

SOMA
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MUAY THAI AS A TOOL FOR RECONNECTION TO ASPIRATIONS AMONG MIGRANT AND REFUGEE WOMEN IN SPAIN

The SOMA project

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I. Introduction — Who is SOMA

The Social Martial Arts Association (SOMA) operates at the intersection of physical culture, trauma-informed practice, and social justice.

01. Founders & Roots

Founded in Barcelona by three women combining diverse professional trajectories in education, social sciences, Muay Thai, law, and research.

02. Core Mission

To build a movement that uses Martial Arts as a powerful tool for mental and physical wellbeing in individuals, fostering inclusion and social cohesion in communities.

03. Program Impact

SOMA has successfully delivered three Social Muay Thai programs to date, focusing specifically on supporting migrant and refugee women in Barcelona.

II. Theoretical Framework

Action-based research at the intersection of politics, psychology, and social sciences.

01. The Mind-Body Connection

Positioning Martial Arts as a site of transformation where the body becomes a powerful tool for reclaiming goals and future pathways.

Especially: exploring how embodied practices can respond to the "enforced waiting" and constrained life projects of displaced populations.

(Moore et al., 2020; Wang et al. 2025)

02. Strengths-Based Pedagogy

SOMA's action-based work operates on a pioneering research field addressing migration and mental health, applying it to Martial Arts as well as using Martial Arts as a tool for it.

(Khatib et al. 2024; Pulla, 2017; Carter–Thuillier et al. 2023)

II. Case Study

Case study: The Spring '26 Program

Social Muay Thai Programs

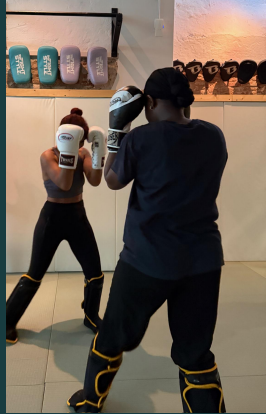
- Utilize Muay Thai training as a space for reconnecting participants with their sense of agency and personal aspirations (Wang et al. 2025; Moore et al. 2020)
- Designed to address the lived experiences of migrant and refugee women facing prolonged periods of uncertainty and structural exclusion, where initial migration aspirations can get lost (Contreras Hernandez, 2020; Khatib et al, 2024)
- Employs a strengths-based approach building upon existing skills and capacities rather than deficit-based social work models (Pulla, 2017; Carter-Thuillier et al., 2023)

Program Design

- **8-Week Programs:** A structured progression from foundational physical skills to self-leadership and concrete steps towards personal goals.
- **Trauma-Informed Space:** A safe, women-only environment prioritizing emotional safety. Professional psychological evaluation ensured through cooperation with a mental health NGO.
- **Educational Workshops:** Includes "Discovering Your Strengths" and "Goals & Voice" to bridge physical training with cognitive self-reflection and holistic support.

II. Program Experience

How does that look like? The Program Journey



1. Muay Thai

Physical training and body reconnection. Full Muay Thai training.



2. Games and social events

Ice-breakers and interactive games designed to build a safe, inviting community.



3. Education

Interactive cognitive workshops focusing on strengths, goals, and finding one's voice.



4. Celebration

The graduation ceremony honoring progress, resilience, and personal success.



5. Mentorship

One-on-one personal guidance as well as a mentors program amongst students (students who have completed one program can become mentors for the next one)

III. Methodology & Qualitative Findings

How we capture impact and hear the voices of participants.

Data Collection Methodology (partially implemented)

Triangulated Approach: Combining participatory action research with structured monitoring tools to validate outcomes.

Pre & Post Assessments: Quantitative psychological scales paired with entry/exit self-evaluation forms on personal goals.

Weekly Reflection Diaries: Trainers documenting immediate feelings and bodily changes after each session.

Semi-Structured Interviews: Deep-dive qualitative conversations post-program to explore shifts in self-efficacy and agency.

Key Qualitative Findings (Spring '26)

Reclamation of Agency: Migrant women reported shifting from a state of forced waiting to actively setting future goals and feeling in control of their lives.

Somatic Transformation: Physical practices released trauma held in the body, converting feelings of physical vulnerability into strength and safety.

Solidarity Networks: The training environment created immediate social bonds and peer support, countering structural isolation in a new country.

Rebuilding Hope: Renewed connection to long-term professional and academic aspirations originally disrupted by displacement.

V. Conclusion: Implications for Martial Arts Studies

How strengths-based Martial Arts programs could reshape social interventions

Future Outlook

Professionalizing Martial Arts Studies

Shifting the paradigm from simple physical recreation to structured socio-pedagogical careers, specialized leadership roles, and scalable systemic social interventions.

Beyond physical activity: Muay Thai programs serve as a powerful tool for migrant and refugee women to actively navigate and overcome systemic social exclusion.

Scalable frameworks: Supported by educational workshops, these pilot programs offer decision-makers highly effective templates for other communities at risk.

New leadership pathways: This evolving field opens unique professional avenues for martial artists to act as leaders in socially complex environments.

Selected Bibliography & Key References

Experience of Refugee & Migrant Women

Contreras Hernández, P. (2020). *Migración, racismo y exclusión: Análisis de las experiencias de mujeres latinoamericanas*.

Khatib, M., Purwar, T., Shah, R., et al. (2024). *Empowerment and integration of refugee women: A transdisciplinary approach*. Hum. and Soc. Sci. Comm., 11, 1277.

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Strengths-Based & Pedagogical Models

Pulla, V. (2017). *Strengths-based approach in social work: A distinct ethical advantage*. International Journal of Innovation, Creativity and Change.

Carter-Thuillier, B., López-Pastor, V., et al. (2023). *After-school sports programmes and social inclusion processes in culturally diverse contexts: Results of an international multicase study*. Front. Psychol., 14.

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Martial Arts Training & Mental Health Outcomes

Moore, B., Dudley, D., & Woodcock, S. (2020).

The effect of martial arts training on mental health outcomes: A systematic review and meta-analysis. Journal of Bodywork and Movement Therapies, 24, 402–412.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbmt.2020.06.017>

Wang, Y., Wang, H., & Lu, X. (2025).

Research on the impact of explosive martial arts training on emotion regulation and attention based on questionnaire data. Scientific Reports, 15, Article 37957.

<https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-025-21790-0>

Evidence backing Muay Thai as an active therapeutic agent for emotional self-regulation, cognitive focus, trauma-release, and personal growth.

VI. CONCLUSION & OUTLOOK

Thank you for your support

Let's continue building a more inclusive community through strengths-based Martial Arts.

Get in Touch

Have questions or want to collaborate with us?

info@soma-association.org



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