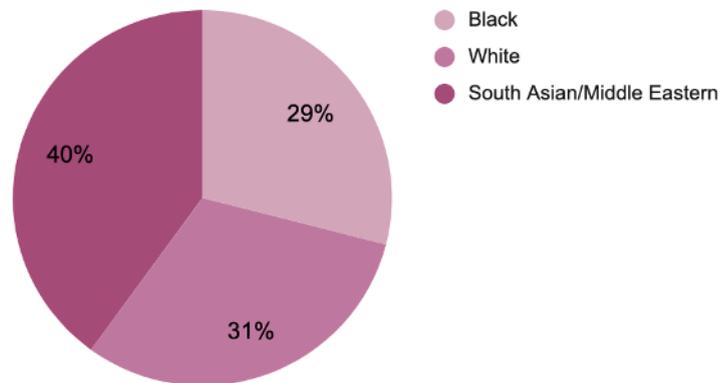


Participant Attendance January - June 2024

### Participant Demographic Breakdown

- Due to the nature of the project, all of the participants were women.
- Due to the nature of the project, all of the participants were over 18 years old.
- The ethnic breakdown of the group was 29% Black, 31% White (mostly Albanian) and 40% South Asian/Middle Eastern.

### Ethnicity Breakdown



## Project Overview

Pan's project for young Afghan women and girls, Papillon, came to an end earlier than expected at the end of December 2023, due to the participants finally moving out of their hotels, but being moved to locations all across the UK. We had confirmed income from Lifelines to cover a full year for the project. Lifelines were who originally put Pan and Happy Baby Community in contact, so this seemed like the perfect opportunity to pilot this project. Lifelines agreed, so fully funded this collaboration.



# HAPPY BABY COMMUNITY

We ran five pilot sessions, one a week from the end of January. These sessions were incredibly helpful to determine how the project could be run going forward. A few things that were immediately clear were that the women would need to come and go from the session, because of their children, that getting women in the room for the session would need help from the Happy Baby Community volunteers, as they needed to build up trust with our facilitators and that the sessions would need to be shorter than those we usually run, as focus and concentration were difficult for the participants with children and babies in the room. Once adjustments were made to accommodate these things, the sessions ran more smoothly.

Although attendance for the sessions was often low, there were a number of participants who attended regularly and seemed to benefit from taking part. There was a definite growth in learning and commitment to the material. There was also a willingness to try new things with percussion and harmony.



The presence of multiple children was initially chaotic, but the children, with the help of the music as well as the childminders' input, actively took part in most of the sessions. This was either in the central space where their parents were or with the childminders in the corner of the room. They learned some of the material and sometimes couldn't wait for the "next song" so they could play the bells or tambourine to accompany. The music also seemed to calm them when they were fractious. The children danced to the music at the beginning of the session and joined in the songs and where clapping was required they eagerly took part. There was one child who initially was very disruptive and whose mother did not attend, who grew into someone who sat with the choir and joined in. One day his mother came in to take him out of the session and he was visibly upset and appeared to not want to leave.

The participants embraced the music in different ways, some closing their eyes and swaying as they sang and some experimenting with movement, percussion and harmony. Upon hearing the choir sessions were coming to an end, many of the participants expressed sadness and disappointment. At the end they also expressed extreme gratitude.



## Evaluation

Pan's key objectives to measure the success of a project are:

- Improved confidence
- Improved communication/expression skills
- Increased engagement in creative activities

Due to the nature of the project, evaluating the participants individually was incredibly difficult. Only a quarter of the participants attended five or more sessions. We were also only able to run 19 sessions, due to Happy Baby Community booking in other activities at the time we would attend.

The team would normally take a baseline assessment for Pan's key objectives at the beginning of the project and then take further assessments periodically across the year. Because of the lack of consistency in attendance, this was not possible to do.

We also normally run evaluation sessions so the participants can feedback their own experiences of the project and the impact they have felt on themselves and the group. Due to the time constraints and the limited amount of sessions we were able to run, we did not want to take singing time away from the participants.

Because of these factors, our evaluation of the success of the project had to be from observations of the group as a whole.

- The returning members of the group learned the songs quickly and would help newer participants pick up the songs.
- Several participants were eager to use the drum and the claves to further participate with the music, asking at the beginning of sessions to use them.
- The more sessions that were attended, the more comfortable the participants would be to move their bodies, as well as singing. They would participate more in the physical warm ups and the body percussion.
- As the sessions progressed, many participants would be excited to sing certain songs, especially the more upbeat ones.
- The participants' trust also grew, and they became more comfortable bringing their children into the space and leaving their children in the corner with our childminders.

Despite the complications inherent in this project, it was clear that the participants benefited from Pan's work. The choir brought joy, peace and community to the space. It allowed the women to take some time for themselves, but also to enjoy the power of music with their children. The participants were certainly more confident in the space and more confident with their singing by the end of the project. There weren't many opportunities to talk with the participants, as we only had time to sing with them, but they did seem more comfortable talking with us and expressing their needs by the final sessions. The easiest element to track was the participant's engagement in creative activities. They were unsure at first about what we were offering, but were very excited to join our sessions as they progressed. They clearly loved singing with us and contributing their own beats and music.

I believe that we have met Pan's key objectives with this project.

## Conclusion

Collaborating with other organisations is always a learning experience. The success and effectiveness of Amies' work is clear through case studies taken from the core Amies projects. However, the partnership with Happy Baby Community had its complications. In our other collaborations and expansions there has always been a space provided for Pan's use, separate from other activities. Initially, we had planned to have childminders in a separate space, so that the participants could take time for themselves in our sessions. However, it was clear from the first moments that the participants would not be comfortable being away from their children, even in the same building. So Pan's childminders sat in the space during sessions, assisting where the mothers were comfortable. This meant that Adwoa had to pivot the focus of the sessions to include the children. By the end of the project, many children were happily participating with the singing and dancing in our sessions, creating a truly joyful experience.

Another difficulty we faced were time constraints and getting participants into the room with us in a timely manner. Happy Baby Community had another activity planned directly after our sessions, meaning that we often had less than an hour. The mothers would also arrive at different times, they would then need time to settle in and get refreshments. Consequently we were rarely able to start on time, meaning the sessions often felt a little rushed, or women would join the sessions just as they were coming to an end. The Happy Baby Community volunteers would help a little in bringing the women into our sessions, but ultimately they were busy with their own tasks.

We also faced difficulties with noise levels, with sounds leaking from the main room meaning that our facilitators had to strain their voices. This was something that had to be carefully monitored, as we did not want these sessions to affect their health, comfort and other work.

Whilst it was difficult to maintain consistency, by the end of the project we had a core group of participants who attended every week and enthusiastically participated. This included a group of children who loved to dance in the middle of the group and join in with the percussion. We have learned a lot from this collaboration, and will use this knowledge in our partnerships going forward.

