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Study points to music as support for maternal mental health

Culturally grounded, community-based music-making can be adapted to support South African women struggling with mental health issues during pregnancy and after birth. This is according to a recent formative study co-authored by [Associate Professor Simone Honikman](#), director of the [Perinatal Mental Health Project \(PMHP\)](#) at the University of Cape Town, together with local and international colleagues.

The study, published in [PLOS Global Public Health](#), was informed by the psychosocial intervention called the [CHIME Project](#) (Community Health Intervention through Musical Engagement for perinatal mental health) in the Gambia, which saw researchers collaborating with local women's community music groups (Kanyeleng groups) to design an inclusive, socially supported intervention for pregnant women.

Comprising one-hour sessions held over six weeks, Kanyeleng groups adapt the lyrics of traditional Gambian songs to align with peripartum mental health themes and lead call-and-response singing with groups of pregnant women. Findings indicated that there was a significant reduction in symptoms of anxiety and depression in the women receiving the intervention compared to those who received standard care.

Based on this work, Associate Professor Honikman and her research team held a series of focus group discussions with a diverse range of South African stakeholders – including the maternal and child health service non-governmental organisation, One to One Africa, based in the rural Eastern Cape; music experts; community health workers; traditional healers and healthcare professionals. The aim was to explore whether and how the CHIME intervention could work in South Africa.

"A main theme that emerged was the number of challenges contributing to peripartum distress among South African women, including food insecurity, unemployment, gender-based violence, substance abuse, and social exclusion and stigmatisation due to mental ill health," said Honikman.

Participants suggested that communal music-making practices such as group singing, chanting, clapping and drumming would be well suited to the South African context, where community music practices are already culturally embedded, some associated specifically with the perinatal period. They also described the communal nature of music-making as having strong potential to support women facing stigma and isolation, while also fostering shifts in mood and enriching spiritual experiences.

Honikman said: "The discussions highlighted the need for music-making interventions that are familiar, accessible, participatory and culturally relevant, thereby promoting supportive environments shaped more by women's comfort and enjoyment than by any formal musical outcome."

She noted that music-based support for perinatal mental health shows strong potential in South Africa, particularly when it is co-developed with the communities it aims to serve. [Current research](#), funded by the National Institute for Health and Care Research, UK, is exploring adaptations of the CHIME intervention in the Gambia, Lesotho, and in an urban South African setting.

ENDS

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