

**Learning from
Women and Girls:**

The Women and Girls Initiative Final Impact Report

Executive Summary



Introduction

The final impact report for the Women and Girls' Initiative (WGI) tells the story and presents the learning and key messages from a programme dedicated to supporting women and girls, delivered from 2016 to 2023.

What was the WGI?

The WGI was a £44.7million investment by The National Lottery Community Fund (the Fund), the largest community funder in the UK, supporting 62 projects across England with funds raised by National Lottery players. The Fund aimed to help strengthen the women and girls' sector through:

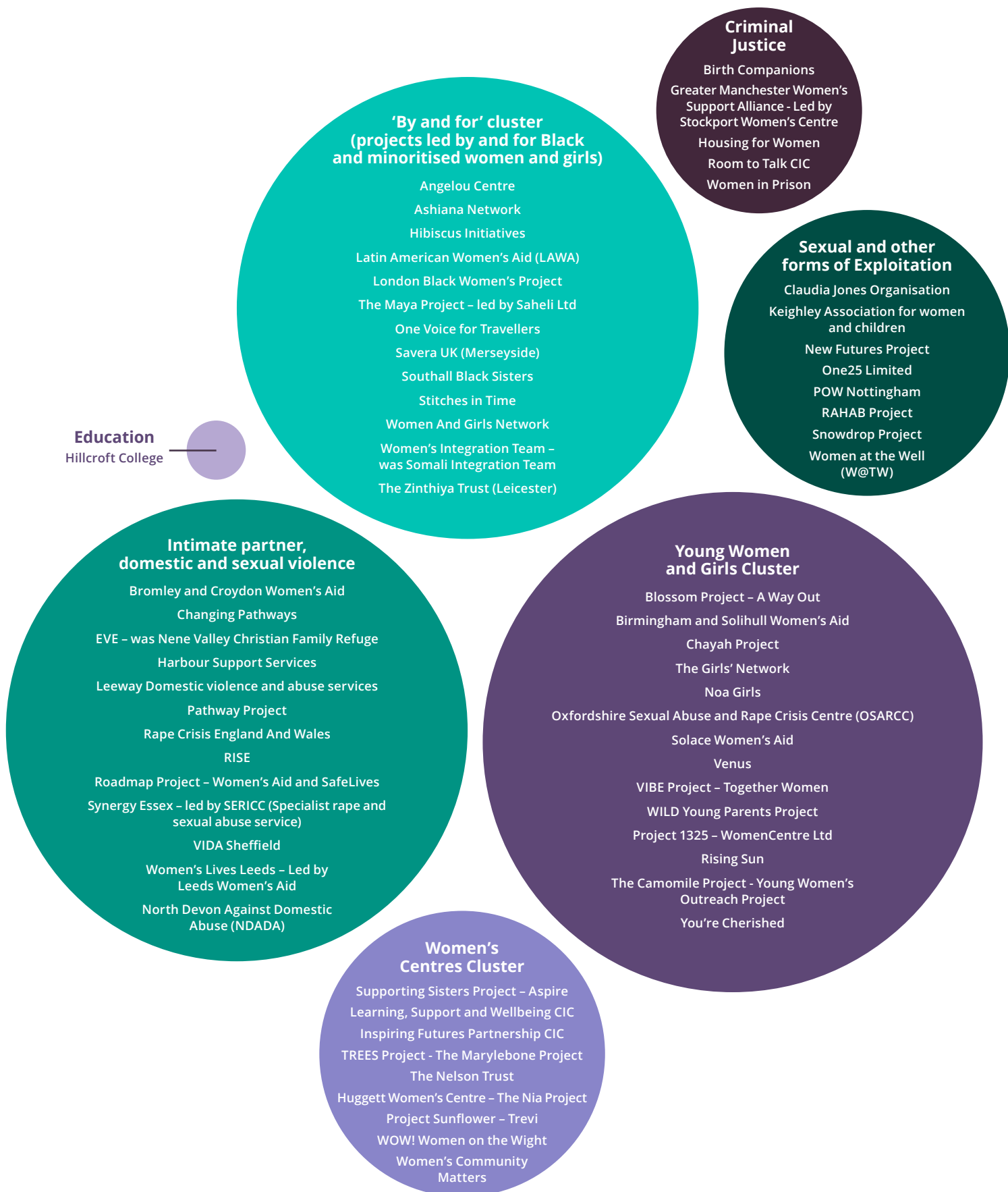
- Increased provision of holistic, person-centred approaches for women and girls
- Increased role and voice for women and girls in co-producing services
- A greater number of women and girls being supported through the provision of improved specialist support
- Better quality of evidence for what works in empowering women and girls.

Grant holders were funded to support and empower women and girls facing violence, abuse, exploitation, and mental health issues. They provided a range of holistic, specialist support including:

- Advice and advocacy
- Refuge provision
- Counselling
- Training and skills development
- Peer designed and led activities, including mentoring.

There were a range of ways that projects were differentiated, including through clustering projects according to different specialisms. One form of clustering is presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Visual taxonomy of projects by cluster



This visual taxonomy represents one way in which funded projects have been 'clustered' by the Learning and Impact Services team, to try and understand similarities and differences in approaches, structures and learning between different types of projects. It is also useful in helping understand the main focus of funding at a glance. However, please note this is a simplistic representation. There are multiple other ways projects could have been clustered and many could have been put in many or all of the clusters. By the nature of holistic work, most projects worked across different themes and populations, to best support women and girls. [Appendix 1](#) provides a short description of each funded project. Case studies throughout this report add further detail about some of what projects achieved.

The Learning and Impact Services contract

The Fund commissioned Learning and Impact Services from the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations, DMSS Research and the Child and Woman Abuse Studies Unit (CWASU) at London Metropolitan University – the partners. This contract began in 2018 and included a range of learning, support and data gathering activities with projects.

What is in the WGI Final Impact Report?

The [final impact report](#) is based on the numerous activities and outputs produced and published over the WGI's lifespan. These include individual project evaluations, [blogs](#), [briefings](#), [reports](#), [webinars](#), and [an animation film](#), produced by the WGI Learning and Impact Services Team. Following an introduction to the WGI, the report explores why holistic, specialist support achieves better outcomes, and outlines the challenges and barriers to this. It then describes the difference made by the WGI for women, girls and funded organisations, before exploring the learning around co-production from implementing the WGI. The report goes on to consider the contribution of the Learning and Impact Services to the success of the WGI. It concludes by summarising key successes, challenges, learning for the future, and ends with recommendations for funders, commissioners, and women and girls' sector projects.

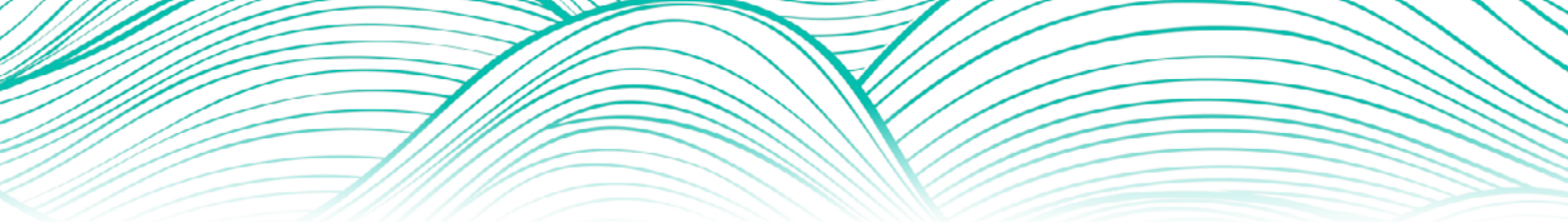
The changing contexts behind the WGI

Since projects were first funded in 2016, a number of culturally significant events took place, including the #MeToo and #TimesUp campaigns, the Domestic Abuse Act and most significantly COVID-19. The ongoing impacts of COVID-19 and the cost-of-living crisis has meant that the background context behind the WGI and its legacy has constantly shifted. However, although the funding period was turbulent, projects, partners and the Fund worked together to be agile and adaptive to continue to effectively support women and girls. How this was achieved is explored in the following sections.

Why does holistic, specialist support work well and what are the challenges and barriers?

The Fund took a holistic approach to its funding and support for grant holders, working with a wide range of projects and organisations from the smallest grass-root groups to the largest national women and girls' charities. WGI funding enabled projects to work with a diverse range of women and girls across England, many facing multiple challenges. The general focus was on supporting the whole person, led by the woman or girl's individual strengths, needs and desires. This meant that work was often long-term, multi-faceted, and varied, leading to different pathways and outcomes for different people.

Projects held specialisms in a variety of areas including sexual or intimate partner violence, migration and trafficking, providing refuge accommodation and/or education activities. For some, work focused on specific populations such as young women and girls or Black and minoritised women. WGI funding has enabled staff and organisations to develop and build new knowledge and skills, including in their abilities to work co-productively and through partnerships, to help women and girls achieve lasting outcomes and organisations to develop and strengthen.



Analysis of learning shared by projects through activities, progress reviews and internal and external evaluation reports identified the following factors as important to successful holistic, specialist support that achieves good outcomes:

- Projects and partnerships holding to the values behind the work
- Nurturing relationships and building trust at all levels
- Capacity to work long-term
- Embedding adaptability and flexibility in the project design and support offer
- The skills, passion and commitment of staff and volunteers.

There were challenges and barriers to holistic, specialist support:

- The wider economic and social contexts
- Increasing needs and demand for support
- Limited resources available for the work
- Staff recruitment, retention and wellbeing
- Partnership working challenges.

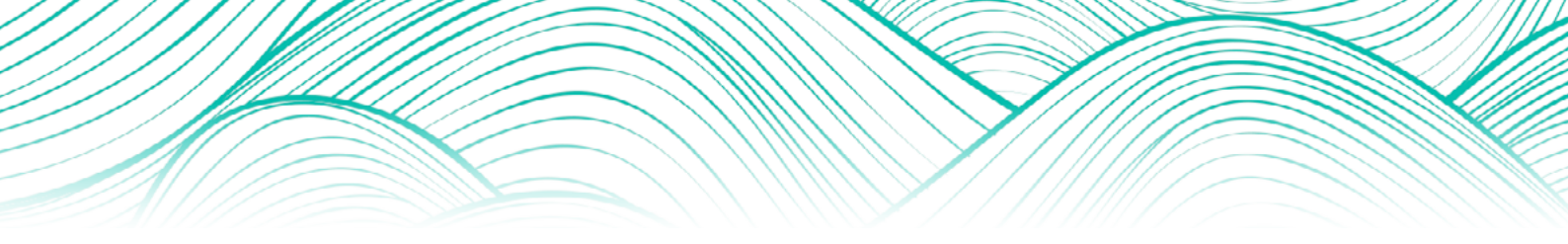
Both success factors and challenges can relate to each other. For instance, holding to the values of the work is connected to nurturing of relationships and the skills, passion and commitment of staff and volunteers. Likewise, the economic and social contexts impact on increasing needs for support and the availability of resources. A key learning from this experience has been how the flexibility and the length of WGI funding, particularly for those funded for five years, enabled projects to develop and tailor their support to the women and girls they were working with. This enabled projects to test new approaches and build on what was working well. This also meant it was more likely that women and girls could achieve positive outcomes.

Finally, there was an open, flexible approach to monitoring and evaluation from the Fund which was valued by projects. However, the lack of consistency in gathering data and reporting from projects meant it was impossible to quantify overall numbers or demographics of women and girls supported without adding significant burden, particularly for smaller organisations.

What difference did WGI funding make for women, girls, and funded organisations?

A range of outcomes were reported by individuals and by project staff, some of which were shared in an animation film, *Where she was to where she is now*, which was created with the significant contribution of project staff and the women and girls they worked with. WGI projects reported that the funding enabled the following outcomes:

- Increasing and improving networks, support and community
- Improving mental health and wellbeing

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- Increasing empowerment through building knowledge, skills and understanding
 - Surviving the impact of domestic and intimate partner violence and sexual exploitation
 - Women and girls rebuilding their lives.

The report contains many stories from projects of women and girls growing in confidence and self-esteem, building new friendships and connections, developing new understanding of their past experiences, and generating a greater awareness of their own capacities and strengths. In some cases, women reported that being involved in a WGI project had saved their lives. In many cases, those supported were able to make changes they had previously believed impossible, because of the contributing factors named in the previous section.

For projects, WGI funding was reported as generally successful in strengthening the women and girls' sector. It supported the achievement of outcomes including:

- moving from survival to sustainability and growth.
- increasing the number and quality of specialist services on offer.
- building new partnerships and networks.
- increasing the voice and influencing of funded organisations.

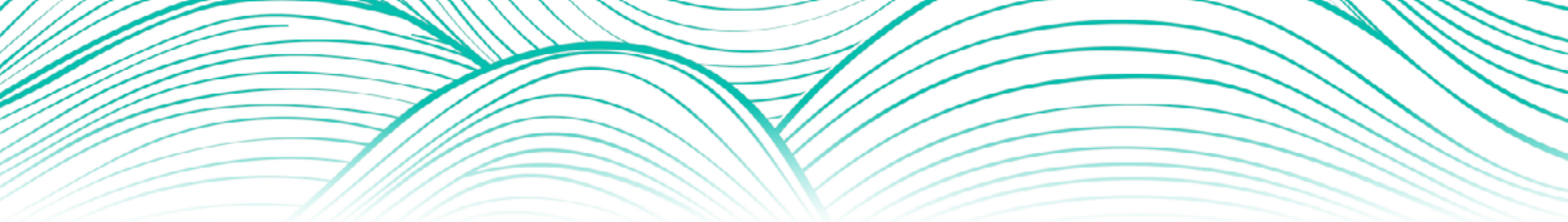
Projects reported that having the support of the Fund contributed to an increase in confidence, giving space and time for staff to develop skills, for organisational structures and practice to grow and for projects to learn from their and each other's experiences. Before the WGI, less than half of projects (29) had previously received grant funding from the Fund. As of February 2023, 90% (56 out of 62) had gone on to receive further funding, for example from the Fund's 'Reaching Communities' programme. This investment in women and girls' sector organisations directly benefits women and girls.

To achieve the best outcomes for women and girls, it is important to give time, space and trust for organisations and individuals to try out different approaches and define their own pathway for development within an overall supportive framework. The key to being person-centred and holistic is that one size will not fit all and that there is expertise in the sector and in individuals, which needs to be supported for flourishing to take place. This leads to the next section, on learning around co-production.

Co-production in the WGI

The WGI aimed to empower women and girls to take control of their lives. An integral part of this aim was to help increase the voice and influence of women and girls in the design and delivery of support, including through co-production. Over the course of the WGI, individually and collectively, through workshops, webinars and other activities, including practice-based research, a lot was learnt and shared around co-production and other types of involvement.

Projects developed a variety of methods to support women and girls to take the lead in different ways, including through:

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- peer support and research.
 - volunteering through to employment.
 - setting the agenda for what work would be done and what it looked like.
 - influencing policy and practice, e.g., participating in governance and management structures.
 - the lived experience of staff.

The report shares many examples from projects that illustrate the learning achieved and principles that are key to empowerment work, whether or not people have the current capacity to co-produce. These principles include:

- starting with the lived experience of women and girls to inform service design and analysis of what works.
- understanding the impact of gender inequality and how it intersects with other inequalities such as racism, class and disability.
- how activism, which seeks to contribute to a more equal world for women and girls, is an important part of dealing with the legacies of violence and abuse.
- the language of the collective is important, expressing the ‘we’ rather than splitting between ‘us professionals’ and ‘them service users’.

Overall, the WGI has given space to connect the principles behind contemporary notions of co-production with feminist ways of working. Both are focused on people working together as equal partners, building on strengths, levelling power relations, valuing and supporting diversity, accessibility, and reciprocity.

The contribution of the Learning and Impact Services partnership

The Fund’s decision to commission, and the approaches taken by, the Learning and Impact Services partners, were reported as contributing to the success of the WGI. It enabled and empowered funded projects to demonstrate the difference they were making for women and girls. It enabled projects to share learning, raise their voice, develop a stronger community of networked services, and increase their influence for the long-term benefit of women and girls. The partners offered a range of activities, from one-to-one project support through to facilitated action learning meetings, *M*Sterclasses, workshops, webinars and a co-created animation film, which was led by Leeds Animation Workshop. As already mentioned, outputs included blogs, briefings, reports and audio-visual resources, all of which can be found [here](#).

The partners made a valuable difference in several ways, including:

- bringing people – organisational leaders, project staff and volunteers - together in purposeful ways, enabling sharing of experience, practice and connecting with others.
- making space for stepping back, reflection and thinking.

- synthesising practice-based knowledge, helping articulate what the work was about and its value, and then sharing this, through high quality briefings and reports over the Initiative's lifespan, with the wider world.

Key learning from this experience:

- Having a learning partner, with deep, specialist knowledge and skills of the issues and the sector, added to both knowledge shared, and outcomes achieved.
- The partners brought and combined different specialisms and strengths which contributed to the diversity and success of the interventions offered.
- Consistency and longevity from the Learning and Impact Services team was reported as beneficial, with project staff valuing the stability offered, and trust built, by working with the same key people.
- Flexibility from both the Fund and the partners enabled support to be adapted to the needs of projects, particularly, but not only, during the early COVID-19 lockdowns.

Overall, the partners worked adaptively to enable and empower projects to gather and use evidence to demonstrate the difference they were making for women and girls. Projects were supported to come together, building a stronger community of networked services, and contributing to the production and publication of a wealth of outputs that shared this evidence, and, thereby, supporting the sector's profile and influence. This leaves a legacy of learning and knowledge that will be a resource for women and girls' projects, funders and commissioners, long into the future.

Conclusion and recommendations

Overall, the Women and Girls Initiative has been a hugely valued investment into the women and girls' sector, not only through direct grant funding for delivery, but also through the Learning and Impact Services support provided to WGI projects. The programme Theory of Change, its assumptions and funded activities have generally worked, to help achieve the planned programme outcomes and ultimate goal of empowering women and girls.

Key successes:

- Funded organisations being able to survive, develop and grow their support, taking calculated risks to support ongoing learning and provide high quality work.
- Women and girls being supported to recover from exploitation, abuse, other forms of harm; rebuilding their lives primarily because WGI funded work could be long-term, multi-faceted and flexible to their needs. In some cases, this was experienced as literally life-saving.
- A better understanding and evidence of how best to support women and girls, through values-led, holistic and empowerment-based work.

- Supporting staff and volunteer wellbeing, nurturing relationships at all levels, with positive impacts on the trusting, healing relationships built with women and girls seeking support.
- The flexibility of the funding approach and the holistic support for funded organisations through the Learning and Impact Services.

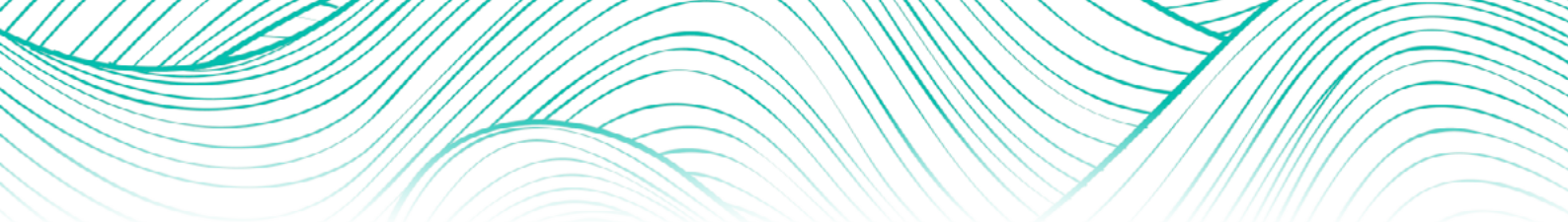
Key challenges:

- Projects facing increasing needs with fewer resources, partly due to the wider economic climate.
- Organisational challenges, including staff recruitment and retention and partnership working.
- The Fund moving to a regional approach to funding, at the same time as the Learning and Impact Services began, and 18 months after projects had started, causing some confusion and mismatches between timeframes, and gaps in support.
- The lack of consistency in data gathering and reporting requirements across projects.

The key ingredients to successful projects:

- Values led organisations, with a feminist lens, who believe in the capacity and potential of women and girls, and take account of the historic, social and economic barriers to empowerment.
- Holistic, long-term, woman-centred support delivered by specialists in the women and girls sector, skilled in working with those traumatised by male violence.
- Spaces that provide physical and emotional sanctuary for women and girls where they feel welcome, cared for and empowered to be themselves without pressure to conform.
- Flexible and adaptable services that do not require women and girls to fit into a pre-determined pathway, but instead follow the needs of individuals, at their pace and in their time, with opportunities to easily return to support if and when needed.
- Offering varied routes into support – such as one-to-one and group work - with diverse activities available – for instance, training, creative projects, counselling and peer support.
- Opportunities for women and girls to lead, using their voices to influence, design and, where appropriate, co-produce services.
- Reflective practice embedded into organisational culture, with a range of protective measures to support staff wellbeing.
- Investment in and valuing of staff skills, commitment and passion, with a focus on building trusting relationships at every level of a project.

The tailoring of support to the needs of individual women and girls has been central to the



success of many WGI projects. The type of support needed, the way that support was provided, the diversity of funded activities, potential approaches and, most importantly, preferences of women and girls varied considerably. A key learning from this is that the greater the variety of support available, the better that a diversity of changing needs can be met. Other learning points for the future, shared in the final impact report, reflect on the:

- programme design and Theory of Change – which has overall proven to be relevant and supportive to the programme aims.
- projects' set-up and management – including that it is easy to underestimate the time needed for this and that it is important to be able to stop and change course.
- ways of best meeting needs and supporting staff wellbeing – for instance, having at least two workers known to women and girls, that can be reached out to, not only ensures more consistent support (such as during times of leave). It also helps staff take time out without being concerned someone has no one else to go to.

The report concludes with a series of recommendations for women and girls' projects, funders and commissioners, based on the successes, challenges and learning points shared. Recommendations for projects included to put brakes into working processes, to support staff wellbeing and to enable reflection on how well the project is achieving its aims and what might need to change. For funders, it is recommended that they come together and with the sector to see how, together, women and girls might best be supported in coming years. And whilst some basic monitoring data is helpful for identifying gaps and needs, a holistic, flexible approach to support learning and evidence building works best for programmes of this kind. The many outputs produced are perhaps testament to this.

In conclusion, the WGI has added tremendous value to the sector, but the issues it aimed to address have not gone away - neither for women and girls themselves nor for organisations. Women and girls' organisations continue to need specific, long-term funding and other strategic support, individually, and collectively, as a sector with a shared identity, to be able to continue making positive differences for women and girls. With demand and needs likely to rise as the cost-of-living crisis continues, support will need to meet these challenges in a robust way, using longer term, empowerment perspectives to drive the design of projects. As the success of the WGI has demonstrated, it is perhaps only through collaboration with, trusting and listening to the specialist sector and women and girls themselves, that the most effective approaches will continue to be developed and the best outcomes achieved.

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