

Amid Travel Ban, Refugee Women Cope With Trauma and Stress Through Drum Circles

How music is helping women from war-torn countries express grief and loss.

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¹ More than three dozen women and children sit in a circle inside the conference room of a public library in El Cajon, California, each holding a hand drum on their laps. No one is speaking.

² I stand in the center and ask who in this group of Afghan, Iraqi, and Syrian women has suffered loss. Several hands go up. I then ask: “Who would like to volunteer to express their feeling of loss, using the drum as their voice?”

³ Sahad Alboshokaf, a 44-year-old Iraqi woman, wearing a grey tunic and a **hijab**, raises her hand. She closes her eyes and begins tapping her drum, **tentatively** at first and then with **deliberate** purpose. The rest of us listen and then join in, blending our beats to match the rhythm of her lead. Soon the room is filled with the **reassuring** sound of our collective beat.

⁴ Alboshokaf, like the rest of us in the room, is a **refugee**— part of a unique refugee-led drum circle designed to help new arrivals not only cope with stress in their lives, but integrate into new homes in this country.

⁵ Adding to their anxiety has been the Trump administration’s attempts this year to ban travel from **predominantly** Muslim countries, where many of these women still have family. It has made them feel targeted. A U.S. Supreme Court **ruling** Monday allowing the administration to fully enforce **visa** restrictions for people from six countries— Chad, Iran, Libya, Somalia, Syria, and Yemen— means the wait for some of them to reunite with loved ones may have grown even more uncertain.

⁶ The drum sessions create an atmosphere of belonging and put us in rhythm with each other. The drums become our voice. **Studies** have shown that recreational music-making in general and group drumming in particular can decrease stress and change the **genomic** stress marker. Drumming has the “**therapeutic** potential” to relax tension and soothe emotional wounds.

⁷ Many, if not all the refugees in our drum circle suffer some form of PTSD or depression. All



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together, we speak four different languages and **dialects**. **Transcending** those barriers, drumming gives us an **avenue** for self-expression. After each woman has “spoken” her feelings through her music—desperation, frustration, happiness, fear—the rest of the circle provides verbal feedback and insight into what we heard in her beat.

⁸ The drum circle arose organically as a way to address the psychological needs of newly arriving refugees in the San Diego area, which has the **largest concentration** of Syrian and Iraqi refugees in the U.S. While there has been an outpouring of local support for their material needs, “what we need is ongoing services to help the refugees find their way,” said Dalia Alzendi, founder of [Bridge](#), a local nonprofit specializing in **psychosocial integration** for refugees.

⁹ The idea for the circle is the outgrowth of a unique Colorado-based nonprofit called [Musical Ambassadors of Peace](#). MAP **ambassadors** study the **indigenous** songs and music of countries that receive unfavorable media coverage in the U.S. and Europe and then use that music to build cross-cultural bridges between the people of those countries and people in the U.S.

¹⁰ Its co-founders, Cameron Powers and Kristina Sophia, have been **utilizing** music’s **transformative** power for two decades and can perform songs in 13 different languages. Shortly after the American-led invasion of Iraq, the two traveled to Baghdad and, armed with only an **oud** and Iraqi love songs, began playing and singing in the streets. The Iraqi people, who up to that point had mostly encountered only U.S. military personnel and contractors, were seeing a different side of America.

¹¹ They saw their trips to different countries as a form of musical mission work. “We call ourselves reverse missionaries because our job is to listen, not to preach,” Sophia says. Now the group has several musical ambassadors from different racial and ethnic backgrounds. Their motto: Healing the world through music.

¹² Earlier this year, MAP set out to provide an ongoing music-centered service for U.S. refugees, many of them from countries the group has visited. As a refugee from Iran, I knew I wanted to become a MAP ambassador and took a workshop to become a [HealthRhythms](#) facilitator.

¹³ Now, alongside another refugee, Dilkhaz Ahmed, an Iraqi who founded the nonprofit [License to Freedom](#), I co-**facilitate** the San Diego area drum circle. How ironic that Ahmed and I both were children on the opposite sides of the Iran–Iraq war of the 1980s, with different languages but similar experiences. Now we are not only friends, but allies in the mission to help fellow refugees succeed. We drum twice a month and hope to increase it to once a week next year.

¹⁴ Originally, Ahmed, who also translates my English instructions for the circle’s Arabic-speaking

members, had reserved the library space so that refugee women and children could meet a few times a month to talk and do arts and crafts. That meeting **morphed** into the drum sessions.

¹⁵ After Alboshokaf is done drumming, I ask her if she feels heard by us. “I do,” she replies, in Arabic. “Do I have your permission to ask everyone what they heard in your beat?” I ask. She nods.

¹⁶ “Desperation,” a middle-aged woman in a striped sweater says. “Hopelessness,” a young Syrian woman chimes in.

¹⁷ Naturally. Alboshokaf says later that she still feels the loss of her father and two brothers, who were executed by Saddam Hussein. She lives with her two teenage sons, anxious for the day her husband will join them here. But because of restrictions imposed on refugee visas by the Trump administration, she’s lost hope that it will be anytime soon. Music helps her express these feelings of loss, frustration, and confusion in a nonthreatening way.

¹⁸ I ask the group if anyone else has felt loss and found a way to transform their feelings. Nahidah, a hijabi woman with a bright smile, begins drumming a **whimsical** beat. We all follow and the mood of the room shifts to one of playfulness. I ask Nahidah about her experience with transforming loss. “Happiness is always just a step away. It’s good to mourn, but laughter waits for you,” she says.

¹⁹ Often, these sessions bring me back to my time when I first arrived in the U.S. as a 14-year-old refugee and stumbled across my first drumming circle. I was living in Austin, Texas, and the group of hippies my friend and I found in a park were quite different from the refugees I work with now.

²⁰ But the impact of their music was no less impactful. Like a moth drawn to the flame, I made my way to the middle of the circle and began dancing until I was drenched in sweat. My friend wasn’t surprised. She had seen me dance **spontaneously** whenever I heard music. In fact, for my first few years in America, I listened to music **incessantly** and **sought** out every opportunity to dance because in Iran, the county I escaped from, music and dancing were illegal.

²¹ I ask if anyone else in the circle would like to drum their feeling. Nasima Hossaini, a **dignified** young Afghan woman, raises her hand. Hossaini looks to me for permission and then begins beating the drum with explosive fury, changing the mood of the room yet again. Reinforcing her feeling, we all join her beat for several minutes. She later recounts her experience as an Afghan refugee in Iran, where she encountered prejudice on a daily basis. After the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, she returned home, where, to her **dismay**, she came across more prejudice for belonging to the **Hazara** ethnic minority. This sense of not-belonging has injured her far worse than the trauma of war.

²² One by one, women come forth to drum their feelings with the group—a woman who lost her favorite cousin to a car explosion; an overwhelmed single mother who’s worried about her autistic child. Soon the bounds of language and otherness dissolve and our hearts open up to the rhythmic telling of one story after another. One of those was Ahlam Salem’s, an Iraqi woman who afterward shared the **harrowing** details of being kidnapped, tortured, and raped for eight days. She had been

on a bus in Baghdad heading home when armed men stormed the bus at a bus stop and took her to an unknown location. Salem is still dealing with the aftermath, but she feels strong and wants to let other women in similar situations know that they don't have to identify with their trauma. "We are much more than that," she says in Arabic. She is hopeful and wants to **advocate** for women's rights. "The drumming makes me feel more relaxed and confident," she adds.

²³ As we begin to wrap up, 8-year-old Yousif Mikaeel raises his hand and asks, "Can I drum my feeling?" Children know they're part of this community and want to participate. Several people praise Mikaeel for his courage, and he begins. He drums an anxious beat and the rest of us follow along for a while. A young woman volunteers to help transition the beat of fear to a more hopeful one and Mikaeel, and the rest of us, follows her lead.

²⁴ By the end of the session, we are all **giddy** with a sense of **camaraderie**. And as we pack away the instruments, many of the women explain how these sessions help them **navigate** the language barrier, culture shock, and the stress of finding their way in a different culture and country. "Our gathering helps me **immensely**," Alboshokaf says as she walks out with her younger boy. "I feel the stress dissolve in the sounds of our rhythm. I feel calm and more able to deal with my life."

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