



## The Psychosocial Impact of Capoeira for Refugee Children and Youth Executive Summary

From 2013 to 2015, Capoeira4Refugees, in collaboration with the University of East London, participated in a two-year field study of the effects of capoeira on refugee children and youth in Palestine and Syria. Authored by Dr Kathryn Kraft and Hannah Prytherch, here is a summary of the long report. A mixed-methods methodology was employed.

### Background

Capoeira4Refugees uses Capoeira as a psychosocial tool to promote well-being among youth affected by conflict. Capoeira is an Afro-Brazilian craft that combines live music, sport, dance, play, culture and history. The long report evaluates the psychosocial impact of Capoeira in relation to Capoeira4Refugees' existing theory of change which purports that Capoeira leads to improved psychosocial well-being through the development of five key domains: playfulness, emotional stability, friendship, tolerance and inner strength.

### Capoeira and the Societal Challenges facing Children in Conflict

Most of Capoeira4Refugees' students face the ongoing threat and consequences of political violence. This affects the regular scheduling of classes, attendance and the mental state of students. Hailed cultural values of loyalty and self-defence are often expressed through violence and many children live in a context where physical, verbal or emotional abuse is commonplace. Both males and females face increasing pressures as they pass through adolescence; the responsibility of financially sustaining their family often falls partially or totally on young men, whilst girls are expected to prepare for married life by staying in and learning domestic responsibilities.

## Results

Results indicated that Capoeira4Refugees students did appear to be experiencing psychosocial benefits through their engagement in Capoeira. Results were divided into four main areas: the distinctive features of Capoeira, the societal challenges facing children in conflict, the domains of psycho-social change, and the relationship between trainer and student.

### Distinctive features of Capoeira

Capoeira combines sport, art, dance, music and play in a unique way. There is ample research demonstrating the role of physical activity and sports engagement in supporting psychosocial well-being. Capoeira is not just a sport, though, and indeed some capoeiristas would argue that Capoeira is not a sport at all. Its unique combination of various modalities and activities positions it well for meeting the felt needs of a diversity of students, and for providing psychosocial support in a holistic way through a clearly defined programme

### Societal Challenges facing Children in Conflict

Most of Capoeira4Refugees' students live in a context of on-going conflict or risk of conflict where political and social tension is common. Many of Capoeira4Refugees' students have parents or loved ones who have been arrested, are in jail, or have been killed. Trainers found that these children reacted in a variety of ways, in some cases overcompensating through expressions of confidence or even bullying, or in other cases withdrawing or struggling to focus or engage meaningfully in activities. Many students also came to Capoeira with a large sense of burden, wanting to help support their families somehow

### Domains of psychosocial change

Evidence supported Capoeira4Refugees' theory of change, showing that through the five domains of change, Capoeira did promote psychosocial well-being in children and youth.

Increased playfulness gave students a means of self-expression and a chance to enjoy their childhoods, leading to feelings of happiness, joy and psychological freedom. These feelings extended beyond Capoeira sessions and resulted in increased joy and productivity in other areas of life. Similarly, emotional stability was seen through improved mood and ability to deal with difficult life situations. In the home and at school, students were calmer and more committed, disciplined and focused. The collaborative approach of Capoeira helped children to build new friendships, strengthen existing friendships and develop social skills.

Related to this, Capoeira resulted in increased tolerance; although Capoeira led students to feel better able to physically defend themselves if necessary, it resulted in a decrease in aggression and increased respect towards and acceptance of others. Finally, Capoeira developed inner strength and confidence, particularly in oft-disempowered groups like girls and low academic achievers.

### Relationship between the trainer and the student

A final component of the psychosocial process not covered in the theory of change was the relationship between trainer and student. Trainers sought to model and develop values in themselves such as are respect, concern for others, self-control, patience and empathy.

They showed patience towards and invested time in their students, expressing pride in the practical and psychological developments they observed. The more trainers invested, the more likely students were to open up. Many students described their trainers as role models. Often these strong bonds meant that Capoeira continued beyond barriers and circumstances, with students training even when political circumstances meant that classes had to be stopped.

## Most significant change stories

Capoeira4Refugees uses a variety of monitoring and evaluation tools to measure change in its students. The 'Most Significant Change' method is a quantitative tool that encourages students and trainers to self-report on what they feel have been the most significant changes to themselves and others over the period of a project. Below are some examples of MSC stories from Palestine and Syria.

*She didn't used to ask others for help, or the teachers. [Since she joined Capoeira] she is asking her classmates for help and she is working in a team with her classmates... if she doesn't know something or needs help with something, she will ask. (Teacher interview)*

*He had no connection with the older students and they were much more advanced than him but after a few classes they started to respect Mustafa and you can see that they created a friendship also outside the class and treating each other with respect. (Trainer story)*

*Once, an airplane was flying low over [our town] while the group was having an open air training session. Normally, planes don't fly low over this area of town and the kids were not used to the loud noise. They were playing in the roda when the plane approached but instead of stopping the roda they started to sing louder and wanted to play more. They almost screamed at the airplane while singing and it was as if they took strength from being together in the roda to fight their fear. (Trainer interview)*

*So, there's a circle of violence. My dad is violent to me, I go be violent to my sister, my sister goes violent to my brother, my brother goes violent to the cat. So if my dad does that to me and I don't do that to my sister, I break the circle. So this is one of the ways to break the circle. I do Capoeira, I'm not violent no more, the circle is never complete. (Student interview)*

## Conclusion

Sport is a proven tool for psychosocial improvement in children, along with music and play. The benefits of these activities are increased when combined. The long report highlights Capoeira's unique combination of music, sport and play does indeed improve emotional wellbeing in children affected by conflict and that the students' commitment often extends beyond the bounds of the original project periods. Children practise at home and in the street, spreading Capoeira to their family and friends, who in turn, also reap the benefits.