

A PLAY IT LOUD! RESEARCH

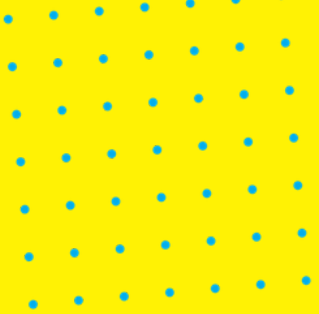
PIL EQ Workplan:
*Focus Groups
Reports*



Sponsored by



Co-funded by
the European Union



Identify barriers and good practices that foster IDEA in the European youth and music ecosystem



Developed by **PIL EQ Facilitators**

Written by **Martha Lomeli**

Edited by **Ingrid Dyrnes Svendsen, Giulia Annibaletti**

Graphic design by **Playstate UG**

Visuals by **Stefania Del Ponte, Gintare Petenaite**



✓ Introduction

✓ Focus Groups guidelines

Understanding the objectives and the demographics of PIL EQ Focus Groups and the guiding questions.

✓ Belgium

Focus groups report from Belgium

✓ Croatia

Focus groups report from Croatia

✓ France

Focus groups report from France

✓ Hungary

Focus groups report from Hungary

✓ Italy

Focus groups report from Italy

✓ North Macedonia

Focus groups report from North Macedonia

✓ Norway

Focus groups report from Norway

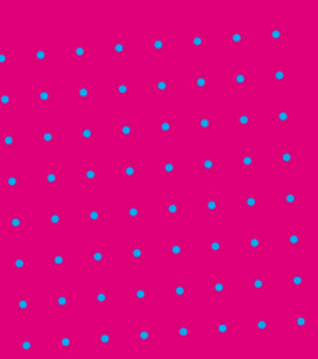
✓ Serbia

Focus groups report from Serbia

✓ Sweden

Focus groups report from Sweden

✓ Conclusions



Introduction





Music is often described as a universal language, but access to it, and to a life built around it, is **far from universal**. For young women, gender-expansive individuals, and those from racially, economically or geographically marginalised communities, the music sector presents a persistent paradox: **a space that promises creative freedom while reproducing many of the inequalities found everywhere else**. Play it Loud! exists because that paradox deserves to be named, understood, and acted upon.

The PIL EQ Focus Groups are the centrepiece of this year's research, conducted between May and December 2025 across **9 European countries** (Belgium, Croatia, France, Hungary, Italy, North Macedonia, Norway, Serbia, and Sweden). Over **300 young people and youth & music professionals** took part in 22 focus group sessions, facilitated by PIL local partner organisations with deep roots in their local youth and music ecosystems. The sessions were designed not only to collect data but to create **genuine spaces for participants to speak, be heard, and connect** with others navigating similar experiences.

What those conversations revealed was both sobering and galvanising. Across very different national contexts, participants described **strikingly similar realities**: the informal networks that determine who gets opportunities; the payment culture that leaves women consistently undervalued; the physical and psychological toll of working in unsafe spaces; and the compounding disadvantages faced by those whose gender inequality intersects with race, class, disability or migration status. But participants also brought solutions: describing **what had helped them, what organisations had got right, and what they most needed next**.

These findings do not end here. They feed directly into **Building Caring Music Ecosystems: A Toolkit for Youth Music Leaders, Teams, and Organisations**, developed and co-created through the PIL EQ workplan and international activities, and designed to turn what was heard in these sessions into changed practice across the sector. ***This report belongs, above all, to the young people and youth & music professionals who gave their time and honesty to make it possible.***



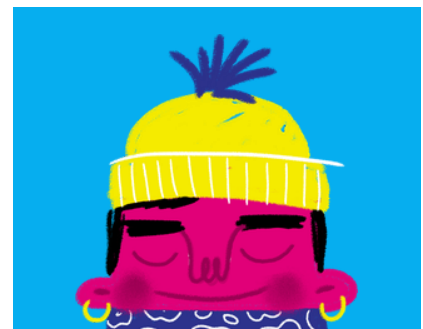
A quick breakdown

350+
PARTICIPANTS
Young people and music professionals (13-35)

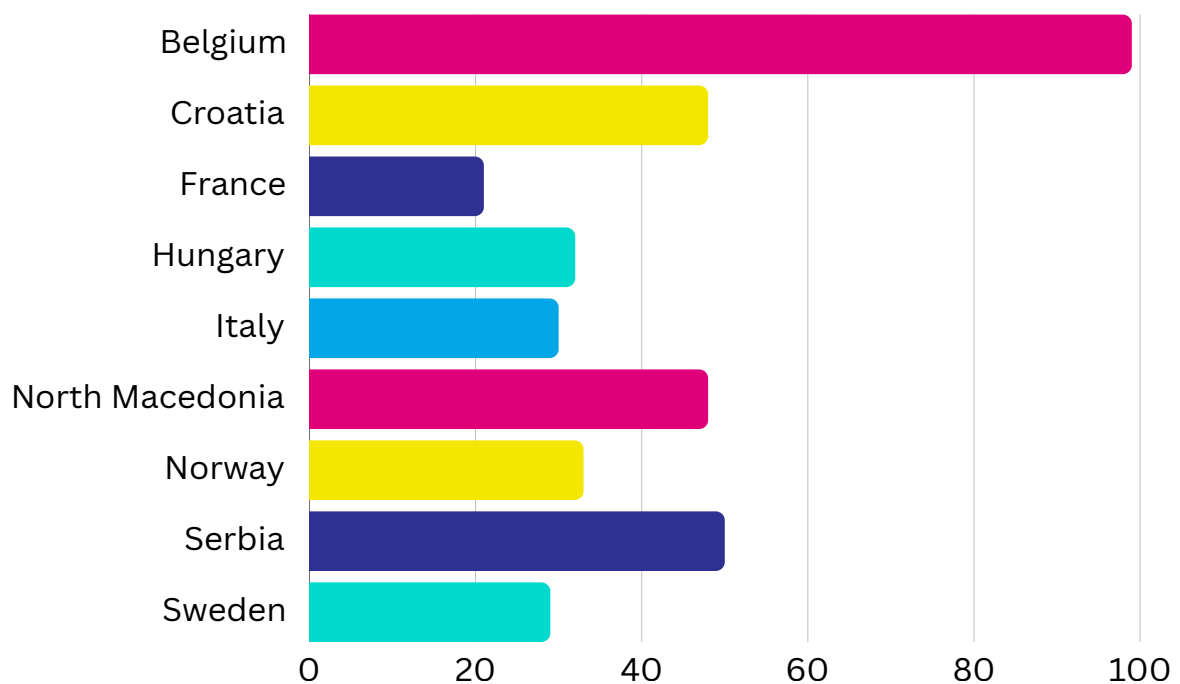
22
FOCUS GROUPS
May to December 2025

9
COUNTRIES
Across Europe

6
KEY THEMES
Cross-cutting findings



Focus groups ran between May and December 2025 across 9 countries, engaging young people aged 13-30 and youth & music professionals aged 25-35. Priority was given to women, gender-expansive individuals and underrepresented communities.



Who was in the room?



297

WOMEN

Appro. 78% of all participants. Priority given to women across all country recruitments.

390

TOTAL PARTICIPANTS

Across 9 countries and 22 sessions

72

RACIALISED INDIVIDUALS

Concentrated in France and Belgium's intersectionality group.

42

MIGRANTS & REFUGEES

Majority in Sweden (Songlines), some in Belgium and France.

40

LGBTIQ+

Mostly in Belgium, Norway, North Macedonia and Sweden.

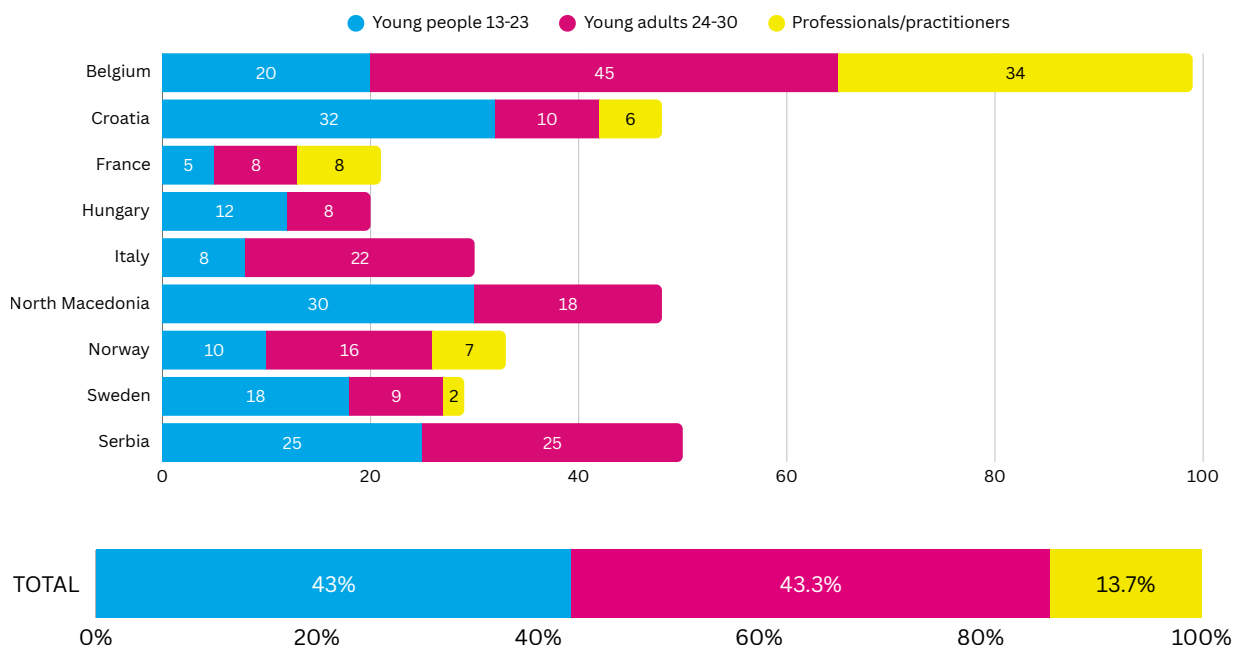
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PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

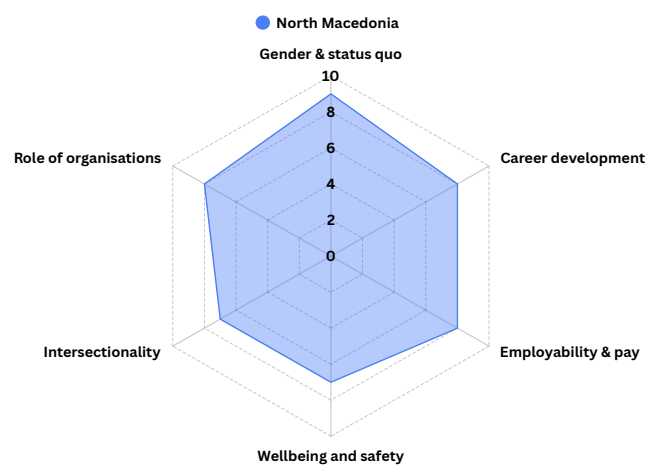
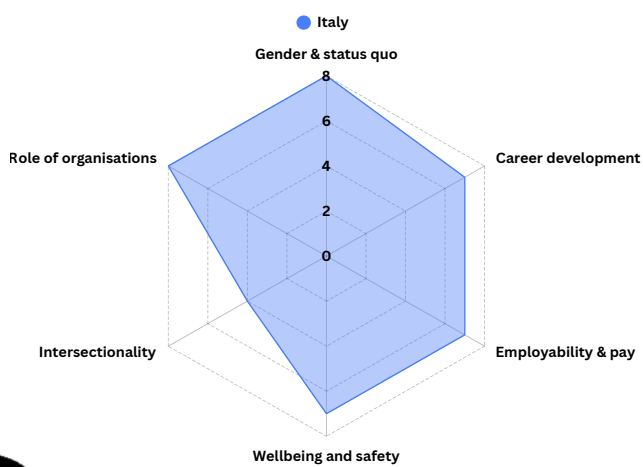
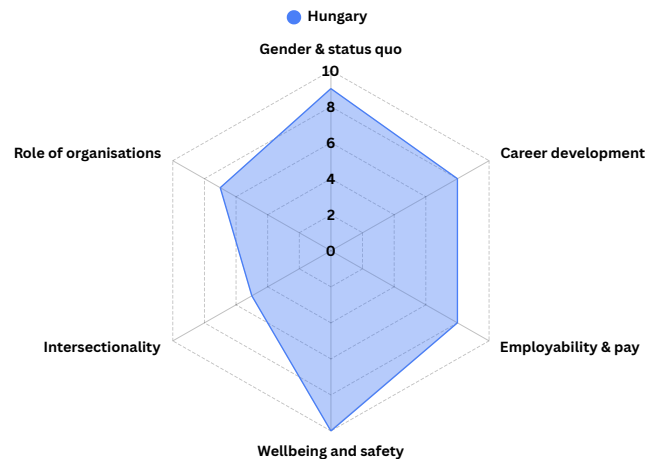
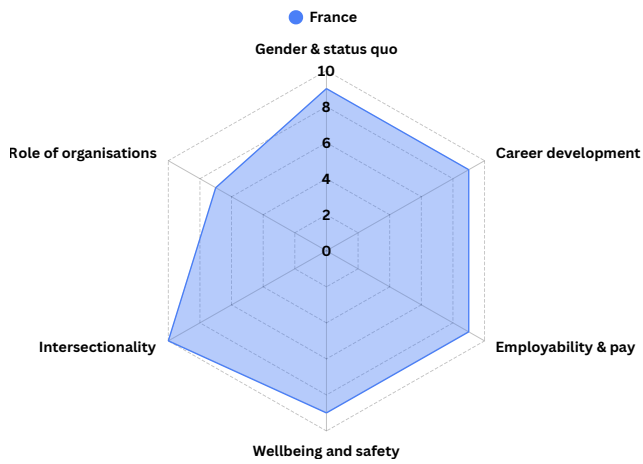
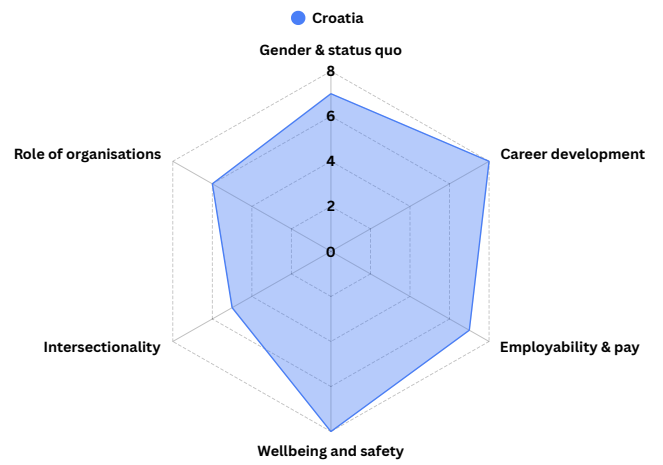
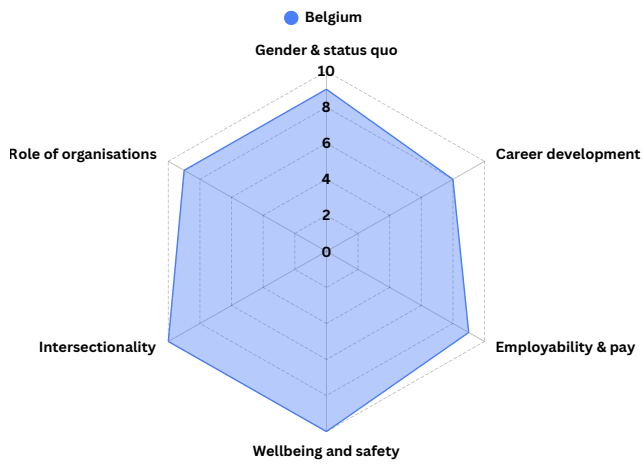
This represents the least systematically recruited group and most under-represented in these numbers.



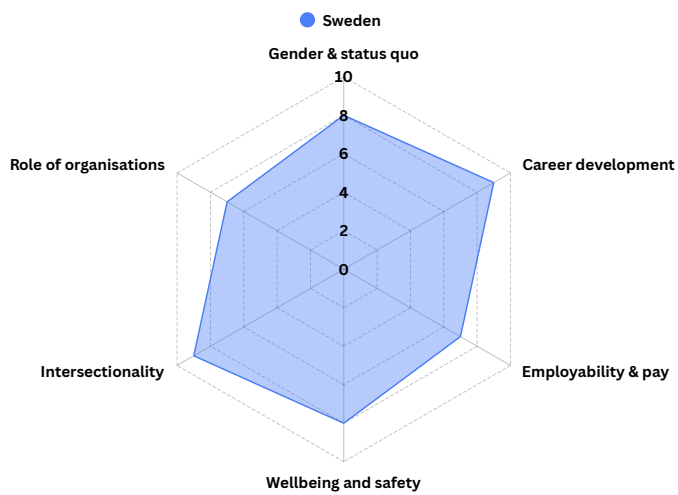
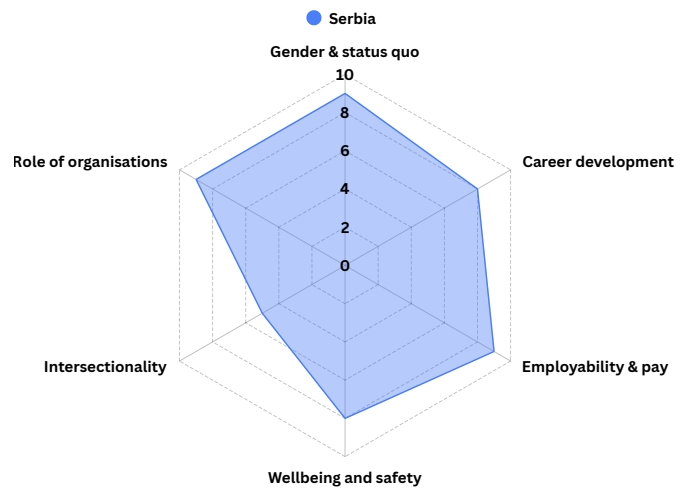
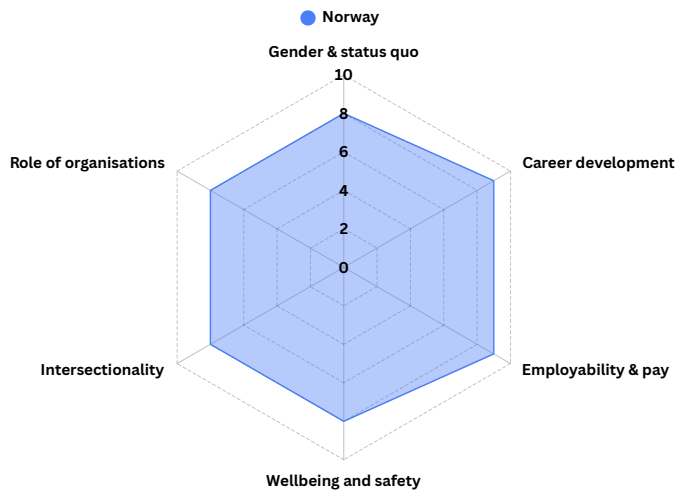
NB: These categories overlap... a racialised woman who is also LGBTIQ+ appears in multiple rows above. They are not mutually exclusive and should not be added together. These numbers show each group's share of the total participant pool independently.



Themes presence across countries



Themes presence across countries





Focus Groups: the Guidelines





Introduction



Following JMI's Play it Loud! pilot in 2020, Play it Loud! Crescendo (2023-2026) and PIL! EQ Focus groups (2025) contributed to **a new research project** aiming to identify barriers and good practices that foster gender and IDEA mainstreaming in the European youth and music ecosystem, contributing to a more equal and diverse music sector.

The research project uses **three different methods of data collection**, each targeting different actors and stakeholders, to gain a more comprehensive picture of the dynamics among young people, youth and music organisations, and the broader music sector (see Table 1). These guidelines were developed to provide **instructions for conducting the PIL EQ focus groups**, ensuring consistency and systematicity in the data-collection process.

First, the objectives of the focus groups and the participants' profiles are outlined. Then, guidelines for before, during, and after the sessions are provided.

Table 1: Play it Loud! profiles and methods for data collection

Target Group	Method
Young people working or wishing to work in music	Focus groups (PIL EQ)
Staff working in organisations offering music-related projects targeting young people (e.g. music facilitators, music teachers, project leaders, human resources).	Survey (PIL Crescendo)
Staff in leadership, decision-making, managerial, and executive levels in organisations that offer music projects targeting young people (e.g. directors, managers, supervisors).	Interviews (PIL Crescendo)
Organisations (case studies)	Ethnography (PIL Crescendo)

✓ **Focus Groups objectives**

The objectives of the focus groups are:

- 1) To **collect young people's and youth & music professionals' experiences**, including barriers and needs for development, as well as successful practices, ideas, and aspirations related to working in the music sector.
- 2) To **identify the role of music organisations** in promoting the development and participation of underrepresented youth in the music sector.
- 3) To **create a safe space and facilitate the creation of networks of support and collaboration** for young people aspiring to work or currently working in the music sector.

Note: Focus group(s) facilitators, supported by partner organisations and participants of PIL EQ international activities, are responsible for preparing and conducting the focus groups, as well as providing a comprehensive report in English.



Participants

Young people (aged 13-30) aspiring to work or currently working in the music sector and youth & music professionals (aged 25-35).

Group	Participant characteristics	Recommended n. of participants per group
Young people in music 1	Young people (priority to women and/or underrepresented groups) aged 13 to 23 who are involved in music-related activities and aspire to work in the music sector.	4 to 10
Young people in music 2	Young people (priority to women and/or underrepresented groups) aged 24 to 30 who are involved in music-related activities and aspire to or are currently working in the music sector. This group can include youth workers and youth organisers directly involved in the youth & music ecosystem.	6 to 12
Youth & music professionals & practitioners	Youth & music professionals (priority to women and/or underrepresented groups) aged 25 to 35 who are working in music organisations and in the music industry, including youth workers and youth organisers directly involved in the youth & music ecosystem.	6 to 15

Before the focus group

Recruitment: Give yourself time to recruit participants!

Successful recruitment is a cornerstone of any strong research project, so give yourself considerable time for the recruitment phase. You can either set a date for the sessions and find participants who can make it on the day, or try to coordinate a date that works for all of those who have expressed interest in participation. Bear in mind that this latter option could be harder to organise.

PRO-TIP: *Never assume that finding participants will be easy or quick, as many factors can influence participants' engagement!*

✓ Before the focus group

Advertise effectively

For these focus groups, you will need to recruit a minimum of 4-6 participants per session. To do this, it is important to advertise the sessions using various channels to **make your recruitment as inclusive and diverse as possible** (see the Play it Loud! Handbook for tips on how to reach a broader audience). You need to make sure that the invitation/advertisement has all the relevant information potential participants need to know, such as:

- Eligibility criteria (e.g. age, gender, race, occupation, etc.)
- Date, place (specify if online or in person), time and duration of the session.
 - **PRO-TIP:** *give yourself more time for the session than you expect. Focus groups are notorious for their tendency to overrun (e.g. you might not be able to start on time because some participants may arrive late or have problems connecting to the computer). Ex. If you expect your session to be an hour, say that the session will be 1.5 hours.*
- An overview of the topic of the session and what will be required from them
- Incentives for participation
 - **PRO-TIP:** *you can organise the focus groups in the framework of other events or include informal moments for social interaction (lunch, coffee-breaks, concerts/performances, talks or workshops with external experts, etc.).*
- Details on how to contact you
 - **PRO-TIP:** *Always confirm with participants when their group is and remind them of the session the day before. Ask them to confirm participation by text, email, or other preferred mode of communication.*



✓ On the day of the focus group

- Arrive before the participants at the space (online or offline). Upon arrival, participants may be anxious or nervous. Engage in small talk (avoiding the topics that will be discussed – save this for later!).
- If you are running the focus groups in person, provide participants with name tags and ask them to write their name and preferred pronouns.
- If you are running the focus groups online, ask participants to check that their preferred names and pronouns are displayed.
- Ensure that all participants have signed a consent form before starting the session.
- Create a group agreement (ground rules for the sessions). Once everyone is happy with the agreement, the moderator will switch the recording devices and ask the first question.



Creating a group agreement: suggested points:

- The discussion should take approximately one hour, but it may go a little longer
- Please keep your phone silent or turn it off. Avoid using them during the session.
- If you need to go (e.g. toilet, grab a drink), please just leave and return quietly (for in-person groups).
- Please keep your mic off if you are not speaking to avoid any noise from the background (for online groups).
- Try to talk to each other, rather than just answering the moderator
- There are no wrong or right answers. Feel free to disagree and offer alternative points, but always be respectful.
- Please try not to talk over the top of each other (invite people to raise their hands)
- The moderator/facilitator may interrupt the group if these ground-rules are not being followed

✓ On the day of the focus group

Tips for running a focus group

- Facilitating a focus requires both interviewing skills and group management skills.
- You also need to be attuned to the group's *vibe* and identify any *power dynamics*.
- Some people may end up speaking more than others. Make sure to moderate the discussion so that everyone gets to speak.
- Your main task is to get people talking and to steer the conversation to cover the topics set in the guide.
- As a facilitator, you do not need to control or 'correct' the group. You are there to interject at certain points to follow up on or clarify what has been said or raise new issues for discussion.
- Do not be scared of looking back at the guide during the session. You do not need to memorise it by heart.
- When the group has covered the issues in the question guide, you must allow participants to add anything they haven't been asked about.



Types of participants in focus groups

- **Dominant participant:** Some participants may hog the conversation and prevent others from contributing. You can handle this by diverting to another person, either physically (e.g., looking at another participant) or verbally (e.g., now, let's hear what... has to say).
- **Shy/ Quiet participant:** Some participants tend to say little or speak quietly. Thus, it is important that the facilitator encourages their participation gently and positively.
- **Bored or restless participant:** Some participants signal disinterest by looking around, using their phones, or seeming distracted. In this case, the facilitator needs to re-engage their interest by asking them questions directly and using their name.
- **Inflexible participant:** a disagreement with their view could cause issues for some participants. You can handle this by emphasising that everyone is entitled to have different opinions and that it is important to make room for everyone's views.

✓ On the day of the focus group

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✓ After the focus groups

- Make sure that you have collected everyone's demographics by using the questionnaire
- Please create your Focus Group report (see template attached) and send it to martha@playitloud.live.

✓ After the focus groups

Please create your Focus Group report and send it to martha@playitloud.live together with full transcripts and/or recordings.

Your Focus Group report should include:

- Country
- Organisation(s) and Facilitator(s) conducting the event/focus group
- Short description of the format
- Participants (number/short description/demographics)
- Narrative report touching on the key topics/themes identified by/in the guiding questions
- Any relevant comment, reflection or contextual note



PIL EQ Focus Groups Guide

Start by introducing yourself and explaining the PIL program/initiative. You can use the following summary:

Play it Loud! is an initiative that has been advancing knowledge and creating opportunities for youth participation in the music ecosystem since 2020. This year, we are conducting a new research project aiming to identify the barriers and challenges faced by young women, gender-expansive folks and underrepresented communities/groups working or aspiring to work in the music sector, as well as their needs, aspirations, and sources of support. This information will then be published in a report and contribute to the development of an ad-hoc toolkit aimed to inform organisations and key stakeholders, and provide them with recommendations to increase the participation of underrepresented youth in the music sector.



Additional points to address and/or use in this phase:

Set up by saying that in line with these objectives, we're seeking their thoughts, opinions and experiences and that nothing they say would be judged as right or wrong.

Start by asking everyone to introduce themselves (name, pronouns, occupation) and ask them an ice-breaker question (e.g. how are you feeling today? What did you have for breakfast? What is your favourite artist/band at the moment?) If participants only say "student," ask them what they are studying.

Once everyone has introduced themselves, say something like "Thanks for being here... shall we begin?" to move to the starting questions.



Starting questions ?

What's the first thing that comes to mind when I say inclusion, diversity, equity and accessibility in the youth music sector?

Let's think about gender equality... where do you see gender equality? Where do you see less gender equality?

- ☐ What is the status quo for young women in the youth music sector?
- ☐ What are some gender gaps they face?
- ☐ What are some causes and drivers for those gaps?

Are you aware of any initiatives and projects that seek to address inclusion and representation gaps in the music ecosystem?



Involvement in music



Participants aged 13-23 (engagement in music):

In your opinion, why is it important for underrepresented youth (and specifically for girls and young women) to get involved in music?

What normally prevents them from getting involved in music? (e.g., trying out an instrument, learning music production, pursuing a career in music, etc.)

What could help them get more involved in music? Think about it: what has helped you?

Have you considered pursuing a music career? / Are you pursuing a music career? Yes, No? Why? *The aim of this question is for them to discuss any worries or concerns related to pursuing music as an occupation.*

Participants aged 23+ (career development and achievements):

In your opinion, what does it take to succeed in the music sector?

What specific barriers and challenges do young people from underrepresented identities and communities (including young women) face in developing their careers and succeeding in the music sector?

What sources of support can help them develop and succeed in the music sector? Role models, mentoring programmes, initiatives, programmes, etc.

How can they self-promote their work and develop their careers in the music sector? Think about it: how did you learn to self-promote? Are there any challenges or barriers that hinder or prevent you from self-promoting your work?





Employability and Remuneration – for those who are considering or are currently pursuing a career related to music.



How would you describe current working conditions for underrepresented identities, and specifically for women, within the music sector? (e.g. access to the labour market, career opportunities, payment, job security, etc). How could these conditions be improved?

Are you able to dedicate as much time as you want to your career in music? Yes? No? Why?

Do you think you will / are you currently able to live from your work within the music sector? Yes? No? Why?

Do you know how much you should charge for your work? How did you learn how to price your work? Do you always get paid for your work? Yes, No, Why?

How could underrepresented youth, and specifically young women, get fairer economic compensation for their work in the music sector?



Physical and Mental Wellbeing

Are there any specific challenges related to well-being faced by women involved in music?

How could the music sector be safer for women and underrepresented young people?

How do you look after your wellbeing?



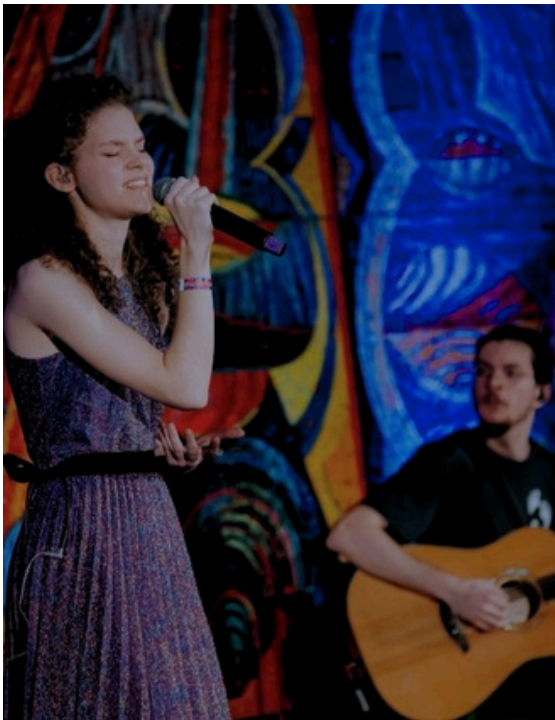


✓ **Physical and Mental Wellbeing**

Are there any specific challenges related to well-being faced by women involved in music?

How could the music sector be safer for women and underrepresented young people?

How do you look after your wellbeing?



✓ **Advocacy**

How do you advocate for representation and gender equality?

Who have been your best allies for your personal development? What makes them a good ally?

How can male peers and colleagues (e.g. those who are around your age) support underrepresented identities in music?

How can men in positions of power within the music sector (e.g. organisation directors, project leaders, employers, etc) support underrepresented identities in the music sector?

✓ **The role of music organisations in supporting underrepresented youth**

Has involvement in music organisations such as NGO's, networks and charities helped your involvement in music? How?

What else could these organisations do to increase their support towards young women and/or youth from underrepresented backgrounds/communities/groups wishing to work / currently working in the music sector?

Do you see any limitations or challenges in such initiatives' support of young women and/or youth from underrepresented backgrounds/communities/groups wishing to get more involved in music?



✓ Closing



Do you have any other thoughts you would like to share? If you could summarise what it is like for underrepresented youth to get involved in music, what would you say?

If you could summarise in one word how music organisations could support young people from underrepresented identities developing a music career, what would you say?

Thank everyone for their participation



BELGIUM



COUNTRY

BELGIUM + online

JMI - Jeunesses Musicales International

5

FOCUS GROUPS

99

PARTICIPANTS

FACILITATORS

- **FG 1** - Lyne Brenac, assisted by Giulia Annibaletti
- **FG 2** - Lyne Brenac, assisted by Janina Hakopuro and Iris Hoxha
- **FG 3/4/5 (online)** - Giulia Annibaletti

DATES

- **FG 1** - September 10, 2025
- **FG 2** - November 30, 2025
- **FG 3/4/5 (online)** - May 2025



FORMAT

JMI conducted two in-person sessions, with drinks and snacks provided. Each session began with an introduction to PIL, followed by small workshops and focus group discussions to explore the role of women and underrepresented identities in the music ecosystem. While FG1 focused more on the Belgian music sector (with representatives from several different Brussels-based realities), FG2 specifically engaged young musicians active in the folk/world music scene, and FG3-4-5 took more of a global and intersectional approach.

Participants



25

FOCUS GROUP 1 - IN PERSON (TWO SUBGROUPS)

Music practitioners, researchers and advocates from Brussels-based organisations working at the intersection of music, equity and safety.

58

FOCUS GROUP 2 - IN PERSON (FOUR SUBGROUPS)

Young musicians and cultural professionals from 30 countries, active in folk, world & traditional music. From ETHNO artistic mentors & organisers training.

7

FOCUS GROUP 3 - ONLINE

Intersectionality focus: working-class people, LGBTIQ+ individuals, disability caucus, non-White individuals. From JMI's international network.

5

FOCUS GROUP 4 - ONLINE

Women in music (mixed ages)

4

FOCUS GROUP 5 - ONLINE

Women up to 30 in technology-related roles: music production, sound engineering, stage management.



Overview

The five focus groups conducted by JMI from its Brussels base represent a deliberately international and intersectional approach to the PIL research. Rather than focusing on a single national context, JMI convened participants from across its global network, allowing for a comparative and multi-layered discussion of gender equality in music.

The **first in-person session** brought together participants drawn from Brussels-based and Belgian organisations working at the intersection of music, prevention, equity, and safety. This session was deliberately designed for young practitioners: participants are not primarily musicians sharing personal experiences, but professionals, researchers, advocates, and activists whose work involves accompanying the music and cultural sector through questions of sexual and discriminatory violence, gender equity, labour rights, and safer spaces. The **second in-person session** took place in the framework of the annual ETHNO artistic mentors and organisers training held in Ghent in November 2025 and saw the participation of 58 young musicians and young cultural professionals from 30 different countries actively engaged in the folk, world and traditional music scene. The **three online sessions** were organised thematically: one exploring intersecting marginalised identities broadly, one focused on young women's experiences in music generally, and one centred on women in technical and production roles specifically.



Despite their different framings, all groups consistently surfaced a shared set of structural and cultural barriers, while also contributing distinct perspectives shaped by geography, genre, disability, race, and career stage.



✓ Gender equality and the status quo

Across all five groups, participants described a music sector where formal equality coexists with persistent informal inequality, and where progress is real but fragile.

In FG2-5, participants from the wider JMI Network (spanning across several countries worldwide) described a sector where women are more present in performance and care-adjacent roles, while technical roles (sound engineering, music production, composition, conducting) and leadership positions (boards, festival programming, orchestra direction) remain male-dominated. A participant in FG3 noted that in Belgium, women working in music are most likely to end up in roles adjacent to the "care sector" (teaching young children) rather than in creative or strategic positions. In FG4, participants described music production classes with only 2-3 women out of 30 students, and a broader sense that technical spaces remain culturally coded as male.

FG1 practitioners confirmed and contextualised this picture from a systemic perspective. Participants working in network organisations, training bodies, and cultural programming roles described the same gaps, but framed in institutional terms: The music sector's workforce is



What participants said:

"The people doing prevention and equity work are predominantly women, and quite often racialised women, working in precarious conditions, without structural funding or institutional recognition, to address problems created and sustained by institutions predominantly led by men."

— Practitioner, FG1



not diverse at senior levels, its governance structures are not representative, and its informal cultures actively reproduce the exclusions that its formal policies nominally oppose. One practitioner working in the live music sector noted that even the organisations nominally committed to equity often reproduce the patterns they critique (programming more women, for instance, while leaving technical and decision-making roles unchanged). In Brussels, “Les Techniciennes” network (women in technical and audiovisual roles) was raised as a direct response to this specific gap: a space for the women already doing technical work to find community and visibility in a field that barely acknowledges their existence.



A recurring observation across FG2–5 was the gap between starting conditions and outcomes: at the point of education, there is often reasonable gender parity in enrolment, but women progressively disappear from the sector as they advance. FG1 practitioners noted the structural parallel in their own field: the people doing prevention and equity work are predominantly women (and quite often racialised women) working in precarious conditions, without structural funding or institutional recognition, to address problems created and sustained by institutions predominantly led by men. The inequality they are paid (when paid at all) to address is also the inequality that shapes their own working conditions.

Genre was identified across FG2–5 as a significant variable. Classical music was described as carrying its own specific conservatism. Experimental and alternative scenes are somewhat more open in principle but still male-dominated in practice. In metal and rock (referenced by participants from Serbia and Brazil), female presence is minimal, and assumptions of incompetence are routine. FG1 practitioners noted the particular complexity of the nightlife and festival sector: a space where gender-based and sexual violence risk is elevated, where labour law barely applies, and where the culture of the sector has historically been resistant to formalised safety interventions.

✓ Intersectionality and compounding barriers

FG2 provided the most explicitly structural and globally comparative discussion, with participants describing how gender inequality in music compounds with class, ethnicity, disability, geography, age, and LGBTIQ+ identity. FG1 grounded these observations in Belgian legal and institutional frameworks, mapping the specific forms of systemic discrimination that practitioners are trained and mandated to address.

FG1 participants worked with a carefully developed taxonomy of systemic oppression (sexism and transphobia, racism, ableism, homophobia and queerphobia, classism) framed explicitly as structural and historical rather than individual. This framing directly reinforces what participants in FG2-5 described from lived experience: that the obstacles they face are not the result of individual bad actors but of accumulated institutional patterns that are embedded in music education, booking practices, venue cultures, and funding decisions.

Geographic inequality was raised in FG2-5 as a foundational barrier. A participant from Kenya described how musical opportunity is concentrated in Nairobi, with rural areas lacking infrastructure, networks, and even radio access.

A Portuguese participant noted she only began serious music training when she moved to Lisbon at 17. The Belgium-based researcher in FG3 highlighted that even within Belgium and France, young people are increasingly economically precarious, making it harder to pursue music that does not immediately generate sustainable income. FG1 practitioners observed a parallel geographic inequality within Belgium itself: most of the organisations doing prevention and equity work are based in Brussels, leaving musicians and workers in Wallonia, Flanders, and smaller cities with far less access to support.



For LGBTIQ+ participants in FG2-5, the social environment of music (inherently collective and relational) presents a specific vulnerability: the prospect of having to come out repeatedly, or of facing discrimination in spaces hoped to be expressive, can be a decisive deterrent. FG1 practitioners from organisations such as OXO and A Nous La Nuit work precisely on making these spaces safer by developing safe-space protocols, training staff in inclusive approaches, and providing rapid response when incidents occur. Their presence in the room offered a practical complement to the experiences described online: the work of making music spaces safe for LGBTIQ+ people exists, but it is small-scale, under-resourced, and not yet systematically applied.

Participants with disabilities in FG3 described both physical inaccessibility and a near-complete absence of adapted pedagogy. FG1 practitioners confirmed that disability is the least developed area of their work: few organisations have the competencies to address it, few music spaces are physically accessible, and the absence of disabled people from decision-making positions means the issue is rarely prioritised.

Racial and ethnic dimensions were discussed in FG2-5 through experiences such as the payola culture excluding rural artists from radio, Black women musicians being tokenised in projects framed as inclusion but experienced as instrumentalisation. FG1 practitioners from organisations including SCIVIAS and Collective Frieda described encountering the same dynamics in their work with Belgian music organisations: diversity initiatives that prioritise appearances over structural change, and that concentrate their attention on the same small number of racialised artists rather than addressing the conditions that produce underrepresentation in the first place.





Career development and the educational system



A strong thread across FG3 and FG4 was the male-centred nature of music education: not in terms of explicit exclusion, but in curriculum, role models, and classroom dynamics. Participants described music history syllabuses from Spain, Belgium, Italy, Brazil, and Serbia that were almost exclusively dedicated to male composers, with women appearing rarely and often in pathologised terms. In composition classes, participants in FG4 observed that girls tended to follow instructions closely while boys felt free to take creative risks, producing systematically different outcomes through socialisation rather than explicit instruction. Male teachers directing attention exclusively at male students during practical sessions was a common experience across multiple participants in FG4-FG5.

FG1 practitioners in the training and education space confirmed this pattern and identified it as a priority area for intervention. Plan SACHA and OXO both deliver training in educational contexts, but these interventions are not yet systematic or mandated: they depend on individual institutions deciding to invest in them, which means that the music schools and conservatoires most likely to have gendered cultures are also the least likely to seek out training. Participants called for a validated catalogue of training programmes approved by field experts: a quality framework that would make it easier for institutions to identify credible providers and for funders to prioritise this work.

The absence of female role models (as teachers, professional musicians visible in curricula, and technical workers) was identified across all FGs as formative and self-perpetuating. Several participants cited Play it Loud (JMI), Rock Camp for Girls (Serbia) and Girl Power Initiative (Kenya) as having changed the direction of their lives. FG1 practitioners noted that this problem is structural: if the people deciding what music gets taught, which composers are studied, and which artists are booked are predominantly (white, cis) male, the absence of different role models in curricula and programmes is not accidental but the outcome of unchallenged institutional defaults. Les Volumineuses (an organisation specifically programming underrepresented artists) and the Psst Mlle database (connecting organisations with female and non-binary music professionals) were identified in FG1 as practical tools for countering this, but they remain small and underfunded relative to the scale of the need.

✓ Employability and Remuneration

All groups described working conditions in the music sector as poor in general, and significantly worse for women and marginalised groups. Across FG2-5, the common themes were: unpaid or underpaid work normalised as "exposure" or "experience"; the absence of a standard pricing framework, leaving individuals (particularly women, who tend to under-ask) vulnerable to exploitation; extreme financial precarity; and no job security in a freelance-dominated sector.

Direct pay discrimination was raised in FG4 by a Brazilian participant who discovered she had been paid less than a male musician for the same work. The sector's informality enables this without any accountability mechanism. In Serbia, state funding for culture amounts to approximately €15 per person, leaving artists structurally dependent on private patronage and informal arrangements. Most FG3-5 participants were unable to build sustainable careers from music alone, having made pragmatic compromises with other employment.



Employability and Remuneration



FG1 practitioners framed these individual experiences within a structural analysis developed in detail during the workshop. They identified several specific mechanisms through which remuneration inequality is produced and sustained. The absence of any pricing transparency or standard rate framework in the Belgian music sector means that negotiation happens in a vacuum, disproportionately benefiting those (typically cis men) who have cultural permission to ask assertively and social networks to benchmark against. The normalisation of unpaid work in the name of "passion" or "exposure" is gendered: it draws on the same cultural logic that has historically devalued women's labour as less serious or less professional. The precarity of the freelance economy means that artists and workers have no sick pay, no maternity protection, and no guaranteed return to a position after any interruption. A structure that, as BBNF and Plan SACHA practitioners noted, falls hardest on those who are already most exposed to harm. The observation from FG3 that women in Belgium are most likely to end up in care-adjacent music roles (lower-paid, lower-status, and offering less artistic autonomy) was confirmed by practitioners as a documented pattern rather than an individual experience.

On what would improve these conditions, FG1 practitioners were specific where FG2-5 participants were necessarily more general: pay transparency and benchmark-setting across the sector; applying existing labour law consistently and visibly (including mandatory workplace notices, which are not consistently displayed even in major venues); building in contractual protections for freelancers working in cultural settings; and ensuring that public funding for culture is conditioned on demonstrable equity practices, not just in programming but in employment, pay, and working conditions.



Physical and Mental Wellbeing

Wellbeing was addressed across all groups with notable openness, and the FG1 practitioner perspective adds important structural grounding to the experiential accounts from FG2-5.

In FG2-5, participants named sexual harassment, physical safety concerns (particularly in late-night and live music environments), the psychological toll of constant marginalisation, and the chronic anxiety of financial precarity as the central wellbeing challenges. Lyne Brenac (Belgium, FG1 and FG3) noted her work as a trainer on sexist and sexual violence in music, and emphasised that processes must exist not just for prevention but for response when things go wrong. Participants in FG5 noted the near-total absence of designated safe persons or reporting mechanisms at most music spaces. The pressure to conform to a male-defined image of professional competence (and, for women, also to perform femininity in order to access opportunities) was described as a chronic source of stress. Mental health challenges arising from financial precarity were described as a persistent background condition, compounded for those facing additional discrimination.

FG1 mapped the infrastructure that currently exists to address these challenges, and, in doing so, revealed how inadequate it is relative to the scale of the problem. The ten professional roles identified in the workshop span a range from event-based awareness-raising and trusted contact persons to care teams, ethics councils, and external consultants. But several of these roles barely exist in practice: almost no Belgian music organisations have formalised trusted contact persons; ethics councils are extremely rare; external consultants in this space are so few that one practitioner estimated "there is practically no one doing this work". The gap between what is needed and what is resourced is huge.

Participants in FG1 also raised the specific challenge of "vicarious trauma": professionals whose work involves accompanying people who have experienced harassment, assault, or discrimination absorb high psychological costs. This is rarely budgeted for, rarely acknowledged, and rarely addressed through supervision or support structures. The work of making music safer for others is itself unsafe for those doing it, in the absence of sustainable working conditions.

Physical and Mental Wellbeing

The relationship between safety and inclusion was made explicit by FG1 practitioners: it is not possible to achieve meaningful inclusion of women, racialised people, LGBTIQ+ individuals, and people with disabilities in an environment that is not safe. Safety is not a separate agenda from equity; it is a precondition for it. The experiences described in FG2-5 confirm this from the other direction: participants who had experienced harassment or unsafe situations described pulling back from the sector, working alone to avoid exposure, or leaving entirely. The most talented and committed young people are being pushed out of music by conditions that organisations have not yet chosen to take seriously enough to invest in changing.

Advocacy and the Role of Organisations

On allyship from male colleagues, FG2-5 participants described a pattern of bystander inaction (men witnessing discriminatory or violent situations without intervening), out of fear or a sense of non-involvement. Participants noted that credibility is often granted to men that is denied to women, making identical observations about their own experience. Genuine allyship, participants argued, requires a willingness to name and call out problematic situations in real time and to use positions of relative privilege to amplify rather than override marginalised voices.

FG1 practitioners offered a structural complement to this: allyship at the individual level is necessary but insufficient. What is needed is institutional allyship: organisations formally committing to equity practices, training all staff (including directors, board members, etc.), establishing clear reporting pathways, and ensuring that equity work is funded and valued rather than absorbed as unpaid effort. Men in positions of institutional power were identified as uniquely placed to make these structural choices. The observation from FG2 that "people will sometimes listen more to a man than to the woman who was assaulted" is painful precisely because it is true, and because it means that the people with the most institutional credibility are the ones most needed to use it on behalf of those with the least.



Advocacy and the Role of Organisations

On music organisations specifically, FG2-5 participants were broadly positive about JMI, Ethno and Play It Loud while identifying gaps in visibility and reach. The most consistent critique: organisations are not visible enough in the early stages of careers when they would be most valuable. FG1 practitioners raised a parallel concern from the supply side: many of the organisations doing the most important work on prevention and equity in the Belgian music sector are unknown to the people who most need them. Safe Ta Night, Plan SACHA, Discare, and Les Volumineuses are well-known within specialist circles, but their reach into the broader music community (particularly among young and emerging musicians) is limited by resources, not by relevance.

FG1 also raised a systemic concern about the sustainability of organisations doing equity and safety work: they are the first to lose funding when budgets are cut, the hardest to justify to funders who want to see direct artistic outputs, and the most likely to be staffed by people in precarious conditions doing emotionally demanding work without adequate support. The Belgian right-wing cultural minister's current policy direction was named explicitly as a threat: the funding environment that has supported organisations like those represented in FG1 is under pressure, and equality initiatives are disproportionately affected.

The closing discussion in FG1 pointed toward two structural responses: the development of a potential federation of prevention, equity and safety professionals in the Belgian music sector (to share resources, avoid competition, build collective standards, and advocate jointly for recognition and funding); and the ACT FIERCE European coalition, which would connect this Belgian ecosystem with similar fields developing across Europe and allow the expertise accumulated in Belgium to contribute to and learn from international practice.





Key Outcomes and Reflections



- The dialogue between FG1 (practitioners) and FG2–5 (young musicians and music professionals/organisers) is the most distinctive feature of this country report: it reveals not only what the problems are, but what kinds of structural responses exist, where they fall short, and what would be needed to close the gap between need and resource.
- **Gender inequality in music is structural and intersectional, compounded by race, class, disability, geography, and LGBTIQ+ identity**, and the Belgian ecosystem of prevention and equity work has developed a sophisticated conceptual framework for understanding this. What it lacks is the **resources** and **institutional recognition** to act on that understanding at scale.
- The three pillars of prevention, equity, and safety are interdependent: **safety without prevention is purely reactive; prevention without equity fails to address underlying causes; equity without safety leaves structural progress undermined by individual incidents**. Effective responses must address all three simultaneously.
- **Technical and production roles remain the most explicitly male-dominated areas of the music sector, and music education is a key site of inequality**: in curriculum, role models, classroom dynamics, and the gendered socialisation of what musical competence looks and sounds like.
- **Financial precarity falls harder on women and marginalised groups, who have less access to informal networks, lower cultural permission to negotiate**, and are more likely to absorb costs (of presentation, of safety precautions, of unpaid labour) that their male peers do not face. Existing labour law offers partial protection but is not consistently applied or enforced in the sector.
- **The professionals doing the most important work to make the music sector more equal and safer are themselves working in precarious, under-resourced, and under-recognised conditions**: a structural irony that urgently needs to be addressed by funders, institutions, and the sector as a whole.
- The ACT FIERCE coalition is a strong opportunity to connect the Belgian ecosystem with comparable fields across Europe, **moving from isolated national efforts to a coordinated transnational response**.
- Closing words from participants across all four sessions converged on: **challenging, resistance, fighting, empowerment, prevention, equity, safety, coalition** ...a picture of communities that are simultaneously exhausted and strategically determined, building collective structures where institutions have not yet followed.



CROATIA



COUNTRY

CROATIA

JMI - Jeunesses Musicales International

2

FOCUS GROUPS

48

PARTICIPANTS

FACILITATORS

- **FG 1 - Lucija Maroevic**
- **FG 2 - Lucija Maroevic**

DATES

- **FG 1 - July 4, 2025**
- **FG 2 - July 15, 2025**



FORMAT

In-person focus groups. Both groups were mixed-gender, a deliberate departure from the more gender-separated approach used in some other PIL EQ! country reports. This produced a richer but at times more contested discussion, with male participants engaging substantively (sometimes productively, sometimes resistively) with the themes of gender inequality. The regional composition (Croatia, Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina) added a Balkan dimension to discussions of institutional support, cultural norms, and economic precarity. The focus groups were organised in the framework of JM Croatia's jazz summer camps in Groznanj, Istria.

Participants



FOCUS GROUP 1 - IN PERSON (TWO SUBGROUPS)

24

More experienced musicians and early professionals (approx. 18–30) from all over Croatia (and Slovenia): early-career jazz musicians and music workers from the same regional background; mix of genders; some with experience in live performance, music education, and arts administration.

FOCUS GROUP 2 - IN PERSON (FOUR SUBGROUPS)

24

Younger musicians (approx. 17-20): jazz students and young musicians from Croatia, Serbia, and Slovenia; mix of genders; instruments including saxophone, trumpet, piano, double bass, drums, and vocals. Several participants are enrolled in music academies or conservatories across the region.





Overview

The focus groups took place in the framework of the JM Jazz Summer Camp and JM Jazz Networking Platform at the International Cultural Centre of Jeunesses Musicales Croatia in Grožnjan (JMI's first and flagship World Meeting Centre, established in 1969 in a medieval hilltop town in Istria). The camp runs alongside the international "Jazz Is Back! BP" festival and brings together young jazz musicians from Croatia and the wider region for masterclasses, ensemble workshops, and concerts. The setting (intensive, residential, international, and musically immersive) created a relatively open atmosphere for discussion, though it also shaped some of the tensions that emerged, particularly among male participants who saw the camp as a shared space of creative struggle rather than as a gendered experience.

The regional dimension, particularly the inclusion of participants from Serbia and Slovenia, is a distinctive feature of these sessions compared to other country reports, and adds perspective on how gender inequality in music intersects with different national contexts within the broader Balkan region.



The Grožnjan focus groups produced a discussion shaped by the unique energy of the jazz camp context: passionate, musically committed, and at times competitive. The setting brought together young musicians who share a deep investment in jazz as both an art form and a career aspiration, and this shared investment became both the richest common ground and, at times, a site of tension. Male participants repeatedly invoked the universal hardship of pursuing a jazz career as a frame that, in their view, rendered gender-specific disadvantage secondary or overstated. This dynamic (well-intentioned but at times obstructive to the discussion) was itself one of the most instructive findings of the sessions: the difficulty of making gender inequality visible in an environment where the experience of general precarity is felt so acutely by everyone that it becomes difficult to see how it is distributed unequally.

Female and female-identifying participants, while broadly affirming that the jazz world is hard for everyone, consistently described experiences (of not being taken seriously as instrumentalists, of having to prove themselves repeatedly in ways their male peers did not, of navigating uncomfortable dynamics at late-night performances and rehearsal environments) that pointed to a specific additional burden. The discussion around this gap was at times heated, with some male participants pushing back against what they described as a false distinction, and female participants having to assert the validity of their experiences against scepticism from the room.



Gender Equality and the Status Quo

When asked about gender equality in the youth music sector, the first responses from male participants centred on the shared difficulty of the jazz career path and of musicians (in general) in the Balkan region: limited gig opportunities, low pay, the social stigma attached to pursuing music professionally in regional contexts, and the difficulty of being taken seriously as a jazz musician in popular-music-dominated markets. Several male participants were quick to emphasise that "it's hard for everyone", a framing that initially dominated the opening exchanges and that facilitators had to actively navigate to bring gender-specific experiences into view.

Female participants did not dispute the general difficulty. What they added (and what eventually became the core of the discussion) was the layer on top. A female saxophonist from Croatia described the specific experience of showing up to a jam session and being assumed to be a singer or a partner of one of the male musicians, rather than an instrumentalist in her own right. A pianist from Serbia described the subtle but consistent sense that her technical abilities were evaluated with more scepticism than those of equivalent male peers: "They're surprised when I play well. They're not surprised when he plays well. That's the difference." A vocalist from Slovenia noted that the assumption that female musicians are primarily singers rather than instrumentalists runs so deep in the regional jazz scene that it shapes what opportunities are offered, what training is recommended, and even what instruments are available in educational settings.

The male participants, to their credit, engaged with these contributions rather than dismissing them entirely, but several returned repeatedly to the "hard for everyone" refrain, framing gender-specific difficulty as one among many difficulties rather than as a structural additional layer. This created a recurring pattern: female participants would offer a specific, gendered example; male participants would acknowledge it but pivot to a comparable non-gendered difficulty; facilitators would redirect to the specific question of whether those difficulties were distributed equally. The conversation around this pattern was itself illuminating, with one female bassist from Croatia eventually naming it directly: "We're not saying it's not hard for you. We're saying it's harder for us. Those are two different things."



What participants said:

"We're not saying it's not hard for you. We're saying it's harder for us. Those are two different things."

— Participant, FG1





Career Development

On what it takes to succeed in jazz, participants converged on talent, persistence, practice, and the right connections, with considerable agreement across genders on the first three. On the fourth, gendered divergence appeared quickly. Male participants described their networks as arising organically from jam sessions, late-night performance environments, and informal mentorships with established male musicians. Female participants described these same environments with more ambivalence: valuable for musical development, but also environments where the boundary between professional and personal interaction is frequently blurred, where they sometimes feel unsafe or unwelcome, and where the informal culture rewards a kind of bold self-assertion that they had been socialised not to exhibit.

A drummer from Slovenia described choosing not to attend certain late-night sessions despite knowing they were important for career networking: "You go there, you play well, and then you spend the rest of the night figuring out how to get home without someone following you. I've stopped going. And I know that costs me." Male participants in the room expressed genuine surprise at this account, and several said they had never thought about this dimension of the same spaces they moved through freely.

The absence of female role models in the Balkan jazz scene was raised across both groups. In Croatia, some female jazz musicians have achieved significant visibility, including several associated with the Grožnjan programme itself, but participants noted that these examples are few, often presented as exceptional rather than representative, and rarely occupy the instrumental leadership roles (band leader, musical director, head of a jazz department at a conservatoire) that would signal structural equality rather than individual achievement.

For participants from Serbia and Bosnia Herzegovina (currently enrolled in Zagreb's conservatory), the situation was described as more acute, as female jazz instrumentalists are significantly outnumbered and face stronger cultural expectations around which musical roles are appropriate for women. One participant from Bosnia described her family's pride in her musical talent alongside their discomfort with the lifestyle of a professional jazz musician (the late hours, the touring, the informality of the music world): "My parents want me to play. They just don't want me to be a musician."





Self-Promotion and Visibility

Self-promotion was discussed with particular energy in the younger group. Participants described social media as simultaneously essential and exhausting: a tool that can build visibility but that also generates a kind of aesthetic and personal scrutiny for female musicians that male musicians do not equally face. A female vocalist described receiving comments on her appearance and relationship status on videos where she was demonstrably showcasing her technique. A male participant agreed this was unfair, but added that he had experienced harsh online criticism too, prompting an exchange about the different nature of that criticism (musical for men, personal and sexual for women).

The question of confidence and self-belief was raised by both genders, but with different framings. Male participants tended to describe confidence as something that can be built through practice and performance exposure. Female participants described it as something that was actively undermined: by teachers who doubted their physical capacity to handle certain instruments, by audiences who expressed surprise at competence, and by peers who talked over them in rehearsal settings. A female pianist from Croatia described being told by a conservatoire teacher that the double bass "wasn't suitable for a young woman", an experience that the male participants found startling, but that was immediately recognised and expanded upon by every female participant in the room.





Employability and Remuneration

On working conditions, the group found significant common ground across genders on the general precarity of jazz as a career path in the Balkan region. The market for jazz in Croatia, Serbia, Slovenia, and Bosnia-Herzegovina is small, heavily concentrated in a few cities, dependent on festival programming and occasional institutional support, and offers very limited opportunities for stable income. Almost all participants (male and female) described needing or expecting to supplement jazz income through teaching, session work, or employment outside music entirely.



Within this shared context of precarity, female participants described specific additional difficulties. A female musician from Croatia described being offered lower fees than male colleagues for equivalent performances at the same venue, discovering this only when a male friend mentioned his fee in passing. A musician and booking agent working in the Croatian jazz scene described a persistent pattern of female artists being offered less without negotiating, while male artists routinely negotiated upward. Several female participants described not knowing what to charge, or feeling that asking for a fair fee would make them seem difficult or ungrateful in an environment where any gig at all felt precarious.

Male participants engaged with this discussion openly, and several expressed genuine discomfort with the idea that they might be benefiting from pay asymmetries they had not noticed. One participant acknowledged that he had never thought to compare his fees with those of female colleagues and said he would do so. This moment was noted by several female participants as exactly the kind of quiet allyship they rarely experienced.

The Croatian intermittent-style arts support system (via the Croatian Audiovisual Centre and Ministry of Culture grants) was raised as a partial buffer, but participants noted that access to these systems requires familiarity with bureaucratic processes, institutional connections, and a level of established visibility that is harder to achieve for those without an existing network. Participants noted, however, that equivalent state support structures are far less developed in other countries in the region, creating an additional structural disadvantage for Balkan musicians outside Croatia.





Physical and Mental Wellbeing

Well-being was the theme where the mixed-gender dynamic was most productively navigated. Male participants largely agreed that female musicians face specific safety concerns in late-night music environments, at festivals, and in touring contexts. The Slovenian drummer's account of avoiding networking spaces for safety reasons had a visible impact on the male participants and opened a more honest conversation than had been possible on some other topics.

Participants described the psychological toll of the double standard of judgment (being evaluated as both musicians and as gendered bodies simultaneously) as a chronic, low-level drain that is difficult to name in the moment but cumulative in effect. A female participant described this as "performance anxiety on top of performance anxiety." The specific culture of jazz (its improvisational ethos of fearless risk-taking) was noted as both inspiring and potentially alienating for those who had been conditioned to be more cautious about mistakes and more sensitive to social disapproval.

Mental health support in the Croatian context was described as limited and often inaccessible for young musicians: expensive, stigmatised, and not specifically tailored to the challenges of creative careers. Participants from Bosnia-Herzegovina and Serbia described an even more significant absence of mental health infrastructure and a stronger cultural stigma around seeking support.

What participants said:

"I go there, play well, and then spend the rest of the night figuring out how to get home without someone following me. I've stopped going. And I know that costs me."

— Participant, FG1





Advocacy and the Role of Organisations



On advocacy, the Grožnjan camp itself was cited by multiple participants as one of the few spaces where gender-balanced participation feels actively cultivated. The international character of the programme (bringing in mentors and participants from across Europe and the Americas) was seen as an important broadening influence on the more conservative gender norms prevalent in some regional jazz scenes.

JM Croatia was praised for creating an inclusive and safe space, though participants noted that gender-specific support programmes within the camp are limited, and that the format of masterclasses can reproduce hierarchical dynamics in which senior (often male) mentors define standards of excellence in ways that may unconsciously reflect gendered assumptions about what jazz playing should sound like.

Male participants, in their closing contributions, expressed a more nuanced position than they had held at the start of the discussion. Several admitted that the "hard for everyone" framing, while not wrong, had prevented them from fully hearing what their female colleagues were describing. One male participant from Croatia offered what may be the most honest synthesis of the session's dynamic: "I came in thinking we were all in the same boat. I'm leaving thinking we're in the same storm but different boats."

On what organisations should do, participants named: more structured mentoring for female instrumentalists specifically; clearer safety protocols at camps and festivals; pay transparency and rate-setting guidance; active programming of female-led ensembles and concerts rather than waiting for organic representation; and embedding conversations like this focus group into the regular fabric of summer schools rather than treating them as separate research activities.



Key Outcomes and Reflections



- The mixed-gender format of these focus groups produced **a distinctive and instructive dynamic**: male participants' genuine identification with the hardship of jazz as a career path initially obscured rather than illuminated the gendered distribution of that hardship. The facilitated process of making this dynamic visible was itself a valuable outcome.
- The "it's hard for everyone" dynamic (well documented in other gender-in-music research contexts) was particularly pronounced in the jazz setting, where the ethic of universal creative struggle is culturally central. **Addressing gender inequality in jazz specifically requires working with, rather than against, this ethic.**
- Female instrumentalists in the Balkan jazz scene face a specific and compounding challenge: **not being seen as instrumentalists in the first place, being held to a higher standard of proof than male peers, and navigating professional environments in which their safety cannot be assumed.**
- **Geographic and national variation within the Balkan region is significant**: Croatian participants described a context that, while still unequal, has more visible infrastructure and greater cultural openness than participants from other neighbouring countries experienced.
- The **absence of pay transparency** in the informal jazz economy is a structural problem for all young musicians. Still, it falls harder on women who are less likely to negotiate and more likely to undercharge... a pattern reinforced by socialisation rather than individual choice.
- The Grožnjan camp and JM Croatia's programmes were identified as genuinely positive spaces, among the few in the region that actively cultivate gender balance and international openness. Participants expressed a wish that these values were **more explicitly embedded in the pedagogy and programming** of the camp rather than present primarily in its spirit.
- Closing reflections from participants across both groups pointed toward **solidarity as the core need**: not special treatment, but genuine peer recognition, honest conversation, and the willingness of male musicians to notice and name what their female colleagues experience.

What participants said:

"I came in thinking we were all in the same boat. I'm leaving thinking we're in the same storm but different boats."

— (Male) Participant, FG2



FRANCE



COUNTRY

FRANCE

International Music Council (IMC)

2

FOCUS GROUPS

21

PARTICIPANTS

FACILITATORS

- **FG 1 - Sanhita Saha**
- **FG 2 - Josephine Hurtut**

DATES

- **FG 1** - November 18, 2025
- **FG 2** - November 27, 2025



FORMAT

Both sessions were conducted in person in Paris and combined semi-structured workshops and structured focus group discussions following the standard PIL guidelines and pedagogical approach. FG1 was hosted in the framework of the 2025 edition of the Les Femmes S'en Mêlent / Les Femmes S'engagent festival. FG2 was organised in partnership with Zebrook as part of their ongoing activities with local young musicians in Seine-Saint-Denis. Both sessions included a closing artistic performance by young female and queer artists from the PIL international community. The first group was deliberately constituted as a racialised individuals focus group, meaning all participants identify as Black or mixed-race: a methodological choice that shaped the discussion significantly, bringing racial discrimination into consistent dialogue with gender inequality throughout. The facilitators, both previously involved in PIL initiatives, actively promoted open, personal sharing, encouraging participants to talk about lived experiences and to converse with one another, rather than in a question-and-answer format..

Participants



8

FOCUS GROUP 1 - IN PERSON

Racialised queer individuals who are already working in the music industry, in particular young music professionals (stage managers, press agents, musicians, booking agents, organisers, etc.). Most of them come from the live music sector, although the artists also collaborate with the recording industry and have knowledge of other professions in the field.

13

FOCUS GROUP 2 - IN PERSON

Musicians involved in Zebroch's outreach music programmes. Founded in 1990 and rooted in Seine-Saint-Denis, Zebroch is a popular music education association working with young people in schools and community settings across the Paris region, supporting emerging musicians through initiatives such as La Belle Relève and Le Grand Zebroch. Participants reflect the diverse, multi-genre musical landscape of the Seine-Saint-Denis territory.

Contextual Note: The French Music Industry

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The facilitator highlights a feature specific to France that shapes the discussion: the public funding of culture through subsidies and the intermittent du spectacle status, i.e. a social insurance system that allows performing arts professionals to benefit from unemployment coverage between contracts, enabling a form of income stability that does not exist in most other countries. This system supports young organisations and emerging projects to remain professionally active, and several participants' accounts implicitly reference it. However, participants also note the increasing pressure on this model as public funding is cut.

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Overview

The French focus groups produced some of the most direct, politically engaged, and analytically sharp testimony across all PIL EQ! country reports. The two sessions brought together participants at very different stages of their musical lives: FG1 comprising racialised women already working as music professionals, and FG2 comprising younger musicians (most of which also from racialised groups) involved in Zebrook's outreach programmes in Seine-Saint-Denism but both groups converged on a shared diagnosis of the French music sector as simultaneously exciting and structurally violent. The intersection of gender and race runs through every theme discussed, shaped in FG1 by years of professional experience and in FG2 by the early encounters with a sector whose norms and gatekeeping mechanisms are already visible to those just beginning to navigate it. Sexual and gender-based violence, racial discrimination, financial precarity, and the normalisation of boundary violations emerged as the dominant concerns across both sessions.





Gender Equality and the Status Quo



Participants in both groups agreed that the French music industry remains far from genuine equality, particularly in access to power and decision-making. In FG1, the most frequently named issue was legitimacy: the additional labour required of women (and especially racialised women) simply to be taken seriously. One artist described this plainly: "When you're a woman, and even more so if you're a racialised woman, I feel like you have to put in extra effort and make more compromises to be respected and taken seriously by older professionals, especially men."

There was a measured acknowledgement in FG1 that conditions for young people entering the industry today are somewhat better than for previous generations (more visible opportunities, some institutional efforts around parity and anti-harassment criteria). But participants consistently described a glass ceiling effect (eventually confirmed by participants of FG2): more openness at the entry level that closes down rapidly as career ambitions rise. The same artist observed that equality among younger workers does not persist as they advance: "after a certain age, it gets much harder."

FG2 participants, still at the beginning of their musical journeys, reflected an earlier moment in this same trajectory. Their observations were less anchored in professional experience than in what they could already see around them: in their schools, their local music scenes, and the artists they followed, and in what they were already beginning to feel about their own place in music. The underrepresentation of women and girls in certain instruments and production roles, the gendered assumptions embedded in how music is taught and talked about, and the sense that certain spaces in music simply were not designed with them in mind were recurring observations. For young people from Seine-Saint-Denis (a territory marked by significant socioeconomic inequality and racial diversity), these gender-specific barriers compound with class and racial disadvantage in ways that make the distance between aspiration and professional reality feel particularly large.

The structural cause identified most sharply in FG1 was the homogeneity of industry leadership. One musician described the major French labels as dominated by the same white people who came out of business schools rather than music schools, who are disconnected from artistic reality and fixated on profitability: "They make all the decisions, and everyone else has to follow, or you're left out, you disappear." Racial stereotyping emerged as a specific and painful dimension: a press agent described the experience of working in classical music while being assumed, because of her race, to work in rap... a subtle but persistent misrecognition that undermines professional identity. The same participant described how a single racist comment, "barely noticeable," from an early employer can resurface years later at a critical professional moment, suddenly hollowing out the confidence needed to take on a challenge.



Career Development

On what it takes to succeed, FG1 participants identified a range of individual qualities (determination, patience, self-reflection, openness to criticism, endurance, adaptability), while critically examining the conditions under which these qualities are demanded. A stage manager noted that the music industry's *"passion job"* framing creates systematic tolerance for labour exploitation: long hours, weekend work, constant availability, and boundary violations normalised under the banner of professional commitment. A booking agent described the trajectory directly: *"We push ourselves, don't count our hours, give our best, become the number one in the company, and then burn out the next month."*

The press agent articulated the racialised dimension of the success narrative with particular clarity: *"When you're a non-white woman in France, you always have to prove yourself more than others. But you have to stay motivated and understand that working in music isn't about becoming rich: if that's your goal, you should choose another career. To succeed, you need to know how to set boundaries. You have to be able to say no and stick to your position without changing your mind just because the guy next to you makes you doubt yourself or makes you feel less legitimate."*

External conditions for success were identified in FG1 as: a strong network, a solid understanding of the music ecosystem, and a reliable support system. The absence of these (particularly for young women entering the industry without established connections) leaves them exposed. One artist described having to work alone to avoid dangerous situations: *"If you want to stay true to your principles and values when starting out in this industry and aim to make a career, you'd better be patient, because you'll have to work alone. It's either that, or you'll have to play along with things you don't agree with."* A booking agent who received early guidance from independent bookers who warned her away from known predatory figures acknowledged that this kind of informal protective knowledge is not universally available: *"That saved me from a lot of bad experiences, but not everyone is that fortunate."*





Career Development

What participants said:

"When you're a non-white woman in France, you always have to prove yourself more than others. To succeed, you need to know how to set boundaries, to be able to say no and stick to your position without changing your mind just because the guy next to you makes you doubt yourself."

— Press agent, FG1



For FG2 participants, the question of what it takes to succeed was more tentative and prospective, shaped by aspiration more than experience. Key themes included the importance of having role models who look like them, access to affordable or free training opportunities, and the support of organisations like Zebroch that create pathways into music from communities that the mainstream industry rarely reaches or reflects. Participants expressed awareness that making it in music as a young woman from Seine-Saint-Denis involves navigating not only the sector's generic barriers but a specific combination of racial, class-based, and geographic disadvantage that most of the sector's existing support structures do not adequately address.

The French music industry has a range of existing initiatives for women, documented by the facilitator: mentorship programmes including MEWEM, Woman Metronum Academy, Wah! Pulse, Lab de musiciennes, and All Access; feminist festivals including Les Femmes S'en Mêlent, More Women on Stage, Burning Womxn, and Lezard Festival; and professional networks including Shesaid.so France and Majeur.es. FG1 participants noted that early-career women often do not know these resources exist, and that accessing them requires time that artists working alone typically do not have. This visibility gap was even more pronounced for FG2 participants, for whom most of these initiatives remain unknown or geographically and culturally remote.

Self-promotion was identified in FG1 as a necessary but difficult practice, particularly for those without formal management training, with legitimacy and imposter syndrome named as fundamental barriers. A musician said: *"It's not easy because it always comes back to questions of legitimacy and peer validation, which are what give you the confidence to promote your work."* FG2 participants echoed this dynamic at an earlier stage: the confidence to put oneself forward, to claim space in music publicly, is already shaped, and often constrained, by the gendered and racialised messages absorbed long before a professional career begins.



Employability and Remuneration

All FG1 participants are currently working in music, but their assessments of working conditions were uniformly critical. The market was described as "locked," especially for newcomers, who need both luck and significant resources to break through. The precarity of the sector (irregular income, no stable employment, constant financial anxiety) was described as simply the baseline condition, not an exception. A booking agent named the structural abnormality plainly: *"It's a precarious industry, not very secure. Financial instability and working conditions are unlike those in other sectors. I don't know of other fields where you can be under the influence of substances and still perform your professional duties."*

Several participants described reaching a point of financial viability in their careers, but at a high cost. One artist stated: *"I make a living from my work, but that's a bit of a stretch. Even though I have a nearly fixed income, I can't truly meet all my needs. I often have to take on jobs unrelated to music just to make ends meet."* A booking agent described only this year reaching an income she could describe as "somewhat acceptable", after years of serious financial difficulty and repeated consideration of leaving the sector.

On the pay gap specifically, participants were unequivocal. A stage manager stated simply: *"By paying them the same as men, because there is a pay gap. If we start with that, I think we'd make faster progress in a lot of other areas."* A press agent added the dimension of promotion and leadership: women are *"often relegated to second place in promotions, even though we're the assistants doing the work. And when a woman takes over a company, and she's the one doing the work, she's accused of being very tough because she's a woman running the company. It's not shocking at all if it's a man who behaves like that."* This gendering of assertiveness, acceptable in men, condemned in women, was a recurring thread.

Pricing their own work was described as genuinely difficult. Participants felt compelled to accept underpaid offers rather than miss opportunities, knowing that the power asymmetry in negotiations systematically disadvantages them.

For FG2 participants, the concrete realities of remuneration are still largely in the future, but the precarity of music as a career path and the sense that it is a path with higher risks and lower floors for young women from their backgrounds was already present in the discussion. The question of whether music could ever constitute a real livelihood was raised with a mixture of ambition and realism. Several participants described having been encouraged by family or teachers to treat music as a complementary activity rather than a viable profession, an expectation they were actively working against, but that shapes the choices available to them.



Physical and Mental Wellbeing



Sexual and gender-based violence, harassment, and their impact on mental health were among the most extensively discussed topics in FG1. The music industry's specific culture (late nights, alcohol and substances, informal professional environments, power imbalances) creates conditions in which these behaviours are both more likely to occur and harder to address. Media exposure was identified as a specific vulnerability for artists, who face cyberbullying, misogynistic, racist, and homophobic abuse through social media. Practical measures proposed for making the sector safer included: listening structures within organisations; clear protocols for addressing discrimination and violence; measures such as menstrual leave and flexible working hours; reminders about workplace rules and labour law and their effective enforcement; and individual wellbeing support programmes.

In FG2, well-being was discussed less through the lens of professional experience than through the emotional reality of being a young (racialised) woman pursuing music in an environment that does not always affirm that choice. Participants described the psychological impact of not seeing themselves reflected in the music they study or the professionals they encounter, of navigating family and community expectations around what music means for a young woman from their background, and of managing the gap between passion and the practical realities of the sector.

In both cases, the closing artistic performances by young female and queer artists were described by participants as a rare and valuable experience of seeing people like themselves on stage, and of having their own presence as musicians treated as self-evidently legitimate rather than exceptional.

What participants said:

"We push ourselves, don't count our hours, give our best, become the number one in the company... and then burn out the next month."

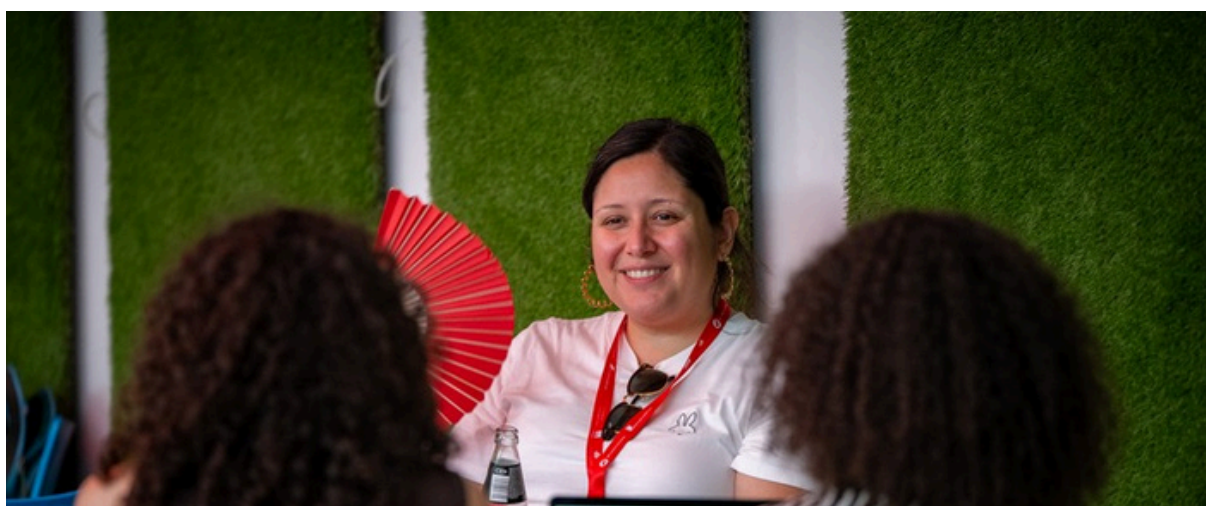
— Booking agent, FG1





The Role of Organisations and Advocacy

On allyship from male colleagues, FG1 participants described a pattern of bystander inaction. A stage manager argued that genuine allyship requires a willingness to name and call out problematic situations in real time, noting: "Sadly, sometimes people will listen more to a man than to the woman who was assaulted." A booking agent called for training at all levels so that men understand what women experience and know how to respond. On men in positions of power, participants linked widespread imposter syndrome among women directly to the absence of recognition from those in authority, producing real, lasting damage to self-confidence that reflects structural reality rather than individual psychology.



On organisations, FG1 participants agreed that networks and associations are valuable but only if known about, noting that early-career women often are not aware they exist. A stage manager noted that representation within these networks is often not very diverse, limiting their ability to think beyond the realities of their most represented members. The financial pressure on the sector, as public subsidies are cut, was identified as a specific threat: equality-focused initiatives are typically the first budgets to be reduced, "which undermines initiatives aimed at greater equality, as these are often the first budgets to be sacrificed."

For FG2 participants, Zebroch itself was identified as a key example of what a supportive organisation can look like: rooted in the local community, attuned to the specific barriers faced by young people from Seine-Saint-Denis, and creating pathways into music that the mainstream sector does not. Participants expressed a wish for more organisations like it, and for the organisations that do exist to be better connected to one another, so that the journey from Zebroch's outreach programmes to professional opportunities in the industry does not require navigating an invisible and unmapped landscape alone.





Key Outcomes and Reflections



- **Racial discrimination and gender inequality are inseparable in the experiences described across both groups:** the specific burden carried by racialised women in French music cannot be understood without both dimensions simultaneously, and this is true whether one is a working professional navigating an industry career or a young musician just beginning to imagine one.
- **Sexual and gender-based violence is described in FG1 as a structural feature of the sector, not an aberration, and its normalisation is reinforced by cultural tolerance for other boundary violations.** FG2 participants are not yet navigating these dynamics professionally, but they are already visible on the horizon, shaping the way young women think about what the industry will ask of them.
- The French “intermittent du spectacle” system provides some financial protection but does not resolve the **underlying precarity** or the **power asymmetries** that make the sector unsafe. For young people from Seine-Saint-Denis, the distance to even this partial protection is significant.
- The **homogeneity of industry leadership** (white, male, business-school-trained, profit-focused) is identified in FG1 as the root cause of both the perpetuation of inequality and the inability to change it. Structural renewal is required, not just individual behaviour change.
- Imposter syndrome is not merely a psychological phenomenon but a rational response to **repeated non-recognition in professional environments designed around different norms**. This dynamic begins earlier than the profession itself: it is already present in FG2 participants’ accounts of their musical education and aspirations.
- Community-led organisations rooted in specific territories (such as Zebrook in Seine-Saint-Denis) are among **the most effective entry points into music for young people from underrepresented backgrounds**, and their value extends well beyond music education to identity, belonging, and the formation of realistic but ambitious visions of a musical future.
- The sector needs **preventative education for young people entering the industry**, giving them tools to recognise warning signs, understand power dynamics, and know where to seek help. The closing performances at both sessions (by young, racialised, female and queer artists) were noted as meaningful in themselves: moments of representation that made the abstract goal of equality briefly, tangibly real.
- Closing words from participants across both groups pointed toward **the need to open up discussions about intersecting forms of discrimination and to equip people, from the earliest stages of their musical lives, to navigate and resist them**.



HUNGARY



COUNTRY

HUNGARY

JM Hungary / Papageno

2

FOCUS GROUPS

32

PARTICIPANTS

FACILITATORS

- **FG 1 - Scheer Lívía**, assisted by Franciska Papp and Maria Kaposi
- **FG 2 - Kaiser Fruzsina**, assisted by Franciska Papp and Maria Kaposi

DATES

- **FG 1** - June 1, 2025
- **FG 2** - September 6, 2025



FORMAT

Both sessions were conducted in person and combined semi-structured workshops, structured focus group discussions, and a closing group artistic/music performance. The facilitator actively promoted open, personal sharing rather than the pursuit of "right answers", encouraging participants to speak to one another in conversation rather than in a question-and-answer format. Sessions were conducted in Hungarian.

Participants

20

FOCUS GROUP 1 - IN PERSON

Young music students (ages 13–23) across secondary and early higher education, primarily from the Weiner conservatoire and other associated institutions and music schools. Instruments represented included voice, flute, oboe, bassoon, cello, violin, and piano.

12

FOCUS GROUP 2 - IN PERSON

University-level and early-career music professionals across performance, teaching, arts management, and music industry roles (ages 24–35).



Overview

The two Hungarian focus groups brought together young women at different stages of classical music training and early career development, all connected to JMH and its local partner organisations. The workshop-and-discussion format, rounded off in both sessions by a shared group musical performance, created a distinctive atmosphere of creative solidarity alongside analytical reflection, and participants described the combination as both practically useful and personally meaningful. The closing performances in particular were noted as a reminder of what is at stake in these conversations: not abstract policy questions but the lived reality of people who love music and are trying to build a life within it.

Participants ranged from secondary school students at the Weiner conservatoire to university students and early-career professionals, spanning voice, flute, violin, trombone, saxophone, oboe, bassoon, cello, and piano. The discussions were notably genuine and wide-ranging, touching on systemic gender inequality, the financial precarity of music careers in Hungary, the specific physical and psychological demands placed on women, and the intersection of career ambition with family planning. Across both groups, the tone moved organically from general reflections on equality to deeply personal accounts of discrimination, self-doubt, and the daily labour of being a woman in classical music.





Gender Equality and the Status Quo



Both groups identified gender norms around instruments as a visible and early-experienced form of inequality. Participants described being steered away from brass instruments, percussion, and other "masculine" instruments: sometimes explicitly, sometimes through an atmosphere of disapproval. D. (FG1) noted she is the first female instrumentalist in her ensemble and felt treated differently at the start, with colleagues adjusting their behaviour self-consciously around her. A participant in FG2 described knowing women who had been actively discouraged from choosing brass instruments, while others had been supported, identifying the individual teacher's attitude as the decisive variable rather than any institutional policy.

In FG1, the Weiner conservatoire students engaged in extensive discussion of gendered expectations in performance contexts. They identified a pervasive double standard: male musicians can perform in casual clothing, while women are scrutinised down to shoe choice, skirt length, sleeve width, and whether a bra is visible. Multiple participants shared direct experiences of being criticised before or after performances not on musical grounds but on the basis of their appearance: one was told by a teacher she could not sit the exam unless she bought high heels; another received a twenty-minute lecture on her skirt length without a word about how she sang; another was criticised for wearing the same dress at two concerts a year apart. The group contrasted this with male classmates wearing wrinkled shirts or casual shoes without comment. One participant observed that a girl spends significant time before every concert on hair, makeup, clothing, and shoes, while a boy "reaches into his wardrobe, picks something up, and brushes his hair."

The objectification of women musicians was raised as a layered problem: women are criticised if they look too casual, but also commodified if they look attractive. Participants noted the phenomenon of musicians being discussed primarily based on appearance, and the experience of being sexualised by audiences or assumed to have obtained roles through personal relationships rather than talent.

FG2 participants raised the specific issues of women in management and leadership. Z. noted the scarcity of female leaders in arts institutions, which limits access to female mentors, and that male mentors, however well-intentioned, may not recognise or relate to the specific difficulties women face. B. described being told her opinion was inappropriate, that she should be "a little charming, graceful girl" rather than someone with strong professional views. She also described being told, when declining a request, that she "must be menstruating", a dismissal confirmed by multiple participants as a pattern they had encountered or heard of.

What participants said:

"A girl spends significant time before every concert on hair, makeup, clothing and shoes. A boy reaches into his wardrobe, picks something up and brushes his hair."

— Participant, FG1





Family Planning as a Structural Barrier



Across both groups, the intersection of career and family was the most consistently and emotionally raised barrier. Hungary's classical music sector offers very limited systemic support for musicians who become pregnant, and the consequences (for wind players in particular, who cannot play during pregnancy, and for all musicians who lose momentum during extended absence) were discussed at length.

FG1 students, still in secondary school, were already thinking about this. Participants noted that female soloists often choose between building a career quickly before having children, or never fully returning to performing after motherhood. One described knowing pianists who had pursued a major solo career, gone into childbirth, and returned as a piano teacher or accompanist. Another described the practical reality: "If you can't blow when you're pregnant, you lose your place in a band, and typically after a year and a half without returning, the position is gone."

FG2 participants reinforced this from a more immediate professional perspective. K. (FG1) described being told by a prospective employer that "he could see the child in her", and therefore was not offered a job she was otherwise suited for. R. (FG2) noted that young women are implicitly or explicitly evaluated on the likelihood of future pregnancy at the point of hiring, while no equivalent question is ever put to men. Multiple participants described the pressure to either race to build a career before starting a family, or accept that a family would effectively end their professional ambition. One participant in FG2 noted that even asking whether adequate maternity systems exist within Hungarian orchestras felt naive: the question of whether musicians can go on leave and return to their position is handled inconsistently and without legal clarity.

The structural dimension (that culture and music are underfunded in Hungary, that there are only five major orchestras of any standing, and that there is a genuine scarcity of stable positions for all musicians regardless of gender) was raised repeatedly as the material basis for these dilemmas. Women bear a disproportionate share of the consequences of this scarcity because their career trajectories are more likely to be interrupted.



Career Development: Contacts, Perfectionism, and Self-Doubt

On the question of what it takes to succeed, participants across both groups identified networking and personal relationships as the dominant factor, often more decisive than talent. Several noted with frustration that auditions and opportunities in Hungary frequently operate through existing connections rather than merit, and that the anonymised audition system (playing behind a screen) is one of the few structural mechanisms that actually levels the field.

A related theme was the culture of perfectionism in Hungarian classical music education, and its disproportionate impact on young women. K. (FG1) described being "graded to decimals" and having her spirit systematically crushed by a culture of criticism that set impossibly high standards. T. noted that when she responded to criticism or expressed strong opinions in the same way male classmates did, she was labelled "hysterical", a double standard that suppresses assertiveness in women while permitting it in men.



FG1 participants at the Weiner conservatoire gave particularly vivid accounts of institutional culture. One participant described a teacher who spent a year criticising her shoe choice and eventually threatened her with exam failure over footwear. Another recounted a teacher delivering a harsh personal criticism that turned out to be the teacher's own stress displaced onto the student, only acknowledged a year and a half later. The group identified the main subject teacher's word as near-absolute within the school, meaning these dynamics are experienced as very high-stakes and very difficult to challenge.

Self-doubt and low confidence were identified as endemic among young women in the sector, with participants attributing this partly to socialisation and partly to structural conditions. Women receive more criticism, less encouragement to take risks, and are more harshly judged for errors. E. (FG1) described the cognitive load before a concert (constantly monitoring posture, appearance, and presentation) as occupying mental bandwidth that men do not have to devote to those concerns.



Employability and Remuneration

Participants across both groups described a music sector in Hungary that is structurally underfunded, with very limited permanent positions available. Most reported needing multiple income streams: orchestra work, private teaching, music school teaching, freelance engagements, and occasional festival performances. Even at the top of the profession, a stable sole income from music is exceptional. Several noted that main subject teachers at the university level typically hold four concurrent positions.

On pay differentials, opinions were nuanced. At the entry level and in state-employed orchestra positions, participants reported not perceiving overt gender pay differences, as salary scales are set collectively. However, Z. (FG2) noted that in management positions, a significant gap can emerge, driven primarily by the fact that men tend to ask for higher starting salaries and are offered them, a dynamic that compounds over time. She cited a specific example of a colleague now working abroad who discovered her male counterpart in an identical role was earning 20–30% more.

The cost of being a professional musician was extensively discussed in FG2: instruments, bows, strings, sheet music, performance costumes, phoniatician appointments, and unexpected repairs. Participants calculated that an acceptable violin requires a million-forint investment; a string set costs 40–50,000 forints and breaks without warning; a performance costume for a singer starts at 40,000 forints; and sheet music from reputable publishers can cost tens of thousands per score. These costs fall entirely on the individual musician and are essentially invisible to employers and institutions.

The contrast with Germany and Austria was raised repeatedly: in those neighbouring countries, musicians can support a family from a single orchestra position, are not obliged to hold simultaneous teaching jobs, and have access to a much larger market. The emigration of talented Hungarian musicians, described as near-universal among those who can manage it, was seen as both a rational individual response and a systemic loss for Hungarian musical life.



What participants said:

"If you can't blow when you're pregnant, you lose your place in a band... and typically after a year and a half without returning, the position is gone."

— Participant, FG1

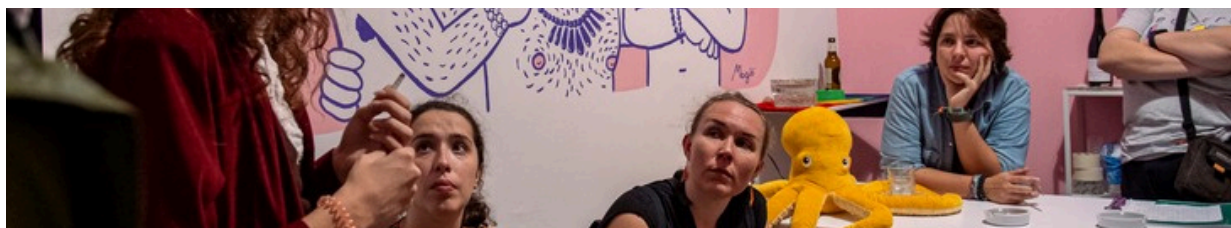




Wellbeing and Mental Health

Well-being was one of the most extensively discussed topics across both groups, and the conversation was notably personal and honest.

The physical demands of being a female musician, particularly relating to menstruation, hormonal variation, pregnancy, and the specific physical consequences of wind playing, were raised across both groups as genuine professional challenges that receive almost no institutional acknowledgement. D. (FG1) described the frustration of being more sensitive or in pain during certain periods of the month, and of having that state dismissed as "overreacting" rather than recognised as a physical reality. FG1 participants compared the physical regime of professional musicianship to that of elite athletes, noting that musicians are expected to perform at a consistent level regardless of physical state, without the salaries, physical support structures, or institutional care that athletes receive.



In FG1, the discussion of school culture at the Weiner conservatoire revealed significant concerns about the psychological environment for young musicians: 14-year-olds living away from home, isolated from parents, reliant on peer support networks that formed organically rather than by design, and exposed to teaching relationships characterised by power imbalances with little recourse. One participant described a school psychologist who had been genuinely helpful but left after two years, and whose replacement had not worked for her. The group identified the community among students as the primary well-being resource, expressing that they would likely not have continued without it. The closing group performance at the end of the session was described by participants as a tangible expression of precisely this community: a reminder that shared music-making can itself be a form of care.

FG2 participants described the emotional labour of constant performance: being expected to appear balanced and capable on stage, in front of students, and with employers, regardless of personal circumstances. One participant described a colleague who performed an opera while grieving, because cancelling was not a viable option. The expectation of professional composure at all times, combined with financial precarity and the absence of systemic mental health support, creates a chronic burden that participants described as wearing rather than acute. The closing performance in FG2 was noted as a rare moment of playing without evaluation or pressure (for its own sake, together), which several participants said they do not experience often enough in their formal training contexts or day-to-day musicianship.



Wellbeing and Mental Health

Strategies for well-being mentioned included: running for 20 minutes daily; spending weekends with friends outside music; deliberately listening to non-classical music to decompress; building peer support communities; allowing oneself to rest without guilt; and maintaining close relationships with family and partners who provide perspective outside the professional bubble.



The Role of Organisations and Allies

Both groups expressed appreciation for the focus group sessions themselves, including the informal settings and performance format, as a rare opportunity to discuss these issues in a structured, safe, and peer environment. Several participants noted that they had been surprised to discover how many experiences they shared: concerns they had assumed were personal or isolated were in fact widely held. The workshop component was particularly valued for its active, collaborative format, and the closing performance was described as giving the conversation a quality of completion: moving from words about music to music itself.

On organisations, participants offered specific suggestions: investing in women's instrument learning from an early age rather than addressing the consequences of inequality in adulthood; creating accessible forums for emotional as well as professional support; embedding mental wellbeing content into curricula at all levels of music education; developing scholarship models based on recorded performance rather than academic grades alone; and building networking opportunities specifically for young women entering the sector.

Mentorship was identified as important but structurally lacking. Female mentors in senior positions are rare; male mentors, while valuable, may have limited visibility into the specific challenges women face. R. (FG2) valued her mentor teacher warmly; B. named two specific female teachers (her music school teacher and a university lecturer) as transformative figures, models of energy, breadth, and professional generosity that gave her a concrete image of what she could aspire to be.

On allyship from men, T. (FG1) made a notably direct point: she had never heard a man publicly say that women can and should be recognised as equals in the music sector. She described a peer who had normalised the discussion of menstruation within a friend group, and how that one statement had shifted the atmosphere. She argued that male voices making these statements carry distinct weight, and that Play It Loud's work to engage male professionals on these issues is genuinely important.



Key Outcomes and Reflections



- Gender norms around instruments, appearance, and professional demeanour (specifically in the classical music scene) are experienced as **pervasive and often enforced by female teachers as much as male ones, a cycle that participants identified as needing conscious interruption.**
- **The intersection of career and family planning is the single most structurally disabling barrier for women in Hungarian classical music,** compounded by the scarcity of stable positions, the absence of reliable maternity provisions in orchestral contracts, and the physical constraints of certain instruments during pregnancy.
- **Financial precarity affects all musicians in Hungary, but falls harder on women** due to the costs of performance presentation, the likelihood of career interruption, and the tendency to undervalue and underprice their own work.
- **A culture of perfectionism and harsh criticism in music education disproportionately damages young women's confidence** and inhibits the risk-taking necessary for development.
- The absence of systemic mental health support and the collapse of the distinction between professional composure and personal wellbeing, represents **a significant unaddressed welfare issue in the sector.**
- **Community (among peers, with supportive teachers, and with family) is the primary resource through which participants sustain their careers and wellbeing,** in the absence of institutional support structures. The closing group performances in both sessions gave tangible, musical form to this community, and were among the most meaningful moments of each day.
- Closing words from participants across both groups converged on: **understanding, encouragement, support, networking, acceptance** ... a call not for radical change but for basic recognition of what it means to be a woman doing this work.



ITALY



COUNTRY

ITALY

Associazione Culturale Darshan

2

FOCUS GROUPS

30

PARTICIPANTS

FACILITATORS

- **FG 1 - Mariaelena Urso**, assisted by Giulia Annibaletti
- **FG 2 - Mariaelena Urso**, assisted by Giulia Annibaletti

DATES

- **FG 1** - September 12, 2025
- **FG 2** - September 13, 2025



FORMAT

Both sessions were conducted in person in Catania, Sicily, in the framework of Darshan's MIC (Music in the Circle) Conference. Sessions combined semi-structured workshops and structured focus group discussions following the standard PIL! Focus Group guidelines. The facilitator actively promoted open, personal sharing, encouraging participants to speak to one another in conversation rather than in a question-and-answer format. Sessions were conducted in Italian on two consecutive days.

Participants

16

FOCUS GROUP 1 - IN PERSON

Music professionals from across Sicily active in the music industry with different backgrounds, profiles and roles, and engaged in the framework of Darshan's MIC (Music in the Circle) Conference.

14

FOCUS GROUP 2 - IN PERSON

Young musicians identifying as women and based in or connected to Catania, Sicily, spanning indie rock, singer-songwriter, folk/traditional, photography/emerging performance, and jazz.





Overview



The Catania focus groups brought together music professionals and young women active across a range of music sectors (indie rock, jazz, singer-songwriter, folk/traditional, festival organisers, grassroots community initiatives, and music pedagogy) in a city and region that presents its own specific structural challenges. Participants ranged from emerging artists early in their careers to more experienced practitioners with organisational and advocacy roles, and reflecting a mix of formal and informal musical backgrounds shaped by the economic and geographic realities of southern Italy.

The discussion was lively, sincere, and at times philosophically rich, with participants engaging not only with their personal experiences of gender inequality but also debating strategies for responding to it, the limits of those strategies, and the deeper cultural roots of the problems they face. Southern Italy's specific economic and infrastructural context shaped several key themes, particularly around access to resources, geographic inequality, and precarious working conditions.





Gender Equality and the Status Quo



In both FGs, opening discussions moved quickly from abstract definitions of equality to concrete personal experiences. Participants identified a consistent pattern of being seen first as women, and only secondarily, if at all, as musicians. G. (FG2) articulated this with particular force: she does not want to be propositioned while concentrating on a show; she wants her voice to be heard the way a guitarist's guitar is heard... as an instrument, not as an extension of a gendered body. She drew on the example of Adele's famous response to body commentary to make this point: the instrument is the voice, and everything else is a distraction from it.

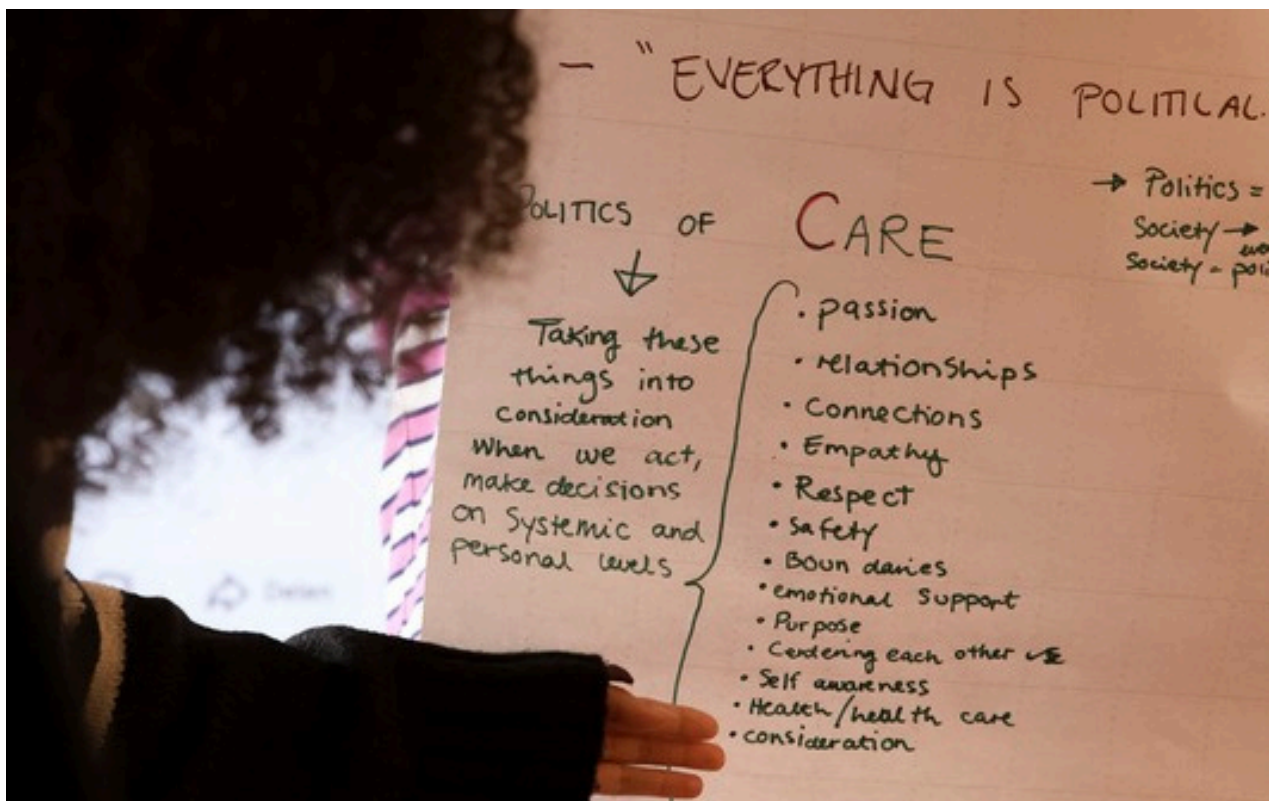
C. (FG2) described a related experience: being young and female means not being taken seriously, being subject to unsolicited advice from male colleagues about her own work, and being made to feel that her professionalism is perceived differently from a man's would be. The added intersection of youth and gender ("not only are you a woman, but you are also young") was identified in both FGs as compounding the loss of credibility. M. (FG1) recounted a specific episode in an instrument shop where a male stranger simply directed all conversation to her male colleague and physically turned his back to her when she tried to contribute, despite her being the one with specific knowledge of the guitar in question.

A. (FG2) noted that the problems she has experienced have often arisen before even arriving at the performance: in the professional and interpersonal dynamics of project-building, where male colleagues' failure to behave professionally towards her as a woman has undermined potential collaborations before they could begin.





Gender Equality and the Status Quo



F. (FG1), speaking from her experience as an organiser in the jazz world (a space she described as numerically dominated by men), offered a more structural framing: the gender gap in jazz is partly a numbers problem, but the numbers themselves reflect deeper cultural attitudes. She distinguished women who resist gendered treatment and women who accommodate or even reproduce it, arguing that the perpetuation of a certain culture depends on both. She described her own strategy of mirroring: making the same jokes about men that are made about women, in order to create a moment of "displacement" that makes the original behaviour visible. The group engaged in an interesting debate about this strategy, as some participants disagreed that mirroring was the right approach, arguing that responding in kind feeds the cycle rather than breaking it. F. clarified that she was not advocating for counter-violence but for subtle, soft, equal treatment, and that when the situation crossed into genuinely problematic behaviour, she would become direct and serious rather than ironic.

In FG2, the discussion also touched on the variation between music environments: A. observed that electronic and younger scenes in Italy feel more equal, while academic, classical and jazz contexts tend to be more conservative and male-dominated. She noted that genre and generational dynamics interact, and that the situation is improving among younger musicians, but that structural norms in institutional music education lag significantly behind.



Career Development and the Question of Success

On what it takes to succeed in music, participants of the two sessions gave notably honest and divergent answers. C. (FG2) reflected that success itself is relative and self-defined, that chasing the kind of success the record industry offers (the "summer song") is not her goal, and that each person must identify their own path. S. (FG2) described a childhood dream of performing on big stages and having audiences sing her songs back to her, but acknowledged that reaching that kind of success requires luck as well as talent, risk-taking, and confronting significant internal and external challenges.

M. (FG1) raised, with evident emotion, that she had been told at an industry event that to be successful, women sometimes have to "give up their bodies." She stated clearly and forcefully that she will never accept this. Participants contextualised it as a pattern not unique to music (many industries instrumentalise young women this way) but noted that those who accept such terms damage the conditions for everyone who refuses. A. offered a practical response to this: if a colleague is clearly pushing in that direction, the most effective response is simply to leave the context and find better ones. Not every situation requires a direct confrontation; sometimes, walking away is both the safest and most dignified choice.

Across the two groups, artistic residencies and informal networks (particularly through Ethno) were identified as the most genuinely useful forms of support for career development. B. valued residencies for the opportunity to meet potential collaborators in a safe, personal context rather than through open advertisements, which carry the risk of encountering people with whom she does not feel safe. G. described Ethno as the only context in which she had ever experienced music in a truly equal, non-judgemental way: a space where she felt valued for what she brought rather than scrutinised or categorised. She contrasted this with more formal academic competitions (she mentioned Umbria Jazz) as technically valuable but very different in atmosphere. She described recommending Ethno to everyone she meets as a result.

On formal support programmes and initiatives, knowledge was limited. M. mentioned MiC Expo as a resource for learning practical music business skills. G. referenced the FUS (Italian Fund for Performing Arts) and the 2030 Agenda as relevant frameworks. None of the participants was aware of specific gender-focused mentoring or support programmes within the Italian music sector.

What participants said:

"When I found the right environment, one where I was judged on my music rather than my identity, my concerns about inequality essentially disappeared. The lesson is that environmental selection is a significant part of the strategy."

— Participant, FG1





Employability and Remuneration



The discussions around working conditions reflected the specific economic context of southern Italy. G. described the difficulty of working from Catania as a musician: few contracts, limited access to rehearsal spaces and recording studios without cost, and a general scarcity of employers willing to offer stable opportunities. Geographic location in the south compounds already difficult conditions for young musicians: fewer connections, fewer venues, fewer structures to support professional development. She noted that she had not been able to devote as much time to music as she would like because of these structural constraints, but was now (having completed her studies) committed to prioritising it.

On pricing and pay, A. described navigating this challenge across her dual roles as photographer and musician. As a photographer, she has developed strategies for valuing her own work by researching what colleagues charge and holding her price even when it means losing projects. She named this clearly: saying no is the only way to gain respect and set boundaries, even though it means forgoing opportunities. She noted that from her limited experience as a musician, adequate remuneration is even harder to negotiate, and that not being taken seriously as a woman compounds the difficulty.



F. described similar strategies: understanding what colleagues are typically paid, insisting on being paid according to her competence rather than her perceived inexperience or visibility, and being prepared to leave contexts where she felt she was being discriminated against financially. She emphasised that when she found the right environment (one where she was judged on her music rather than her identity), her concerns about inequality essentially disappeared. The practical lesson she drew was that environmental selection is a significant part of the strategy.

The question of living solely from music was not directly answered, though the clear implication across multiple contributions in both FGs was that this is not currently possible for any of the participants, and that the structural conditions in Sicily and southern Italy make it particularly unlikely in the near term.



Physical and Mental Wellbeing

Participants named psychotherapy and sport as primary personal strategies, and A. added mindfulness and "getting angry" (the capacity to feel and express emotion) as part of her toolkit. B. noted simply that music itself is what makes her feel well, and that it is the absence of music that is harmful rather than the presence of it.

C. offered a more philosophical framing: the foundation of wellbeing for her is a solid relationship with herself and a clear sense of her own competence. From that basis, she described dealing with situations directly rather than letting them accumulate (naming problems when they arise, trying to resolve them, accepting what cannot be changed and moving on). She noted that addressing things directly can sometimes open unexpected doors: people who behave in certain ways may simply not have considered the impact, and presenting a thought directly to them can open new possibilities.

G. described a specific experience at an Ethno programme where she experienced verbal harassment from another participant. The presence of a person she could speak to about it was described as very important, suggesting that a named, trusted contact/safety person within an organisation is a genuine and practical safety mechanism rather than a symbolic one.



What participants said:

"I don't want to be propositioned while concentrating on a show. I want my voice to be heard the way a guitarist's guitar is heard: as an instrument, not as an extension of a gendered body."

— Participant, FG2





The Role of Organisations and Advocacy



On what organisations could and should do, participants offered a convergent set of recommendations in both FGs:

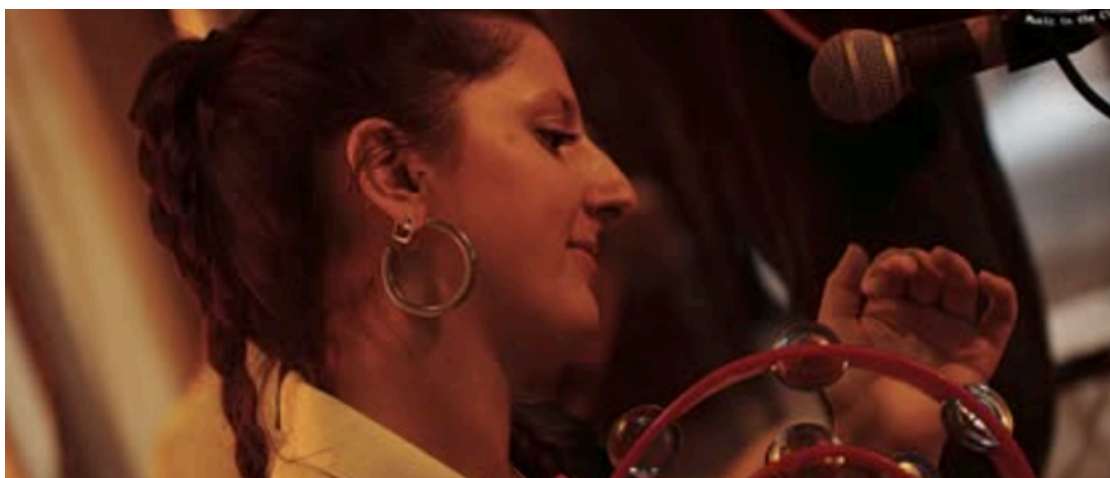
- The provision of a named reference person or trusted figure within events and organisations, specifically to receive disclosures of harassment, abuse, or uncomfortable situations, was identified as a concrete practical priority (drawing on direct experience).
- Participants called for more structured moments of exchange and discussion (like these focus groups) as part of ongoing prevention work, and for collaboration with institutional music training contexts (conservatories, music schools) to ensure that musicians are educated not only technically but also about the social and professional challenges they will face.
- Participants advocated for integrating gender studies and humanities content into music education curricula. A. noted that gender studies already exist across many faculties but must be applied across all life contexts, not confined to the arts.
- Participants called for more awareness-raising activities generally, and M. emphasised that male colleagues and employers have a role to play: treating female colleagues as equals (no special treatment, no line-crossing, and fair wages) is both the minimum standard and the most effective form of structural support available to men in the sector.



Key Outcomes and Reflections



- **Gender inequality in Italian music is experienced as pervasive, normalised, and culturally embedded**, not specific to music but acutely expressed within it, particularly in more traditional and academic environments. Younger and electronic scenes are perceived as more progressive.
- **Sexualisation and objectification of women musicians** (in audience dynamics, professional relationships, and even career-entry propositions) **are named as real and ongoing risks**, not historical artefacts.
- **Geographic location in southern Italy compounds gender disadvantage with structural economic precarity**: fewer opportunities, fewer networks, fewer resources, and greater difficulty accessing the kind of informal support (residencies, mentoring, peer networks) that help careers develop.
- **Pricing and self-worth are areas where women face a specific form of difficulty**: the challenge of asserting the value of their work in a sector that routinely undervalues it, and the risk of being seen as less professional or serious if they do so.
- **Ethno (JMI) emerged as a genuinely transformative experience for multiple participants**, cited as one of the few spaces where they had experienced music in a truly equal, non-judgemental environment, and where they had built lasting networks they trust.
- The group's closing words were **collaboration, union, comparison, environment, exchange**, reflecting a vision of music as fundamentally **relational and collective**, and a desire for the sector to be built on mutual support rather than competition.



NORTH MACEDONIA



COUNTRY

NORTH MACEDONIA

JM Macedonia

2

FOCUS GROUPS

48

PARTICIPANTS

FACILITATORS

- **FG 1 - Iva Damjanovski**
- **FG 2 - Sara Bogoeva**, assisted by Iva Damjanovski.

DATES

- **FG 1** - October 3, 2025
- **FG 2** - October 4, 2025



FORMAT

Both sessions were conducted in person and featured semi-structured workshops and group discussions that encouraged a conversational tone. The facilitator actively promoted open, personal sharing over the pursuit of "right answers". The first session targeted young cultural and music professionals aged 25 to 35, as well as some young musicians aged 20 to 25 who are currently involved in JMM music programs. The second session, held on October 4, was part of JM Macedonia's Imagine National Finals and included approximately 30 young musicians, the majority of whom were between 17 and 25 years old, from across the country.

Participants

18

FOCUS GROUP 1 - IN PERSON

Young cultural/music professionals and young musicians under 35 already engaged in JMM activities.

30

FOCUS GROUP 2 - IN PERSON (TWO SUBGROUPS)

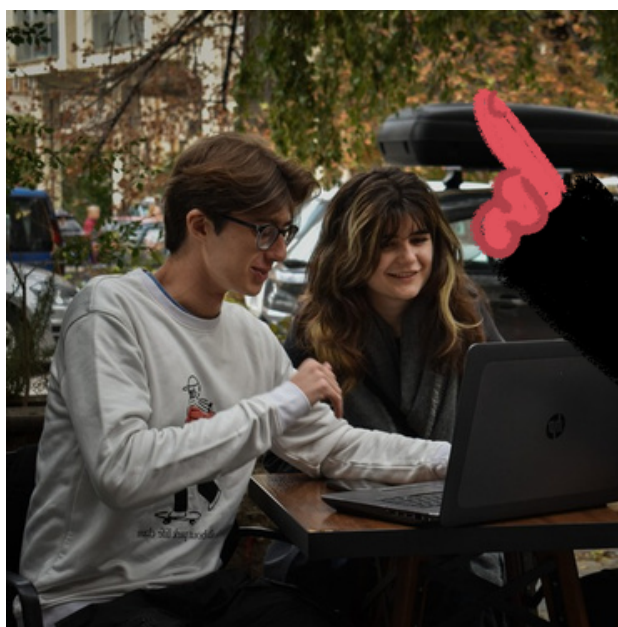
Young musicians participating in Imagine Macedonia 2025.





Overview

The two Macedonian focus groups brought together a richly diverse set of young people across career stages, music sectors, and personal identities. The younger group (FG2) included students and early-career musicians from classical, alternative, and non-professional backgrounds, while the older group (FG1) comprised active professionals working across classical performance, jazz, DJing, cultural management, and the NGO sector. Together, they produced a layered and often candid picture of the music sector in North Macedonia, one shaped by structural underfunding, geographic centralisation, tokenistic inclusion practices, and the emotional demands of working in a field that is simultaneously a passion and a source of profound precarity.





Gender Equality and the Status Quo



Both groups began with a broad framing of gender equality and quickly moved into nuanced, sometimes challenging territory. Participants described a music education system that centres male figures at every level: male conductors, male professors, male violinists as the benchmark, male composers as almost the entirety of the curriculum. V. observed that even when choosing ensemble partners, she consciously considers including a male musician so the group will be *"taken more seriously"*: a self-censorship she identified as systemic rather than personal. Z. noted that, as a percussionist, a field almost entirely male-dominated, she has been routinely undermined and not heard, despite being the orchestral leader, unless her instructions were first validated by the male conductor.

The alternative scene was consistently described as more equal in practice. L. and A. both reported overwhelmingly positive experiences in their bands, where their opinions were respected and their identities unremarkable. Z. reinforced this contrast directly: she feels more accepted in bands than in the classical orchestral environment where she hopes to build her professional career, a painful disjunction.

In FG1, the framing of gender equality was complicated by a sustained critique of tokenism. Several participants expressed discomfort with the ways inclusion is currently enacted: quota-driven lineups, "Ladies' Night" branding, and the instrumentalisation of women (and people with disabilities) as visible markers of an organisation's progressive values. A. stated this with particular directness: being praised for being "a woman who plays the double bass" makes her feel like "a zoo specimen". She is a double bassist, full stop. E., as a person with complete blindness, described a structurally identical experience: being invited to projects not because of her extensive career as a pianist, but because she represents a desirable image of disability inclusion. She has repeatedly declined such invitations and only recently developed strategies to screen for genuine vs performative engagement.

What participants said:

"Being praised for being 'a woman who plays the double bass' makes me feel like a zoo specimen."

— Participant, FG1

What participants said:

"An unnatural ecosystem where in the end nobody feels good."

— Participant, FG1





Gender Equality and the Status Quo



E. raised the specific dynamics of the DJ and electronic music scene, where post-COVID booking practices have created a situation where entire female-only lineups are assembled not on artistic merit but to fulfil an image requirement. The artists themselves then have no way of knowing whether they were booked for their talent, and the resulting confusion and self-doubt undermine rather than support their confidence.

A shared insight across both groups was that forced or top-down inclusion creates an "unnatural ecosystem where in the end nobody feels good" (E.). Meaningful change requires depth and time, not the completion of a project or the filling of a quota.



Intersectionality: Disability, LGBT Identity, and Geographic Disadvantage

Both focus groups gave significant space to dimensions of inequality beyond gender. In FG1, J. opened the discussion with a reflection on a friend with autism whose musical expression offered her a freedom of communication unavailable in spoken language: an account that framed music as a transformative space for those the mainstream often excludes. In FG2, O., an LGBT musician, described the profound anxiety preceding the release of the first Macedonian queer-themed song (released under a pseudonym, "for obvious reasons"), and the relief and surprise at its warm reception. The song has only been performed once in public, in the alternative space of Laboratorium. O. and V. discussed whether a performance on national television would be conceivable, both agreeing it would take courage and significant risk, and that the mainstream remains far less safe than the alternative scene.

E. (FG1) spoke at length about the intersection of disability and performative inclusion, and the exhaustion of navigating a sector where her presence is routinely instrumentalised. She has set clear personal limits and now screens engagements carefully, but noted that the underlying mindset is only slowly changing.

Geographic disadvantage was a recurring theme. Z. described Tetovo, where her band has been active for eight years and has managed only three local concerts. N. and others described how virtually all musical infrastructure, audiences, and opportunities are concentrated in Skopje. Other cities have standing cultural centres, sometimes renovated and physically impressive, but these are largely unstaffed and inactive. The absence of local music scenes pushes young people from smaller cities either towards Skopje or out of the sector entirely.



Career Development and What It Takes to Succeed

Across both groups, success in music was understood to require not only talent and hard work but also financial resources, a team, strong networks, and a degree of luck. In FG1, several participants noted a generalised social stigma attached to artistic careers (the "starving artist" stereotype) which shapes both family attitudes and young people's own self-perception from an early age. In FG2, I. described navigating this from age fourteen, when she chose to attend art school; L. chose computer science precisely so she could afford to fund her music independently.

O. described their career prospects with humour and candour: hoping to land an orchestra position while simultaneously building a profile in a completely different kind of music, with no certainty about either. The intersection of classical training and queer artistry made the path doubly uncertain. J. added that the road to professional sustainability in music is "very difficult and unpredictable, especially in our country, as there is a deficit of workplaces for musicians".

In FG1, A. and E. both described their ability to live from music as "debatable", the most precise answer available. J. spoke of multiple parallel income streams: music teaching, collaborative projects with DIY organisations, inclusive education work, and occasional formal engagements... none of which alone provides stability. The sector's centralisation in Skopje, the absence of a functioning music industry infrastructure outside the capital, and the systemic failure to invest in or digitise Macedonia's own musical heritage (I. could not find a Macedonian evergreen on social media platforms) all compound individual career difficulties.





Employability and Remuneration



Payment was one of the most substantively discussed topics across both sessions, with participants in FG1 in particular drawing on concrete professional experience to describe a sector characterised by very low and stagnant fees, normalised unpaid work, and a near-total absence of collective standards.

A. noted that bar and venue fees for jazz musicians have been "locked in for decades" and that price increases are impossible to sustain individually: if one musician refuses a low fee, another accepts it, and the rate stays the same. This dynamic of enforced undercutting was described as a structural problem requiring collective action, but musician solidarity of this kind does not yet exist. E. has set a personal minimum and declines engagements below it; T. has stopped taking unpaid gigs entirely, having experienced how doing so normalises undervaluation both for herself and for colleagues.

J. offered a particularly striking account: in a two-year international project, she was told directly by a fellow (Belgian) artist that Macedonian participants should receive lower pay because local living standards are lower... a logic she and E. both rejected as a fundamental misunderstanding of how artistic contribution is valued, and as a form of discrimination that made genuine creative collaboration impossible.

In FG2. N. raised the landscape of showcase festivals as theoretically promising but practically limited: bookers attend these events but spend their time in the delegate area rather than watching acts; showcase networks tend to be self-referential; and local artists are not paid while foreign artists are. She described the label Mrtov Konj's approach as one of persistent pragmatism: booking around tours, accepting some low-fee gigs to build presence, while acknowledging that no Macedonian artist has yet demonstrated a sustainable model for breaking out internationally through this route.

On the question of where money should come from, there was broad consensus: a combination of state baseline funding (covering venue infrastructure, technical staff, and security) with a revived culture of ticket sales. E. and T. both identified the practice of giving out large numbers of free tickets as corrosive: even people who claim to support the artist expect not to pay, and this needs cultural change alongside any structural reform. E. noted that moving from free-admission to ticketed events should happen gradually to avoid alienating audiences who have been conditioned by one model.



Wellbeing and Mental Health

The well-being discussion was notably honest and personal in both FGs. N. identified the emotional toll of constant unprofessionalism (unanswered messages, last-minute changes, unreliable communication) as a significant source of stress, particularly because it reflects a broader lack of respect for the labour of coordination and management. J. described the difficulty of achieving any stability in a field characterised by extreme irregularity of work and income, and expressed a wish for enough stability to “simply have time for the people she loves”. E. described oscillating between phases of overdrive and depression, and a hard-won maturity in managing this cycle: no longer letting every negative experience destabilise her, and choosing carefully whom she allows to affect her.

O. spoke movingly about the anxiety preceding the release of their queer-themed song: not just artistic vulnerability but genuine concern about physical safety. The relief and joy when the reception was positive were described as a “big moment”, but the fact that the song was released under a pseudonym illustrates the limits of that relative safety.

I. observed that the generation of Macedonian cultural workers older than the participants' own tends to carry the accumulated trauma of the post-Yugoslav period and is often not in a position to model healthy professional or artistic life, meaning the participants are effectively constructing their own reference frameworks without adequate mentors.





Role Models and the Role of Organisations



The absence of local role models was a consistent theme in both groups. In FG1, I. noted that she could only identify Iva (the facilitator) as a genuine local role model: someone visibly working across multiple artistic and organisational fields with apparent success. Z. credited her professor at the Philharmonic as a key source of support and inspiration. O. described having largely taken on the role of role model for the queer community in music by default, in the absence of anyone else in that space. V., who recently relocated abroad, described how her performances of Macedonian folklore music had already led parents to contact her about teaching their children... an organic form of inspiration she described with pleasure.

On organisations, opinions were divided. I. described Laboratorium's model (charging large corporate clients for use of the big hall to cross-subsidise artists) as a practical and values-driven approach to sustainability. She highlighted EU funding as the primary source of support for marginalised artists in Macedonia, noting that the state remains largely indifferent. M. described the NGO sector's quota-based approaches critically, while acknowledging that, as a booker, she genuinely struggles with how to increase the number of strong female artists to book without resorting to tokenistic workarounds. E. was the most pointed in her criticism of how NGOs execute inclusion projects, describing a pattern where artists are instrumentalised as symbols of diversity while being treated with disrespect in practice, and where "the level of hypocrisy you encounter in the process is the main problem."

Both groups flagged the gap between awareness events and lasting change. A. (FG2) articulated this clearly: projects and workshops are useful for participants, but reach a small, already-aware group, and the change generated is minimal. The challenge of reaching those who most need exposure to these ideas, rather than those already converted, was named as a key unresolved question.



Key Outcomes and Reflections



- **The classical music sector in North Macedonia remains male-centred in curriculum, faculty representation, and professional norms**, while the alternative scene is experienced as significantly more inclusive and equal in practice.
- **Tokenistic inclusion, whether of women, people with disabilities, or LGBT artists, is widely and critically identified by participants as counterproductive**, generating self-doubt rather than empowerment in the artists concerned.
- **Financial precarity is near-universal**: almost no participant can live from music alone, fees are stagnant and low, payment norms are poorly defined and weakly enforced, and geographic centralisation in Skopje dramatically limits opportunity outside the capital.
- **Geographic and structural inequality (city vs. rural; Macedonia vs. Western Europe) compounds inequality and creates nested systems of disadvantage** that individual initiative alone cannot address.
- The **normalisation of unpaid or underpaid work**, including at major festivals, requires collective action and cultural change that currently lacks the institutional conditions to develop.
- **Wellbeing is affected not only by financial precarity but by the emotional labour of navigating disrespect, unprofessionalism, and the constant need to prove worth**, compounded for those with intersecting marginalised identities.
- The **absence of credible local role models** (outside close personal relationships) leaves younger participants building their own frameworks without adequate scaffolding, a situation that itself demands attention from organisations and institutions.
- The desire expressed most consistently across both groups was simple and clear: **to be valued and engaged for the quality of their work, not their gender, disability, nationality, or any other identity marker**, and to be treated with consistent professional respect.





NORWAY

COUNTRY

NORWAY

JM Norway

2

FOCUS GROUPS

33

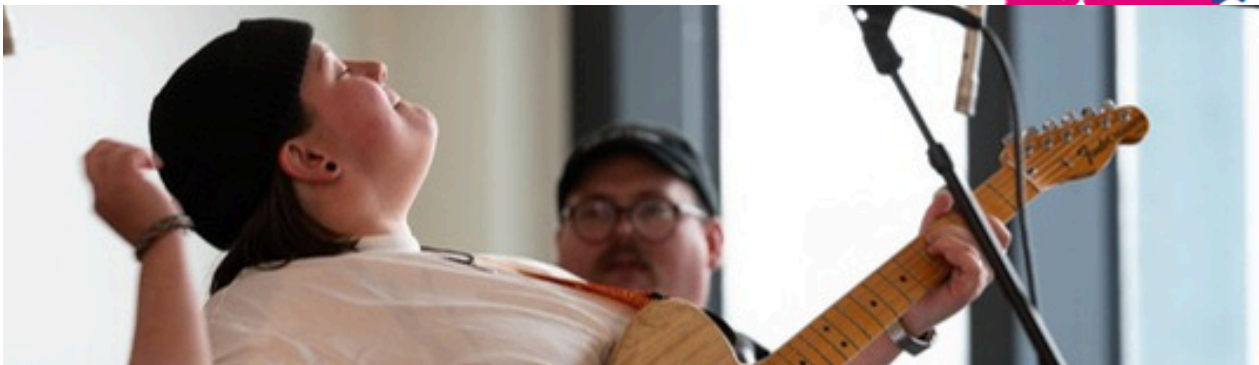
PARTICIPANTS

FACILITATORS

- **FG 1 - Nor Sarira**, assisted by Sofie Søndervik Sæther and Ingrid Dyrnes Svendsen (JMN)
- **FG 2 - Maya Heimro Skjelseth**, assisted by Melissa Hagen and Ingrid Dyrnes Svendsen (JMN)

DATES

- **FG 1** - June 7, 2025
- **FG 2** - November 23, 2025



FORMAT

Both sessions were conducted in person in Norway and combined semi-structured workshops and structured focus group discussions following the standard PIL guidelines and pedagogical approach. They both included informal social moments (meals/coffee breaks). FG1 brought together participants from across the Nordic region through the LOUD!/GRCA network. FG2 was organised as part of JM Norway's ongoing ElektroLoud initiatives and events. The facilitators, supported by JMN staff and PIL EQ participants of A1 and A2, actively promoted open, personal sharing, encouraging participants to talk about lived experiences and to converse with one another rather than in a question-and-answer format.

Participants



FOCUS GROUP 1 - IN PERSON

17

Young women and gender non-conforming musicians and music workers from Norway, Iceland, and Finland, connected through the LOUD!/GRCA network. Professional backgrounds span performance (drums, bass, vocals, rap), music production, sound engineering, and music organisation involvement.

FOCUS GROUP 2 - IN PERSON

16

A mixed group combining two profiles: young musicians aged 16–25 identifying as women, trans, or non-binary from the Oslo region, enrolled in JM Norway's ElektroLoud initiatives and events; and youth workers and music professionals aged 25–40, currently employed or engaged as volunteers or collaborators at JM Norway, identifying as female and/or non-binary/queer.





Overview



The two Norwegian focus groups brought together participants at different stages of their musical lives and with different relationships to the music industry, but united by a shared experience of navigating spaces that were not designed with them in mind. FG1 gathered young women and gender non-conforming musicians from across the Nordic region (Norway, Iceland, and Finland) connected through the LOUD grassroots network and spanning performance, production, sound engineering, and music organisation roles. FG2 combined two complementary profiles: younger musicians aged 16–25 from the Oslo region enrolled in JM Norway's ElektroLoud initiatives, identifying as women, trans, or non-binary; and music professionals and youth workers aged 25–40 currently engaged with JM Norway, identifying as female and/or non-binary/queer. Together, the two groups offered a layered picture: FG1 providing depth of cross-Nordic comparative perspective, FG2 grounding the discussion in the specific institutional context of JM Norway and the experiences of a younger generation just beginning to find their place in the sector.

The central themes that emerged across both sessions were: the systemic underrepresentation of women and non-binary people in technical and production roles; the pressure to conform to sexualised or otherwise narrowly defined images of femininity in order to gain visibility; financial precarity compounded by structural discouragement from the revenue-generating skills of the industry; the vital but often insufficient role of grassroots community-building as a survival strategy; and the specific value (and limitations) of organisations like LOUD and JM Norway as spaces of support, training, and belonging.





Gender Equality and the Status Quo

The opening discussion in both groups quickly moved from abstract definitions of equality to structural observation. In FG1, participants identified the most glaring inequality not in performance per se, but in the production, engineering, and technical infrastructure of music, the parts of the industry that generate the most stable income and hold the most power. As one participant put it: "It's not good enough that there's only a female singer, but everything else in the production is just men." The visible presence of women as performers is not, in itself, equality.

Several FG1 participants noted that the grassroots and politically engaged music scenes they inhabit feel considerably more equal than mainstream industry contexts, because participants enter those spaces with shared awareness of inequalities and a conscious commitment to countering them. S. described the effect: "everyone is consciously trying to lift up everyone, and then it just creates this equal space," noting that their scene has markedly more female producers, sound designers, and mixing engineers than the mainstream. H., by contrast, described working in the jazz world (primarily with older cisgender men) as a fundamentally different experience requiring constant self-proof: "I've always felt like I've had to prove myself as a drummer, before I get gigs or opportunities."

N. raised an important critical counterpoint: initiatives explicitly designed to bring more women into professional spaces sometimes fail to follow through on their promises. She described being recruited into a studio collective with a stated aim to increase female participation, only to find that the training and opportunities promised never materialised. "The women are there, but they're not really getting opportunities. They're just invisible." She distinguished this from the LOUD space, which she described as genuinely following up, but noted the risk that organisations may use inclusion rhetoric to access grants without implementing real change.



What participants said:

"It's not good enough that there's only a female singer, but everything else in the production is just men."

— Participant, FG1





Gender Equality and the Status Quo



S. (FG2) identified a foundational site of inequality in education: in her music school, all 14 drummers are men; of 14 guitarists, only 2 are female; she is the only female bassist. Women and non-binary students gravitate toward piano, voice, and strings: not because of formal restriction, but because of the gendered expectations embedded in how instrument choice is socially navigated from childhood. "Girls and non-binary people are not encouraged to freely choose their instrument."

In FG2, these dynamics were visible both from the perspective of the younger ElektroLoud participants, who were already encountering gendered assumptions about their musical roles and abilities in their schools and local scenes, and from the more experienced music professionals and youth workers in the group, who could name the patterns with institutional fluency. The professionals described recognising in the younger participants the same barriers they had navigated themselves, and expressed a particular concern about the gap between what JM Norway's programmes try to offer and what the broader sector continues to reproduce. The ElektroLoud participants noted that even within relatively safe and intentional spaces, the default assumption that production and technical work belong to men requires active and repeated resistance.





Career Development



On what it takes to succeed, FG1 participants emphasised resilience, self-confidence, and the willingness to push through persistent doubt, while clearly stating that the baseline demand for these qualities is significantly higher for non-cisgender-male musicians. S. described the asymmetry directly: a man putting out music would simply feel confident it would be received well, while she constantly second-guesses herself. E. described a standard that is both higher and differently shaped for women: "the bar is a bit more low for men... As a non-cis male, you have to really prove that you have the skills. And even then, you might not be good enough because of your looks."

N. raised a specific and pointed observation about visibility and sexualisation: in the Norwegian rap scene, female artists who have gained mainstream radio attention have tended to adopt heavily sexualised images to do so. Female rappers who have not taken that route, including established names, are not recognised as rappers. "You'll notice in Norway, they always say, oh, it's finally a female rapper. But we already have them." This invisibilisation of women who do not conform to specific visual expectations extends beyond rap to the sector generally: visibility is available, but only on terms that many participants find incompatible with their artistic and personal integrity.

M., as a gender non-conforming participant in FG1, raised the psychological weight of not being able to identify a single gender non-conforming artist in Norway: "It makes me kind of question: maybe if I were to conform more to my natural born sex that could lead to more success?" This absence of visible role models creates genuine uncertainty about whether a non-conforming artistic identity is compatible with a viable career.

In FG2, the younger ElektroLoud participants described a similar experience of limited role models, particularly in production and technical roles, and expressed the significance of ElektroLoud itself as a space where they could begin to imagine themselves as producers, engineers, and active shapers of music rather than only its performers. The music professionals and youth workers in the group reflected on the importance of this early exposure, drawing on their own experiences of having found (or not found) such spaces at the equivalent stage of their development. Several described their current work with JM Norway as motivated in part by a wish to provide for younger generations what had been absent for them. Sources of support named across both groups included mentorship programmes, genre-specific labels and organisations that actively invest in underrepresented musicians, funding bodies such as Sara (Finland) and the Laut network (Iceland), and most consistently the LOUD and GRCA networks, Play it Loud, and JM Norway's ElektroLoud programme.



Self-Promotion and Community-Building

On self-promotion, FG1 participants were realistic: the demand that artists also be publishers, marketers, and entrepreneurs is a structural feature of the current music economy that falls especially hard on those without institutional backing. M. described it plainly: "You have to have two jobs. You have to be a publisher and a music maker."

The most practically useful advice shared in FG1 was around community-building rather than individual self-promotion strategy. N. described the value of finding like-minded people ("find people that are like you and create community with them"), noting how publishing music into a community that already knows and trusts you generates real responses: listening, sharing, tips, and opportunities. S. described a similar trajectory in Iceland: publishing demos to SoundCloud got her gigs, radio appearances, and entry into a community of people with similar musical values. M. articulated the philosophical dimension: "By speaking with people from that community, you can create links and also realise that you may have the same questions and problems. So you feel less alone."



In FG2, community-building was also central, but experienced differently across the two sub-groups. For the younger ElektroLoud participants, the programme itself represented their primary experience of musical community outside of school, a space where they could make music with others who shared their identities and values, without having to explain or justify their presence. For the professionals and youth workers, the question of community had evolved into one of sustainability: how to maintain and grow these spaces over time, with limited resources and in the face of institutional indifference. Several described the challenge of reaching young people who do not yet know that spaces like ElektroLoud exist, mirroring the visibility gap identified in FG1.



Employability and Remuneration



On working conditions, FG1 identified both overt and structural financial inequality. M. noted that women and non-binary musicians are frequently less aware of their rights, pricing norms, and legal frameworks, and that this information asymmetry is sometimes deliberately exploited. N. offered the most structurally sophisticated account of how financial disadvantage is built into the production ecosystem: because women and non-binary musicians are systematically discouraged from producing, mixing, or mastering their own work, or told their technical skills are not good enough, they lose a significant portion of potential income at every stage of making a song. "That is the way we're losing a lot of money." She also noted that female and non-binary instrumentalists are booked less and paid less than equivalent male musicians, not because they do not exist but because booking culture systematically defaults to men.

M. raised a concern not prominently surfaced in other country reports: the specific vulnerability of freelance workers, and the compounding disadvantage faced by queer and disabled musicians within the freelance economy. The inability to afford to be sick (no sick pay, no job security) is a practical barrier that disproportionately affects those already more likely to experience health challenges. The honest consensus on whether participants could live from music was "not yet, and it's hard to imagine", with multiple income streams identified as necessary, and the structural discouragement from acquiring revenue-generating technical skills making this path harder for women and non-binary musicians than for their male counterparts.

In FG2, the question of making a living from music was discussed from two angles. For the younger ElektroLoud participants, it was largely prospective, but already marked by a realistic awareness that the odds are not evenly distributed, and that the path is harder for those who do not fit the default image of a working musician. For the professionals and youth workers, the discussion was grounded in the lived experience of the sector's precarity: several described having needed to hold multiple roles simultaneously (as performers, educators, administrators, and volunteers) in order to remain professionally active in music.

The role of JM Norway's programmes was identified as particularly important in this respect: by offering paid or meaningfully structured opportunities to young people early in their careers, LOUD, ElektroLoud and related initiatives can make a concrete difference to the economic viability of a musical life for those who would otherwise not be able to afford the unpaid period of building a career.

What participants said:

"That is the way we're losing a lot of money: women and non-binary musicians are systematically discouraged from producing, mixing or mastering their own work, and they lose a significant portion of potential income at every stage."

— Participant, FG1





Wellbeing

On wellbeing, FG1's S. framed the issue at its broadest: "We will always have issues with everything we do just trying to live. So like, yeah, it will always be hard for us, like, no matter what we do." The mental health cost of being a minority in male-dominated spaces (the loneliness, the exhaustion of constant self-proof, the risk of being spoken over) was acknowledged as a structural feature rather than a personal failing. H. described the isolation of being "the only woman there" as both stressful and genuinely lonely, particularly without community to fall back on. M. described the difficulty of well-being management in a context of passion-driven work: "When you're passionate about something, you want to give a lot, but you also have to take care of your body and your mind because if you don't have it, you can't do anything."

In FG2, well-being was discussed through both the experiential lens of younger participants and the structural lens of the professionals. The younger ElektroLoud participants described the psychological cost of constantly navigating spaces that do not affirm their presence: the low-level exhaustion of having to prove belonging in environments that should simply be open. Several described LOUD/ElektroLoud as one of the few spaces where this exhaustion lifted, where they could focus on the music without managing how they were perceived. The professionals and youth workers reflected on the emotional labour of their own roles: sustaining safe and affirmative spaces for young people while themselves operating in a sector that does not consistently apply those same standards to them. Burnout, underpayment for care-intensive work, and the invisibility of this labour within institutional structures were identified as specific concerns.





Advocacy and the Role of Organisations

On how male peers can support, FG1 emphasised self-education and platform use: men in the industry have platforms and influence they can deploy to shift attitudes. S's formulation was direct: educate themselves, speak up, use their platform. Labels and music schools were identified as key allies currently falling short: S. noting that labels should be actively working for equality, and A. describing how even within music education, male teachers with gendered attitudes actively reproduce the problem.



The LOUD network was unanimously praised in FG1 and FG2 as genuinely helpful: for production training, technical skill development, paid opportunities, and community. N. described it as the most concrete and follow-through-oriented support she had encountered. H. noted that visibility and advertising matter: she had not even known this kind of space existed until she encountered it, suggesting that reaching those who most need these resources requires more active outreach.

In FG2, JM Norway's ElektroLoud programme was positioned similarly: as a space that does what it says it will do, and that is valued precisely because it is reliable in an environment where many inclusion initiatives are not. The professionals and youth workers in the group described the challenge of sustaining this reliability with limited resources, under-recognition from the broader sector, and in the absence of structural funding that would allow the programme to grow to meet the demand they see. Both sub-groups in FG2 expressed a wish for a closer connection between JM Norway's programmes and the wider ecosystem of Nordic networks so that young people moving through ElektroLoud/LOUD have a visible onward pathway rather than arriving at the edge of a support system that ends where the programme does.



Key Outcomes and Reflections



- The Nordic grassroots and politically engaged music scenes (particularly the LOUD and GRCA networks and JM Norway's ElektroLoud programme) represent **meaningful alternatives to mainstream industry norms, but they are small, geographically concentrated, and under-resourced** relative to the need.
- Technical and production skills are the primary site of financial and professional inequality: **women and non-binary musicians are systematically discouraged from acquiring them, losing both income and creative autonomy as a result.** This discouragement begins early and is reinforced at every level of musical education and industry culture.
- **Sexualisation as a condition of visibility is a real and documented pattern,** particularly in commercial sectors like Norwegian rap, forcing a choice between professional integrity and mainstream recognition.
- **The absence of visible gender non-conforming role models creates genuine career uncertainty for those whose identities do not fit recognised archetypes:** a concern that was present across both the experienced FG1 participants and the younger FG2 musicians.
- Community-building (honest, non-competitive, grounded in mutual recognition) was identified across both groups as both **the most effective practical strategy available and a form of resistance in itself.** For FG2 professionals, sustaining these communities over time, with scarce resources and limited institutional support, is itself a form of ongoing advocacy.
- **Financial precarity is compounded by the freelance economy's lack of safety nets, which disproportionately affects queer musicians, disabled musicians, and those from less privileged economic backgrounds.** For younger participants just entering the sector, this precarity is already visible as a horizon that shapes what they allow themselves to imagine as possible.
- The emotional and care labour involved in creating and maintaining affirming spaces for young musicians, **undertaken disproportionately by the women, non-binary, and queer professionals** in FG2, is largely invisible to the institutions that benefit from it, and needs to be recognised, resourced, and valued accordingly.
- Closing words from participants across both groups pointed toward: **opportunities, support and role models, listening, encouragement, networking, visibility, education, and openness...** and a collective wish for the music sector to finally become as open in practice as it so often claims to be in principle.





SERBIA

COUNTRY

SERBIA

JM Serbia + Femix

2

FOCUS GROUPS

50

PARTICIPANTS

FACILITATORS

- **FG 1 - Andriana Takić**, assisted by Nevena Prvulj (Femix)
- **FG 2 - Nikola Nejcev**, assisted by Nevena Prvulj (Femix)

DATES

- **FG 1** - September 10, 2025
- **FG 2** - September 20, 2025



FORMAT

Both sessions were held in-person, with lunch provided. Each session began with personal introductions, an overview of the PIL EQ project and the broader PIL programme/initiative, followed by a short workshop (group agreement, setting up personal expectations and needs, understanding the framework of the focus groups, etc.), group discussions in separate subgroups (to handle the high number of participants) for each sub-topic, a plenary session to share key findings and challenges, and a final closing (reflection) circle with all participants and facilitators.

Participants

25

FOCUS GROUP 1 - IN PERSON (TWO SUBGROUPS)

Young musicians (15–23) still in education or at the start of their careers.

25

FOCUS GROUP 2 - IN PERSON (TWO SUBGROUPS)

Young musicians (24–30) who had been navigating the sector professionally for more years.



✓ Overview

Both focus groups were conducted with young musicians active in Serbia's music scene, spanning a wide range of roles (performers, sound designers, session musicians, producers, educators, and volunteers). The two groups reflected different career stages: FG1 included younger musicians (15–23) still in education or at the start of their careers, while FG2 brought together more experienced musicians (24–30) who had been navigating the sector professionally for several years. Despite this age difference, the two groups showed a strong convergence of views on the key challenges facing young women and underrepresented youth in Serbian music.



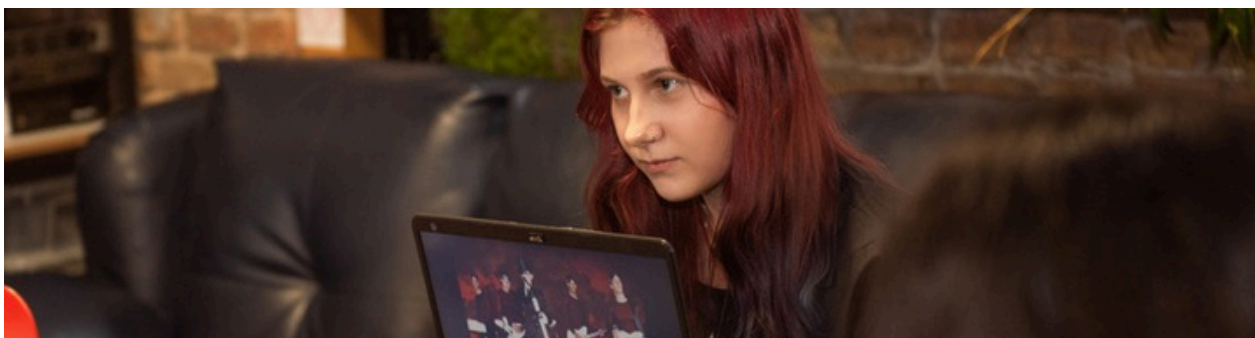


Gender Equality and Status Quo



Participants across both groups identified a persistent culture of low expectations directed at women in music. The most commonly cited experience was being on the receiving end of backhanded compliments ("You play great for a girl"), which implicitly frames female competence as surprising. Women playing instruments culturally coded as masculine (drums, bass guitar, electric guitar) reported this most frequently, but it was echoed across genres and roles.

FG1 participants highlighted more overt forms of bias: being hired for their appearance ("just sit and be pretty with the guitar"), being dismissed by older male sound technicians who refused to work with female engineers, or being labelled "hysterical" for assertive professional feedback that would be accepted without comment from a male peer. One participant recounted a client explicitly requesting a "male sound engineer," while another received a booking framed around "female energy" and aesthetics rather than musical skill... both experiences were two sides of the same coin: women valued for their gender rather than their craft.



FG2 participants, while drawing on a wider range of experiences, largely reinforced these observations. They noted gender-differentiated treatment in booking and pricing negotiations (male colleagues quoting identical rates and being called back within minutes, while women were ignored) and pointed to the near-invisibility of women in technical and backstage roles. One participant noted that at a major 2022 festival, she was the only woman among approximately 24 performers on her stage. Several also observed a pattern of "credit erasure" in collaborative production work, where female contributions were minimised when working alongside male collaborators.

There was notable nuance across both groups, with some participants cautioning against attributing all barriers to gender specifically. Some in FG2 argued that the absence of systemic support for young musicians in Serbia affects all genders equally, and that individual drive and social capital are often more decisive than gender. However, even these participants acknowledged structural asymmetries, particularly around pricing confidence and family planning, that disproportionately affect women.



Career Development

Both groups agreed that success in Serbian music depends heavily on informal networks, social intelligence, and persistence, alongside, but arguably more than, raw talent. "You have to know someone who knows someone" was a sentiment expressed in nearly identical terms across both sessions. The absence of any formal mentoring or support system for young musicians was repeatedly flagged, with participants noting that older, established musicians tend to view younger talent as competition rather than as a community to invest in.

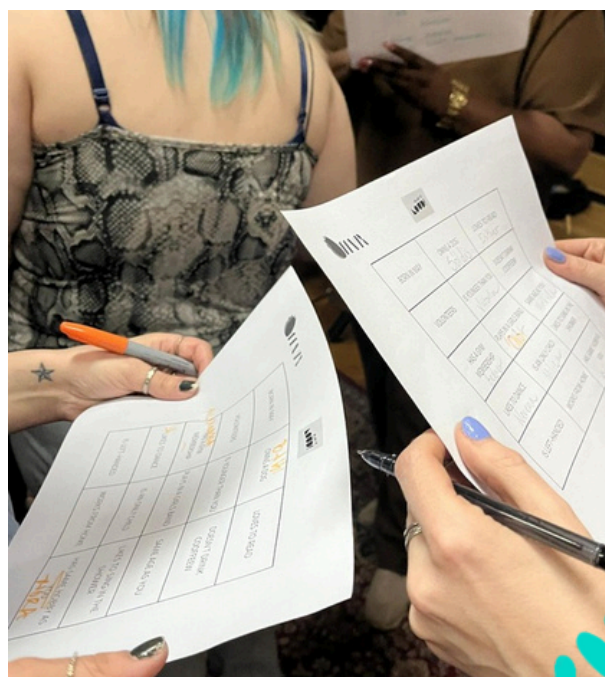
For FG1, financial barriers were prominent: instruments, recording equipment, and studio rental are costly, and participants from smaller towns face additional hurdles, including geographic isolation from music education and limited access to basic supplies (one participant noted she could not buy drumsticks in her hometown). Cultural conditioning was also raised: the gendered socialisation of children toward "appropriate" instruments (violin for girls, not drums) was seen as an early, formative barrier that institutions reinforce rather than challenge.

FG2 participants emphasised the additional challenge of sustaining a music career alongside financial precarity. Almost all participants in both groups held secondary jobs to fund their music activity. In FG2, several noted the heightened anxiety of not knowing whether they would be able to continue the following year, describing the financial model of an alternative music career in Serbia as "like walking on a tightrope." The particular vulnerability of career interruption due to pregnancy and maternity was raised in FG2 as a distinct and underacknowledged barrier: participants felt that returning to the stage after two years would likely mean professional erasure.

What participants said:

"My parents want me to play. They just don't want me to be a musician."

— Participant, FG1





Employability and Remuneration

environment. Few participants had fixed rates; instead, they negotiated case by case, frequently underselling themselves out of fear of being replaced by cheaper alternatives. Several noted that female musicians tend to ask for less than their male peers in equivalent situations, a pattern partly attributed to socialisation and partly to real market consequences ("if you offer too much, they'll find someone similar who plays for less").

Delayed payments, upfront costs borne personally by the musicians, and the normalisation of performing without pay (in exchange for "exposure") were cited across both groups. In FG2, participants raised the issue of the closure of BIGZ, a subsidised space for musicians in Belgrade, as emblematic of the broader lack of public investment in rehearsal and production infrastructure. The absence of affordable, accessible spaces was seen as a structural constraint that disproportionately affects those without financial means... and since women often earn less and access fewer financial resources, the impact is gendered even when the policy appears gender-neutral.

Sexual harassment and quid pro quo dynamics in hiring were raised cautiously in FG1: participants noted that in a male-dominated field, women in precarious positions are sometimes subjected to expectations beyond their professional role. No one elaborated extensively, but the mention of this dynamic in both the main discussion and the closing reflections suggests it is a lived reality that the group felt important to name.

What participants said:

"If you ask for too much, they'll find someone similar who plays for less."

— Participant, FG2





Wellbeing

Participants across both groups acknowledged that the music sector's precariousness, combined with the specific pressures marginalised identities face, creates real mental health challenges. The common understanding was that maintaining well-being in this environment requires active self-management: setting boundaries, taking breaks, and drawing on the support of friends and bandmates. Physical exhaustion was also noted, particularly for performers who combine daytime employment with evening gigs and late nights.

In terms of safety, participants in FG1 named the sexualisation of women in music as the central issue, including the persistent focus on appearance rather than artistry. Participants were reluctant to frame wellbeing challenges as exclusively female, but acknowledged that the compounding pressures of gender bias, financial instability, and isolation make the experience qualitatively different for women and gender non-conforming folks.



The Role of Organisations

Both groups were highly positive about Rock Camp for Girls and Femix as the primary organisations supporting young women in Serbian music. Rock Camp in particular was credited with a transformative impact: multiple participants stated they would never have picked up their instrument, or would never have continued, without the camp. Its significance was not only practical (performance opportunities, mentorship) but deeply psychological: participants described it as one of the few spaces where they experienced peer solidarity, mutual recognition, and the normalisation of women in music.

JM Serbia, Spotlight (Serbia Creative) and Beovision were also mentioned positively in FG2, mainly for providing performance opportunities and marketing visibility. However, participants noted that these organisations are few in number, under-resourced, and ultimately dependent on budgets that are themselves inadequate. The primary ask from organisations was encapsulated in the single-word closing responses from FG1: "Money", and from FG2: "Capital," "Opportunities," "Spaces," "Resources," "Respect," "Support."

Suggested improvements included appointing experienced female participants as mentors in future projects, creating dedicated female line-ups or stages at festivals, and organising smaller performance opportunities within existing activities.



Key Outcomes and Reflections



- **Gender bias in Serbia's music sector is pervasive but often subtle**, operating through lowered expectations, dismissive compliments, pricing differentials, and selective credit rather than through overt exclusion.
- **Financial precarity is the single most-cited structural barrier, and it intersects with gender**: women ask for less, earn less, and have fewer resources to invest in their careers.
- **Informal networks and personal connections** remain the dominant pathway to opportunity in the absence of any systemic support infrastructure for young musicians.
- **Organisations like Rock Camp for Girls and Femix are highly valued but operate in isolation**; participants feel there is a need for more stakeholders, more coordination, and significantly more public funding for culture.
- **The psychological dimension of solidarity** (knowing others have faced the same experiences) emerged in both groups as independently valuable, not just as a means to an end.
- Young musicians at earlier career stages (FG1) showed greater optimism and a stronger tendency to view **barriers as surmountable through individual effort**; those with more experience (FG2) expressed a more structural critique while remaining committed to their careers.
- Both groups closed with a consistent message: young people, and specifically young women, in Serbian music are **resilient, talented, and resourceful** ... but they are navigating a sector that does not yet see or reward them on equal terms.



SWEDEN



COUNTRY

SWEDEN

Songlines

3

FOCUS GROUPS

39

PARTICIPANTS

FACILITATORS

- **FG 1 - Demian Shammo**, assisted by Lesia Lesiv
- **FG 2 - Annelie Arffman**, assisted by Eray Temiz Gumus
- **FG 3 (online) - Lesia Lesiv**

DATES

- **FG 1** - August 29-31, 2025
- **FG 2** - October 27, 2025



FORMAT

Songlines organised the first session as a 2-day event within the framework of its annual summer LOUD music camp, targeting young people from migrant backgrounds. Through workshops, world cafés and group discussions, the participants explored the different topics suggested by the FG Guidelines by sharing their lived experiences and reflecting together on challenges and potential solutions. The second session was held in-person in Songlines headquarters in Stockholm, with lunch/snacks provided, and built on the previous session's insights and methodology (world café style discussion, guided group discussion). Songlines also conducted a third, smaller online session specifically targeting young Ukrainian youth engaged in its music initiatives.

Participants

15

FOCUS GROUP 1 - IN PERSON (TWO SUBGROUPS)

Young people (majority with migrant background) attending Songlines summer music camp and normally enrolled in Songlines projects/events (musicians, aspiring musicians or with a direct interest in music).

22

FOCUS GROUP 2 - IN PERSON

Young people with a migrant background volunteering at Songlines for music workshops and projects (musicians and/or experienced in the local cultural/music scene).

2

FOCUS GROUP 3 - ONLINE (smaller session, conducted in Ukrainian)

Young Ukrainian refugees (musicians) attending Songlines projects/events.





Overview

The three Swedish focus groups were organised and facilitated by Songlines, a music initiative operating within the Play It Loud framework. The participant group was notably diverse (spanning Swedish-born and immigrant women, a non-binary participant, Ukrainian refugees, and young women from African and Central Asian backgrounds recently relocated to Sweden), reflecting both the breadth of Songlines' reach and the intersectional realities of young women navigating music in Sweden. The sessions ranged from a more intimate conversation (FG1 and FG3) to broader group exchanges (FG2), each yielding valuable and complementary insights. FG3 participants were particularly distinctive in that they were Ukrainian refugees now based in Sweden, offering a dual perspective (on building a career as a young woman in Ukraine and on the specific challenges of restarting a musical life in a new country).





Gender Equality: Concepts and Everyday Experience

The opening discussion in FG1 moved quickly from formal definitions of equality to a richer, more nuanced understanding of equity: the idea that true equality requires meeting people where they are, not simply offering identical treatment. Participants drew on their own multi-layered identities to articulate this: J. (non-binary) framed it through the lens of disability and structural access; R. highlighted the exclusion that comes from not having grown up in Sweden and therefore not having entered the formal music education pipeline at the "right" age; D. brought her experience as an African immigrant navigating both racial and gendered assumptions in Swedish institutions.

A consistent thread was the invisibility of women's contributions in mixed-gender spaces. R. described the phenomenon of saying something in a group discussion, being ignored, and then hearing a man say the same thing moments later to general acclaim... an experience described as deeply demoralising and widely recognised by other participants. J. observed that in her music class of 27 students with 9 women, when classmates were asked how many women were in the group, they guessed half ... because women asking questions or speaking felt more noticeable, more "other," than men doing the same. The norm remained male; women's presence registered as exceptional.

In FG3, V. defined equality in music as being evaluated on talent and creative expression rather than as an object: a framing that reflected her own experience of navigating an industry where women's appearance frequently overshadows their craft. A. connected equality to the opportunity for self-realisation and the freedom to be heard and taken seriously.

In FG2, G. highlighted cultural and family barriers as a primary obstacle: in some families and cultural communities represented in Sweden, girls are simply not permitted to sing or play instruments, and this constraint operates regardless of the formal equality available in Swedish society. M. (FG2) pointed to the structural absence of support organisations for women in music outside Stockholm as a geographic dimension of inequality, one that left her, living in Lund, effectively without access to the resources she knew existed in larger cities.

What participants said:

"In my music class of 27 students with 9 women, when classmates were asked how many women were in the group, they guessed half ... because women asking questions or speaking felt more noticeable, more 'other', than men doing the same."

— Participant, FG1





Career Development and What It Takes to Succeed

Across all three sessions, participants identified ambition, hard work, contacts, and financial capital as the essential ingredients for a music career, with an explicit acknowledgement that these requirements fall harder on women, marginalised groups and those without established networks.

J. (FG1) articulated this most directly: succeeding in music requires drive and time, but if you are not a white straight man, it will be significantly harder. R. (FG1) emphasised the structural exclusion of those who arrive in Sweden as adults or teenagers without having gone through the Swedish school system, a pathway that provides not just musical training but the contact networks that underpin any career in the sector. For those who discover music later or who were educated elsewhere, the implicit precondition is "either you're in from the beginning, or you're out".

V's account from FG3 illustrated this vividly: she started her professional music journey at 16 in Kyiv, launched her solo project at 19, and spent years discovering that talent alone was wholly insufficient. Success required PR management, financial investment, a team, and connections: a complex machine that she had to learn to understand and operate largely on her own. The war in Ukraine and her subsequent displacement to Sweden had disrupted this process entirely: she now prioritises learning Swedish, works as a vocal and piano teacher to maintain financial stability, and is trying to find pathways back into active performance. She estimates she devotes less than 50% of the time to music that she would like to.

G. (FG2) named the geography of opportunity as a fundamental obstacle: organisations like Songlines exist in Stockholm, but for the years she lived in Sundsvall, there was nothing equivalent. She is certain that if the resources had been available earlier, she would have progressed significantly faster.

What participants said:

"Either you're in from the beginning, or you're out."

— Participant, FG1





Challenges and Obstacles



The obstacles described across the three focus groups were numerous and interconnected:

Appearance pressure and objectification. A. and J. (FG1) both noted the double standard whereby male musicians can present themselves casually while women are expected to invest in their appearance (wearing makeup, dressing well, performing femininity) as a condition of being taken seriously or simply of being booked. One participant's contribution noted a particularly stark formulation: women in the industry are often admitted to teams "on vocals as decoration". J. added the layer of sexual ambiguity in professional relationships: never knowing whether a booking, an invitation, or positive feedback was based on genuine appreciation of musical skill or on sexual interest.

The impossible balancing act. Women who are too assertive risk being labelled difficult; women who are too accommodating risk being exploited. J. described this as "an extremely difficult balancing act that is basically not possible", an expectation of constant pleasantness and compliance that men are never subjected to.

Social media and visibility. The dominance of social media as the primary route to visibility was raised as an obstacle, particularly for women with disabilities or those who are uncomfortable being visually prominent online. R. (FG1) noted that the industry has become so dependent on social media that it effectively excludes those who cannot or do not wish to be visible in this way.

Family and cultural gatekeeping. C. (FG2) raised a dimension less present in other focus groups: in some cultural communities represented within Sweden's immigrant population, women and girls are explicitly forbidden from singing or playing music in public. The expectation that they remain at home (and the fear of family disapproval) acts as a decisive barrier even where formal opportunities exist. She suggested that all-girls music groups would be one practical solution, as parents from more conservative backgrounds are more likely to permit participation in female-only spaces.

Competition rather than solidarity. A. (FG1) raised a painful observation: that women sometimes compete against each other rather than supporting one another, a dynamic she attributed partly to structural conditions that make opportunities feel scarce. She described this as an obstacle to collective progress and something the community needed to actively work against.





Challenges and Obstacles

Displacement and linguistic barriers. Personal accounts in FG3 gave concrete form to a challenge not always visible in mainstream discussions: for Ukrainian refugees rebuilding lives in Sweden, developing a music career simultaneously with language acquisition, financial survival, and cultural integration is simply not possible at full capacity. The emotional weight of displacement, the loss of existing networks, and the energy required to start again in a new country all compound the challenges that already exist for women in music.



Employability and Remuneration

Payment emerged as a significant and multi-layered theme. The musicians' union's standard rate exists in Sweden, but participants characterised it as largely aspirational, referenced in negotiations but rarely actually enforced. In practice, pay depends heavily on individual negotiating skill and confidence, characteristics that participants noted are unevenly distributed along gender lines: women tend to ask for less and accept less, while men negotiate more assertively and receive more as a result. This is even worse for young people with intersectional identities.

V. described a clear three-stage experience of payment: being paid as agreed; being paid without having agreed in advance (a positive surprise); and performing without agreed payment and later reflecting that she should have been compensated. A. recounted performing a song at an event following a request, receiving praise, but receiving no payment, and resolving afterwards that she would not repeat that experience. Both participants were clear that they now know what they should charge, having learned this through peer networks and experience, but that this knowledge came slowly and expensively.

J. (FG1) raised the broader question of whether it is possible to make a living from music at all, concluding that yes, it is possible, but that it requires extraordinary determination and that the path is longer and harder if you are not part of the dominant social group. Several participants across FG1 noted the heavy time investment required before any financial return materialises, often spanning years.

For C. and B. (FG2), the question of dedicating time to music was straightforwardly constrained by education and work obligations: both were fitting music practice around other commitments rather than the other way around.



Physical and Mental Wellbeing

Well-being was addressed most directly in FG1 and FG2. M. proposed mandatory training on sexism and harassment as a structural safeguard for the music sector, citing an example of an Afghan female journalist who had publicly refused to be intimidated by sexist messages and called on other women to report such behaviour. She framed the music sector's safety challenges as part of a broader pattern affecting women in all public-facing and creative fields.

K. noted that the existing Songlines environment felt supportive, but that the group format limited the individual attention that would be most beneficial: she specifically requested private lessons and more personalised feedback as a way to develop faster and more safely.

A. named harassment and objectification directly, noting that women in music are often treated as visual decoration and that the fear of sexual motivations behind bookings or positive attention creates a persistent background anxiety that male musicians simply do not experience.

J. pointed to the absence of any formal space to process the emotional dimension of navigating the music industry as a woman or gender non-conforming individual, and that the discussion in the focus group itself had started to feel like a "therapy group", not dismissively, but to indicate that this kind of space was genuinely needed and genuinely absent.





The Role of Music Organisations



All participants who had engaged with Songlines were positive about its impact. N. (FG2) described the experience of meeting other women musicians through Songlines as genuinely inspirational, seeing "successful people who worked through this industry" normalised the possibility of her own success. C. credited Songlines with giving her access she would not otherwise have had, but also noted the geographic limitation: had Songlines existed in Sundsvall when she lived there, her development would have been considerably faster.

V. (FG3) was clear about what she needed from organisations: people to help her find and arrange concert opportunities, access to labels, a creative community of like-minded musicians, and support with content creation and social media. These are not abstract wishes but specific, practical gaps that make the difference between being able to develop a career and not. A. cited access to rehearsal space and recording studios as essential, neither of which she currently has.

R. (FG1) suggested that organisations should prioritise creating spaces for peer support and experience-sharing among women and non-binary people in music, not just skills development, but the relational and emotional infrastructure that makes development possible. J. agreed, emphasising early investment in girls' music education before problems accumulate, rather than remedial work on adult women who have already encountered multiple barriers.

N. proposed all-girls music groups as a practical measure with immediate cultural impact, noting that some migrant families who would not permit daughters to attend mixed-gender activities would accept participation in female-only groups, and that girls themselves often feel safer and more able to take creative risks in those spaces.



Key Outcomes and Reflections



- Gender inequality in Swedish music is experienced as **pervasive and systemic, not exceptional, intersecting with race, immigration status, language, disability, cultural background, and geographic location** in ways that produce widely varying individual experiences.
- Women and non-binary people are expected to meet higher standards of appearance, compliance, and pleasantness than male peers, with less tolerance for error, assertion, or simply taking up space: **a double bind that inhibits risk-taking and development.**
- The **absence of support infrastructure outside Stockholm** is a structural inequality in itself, effectively rationing opportunity geographically.
- For Ukrainian refugee musicians, displacement compounds pre-existing gender barriers, creating a situation where **rebuilding a music career while integrating into a new country is nearly impossible** at full capacity.
- **Financial literacy and pay negotiation are areas where peer networks provide the most support, but these networks are themselves unevenly distributed,** and those without connections are doubly disadvantaged.
- Organisations like Songlines are highly valued but face **limitations of scale, geography, and format;** participants requested more personalised support, private tuition options, gender-separated spaces, and a stronger presence in smaller cities.
- **The emotional labour of navigating a male-dominated industry as a woman, a non-binary person, or an immigrant is real and largely unacknowledged:** participants expressed a need for spaces where this can be named and processed, not only professionally addressed.
- Closing sentiment across all three groups was one of **cautious hope tempered by exhaustion:** participants remain committed to their music, but are clear-eyed about the structural conditions they are working against.



CONCLUSIONS



What strikes us most, after reading through all nine country reports, is not any single finding: **it's the consistency**. Young women in Serbia and young women in Norway, young musicians in Sicily and emerging professionals in Paris, a blind pianist navigating tokenism in North Macedonia and a Ukrainian refugee rebuilding her career in Stockholm: they are describing, in their own words and from their own very different contexts, the same landscape. Across **nine countries and dozens of voices**, these focus groups tell a story that is at once diverse in its details and strikingly consistent in its core message: **young people (and particularly women, gender-expansive individuals, people of colour, those with disabilities, and those from economically or geographically marginalised communities) are navigating a music sector that has not yet chosen to see them fully, pay them fairly, or keep them safe.**



That consistency is both the most important finding of this research and, in a way, its **most uncomfortable one**. Because it means the barriers young people face in the music sector are not accidents, not the result of a few bad actors, not problems that will dissolve on their own as attitudes gradually shift. **They are structural**. They are reproduced daily through the informal networks that determine who gets opportunities, the payment cultures that leave women asking for less and receiving less, the educational systems that centre male composers and steer girls toward "appropriate" instruments, and the late-night environments where harassment is treated as an occupational hazard rather than a failure of institutional responsibility.

And yet (and this matters!), the young people in these sessions were not defeated by what they were describing. Exhausted, often. Clear-eyed about the odds, absolutely. **But also funny, generous with each other, full of ideas, and genuinely invested in making the sector better.**

The focus groups were designed to create **safe spaces for honest conversation**, and what filled those spaces, again and again, was not despair but a kind of **determined solidarity**. People recognised themselves in each other's stories. They left with language for things they had previously struggled to name. Several facilitators noted that participants described the sessions themselves as valuable: not just as a contribution to research, but as something they needed.

If a two-hour conversation with peers can shift something, **imagine what sustained, well-resourced, genuinely intersectional support structures could do**. The ask from participants was not complicated or utopian. It was, at its core, quite simple: **take us seriously. Pay us fairly. Make the spaces safe. Show up before the problems compound, not after**. And when you say you're committed to inclusion, mean it, all the way down, not just in the programme lineup.

A few things stand out as particularly urgent from the research as a whole. **The intersection of gender and financial precarity was named in every single country, and it matters because precarity is not gender-neutral**: it falls harder on those with less negotiating power, fewer informal connections, and a greater likelihood of career interruption. **The near-total absence of female role models in technical, production and leadership roles was raised everywhere**, and it matters because what young people cannot see, they struggle to imagine for themselves. **And the gap between what music organisations say about inclusion and what they actually do about it was flagged, critically and specifically, across almost every report**, which matters because trust, once lost, is hard to rebuild.

These focus groups are part of Play it Loud! broader research commitment to understanding these dynamics and responding to them practically. The findings here feed directly into the development of **Building Caring Music Ecosystems: A Toolkit for Youth Music Leaders, Teams, and Organisations**: a resource designed not to sit on a shelf, but to be used: in team meetings, in governance conversations, in the everyday decisions that determine whether a young woman feels she belongs in a music space or decides it isn't worth the cost.

We are grateful to every young person, practitioner, educator and music worker who gave their time and honesty to these sessions. The least we can do is make sure what they shared actually changes something.

The Play it Loud EQ Team



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PIL EQ Workplan:
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