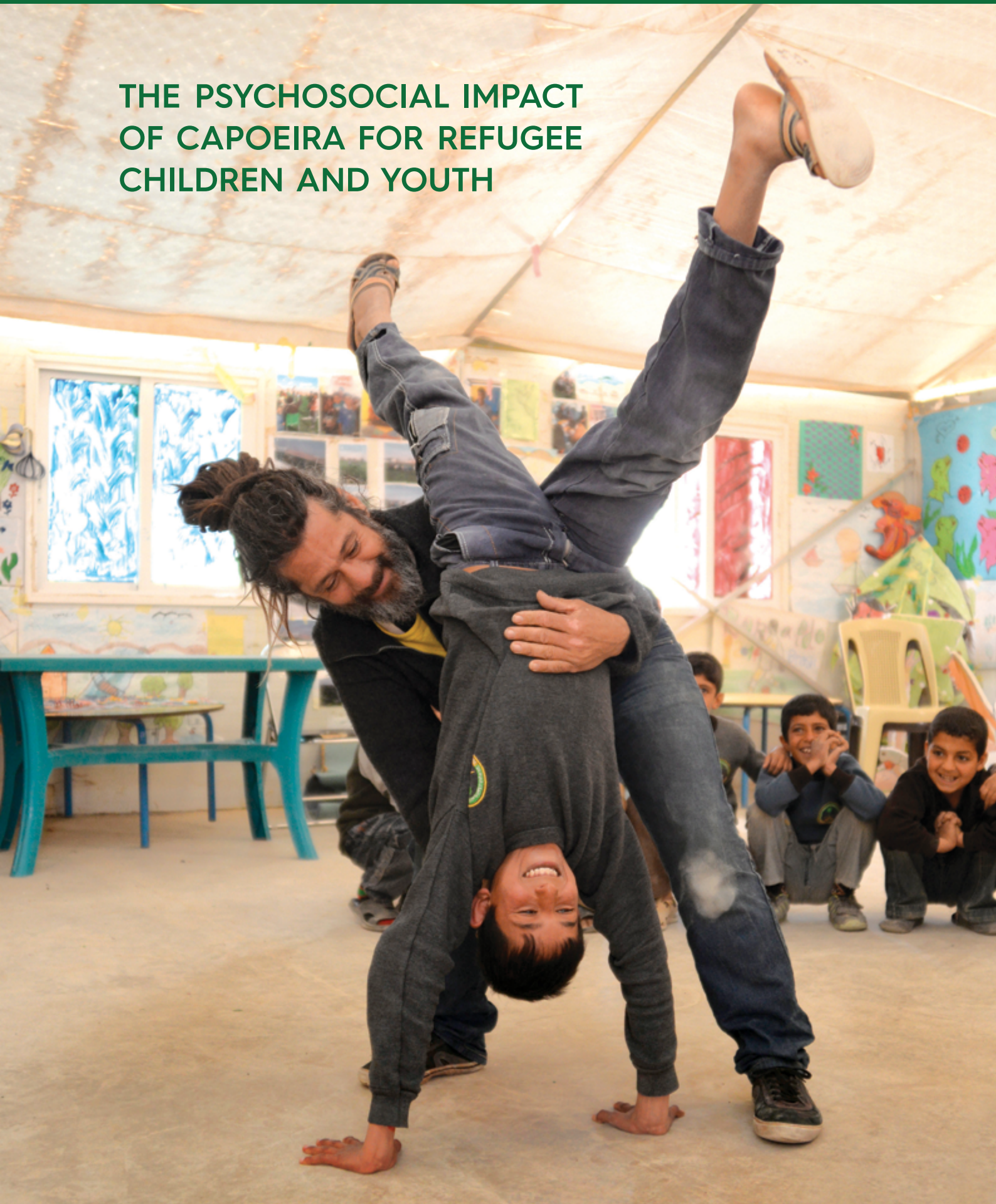


# THE PSYCHOSOCIAL IMPACT OF CAPOEIRA FOR REFUGEE CHILDREN AND YOUTH



Capoeira4Refugees (C4R), a UK registered charity, uses the Brazilian artform of Capoeira to provide psychosocial support to children and youth who are victims of war and conflict. Through the combination of live music, song, sport and play, Capoeira helps vulnerable refugees to develop positive coping mechanisms and to build communities. Capoeira4Refugees has maintained a presence throughout the Middle East since 2007 and has given classes to over 10,000 children in Syria, Palestine, Lebanon and Jordan.



<http://www.capoeira4refugees.org>

University of East London's Centre for Social Justice and Change (CSJC) is dedicated to undertaking high quality research which contributes to the development of theory and knowledge, and to the improvement of public policies both nationally and internationally. The Conflict, Displacement and Development strand takes a multidisciplinary approach to the study of conflict-induced displacement, human rights, development and human mobility at local, national and global levels.



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## Foreward by Ummul Choudhury

Born on the streets of Damascus, Capoeira4Refugees has grown since 2007 to develop unique projects across the Middle East. The Charity has seen many challenges over the years, including the outbreak of war in Syria, which forced it to close down the majority of its work by 2012 and build it up again, the terrible Gaza conflict in the summer of 2014, and most recently, the rise of the extremist group ISIS. Despite what feels like constant crisis, C4R has managed to not only keep its projects running, but has managed to grow and develop a strong infrastructure and strategic vision to ensure its sustainability.

C4R Programmes have been designed for the particular contexts of conflict, war, and the cultural parameters within which we work. But we cannot take the credit for the unique artform that is Capoeira. Brazilian slaves developed Capoeira in the 16th century as a powerful response to their physical oppression: in mind and spirit they could still fight. Recognised by UNESCO for its unique cultural heritage, Capoeira is a living documentation of a people's struggle for freedom, and that specific heritage resonates with the students, those survivors of conflict, that C4R works with today.

C4R has innovated and worked with this living artform to be relevant in the highly volatile and sensitive context of the current Middle East situation with refugees. C4R follows an integrated, tiered approach to its programmes: running Capoeira classes for target communities to help participants deal with their experiences of conflict, and from these classes identifying talented students who can take part in the training of trainer's classes (ToTs). These ToTs are essential to building up local skills sets and to allowing local people to own Capoeira within their communities. We also run Capoeira4Refugees tours, essential to creating tolerance and cultural understanding between communities. We are now launching a Capoeira Peace Day. The Peace Day will catalyse a movement to support Capoeira social projects, as well as bring recognition to the unique artform and positive impact of Capoeira as a tool of transformative social change.

Getting a new idea off the ground, and getting others to believe in it, has required relentless dedication and passion. C4R has consistently invested in a strong infrastructure to give a stable base from which its activities can reach out into communities whose very fabric has been rent apart by war. This infrastructure has been essential in allowing C4R to innovate and find solutions to the many complex problems we encounter daily.

Our hope is that as you read this report, you will also be inspired by what can be achieved through Capoeira. And, that you will also remember that it is the infrastructure that allows this type of research and Project to happen.

The report will take you through many aspects of what Capoeira is, and how it impacts the students we work with. To truly understand the artform, and to better understand the report - we would ask that you also try it! We can all benefit from a little bit more music, play and community in our lives.

Finally, we would like to thank our supporters, the Drosos Foundation, the Asfari Foundation, Itamaraty, and Save the Children, amongst many many others who donated their time and money for allowing us to grow and keep these incredible projects going. We would also like to thank the University of East London for entering into a collaboration with Capoeira4Refugees in support of conducting original research on Capoeira.

Axe



Ummul Choudhury  
Co-Founder, Capoeira4Refugees

## Executive Summary

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. This 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. The evaluation draws on data gathered as part of regular monitoring and evaluation activities from September 2013 to May 2015, in Palestine and Syria. This includes focus group discussions with youth, Facebook posts by youth, interviews with Capoeira trainers, school teachers and counsellors, and stories of change written by trainers.

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.

### The distinctive features of Capoeira

Capoeira includes strenuous physical and acrobatic training, which develops physical capacities and related self-esteem. Like other martial arts, it develops self-control and discipline, but through the incorporation of dance, it allows space for creativity and self-expression. Capoeira is highly collaborative and unlike other sports, there are no winners or losers in Capoeira. The music, along with its history and culture, provide a dimension lacking in most other physical activities. The nicknames given to students often aid the development of trainer-student bonds and student identity, whilst the diversity embraced by Capoeira facilitates the development of tolerance and acceptance of difference. Ultimately, Capoeira's multifaceted nature means that it tends to have something in it for everyone, regardless of skills or interests.

### 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. These social realities and expectations often act as obstacles to consistent engagement in Capoeira, and, conversely, Capoeira has served as an outlet that helps students work through such life challenges.

### 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 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.





## Background: What is Capoeira?

Capoeira is a craft that was developed by African slaves in Brazil, dating back to at least the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Depending on the practitioner, Capoeira can be described as anything from an exercise class to a way of life. However, some of the most common terms used to describe Capoeira are music, dance, sport, play and culture. In the traditional form, Capoeira games take place in a circle, which is headed by musicians playing one of five traditional Capoeira instruments. One person leads the singing whilst everyone else responds with a chorus. Two people 'play' Capoeira together in the middle of the circle, responding to the corporal questions posed by their partner with an array of kicks, jumps, spins and twists.

The specific principles, 'rules' and aims of Capoeira often vary from group to group. Nonetheless, the majority of capoeiristas nowadays would agree that Capoeira is not about physical contact, nor about winning or losing. Rather, it is about social interaction, communication and cooperation. This is reflected in the language used; it is a 'game' between 'comrades' rather than a fight against an opponent.

Capoeira is practiced all around the world, though most Capoeira groups still maintain strong ties to Brazil. During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, many projects have been implemented with youth in slums and other marginalised communities in Brazil, as well as in developing or conflict-stricken countries around the world, teaching youth Capoeira as a means of strengthening their psychosocial resilience and well-being.

## About Capoeira4Refugees

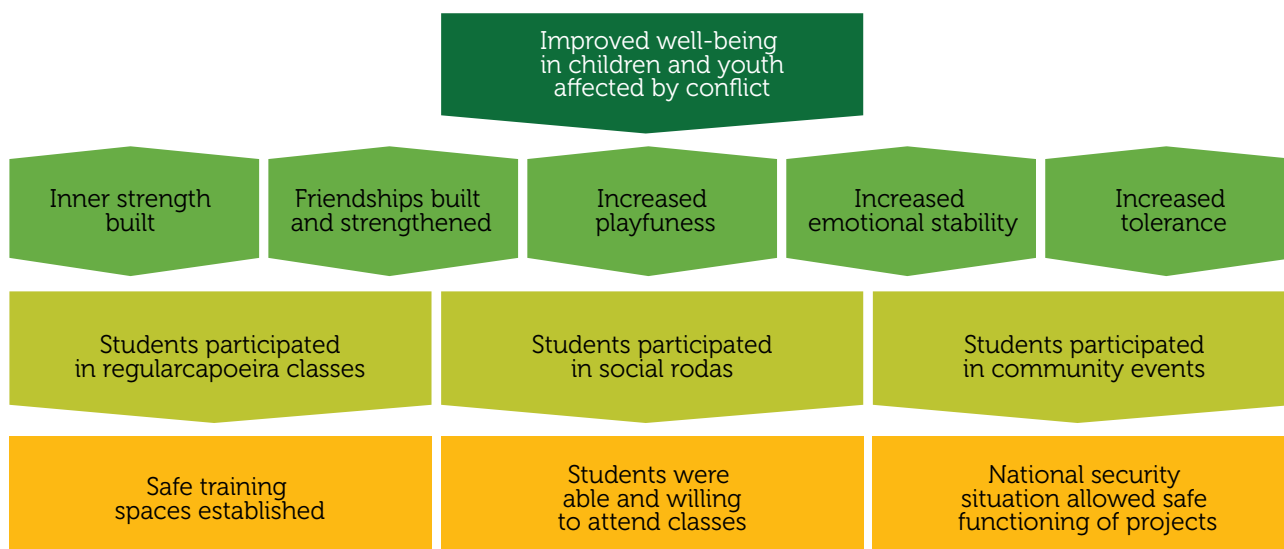
Tarek Alsaleh founded Capoeira4Refugees in Damascus, Syria in 2007. His playing on the streets attracted an enraptured audience of local children, so he rented a training space and started to offer free classes, which soon became very popular. Noticing the potential for psychosocial benefits, Tarek started a few small projects with vulnerable children in refugee camps and prisons in and around Syria. In January 2011, 'Bidna Capoeira' became a registered UK charity and from there, its projects expanded to Palestine, and most recently

Jordan. In 2015, in recognition of its growing geographical reach, Bidna Capoeira was rebranded Capoeira4Refugees.

Capoeira4Refugees' aim is to provide psychosocial support through Capoeira to children and youth affected by conflict, and to support or develop sustainable local Capoeira groups that can continue independently. Though there is a great deal of enthusiasm for Capoeira in the Middle East, there is limited local expertise; therefore, over the years, foreign capoeiristas have been flown in to provide training. Although these international capoeiristas often deliver the social Capoeira classes to children, their primary aim is to target and develop the capacities of already existing local capoeiristas. This is achieved through employing and equipping local capoeiristas as trainers, and through training of trainer programmes, where talented and committed youth receive intensive Capoeira training, preparing them to become trainers in the future.

Capoeira classes are a central feature of all of Capoeira4Refugees' projects, though the specific class structure and other details of project design vary from one context to another. Classes for children and youth ideally consist of no more than 25 students, and where class sizes are bigger, trainers make efforts to divide classes into smaller groups. Wherever possible, Capoeira4Refugees holds mixed gender classes, although cultural norms often require classes to be gender segregated, especially for older students. Classes may be held in schools, during scheduled class-time, or in community centres or sports clubs. Classes range from weekly to daily, and may or may not be combined with other activities such as literacy or arts classes. In some locations, trainers work in their own neighbourhoods and enjoy a close relationship with many of their students, while in other locations, trainers need to commute to other districts where they are less familiar with the communities.

## Capoeira4Refugees' Theory of Change



**Main aim – Improved well-being in children and youth affected by conflict**

Capoeira4Refugees runs on-going psychosocial projects in which Capoeira is used to increase the well-being and resilience of children and youth affected by conflict. The children and youth that Capoeira4Refugees work with come from various backgrounds. Within Palestine, children have grown up under occupation. Violence and a lack of freedom have become normalised, as has the presence of international humanitarian aid. For most Syrians, both within the country and those living in refugee camps in Jordan, violence and conflict only entered their lives after war broke out in Syria in 2011. Traumas are recent and most Syrians have little previous exposure to psychosocial programmes or foreign aid. Although

there is not yet significant academic research on the topic, both practitioners and scholars have suggested that Capoeira may have the potential for psychosocial benefits<sup>1</sup>. However, these potential benefits may be different within different settings.

Play therapy, music and movement are widely recognised therapeutic interventions. Music therapy has been found to have positive psychological consequences and to be an effective treatment for trauma<sup>2</sup>, whilst dance and movement have been shown to lead to improved mood, affect and subjective well-being<sup>3</sup>. In addition to dance-like movements, Capoeira is also considered by many to be a martial art and a strenuous work-out. The impact of exercise on psychosocial well-being is well documented and there is evidence to suggest that martial arts can lead to reduced feelings of depression, anxiety and stress<sup>4</sup>.



### Increased playfulness

Play is recognised as being an important component to psychosocial development in children. However, many of the children that Capoeira4Refugees works with have experienced overwhelming trauma and taken on demanding responsibilities at a young age, compromising their ability to enjoy their childhoods. Capoeira4Refugees believes that providing children with the chance to play again, a space where they can temporarily forget their hardships, and a means by which they can express themselves, can lead to improved psychosocial development.



### Emotional stability

The discipline, passion and playfulness that students experience in their Capoeira practice can help encourage overall emotional well-being, leading to improved overall mood and feelings of happiness. Through the play of Capoeira, children find an outlet for their frustrations and can find inner calm that helps them cope with the various stresses of life more productively.



### Friendship

Capoeira is inherently social. Two people must play together within a circle, maintaining eye-contact, responding to their partner's moves, in rhythm to the music produced by the rest of the group. Through this process, students typically develop new and deeper friendships. Strong social networks are a key indicator of resilience<sup>5</sup> and thus providing a means to enhance social relationships is likely to promote psychosocial well-being.



### Tolerance

As they develop new friendships with different people, so participants must also learn to accept new people and ideas. Capoeira, despite being considered by some to be a fight, is about finding non-violent and cooperative dialogues and solutions. It is about using wit, creativity and

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1 Assunção, M. 2005. *Capoeira: a history of an Afro-Brazilian martial art*. London: Routledge., pp. 210-11.

2 Gold, C., M. Voracek and T. Wigram. 2004. "Effects of music therapy for children and adolescents with psychopathology: a meta-analysis." *Journal of Child Psychology and psychiatry* 45 (6): 1054-1063; Sutton, J. 2002. *Music, music therapy and trauma: International perspectives*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publications.

3 Koch, S., T. Kunz, S. Lykou, and R. Cruz. 2014. "Effects of dance movement therapy and dance on health-related psychological outcomes: A meta-analysis." *The Arts in Psychotherapy* 41 (1): 46-64.

4 Daley, A. 2008. "Exercise and Depression: A Review of Reviews." *Journal of Clinical Psychology in Medical Settings* 15 (2): 140-147; Wang, F., E. Lee, T. Wu, H. Benson, G. Fricchione, W. Wang, A. Yeung. 2014. "The Effects of Tai Chi on Depression, Anxiety, and Psychological Well-Being: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis." *International journal of behavioural medicine* 21 (4): 605-617.

5 Regional Refugee and Resilience plan 2015-2016; In response to the Syria crisis. Regional Strategic Overview. Accessed at [<http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/3RP-Report-Overview.pdf>]

intelligence rather than physical force<sup>6</sup>. Other martial arts have been shown to lead to positive behavioural changes in aggressive adolescents which in turn can lead to improved well-being<sup>7</sup>.

### Inner strength

Finally, Capoeira requires significant confidence. Students are learning new ways to move their body, to use their voices and to express themselves, and they must experiment with all of these in front of a group of peers. Developing the courage to try, to make mistakes and eventually to succeed in front of peers is an empowering process, which can lead to improved confidence and self-esteem. Scholars have argued that Capoeira can be particularly useful in empowering typically disempowered groups such as females<sup>8</sup>.



This paper serves as an evaluation of Capoeira4Refugees' theory of change, seeking to understand better the psychosocial impact that Capoeira might have in the children it serves. The report will begin by looking at some of the distinct features identified by various stakeholders in Capoeira4Refugees' programming that position it uniquely for psychosocial influence in the lives of conflict-affected children; then will look at how Capoeira interacts with specific issues within the cultural and political contexts in which Capoeira4Refugees works. Subsequently, the report will analyse data collected with relation to the five domains of change, and finally will highlight the specific characteristics and roles that trainers play in enabling these changes.

## Methodology for this research

This research covers the period from September 2013 to June 2015 and draws from data produced through planned project monitoring and evaluation activities. Different procedures were used in different locations depending on staff availability and capacity for monitoring and evaluation.

Prior to September 2013, many of the activities in Palestine had been conducted within UNRWA<sup>9</sup> schools and therefore in a review of these classes, interviews were conducted with four teachers and three school counsellors in three different schools during September 2013. Seven Capoeira students of mixed gender, between the ages of 11-24 were interviewed at the same time. A total of six trainers were interviewed in 2014 during reviews of their projects, five of whom were Syrian and one of whom was Palestinian. Further information about the impact of Capoeira within Palestine was also gathered using focus group discussions (FGDs) and questionnaires. Four FGDs were conducted with four Capoeira classes between September 2014 and May 2015. A questionnaire for quantitative analysis was also implemented at base-line and after 6-12 months of Capoeira participation with four classes of students in Palestine. The questionnaire consisted of the WHO-5 Well-Being Index<sup>10</sup>, the General Self-Efficacy Scale<sup>11</sup> and a number of other questions relating to Capoeira4Refugees' theory of change.

6 Fuggle, S. (2008). Discourses of subversion: The ethics and aesthetics of capoeira and parkour. *Dance research: The journal of the society for dance research*, 26(20) p.204-222.

7 Twemlow, S., F. Sacco, and P. Fonagy. 2008. "Embodying the mind: Movement as a container for destructive aggression." *American Journal of Psychotherapy* 62 (1): 1-33.

8 Assunção, M. 2005. *Capoeira: a history of an Afro-Brazilian martial art*. London: Routledge, pp. 210-11.

Green, A.B., 2009. *Empowerment through cultural practices: Women in Capoeira*. MA. University of Florida, p.8. Available at: [http://etd.fcla.edu/UF/UFE0024587/green\\_a.pdf](http://etd.fcla.edu/UF/UFE0024587/green_a.pdf) [Accessed on 20.10.2014].

9 United Nations Relief and Works Agency, the UN agency with the set mandate of supporting Palestinian refugees

10 'The WHO-5 Well-Being Index is a 5-item measure of current mental well-being and quality of life that uses positively phrased questions and avoids symptom-related language. See <https://www.psykiatri-regionh.dk/who-5/Pages/default.aspx>'

11 'The General Self-efficacy scale is a 10-item psychometric scale that is designed to assess optimistic self-beliefs to cope with a variety of difficult demands in life. See <http://userpage.fu-berlin.de/health/selfscal.htm>



Another key source of data were stories produced through the Most Significant Change (MSC) technique<sup>12</sup>. In MSC monitoring, practitioners engage in a process of story writing, discussion and selection, which aims not only to produce impact data but also to involve staff in a process of reflection and project adaptation. MSC stories are different from success stories as practitioners are encouraged to write stories of change, which could include both positive and negative change. MSC was introduced in August 2013, and though story writing has been somewhat sporadic in both Syria and Palestine, on average trainers have either been writing stories, or documenting stories told to them by their students, on a bi-monthly basis from late 2013 until mid 2015.

Finally, in January 2015, in order to extend the MSC methodology to invite more participation from students, four Capoeira classes in Palestine established or revived Facebook groups and invited Capoeira4Refugees representatives to join the groups. There was express agreement that Capoeira4Refugees would review the content being posted periodically, between January and June of 2015, to identify stories of change or other insights into the role of Capoeira in students' lives. Two groups merged into one, and two became inactive; data from the one combined group was analysed for this report.

Limitations: No data from the projects in Jordan is analysed in this report, as the project in Jordan is relatively new and has had frequent turnover of both staff and students, due to its focus on working within a newly-established refugee camp. In both Syria and Palestine, frequent changes due to ongoing conflict and uncertainty have meant that no one methodology could be enacted consistently over an extended period of time. Instead, this report brings together a wide variety of data sources to identify and triangulate key themes and trends, using a mixed-methods analysis approach.

## Distinctive Features of Capoeira

Capoeira combines sport, art, dance, music and play in a unique way. As seen above, 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.

### 1. Physical Abilities Developed

Although pitched at students' level, trainings are designed to prepare students for the physically-intensive Capoeira games that take place in the *roda*. Data indicated that through training, students developed physical stamina, flexibility and reflexes. Many students said that it was the prospect of learning the new and impressive movements of Capoeira that first attracted them to join the programme. In the questionnaires, girls reported more than doubling their physical exercise since starting Capoeira (physical exercise increased from 1.67 to 3.82 times a week) whilst boys' physical activity increased by 16% (3.29 to 3.94 times a week).

Students noticed the benefits of increased exercise. Many commented that they were losing weight and their bodies were more toned, or that their flexibility had improved. Some students enjoyed Capoeira as an opportunity to "show off" their physical fitness. For many, this strengthened physical capacity served to boost their overall confidence.

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12 Dart, J. and R. Davies. 2005. "The 'Most Significant Change' (MSC) Technique: A Guide to Its Use."



**Moatasem<sup>13</sup> is a student that loves Capoeira so much, but his body is not helping him to do the movements easily, and I liked that he is not giving up and his insisting on doing the movements, I start giving him more attention and more tips about how to take it step by step without to rush things. Today he is a lot better and start losing weight and he is more confident. (Trainer story)**

These benefits may be found in all sports activities, but Capoeira's emphasis on acrobatic skills, such as *bananeira* (handstand), *aú* (cartwheel) and *macaco* (similar to a backflip) set it apart from many other sports. In the Facebook group, 26 posts were dedicated to celebrating acrobatic moves, and this was the most common type of content for group members to post. These posts included photos of themselves, or of each other, doing impressive acrobatic moves; they also found videos on the Internet of others doing acrobatics and regularly shared those with each other.

**He is a kid 11 years who loves doing Bananeira. I never saw someone of his age insist on doing it the way he does. He keeps doing it all the time in the class in the street wherever he is able to make it, even his friends call him Abu Agiqah, which means 'the one who is really dedicated and passionate about something'. Because of that later on I feel that his hands will be as strong as his legs. (Trainer story)**

Indeed for some classes, particularly classes of boys, their excitement about acrobatics had the potential to obscure other aspects of the Capoeira classes. In general, Acrobatics were more interesting to boys than to girls, but many girls also felt empowered as they developed new and unique physical abilities

**She is 12 years old and she joined Capoeira 7 months ago... One day she went to the university with her cousin and there she was doing some Capoeira move like headstand, and handstand, ponte (bridge), and the other girls were amazed from her and they liked it so much. (Trainer story)**

Capoeira bears some similarity to the physical disciplines developed in other martial arts, and some Capoeira students joined Capoeira after already participating in practices such as Karate or Tae Kwon Do. Students observed that, like other martial arts, self-control and discipline are key skills developed through the craft. But students and trainers alike point-

<sup>13</sup> All names are changed.



ed out a variety of ways in which Capoeira is different. For some, it was a simple preference, such as one boy who explained that Capoeira “had his heart.” Other reasons given for why Capoeira was preferred by many students is the fact that it is participatory and, though highly physical, it is not aggressive. Some students also identified in Capoeira a greater space for creativity in choosing what moves to do, and when.

## 2. Dance

This creativity and freedom of expression leads some capoeiristas to describe Capoeira as a dance. The movements of, ‘rolling and jumping’, as described by one mother, bear resemblance to other dances. However, Capoeira is improvised, rather than choreographed. Students and trainers described it as having a guiding structure but with enough freedom to explore their capacities and preferences, while expressing themselves through the movements.

*It’s freedom in both ways, it comes from us and from Capoeira itself. In Capoeira you are free in the movements you do. You can do movements but it needs to stay... for example, you can do lots of movements but then you have to go back to ginga (the starting move). You have freedom, but it’s freedom with guidelines, a system. (Trainer interview)*

Nonetheless, many students found it important to emphasise that Capoeira is not ‘just a dance’. Several boys struggled to get their fathers’ permission to allow them to participate, due to such conceptions. Trainers made a point of meeting with those fathers to explain that, in addition to dance, Capoeira is also a sport and a martial art, which includes music and has a history of resistance as well as potential psychosocial benefits. Such intentional engagement helped members of the community grow to accept, and appreciate, Capoeira.

## 3. Collaborative, with no winners or losers

Capoeira is highly interactive in nature. The roda, the main event in Capoeira, is a circle in which two people play, maintaining eye-contact and paying attention to each other’s movements in order to respond in harmony.

*There’s a relationship between all the people around you in the circle. There’s a relationship between you and the person playing in front of you. It’s like, how you’re going to move [and] how’s the one in front of you answering you. Like whatever they do, are they really excited to do it, are they happy? Are they enjoying their time? If they’re enjoying their time, you’re enjoying your time and everyone is. (Student interview)*





In Capoeira4Refugees' projects, all exercises are built around supporting one another and playing together, rather than seeking to beat one another. While some Capoeira groups can become performative and competitive, Capoeira4Refugees trainers work hard to maintain a spirit of 'there are no winners or losers'. Students found that this helped them feel less pressure than in other sports, and also pushed them to find the inner strength to challenge themselves.

**The girls feel that they are all equal in Capoeira. No winners, no losers. They are all the same. So this is why, it makes them feel, "we are the same, you are not more perfect than me, you are not better than me, we are all the same." (School counsellor interview)**

Participation in Capoeira demands a high level of interaction and team-work. Capoeira is best enhanced when all the members of the roda play well, and so students learned that if they wanted to excel, they needed to find ways to bring out the best in each other. This required paying attention to one another's overall sense of well-being. Social tension within the roda was often readily identified and worked out through interactive play. One trainer described it as "interaction but with the language of the body instead of words."

**Through the singing, the music and the game, you know what people are feeling. That's what's great about Capoeira, you find out and feel what people are thinking. It's in the roda, because in the roda it has to be everyone together, and every little issue becomes obvious. (Trainer interview)**

Data from stories, interviews and focus groups all pointed to how the interaction and communication inherent to Capoeira led to a growing sense of team, camaraderie and unity within Capoeira groups. Interestingly, in at least one instance, team camaraderie was credited for helping a student improve her grades.

**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)**





#### 4. Music

Music is an integral component of all Capoeira practice. Some Capoeira groups even believe that the music is the foundation of Capoeira; the repertoire of culturally-rich songs combined with the orchestra and chorus are, in the words of one leading Brazilian teacher, 'the combustion to the engine'.

*Sometimes I'm just walking in the street or maybe just hanging out at home and it's like, sometimes I just start singing songs in my head or hearing the sounds of the atabaque or the birembau. I don't know, it just makes you happy, whenever you hear it or visualise it in your head, it's just, that's the atmosphere I want to be in right now. (Student interview)*

Many children found the music less intimidating than, or a nice complement to, the physical training. They learned to play instruments, many of which are simple percussion instruments with a basic rhythm, but which can be further developed as their skill level grows. Some shy students began practicing the music before learning the physical moves. Indeed, playing instruments and singing were two skills in which younger children, girls and others who felt they were less physically capable saw significant improvement early on in their engagement with Capoeira. Trainers gave many examples of students whom they noticed had an aptitude for music but who were less skilled in acrobatics or other physical aspects of Capoeira. They helped nurture those students' passion for music and saw them find their self-expression in the singing and playing of the instruments.

*Maram began like most young people who are attempting to learn to play. She could not hold the rhythm... and if anyone would improvise on the basic rhythm, then she would lose her place in the rhythm, causing us to have to stop and begin again. I don't know exactly when it happened, but she learned to play in time with me, and to keep a steady rhythm no matter if I improvised the beat or not... I often rely on her to help me by playing the atabaque, which is the most dominant sounding instrument in the orchestra. She is demonstrating a natural talent for music. (Story by Trainer)*



Students were intrigued to be singing in a new language (Portuguese), and by the lyrics when they learned the translations. They enjoyed singing with their friends during practices, and on their own between practices. One student posted to Facebook a screenshot of his phone showing the lyrics to a Capoeira song; in response, the trainer congratulated him, saying that using their phones is a great way to start memorising the songs.

*The first thing that made me want to participate was the music, cos I'm very, I'm a person who really really really loves music no matter what it is... The berimbau was one of the things that made me want to participate because it has a very very beautiful voice and it really touches me deep inside... I don't speak Portuguese, I don't understand Portuguese but sometimes I would go to Youtube and I would pick some random song and if I liked it, and I usually do like every song of Capoeira... Every song inspires me. (Student interview)*

Finally, though Capoeira4Refugees brought instruments from Brazil for students' use, some children who were creative and who enjoyed working with their hands found a new hobby in trying to make instruments out of local materials. Two members of the Facebook group posted photos of self-made Berimbaus (the most iconic member of the Capoeira orchestra); in response, others expressed their admiration for their colleagues' craftsmanship and encouraged them to bring their new Berimbaus to the next class.

### 5. History, Culture and Philosophy of Capoeira

Capoeira has a rich tradition of resistance, developed by slaves in Brazil to empower them both physically and mentally against their owners. For this reason, some students felt a personal connection to Capoeira, as it teaches values and skills that are relevant to the social and political struggles in their own country. One student even told her trainer that she sees Capoeira as a "social movement" first and foremost. On the Facebook group, some students connected Capoeira to their own political struggles by posting photos of themselves playing Capoeira in contested geographical areas, or, in the case of one student, wearing an 'Anonymous' protest mask while doing a handstand.



This personal connection inspired some students to study the history and teachings of Capoeira in their spare time and to learn the meaning of the Capoeira songs so as to understand how they apply to their Middle Eastern reality.

*I was more interested in Capoeira when they actually talked about the history of Capoeira. Because I'm really interested in the resistance idea, no matter what. I'm living under occupation in Palestine and this is one of the reasons that made me want to so... The history of Capoeira is a very beautiful thing and it's a very interesting thing. I started reading more and more and more about Capoeira and how it started and how they were not allowed to play Capoeira and how it first started and how it became legal if we can say that. (Student interview)*

While it was a relatively small number of students who embraced the resistance idea, many students were attracted by the fact that Capoeira is Brazilian. There are strong historical ties between Latin America and the Middle East, but most of Capoeira4Refugees' students knew little of the culture or traditions of Latin American countries. They also appreciated that they could learn a new culture and a new language, one that they did not associate with Europe.

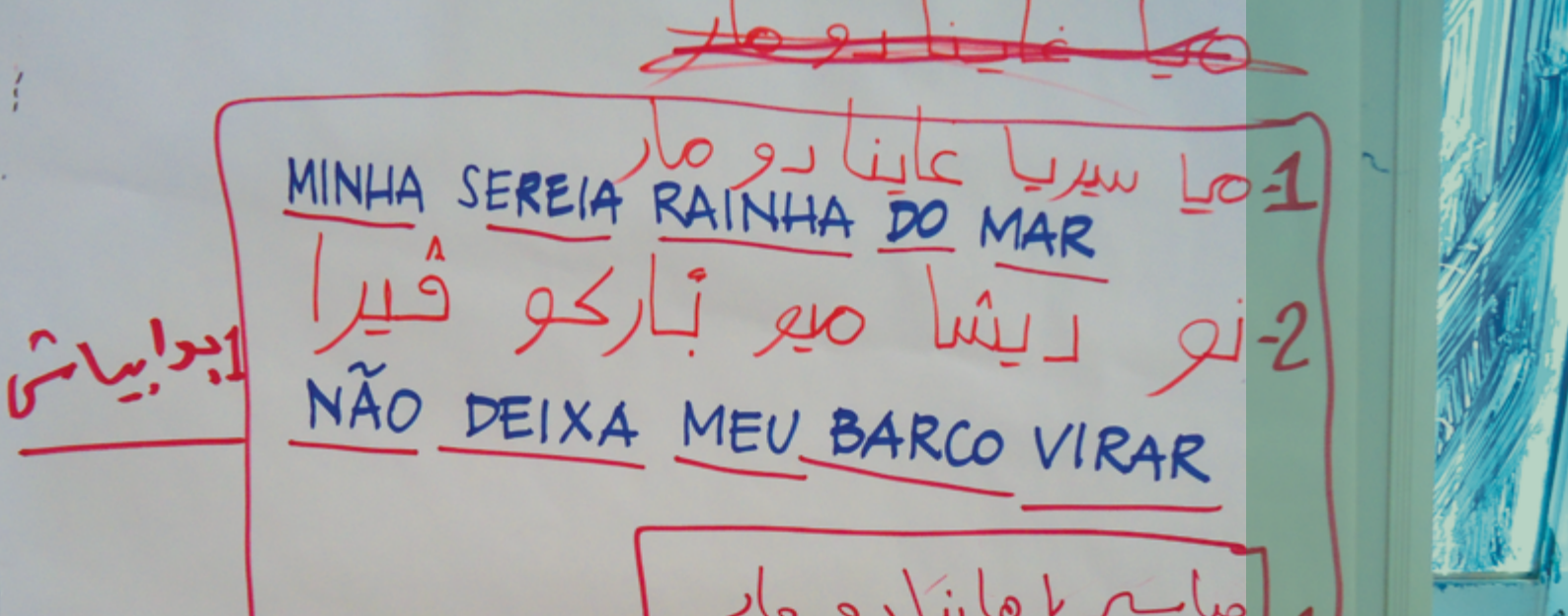
*Today in English class my teacher asked me what kind of sport I like. I told her: 'Capoeira'. The teacher didn't know what Capoeira is and asked me 'What is Capoeira?'. I told them (the whole class) the story of the slaves, coming from Africa, and how they started Capoeira in Brazil... I was very happy because it was the first time I knew something my teacher didn't know." (Student story)*

## 6. Apelidos: nicknames

One of the hallmark moments in Capoeira trainings was when a student was given an apelido (nickname), by his or her trainer. Nicknames often captured a feature that the trainer liked in a student, such as Dedicada (Dedicated), or Guerreiro (Warrior). This created a special bond between student and trainer, and also reinforced a sense of new identity. When some students received their nickname, they posted that name and images capturing the meaning of the name (i.e. Pinnochio or a Monkey) to the Facebook group, celebrating this new identity.

*He is a fast learner, smart and has a good ability to do hard moves. His apelido in Capoeira is cobra (serpent) because of the way his body looks and how he moves. I have been informed that before, Muhaned was hanging around with bad people; he was smoking and getting in trouble and fights all the time. But*





the guy I see in the classes is not like that, so I had a little chat with him one day and I asked him about what I heard. He smiled and said to me, 'Yes that was the old me but now I am Cobra. Capoeira changed the bad guy in me and gave me happiness and I met a new friends here that I no longer need to be around bad people.' (Trainer story)

### 7. Diversity within a single group

In Capoeira, diversity and integration is encouraged. Although out of cultural sensitivity and respect for existing educational traditions, Capoeira4Refugees often organises classes according to age and/or gender, the aim is to integrate students wherever possible. Where multi-age classes occurred, trainers enjoyed seeing older kids helping and learning to respect the younger ones, and seeing younger children growing in their confidence.

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)

Where mixed gender classes were held, trainers celebrated this as a way of challenging community perceptions and ensuring that children grow up with a sense of diversity and shared humanity, something which they saw as particularly important in conflict contexts. One trainer said that the pillar of the training is respect. He and the other trainers in his town believed that building diversity into the training would help mitigate the temptation to turn to religious extremism.

### 8. One activity is not for everyone and Capoeira is multifaceted

As would be true for any activity, Capoeira is not for everyone. However, Capoeira is extremely diverse, combining dance, play, sport, music and a rich historical tradition. The diversity of the programme ensured that there was something in it for most children. Furthermore, Capoeira4Refugees trainers integrated other activities, such as arts and crafts, according to both their own interests and the interests of their students.

[One of the new trainers] did creative stuff like collages, drawings, his mind was like that, he liked to do stuff. He made games for the children. For example, "Bring some empty cigarette packets and we'll make shapes out of them." ... he even did the decoration for the space (Trainer interview)





Other students found that they genuinely thrived in a different sport or other activity and chose to focus their energy on something other than Capoeira. This was more likely in Palestine, where students had more activities to choose from, than in Syria where Capoeira students rarely had other options. In Syria, therefore, trainers sometimes expanded the project to include other activities, such as literacy and numeracy, or visual arts.

*We give children the opportunity to choose the games and activities they prefer. However, we noticed that they wanted something new, unlike football and other popular usual games. Some of them want to do beautiful and new things. (Trainer interview)*

Trainers found that this diversity of activities within the Capoeira practice, did lead to psychosocial benefits in the ways outlined in this report. While they were pleased to see their students empowered, growing in confidence, playing, emotionally stable, and making new friends, they also encountered community members who were resistant to these changes. There was some fear of the unknown, and Capoeira is different. Some parents complained that the training taught children too much freedom, a type of freedom for which their community was unprepared.

## Capoeira and the Societal Challenges facing Children in Conflict

### 1. Political realities and living in conflict/constant risk of 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.

*I mean children that are lost, really young children that were dependant on their fathers and, having only grown up a little, lost them. I've helped them to get through that. Yeah, for sure they came to training, but most of the time they would just stand there. I've helped them to realise that life goes on, that it's not in either of our hands. (Trainer interview)*



Furthermore, many of Capoeira4Refugees' students are themselves victims of violence, either inadvertently or because they themselves participated in clashes or fighting. It was not uncommon for students to come to Capoeira, in particular teenage boys, having recently been shot or attacked in clashes. Trainers told these stories as a testimony to how much students appreciated Capoeira, that they come to training even injured, but they demonstrate also that, while Capoeira may be a supportive environment, life outside of training often is not.

Classes were cancelled or rescheduled due to fighting on a regular basis, and students sometimes struggled to get to Capoeira because of checkpoints or restrictions on their movements. How this affected students' morale and the continuation of classes varied by context. In some places, students felt torn between participating in clashes themselves and attending Capoeira, while in other places, trainers found that for the safety of their students they needed to often change the class schedule. Many stories told by trainers highlighted students' enthusiasm and dedication to come to Capoeira even in the midst of such logistical complications.

Many students and trainers live with some sense of constant fear or tension. One student said, in her story, "When there is Capoeira I pray to God: please, God, let Capoeira be safe and protected, and let [our teacher] be always safe and well." Most of the project's students, regardless of location, are always aware that their circumstances could change at any time and that fighting could break out near them. This awareness underlined all Capoeira classes, but students also found comfort and courage in facing the daily uncertainty together.

*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)*

## 2. Cultural values of loyalty and self-defence

Many of Capoeira4Refugees' students were raised in families or communities where violence is the norm, where self-defence is valued above respect, and where loyalty can at times take a violent form. Some of the stories told by trainers revealed that many of Capoeira





ira4Refugees' students were raised in abusive homes, often watched violent films on television, had witnessed or themselves experienced violence at the hands of armed groups or military, and fought regularly on the streets.

*A fight started... After they calmed down and they apologized to each other I had a talk with Marwan, a 9 year old kid. I asked him why he [fought]. 'Because Amjad is my cousin and I have to stand up for him even if I'm still young... Even if he is wrong I will defend him and later I will ask him what happened... I'm brave I'm a man... I defend my family.' (Trainer story)*

Growing up in this environment, many students expressed feelings of hatred for individuals or for different military factions, but at the same time a commitment to defending the people closest to them no matter the cost. Capoeira teaches a different way. One trainer in an interview described how he saw Capoeira as relevant to his society because, while teaching respect and discipline, it also equipped students to "be tough", but in a positive way.

*It's not like now he feels weak because like a month ago, one day I saw him in 2 fights on his own, he was fighting 5 guys. He's tough, he's not weak. But in the class, he also respects what we are teaching them, it's not just Capoeira, it's about the behaviour, about the respect, all these things. He's listening, he's willing to listen to the others. And do it when he believes it's right, not when we are telling him to do it. (Trainer interview)*

### 3. Abuse in the home

Many of Capoeira4Refugees' students are victims of domestic abuse or have been raised in a context where physical and verbal violence is commonplace. Many stories documented the contrast between the difficulties a student faced at home, and the joy and enthusiasm they found in Capoeira.

*You will love seeing her playing with this big smile on her face although when I heard her story I wanted to cry for the bad situation she lives in. Her father left them a long time ago and married another wife. Her brothers from her stepmother are always screaming at her in the streets and hitting her if they saw her walking in the street. She used to hide if she saw anyone from them. Also, her father is a bad model of parent. He is always asking her brothers to steal/sell drugs/ or to do anything to give him money. He hits and treats them badly. (Trainer story)*



It was not uncommon for children to speak of how their parents or step-parents tell them that they hate them or even that they wish their child dead. Many children explained that their families pay them no attention at all; in the case of divorced parents, one may be entirely absent even if they live nearby. They felt neglected and unappreciated by the people closest to them. It was up to them to find a means of coping with the stress and breaking the cycle of violence into which they were born.

***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)***

When they came to Capoeira, students found a supportive environment and a new community which encouraged them, and in which they were taught alternative means of taking out their frustration through physical activity and artistic expression. One of Capoeira4Refugees' few female students who was already a mother came to class hitting her toddler, but learned new approaches to behaviour management in the project. Trainers also found that Capoeira could provide a space in which students could talk about their problems, especially as their personal connection to their trainer grew over time.

***Nuha has a 2.5 years old child from her missing husband. Nuha always dealt with her child with violence: she beat him. Through Capoeira and with the small children in trainings and how she deals with them, Nuha is more mature and calm and beats her son less and tries to ask others how she should deal when her baby is crying which made her less tense in dealing with her son. (Trainer story)***

#### 4. Pressure on young men

As boys grow into manhood, there is mounting pressure on them to become self-sufficient, help support their families, and begin to plan for their own future. Trainers struggled to continue supporting young men as they reached university age, or when they were pushed into playing the role of 'man of the house', sometimes at a very young age.

Almost every month, at least one trainer wrote a story about a male student who had to stop attending Capoeira because he needed to go to work. One boy told his trainer, "First I left school to work and now they want me to leave Capoeira too." Many other boys echoed the sentiment that they wished they could stay in Capoeira, but that their family needed them. Other young men dropped out of Capoeira to focus on their university studies, in order to prepare for a financially secure future. Nonetheless, for each story of a student who left Capoeira, there was also a story about a student who fought to find the time and acceptance to continue with Capoeira.

Other stories described the cases of boys who had not yet reached adolescence, but had lost their fathers and therefore had to work to support their mothers and younger siblings. Trainers sought to support these children's ability to attend and engage in Capoeira classes, and they saw that they also benefited from the psychosocial support that Capoeira offers if and when they were able to participate regularly.

**Kemal, 12 years old, lost his father and elder brother during the bombings [in their town] and he came [to the city] with his mother and his 3 year old little sister. From the beginning Kemal was hesitating to play Capoeira. He was feeling that he became the man of the family after those events. (Trainer story)**

As seen above, some boys also struggled with their families' idea that Capoeira is an inappropriate activity for boys, particularly when perceived as a dance. Other boys came to share a similar perspective as they grew into manhood. Even though Brazil's greatest capoeiristas are fully grown men, in the Middle East many students still see Capoeira as fun, and fun is for children. One trainer asked a young man why he stopped attending and was told that, "he felt older than the others, and that practicing with them was something shameful to do."

### 5. Pressure on girls

For girls, cultural challenges to engaging in Capoeira also increase as they grow older, but in different ways. Many girls explained that they are expected to stay at home, help around the house, and behave demurely, as deemed appropriate for a young woman in their community.

Girls often felt a pull between the pressures of helping out at home and engaging in social activities such as Capoeira outside the home. They felt that there is more pressure on them than on their brothers, especially in early adolescence, to be available to help the family. Some girls had poor attendance at Capoeira classes because they felt they needed to respect their families' wishes and were often summoned to help at the last minute. Others dropped out of Capoeira entirely as the amount of responsibility they bore at home grew.

**Her mother prefers to ask her to bring bread or anything she needs from the supermarket rather than asking her sons. One day, she left the Capoeira class because her mother called her to bring her bread from the supermarket. She came back crying because she missed some of the Capoeira activities. (Trainer story)**

However, in a focus group with a girls' class, many girls pointed out that it was exactly because of the pressure they felt at home that they enjoyed Capoeira so much; it was a moment in their week when they could feel equal to their brothers and independent in their own identities.

While some boys struggled to convince their families that Capoeira was not "just a dance", many girls struggled to convince their families that a physical activity of any type is appropriate behaviour for a girl, even more so when and if done in a public venue. Capoeira4Refugees has sought to respect community norms by offering girls' classes in indoor, private, venues, and by gender segregating classes in communities where this is a marked issue. This has made it possible for more girls to attend than otherwise could.

When a girl begins to prepare for marriage, though, it is extremely difficult for her to continue in Capoeira. Many girls in the communities where Capoeira4Refugees works, get engaged in their late teens, and this event usually marked the end of their Capoeira participation.



# Domains of Psychosocial change

## 1. Playfulness

Within most formal schools that Capoeira4Refugees students attend, a punitive teaching style dissuades self-expression, and the emphasis is on study as opposed to other recreational activities. Even after school, students rarely engage in playful activities. In contrast, Capoeira became a place where students could play, express themselves and be children again. In interviews, trainers and students spoke of increased laughter, play, entertainment and games.

**Capoeira is not like school, where the school teacher beats up the students. What we have here is Capoeira, not school! You didn't come here to be beaten up with a hoe! Capoeira is an entertaining game. (Student story)**

Capoeira did not remove the premature responsibilities that many students had been required to take on, but at least it provided a space where children could have fun alongside these responsibilities, or after studying.

**During the practice we noticed that Fawzi needs to be taken care of and followed up, and so we did. After a short while he became a real 11 year old boy, because he realised what real childhood is. Meaning that, although he's still working, it was important for him to see that he has free time and has the right as a child to play in that time. (Trainer story)**

The data described a number of positive consequences resulting from this increase in playfulness and self-expression. Students described feeling happy and joyful and temporarily forgetting their problems. Students found a constructive route to release tension and anger and described a feeling of psychological freedom, with frequent references to 'flying'.

**It makes us feel free –not like a bird in a cage! (Girls focus group)**

There were many references to how these positive feelings extended beyond the Capoeira session and affected their general approach to life. They would continue to play and sing even whilst engaging in their normal daily tasks.

**What I like about Capoeira is that whenever I take a class, I go home happy. I go home very relaxed and I can't get the mood out. I'm always in the Capoeira mood and I am singing the songs until I sleep. I'm washing the dishes listening to the songs. (Student interview)**

Finally, there were several references to how Capoeira's playful approach could in fact lead to increased productivity in other areas of life. A school teacher described how students' excessive amounts of unreleased energy would often disrupt concentration, so he was thrilled that, through releasing this energy, students were then better able to concentrate on school work and other responsibilities.

**Sometimes they go home and instead of going out into the streets trying to do anything else unuseful, so they end up tired from doing the Capoeira and staying at home and maybe studying. Which is a good idea. (Teacher interview)**

## 2. Emotional stability

As noted in the previous section, engaging in playful self-expression often led to feelings



of happiness and stress-release. In addition, there was repeated reference in the data to how Capoeira led to improved mood and an improved ability to deal with difficult home situations. One teacher reported that the school counsellor, who had been monitoring the emotional development of students, had noted significant improvements after Capoeira, whilst a trainer described the developments in children as 'a 180 degree turn'.

**Children changed their inner feelings. The most striking example is that, at the beginning, they were drawing blood or planes... Now they draw the things they are dreaming about once they become adults. (Trainer interview)**

These findings were supported by the results of the WHO well-being index. Females' self-rated emotional well-being increased from 2.66 before Capoeira to 2.85 after Capoeira, whilst males' scores increased from 2.73 to 2.87.

Increased emotional stability was also demonstrated through frequent descriptions of students becoming calmer after Capoeira and more responsible, committed, focussed and attentive. At home, parents stated that children's sleeping patterns had stabilised whilst teachers and trainers described improved discipline, better concentration or better self-control within classes. Furthermore, punctuality and attendance at Capoeira classes improved over time, and this same behaviour was noticed in the classroom, even in a group of students who were referred to Capoeira4Refugees specifically due to their hyper-active and disruptive behaviour. These observations were supported by questionnaire data showing that for both males and females, self-reported school absences dropped by nearly half (2 to 1.33; 1.29 to 0.71 per month respectively). Some teachers and parents even attributed improvements in grades to the increased focus and discipline learned in Capoeira and transferred to the classroom.

**"The kids have become calmer, they listen to what we say and stopped getting into trouble with each other. We often see them doing a circle on their own, play-**





*ing music, Capoeira and singing with each other". (quote from Trainer story)  
Yes, their grades have become better than before, not perfect but better than before. Also their behaviour and attitude inside the class became more disciplined and more good than before. (Teacher interview)*

In addition to the positive benefits of increased play, a number of other explanations were given for why Capoeira appeared to result in increased emotional stability. A number of stories and interviews explained how, as students learned to discipline their bodies through regular training, they became more self-aware and more in control of themselves, emotionally and socially, as well as physically. One trainer described Capoeira as 'a game that gets the body moving and is also a mental exercise', whilst a teacher suggested that the moves can only be mastered through the development of self-awareness and focus. A number of trainers suggested that it is the supportive and inclusive way in which rules are enforced and issues discussed that led to increased self-awareness and psychosocial benefits.

*One day, Suheir was really quiet, and he had tears in his eyes, we've never seen him like that. After the practice we talked to him and he told us that he feels like his actions do not satisfy anyone and that he feels detestable. We told him that everyone loves him but that his behaviour is what makes people mad at him. This conversation had a good effect on him, even his mother felt the change in her son and she was happy about that. In the roda (circle) he stopped to interrupt or talk and became attentive and followed the rules of the game. His mother said that he started to see how his behaviour had an effect on the relationships with other people. (Trainer story)*

### 3. Friendship

Capoeira is a highly interactive and collaborative activity, which helps children engage with one another socially. Students often made new friends through Capoeira, built social skills and strengthened already existing friendships. In the questionnaire, girls reported an in-

crease in the average number of friends that they could trust from 3.29 at baseline, to 4.57 at evaluation. This trend was not seen in the boys' data and in fact, they reported some decrease in number of friends. However, there were many stories and reports in interviews and focus groups, of new friendships being made or strengthened for both boys and girls.

***When Sawfa', 10 years old, first came to Capoeira, she didn't talk to anyone and wasn't part of a group of friends with whom she would sit and laugh... She only participated in the drawing activities at the beginning of the training sessions, drawing her family... She didn't want to participate in the training nor in the music class. After a while, she slowly started to join the training and music classes. The trainers and her mother observed a slow change over the months... she has made friends and is generally less sad than before. (Trainer story)***

Some parents enrolled their children in Capoeira with the hopes that they would make new friends, and reported that this indeed has happened. In the questionnaires, both girls and boys reported that they felt more comfortable around people, with an overall improvement of 10.56% and 14.3% respectively in their level of comfort around others. In some instances, Capoeira classes brought together children from different neighbourhoods between which there was some animosity, and though it took some time, new friendships were forged amongst children who previously avoided each other. For their part, students in interviews and focus groups spoke with excitement about their new friends. Many of the girls described their fellow capoeiristas as "sisters", with whom they shared something in common.

***Capoeira made the relationship between us better because we are together during training and we also talk about Capoeira at home after Capoeira. We share the same passion, we have something in common. (Student story)***

Many of Capoeira4Refugees' students come from families which do not encourage them to spend time with people from outside their community. Students may have come to Capoeira with a pre-existing friendship with some of the people in their class, but many of their classmates were new. They needed to learn together, help each other practice, and then play together in the roda. Over time, trainers found that Capoeira students became more accepting of, and welcoming to, others.

***One day she showed up at the club breaking her family customs of not dealing with anyone. And that was her first day. She learned and practiced Capoeira in the club and after some time we could see that she became much less violent especially with the kids that came to the club with her. She now would smile at them when she meets them in the street, make a roda with them and sing and play together. (Trainer story)***

The shared language of Capoeira, and shared interest in perfecting the moves and learning the music, helped students who are naturally shy to have something to talk about with their classmates, and an activity to do together that facilitated interaction. In the Facebook group, over time, members began to interact more frequently and comfortably with each other, and occasionally posted about non-Capoeira issues such as asking after each other when it snowed, or inviting one another to a party, but usually the interaction was about Capoeira, and they used highly affectionate language to encourage one another in their practices.

As mentioned above, it is in the students' interests to work together and to support one another to develop. Some of the students in focus groups talked about how they asked



one another for tips about how to do the movements, they practiced the music together at home, and they helped their classmates who missed a class to catch up. When trainers asked students to practice certain techniques in pairs, this in particular helped build a sense of interdependence between them. Some children reported that it was this positive and supportive environment that attracted them to Capoeira initially.

*Because Capoeira encourages collective thinking and collective playing, group work, this shy student, this non-social student starts to be engaged with them. And this is a very important thing for her. [She may say] 'The other students don't like me, don't like to talk to me'. I say, 'what? Why?' 'I am playing with myself, staying by myself, I didn't make a connection with them' [But] when they start Capoeira, most of the work is collective and in a group [so] she starts to engage. She realised that, 'No, this is not a problem with the students but the way that I behave changed'. (Trainer interview)*

*Capoeira not only created new social ties, but since many students brought their siblings or other friends to Capoeira class, it also became a means by which existing ties were strengthened. They enjoyed playing with one another, both inside and outside the class, and were inspired to keep training in order to keep up with their friends' progress. There were some reports of these strengthened ties in Capoeira becoming so strong that students in Capoeira formed cliques, but just as often they used their bond to invite more of their friends, siblings or classmates to join them at Capoeira.*

*They brought their friends from school [to Capoeira], so there were new children... Friends from the same class, for example from fifth grade; there would be five from the same class. They would laugh with each other in training, remembering what happened in school, then since they know each other they would go together to school and talk about what they did in Capoeira. (Trainer interview)*

#### 4. Tolerance

The most remarkable aspect of tolerance that emerged in this study was the decrease in aggression among students. Students were more able to listen to and respect one another, learned how to defend themselves in ways that were both culturally appropriate and non-violent, and developed healthy coping mechanisms for dealing with frustration.

Many stories written by trainers were of students who demonstrated aggressive or violent behaviour towards other students when they first joined the Capoeira class. They used verbs





such as “bully”, “fight”, “quarrel”, “provoke” or “argue” to describe their students’ behaviour. During the early weeks of a new Capoeira class, it was common for fights to break out. Though these problems were more frequently identified among boys, there were also stories given of girls who came to Capoeira with an aggressive attitude. Over time, trainers noticed that fights broke out less often and children demonstrated improved self-control in interpersonal relations. This was supported by the well-being questionnaire data, in which boys reported that they were 29.8% more likely to use verbal strategies to solve disputes than physical force, and the number of fights that they reported being involved in more than halved. Some of the suggested explanations for these observations included making new friends in Capoeira, Capoeira as an outlet for expressing their emotions, the discipline being instilled by their trainers, and personalised attention to students with behavioural problems from the trainers.

***Najar, a 12 year-old boy, was one of the children who showed aggressive behaviour towards other children, always starting fights and hitting them while playing. It was difficult to talk to him and to make him understand that that’s wrong. After he had participated for a while in our activities, the teacher saw him doing Aú (cartwheel) and other Capoeira moves peacefully together with other children. She had never seen him behaving like that with other children before and was impressed by the change he had gone through in very little time. (Trainer story)***

Furthermore, in Capoeira classes, students are taught important social skills, including instructions for how to show respect and the importance of listening. Over time, many students began to learn the rules of the group, which helped them to build respect and earn the respect of their classmates. Some students initially acted out, wanting all the attention for themselves, but then slowly learned to watch their classmates and to play together rather than to attempt to monopolise the trainer’s time.

***When Haza’ saw that we treated the children very well he grew more jealous and started to participate indirectly, showing us that he is involved in the playing, and that he plays well too, so that we paid attention to him... After a short while you could see him adapting to the [Capoeira] community... and when he felt that dealing with other children is fun he became willing to blend in, talk and play. (Trainer story).***

Though Capoeira does not promote violence and is to be played rather than fought, it does teach moves that may be classified as martial arts. Students reported feeling empowered by this because they feel it is important to be able to defend themselves. No students gave examples of actually using Capoeira moves in a fight, though, and trainers often discuss with their students ways that they can use the discipline, courage and physical fitness they are learning in Capoeira in productive ways, rather than in fights.

*Others are not laughing anymore about my weight, I have real friends now and they also know that I can defend myself. (Student story)*

*It teaches you how to defend yourself, using fighting skills but not to hit. Not to injure anybody. How to fight but not hurting. (Teacher interview)*

For many girls, it was particularly meaningful that they felt they were learning how to stand up for themselves. Many girls come to Capoeira with a fair bit of fear, feeling physically unable to face any threat which might present itself to them in their home or on the street. Girl students reported an increase in their ability to defend themselves physically: in the questionnaire, girls reported that if someone insulted them, they were 7% more likely to use physical force than simply verbal force to solve a situation (2.14 – 1.98) from baseline to evaluation. However, they also reported a noteworthy decrease in the number of physical fights that they actually participated in, from 5.65 to 1.91 in the previous month. This suggests that although girls reported feeling more able to defend themselves physically if necessary, they were also more able to manage their feelings and resolve conflict effectively without resorting to physical force.

*But what I like more about Capoeira is that it makes me want to challenge. Especially want to challenge men at Capoeira. I know I'm not doing that yet but I am training to do that. Cos I know that no matter how men get high in the way they think, no matter how educated they are, they always think that they are one step ahead of the women. What I want to do is kick one of them in the face. You know, not to hurt them you know, but to prove a point. That I can do good. (Student interview)*

Many students said that they now play Capoeira instead of getting angry or taking their anger out on others. They reported that it helped relieve their feelings of stress, filled their free time, was a form of anger management, and became a means of expressing their feelings.





*Instead of going and beating the person that we hate, we just play Capoeira. We let all our energy and our pain out in the Capoeira. We let out our anger. When we are very worried or stressed, we play Capoeira and we relax, we just forget. (Girls FGD)*

For some, it was the simple existence of a productive activity in which they could invest their energy and emotions which led to increased tolerance. Others reported that the interaction and self-expression facilitated by Capoeira enabled them to work out their differences through play. Even the tensest games end with a handshake and hug. For other students, Capoeira became a coping mechanism over time, through the discipline of training regularly for months on end, seeking to perfect their craft, hence pulling them away from unhealthy coping mechanisms.

*Ahmed is a very patriotic boy but he expresses his anger about the political situation by... participating in clashes... Many times I went there to bring him back home and we talked... many times about stopping going to clashes, but he never listened to us. Last year Ahmed got shot in his leg... He could not move for 3 months and then he had to stay home for another 3 months. But he did not give up on himself; he came back early to train with me and he is improving every day. (Trainer story)*

### 5. Inner strength

The theme of building inner strength came up repeatedly throughout the data. Teachers, parents, trainers and students all used words such as 'courage', 'confidence' and 'increased engagement' to describe the changes they had seen through Capoeira. Teachers described children as 'growing inside' and 'breaking shyness walls'. Some considered improved confidence to be the biggest and most obvious change brought about by Capoeira. One trainer described parents as being 'amazed by the scale of the change taking place with their children'.





*Like shyness, that's the thing you most notice, shyness. In Capoeira, shyness is extremely clear, and it's also one of the things that Capoeira can help the most in solving. A child can be shy for one, two, three, four days or even a month, there are children who go for a month and they're still shy. Then suddenly, I mean, not necessarily in training, I would see this child playing with another..., and this child was sitting alone for a month, even in the songs you couldn't make out his voice. Then little by little he would keep singing, the first day still pretty shy, then the second day, "Vai você, vai você." And it's like, "Were you just pretending to be shy?" It's nice, because he really was embarrassed. (Trainer interview)*

These findings were supported by the well-being questionnaire data. Girls' scores on the general self-efficacy scale improved 11.4%, whilst boys' scores improved by 6.8% showing that through Capoeira, they felt more confident in their ability to deal with challenging life situations. Some girls in Palestine even referred to the political situation, stating that through Capoeira, they felt braver in the face of the challenges brought on by the occupation.

Increased inner strength was observed across all groups of students, from children to adults for both boys and girls. However, of particular significance was the way in which Capoeira empowered some groups who are typically disempowered. For example, within many of the communities where Capoeira4Refugees works, girls are often encouraged to be quiet, not to engage in physical activities, and prioritise preparing for marriage above personal development or education. One girl described how Capoeira gave her the strength to confront some of her family's expectations.

*Her brother used to do Capoeira, but when she told him that she would like to try it and practice he yelled at her and he said to her that girls in the family are forbidden to do such activities. When she heard about our project in [the] camp she came to us and explained her situation. Now, after 3 months, she has been able to confront her family and her brother and she is fighting to go back to school next year. (Trainer story)*

Another group of students for which Capoeira was found to be particularly useful were those who were weak academically. Teachers described how such students had never had the chance to shine and therefore their self-esteem had been negatively affected. Some of them took to Capoeira, which gave them an alternative avenue to develop confidence and self-esteem.

*Because some have low academic achievement and they are not appearing in the class. But Capoeira gives them a chance to appear their interest, to appear their hobby so their self confidence becomes higher. And when their self confidence becomes higher, all of the students look at them. Maybe their family also. So when they become special in Capoeira, it raises their self esteem or their confidence a lot. I noticed it. (School Counsellor interview)*

It is important to note that despite all these potential benefits of Capoeira, one teacher warned that the inner strength developed through Capoeira could be detrimental. She noted that a few students' ego had become so big through Capoeira that they started to show off and neglected their studies.

There were many descriptions of the process through which Capoeira led to the development of inner strength. Challenging oneself and the eventual mastery of new skills was seen as a confidence-building process. Teachers talked about how some students were ini-

tially scared to try movements because of their 'fear of failure', but how through trying, they managed to overcome such fears not only in Capoeira but in other areas of life also. Having to take on such challenges in front of friends was seen to add another dimension, which made Capoeira more challenging but ultimately more rewarding as friends marvelled at their new abilities. This process occurred in Capoeira during every class but also outside of Capoeira as many quotes described children performing Capoeira in other contexts such as at school, or to friends and family.

*One of the girls was slightly more confident so when I invited her to join in, she agreed. Her friend however was very shy and wouldn't join in at all. Gradually however, through watching her friend, she agreed to come and try jinga. It was like this with each move, at first she was too scared to try aú in front of anyone but as she saw others doing it and her friend doing it, she built up the confidence to try. By the end, in the roda, she came up to me and asked if she could play with her friend in front of everyone. (Trainer story)*

Many students talked about teaching Capoeira to friends, siblings and other new students within the Capoeira class. This developed feelings of importance, leadership and mastery. Finally, as one of the trainers said when contemplating the way in which Capoeira led to improved inner strength, 'In the end it's art, and art always puts new ideas in people's heads'



## Relationship between the trainer and the student

One particularly instrumental component of the psychosocial process not yet mentioned, was the relationship between the trainer and the student. Not all trainers are the same, nor share the same approach to their practice, but in various different ways, trainers with good pedagogy contributed meaningfully to the lives of their students.

### Trainer teaches/models values, such as respect

Good trainers articulate the values that they want to instil in their students and seek to model those values. Some of the values most often highlighted by Capoeira4Refugees trainers are respect, concern for others, self-control, patience and empathy. Students watched their trainers and learned from their example. One student said to her trainer, "In the future, I want to become a trainer like you to teach children Capoeira because it helps us a lot and give us hope and support in our lives."

*I just want to say that we really have a good teacher. He makes us enjoy the class so much. (Student interview)*

Girls were particularly inspired by female trainers. They saw them as role models of strong, yet sensitive, women.

*[My trainer] can compete with guys and she's given a very very beautiful image about women and females in general. She can kick and she kicks very good so um, she made me more attached to Capoeira because she knew how to train and she knew what we like and what we don't. And she could participate in our community as a conservative community in a very good way. (Student interview)*

Many of Capoeira4Refugees' trainers received little psychosocial support themselves before joining the programme and, as part of their training have learned more about the psychosocial role that Capoeira can play. This has inspired them to seek to build their own capacities to emulate that which they want their students to learn.

Trainers need to be patient as they seek to teach their students strength of character. They spend a fair bit of time outside of the actual Capoeira practice talking with their students about values, visiting their families, or just socialising. Students noticed that their trainers were patient and supportive, and in interviews shared that this was one of the things they most appreciated about their trainers.

*The change I hope to see in Mahmoud is an evolution from using Capoeira as a space to bring attention to himself – for negative and for positive behavior choices– to a place where he demonstrates a concern for others in addition to creativity, rhythm, self-control and respect. Of course, this is going to take some time, but with patience it will certainly become a reality. (Trainer story)*

When they saw their students changing, trainers took pride in their ability to pass their knowledge, not just mere information but a deeper sense of wisdom, to their students. They grew in their confidence as trainers and were inspired to invest the extra time and energy in new students needed to instil values and character change.

Each trainer is different, and while each student responded personally in a different way to different character traits, there were some characteristics of trainers that students in partic-





ular seemed to value. The most important one was a sense that the trainer cared about them, both as individuals and as capoeiristas. Students noticed when trainers took a personal interest in them by, for example, memorising their names and giving them Capoeira nicknames. They also wanted trainers who were consistent and reliable, who stayed working with them over an extended period of time. Some students also highlighted creativity and diversity in the practice, appreciating trainers who planned a wide variety of activities in lessons.

#### A student will open up when s/he feels comfortable with the trainer

The relationship between student and trainer is, therefore, of key importance. As students felt more comfortable with their trainers, they opened up and were more willing to share, whilst trainers felt more inspired to invest in the lives of their students. In many cases, it helped that trainers came from the same communities as their students and so regularly saw students outside of Capoeira practice, and had friends in common.

There were many instances in which trainers told stories of times that they visited students in their homes. They did this of their own volition, usually when the students lived relatively near to them. They usually made a point of visiting students who seemed to have extra emotional needs or who were struggling to integrate into the classes. This community engagement with students and their families helped them to get to know students from a more holistic viewpoint, understanding their family situation and other factors which influenced their lives. In other instances, trainers already knew their students because they came from the neighbourhood, and so found themselves in a privileged position to watch the transformation in the lives of their students over time.

Good trainers enjoyed the respect of their students, as well as wider respect in the community. Members of the Facebook group regularly referred to their trainer affectionately as "Captain", posting expressions of appreciation and respect for him. One student posted a photo of himself with the trainer, saying, "You bring me light, Professor!" Another student shared with staff that she pays close attention to everything her trainer says because it is important to listen when he speaks.

Over time, students found that they developed a strong sense of affinity toward their trainer. Sometimes this was due to a trainer's concerted efforts to get to know a specific student who they noticed was struggling in class. In one group, the trainers made an effort to write down details they observed about their students after each class, and found that as a result of this effort they began to notice more and understand the children more intimately.

***After that, one of the assistant trainers started to talk to Fadia regularly after class. She's asked her how she was feeling and what was bothering her. These conversations seem to have helped her a lot to calm down: her state of mind has improved a lot and she's become much calmer and more focused in class. (Trainer interview)***

Other times, students sought out a relationship with their trainers and were pleased to find that their trainer was someone with whom they could share openly. These students responded well to efforts by trainers to help build a sense of community, or family, within the Capoeira group. For example, the girls in one group were happy when they were given T-shirts, because when they wore the shirts they felt like the trainer had become their sister. Ultimately, for students to feel comfortable with trainers and trainers to feel they have some positive influence in students' lives, there needed to be movement on both sides to grow in mutual affinity.

***We changed the life of these children and prior to this they had nothing and now they have something... We [as a team of trainers] are now closer to the kids and their needs, understand them more. It works on both sides: the team got closer to the kids and vice versa. This is what happens on both sides. (Trainer interview)***

For some students, their enthusiasm for Capoeira was wrapped up in their affinity for their trainer. In one instance, when a trainer had to leave his students due to the conflict, he was told later that his students had cried and declared that they no longer were interested in Capoeira because he abandoned them. Fortunately, in that instance, new trainers got involved and kept the group engaged. In a focus group with a girls' class, the participants universally agreed that their favourite thing about the Capoeira class was their trainer.

## **Capoeira continuing on its own, or beyond the barriers/circumstances**

When students have an affinity for their trainer and for their Capoeira class, they are likely to want to participate voluntarily and with enthusiasm. Some trainers told stories of students finding ways to practice Capoeira even when they could not attend classes. In one case, a student was too young for the agreed composition of the class, so watched the classes and practiced the moves on his own at home.

Capoeira4Refugees has been pleased to learn that, in many locations, when the project had to end due to conflict or other extenuating circumstances, children continued the practice on their own, teaching one another or finding a new trainer, often someone with only slightly more experience than the students themselves. When all classes were paused in Palestine during the Gaza conflict, for example, some of Capoeira4Refugees' trainers who live in or near refugee camps, noticed that children were on the streets practicing Capoeira on their own.





In many ways, Capoeira4Refugees has found that stories of Capoeira continuing beyond Capoeira4Refugees, are an important indicator of success. Though the technical quality of the practice may not continue to improve without the expertise and resources that Capoeira4Refugees can offer, and even if the psychosocial capacity of the youth may be somewhat limited without further support, the fact that at least some aspect of the project is sustainable, indicates that Capoeira has meant something to its students.

One experienced trainer, observed, “Even just playing the *pandeiro* will be beneficial for a child, or for anyone, their whole life. I’m convinced of this... That thought is enough for me, I mean I believe in the idea that anything the child learns, she can benefit from it in the future, wherever and whatever he’s doing.”



