

FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION REPORT



IRAQI WOMEN ART AND WAR (IWAW)



Introduction

In May 2025, at The Source in Oxford, 8 women from a variety of countries met Jane Gallagher - a Community Capacity Builder from the Well Together programme - to talk about their experiences of IWAW. They discussed their engagement in the activities provided through the IWAW group, prompted by open questions. The following report summarises the main themes, supported by participant quotes.

Theme 1: "The Arts as Therapy"

Participants described art as a powerful way to process painful memories and experiences of conflict. They use creative expression as a way to transform trauma into beauty, and to regain confidence.

"When some of us think about the country we came from, we cry. Here, we are given a pen and paper and we draw the house, we draw the river, we draw the Mum and Dad, the cow, the farm, the flowers that were there, and we feel more comfortable."

"We lived in war countries, I still hear the rockets in my ears, the windows shaking, the people, all the stress. When you do art, all your negativity goes into the paper. If we talk, we cry, but if we draw, we make pictures, we turn some of the pain into beauty. I am amazed that I can make beautiful pictures."

"It is really good to go outside of the house – in the house the woman cleans and tidies up, but when I go out, I put on the make up, I find the beautiful dress, I show up – I am here! Look at me, I am here! And I am really proud of Rana for giving us all this art, the museums, the fashion show... When I walked in the fashion show, oh my goodness, I find myself. There are no words to describe how much I value this group."





Theme 2: "A New Family"

The IAWW group was consistently described as a "family." Women valued the diversity of the group, noting that conflicts between home countries disappeared in this supportive space.



"I don't have a family, this is my family. IAWW group is not only for Iraqi women, it's for everyone, we have women from Turkey, Iraq, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Syria, Egypt, Balochistan, Kuwait, Ukraine, Iran, China, Kurdish.... we all come together and we belong. We are every culture and every colour. Even when countries have conflict with each other, when we come here it's different, we are all human. Women support each other."

"Being here is amazing. I felt so happy when I found these women. I used to hang my head, but when I saw these women, it was like I saw my mother or my sister, like I saw my family. We don't feel alone, we feel like family."

"We are women – we listen to others and they listen to us. We are all family. We need to know how to support our children, how to look after them because we live in this country. If we have stress, and we just sit down in the house, then we won't know anything about this country or who can support us. How to look after family, how to look after children."

Theme 3: "Feeling Better and Getting Healthier"



Participants reported that engagement in the group improved mental health, reduced stress, and lessened reliance on medical services. Women highlighted the importance of shared activities such as walking, dancing, and talking.



"We come from a place of war, of stress, and in this group we find friends, we do dancing, we do walking, we talk, we do so many things. And we share our problems here, because we have confidence they won't share these things outside the group. It is stress-reducing so we have less need to call the doctor. We just need somebody to listen to us - that is the best medicine."

"I felt broken. I was suffering with my own self, I had depression. Here I make myself busy and it helps."

"You need to look after yourself. I don't need to just go to the doctor and have medicine to feel happy and healthy. I need somebody to make me understand how to look after myself, how to do exercise. Here, we share ideas about things to do - swimming, walking, exercise in a group, to have a picnic outside - when you talk, it is like a psychotherapy."

"I have some diagnoses and so I don't go many places. I get overwhelmed with things. Coming here has helped me a lot. When I come here I relax and take my time."



Theme 4: "Opportunities to Learn and Work"

IWAW also created pathways into education, volunteering, and employment. Women spoke of rediscovering confidence, developing skills, and connecting with opportunities.

"In my country I worked in the bank, I studied business. When I came to England the first thing to stop me is the language. When I came to IWAW it gave me the power, meeting all these woman, to build myself again. It helped me learn English."

"I was having a hard time. Then I heard about this group. Being involved and doing activities has helped me a lot. We did the fashion show and it was the first time in my life to show my cultural dress, and it was so important to show my culture, my background to people. It is also giving me opportunities - I'm doing a science course, which I heard about through this group. This group is connecting me with so many other things. And I volunteer with IWAW's pop-up café, and I've put that on my CV and now I'm applying for jobs."

"We learn a lot about courses, like English language, and they support us to go to college. Now we're doing lots of courses at college – photography, science, English, ceramics. We're doing something and learning something and it's really important. Before, I wanted to do something but I don't have money to spend like college fees, but this group they support us."

"We do art, English language, cooking, sewing and fashion. It builds up our self-confidence, and we are learning. And we had a fashion show – it was never in my dreams that I could do this, then I did! It was beautiful. Learning art with this group takes our stress away. We learn English culture, we learn other cultures. We go to the theatre, we go for picnics, sometimes we take the children. We learn how to bring up our children in the English culture. Now I know how to look after my family, my children."

Theme 5: "Supporting Each Other"

The group fostered mutual support, both inside and outside sessions. Women translated for one another, offered guidance, and provided emotional solidarity.

"If you keep inside the house, just crying, lots of stress from the husband, from the children... who is going to look after me? When I came here to this group, all each other support. And they show me - go to this way, there's open exercise, go to other things, go to the doctor if there is something wrong in my body I'm not understand. And they help me when I speak because I'm not good at everything English. They help me and translate for me if we go anywhere. Lots of things I don't know about here in this country - that's why it's really important for women's groups to support each other."

"[Translated by another woman]: 'I was liberated coming here to England. I stayed in one hotel, then another hotel, then another house, and another. Then I met someone who comes to this group, and now I'm coming here and enjoying this group. Thank you to these people, they are very kind, they say, 'Don't worry, we can help you,' and they help me every time. I'm coming here, I'm going to college, and now I am happier, I am happy.'"

"Since coming to this group I am fine, I have cut my medicine, now I am happy. Before this group, every time I am shouting with my children and my husband. Every day I think what will I do, where will I go, no friends, what can I do? Now I have this group I am so happy. They give us advice and support. We share good news, bad news, we share everything. If we are not in a good mood, we can speak here, even if we can't speak with other people or at home. It makes me feel light!"



"When I come here I am over the moon. It helps me. Art supports you. These people are my sisters."



"When I came to this country, I was anxious and depressed, because I was alone here, no family. No one to help and we have stressful children all around us because we don't know how to do different culture, different language."



"Everyone has talents inside, we just need support to find them. Here we get opportunities to find our talents."



"Thank you to Rana for making this IAWW women's group for us. It's really good to learn because my first language is Arabic, this gives me more support to speak to people from other cultures and to learn. It makes me relaxed because I have lots of stress from life, children, it's not easy to live here. The life is really making me crazy. I miss my family. When I come to this group, I find myself. Somebody listens to me, I listen to them, they support me lots. I do art, I do fashion, I do cooking, we share food from different countries and I learn from people who are not just from my country. This has given me power."

"Sometimes some of us who live near by will meet up outside the group to go for a walk or go shopping, or just talk, or to the park with the children or make a picnic – when we do this, it is making us healthier and happier."

3. Conclusion

The focus group discussion highlighted the profound impact of IAWW in providing:

-  A therapeutic outlet through art and creativity
-  A sense of belonging and family
-  Improvements in mental and physical wellbeing
-  Opportunities to learn, volunteer, and move towards work
-  Strong mutual support and solidarity

Participants repeatedly emphasised how the group has given them confidence, reduced isolation, and helped them to find themselves again.



To help us understand, and be able to communicate more widely, the impact of Well Together for the participants and attendees of funded activities, we have completed a series of focus group discussions. Each has been facilitated by the Well Together teams' Community Capacity Builders with the support of activity organisers / facilitators. The outputs of these focus groups sit alongside stories produced using storytelling methodology and data submitted through online forms.

The focus groups discussion were based around open questions - such as:

- What does it mean to you to be able to take part in this activity? / What does it mean to you be a part of this group?*
- What do you like about coming here? / What do you like about being a part of this group?*
- What do you get up to when you come here? / What do you get up to with this group?*

before moving on to more specific questions about the health inequalities / clinical areas that the groups are addressing through their activities (where appropriate) - such as:

- Have you found out more about health checks? / Do you know how to get a health check?*
- Has attending this activity encouraged you to eat more healthily? / What have you found out about eating well? / Have you changed what you eat since coming here?*
- Has your level of physical activity changed since coming here? / Have you been more active since coming here? / Do you move more since coming here?*

With thanks to everyone who has been involved in the focus group sessions

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