

“It’s been a game changer”

The impact of National Lottery funding on women and girls’ projects

The Women and Girls Initiative (WGI) is a £44.7million National Lottery funded investment supporting 62 organisations across England to empower women and girls to take control of their lives. The funding is enabling national organisations and grassroots projects to provide dedicated support for women and girls in local communities through outreach, advice and advocacy, refuge and prevention projects.

The WGI is supported by a learning and impact partnership appointed by The National Lottery Community Fund (The Fund) to work alongside the programme.¹ As part of their support, the learning and impact team have carried out annual review interviews with projects to capture learning and progress. One of the areas explored in the most recent round of reviews (carried out between February and April 2020), was the difference National Lottery funding has made to projects. The purpose of this report is to summarise what projects told us about the impact of WGI funding on their organisations and the way they work to support women and girls. It is intended to be useful as an internal report to inform The Fund about some of the impacts of the WGI reported by organisations in the women and girls’ sector. It is also intended to share learning about some of the key factors which organisations identify as having made WGI funding particularly successful for them and we hope that this learning will be of use, not only to The Fund, but potentially to other funders with an interest in this sector.

Because most of our review interviews were carried out in February and March 2020, they mainly reflect the circumstances of organisations prior to the Covid-19 pandemic. Clearly, projects and the women they work with have been profoundly affected by Covid-19 (as we have reflected in some of our recent [blogs and briefings](#)). However, this report focuses on the impacts of WGI funding not just in the past few months but over the past few years – impacts which were being reported pre-Covid-19 and which will hopefully help sustain organisations through Covid-19 and into the future.

Context of the WGI

In 2015 we undertook an initial wave of work to support shortlisted applicants to the WGI fund to develop their theories of change and learning priorities. During this process we observed that this was an extremely depleted sector with limited existing infrastructure for learning or organisational development. Feminism had been out of fashion for much of the nineties and noughties, many women’s centres had closed, girl’s work had all but disappeared amidst the decimation of youth work and violence against women and girls (VAWG) services had seen their funding shrink dramatically. The national and international activism, publications and conferences that had sustained the sector in previous decades had dwindled and services supporting women and girls were generally isolated with some organisations hanging by a thread. Even the concept of ‘a women’s sector’ was unfamiliar to many smaller organisations. In our first report to The Fund we wrote:

“Our contact with projects has highlighted many strengths—there is plenty of skill, creativity, innovation and certainly no shortage of commitment. But this is a sector which has not only been starved of resources but also networks, confidence and a sense of identity.”²

The WGI funding programme hoped to address at least some of these deficits, strengthen the organisations it funded and increase their chances of survival.

Five years on, this report is based on feedback from 40 projects which have been in receipt of WGI funding and reflects on some of the main impacts so far.³

These impacts include:

- Enabling organisations to create projects and to move from survival to growth.
- Increasing the status and profile of organisations in the sector locally and nationally.
- Enabling them to have a stronger voice in partnerships with other organisations.
- Strengthening networks of support and learning across the sector.
- Building capacity for co-production between projects and women and girls with lived experience.
- Increasing the ongoing sustainability of organisations.

Creation, survival and growth

Some projects owe their very existence to WGI funding. It has helped some organisations to set up completely new projects; enabled some to survive when they were at serious risk of closure; and acted as the catalyst for others to grow from small, voluntary run projects into fully fledged organisations, as the examples below illustrate.

Snowdrop, a project which supports survivors of human trafficking, has used WGI funding to transform themselves. The WGI was the first major funding they had received. Previously they had been entirely run by a group of volunteers who supported about 20 women a year. After a year of WGI funding, they were supporting 124 women. The CEO told us that the WGI funding:

"...came at a point where we were on our knees and it was sink or swim for Snowdrop. WGI funding saved us."

Cornwall based Wild Young Parents used WGI funding to set up a new **Wild Young Parents - Building Futures** project. This helps young mums whose children have safeguarding plans, or who have experienced, or are at risk of, repeat removals of children from their care. Caseworkers work with young mums, who may struggle with understanding safeguarding processes, to give them a voice when working with agencies and support them to build on skills for more positive futures.

Before the WGI funding this project did not exist. Four years on they've worked with over 100 young mums and built a respected reputation with partners in the judiciary, health and social care. They told us:

"We have built something from nothing, with no blueprint: it's a stand-alone project within a stand-alone charity. We exceeded what we were aiming to deliver, and we have built something we're really proud of. I find it hard to believe it didn't exist before. People have said to us: 'If you hadn't spoken to me, I would definitely have lost my children.' So, it is life-changing, it can have such a massive impact on people's lives."

The security of receiving WGI funding for between 3 and 5 years has allowed many projects to grow their capacity and extend their activities to reach more women and girls. For example, **Hibiscus**, a project which supports foreign national women in the criminal justice system, told us that WGI funding has fundamentally changed their organisation from being solely prison and office focused to being more community based through a women's centre, which means they are now actively involved in keeping more women out of prison. They told us:

"[The WGI funding] was a game changer for the organisation and for the women we support."

Savera, a project which supports survivors of 'honour'-based abuse and harmful practices, told a similar story. Before the WGI funding they were providing support on a voluntary basis and could only work with 14 women at any one time. WGI has enabled them to transform their service, from providing crisis intervention through to ongoing one to one support:

"So, doing all of the case work, that's all due to the Lottery and Savera would look completely different if it wasn't for that funding."

In Sheffield, WGI funding enabled a group of organisations to come together in a new **WAGI partnership** for women and girls. Prior to the WGI funding, loss of funding meant some VAWG organisations in the city had been decommissioned and had been through a very difficult period. The lead organisation, **Vida**, and one of their partners, **the Haven**, were under imminent threat of closure and the WGI funding made it possible, not only for them to survive, but to become much stronger in both their support to women and as a collective voice for women and girls in the city.



Women on the Wight set out to create a women's centre on the Isle of Wight. With support from WGI funding they have achieved that goal. They have not only established a popular and safe space for women, they have positioned themselves as an organisation to be respected and listened to. They told us:

"With the help of WGI funding we have built the best, most stable foundations it is possible to have. We are now regarded as a brand – a known entity."

In the North East of England, WGI funding has helped the **Angelou Centre** to establish the first specialist BAME refuge in the North East, which provides a vitally important safe space for BAME women and intersectional advocacy with holistic support from the Centre. The refuge has been oversubscribed and Angelou have since been able to expand their provision. The WGI funding has also enabled them to secure a stronger profile with other agencies in the region and Angelou has become a 'go to' organisation for local services, including advice, training and support.

WGI funding has enabled some projects not only to extend their reach but to trial some new ways of working. **RISE** is lead partner of The Portal, a 'one-stop shop' for survivors across Sussex. They have used WGI funding to reach out into different communities– to build partnerships, open up dialogue, increase awareness, build capacity and create safe spaces in the community for all women affected by domestic abuse.

The project includes: the recruitment, training and support of Community Connectors - survivors who develop their own projects to support other survivors; engaging BME communities in activities such as the Sew 'n' Grow project that offers safe, women-only sewing spaces to open up the conversation around DVA; joined up working with partners who work with older, disabled and multiply disadvantaged women and the rolling out of the Ask Me Scheme that offers a free 12 hour training course for community members to help break the silence. They have had an embedded researcher and community researchers (survivors) 'walking alongside' to capture the voices of the women supported. The project has evidenced the need for a new paradigm within the domestic abuse sector for survivors to thrive and for communities to make domestic abuse their business.

The stronger relationships that RISE has developed with community groups and other agencies has stood them in good stead during the Covid-19 crisis when they have been able to extend their work in partnership in all sorts of ways - for example they are offering online training to the homeless sector as well as a weekly online 'one stop shop' to all the homeless hostels in Brighton to support them in identifying and working with women who experience domestic abuse during the pandemic.

Profile, status and influence

RISE is just one of many organisations who believe that having WGI funding has enabled them to increase their profile, status and influence. Being taken seriously by The National Lottery Community Fund as a major funder increased the confidence of several projects from the start of the WGI. They appreciated the fact that other organisations were interested in their experience and that their expertise was acknowledged.

For some projects, being part of the WGI made them feel part of a 'proper sector' and no longer feeling they had to apologise for being 'just for women'. For others, the award of National Lottery money conferred status in their local context and meant they were taken more seriously as a local organisation.

Bromley and Croydon Women's Aid told us the WGI funding enabled them to strengthen their networks in Croydon:

"We had a small foot there already, but now the local authority approached us, and our networks and relationships built are phenomenal."

Women at the Well is a London based project which supports women involved in prostitution, providing outreach, drop-in support and advocacy. They told us that WGI funding has enabled them to build their profile and develop their partnerships with other agencies, including having greater capacity to provide training to local authority staff. They have also extended their reach beyond their centre in Kings Cross to women in different parts of London.



One Voice 4 Travellers is a project which supports women and girls in the Gypsy and Traveller community on domestic abuse. WGI funding has helped them to strengthen their relationships with other agencies, particularly giving them more profile as experts on supporting gypsy and traveller women.

"WGI has moved us on from being a small voluntary group who only a few people knew about to being known as a legitimate charity which works with professionalism. It's enabled us to build a team of workers and to focus on what we do and do it well."

Women's Community Matters based in Barrow in Furness told a similar story. They provide holistic support to women and girls on topics ranging from personal development, mental health and domestic abuse through to education, employment and housing issues – a real 'one stop shop.' With the help of WGI funding they told us that they had:

"...moved from being a small community organisation to an organisation that is professional and business minded, able to compete and collaborate with other large public, private and large charitable organisations."

Recently, Women's Community Matters, were honoured with the Queen's Award for Voluntary Service, the highest award a voluntary group can receive in the UK.

Partnerships

Many WGI projects have extended and strengthened their partnerships with other voluntary and statutory organisations. Working in partnership can make small organisations more powerful, enhancing the capacity of the women and girls' sector both to influence others and to attract further funding. However, partnership working requires time and resources which small organisations rarely have and which all too often leaves them without a seat or a respected voice at the partnership table. WGI funding has enabled many organisations to build their capacity to get that seat at the table and, once there, they have used it to great effect.

Womenscentre built on a pilot project with girls in Calderdale, where strategic and operational partnership working was well-developed. WGI funding provided additional capacity enabling them to extend their reach to girls and young women living in Kirklees and forge new partnership links with schools, CAMHS and other statutory and voluntary agencies across the district.

Similarly, **Women's Community Matters** told us:

"Our level of multi-partnership working has gone through the roof. We've become a key player in the area with local council, PCC, children's services, schools, arts and other voluntary organisations."

For some, partnership working has been at the heart of what their WGI project has been about, and the funding has taken it to a new level.

Synergy is a partnership of Rape Crisis Centres in Essex developed to improve support for survivors across the whole county. Together they created the First Contact Navigator project to provide timely and consistent support to victims/survivors of sexual violence. WGI funding gave them the capacity to do this:

"It enabled the partnership to happen and it enabled the Navigator model to be developed, piloted, and evaluated. It's been pivotal in enabling the partnership to be developed and increasing both the reach and consistency of support for survivors across Essex."

Women's Lives Leeds is one of the biggest partnership projects in the WGI. The partnership and project are indivisible as one informs the other and both have strengthened and developed over time. The WGI has funded the capacity to enable both the Project and the Partnership to go from strength to strength:

"The partnership is now known and the 'go to' place for women and girl's issues in Leeds. We have strong partnerships with the City Council, health, Universities as well as other women and girl's projects. This is enabling us to influence systems change and commissioning in the City, for example, on women's health."

Some partnerships have been particularly innovative. For example, **Latin American Women's Aid** is part of an effective BME partnership (the OYA consortium) that produced a report on the housing needs of BME survivors of abuse.⁴ They also worked in partnership with the Tate which gave space for LAWA to showcase Latin American women artists in a session called 'The Power of The Power of our Ancestors'.

"It was great to participate in a context that is usually not available to communities like us."

Networking and support

Most local partnership working is about increased capacity, collaborative approaches to service development and funding. Many WGI projects have been successful in these. However, the WGI has also provided opportunities for national networking and collaboration across the women and girls sector. A good example of this is the networking across many of the women's centres. For example, **Hibiscus** highlighted the importance of the links they have made with other women's projects, especially other women's centres:

"...WGI has facilitated this and Women's Centres have been really supportive of one another and in sharing resources."

The women's centres funded by the WGI have found the [briefing](#) produced from the Women's Centre Action Learning Set particularly useful. It brought together some evidence of effectiveness and bolstered a shared identity.

As **The Nelson Trust** reported:

"We have used the briefing for our meeting with commissioners in Gloucester, I have also quoted it in reports to funders and is also part of our business case for co-commissioning."

The networking and support has increased the confidence of a number of projects in describing their work and philosophy:

"We all use the f word [feminist] more and that's come out of the partnership via increased confidence and the learning programme such as the feminism and mental health Mstrclass ...we are less inclined to hide our feminist principles under a bushel and have met with a positive response from the Lottery so that increases confidence that we don't have to hide them."

North Devon Against Domestic Abuse similarly reported:

"...huge increases in the confidence of staff, which enable them to speak out whereas in the past they may have been more deferential to those who were more powerful. They also have data they can draw upon to support their case. [We are] more assertive, confident, articulate, persuasive, influential."

Co-production

A core aim of the WGI is to empower women and girls to take control of their lives. Increasing co-production, whereby projects genuinely empower women in every aspect of their work, is integral to this aim. The first *Mstrclass* provided by the Learning and Impact Partnership had a strong focus on the co-produced origins of feminist services and over the last three years, co-production has clearly been embraced with greater confidence by WGI projects. Many projects gave us examples of this:

Aspire is a women only centre based in Chester Le Street Co. Durham and delivers learning programmes, support and wellbeing services, volunteering opportunities and provides an on-site crèche. WGI funding has enabled Aspire to develop a holistic, person centred approach to support and wellbeing services for women, with some specific focus on mental health issues, domestic abuse, financial hardship, isolation and loneliness.

"Delivered in the main by our Supporting Sisters' volunteer's co-production is firmly embedded in our processes. Women, many with their own lived experiences are involved in designing and deliver all the support provision, both one to one services and are support group leads. This peer led approach has given a sense of ownership and many have continued to volunteer over the lifetime of the programme. Aspire now has a strong cohort of dedicated volunteers who are confident to mentor new volunteers."

One25 is the Bristol charity for women trapped in street sex-work and for those who are building new lives away from poverty, violence and addiction. They provide specialist support to around 250 vulnerable women each year, via a night outreach service, afternoon drop-in centre and specialist one to one support. They also run the Peony service for women who are further on in their recovery to help them to develop wellbeing and skills to reach their goals in the community. When women are very vulnerable, they are often not ready to engage in co-production, but once women are able to get involved in the Peony service this really changes. One25 describes co-production as one of their biggest areas of learning in the past year. From the start, Peony had six volunteers who had used their support and wanted to give back. Volunteers lead workshops and run a service user forum.



Confidence has risen, drug use has dramatically declined, and recently one woman was able to use her experience of volunteering with Peony to obtain a full-time job.

Women in Prison Health Matters is a project funded by the WGI to promote the physical and mental health of women in prison. The prison environment is not the easiest of places to develop co-production, but Health Matters did it via stress management workshops co-created and delivered by women.

"We worked the content up together and then the women went ahead to deliver workshops to peers in prison themselves. It went so well. So many women benefited from that. Going to prison is such a stressful thing, which is why we chose stress management as a topic. And the women were able to feel part of creating and delivering this workshop. Through this they gained more self-confidence, public speaking skills, self-esteem. So, it was really valuable."

Birth Companions was originally founded to support pregnant women and new mothers in Holloway Prison. Since then they have developed an expertise in the needs of perinatal women in the most difficult and disadvantaged circumstances and work with women facing a range of difficulties which can often make the birth of their baby a time of anxiety, stress and hardship. These can include being in prison, immigration issues, homelessness, financial difficulties, mental ill-health, involvement with social services and a history of domestic violence or sexual abuse. Birth Companions have used WGI funding to really change their organisation's approach to co-production including having ex-service users as trustees. They approached these changes carefully, providing support and training for women to enable their involvement. They told us:

"We now have lived experience throughout the organisation which is what we wanted four years ago."

VIBE (Voice, Influence, Be Empowered) is a Together Women project for and led by young women and girls aged 12-19 to have a say on issues affecting them and make changes locally, regionally and nationally. The project and its spaces have been co-designed with staff and young women (the design team). Young women are VIBE champions and ambassadors, working with, and supporting other young women, and have gained recognition for their work on a number of issues including their period poverty campaign and an online interactive story book about peer on peer abuse.

The Nelson Trust describe their co-production as having moved into a whole new zone this year. They have always had peer mentors but previously each individual was supported as a mentor by her key worker. Now they have a peer mentoring coordinator along with a structured programme of training. As a result:

"The peer mentors are now really drivers or co-pilots of service: they are joint facilitators of the Grow groups and the lunch club is entirely peer organised. They were ahead of staff in confidence and knowledge re moving groups on-line when lock-down hit. It's like we've hit on the right structure for the women to grow through."

Blossom – A Way Out provides targeted support for young women aged 16-24 living in the Stockton-on-Tees area. A key aspiration of the project is to prevent the sexual exploitation of vulnerable young women through a programme of empowerment and advocacy. Their support includes outreach, befriending/mentoring, development programmes and one to one support. From the start of the WGI funding, Blossom has been committed to developing peer support and they have learned a lot along the way:

"Initially we held some quite structured sessions around what peer support might look like and be delivered going forward ...it felt as if we were almost giving them a template as to what peer support should look like rather than letting them shaping and developing it themselves... the young women were saying, 'we want to do this... this is about what we can offer and we would really like a bit more space to grow that and to influence it' ... so we really stood back and empowered and enabled them to do that in a safe environment – but allowing them to lead. It's been very, very successful. There was this understanding that 'someone knows where I have been' and 'stood in my footsteps' which we know is a lot more powerful than coming from a member of staff. We didn't get it right first time but have developed this based on feedback from the women themselves – enabling them to do what they wanted to do in the way they wanted to do it."

Sustainability

The 'gold standard' for success in many funding programmes is leaving organisations more sustainable than they found them. If this is the case for the Women and Girls Initiative, then there is plenty of evidence that it is being achieved. In as complex and unpredictable world as the voluntary sector, it can be argued that the very act of survival is in itself a major achievement, but becoming sustainable is different to hanging on by one's fingernails – which is what a number of WGI projects were doing prior to the programme.

Sustainability is often seen as being simply about stabilising and diversifying income but improving the sustainability and resilience of an organisation is as much, or arguably more, about clarity and confidence of purpose, strength of leadership, profile, partnership working, staff skills and stability and connection to beneficiaries. The National Lottery funding of the substantial size and longevity that many projects were awarded enabled them to develop and grow in all these respects and allowed them valuable breathing space to test out ideas and build new services.

WGI gave the fundraising team at **One25** valuable time to invest in developing an individual giving programme and so reduce their reliance on grants; the success of this has led to the recruitment of a specialist donor fundraiser and a growing connection to supporters both locally and nationally.

"Having the lottery funding was transformational for us, the influence of securing the funding on mental wellbeing of the senior management and fundraising team was huge. It gave staff a stable base to do things."

Snowdrop were determined to use the opportunity of the WGI funding to make themselves sustainable and not overly reliant on grants. They planned how they might move away from Fund dependence and have prioritised and championed fundraising activity not just service provision. Fundraising has been a real success and is greatly aided by Snowdrop volunteers who are really important to their local profile and in supporting events fundraising.

"We are lucky to have a wide range of volunteering opportunities including creative stuff and the renovations projects so draw in lots of different people who get inspired."

They are one of many organisations who are well aware that having secured funding from The Fund stands them in good stead when they approach other funders. Projects variously referred to this as The Fund being seen as a 'seal of approval' or 'a big tick' and it having helped enormously in securing other grants.

"Having been part of the WGI was pivotal especially with [X trust] who now see us as an expert organisation."

This 'snowball effect' seems to have operated whether organisations were applying for small grants from local trusts or to large funders or for commissioned tenders.

Women's Community Matters have gained Arts Council funding, PCC funding and funding for working with local children's services. They described how the secured funding of the WGI had enabled them to attract and employ more professionally qualified staff:

"It meant we could attract professionals with security of length of funding. People feel more secure about taking the jump [into a voluntary organisation]. It upskills everyone. We now have four registered social workers in post, an ex-teacher, midwife, and a youth and community worker. Our safeguarding is fantastic."

This in turn has made them appear more attractive and robust in the eyes of funders and commissioners.

Similarly, **Solace Women's Aid**, an organisation which works to prevent violence and abuse as well as providing services to meet the needs of survivors, noted that:

"The WGI funding has had a positive impact on the skills of the whole organisation and the associated growth has made career pathways available which has been a factor in staff retention... Because the project is both substantial and impactful it attracts good staff."

Aspire has also recognised how gaining other funding has been closely entwined with the increased profile and status that has come from being funded through the WGI:

"This funding has had strategic importance and impact. It has brought £500k into the local economy, creating jobs and strengthening our relationships. The local authority championed us with small pots of funding to pilot elements of the programme. We have also been able to secure a 2 year tender for our learning provision by bringing added value".

Conclusion

It is obvious that a funding programme would enable services to survive and grow but the WGI was always intended to be about more than that. It was developed in recognition that the women's sector had been depleted over many years and was lacking in not only resources, but also networks, confidence and a sense of identity.

What this review shows is that WGI funding has been instrumental in supporting many women and girl's organisations to transform themselves in a number of ways. They have come together in new and more powerful partnerships, strengthened women's voices in more creative co-production and have gained confidence in who they are and what they have to offer. All this adds up to increased influence and sustainability for the future.

In future reviews the learning and impact partnership will be exploring what the critical success factors are for the WGI funding programme. At this stage, the feedback from projects suggest that there are some key features of the WGI programme which may offer lessons to The Fund and other interested funders who want to achieve similar objectives.

Investment at an adequate level and over enough time:

The investment of sufficient funding over reasonably long periods has provided projects with the stability they need, not only to deliver their services, but also to build their capacity for the future.

Encouraging projects to build their capacity as well as to deliver services: For many organisations in the voluntary and community sector, there is considerable pressure to be accountable to funders and commissioners for the level of service they provide. This can leave few resources for projects to pay attention to partnerships, profile, co-production and learning – all features of confident and more sustainable organisations.

A trusting and flexible funding relationship: For many, it has been important to have a trusting relationship with a funder which has allowed flexibility when circumstances change, or new learning suggested a different approach.

Combining a funding programme with opportunities for sharing learning and networking: The WGI has been more than just a fund. The opportunities it has provided to share learning and network has helped to build confidence and a stronger sense of identity as a women and girls sector.

Notes

1. The partnership is composed of the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations (TIHR), DMSS Research and the Child and Woman Abuse Studies Unit (CWASU).
2. CWASU/DMSS (2015) Women and Girls Initiative Learning and Evaluation Scoping Support: Report from Project Team.
3. When the Covid-19 lockdown began in March we were unable to complete interviews with all projects .
4. Heimer, R. (2019). 'A Roof, Not a Home: The housing experiences of Black and minoritised women survivors of gender-based violence in London'. London: Latin American Women's Aid, available at http://lawadv.org.uk/en/waha_executive_summary/

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This report was written by Di McNeish and Sara Scott, DMSS Research, as part of the WGI Learning and Impact Services provided to WGI projects by the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations (TIHR), DMSS Research and the Child and Women Abuse Studies Unit (CWASU).

Find out more [here](#).

