Learning from Women and Girls:

The Women and Girls Initiative Final Impact Report

September 2023

Contents

Acknowledgements

1. Introduction

Three key messages

1 The Fund invested considerable resources in the women and girls sector at a time when it really needed them and committed to a five year programme which was highly unusual, especially in the voluntary sector. As well as funding the projects, the Fund also provided support for projects, through the Learning and Impact Services team, which helped develop evaluation capacity and capture evidence and learning across projects.

2 Many different kinds of specialist support and activities were offered and further developed throughout the funding period. Women and girls across England, often with complex needs and different kinds of lived experience, benefited hugely from these activities.

3 The funding period was turbulent because the main lockdown periods of the COVID-19 pandemic occurred during the life of the funding of most of the projects. A particular success of the WGI was that the projects, the Fund and the Learning and Impact Services team were all aligned in being agile and adaptive in order to effectively support the needs of women and girls during this time.

The National Lottery Community Fund (the Fund) launched the Women and Girls Initiative (WGI) in June 2015. In May 2016, a total of 62 organisations working with women and girls across England were successful in receiving funding with a total investment of £44.7 million.

Projects were funded for between three and five years to deliver specialist, tailored work to support and empower women and girls facing a wide range of issues including violence, abuse, exploitation or trafficking. Some were homeless, had mental health and/or drug or alcohol issues and most were experiencing gender inequality, alongside other oppressions and discrimination.[1]

---

[1] To discover more about the funded projects, see Diving into the Women and Girls' Initiative and Appendix 1.

The Fund saw WGI funding as a route to enable a stronger women and girls' sector through the following four outcomes:

- 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.

This report presents a picture of the learning and key messages from the programme and refers throughout to the numerous outputs and reports that have been produced over the last five years.

Together, these papers, briefings, reports, blogs, a film and many other activities provide the story of the programme. It was funded, supported and delivered in a holistic way, with a focus on using specialist knowledge, lived experience and a flexible, strength and needs based approach at all levels. It was also a programme which continued its work throughout the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns, with the project leaders and workers adapting to the circumstances, and changing their methods, while maintaining a focus on supporting women and girls, often in crisis situations.

A programme Theory of Change (see Figure 1) was created during the development phase of the WGI. The outcomes that were identified during that phase have been reported on throughout the lifecycle of this programme and in this report. The assumptions made about what was important for women and girls and what would work to achieve the identified outcomes have been justified. The ambitions of the programme have largely been met and the achievements of projects point to the success of this programme, despite the complex times in which it found itself. This has helped enable women and girls to get much needed and wanted support, at a time and in a way that works for them, empowering individuals to develop and make changes that are, they hope, sustainable.

Figure 1: Programme Theory of Change

Assumptions	Activities	Outcomes	Ultimate Goal
Women and girls want to be involved in co-producing services & the sector is committed to this	Promising practice: tried & tested, new, with a strong theory of change/evidence base, scaling up & rolling out, adopting, adapting and growing	1. Increased provision of holistic, integrated, person-centred approaches for women and girls at risk	Empowering women and girls to take control of their lives
Sector organisations can produce enough evidence to support their application	Person-centred	2. Increased role and voice for women and girls in co-producing services	
sector can work in partnership with others	Putting people in the lead		
Women and their children can be supported through this funding	Working in a joined up way (partnership working)		
There is no need for an age range with this initiative	Open access and increase access	3. A greater number of women and girls are supported through the provision of more & improved specialist support	
Sector's version of 'tried and tested' is correct	Support to women and girls who are 'at risk' or 'in need'		
Sector can move quickly enough to deliver this level of funding & organisations can manage up to £750,000 over the 5 year period	Prevention and early intervention work		
Women and girls sector is uniquely and best placed to support the women and girls who are in need or at risk	Education & awareness raising as well as service provision		
Holistic, integrated, person/women-centred is the best approach to supporting us in achieving our goal	Values led ways of working:	4. Better quality of evidence for what works in empowering women and girls	
Supporting the sector to be resilient and exploit opportunities like this is the right thing to do	Quality, safer, trauma-informed, long-term trusted relationships, advocacy		
	Long-term services with funding for 3-5 years		

What is in this report?

This introductory chapter provides a brief overview of the WGI and its inception and progress over the five years of the funding. It describes the Learning and Impact Services, highlights some of the changing contexts behind the WGI and some caveats and limitations to be aware of whilst reading this report. We focus on what has been learnt and the key messages that come from this in the following chapters. Chapter 2 explores why the funded holistic, specialist provision has worked well, together with challenges and barriers faced, whilst chapter 3 provides insights into the outcomes that the programme achieved. In chapter 4 we look at how co-production has been understood and enacted in the WGI. In chapter 5 we outline what we did as the Learning and Impact Services team and draw out lessons for future programmes of this kind. In the final chapter we summarise our insights on the WGI successes and challenges, with recommendations for women and girls sector projects, funders and commissioners.

Throughout the report, the Learning and Impact Services team (or partnership) is referred to by its whole name or as 'the partners'. When we say 'we' it is referencing the views and experience, and data from the team, unless otherwise clarified. Organisations that received funding are called WGI projects, funded organisations or grant holders.

The report refers to The National Lottery Community Fund as the Fund. When the WGI began it was called the Big Lottery Fund.

Inspiration for the Fund

The original inspiration for the Fund's development of the WGI was the recognition that projects and groups most concerned with gender equality and violence against women had been under-resourced for many years. The Fund recognised that the women and girls' sector needed more support. Through its responsive funding programmes, the sector had been having relatively low levels of success in gaining funding.

The Fund was committed to addressing these issues and wanted to understand the sector's issues in more depth and find out what those directly involved thought was needed, in order to be of best use to a sector under pressure. To that end the Fund held a series of consultation events in 2014/15 which brought together women from a wide range of women's organisations with academics and researchers. The learning from these events helped to shape the Initiative, launching with an emphasis on co-production. It ensured that the ambition for the Fund's investment would be to support the development of a stronger, better connected, and more confident women's sector with better evidence of its effectiveness in empowering women and girls.

Awarding the WGI grants

In accordance with the Theory of Change, the Fund wanted to support projects that could help women and girls achieve their potential through specialist and tailored work. National and local charities were funded with fifteen of the grants awarded to partnerships or consortia of organisations. Each project was funded from 2016 for between three and five years. The smallest grant awarded was £150,000 and the largest grant was £5,750,733. Just less than half of the grantees had not previously received funding from the Fund. See the information on the right which gives further details on applications received and awarded.

What activities and people were supported through WGI?

Grant funding was made available for projects to support women and girls through one-to-one and group-based activities, including:

- advice and advocacy.
- refuge provision.
- counselling.
- training and skills development.
- peer designed and led activities, including mentoring.

See Appendix 1 and 'Diving into the Women and Girls Initiative' for more information on the projects funded and where they were located.

We also identified other ways that projects were differentiated according to different criteria, which can be seen in Figure 2. Figure 3 illustrates the geographic spread of projects across England.

Applications received and awarded

Over **1056** verbal expressions of interest were received

515 of these were deemed eligible for funding and progressed to initial conversations

90 applications for funding were received

62 applicants were successful – these became the projects

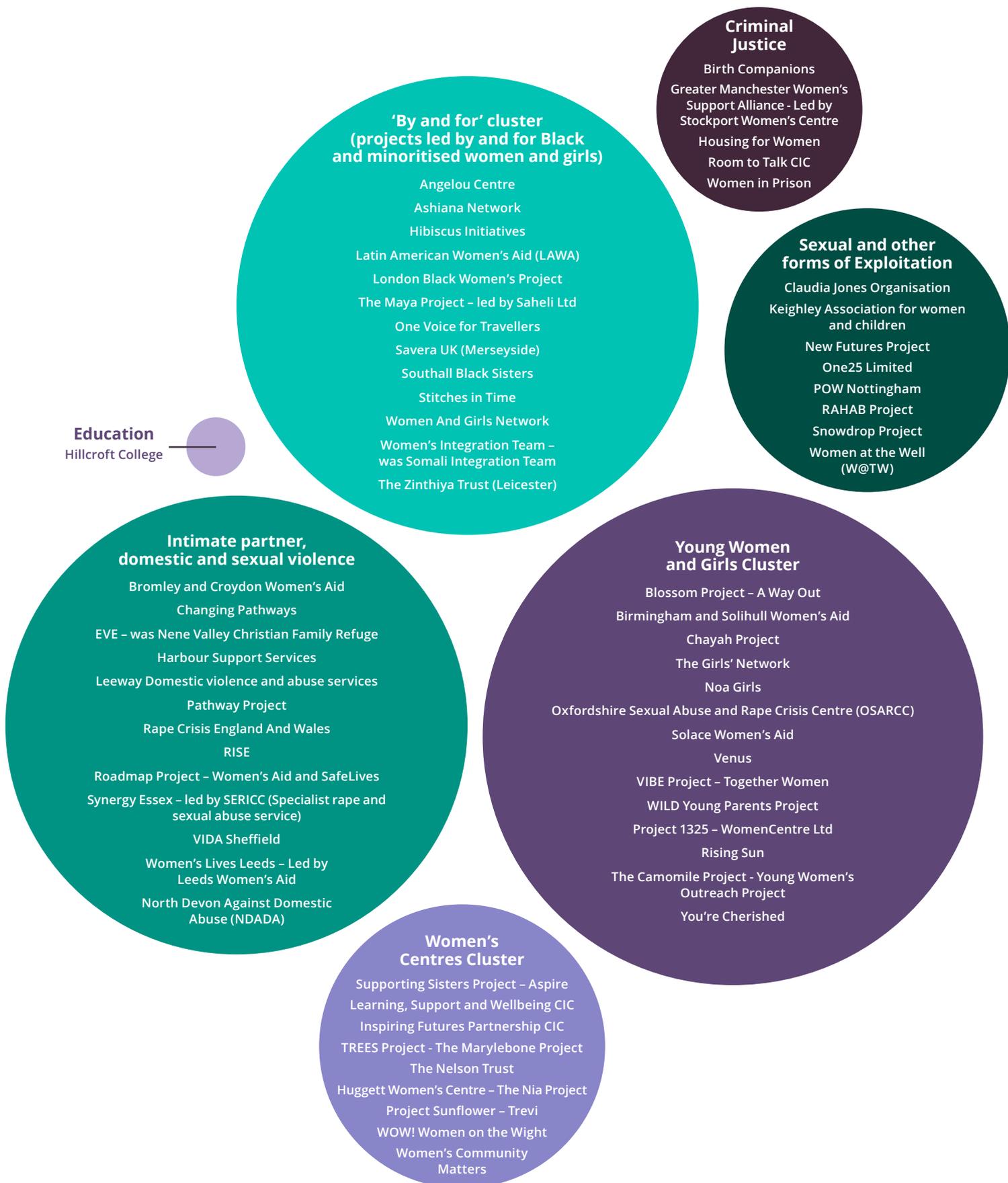**47%** (**29** projects) had not previously been funded by the Fund

The total, final investment into WGI was **£45,507,104**[2]

---

[2] This was the final investment figure following some funding uplifts and extensions for projects due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Figure 2: Visual taxonomy of projects by cluster

Criminal Justice
Birth Companions
Greater Manchester Women's Support Alliance - Led by Stockport Women's Centre
Housing for Women
Room to Talk CIC
Women in Prison

'By and for' cluster
(projects led by and for Black and minoritised women and girls)
Angelou Centre
Ashiana Network
Hibiscus Initiatives
Latin American Women's Aid (LAWA)
London Black Women's Project
The Maya Project – led by Saheli Ltd
One Voice for Travellers
Savera UK (Merseyside)
Southall Black Sisters
Stitches in Time
Women And Girls Network
Women's Integration Team – was Somali Integration Team
The Zinthiya Trust (Leicester)

Sexual and other forms of Exploitation
Claudia Jones Organisation
Keighley Association for women and children
New Futures Project
One25 Limited
POW Nottingham
RAHAB Project
Snowdrop Project
Women at the Well (W@TW)

Education
Hillcroft College

Intimate partner, domestic and sexual violence
Bromley and Croydon Women's Aid
Changing Pathways
EVE – was Nene Valley Christian Family Refuge
Harbour Support Services
Leeway Domestic violence and abuse services
Pathway Project
Rape Crisis England And Wales
RISE
Roadmap Project – Women's Aid and SafeLives
Synergy Essex – led by SERICC (Specialist rape and sexual abuse service)
VIDA Sheffield
Women's Lives Leeds – Led by Leeds Women's Aid
North Devon Against Domestic Abuse (NDADA)

Young Women and Girls Cluster
Blossom Project – A Way Out
Birmingham and Solihull Women's Aid
Chayah Project
The Girls' Network
Noa Girls
Oxfordshire Sexual Abuse and Rape Crisis Centre (OSARCC)
Solace Women's Aid
Venus
VIBE Project – Together Women
WILD Young Parents Project
Project 1325 – WomenCentre Ltd
Rising Sun
The Camomile Project - Young Women's Outreach Project
You're Cherished

Women's Centres Cluster
Supporting Sisters Project – Aspire
Learning, Support and Wellbeing CIC
Inspiring Futures Partnership CIC
TREES Project - The Marylebone Project
The Nelson Trust
Huggett Women's Centre – The Nia Project
Project Sunflower – Trevi
WOW! Women on the Wight
Women's Community Matters

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.

Figure 3: The geographic spread of projects across England
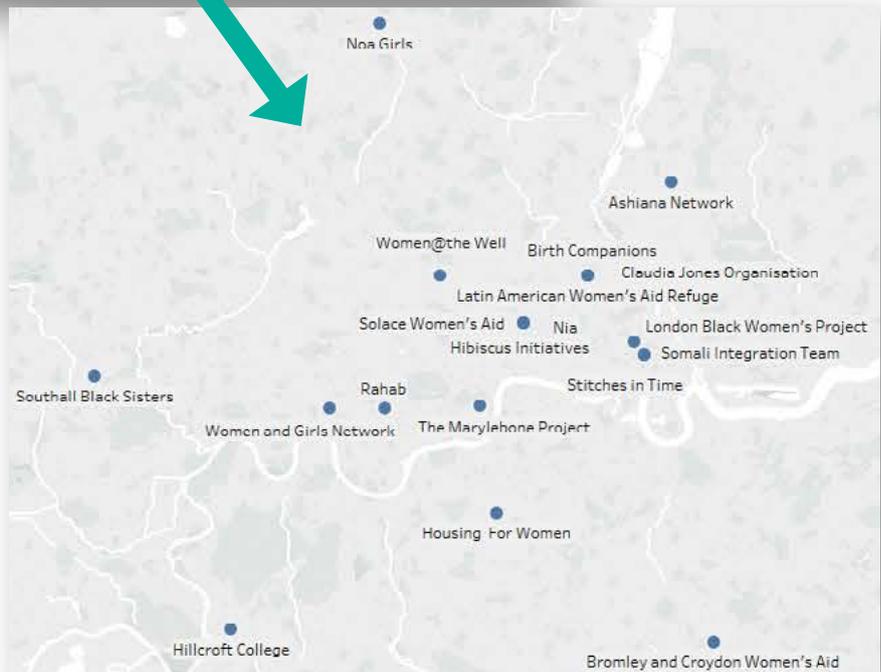
Resource allocation for evaluation and learning

One of the important features of the WGI is that projects were asked to allocate 10% of their budget to evaluation and learning activities with the expectation that the learning from projects would be shared. This was to make sure that evaluation and learning could be developed by each of the projects. The project leaders could choose how they wanted to spend this resource, for example by supporting internal staff to develop their evaluation skills or by commissioning an outside agency to undertake it.

Additionally, each project was expected to use its funding to best meet their local and specific needs. As we go on to elaborate in Chapter 5, one result of the individualisation of the projects and resources for project-specific evaluations was that it was not possible to collect data in a systematic way across all 62 projects. As we do not have consistent baseline or outcomes data, it has therefore not been possible to undertake a full programme evaluation and nor was this intended, due to the prioritisation of project flexibility in design and delivery. Rather a meta-analysis of the impact of the investment, according to the identified themes, was suggested in the tender document. In the light of the unfolding picture as regards the data, the team needed to plan creatively to find other ways to capture evidence and have been able to make a great deal of the data and draw conclusions from it. This data was gathered by project staff, external evaluators and the Learning and Impact Services team themselves. To help identify and extract data for learning, projects were offered mentoring and evaluation support, ranging from an annual check in on the phone, to evaluation sessions or workshops on data collection, analysis and report writing.

The Learning and Impact Services contract

The Fund was keen to support its investment in the WGI and set out to procure a Learning and Impact Services contract which would support the projects throughout the lifetime of the Initiative. This followed the earlier development work, through the Learning and Evaluation Scoping Support for WGI contract, (outlined in more detail in Chapter 5). So, in January 2018, the WGI Learning and Impact Services contract was awarded to the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations (TIHR), as consortium lead, DMSS Research (DMSS) and the Child and Woman Abuse Studies Unit (CWASU) – the partners. Together, we delivered a programme of support to projects with the aim of capturing and sharing learning and creating a stronger community of services with greater influence on decision-making structures across the country.

As a team of experienced and committed researchers and practitioners, the partners offered many different activities, working with and alongside the funded projects. These included providing one-to-one support to projects, workshops, action learning group meetings and *MS*terclasses, developing and writing themed briefing papers, providing an online community hub, and producing an animation film featuring many of the projects and their work. We worked with local and regional commissioners and the Fund, and projects, in designing and delivering round table events to showcase local projects and their work. We were also able to adapt our work to meet the needs that arose over the five-year funding period and according to emerging circumstances, such as the move from a face-to-face conference for all projects to online regional round tables and showcase events due to the pandemic. This programme of work is outlined in Chapter 5, with a full list of outputs in Appendix 2 and activities detailed in Appendix 3.

Learning and Impact Services: how the team organised the work

Our early activities as the Learning and Impact Services team was finding out more about the programme: how the projects were organised; what they were delivering and how they had come together (some projects for example had been brought together by the Fund); how they were planning on evaluating their work and what we could do to support them in this: What were their challenges? We undertook an initial 'audit', involving telephone conversations with all projects and a short survey. We gained a good overview of what would be most useful for projects at that time, and from this, identified themes for activities and a focus for support, as well as developing a monitoring and evaluation framework.

Our annual 'audit' (re-named 'progress review') via a telephone catch up, enabled us to keep in touch with the projects, learn about how they were developing, and used the information to inform our planning of activities the following year. We worked with project staff to identify and share learning about the challenges that women and girls were facing, the challenges that their organisations faced in supporting them, and the achievements being made with the help of WGI funding. These have been captured in briefings, reports and blogs throughout the course of the Initiative.[3]

Keeping in touch was particularly important at a human level from 2020 as the projects grappled with their emerging circumstances and new ways of working.

As the COVID-19 pandemic progressed, we offered different kinds of support for staff and for learning, sharing what we could in briefings and blogs about what was working during the lockdowns and providing regular support for staff where they wanted it. Over time we explored particular requirements: for young women and girls and for Black and minoritised women, the impacts of WGI funding on organisations, partnership working, and the importance of spaces to the work. Throughout the five years the team also had its eyes firmly on what other learning could be developed, how this related to the original programme Theory of Change, and what the key messages for sharing were for organisations, funders and commissioners.

The changing contexts and the effects of these on the WGI

Any initiative and its learning and impact function needs to respond to the context in which it finds itself and to say that the WGI found itself in turbulent times would be an understatement.

Politically, the WGI was established during an upturn in international consciousness around issues to do with violence against women. For example, the #MeToo and #TimesUp movements were able to raise greater awareness and create international conversations about the treatment of women.

However, the most significant change for the WGI was the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic and the related lockdowns and partial lockdowns. This followed a period of austerity during which the women and girls' sector had suffered pressure due to funding cuts to statutory services. The impact of COVID-19 on the WGI participating projects was immediate, with the shift to working from home and online and a need to switch resources towards supporting women and girls in different ways. This constituted a huge shift for a sector that was not traditionally tech-savvy and

---

[3] See Appendix 2 and throughout this document for links to resources published.

Information and all outputs can also be found via this link: https://www.tavinstitute.org/wgi

was supported by the Fund, which readily agreed to projects buying laptops and other equipment to support them. Projects also reported to us that they were often continuing supporting their clients when statutory services had closed or were not able to reach them. While project support often moved to online, some staff also felt compelled to ensure that the vulnerable women and girls they worked with had face to face contact where possible, even if socially distanced. One of the young women and girls projects for example, told us that they created parcels with things to do in them which staff delivered to the door, so that they could keep an eye on the young women they worked with who were at risk or socially isolated. The longer-term impact on the projects, as reported by staff, was that they were at risk of staff sickness and burnout.

Another impact of the pandemic was an upsurge in the national conversation about the impact of the lockdowns on women and girls at risk of violence, when left in isolation with abusive partners and family. A long-awaited Domestic Abuse Act was finally passed in April 2021, clarifying and developing some points of law, although it still omits migrant women. It possibly received greater attention because of pandemic effects. At a similar time, the protests which surrounded the murder of Sarah Everard in March 2021 at the hands of a then-serving Metropolitan Police Officer and the police response to those protests also contributed to greater interest in the safety of women.

The cost-of-living crisis which began in 2022 has also increased pressure on the women and girls' sector, via greater demand for support which is more costly to provide due to rising energy and food prices.

Caveats, limitations and challenges for the Learning and Impact Services

Adopting a regional approach to funding

In 2018 the Fund changed the way that it was organised, moving from centralised funding teams to one which provided project support on a regional basis. The emphasis on regionalisation was to support closer alignment with local conditions, needs and priorities. This complex change for the Fund had an impact on some projects that had recently been funded, as new regional posts were being created and embedding into a new way of working. For these WGI funded projects the hiatus led to a break in the support they had received following the initial programme Theory of Change that had been undertaken and coincided with the start of the Learning and Impact Services contract. This led to some confusion for projects, some of whom thought that contact from the Learning and Impact Services team, was contact from their Funding Officer from the Fund. It also had an impact on what was reported, and how, to Funding Officers as they settled into their posts. Funding Officers differed in their requirements and expectations with grant monitoring moving to a more light touch approach. And it became more difficult for the Learning and Impact Services team and the Fund's national leads to influence regional reporting requirements.

Reporting against programme outcomes

There was widespread agreement amongst projects that a change in focus by the Fund to move away from standard measures collected by all WGI funded projects for national evaluation purposes was welcome. It also complemented the Initiative ethos which was about service development in multiple ways. However, the Fund was keen to ensure that there was evidence gathered about how far the four outcomes, described in the introductory paragraphs above, had been achieved.

The problem of what exactly the team could evaluate at the level of the Initiative came to the fore as we learned the extent to which there were variations in how projects were collecting baseline data and other evaluative information. Some projects reported year on year, others included a final report that summarised the whole project; some had an external evaluator; others internally evaluated; some evaluated funded work separately whereas others included it within their overall organisational reporting.

This, together with the difference in aims, activities, approaches, scale and size between projects, and their different approaches to evaluation meant it was also not possible to provide an initiative-wide meta-analysis of beneficiary numbers and outcomes for individual women and girls supported through the WGI.

The implication of all of this has been that a full programme evaluation which has comparable measures has not been possible. Despite this we have worked hard with projects to identify impacts where possible, and also supported improvements, where we could, in the production of good evidence about what works in empowering women and girls. We have reported on these in our outputs over the five years and reflect further on this work, its achievements and challenges in Chapter 5.

The pandemic also changed our approach to data collection as we no longer visited projects and often the primary concern of the projects was in supporting women and staff rather than on evaluation. However, fundamentally, we have worked to find evidence, and have been able to draw conclusions based on the outcomes that were anticipated in the Theory of Change. We present our findings on these in subsequent chapters.

Concluding thoughts

The WGI was established at a moment in time that nobody could possibly have foreseen. Following two years of establishing a comprehensive programme of work, the projects, Learning and Impact Services team, and the Fund alike all had to adapt to a world that had previously not been encountered. It is widely agreed that the passion and dedication given by workers across the sector in supporting the women and girls they serve is profound. What we demonstrate here and in future chapters is how this has been manifested according to the anticipated outcomes of the Initiative.

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

Three key messages

1 The women and girls that arrived at the projects, generally came with a range of intersectional needs. The WGI provided specialist services which ensured that needs could be met, and attending to the multiple challenges that may be faced. Achieving long-term impactful change for women and girls requires investment in long-term, holistic and specialist support that can adapt to the strengths and needs of individuals and that is able to support individuals across a range of areas, beyond single issues or problems. This meant it was more likely that the women and girls would achieve good outcomes: their immediate lives and life chances could be improved.

2 Key to the success for projects was that they had security of funding for up to five years. This allowed women and girls organisations to provide tailored support which could be adjusted over time. They could also develop and test new services and partnerships. The Fund's approach also allowed organisations to be flexible. This was according to new contexts, in responding to the pandemic, and according to what projects were learning about what works as they went along.

3 Positive experiences for women and girls were achieved as project values remained intact despite multiple challenges faced. The volatile external environment meant that projects could find it hard to recruit and retain staff, and staff could burn out. This was in addition to 'usual' challenges they faced of limited resources, problems related to working with partners and the wider political environment. The dedication and passion of the workers was tested to the limits and was not found to be wanting.

As the Theory of Change in the Introduction shows, the WGI was set up with the ultimate goal of helping support and empower women and girls to take control of their lives. This chapter explores the impact of and learning from WGI in relation to the first two programme outcomes, which were defined as stepping stones towards its goals:

1. Increasing provision of holistic, person-centred approaches for women and girls

2. Increasing the numbers of women and girls supported through the provision of specialist support

The first programme report, '*Diving into the WGI*' described what the WGI sought to achieve, who was funded through it, and some early learning, achievements and challenges. It also set out some questions regarding the first two outcomes which the partners have been pursuing with projects since 2018 to support learning and to gather better evidence of what works for women and girls. These questions included:

- What it is about WGI services that make a difference in the lives of women and girls? For instance, is it because WGI-funded case work can be needs led and for as long as women and girls require it?
- What is a 'holistic' approach (to working with women and girls)?
- How is it different from mainstream interventions?
- What difference does working holistically and long-term make for women and girls?

This chapter highlights key learning points in response to these questions, using data synthesised from previous WGI reports, blogs and briefings, together with qualitative data drawn from:

- final telephone progress reviews undertaken with projects between February and July 2021 (43 of 62 projects participated).
- project final evaluation or monitoring reports where available (50 project reports analysed).[4]

In answering these questions, we consider both the nature and value of holistic and specialist support, how this has developed through the life of the WGI and what this means in the context of the women and girls' sector. It also takes account of the COVID-19 pandemic which inevitably and disproportionately impacted women and girls and influenced the work and its outcomes. The chapter ends with a consideration of the question of whether WGI funding has helped increase the numbers of women and girls being supported, the challenge of evidencing these increases quantitatively, and a summary of the qualitative evidence around the reach of WGI funded projects. The following chapter considers the outcomes that have been reported for both women and girls, and funded organisations.

What is it about WGI services that make a difference to the lives of women and girls?

Before going on to discuss the difference made by services working with women and girls, it seems important to highlight the role of funders in using a holistic lens when deciding what, who and how they fund. The Fund recognised the relative lack of success of women and girls' sector organisations in gaining National Lottery funding historically and introduced the WGI to support holistic approaches, as described below.

---

[4] All final progress reviews and project reports were analysed thematically, using NVivo software, coding inductively from the data, to generate themes. These were then matched to the programme outcomes through a thematic mapping process and interpretations developed. This data was synthesised with learning shared through other WGi outputs, in order to further develop themes and validate interpretations made within the final report.

This included working with organisations from the women and girls' sector as well as specialist researchers to develop the WGI and its Theory of Change (see Chapter 1 and Chapter 5 for more details). Funding applications were invited in a format chosen by the applicant, such as using a standard application form, a business plan or a project proposal. The idea behind this was to encourage those who might not normally apply or be successful to get in contact and discuss their ideas with Funding Officers. The WGI supported work from the smallest, grassroots projects, such as **Chayah Project**, the **Somali Integration Team** (now Women's Inclusive Team) and **Rahab** through to the largest national organisations such as **Women's Aid Federation England (WAFE or Women's Aid), Safe Lives** and **Rape Crisis England and Wales**. This illustrates the Fund's efforts to support the ecology of women and girls sector organisations across England. Its engagement of a learning and impact services team instead of a national evaluation was another aspect of these efforts, considered in more depth in Chapter 5 – The contribution of the Learning and Impact Services partnership.

In essence, the Fund did not expect projects to fit to a standardised national approach to monitoring and measuring outcomes. As mentioned in the Introduction and reflected on in Chapter 5, this did present some challenges for evaluation but overall was seen as a strength of the programme as it allowed tailored delivery based on local needs. For the purposes of supporting holistic working this approach also made a positive difference to projects:

"The consultative process, an ongoing conversation, with the Fund, is helpful."
Project staff member

This section now goes on to define and describe what is understood as holistic and specialist work in the WGI context. It will then explore why such approaches make a difference and some of the challenges that can hinder holistic and specialist working.

What is a 'holistic' approach to working with women and girls?

As Chapter 1 describes, funded projects worked with different populations of women and girls, for different reasons and for varying time-lengths. Some might specialise in giving support around particular issues, including domestic and/or sexual violence; court proceedings when children are at risk of being removed, drug and alcohol misuse, loneliness, social support, education and/or work skills. The uniting principle behind the reason for being funded was that projects sought to work with women and girls as whole human beings, each with a complex mix of experiences, needs and strengths which project staff could support with. This usually meant not just supporting an individual with one aspect of their life, but with multiple aspects that together can influence a person's future. What forms of support a woman or girl required or sought varied, leading to different pathways and outcomes for individuals.

Most funded support was tailored to the individual, often following some form of assessment. Whilst someone accessing a WGI funded project might work with a range of professionals (including staff from WGI funded organisations and other services) and peers, often there would be a named individual as a key contact. For many projects there was a strong sense that relationships – with peers and support staff – were important in helping enable change. It is worth noting here that many Black and minoritised groups have always worked in a holistic way, since the women and girls they support are always living at the intersections of gender, race and class, as described in *Safer pair of hands*.

What does specialist support mean in the context of the Women and Girls sector?

Most projects funded through the WGI specialised in working with women and girls only, using their in-depth understanding of the specific needs and approaches that work well for the communities of women and girls they support. Being able to work holistically is another specialism linked to this. In addition, as mentioned above, different projects have other types of expertise, on issues of violence and abuse, through to detailed knowledge and understanding linked to being rooted in local communities. WGI funding has enabled staff and organisations to develop and build new knowledge and skills, including in their abilities to work co-productively (see Chapter 4). As with holistic working, specialist support cannot be defined narrowly or described in one way. However, the learning shared in this chapter reflects experiences across the diversity of projects funded.

Why holistic and specialist work achieves better outcomes for women and girls

From working with projects over the past five years and through analysing project reports and reviews, some key elements of holistic, specialist work have been identified that help achieve better outcomes for individuals. These include:

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

These are each considered in brief, with some examples. Whilst explored separately, it is worth noting that these different aspects work together and having one of these factors, or just a few of the others, is likely to limit the overall impact. This is perhaps what sets WGI services apart from mainstream, statutory interventions. For instance, the latter may have passionate and committed staff, but they are more likely to be required to work in a more transactional, time-limited, and narrowly defined service environment, as decided (for instance) by mainstream funding policies.

Projects and partnerships holding to the values behind the work

One of the first WGI briefings, 'Why women's centres work', states that *"The values and approaches informing the delivery of women centred working are as important as the delivery itself".* This has been borne out by many projects' experiences, as shared in action learning group meetings. For instance some WGI projects that were delivered through a partnership model came together to help inform the briefing, '*Partnership working for women and girls*'. A key learning shared by these projects was that money is not enough to bring partners together and that a shared feminist ethos and woman-centred approach to working was '*glue for their partnerships*'.

Likewise, during progress reviews, many WGI project staff spoke of the importance of values (including being authentic, trauma-informed, working with love and compassion) to their success. Keeping organisational or project values central when deciding how to approach project delivery, what to deliver, who to partner with, and how to address any challenges, helped ensure work kept to its aims.

"[...] providing an empowering woman centred and trauma informed approach [...] enables us to tailor both the support and the environment we create for young women to be physically and emotionally safe."
Birmingham & Solihull Women's Aid

"For us in Senior Leadership team, the hierarchy needs to model every bit of our values as much as we can. Can we model our values, and can it be sewn in? More and more evidence of this through training…. Adapting interventions, picking up the phone to talk…. It's the subtleties, the interactions."
Changing Pathways

At times when there was a mismatch of values between funder and funded, project partners, or indeed between staff, this was felt to impact negatively on the work with women and girls, which takes us onto the next insight.

Nurturing relationships and building trust at all levels

As indicated above, relationships at all levels of a project need to be nurtured. This is particularly evident when delivering support through relational work. This became clear when the COVID-19 pandemic led to national lockdowns in 2020. Staff wellbeing gained a heightened focus from many organisational leaders, when staff had to work from home, or change their working practices because of lockdown rules. This, on top of the personal impacts of the pandemic, led to increases in staff support being made available. Some of the learning and the efforts made by projects during this time was shared in a webinar and associated blog, *'Supporting staff in the women and girls sector'*. In many cases, this work has continued as organisations recognised how important their relationships with staff are to the success of the work with women and girls. In a sector that is so focused on supporting others, and when there is a strong societal narrative that caring for others is 'women's work', it is important that making space for wellbeing support – including informal check-ins, clinical supervision and reflective spaces – is not lost as economic pressures increase.

Investing time and effort in relationships with partners has also been reflected on by project staff as valuable to ultimately achieving good work with and on behalf of women and girls. This investment has been reported as key to building trust, which in turn helps prevent misunderstandings and conflicts that drain energy and slows down work. It also enables different partner strengths to be recognised and built on, so that women can access what they need from the most appropriate place. This links to learning around specialist support. Most WGI projects held one or more specialisms for instance, in refuge accommodation; supporting recovery from trauma; advocacy and navigation support with statutory services; supporting women to build relationships and experience joy in connecting with others. However, projects can't and aren't necessarily best placed to offer everything that a woman needs.

There can be a value in women and girls making connections with other spaces and people, as they grow in confidence, to avoid an assumption that they can only ever be supported by one person or organisation. This is a delicately nuanced area of work and relies on staff having good enough supervisory support, which helps ensure that women and girls can depend on staff when and for as long as they need and knowing they can access support from elsewhere as part of their growth, when ready.

"The Recovery service has strong links with a diverse range of complementary organisations who contribute to our clients' recovery." **Harbour Support Service**

However, this process can be even more challenging when statutory and more generic community services present additional barriers to support. For instance, Black and minoritised women and girls can experience multi-layered discrimination, which means needing more specialist support, for a longer time, that understands and helps redress intersecting inequalities. **Ashiana** expanded its in-house provision, upskilling staff, to include legal support as well as work with external legal specialists. Likewise, **Stitches in Time** provided translation support during the pandemic when the women they supported were otherwise left without essential basic information during early lockdowns.

Capacity to work long-term

As anticipated in the early days of the WGI, working with women and girls for as long as they need, rather than expecting them to fit into a pre-prescribed short-term 'solution-focused' programme seems to have been a central component to the success of WGI projects. In addition, when the work does come to an end, supporting transitions onwards, without a sharp drop-off of support or case 'closure', has helped women feel more confident to take the next steps, knowing that the relationship with project staff and the organisation can be returned to if needed:

"So many times, I have been so, so sad and I said I don't know whether I'm going to make it today... But it's knowing where I can always go when I feel like that... It doesn't matter how many times you mess up; the door will always be open."
Aspire

"They've always been there for me ... they're there when you need them ... [that is] so important."
Young woman supported by Blossom A Way Out

However, this has presented challenges for projects. Many have shared how women and girls have faced more complex needs than originally anticipated, in part exacerbated by the pandemic, meaning the work has needed to be longer than was planned for. In some cases, this has meant working with fewer women and girls overall than planned. At times, it has meant staff and services becoming over-stretched. And as demand has increased since the pandemic began, this has become a growing concern.

Embedding flexibility and adaptability in the project design and support offer

WGI funding enabled projects to adapt to the needs of women and girls, and to try out new ways of working, testing and refining services and delivery methods based on ongoing learning. For instance, **A Way Out** was funded to set up a new specialist support service, the Blossom project, for young women between 16 and 24 years. Over time, the age range increased to 13 to 25 years. Provision also developed to include an Additional Support Needs worker for those with learning difficulties and a Transitions worker to support those moving between children and adult services. **Savera** was funded to start up a new one-to-one support service for women, anticipating 20 to 30 referrals per year. Within six months, the service was receiving 120 to 150 referrals. As a result, the project was able to change the way it used its funding, increasing the budget for staffing, helping it go some way to meeting the demand.

Experiences during the initial phases of the COVID-19 pandemic emphasise the value of these specialist services. During the first lockdowns when statutory provision and other providers stopped services and were slower to adjust to pandemic restrictions, many WGI projects mobilised, as described in '*Virtual support and vulnerability in the women and girls sector*'. Having embedded flexibility and adaptability to women and girls' needs, meant that projects were perhaps uniquely ready to respond to the challenges placed by lockdown restrictions. And having WGI funding in place, meant that this could be re-directed to meet newly identified support needs – from delivering food packages and phone credit, through to offering online and COVID-safe in-person activities.

"We've had a noticeable spike in referrals during COVID – a result both of women's vulnerability during the pandemic and the fact that so many statutory services have been closed or curtailed and signposting to us."
Project lead

Without the eligibility and time restrictions that can limit statutory services and commissioned contracts, WGI projects could be truly person-focused. This takes us to the next key element of holistic, specialist support: the skills, passion, and commitment of staff and volunteers.

The skills, passion and commitment of staff and volunteers

Staff working for WGI funded organisations have been key to ensuring that holistic, specialist work is undertaken to the depth and quality that women and girls need. This is partly because many organisations have long histories of working with women and girls, as well as of being part of local communities and infrastructures, and so have a deep understanding of what is needed and when, and how best to mobilise support for individuals who require it. In addition, specialist roles including Independent Domestic or Sexual Violence Advisors (IDVAs/ISVAs), case workers, counsellors and volunteer coordinators have all been named, depending on the project context, as critical to providing appropriate well-informed support that is relatable for women and girls seeking help. This has been supported by the aptitudes of staff and volunteers, as these quotes highlight:

"Their passion, knowledge and way of communicating is a huge part of the success of the work [...]."
External evaluation Report for Solace Women's Aid (by AVA)

"All women interviewed described the kindness, non-judgemental approach, approachability and helpfulness of the Venus 'Step Together' staff. The interviews conveyed a deep sense of being cared for which had often been absent in other parts of their lives. Venus is a 'safe' place for the women who come, a place where nothing is too much trouble."
External Evaluation Report by University of Essex and Lancaster University

Feedback from individuals receiving support have supported these statements demonstrating the life-changing difference made to women and girls:

"Sometimes you want to give up and they reassure you that you're not going to do that."
Woman supported by Venus

Working holistically requires the use of judgement to identify what support will meet an individual's needs at any one time, when to adapt and/or bring in other support, and when to step aside. Many projects offered groupwork activities, hosted by staff and volunteers, enabling women to come together, develop networks of support, building on each other's strengths, empowering women and girls, individually and collectively. Enabling women to take up leadership in this way requires facilitation skills and a commitment to reducing the power differential between those providing support and those receiving support, so that power becomes situated within the group as a collective and not any professionals hosting it. This takes specialist skill and experience – for instance to know when to listen and affirm, provide gentle guidance, be proactive and actively advocate, challenge and so on. As Chapter 4 explores in more depth, collaborative, co-creative work with women, that is informed by the lived experience of staff, volunteers and those being supported, is a key ingredient in strengths-based, empowerment work.

Finally, the personal passion and commitment of WGI project staff and volunteers was clearly demonstrated during the *early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic*. As work moved into people's homes, the predominantly female workforce perhaps needed this more than ever, helping them draw on their creativity and resilience, so as to adapt support for women and girls. This passion and commitment however was evident before and since COVID-19 began:

"I am passionate about ending Domestic Abuse and am constantly inspired by the courage, creativity, capacity to embrace change, and also the resilience and strength of the survivors I work with."
From final project report, NDADA

It may sometimes be this that helps keep the work going, despite the different barriers and setbacks faced along the way. And it is perhaps one way in which individuals working for WGI projects deliver the project and organisational values behind the work, which have already been identified as key to holistic support.

"Our values matter and work, which we put into everything we do: love, care, kindness and compassion. They are values that other women's organisations hold too."
Women's Community Matters
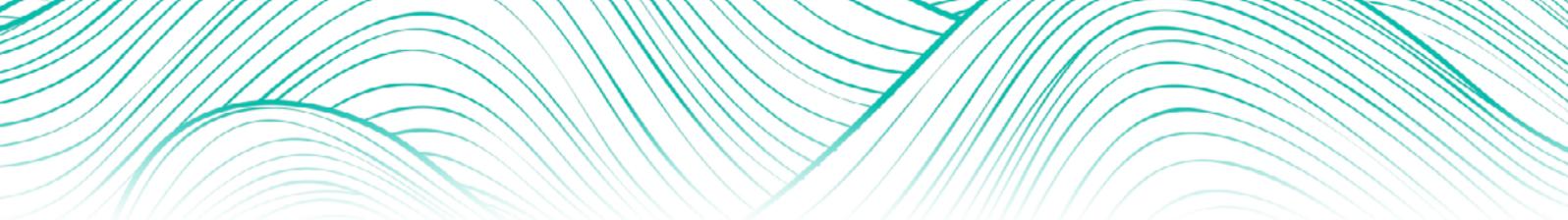
However, it is crucial to recognise that passion and commitment alone are not enough, that relying on this at times of over-stretched resources and under-funding has a limit and runs the danger of negatively impacting on individuals and the work. Passion and commitment are themselves limited resources. This takes us on to the next section of this chapter – the challenges and barriers to holistic working, which include the high demands and high staff turnover experienced by some projects.

Challenges and barriers faced when providing holistic and specialist support

Many WGI projects have kept a relentless focus on holistic, person-centred working, providing much needed specialist support and producing impressive outcomes, as outlined in the next chapter. This has not been without its challenges though, which include:

- wider economic and social contexts, including austerity, COVID-19 and policies through to the cost-of-living crisis.
- increasing needs and demand for support.
- limited resources available for the work.
- staff recruitment, skills, retention and wellbeing.
- partnership working challenges.

This section summarises each of these in turn, as reported by projects during progress reviews, action learning group meetings and their final reports. As with factors that support holistic work, challenges and barriers can also be seen to be intertwined and related to each other. For instance. the wider economic and social context interacts with limited resources, increasing demands and staffing difficulties, all of which can impact on the success or otherwise of a partnership.

The wider economic and social contexts

The wider economic and social contexts behind the delivery of WGI projects have become increasingly challenging, as also discussed in Chapter 1. The 2010 Government's austerity policies were widely reported to adversely affect women (e.g. Women's Budget Group, 2018)[5] and in particular Black and minoritised women.[6] For example, cuts to statutory services, for instance early intervention support for families, and to funding for children and young people's activities, and to benefit payments for families, have all left gaps in support for those who most need it and increased levels of poverty (Tucker, 2017).[7]

---

[5] Women's Budget Group (2018). The impact of austerity on women in the UK. Available at: https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/Development/IEDebt/WomenAusterity/WBG.pdf

[6] See more on this in the briefing, Safer pair of hands.

[7] Tucker, J (2017). The Austerity Generation: the impact of a decade of cuts on family income and poverty. London: Child Poverty Action Group. Available at: https://cpag.org.uk/sites/default/files/files/Austerity%20Generation%20FINAL.pdf

The effects of the UK leaving the EU, including for EU citizens living in the UK requiring support to leave an abusive relationship, and organisations that previously received income from EU-funded programmes, continue to be felt, at the time of writing. The effects of the pandemic, discussed in the _WGI Synthesis Report #2: Learning from a turbulent time_, are also continuing, including through the additional health and financial impacts on families, organisations and society in general.

"We have had both staff and clients hugely affected with the impact of COVID-19 and although we still hope to continue, the uncertainty really affects us all."
Project lead

"The biggest challenge over the last year has been witnessing young women facing this huge change, often without the resources or support to cope."
Project worker

Which leads us to the 2022/23 cost-of-living crisis which has been impacting the finances of individual women, families and many organisations in the charitable sector and beyond. Many projects have consistently reported challenges associated with attracting funding, which continue and rising costs add to financial pressures. Although the WGI funding has made an important contribution to the sector, other funding sources have been cut. In the meantime, competitive contracting and commissioning processes tend to favour larger organisations (see NPC, 2015)[8] – a relative rarity in the women and girls sector – and what funding is available is often relatively small, short-term and limited in scope.

Increasing needs and demand for support

Linked to the above challenge, and as mentioned previously, projects faced higher and higher levels of demand for their services during the WGI, with changing and increasingly complex needs. Some projects realised that they had taken on too much, with some staff feeling overwhelmed. It was not uncommon that the complexity of needs that a woman was experiencing only became clear after they'd been with an organisation for a while. At this point they felt they could trust staff enough to share what else might be happening for them, such as problematic drug or alcohol use. It isn't straightforward when trying to triage a woman's support needs on first meeting and needs can also vary over time.

Projects found different ways of approaching these challenges, including operating a waiting list at different points. Some also moved away from staff working on specific issues or with particular groups of women and girls, as they found that a more mixed caseload and set of responsibilities helped decrease a sense of being overwhelmed. And some brought in a system of ensuring women got to know at least two workers that they could reach out to, to enable women to have support when their key contact was away, improving the wellbeing of everyone involved.

---

[8] NPC. (2015). Times of change: What grant-makers and philanthropists need to know about public sector commissioning. Available at: https://www.thinknpc.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Times-of-change_Public-sector-commissioning-briefing.pdf

Limited resources available for the work

The WGI was a much-valued investment for women and girls sector organisations, and as described in the next chapter, enabled many organisations to develop, grow and support more women and girls. However, increasing demands, costs and gaps left by other services shrinking, seemed to lead to resources being increasingly limited for the work. And this is in a sector that has been historically under-resourced. Staffing and time, as well as partners' staff, time and services seemed particularly stretched. Regarding time, it seems a number of organisations learnt how much longer it can take to get a new project up and running than anticipated. Those projects funded for only three years seemed to struggle more to sustain activities beyond the funding period, compared to four- or five-year projects. This makes sense, bearing in mind that once a project is set up, often with less financial and staffing resource than it really needs, and then refines what it does based on ongoing learning, it is time to start winding activity down.

"[...] a 6 month inception period, meant [we] only had 2 and half [years] to deliver, we were just knowing how to get it right when funding ended, wonder if should have [applied] for the 5 [years] anyway, as this would have made it more sustainable."
Project lead

This lack of time for project delivery, links also to the time it takes to build relationships with partner organisations, and with women and girls, which can also be underestimated. Some projects realised that their initial project plan was over-ambitious and needed to drop some planned activities. Also, working in a more co-productive way can take more staff time and was, for some projects, a slower process than had been anticipated. In other cases, projects just didn't have the capacity to respond to the number of referrals they received.

"The challenges have been with our young women's work and being consistent with our co-production activities when there are staff shortages and the pressure for delivery becomes over-whelming."
Project lead

Other challenges mentioned by a few projects were:

- the lack of appropriate venues to work from.
- a lack of IT and organisational infrastructure support.
- some difficulties in getting support from the Fund when it was restructuring in 2018 (as mentioned in the Introduction).

Staff recruitment, skills, retention and wellbeing

This challenge has been a theme throughout the WGI and reported on since the Learning and Impact Services began. Difficulties with recruitment and retention have been linked to the generally low salaries on offer across the sector, and in some cases a mismatch between the skills needed and candidates applying. Staff wellbeing has also been cited as an issue for retention. Despite the efforts of organisations in supporting staff to do the emotionally demanding work (discussed above), the risk of burnout remains, and it may be that for some people, continuing to work in the sector comes at a personal price, which is unsustainable. Limited organisational capacity (as already mentioned in relation to high demand and lack of resources), can also increase pressures and workloads on individual staff, leading to impacts on staff wellbeing and retention.

"This is a small organisation and staff turnover has been one of the biggest challenges."
Manager

This can then impact on the quality of activities, as there is not necessarily the organisational and project memory to build on what has previously been learnt. One challenge not previously reported by funded projects, was specifically in relation to finding staff with the skills and experience to work with perpetrators of violence against women and girls. As only a minority of funded projects undertake work with perpetrators, it is not a surprise that this was mentioned by only one organisation. However, it seems important to mention as it is a growing area of development and interest for government and non-governmental agencies and already recognised as an area with workforce development needs (Westmarland and Kelly, 2023[9]).

## Partnership working challenges

As with staffing, partnership working has been raised as a challenge since the beginning of the WGI and discussed intermittently, including in the briefing, Partnership working for women and girls and the blog, Responding to and learning from changes during COVID-19. For instance, a mismatch in values or working approaches that did not align between partners, a lack of experience and skills in working with partners and a lack of time and resources for initial partnership building work could all create difficulties.

"Partnership working takes up much more time than anticipated. The huge amount of time on maintaining the partnership takes away from delivery. It took a lot of resource in the early stages." **Project Manager**

Additional challenges raised during progress reviews and evaluation reports included project staff needing to address and/or repair instances of bad practice from project partners, as well as advise and share best practice. This work is often unseen and unfunded. One or two projects also mentioned the difficulty of partners not fulfilling their agreed commitments, with the lead partner having to take responsibility without any method for addressing these issues. Likewise, in some cases, project partners did not refer women to each other, as originally agreed, for fear of losing funding, which links to challenges of working in partnership in an environment where organisations are also competitors for commissioned funding.

---

[9] Westmarland, N and Kelly, L (2023). Standards for domestic abuse perpetrator interventions. London: Home Office. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/standards-for-domestic-abuse-perpetrator-interventions
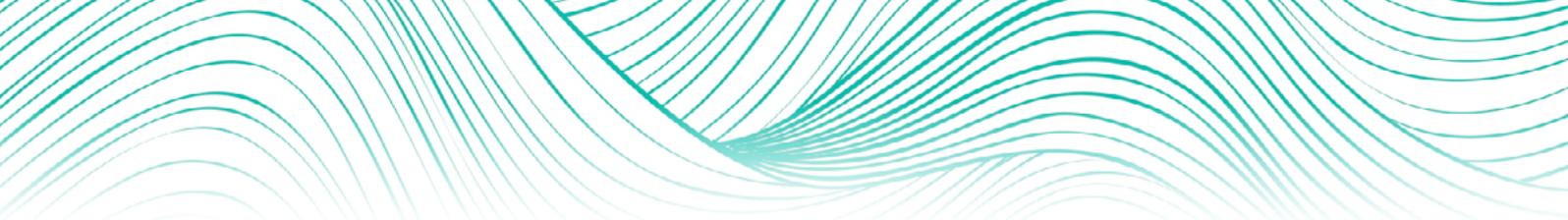
Having considered the different challenges and barriers to undertaking holistic, specialist work, this chapter ends by considering the planned WGI outcome that more women and girls would be supported as a result of the funding.

Did the WGI enable more women and girls to receive holistic and specialist support?

When the Learning and Impact Services contract began, an initial monitoring and evaluation framework (see Appendix 4) proposed that data was gathered and analysed to understand the numbers of women and girls benefiting from services and the average length of contact with clients. However, it was not possible to analyse or present conclusions from the quantitative data reported by projects to say whether provision or the numbers of women and girls supported increased, as a result of WGI funding. As stated in the Introduction and further explored in Chapter 5, several factors contributed to this, with the two main reasons being the lack of data availability and consistency. No baseline numbers were collected at the beginning of the WGI and projects reported numbers for different time-periods, different activities and in some cases an individual might be counted more than once as they moved between different support strands. The diverse use of the funding further complicated the interpretation of engagement numbers if these were reported and shared. This is because some organisations used the funding for a specific project, others developed existing services or a range of services, sometimes in combination with other funding sources (and so were not necessarily trying to increase numbers of women and girls supported).

The analysis of final evaluation reports and progress reviews showed two patterns:

- Some projects reported an increase in the number of women and girls they were working with at any one point, due to the funding enabling new posts to be created. Apart from increasing capacity, some projects created new referral routes and increased the length of support available, enabling new women and girls to get support, and increasing the overall number of people reached in total.

- Other projects reported a reduction in the number of women and girls being supported. In some cases, this was due to a reduction in referrals, whilst in other cases, organisations intentionally reduced the overall numbers, to better meet the needs of women and girls with complex needs and/or to work with them longer-term.

The COVID-19 pandemic had a further impact on the number of women and girls being worked with, in addition to changes in the format of support given. For instance, some projects had an initial drop in women and girls accessing support, because of the shock of COVID-19 and the first lockdown leading to much of society stopping. However, projects soon developed a new range of services and support to meet increasing and more diverse needs of women and girls (as mentioned above in relation to high demand). In addition, the move to online meant that more people were able to access support, who might not have previously accessed it in-person.

This mixed and complicated picture means that no conclusion can be made about the increase or decrease in the numbers of women and girls being supported because of the WGI funding. Nor can we say what proportion of projects experienced an increase or decrease in referrals or engagement numbers. For future projects, we recommend gathering consistent monitoring data to foster the analysis of engagement numbers, including a clarification as to whether numbers reported refer to unique individuals or unique engagements (which might be one person counted more than once). In addition, we recommend gathering basic demographic data to understand the level of reach of projects as well as if there are gaps in supporting any particular groups of women and girls. This would help identify needs that are not being met and/or population groups that are under-served.

However, as explained above, any counting of numbers and related data gathering should not be at the expense of the holistic, person-centred work with individuals, who need to remain central.

Concluding thoughts

In this chapter we have highlighted the complexity of the world and the work that WGI projects were engaged with over the five-year funding period. In the main we have presented information in this chapter from the perspective of the staff and projects, who have been providing services to women and girls. The learning highlights the skills required by projects in navigating change, be that of the external societal circumstances and the organisational responses this requires, to the knitting together of services around women and girls with intersecting needs. Through the WGI, the projects have had an opportunity to develop and explain why holistic, specialist work is important.

In the following chapter we look in more detail at the difference the funding made to women, girls and funded organisations.

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

Three key messages

1 The investment in the women and girls sector through the WGI has strengthened organisational structures, helped grant holders move from survival to growth, supporting the development of staff, practices and programmes. As a result, funded organisations became stronger, more confident and better connected. Investing in organisations that are committed to and specialised in holistic work with women and girls directly benefits women and girls.

2 Having support that was not limited in scope or time, enabled women and girls to improve in mental health and wellbeing, be empowered through building knowledge, skills and understanding, survive the impacts of violence and exploitation, and rebuild lives. These improvements were also helped by experiencing better support networks and a sense of community.

3 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 in order for flourishing to take place.

A range of outcomes have been reported for both individual women and girls and for organisations, as a result of WGI funding. This section explores the differences made for individuals, moving onto differences made for organisations. It is based on data shared through annual progress reviews, action learning group meetings, project reports and briefings.

What difference does long-term, specialist, holistic work make for women and girls?

The WGI film, <u>Where she was to where she is now</u>, made by **Leeds Animation Workshop** with some of the funded projects and participants, highlights positive changes that women and girls have experienced. It is told through the words and images of those directly involved and emphasises how long-term, holistic, specialist support helps women and girls achieve a range of outcomes. In this section, we explore some of the main outcomes identified by women, girls and projects over the life of the WGI. These include:

- increasing and improving networks, support and community.
- improving mental health and wellbeing.
- 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.

Although described in turn, it is important to highlight, as with factors listed in previous chapters, and as the following quote illustrates, different outcomes often overlap and interact with each other.

"It's given me that confidence and empowerment to take back ownership of my life"
Woman supported by Venus

For instance, leaving a violent and/or exploitative situation can be made more possible when people have greater knowledge of how abusive relationships work. Alongside this, increasing networks and improving mental health and wellbeing can both precipitate and be a result of leaving an abusive relationship, which can help enable people to rebuild their lives and fulfil their potential.

Increasing and improving networks, support and community

This outcome is linked to the relational approaches of projects and the importance of attending to relationships at all levels, as discussed in <u>Chapter 2</u>. Several projects shared reports from women and girls who expressed how they felt less isolated because of the WGI project they were supported by.

"It's getting me out, it's getting me out talking to other people and finding out what other people are up to and what they have been through and stuff. It's helped a lot."
Woman supported by Venus

In addition, there were reports of improved relationships with family members and friends, in some cases reconnecting with relations where it was healthy to do so. For some mothers whose children were at risk of removal into care, accessing peer and community support helped enable children to stay with them.

"Now I have best friends and so does my son and I've been able to do a lot on my own with my son too."
Woman supported through WILD

Women and girls have also got better support from statutory services as a result of WGI funded support:

"When I call [the housing association] sometimes they don't do stuff. If she doesn't chase up, they won't help you unless you have someone of authority."
Woman supported by Hibiscus

Finally, linked to other outcomes in this section, as well as to learning shared in Chapter 4, around co-production and collective support, women and girls highlighted the value of finding a community they can be part of. This is perhaps especially powerful when you face discrimination and abuse because of your minoritised status within UK society.

"The fact that it's run by traveller women themselves who understand the community inside out and have got really strong relationships of trust – this is why it works."
Partner working with One Voice for Travellers

"I haven't come across a service like this out there. It's actually real – even the therapist treats me like a human being and not a machine."
Woman supported by the Women and Girls Network

This highlights the importance of lived experience within staff teams, the space provided by projects for women to be themselves with others in similar situations, and the time that is needed to build a sense of trust and community.

Improving mental health and wellbeing

Many projects reported feedback from women and girls that spoke of the differences made to mental health and wellbeing, including improvements in confidence, self-esteem and feeling more resilient during difficult times.

"Being at the refuge has showed me the way to value myself."
Young woman, Seerose Refuge, Birmingham and Solihull Women's Aid

"It's hard to explain but having a job gives you a whole new purpose, you feel a lot better about yourself, it has really helped to improve my mood. I find that I am naturally a lot happier now."
Woman supported through Marylebone Project

"My mental health has obviously got a lot better...I'm not waking up every morning feeling like I'm going to be sick, fearful."
Woman supported through the Women's Aid and SafeLive's Roadmap Project

"Working with my Recovery worker for nearly 2 years has helped [....] someone to talk to about the way I am feeling and to get advice on difficult situations. Getting this advice helps me to keep on the right track and helps greatly for my mental health."
Woman supported by Harbour

"...I decided to volunteer. I was put in charge of ordering resources [...] This was a great opportunity for me to get my confidence back up and get some new skills."
Woman supported through Somali Integration team

Case study

The difference that holistic work can make to a young woman

Naomi[10] was 17 years old and at high risk of child sexual exploitation because of her numerous vulnerabilities. She had been speaking to older men online and had a very limited understanding of healthy relationships, admitting that she found it difficult to say 'no' to men even when she knew she did not want to have sexual relations with them. In addition, she regularly used class A drugs, had very low self-esteem and confidence and a poor relationship with her family. Naomi's mum could be very critical of her, spending more time and money on her younger brother. While she was currently eligible for support from a local statutory service helping children at risk of exploitation, she would no longer be able to receive this support once she turned 18. She reported that she found it difficult to understand how she could be deemed 'at risk' at 17, but not be able to receive support the day she became 18.

Upon referral to the WGI funded young people's service, Naomi was assigned a project worker who made several visits to see her. She was very shy and at first would only give short responses to questions. It took 9-12 months to build a good rapport, but eventually Naomi started opening up enough that the project worker could explore the reasons why she used drugs and issues with boundaries in sexual relationships. The project worker also provided support to attend appointments at sexual health clinics and undertook safety planning around drug use and sexual activity: this included distraction and reduction techniques to limit Naomi's drug use and changing privacy settings on her social media accounts.

Through this work, Naomi has built positive coping strategies and her confidence has notably improved.

Increasing empowerment through building knowledge, skills and understanding

Empowerment through knowledge (Coy and Kelly, 2016)[11] is another core theme identified across reports and was often an intentional project outcome. This was achieved by offering ways to make sense of lives that did not place responsibility on women and girls for the difficulties they were struggling with. This then helped ensure women knew about their rights, entitlements and the practical information and skills they needed to manage everyday life.

---

[10] All case studies of individuals in this report have been created through blending different stories told by a number of projects and with new names generated, to protect confidentiality and anonymity. Therefore, no case study within this report is about any individual person or project but written to demonstrate common situations and stories reported.

[11] Coy, M. Kelly. L (2016). Islands in the Stream: An evaluation of four London independent domestic violence advocacy schemes. London: Trust for London & Henry Smith Charity. Available at: https://trustforlondon.org.uk/research/islands-stream-evaluation-independent-domestic-violence-advocacy-scheme/

Changing Pathways received WGI funding to run an advocacy service for victims/survivors of stalking. In-depth interviews with women, undertaken by External Evaluator, Berni Graham, revealed that the service had made an important difference in areas ranging from safety and mental health to women's sense of agency and relationships with others (both external agencies and friends and family members). In addition, working with the service also improved understanding of stalking and, through this, reduced the degree of psychological control that perpetrators had over women.

"I'm not so worried anymore. I'm not scared, a bit more positive. Not looking over my shoulder all the time … I'm stronger and more assured of myself."
Woman supported by Changing Pathways

There are multiple stories from projects of women developing their skills in areas such as parenting, financial management or employability, all of which could be empowering. Women and girls reported being enabled to recognise their capacities, and to make the changes that had not previously seemed possible, because of the impact of traumatising experiences and relationships.

"I wouldn't have been alive and my daughter would not have had a mum. I wouldn't have had the courage to have gone through what I have without your help."
Woman supported by NDADA

"I was really excited about going forward and getting a job and everything and I was terrified before"
Woman supported by WomenCentre

"I [...] soon learnt that I can do many things which I first thought I was not able to, like open a bank account, travel on my own, communicate with phone and email with support organisations"
Woman supported by Ashiana

"The group saved my life. I cannot put into words how grateful I am to have been given the chance to address the traumas I have been through."
Woman supported by VIDA Sheffield

"It took me months before I could open my mouth without crying. Things were that bad. I was really a mess. But just going there, every week, I had something to look forward to and to see other people and they would listen to us and it saved my life at the time. I'm not exaggerating, it really did."
Woman supported by Aspire

"It's helped me be a better mum to the children and helped me understand them and what they've been through more"
Woman supported by WAFE and SafeLives' Roadmap Project

Surviving the impact of domestic and intimate partner violence and sexual exploitation

There have been many reports of women and girls getting out of violent and exploitative relationships and situations, with the support of WGI funded projects, enabling survival, recovery and processing of experiences. It is likely, and women have fed back as such, that lives have been saved because of the support provided. This belief is supported by wider research, with evidence of one woman being killed every three days by a man (Femicide census, 2020),[12] and of the links between intimate partner violence and suicide (Agenda Alliance, 2023).[13]

Case study

The difference specialist 'by and for' organisations make

Shreya moved to the UK on a spousal visa after she got married, and as a result had no recourse to public funds (NRPF). Her husband soon started being abusive, which put Shreya's mental health into an extremely fragile state. When she said she was going to report the abuse he threatened her and her family members in her home country. Nevertheless, she reached out to a local domestic abuse service but her NRPF status meant that she was not eligible for support and there was a lack of understanding about her cultural background and experiences. In desperation, she ran away.

She was fortunately found in a park by a project worker from a WGI funded service supporting Black and minoritised women. They provided her with immediate support including moving her into a home shared with a volunteer of the service who was also a member of Shreya's community who was able to make her feel welcome and safe. Shreya's NRPF status made it very difficult to access funding to support her, but the organisation made several applications to different charitable organisations in order to ensure that she had the funds for basic necessities such as food and toiletries. They also arranged counselling sessions for her in her mother tongue since, although Shreya could speak some English, she found it much easier to express herself fully when speaking in her first language. They also knew a solicitor who spoke her language and who was able to help her gather the necessary evidence to apply for indefinite leave to remain.

Shreya's application for indefinite leave to remain is still awaiting a final decision. However, in the meantime Shreya's mental health gradually improved, with increases in her self-esteem and self-confidence. She recently started attending English classes and building employability skills in the hope of finding a job in the future. Shreya also, through the support of the project, has accessed social gatherings with other women from her community, leading to her making many friends and improving in confidence.

---

[12] Femicide Census (2020). Available at: https://www.femicidecensus.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/010998-2020-Femicide-Report_V2.pdf

[13] Agenda Alliance, Vision Consortium (2023). Underexamined and underreported: Suicidality and intimate partner violence: Connecting two major public health domains. Available at: What difference did WGI funding make to the organisations supported?

How specialist, holistic support has supported a woman to rebuild her life

Mia had been in an abusive relationship for four years, although she had not initially recognised his outbursts of anger and controlling behaviour as abuse. However, it was having a significant impact on her mental health, with Mia suffering from severe anxiety, depression and feelings of worthlessness. With her partner's abusive behaviour escalating, Mia started to be concerned about the impact on her child and fled to a refuge. Unfortunately, her partner quickly became aware of their location and so they were moved again to a different refuge on the other side of the country, leaving behind family and friends.

Through staff at the new refuge, Mia was referred to an organisation supporting victims/survivors of domestic abuse, which offered her a safe space to start recovering from her experience. While she described feeling anxious when she entered the service, she said that encouragement from her key worker helped her to build the trust and confidence to engage in the WGI funded programme. She was enrolled onto an educational programme to further her knowledge and understanding of domestic abuse, and due to her isolation was invited and encouraged to attend one of the regular support groups. Staff also helped her to secure a nursery place for her child.

Mia's confidence and self-esteem grew notably through her involvement with the service. Because of the educational programme, her awareness of domestic abuse grew, helping to reduce her feelings of guilt and empowering her to make more informed decisions. This was evident when she started a new relationship during her time with the service. Mia soon identified it as being unhealthy, supported by discussions with her key worker, and decided to end it. Mia's key worker also helped her to remember previous aspirations. Through this, Mia identified that she wanted to learn to drive but had been discouraged from doing so by her previous partner. She was now determined to start lessons, to improve her independence and increase her ability to visit family and friends. After undergoing training, Mia began volunteering at the service, where she could use her lived experience to relate to and empathise with other women. Mia then successfully got a full-time job as a Support Worker. Having never thought herself capable of getting a job, this was an important step, supported by continuing to visit the service whilst settling into this new role, and receiving ongoing advice and support from staff members and friends.

Helping women and girls to get away from and survive the impact of abuse and exploitation is a major focus of many WGI funded projects. However, this is a long term and complicated process linked to the next outcome, the rebuilding of lives beyond survival.

Women and girls rebuilding their lives

The route from accessing support to achieving positive outcomes is not a linear pathway. This is particularly the case when there are multiple influencing factors (such as recovery from a violent relationship alongside dealing with unstable housing, unemployment and/or experiences of racism) and when new life events happen. Despite this, many projects shared stories of women and girls rebuilding their lives, relationships and creating new chapters with more fulfilling futures, supported to navigate the multiple barriers that may be faced along the way.

"I can now leave my flat, I can go out and socialise. I've met some brilliant friends through it and we are still friends to this day"
Woman supported by WILD

This section has included some examples of how projects have supported women and girls in different ways to achieve positive outcomes. As mentioned already, this is against the backdrop of increasingly challenging economic and social contexts, which have disproportionately impacted women and girls. For instance (as described in WGI Synthesis report #2: Learning from a turbulent time), the risks and actual experiences of domestic violence, exploitation and abuse increased during early lockdowns. In addition, some women were ineligible for government furlough payments, due to having zero hours employment contracts. Many also found themselves having additional home schooling and caring responsibilities. These disproportionate impacts help explain why women's mental health has been more adversely affected than men's (e.g. Close the Gap and Engender, 2021)[14], leading to large increases in demand for support since the early lockdowns.

"I suffer with mental health and it obviously dipped in the last 18 months."
Woman supported by Venus

Having considered some of the positive outcomes for women and girls, the next section explores outcomes experienced by WGI funded projects.

---

[14] Close the Gap, Engender (2021). Joint briefing on the impact of COVID-19 on women's wellbeing, mental health, and financial security. Available at: https://www.closethegap.org.uk/content/resources/Close-the-Gap-and-Engender-Joint-briefing-on-the-impact-of-COVID-19-on-womens-wellbeing-mental-health-and-financial-security.pdf

What difference did WGI funding make to the organisations supported?

As explained in the Introduction, the main aim of the WGI was to help strengthen the women and girls' sector. As this section goes on to describe, the WGI was successful in achieving this aim, with many funded organisations reporting a range of benefits due to being part of the WGI. These include:

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

This section explores each one in turn. It is perhaps important to note that outcomes reported by projects were partly due to being funded for five years, and having flexibility to develop, learn and adapt as they progressed. It was also partly down to the commissioning of the Learning and Impact Services, which supported projects to come together with their peers, as described in more detail in Chapter 5.

Moving from survival to sustainability and growth

In some cases, the WGI helped organisations survive:

"It saved two of the organisations in the partnership: [...] both at risk of folding after [the local authority] had withdrawn all funding from specialist DVA services ... The WGI secured our future."
Project Lead

Others moved from being a completely voluntarily run group to paying staff, and therefore providing jobs. Many organisations, particularly those who were funded for five years, reported how WGI funding helped them stabilise, and were able to develop organisational structures and services as needed. This included increasing the number of workers and shifting the ways in which teams operated to better support women and girls.

"It's been a real stepping stone that enabled us to change from a small grassroots organisation with 6 p/t staff to one with 24 staff today."
OSARCC

"We have grown from a small community organisation to becoming a lead organisation in the county."
Women's Community Matters

"We've built up a loyal cohort of part-time staff and volunteers. It's hard to think how much of this would have been possible without WGI funding"
One Voice for Travellers

As already mentioned, the WGI supported the smallest community groups through to the largest national organisations. Most funded organisations could be identified as small to medium sized charities which operate in a highly competitive funding environment, with many not being previously successful with charitable grant applications. As WGI funding ended, some projects applied to the Fund's Reaching Communities programme and a number have reported success with gaining funding from that source, as well as from other funders and commissioners. Of the 62 WGI projects, 56 (90%) have subsequently received further grants from the Fund (as of February 2023). This highlights how effective the WGI has been in helping strengthen the sector.

One Voice 4 Travellers, which supports Gypsy and Traveller women and girls, reported that the WGI funding had helped them to receive other funding. This is because it demonstrated that they could manage large projects, a large amount of money and that they could work well with other organisations. They have since received funding from bodies such as the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation.

OSARCC (Oxfordshire Sexual Abuse and Rape Crisis Centre) saw WGI funding having a direct and indirect impact on increasing the funding they received from other sources. It directly increased the amount of money they received from the Rape Support Fund because this allocation of funds is based on the number of clients a service sees. Due to WGI funding, OSARCC could grow the size of its staff team, meaning it could support more women. OSARCC also reported an indirect effect from WGI funding, of improving their credibility, which they felt helped lead to increased success with other funding bids.

Increasing the number and quality of specialist services on offer

As well as helping organisations increase numbers of staff and volunteers, funding also helped organisations improve specialist provision through, for example, developing staff and volunteers' knowledge and skills. This might be through additional training in areas such as working with complex needs, understanding trauma, providing legal and immigration advice.

"Additional funding for training has been extremely useful as have been able to upskill several members of staff."
New Futures

The flexibility of the funding also enabled projects to test, learn and adapt support accordingly, enabling continuous improvement of services.

The Synergy Essex First Contact Navigator Project led by **SERICC** (Specialist Rape and Sexual Abuse Service) was funded to bring together a partnership of three Essex based rape and sexual abuse centres to improve initial responses and services for survivors across the county. This included the set-up of a 'First Contact Navigator' (FCN) service and a series of co-production activities. As a result, it improved access to specialist support, increasing referrals by nearly 10% in its first three years and building the knowledge and understanding of staff in non-specialist services. Through working together, the partners were able to share knowledge and skills with each other, improve data collection and evidence building, and share the FCN model with other areas to improve services beyond Essex. And ultimately it offered better support for women and girls who might need urgent help at a time of crisis.

"The service you provide is amazing. Just to be able to know that you understand [...] The service went above and beyond to help me. I couldn't be more happy with the help and advice I received."

Project staff could get on with learning with and from women and girls, drawing on their collective expertise, knowledge, and experience, to either stick with an approach if it was working or change course, as necessary. Not having to constantly get authorisation for project changes from the funder made a big difference to project staff.

Rape Crisis England and Wales used WGI funding to set up an online support service, including a 'Live Chat service' which gained satisfaction ratings of 4.37 out of 5 during the funding period. Aspects of the service that users said they particularly valued included having support available 'out of hours', the immediate, rapid help, the anonymity and privacy afforded through online 'chat', and enabling typing rather than talking, which some preferred.

"What is working well is being flexible and not being symmetrical. It is client-led. Initially we said if we're doing it at Calderdale, we're doing it at Kirklees, but we don't need to do that, that wasn't the best option for the women we are working with."
WomenCentre

Projects were also able to use part of their WGI funding for evaluation. This helped projects learn and improve their work as it progressed.

"Enabled us to have an independent evaluation, to give us the evidence we needed. Was great for the team to see the validation. Building in monitoring and evaluation, not on a shoe-string, was a real advantage for learning internally and externally. [...] It gave us a lot of confidence in the project. We are hugely grateful." **Rising Sun**

"It made us start on a long journey trying to find appropriate evaluation and monitoring tools. If the funding hadn't ringfenced 10% for evaluation we'd never have done what we've done." **Noa Girls**

The **Young Women's Outreach Project (YWOP)** used its WGI funding to build its holistic provision, develop organisationally, including develop staff skills and support staff wellbeing, and build on its national and local networks and partnerships. It did this through employing a counsellor and worker specialising in child sexual exploitation, enhancing its team of youth workers, setting up new projects and services, including the Freedom programme, for young women in the process of leaving abusive relationships. Staff were also supported to engage in WGI Learning and Impact Services activities, including the Young Women and Girls' Action learning group, the film made with Leeds Animation Workshop and community calls for projects during the pandemic.

Building new partnerships and networks

At the beginning of the WGI, many organisations seemed isolated and unconnected to other women and girls' specialist organisations. Chapter 5 discusses the value that projects experienced through engaging with the WGI Learning and Impact Services and each other. This support, together with the confidence and space the funding offered them, enabled project staff to network with and learn from their peers, locally, regionally and nationally. This then fed back into the work being done with women and girls, supporting staff to continue building and reflecting on their practice.

Some organisations were funded specifically to work together, such as the Women's Aid and SafeLives' Roadmap Project, and the **Greater Manchester Women's Support Alliance** (GMWSA), which brought seven women's sector organisations together.

"It enabled us to establish an alliance of women's organisations across Manchester."
Stockport Women's Centre (Lead for the GMWSA)

Women's Lives Leeds, led by Leeds Women's Aid, were supported through the WGI to develop an alliance of 11 women-centred organisations, to better raise awareness and change lives through collaboration:

"The point of the consortium is to be more powerful together, to have more connections and to share the specialisms. No one women and girl's organisation has all of the specialisms and knows everything. There is more skill together than separate."
From final project evaluation report, with Leeds Beckett University.

In addition, funded projects also generated new partnerships with other sectors, and increased their local networks, getting involved in a greater variety of projects, some of which were initiated during the early COVID-19 lockdowns. For instance, **Trevi** in Plymouth began collaborating with local partners to address the need for women-only accommodation as part of a wrap-around support service and which has since received funding through the Tampon Tax fund.

POW Nottingham (a service focusing on child sexual exploitation and supporting migrant sex workers) made a concerted effort over the course of its WGI funding to build up professional networks. This included running sessions and delivering presentations for professional workers, holding an open day with partner organisations and agencies, emailing information to key referral partners and meeting with the local council to gain advice on raising the profile of the organisation. Several new referrals were made to POW as a result of this promotional activity, and since then the Project Worker has continued to build links with other professional organisations.

New partnerships and networks link to the next outcome for funded organisations, increasing voice and influence.

Increased voice and influencing of funded organisations

As with the previous outcome, this is explored further in <u>Chapter 5</u>. The Fund and many funded projects had the intention that the WGI would increase the voice and influence of funded organisations. This was to ensure that the value of the sector was advocated for more widely, and improving the lives of women and girls. It seems that the funding has been successful in helping achieve this, although, as with everything achieved through WGI, it is an ongoing process that requires continued support to make sure women and girls continue to be heard and taken account of by strategic decision-makers at local, regional and national levels.

"It was an 'amazing new chapter' for us. The work we have been able to do has contributed to many reports and created a higher profile for the whole organisation."
Hibiscus

This in turn will have helped organisations increase their sustainability, enabling them to continue the essential work of supporting some of the most marginalised women and girls who might otherwise be unseen.

"None of our women are hard to reach. They are easy to ignore."
Women's Community Matters

Learning from the three WGI national, strategic projects

While several organisations funded by the WGI led national projects, there were three projects that were given specific funding for strategic work at a national level. Rape Crisis England and Wales led the project Weaving the Web, which created an online platform for survivors of sexual violence to enhance provision of support for under-served women and girls and test the effectiveness of this type of online service delivery. **Women Together** ran VIBE – standing for Voice, Influence, Be Empowered – which supported young women and girls to influence strategic change and developed a toolkit to help other organisations apply the same model. Women's Aid Federation England (WAFE) and SafeLives ran a jointly funded project called the Roadmap Programme, which promoted early intervention in incidences of domestic abuse to create change in policy, practice and commissioning. The intention of funding these broader scope projects was so they could provide important lessons on the factors that help ensure the success of strategic projects.

Whilst time constraints were a barrier for many WGI funded projects, this pressure was perhaps enhanced for these three projects. This is because the nature and scale of strategic, systems change work means that goals are longer-term, with short-term progress being more difficult to measure.

"We've learned that it takes time to change people's perceptions and to take on new ways of working – transformational projects take time."
Project lead

Despite this, all projects were able to produce some tangible outcomes and positive results that could impact women and girls across the country. This was either through providing a new country-wide service or testing different approaches in particular geographies, that could then be scaled, to improve the lives of more women and girls. Key to achieving good outcomes was finding a balance between creating a programme that was broad enough to support and guide a wide range of individuals and organisations, whilst being flexible enough for adaptation to local contexts. This required a particularly intensive engagement process with women and girls to ensure that projects were suitable for people living in very different circumstances.

Another important learning from these projects was the need to invest additional time in developing partnerships at the project outset. National, strategic projects often necessitate partnership working between a range of sectors as well as between organisations within specific sectors who might not have worked together before. The new partnership links made through these projects yielded some very positive outcomes, despite challenges along the way.

"In the public policy space, we're much stronger together ... There's been some real wins, in terms of speaking together."
Project lead

However, as stated in the Joint Foreword to the Roadmap Evaluation report by the CEOs of WAFE and SafeLives:

"System change is a lifetime's work and even five years is just a blink of an eye on the way, compared to the scale and nature of domestic abuse."

Concluding thoughts

In conclusion to this chapter, we have explored some of the outcomes and changes for women and girls that the programme has helped enable. What has come across clearly in projects' final reports and progress reviews, is that women and girls have been able to make big changes in their lives, from increasing and improving their networks, support and community through to saving and rebuilding their lives. Organisations and their staff have been supported to grow in confidence, develop their structures and practice, improve their financial stability, improve the content and availability of specialist services, and learn from experience, from women, girls and partners.

It has also supported organisations to step back from relentless delivery, develop new relationships and networks, and influence and deepen the impacts for women and girls.

In chapter 4 we look at one of the other core aims of the WGI, around co-production, which links to outcomes around empowering women and girls. It explores some of the impacts that keeping women and girls at the centre of work and collaborating collectively had.

4. Co-production in the WGI

Three key messages

1 The WGI was underpinned by principles of equality, diversity, accessibility and reciprocity, consistent with feminist and co-production principles. Many WGI projects enacted these principles, levelling the power relations between staff and women and girls.

2 Whilst co-production was not always possible, because of individual circumstances and some project contexts, WGI projects worked hard to keep recognising different women and girls' needs, and ways of expressing them. These included contributing to service design, peer support, evaluation and feedback, and being part of governance structures.

3 A key learning from WGI was the importance of reclaiming the 'We' in women and girls organisations and resisting splitting into 'us professionals' and 'them service users'. Although it is important to recognise and work with different experiences, strengths and skills, it is also essential to keep the focus on working collectively, across professional and non-professional boundaries, to share voice, influence and contribute to social change that improves the lives of women and girls.

A core aim of the Women and Girls Initiative has been 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.

In this chapter we discuss to what extent the WGI has enabled co-production to happen, provide some examples of what projects have done and share some of the learning gained along the way. We also explore what is (or can be) different about the way women work with women and how the combination of feminism and the principles of co-production can transform women's lives.

The rise of co-production

The term 'co-production' has been around for forty years or so but has become an increasingly popular concept over the past decade. Prior to that, public and voluntary sector services more often used the language of 'participation' or 'service user involvement'. This was most often enacted at an individual level by giving people more of a say in how their individual support was provided. Participation at a more collective level was often limited to consultation exercises which gathered people's views and experiences but generally left the actual decision-making firmly in the hands of those with more power – i.e. the professionals, managers, commissioners or policy-makers. Gradually, there was a growing recognition that these approaches to involvement, positive though they may be for individuals, would not achieve empowerment or the transformation of services. Policy makers across the political spectrum have embraced the concept of co-production as a means of empowering people and communities, as a way of improving services, and, as a route to 'better value' in an era of austerity.

Definitions and principles

There are many definitions of co-production. Some are easier to grasp than others, but they all make it clear that co-production involves a greater sharing of power between those who have traditionally planned and delivered services and those who use them. For example, Boyle and Harris (2009)[15] noted that:

"Co-production means delivering public services in an equal and reciprocal relationship between professionals, people using services, their families and their neighbours. Where activities are co-produced in this way, both services and neighbourhoods become far more effective agents of change."

When working on defining co-production, projects focused on supporting young women and girls found the following definition to be useful:

"It just means 'working together to produce a product, service or activity.' It is based on the idea that many heads are better than one. It also celebrates the value of direct life experience (rather than only professional expertise) in planning, designing, delivering and reviewing services...... We can think of co-production as a journey that staff and young people go on together to get to a better place, learning from each other on the way."[16]

---

[15] Boyle, D., Harris, M. (2009). The Challenge of Co-production: How equal partnerships between professionals and the public are crucial to improving public services. London: NESTA. Available at: https://www.nesta.org.uk/report/the-challenge-of-co-production/

[16] Rathbone, A., Pallan-Jhalli, S.T., Clay, H., Codner, R., Bourne, T., Gregory, S., Turner, F., Morris, E. (2018). All together now; A toolkit for co-production with young people for use by Wolverhampton service providers, commissioners and schools. HeadStart Wolverhampton, Wolverhampton, UK: City of Wolverhampton Council. Available at: https://www.boingboing.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/All-together-now-a-toolkit-for-co-production-with-young-people.pdf

There is no single formula for co-production, but as guidance from SCIE (2022)[17] points out, there are some key features that are present in successful co-production initiatives. They:

- define those who access care and support as people with skills.
- break down the barriers between people who draw on care and support and professionals.
- build on people's existing capabilities.
- include reciprocity (where people get something back for putting something in) and mutuality (people working together to achieve shared objectives).
- work with peer and personal support networks alongside professional networks.
- facilitate services by helping organisations to become agents for change rather than just being service providers.

Co-production can take place in relation to a range of core activities including:

- co-design, including planning of services.
- co-decision making in the allocation of resources.
- co-delivery of services, including the role of volunteers in providing the service.
- co-evaluation of the service.

Total equality between those who use services and those who provide them is comparatively rare. More often, services aim to increase the level of equality and power over decisions and resources from a value base which is underpinned by principles of equality, diversity, accessibility and reciprocity.

Co-production and feminism

Many of the principles of co-production are consistent with feminist ways of working. The first learning event facilitated by the Learning and Impact Services team had a strong focus on the co-produced origins of feminist services and it is a theme we have returned to throughout the WGI. In her introduction to one of the first WGI '*MS*terclasses' in 2018, titled 'Catching the Wave', Liz Kelly challenged us with the question 'What has happened to the 'we' in women's organisations?' She reflected on the feminist roots of women's organisations – the early refuges and rape crisis centres – when women naturally talked about 'we': we women who experienced violence, we women who sought to end it, we women who intended to create women's liberation. In this context, she argued:

"The idea of talking about 'service users' or 'clients' would not have made sense back then as we thought most women encountered some form of intimate intrusion in our lives, and that our solidarity around violence was rooted in part in the fact that it was a reality, or a possibility, in all our lives. We encouraged women to become part of our organisations, to join in actions and demonstrations – violence was not just a personal experience but a political issue at the heart of feminist struggle."

---

[17] SCIE (2022). Co-production: What it is and how to do it. Available at: https://www.scie.org.uk/co-production/what-how
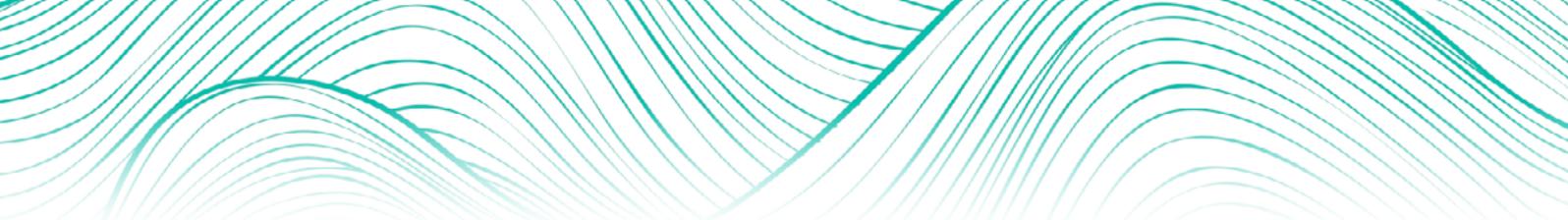
The early development of women's organisations such as women's centres, refuges and helplines took place in the 1970's and 80's and these collectives were 'flat' structures. However, the sector underwent major changes from the 90's onwards which reshaped many groups and organisations. The need for organisations to survive in the age of competitive tendering tended to undermine women's collective action.

Liz concluded her talk by asking:

"What would reclaiming the 'we' look like? How might it change the language we use and the way we think about violence and the support that women need and want in relation to it?"

This question has been central to the WGI and has been considered by individual projects and in workshops and action learning meetings. A recent briefing on co-production produced by the Learning and Impact Services partners is based on the conversations that have taken place and the thinking that has emerged over the past seven years of the WGI.

Co-production across the WGI

The Learning and Impact Services team has continually reviewed the development of co-production across the WGI, and we have reported on progress in each of our annual synthesis reports, as well as helping to keep it on the agenda through the facilitation of *MS*terclasses and action learning groups (themselves a 'safe space' for co-production of agendas, knowledge development and briefing papers).

In keeping with the limited requirements asked of projects, they were not asked to report consistently against co-production or versions of it. We were given many examples of how it was developed through the WGI across the different beneficiary sectors and types of projects, without being able to quantify it in numbers. The thematic and project specific briefing papers developed through the project offer examples of co-production. The young women and girls action learning group decided to look at co-production through the lens of an increase in voice and influence. In this section we provide examples of the overall progress towards co-production that we can identify across the WGI, illustrated with examples from projects. Beginning with the influences on how co-production developed, we also look at how co-production is achieved (with women, not for women) and the circumstances of the women and girls themselves.
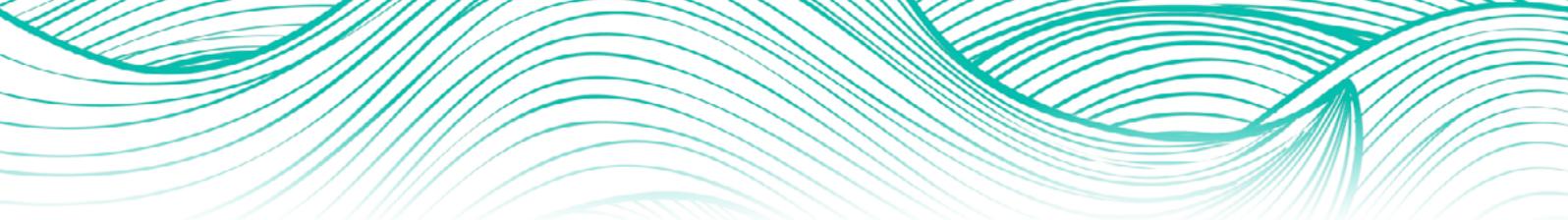
RISE – Refuge, Information, Support, Education – used the WGI funding to give them the space to test and develop a new model and set of activities, focusing on co-creating grassroots social change projects with survivors of VAWG. Their projects were based on an understanding that survivors are more than service users and that many wanted to be change makers: the ambition was to 'mobilise voices, skills, action and networks for women survivors' and wider communities. Specific programmes included the Community Connector Programme, which enabled survivors to access small grants for activist projects, and the Community Researcher Programme. This offered to train survivors in research skills and gave them the possibility to conduct their own studies, such as looking into how survivors coped with lockdowns.

Key to the success of these projects was the flexibility shown by RISE and their understanding that commitment to co-production can mean unlearning previous assumptions and relationships between staff and service users. They helped rebuild these in a different way, with staff being comfortable with service users taking the lead. One example of this was in the change of approach to some research being carried out and the subsequent development of the Walking Together methodology. While at the start of the project, RISE had hoped to be able to 'track' women's sense of 'space for action' in different areas of women's lives, community researchers were uncomfortable with this goal since they felt it placed the responsibility for progress too heavily upon the individual rather than on the wider system. Instead, they wanted to work towards something that was more open and responsive to the needs of survivors. They, therefore, developed the Walking Together methodology which used a participatory and active method of storytelling combined with researcher-led observation and reflection. Through this, they were able to hear and understand the stories of different survivors and from this learnt, for example, that unspoken expectations and stereotypes of the 'good survivor' create controlling images that older, Disabled, Black and minoritised women fall outside of, thus limiting their access to support and activism.

The Walking Together approach could only be developed through the input and understanding of survivors, and particularly those community researchers who were Black and racially minoritised, Disabled or facing multiple disadvantages. This is because they understood the barriers that are faced by many survivors, but which may remain unseen if research is carried out in accordance with the status quo. This process of co-production, which focused on centring the voices of marginalised survivors through their roles as community researchers, created the opportunity for the stories of other marginalised survivors to be heard and valued.

Type and nature of projects

Some types of projects were intrinsically more likely to be co-produced than others. For example, there were some community-based projects set up by women and their whole ethos was based on peer support, mutuality and equality of decision-making about what the project did and how it did it. Some of these projects were similar to the flat-structured, collectively organised, feminist groups of the 70's and 80's and co-production was an intrinsic part of how they worked. At the other end of the spectrum, some projects were working within contexts

where the sharing of power was extremely limited, an obvious example being projects working in prisons. In these contexts, projects could increase the amount of power and control women had over some decisions and choices (e.g. about individual support plans) but they were unlikely to be able to increase women's power over more structural issues.

Projects also varied in the underlying values to which they subscribed. For example, the work of some therapeutic services was governed by principles which emphasised the importance of professional boundaries. These certainly prioritised the value of respect, but the relationship of therapist and client is not one of mutuality. This is not to suggest that one type of project is 'better' than another, but simply to note that different levels of co-production are more possible and more likely depending on the context and characteristics of projects.

Starting points

When the WGI began, the funded projects were at different starting points with regard to co-production. Some already had it firmly on their agenda and were able to use WGI funding to take it a step further, as in this example from Aspire.

Aspire is based in Chester-le-Street, Co. Durham and delivers learning, support and wellbeing services at their women-only centre, including free and low-cost courses, support groups and services and an on-site creche. Aspire has a long-standing commitment to co-production but WGI funding helped them be even more focused on this:

"All our services are being delivered by women with lived experience, we have trained volunteers, recruitment and retention has been good, the model is working well. We are starting to train more experienced volunteers to be a part of the evaluation, helping with capturing impact. It feels like the first few years, we were trying things out, things are now falling more cohesively in place, it feels more structured, and the pace is picking up – it has direction."

At the beginning volunteers simply provided support for drop-in groups, but gradually a core training programme developed covering listening skills, then mental health, self-harm, suicide and trauma informed approaches. Volunteers were now highly trained and could lead all kinds of groups - mainly on-line through the pandemic. Workers were not invited (unless they needed support themselves) so they were all entirely peer led.

The Aspire 'volunteers' were mainly women with lived experience and over the 5 years, 32 of them were active in front line support work. Aspire sees training as both a 'leveller' and as a developmental progression route for women – sometimes into paid employment.

"When we say: 'At Aspire we...' that's who we mean. We mean all of us."

Co-production as working 'with' not 'for' or 'doing to'

The first of the briefings produced by the Learning and Impact Services team was on the work of women's centres. Why Women's Centres work highlighted the importance of co-production within a holistic approach to working with women:

"Women's Centres empower women by building on their capabilities and strengths and encouraging their belief in their own ability to make positive change. The idea that people's needs are better met when they are involved in creating solutions as equal and reciprocal partners, is central to this approach.

Many of the characteristics of co-production are aligned to women centred working i.e. building on people's existing strengths, promoting mutuality and reciprocity, breaking down barriers between professionals and recipients by doing things 'with' people rather than 'to' them."

There are several examples of WGI projects taking these principles seriously and moving their co-production on to the next level, including this from the Nelson Trust:

Nelson Trust described their co-production as having moved into a whole new zone. They've always had peer mentors but previously each individual was supported as a mentor by her key worker. With WGI funding support, they recruited a peer mentoring coordinator and could offer 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 lockdown hit. It's like we've hit on the right structure for the women to grow through."

Even in the most challenging of environments, projects have shown that elements of co-production are possible, as illustrated by Women in Prison Health Matters:

Women in Prison Health Matters was 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 benefitted from that. Getting into 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."

The circumstances of the women and girls

A key factor which can either make co-production easier or much harder is the circumstances of the women and girls involved. Many of those supported by WGI projects were facing extreme challenges in their lives. In such circumstances, it can be impossible for women to find the capacity to be involved in anything beyond their own survival. It may only be once acute issues have been addressed that involvement becomes possible, as illustrated by this example from One25:

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. From 2018-2023 they also ran 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 were able to get involved in the Peony service this really changed. One25 described co-production as one of their biggest areas of learning. From the start, Peony had six volunteers who had used their support and wanted to give back. Volunteers led workshops and ran a service user forum. Confidence rose, drug use dramatically declined, and one woman was able to use her experience of volunteering with Peony to obtain a full-time job.

Co-production activities

The range of co-production activities across the WGI were varied. The briefing on Women's Centres identified several approaches, which the team encountered taking place to varying degrees in projects, including:

- having a volunteering model through which women can contribute to the overall running of a project in support of the core staff. Frequently this offered women who had previously benefited from the organisation's support, a way of giving something back to the organisation they valued whilst continuing development of their own skills and experience.
- setting up workshops for women and girls to run, encouraging them to spearhead their own activities.
- inviting women and girls to sit on staff selection panels, taking part in co-production workshops to help design and develop services, and being part of advisory groups or shadow boards.
- influencing policy and practice more widely.

These kinds of activities and variations of these are presented in the boxed examples in this section.

Peer support

Across the WGI, a popular approach has been the development of peer support. Some of these have taken projects in unanticipated directions, as women and girls have come up with their own ideas and plans about what they want to offer, as illustrated by this example from Blossom – A Way Out:

Blossom – A Way Out provides targeted support for young women aged 16 – 24 years 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 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."

Peer research

As well as peer support such as peer mentoring, some projects developed approaches to peer research to help them develop or to evaluate their work, including this example from the Girls Network:

The Girls Network set up a connection with a university to facilitate a mentee advisory group. This led to them developing their own research project.

"With their new-found research skills, in June 2017 they began work to answer the question: 'What barriers do girls face to personal success in 2017?' We were astounded when the girls returned to us with a number of innovative research collection methods, including a graffiti wall and whole-school presentations. They also returned over 70 questionnaires containing data from their fellow female students."

Developing volunteering roles

Another common approach has been building the capacity of women and girls to make the transition into a volunteering role. There are many examples of this, including from Women on the Wight:

Women on the Wight – WOW was established as a 'safe space' on the island for women, with the ambition to create a welcoming space with a changing diary of events, combining creative activities, health and well-being, life skill classes and inspirational talks.

What was unique about WOW was that every woman who visited the centre became a member and all members could become volunteers, drawing on a strongly held belief that everyone has skills they can share. Pre-COVID they grew to 900 members, with at least 30 women a day visiting the centre.

WOW prioritised doing more work with volunteers, encouraging them to take responsibility for specific courses/activities, as a way to make the project more sustainable. Volunteers, board members and staff also took activities to other parts of the island, offering 'pop up' events in other towns and at community events.

Setting the agenda

One of the lessons learned by Women on the Wight was that if you are serious about co-production you have to allow women to do the things that they want to do. This was also the experience of RISE in Brighton:

RISE in Brighton found that in working to co-produce with Black and minoritised women in the community they had learned a lot about listening, earning trust and about 'allowing' women to set their own agenda:

"I accessed some groups that were meeting already including Bangladeshi women – but they didn't want to talk to me. I really had to understand what listening meant because what they wanted was to learn how to sew. So that's how the Sew & Grow group started. Then COVID happened and that's when co-production really started. I'd gone to their spaces; walked alongside them at their pace so when COVID hit we had that relationship. COVID disrupted the usual way of doing things and also the normal power balance. It moved things on."

RISE was not alone in finding that COVID-19 actually increased rather than decreased co-production. Several projects commented that moving groups on-line was both more accessible and more empowering for some women.

Management and governance

Other projects have used the opportunity of WGI funding to increase the role of current or former 'service users' in the management or governance of their organisation. An example of this is Birth Companions:

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. They 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 including a 50 strong lived experience team and we have achieved far more than we could have anticipated at the start of our funding period"

From volunteering to employment

For some women, the experience of volunteering can lead to employment, and a key feature of many WGI projects is that their staff have themselves had experience of receiving support. Within projects such as Aspire, women have moved from volunteer roles to being members of staff. Similarly, the **Camomile Project** in Gateshead developed young women as peer mentors, building their skills and confidence and three of those young women now work for the organisation.

Lived experience of staff

Having staff with lived experience themselves has an impact on how services are developed and delivered. However, this is not always explicit – indeed some staff may be reticent about being open about their experiences. One of the learning aspects of the WGI has been the greater acknowledgement of the value of lived experience within projects. In some instances, the reclaiming of the 'we' has involved 'coming out' as a survivor-led service. For example, over 60% of staff at **Leeway** in Norwich have domestic violence experience themselves:

"Lots of staff are ex-service users who came through our refuges. It's not something we want to keep quiet about. It's a strength and a source of pride."

Influencing policy and practice more broadly

Many of the WGI projects have been focused on empowering women within their own services, but some have also aimed to increase the voice and influence of women and girls more widely. An unusual, city-wide, example of this comes from Leeds:

The Leeds based WGI project, **Women's Lives Leeds,** initially employed an engagement worker and planned to work with the Women's Lives Leeds partner organisations to develop a 'service user advisory board'. However, it has now developed beyond that as the project manager explained:

"That's not the language we think in anymore – the women are all 'experts by lived experience' and they are actively engaged in activities that shape our plans. Originally, they participated in project reviews and gradually moved to co-produce new elements of the project. There were 30 members but it became a core group of 8-10 who participated very regularly and it always had a peer support element.

The group had support from the 'engagement worker' who was a woman with lived experience herself. It needed that support at the start but over time women were able to lead the meetings themselves and the worker was able to step back. They now also have a representative on the partnership board and partners have recruited two women with lived experience as workers.

But what has also emerged from this Initiative is the Women's Hub - drawn from any women who wanted to be involved - not specifically 'service users' but including those who are. We are all hub members just as women."

Co-producing with young women and girls

In the briefing paper entitled Increasing the voice of girls and young women, written with staff and girls and young women from nine WGI projects, we explored what co-production might mean for a younger age group. An important principle was inclusive co-production which recognises that some girls and young women accessing projects may feel unable or unwilling to participate in co-production that requires a substantial personal contribution, due to the level of trauma they have experienced in their young lives. This work is long-term, ensuring that the voices of girls and young women are valued and heard so they can shape their own futures.

These projects tended to work in three key ways:

1. Developing services that adapted to the needs of girls and young women through careful listening to what they say.

For example, in the Blossom project in Stockton, support plans were developed together and girls worked with staff on how their sessions were structured. The Camomile project in Gateshead built in routine feedback and the Noa Girls Project developed more formal quarterly 'think tank' sessions. **WomenCentre's** Project 1325 followed up confidence workshops in schools with supporting a group of sixth form students who had come together to provide peer support to younger students.

2. Girls and young women participating in how projects are designed, run and evaluated.

The Girls Network used school closures during COVID-19 lockdowns to keep up to date by researching girls' needs and adapting their offer, to encourage ownership. Most WGI projects who work with young women and girls provided opportunities for participants to evaluate interventions they experienced, and then staff would feedback how their input had helped change services.

3. Girls and young women playing a role in influencing wider practice and policy.

At **Women's Community Matters** in Barrow, their young women's project:

"...undertook a body of work as a group, led by a peer mentor, evidencing what they expected from agencies working with them, based on their personal experiences. The project was called #thefutureisme and was launched with publicity in our local mayoral office in Barrow in Furness."

The local authority also supported their young people's charter.

WGI projects also contributed to local consultations. For example, The Camomile Project contributed to local policy around maternity services, where young women from the project were able to offer advice and suggestions. Young women from the Blossom project also periodically contributed to local partnership consultations whereby their opinions and experiences were shared to enhance local service delivery.

"This not only empowers them but also strengthens their entitlements, particularly to the political process and to voice."

The lived experience of co-production in the WGI: reclaiming the 'we'

In one of the WGI co-production workshops facilitated by the Learning and Impact Services team, we asked participants to consider whether the term 'co-production' captured how they aimed to work. One woman responded that to her mind:

"The 'co' in co-production still suggests that there is an 'us' and a 'them'. I prefer thinking that what we are doing is being women helping women helping women."
Project worker

Some preferred the language of co-creation or collective working because they felt the way they worked was a shared, creative process rather than a production line.[18] Others suggested that reclaiming the 'we' was about going back to the origins of the women's movement and that 'co-production' was simply a new 'buzz' term that had been thrust upon them by funders and commissioners.

In a co-production action learning group meeting we explored the implications of reclaiming the 'we' for organisational structures, the ways we publicise and explain our work and for different groups of women: staff, volunteers, women accessing support for the first time etc. There was a strong emphasis on the importance of what women had in common:

> *"Reclaiming the 'we' means seeing staff, volunteers and women seeking support as in some sense 'all the same'. We may be at different places in our lives – and that has to be acknowledged – but what we share is more fundamental than our different roles or needs at any particular time."*

However, this distinction between those in need of, and those providing, support was understood to be only one of the power differentials that mattered. Age, class, place, race, caring responsibilities and many other inequalities still need to be addressed:

"Reclaiming the 'we' doesn't have to imply denying difference – the 'we' can be very broad. It can also mean different groups of 'us' at different times: sometimes I'm just 'a woman', sometimes a woman with a disability or a survivor...Rather it's about there being no 'them' in the 'us and them'."

---

[18] See also Co-creation.org.uk (2019). Co-creation: Exploring openly, honestly, with understanding, love and compassion the challenges and opportunities of cocreation, coproduction and service user involvement. Supported by The National Lottery Community Fund. Available at https://www.tnlcommunityfund.org.uk/media/insights/documents/Cocreation-Booklet-WEB-V2pdf?mtime=20191219155809&focal=none

There was concern that in reclaiming the 'we', inequalities in skills, training, experience and personal circumstances could be brushed over. While those facing more challenges than others often have considerable understanding of what's needed, other kinds of knowledge and experience can also be very valuable. One participant explained that what mattered was how expertise was used:

"Of course we have expertise: knowledge, skill and experience of what helps or of how the law works. But you can either use that to simply provide a service and do something for someone, or you can make the whole process empowering so she'll grow her own courage and confidence in challenging things. She'll go on to influence other women and her partners or children - she might never wave a placard or go on a demonstration, but she'll still be a force for change."

It was also recognised that reclaiming the 'we' has personal implications for staff and that these include potential losses as well as gains:

"Reclaiming the 'we' means workers losing some of their status as professionals – as separate, more 'sorted' individuals. It may also mean they can 'come out' as themselves being survivors of violence or racism or whatever. But at the same time organisations need to believe and insist that that's a positive: that 'wounded healers' bring insight that others don't necessarily have."

There was a general acknowledgement that women who have received support at one time often want to 'give something back' at another point. Therefore, reclaiming the 'we' involves creating different ways to get involved and support others – often as part of helping oneself. It was also acknowledged that this hadn't always happened:

"We used to be nervous of women returning to volunteer: we thought they'd get over-involved or that their own issues wouldn't be sufficiently resolved enough...There was this idea that there should be clear, blue water between being 'a client' and being on 'our side' of the fence."

This was confirmed by survey respondents in research carried out with Rape Crisis Centres by one of the WGI project leaders. One pointed out that when this was the case:

"Women may feel that they are being unnecessarily and unfairly precluded from supporting other women in the sector when they may well be in the position to do so. This may feel like a further injustice."[19]

---

[19] Lisa Ward (2022) Presentation for WGI Webinar 2: Lived experience in the sector: How do we better enable a 'we'?

Co-production: what we have learned

The WGI Learning and Impact Services Team have supported co-production by taking the topic as a focus for workshops and *MS*terclasses, by encouraging the involvement of women and girls in learning events, and by using participatory methods - such as action learning group meetings - to co-create evidence and insights that have then been shared in co-produced briefings. In addition, we commissioned Leeds Animation Workshop to work with WGI projects to produce the film 'Where she was to where she is now' celebrating the WGI. It was made with the active involvement of women and girls from 17 different projects who shared their thoughts and their artworks.[20]

Along the way we have sought to gather and synthesise the lessons learned. Women involved in the WGI have identified the following commitments and principles - through action learning group meetings and workshops - as underpinning feminist co-creation/co-production:

- The lived experience of women and girls is the starting point for our analysis and services. There are several questions to work through for organisations seeking to develop their skills in this area. See for example the briefing paper Increasing the voice and influence of girls and young women.

- Understanding the impacts of gender inequality, how these intersect with other inequalities, including poverty, racism, and disability, how power operates and how inequalities are maintained.

- Working with women collectively and collaboratively to co-produce both services and social change.

- We create groups and communities that enable women to care about and for each other through both peer support and involvement in a movement to build a more equal world.

- Activism is an important part of dealing with women's legacies of violence and abuse.

- We use a language of 'we' rather than of 'us/them' (e.g. worker/survivor/woman instead of IDVA/victim/client).

- We create art and creative expressions that celebrate the hope, optimism, healing and imagination of a better world for women.

- We regard challenge and change as healthy processes and trust each other to let go of individual power and control.

- There is a commitment to reflecting on the different kinds of power we have as individuals and how we exercise them and to recognising privilege and advantages we may have by virtue of our class, race, ability and other factors.

---

[20] "Where she was to where she is now: Celebrating the Women and Girls Initiative" Also available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sGG6uc3Mvk8

- We accept our vulnerabilities, as well as recognising and valuing our strengths and those of others. Taking care of our own emotional and physical well-being is essential in supporting others to do the same. We are open about mistakes and self-doubts. We are transparent in how we make decisions. We aim to build diverse and inclusive organisations and ensure that women with different perspectives join conversations at the start rather than talking just to those 'who think like us'.
- Collective and individual contributions and achievements are recognised and celebrated. We don't 'steal each other's thunder'.

Concluding thoughts

Many of the characteristics of contemporary co-production are aligned with the traditions of women-centred working. The idea that people's needs are better met when they are involved in creating solutions as equals and reciprocal partners, building on people's strengths, promoting mutuality and reciprocity, and breaking down barriers between professionals and recipients by doing things 'with' people rather than 'to' them are central to both. Women supporting each other as peers, volunteers, workers and enabling women to have a voice and develop the confidence to speak out and share their experiences and views are also core to any strengths-based approach. In reclaiming the 'we', women's organisations are returning to their own feminist roots, but they are also contributing an intersectional, gendered dimension to the wider contemporary movement towards more co-produced services and interventions.

The WGI has played an important role in this in several ways by:

- providing the funding to enable projects to extend their empowerment activities.
- providing space for projects to experiment with different approaches and to think, explore and debate how to take their co-production further.
- encouraging projects to be more ambitious and take further steps toward greater co-production.
- providing a supportive, learning environment in which to develop, share skills and to reclaim confidence in women's ways of working.

5. The contribution of the Learning and Impact Services partnership

Three key messages

1 The Learning and Impact Services team enabled and empowered funded projects to gather and use evidence to demonstrate the difference they were making for women and girls. It enabled projects to capture and share learning, develop a stronger community of networked services, and demonstrate what works in empowering women and girls.

2 The investment in a Learning and Impact Services partnership to develop an integrated learning and evaluation strand and thereby support and develop the women and girls sector was timely and welcomed by participating projects. The length of the contract allowed for trust to be built and networks developed between projects. A wealth of outputs were produced, with the projects themselves, which were responsive to the emerging context including the COVID-19 pandemic.

3 The individualised focus on evaluation and reporting was welcomed by the projects, along with the ring-fenced budget. However, as monitoring and evaluation data was collected in very different ways by projects, it was not possible to develop programme-wide evidence on some of the outcomes that were envisaged at the start of the programme.

In this chapter we discuss the purpose and development of the WGI Learning and Impact Services partnership; the relevant features of the partnership team; our activities and outputs, and the difference this work made to the impact of the overall initiative.

The purpose of the Learning and Impact Services partnership

The Fund was keen to support its investment in the women and girls' sector via the establishment of the WGI by commissioning a learning and impact services team to work alongside projects. The Fund stated in its invitation to tender document in 2017[21] that:

"the most powerful and impactful action the Fund could take is to provide the WGI projects with the confidence, skills and ability to make a clear, cohesive case for gender specific services, through the work that they do and the stories of the women and girls they support."

In 2019, this was elaborated, as the Fund understood there was:

"a need to empower projects to provide strong evidence of what works when supporting women and girls, ensuring they have the confidence, skills and ability to share inspirational stories and communicate their successes and learning."[22]

The partnership worked to do this by supporting projects to gather and use evidence to demonstrate the difference they were making to women and girls. They also maximised collaboration, co-production, learning, and influence through different activities, such as action learning groups, *MS*terclasses, workshops and publications.

Before the Initiative launched, in September 2015, the Fund engaged a joint team from the Child and Woman Abuse Studies Unit at London Metropolitan University (CWASU) and DMSS Research to undertake some initial work with grant applicants, before the funding application deadline in December 2015. This 'Learning and Evaluation Scoping Support for WGI' contract, supported WGI grant applicants on practical aspects of the funding process, helping them think through learning and evaluation priorities, develop their theories of change, and providing recommendations to the Fund on the WGI's national learning and evaluation focus.

The team worked with over 90 organisations and observed how extremely depleted the women and girls' sector was, with very little existing infrastructure for learning or organisational development. Even the concept of 'a women's sector' was unfamiliar to many smaller organisations.

---

[21] Invitation to Tender: Women and Girls Initiative – Learning and Impact Services BIG001-0826 2017

[22] WGI communications protocol and key messages document, 2019. This was an internal joint working document agreed and used by Fund staff and the Learning and Impact Services partners.

However, they also encountered a real appetite for shared learning across the Initiative for more than just opportunities and space to share and network. They therefore recommended that the programme should be developed with an integrated learning and evaluation strand which would:

- build networks for peer support and learning across related projects.
- provide some formal opportunities for learning and skill development.
- engage women and girls with lived experience as full participants in the learning process.
- offer additional support for those funded through the WGI to increase their influence and profile.
- integrate learning with the evaluation of common themes across the WGI programme.

The first four of these were incorporated in the subsequent Learning and Impact Services tender.

Rather than commissioning an integrated programme evaluation, led by a national evaluation provider[23], the Fund required projects to spend up to 10% of their overall budgets on evaluation, alongside commissioning a national learning and impact services, to work in a more flexible and non-prescriptive way. How projects used their resource for evaluation and how their work was monitored by the Fund was flexible – it could be anything from phone calls with their Funding Officer through to submitting annual grant monitoring forms, equality information forms and/ or commissioning external evaluation or research projects and reports. This flexibility was valued by projects, although it meant that data was gathered and reported on in different ways, using varied criteria and timeframes. This has made it challenging to draw strong conclusions from analysis of local monitoring and evaluation reports. Despite this, the Learning and Impact Services team have been able to support the projects in many and different ways, finding, developing and sharing learning over the five-year period of the contract.

From the experiences during the initial pre-funding period along with the findings of the Fund's early consultations, partners at CWASU and DMSS Research helped formulate an overall aim for a learning partnership. This was:

1) to build the confidence of the women's sector to overcome its fragmentation by developing a stronger sense of identity and shared purpose and,

2) through capturing and sharing their learning, develop a community of services that would be stronger and have greater influence.

---

[23] This was a departure from the norm for programmes of this kind, where national evaluation providers would traditionally be commissioned and required to set out standardised measures for local projects to use in their evaluations. This approach is problematic when it comes to evaluating projects that are not delivering the same intervention to the same population groups, but working in a more complex, person-centred way as already described in Chapter 2.
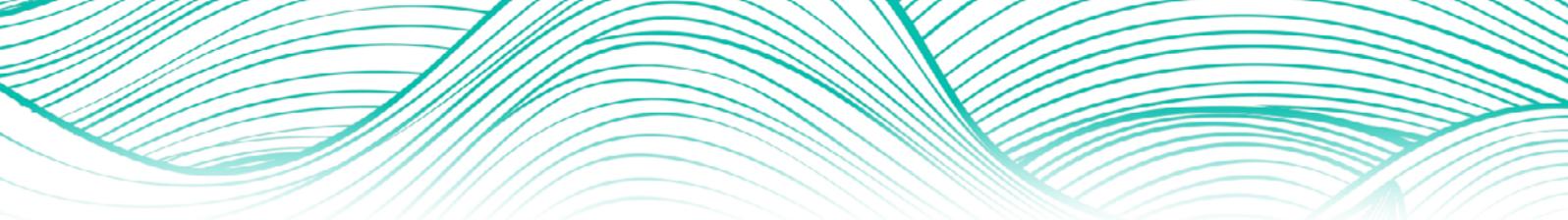
To achieve this, in early 2018, the Fund commissioned learning and impact services provision from CWASU, DMSS and The Tavistock Institute of Human Relations, consisting of a range of additional support to grant holders including:

- One-to-one support and mentoring for evaluation and organisational development
- An online learning hub to enable collective conversations
- Action learning groups
- A series of *MS*terclasses and workshops
- Regularly published reports and briefings
- A national conference to showcase and share project achievements and learning.

The initial plans changed over the course of the support programme and were adapted to suit the emerging contexts that we found ourselves working in. For example, the impact of projects' individualised approaches to evaluation meant that the initial audit had to become something more extensive. In addition, our desire to support projects during the COVID-19 lockdowns led to a series of online community calls available for all projects alongside further blogs and briefing papers.

COVID-19 scuppered the national conference which had been scoped with projects and a venue booked. Instead of a two-day face to face conference, this was replaced by a series of online regional showcase events, community calls (regular online spaces convened by us for WGI staff to join), rapidly produced blogs and briefings highlighting up-to-date learning during the first two national lockdowns and the commissioning of an animation film. Each of the above are described in detail below in this chapter.

The Learning and Impact Services partnership

The Learning and Impact Services partnership team was made up of key staff from the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations (TIHR), DMSS Research (DMSS) and the Child and Woman Abuse Studies Unit (CWASU). Di McNeish and Sara Scott (DMSS) and Liz Kelly (CWASU) had been involved in the initial Fund consultations and then won the pre-application learning support contract. They joined with Georgie Parry-Crooke, Heather Stradling and Camilla Child from the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations to develop the learning partnership bid. This brought together a strong team with the following features:

- Many years' experience of working in women's organisations, with 'feminist credentials' and established networks.
- Expertise on gender, violence and abuse.
- Group work, training, research and evaluation skills.
- In-depth knowledge of organisational development and systems change.

The team was augmented by DMSS associates Sue Botcherby, Sarah Frost and Jennie Williams, CWASU staff including Sukhwant Dhaliwal and Joanna Lovett who brought additional expertise in girls work, sexual exploitation, mental health and action learning, and TIHR staff, Anna Sophie Hahne and Giorgia Iacopini, (amongst others) who brought qualitative and quantitative research and policy evaluation expertise to support at different time points.
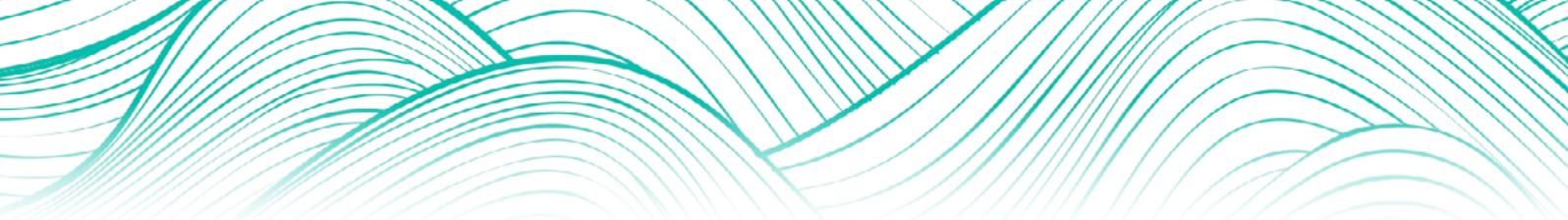
The credibility of the team within the women's sector, their understanding of its history, politics and current challenges; a commitment to developing good evidence and previous experience in knowledge transfer; along with the interpersonal skills for engaging and building relationships 'at a distance' with busy practitioners, were the essential ingredients for this partnership.

Team members shared a values-base and a commitment to feminist principles. We started from a position of being allies – believing in the sector, not outsider 'evaluators' – and an appreciative inquiry approach, that we would raise questions and challenges from a position of interest and curiosity.

What the Learning and Impact Services team developed

This section describes the various elements of the team's evaluation and learning support offer, why those elements were developed and what they contributed to the WGI. As noted earlier, the approach was always to be flexible to emerging circumstances and adapt the offer to the needs of the projects. Figure 4 presents a summary of activities and outputs delivered as part of the contract.

One-to-one support and mentoring

At the outset each funded project was allocated a learning mentor (or one-to-one support) from the team. The intention was to build a relationship with key women involved in each project, encourage and support their participation in learning and evaluation activities and be a trusted starting place for questions about project development, evidence building, strategy and influence. Informal contact, visits, phone calls and meeting up at learning events was supplemented by a more formal annual progress review to keep track of the changing needs of individual projects.

The data collected was used to establish individual project needs, shared needs and issues and to set an annual agenda for learning activities. It was also synthesised into reports shared with grantees and the Fund, with the first report presenting an overview of the WGI, sharing some early insights, successes and challenges.[24]

The first review highlighted the variability of projects' approaches to evaluation and collecting data, with very different needs for bespoke support. Our yearly check-ins became, therefore, more extensive than originally envisaged.

The uptake of mentoring support by projects also varied considerably. The team were consistent (each of us were allocated a group of projects to support and remained attached to these for at least three years) and were persistent in making contact. Despite this, a small number of projects never engaged with their allocated mentor outside the annual review interview and a few even evaded that. At the opposite end of the scale there were a substantial group of projects who regularly sought advice from their named support, used them as a sounding board or worked with them to co-produce internal learning activities.
The relationships were highly valued by many projects and the feedback we received highlighted the importance of the team having an in-depth understanding of women's organisations and the women's sector as well as research and evaluation.

---

24 Diving into the Women and Girls Initiative

5 Years
62 funded projects

Figure 4: The Learning and Impact Services delivery in numbers

Minimum of **343** **individual progress reviews** with/support for project staff

Over 88 **activities:** action learning meetings, *MS*terclasses, webinars, workshops, round tables etc.

Over 351 **project engagements** in activities

Over 1426 **individual attendances** at different activities

34 **public outputs produced:** 12 briefings; 6 blogs; 4 reports; 1 keynote publication; 2 learning packs; 1 film; 3 webinar recordings; 5 project promotional briefings; 1 Lunchtime talk

> *"The learning partnership made people lift their heads up from their own corners and see themselves in the context of a wider sector. We were encouraged to reflect on what we were doing."* **VIDA**

> *[What was helpful about the support?] "The training, MSterclasses and learning events – with really excellent key people – and the emphasis on evaluation. It's enabled us to have an external evaluation running alongside the whole project. That has been crucial and we've learned such a lot from that."*
> **A Way Out – Blossom**

The remainder of the projects tended to use their named support mostly at the beginning of their funding, largely in relation to finalising their theories of change, developing evaluation plans, commissioning external evaluators or identifying/designing monitoring tools and approaches to data collection. It made a difference to project staff that they could explore these with a trusted mentor who could provide specific advice, run sessions with a project team and feedback on draft documents.

A small number of projects also took the space to explore organisational issues which were not related to evaluation. For example, several of the projects comprised a number of organisations working together, often for the first time. Leading new partnerships provided a challenge in agreeing a values base, direction, and co-ordination of multiple activities. Mentors could offer support in this area, occasionally providing ad-hoc coaching sessions, for example, with one of the project leads for Women's Aid and the Project Manager of the **Saheli**-led Maya Project partnership. A focus on this also led to the development of action learning group meetings and the briefing paper Partnership Working for Women and Girls.

An online learning hub

As part of the progress reviews in 2018, the team asked the projects for their views on the development and utility of an online hub. The majority (71%) were very interested though wanted to be certain that they would get something useful out of engaging with an online platform. Their concerns were about their capacity to engage with it and using the space frequently. We therefore developed the Basecamp women and girls' learning hub to be both a communications tool and a repository for useful documents and resources. Basecamp was a dedicated 'safe space', open for WGI projects to communicate with each other and the Learning and Impact Services team. It was agreed that Fund staff would not join the hub, to enable honest conversations that might not otherwise take place, due to projects potentially self-censoring themselves. It is an example of a 'safe space' mentioned in the briefing developed with projects. While Basecamp was not used by all projects and a few never subscribed, there were over 160 sign ups overall with many people asking to be added during the course of the Initiative. It was a vehicle to post useful information about upcoming events, requests for participation, and to announce our community calls during the first 12 months of the pandemic. All of the resources that were developed as part of the WGI (and some that were developed elsewhere) were uploaded to Basecamp. On occasion, projects also used the space to advertise their own events or ask questions of each other.

Action learning groups

The partners were committed to learning as an active, participatory activity. The purpose of the action learning approach was to engage with women involved in projects in order to explore current thinking, practice and challenges and through learning together, build a better evidence base for the sector. Partners saw this as activity based, active learning and adapted traditional action learning set methods to fit the circumstances. We collectively adopted a broad definition of action learning as people learning from what they do, tackling issues together, testing out solutions and generating a shared understanding of what works in different contexts.

The women who participated from a variety of different projects could share, compare and synthesise their ways of working and identify their 'active ingredients' and the values and principles which underpinned them.

Action learning groups brought together projects that shared a topic focus, had a similar role or worked with a similar constituency of women or girls. Facilitated by members of the Learning and Impact Services team, they first shared issues they were currently addressing; then prioritised a particular issue, discussed their approaches and what was most significant about these. The partners also contributed any relevant external evidence, undertook further consultation with additional WGI projects, and took responsibility for writing up the findings or conclusions of the action learning process in a way that could be shared more widely in a series of briefing papers.[25]

> *"We have used the [Why women's centres work] briefing for our big meeting with commissioners. I have also quoted it in reports to funders and is also part of our business case for co-commissioning."*

One of the action learning groups, focused on working with young women and girls, were active participants in the writing process and expressed their pleasure and pride in doing this. Although initially all held in person, groups moved online once the pandemic began.

---

[25] Feminist coproduction
Sanctuary and freedom: The transformational power of spaces for women and girls
Preventing another serial killer? Learning from projects supporting women and girls who are sexually exploited or selling sex
Increasing the voice and influence of girls and young women
Partnership Working for Women and Girls
A Safer Pair of Hands: Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) specialist violence against women work
Why Women's Centres Work

The 'by and for' action learning group

This was one of the earliest learning groups and it met four times. The participants all worked in 'by and for' services – the term preferred by organisations provided for Black and minoritised women by Black and minoritised women. Its members included **Claudia Jones organisation, Latin American Women's Aid, London Black Women's Project and Southall Black Sisters**. Having a space to meet, resources to pay for travel, and time to share were all welcomed. The key interest in the group was to build an argument in favour of 'by and for': that smaller community-based organisations needed to be valued and recognised rather than absorbed into larger groups. The work of the group was to make the argument about this in as cogent a way as possible, including the words of women seeking support. In thinking about what made work holistic, the group created and defined the concept of intersectional advocacy. Their work produced a briefing paper: Safer pair of hands.[26]

The young women and girls action learning group

This group met regularly over the course of the programme and managed to sustain a core group of participants. During the pre-pandemic years, the group visited each other and moved from project to project across the country. With the support of the facilitators the space became a place where project leaders and workers learned about their successes and difficulties, and explored some of the fundamental issues which touched them and young women and girls. We talked for example about the differences in working with young women and girls compared to adult women, why it remains vital and the values and principles which underpinned their work. This became the topic of an insights paper they developed together, supported by the facilitators.[27] During COVID-19 lockdowns, the group met online and became a support group for members and a place to share new ideas about supporting young women and girls from a distance. A further briefing paper on co-production by the projects titled: Increasing the Voice and Influence of girls and young women was co-produced.[28]

"The Action Learning Sets were absolutely awesome […] There were opportunities for small organisations that were fantastic. Opportunities to learn and grow and I always came back feeling enlightened, empowered and valued."

---

[26] A Safer Pair of Hands: Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) specialist violence against women work

[27] Why work with young women and girls matters: An insights briefing

[28] Increasing the voice and influence of girls and young women

A series of *MS*terclasses and workshops

In the 2018 progress review interviews, projects were asked about their interest in attending *MS*terclasses and on what subjects. As a result, partners developed a learning programme to address as many of the topics identified as possible. These included workshops on, for example, influencing commissioners, different aspects of evaluation, and feminist approaches to mental health. The full list of *MS*terclasses and workshops is in Appendix 3 and led to blogs, briefings and other resources (e.g. slide packs), brought together by team members, some of which were published for wider consumption.[29]

The *MS*terclasses were designed to be relevant to current experience and practice and participative so that those who came were actively involved in the learning process. The team invited speakers from the sector who provided inspiration, information and sometimes training. Examples of training were on developing influencing skills (with different aspects of this topic run by the team and invited guests with relevant expertise, for example, influencing commissioners) and a grounding in the knowledge required for working with refugee women without recourse (Southall Black Sisters).

> *"We've really valued some of the national networks & events such the MSterclasses."*

Supporting staff during the pandemic: webinars, short courses, community calls and blogs

During the early days of the pandemic, the team was supported by the Fund to adapt our support offer to grant holders. We were particularly alert to the fact that staff from the sector had already identified that they were stretched, and caseloads were high. During lockdowns we learned that they continued their support, often when statutory services were not visiting or supporting clients, other than online. Managers and staff were exhausted and near burnout. Our concern about the wellbeing of staff in the sector led to a number of offers:

Webinars and short courses

A webinar on staff support had already been identified before the pandemic, and in July 2020 we ran a session on *Workers Wellbeing, Supporting Staff in the Women and Girls Sector*.[30] We followed this up with an on-line course in developing reflective practice capability so that leaders were better able to support their own staff by providing open, non-judgemental spaces, which had 39 initial sign ups from 21 organisations. We also facilitated a series of meetings exploring working with trauma and commissioned Nimble Fish, an artist collective, to run a series of creative workshops for staff to both decompress and learn new skills for working with their clients creatively online.

---

[29] These outputs resulted from *MS*terclasses and workshops:
Women's Mental Health – The Essential Contribution of Feminist Services
Residential services for women survivors of abuse and multiple disadvantage Implications of the Covid-19 pandemic: Where are we now?
Have we lost the 'we'?
Influencing commissioners
Catching the Wave: the many ways women have influenced change

[30] Workers wellbeing webinar: Supporting staff in the women and girls Sector

Community Calls and blogs

We also instigated a bi-weekly, hourly online space hosted by our facilitators which staff from across the WGI could join, as and when they could, to come together, share what projects were doing in response to COVID-19, the successes, challenges and specific barriers faced by the women and girls they work with. Community calls also offered a space for mutual support when staff were themselves facing the personal effects of the current crisis. Members of the Learning and Impact Services team picked up on emerging themes from the calls and wrote short blogs to continue to highlight the work of the women and girls sector and share learning in real time. These were accessed on the Fund and partners' websites.[31]

"staff have really valued being part of the ALS meetings – and during lockdown they really valued the community calls. It made them feel much less isolated to hear from others in the same boat around the country and to know how they were tackling things."
Project lead

Regional showcase events

The regional showcases were discussions that would bring together representatives of the women's sector with key commissioners and funders in each region. These were co-produced with WGI funded projects and staff from the Fund. All took place on-line and attracted between 70 and 170 participants.

Five events took place between 2020 and 2022 in the South West, North East and Cumbria, Yorkshire and Humberside, the Midlands and the North West regions of England. These events brought together over 600 people from women and girls' services along with funders, commissioners, health, social care, criminal justice, and other providers. The aims were to:

- highlight effective practice in supporting women and girls.
- explore solutions to pressing issues facing the sector.
- spark ideas for new collaborative working and systems change.

All five events were very well received, with up to nine out of ten participants reporting a greater understanding of the importance of specialist services for women and girls as a result of their attendance.

"I hadn't realised what fantastic and diverse services were available to women in this region... It was great to hear from so many Black and ethnic minority providers – and to find out about work with girls and young women."
Event Participant

---

[31] The Covid Community Call inspired blogs included:
  Responding to and learning from changes during Covid-19
  A woman's place is in the (on-line) world?
  Supporting staff in the women and girls' sector
  Virtual support and vulnerability in the women and girls sector
  Covid-19 and the Women and Girls Initiative

These events highlighted how local 'by and for' women's projects are often best able to reach some of the most vulnerable and isolated women because they appreciate local geographical and cultural differences, are trusted, embedded in communities and often recommended by word-of-mouth.

> *"The pandemic has just brought to the fore the massive inequalities (health and financial) that have existed in our communities for a long time. There are so many women who are left behind due to language challenges and so many other factors. This is where grassroot organisations are so crucial in ensuring these women and girls have tailored support and services."*
> **Event Participant**

Nearly three quarters of participants in the regional events who provided feedback reported:

- knowing more about how funders, commissioners and the women's sector can work better together.
- having gained useful information relevant to their work.
- making new connections.

The events collectively allowed people to gain greater understanding of issues for women and girls, stimulated interest in opportunities for future collaboration and found the WGI briefings to be valuable. Two learning packs were developed that were shared with participants.[32]

Online webinars

We also ran a couple of online webinars: one on economic abuse and another on lived experience in the sector which included input from recognised experts in the sector. The webinars were open access, and their reach went beyond the funded projects; in particular the economic abuse webinar attracted participation from the banking sector. The webinars were recorded and remain available.[33]

At the time of finalising this report, a Lunchtime Talk hosted by The Tavistock Institute has also taken place. It highlights some of the messages included within this report, shares some final reflections from team members, Fund staff and WGI projects, with a wider audience in attendance. This will be made available online as part of the overall programme legacy.

---

[32] South West Round Table Learning Pack; Learning Pack from North East and Cumbria, North West, the Midlands and Yorkshire and Humber

[33] Webinar 1: Economic abuse, it's policy and practice implications; Webinar 2: Lived experience in the sector: How do we better enable a 'we'?

Animation film

To ensure the legacy of WGI, the team has always aimed to produce outputs which would outlast the Initiative. To this end, we commissioned, developed and co-produced the animation 'Where she was, to where she is now: Celebrating the Women and Girls Initiative'. The animation film was launched in 2022.[34] This achievement itself indicates the depth of experience of the Learning and Impact Services team and highlights the strength of the relationships with projects and the Impact of WGI.

Individual Project promotional briefings

To support projects in a different way, and using information captured from interviews and final evaluation reports, the team produced five individual project briefings, designed to showcase the work of the organisation in question, and available for other projects to use as a good practice template.[35] Projects have included WGI briefings in their funding bids, used them as the basis for presentations to commissioners and local councillors, included them in conference and supporters' packs and incorporated them into staff induction and training. This highlights how professionally written briefings can be used to promote the work of organisations and demonstrate their impact.

It also shows how important it is to evaluate project activities and be able to communicate learning from project delivery, so as to clearly demonstrate evidence-based value to potential funders and commissioners.

Synthesis Reporting and additional impact briefing

As described earlier in this section, individual projects had different data collection and reporting requirements. And as mentioned throughout this report, there were, therefore, challenges around reporting on the impact of the Initiative at this level as there was not an agreed common framework to capture data overall. However, the Learning and Impact Services team did develop a monitoring and evaluation framework (Appendix 4) and held a workshop in 2018 for WGI projects' internal and external evaluation leads, to understand better how local evaluations were working and how these might feed into a programme-wide framework and reporting. This informed our work throughout, including our attempt to undertake a meta-analysis of projects' demographic reporting for the 2016-19 synthesis report.[36] We wanted to understand more about who was benefiting from WGI funding, and to identify any gaps. However, as previously discussed, most projects did not submit information summarising the demographics of beneficiaries and there was no baseline data. The team also noted that across the projects, a wide range of outcomes measures and different scales were being used.

Despite these challenges, the team was able to report on the successes and difficulties individual or specific groups of projects faced in relation to the areas identified in the Theory of Change. And as the pandemic began, it was necessary for us to adapt our approaches, as already described. Therefore, the second synthesis report for 2020 focused on the achievements, challenges and

---

[34] 'Where she was to where she is now'

[35] Project promotional briefings were produced for: Aspire Learning Support & Wellbeing;
One Voice for Travellers;
WILD Young Parents' Project;
Blossom Project (A Way Out);
Hibiscus Initiatives

[36] WGI Synthesis Report #1 (2016-2019)

learning from projects' work in response to COVID-19.[37] Additionally, instead of working on an interim impact report, as had been originally planned for 2020, and which was no longer appropriate as everyone needed to focus on the immediate evolving context, team members generated an additional, shorter briefing, to explore the impact of the funding for projects.[38] This then enabled us to focus our time on supporting projects in different ways.

What difference did we make?

Together, with the 62 WGI grant holders and the women and girls they work with, TIHR, DMSS and CWASU explored how the sector can better demonstrate its impact, raise its voice, and increase its influence for the long-term benefit of women and girls. It did this by:

- bringing people together in a purposeful way – and not just project leads but workers and volunteers who don't normally get to meet.
- synthesising practice-based knowledge across a range of projects helping to articulate the essence of what working with women and girls and feminist ways of working are all about.
- making space for people to step back, reflect and think.
- offering, in various ways, shared language and concepts throughout the duration of the programme.
- encouraging people to see that they had things of value to share and promote.
- acting as a 'secretariat' – using our skills to turn the sector's practice-based knowledge into something that could be used for influence in the wider world.
- making the most of the evaluative data to provide what we could, in terms of an evidence base across the sector.
- producing well written, attractively designed, evidence-based outputs which projects have found useful – and used for a variety of purposes.

"WGI has helped with everything. Helped shape a lot of thinking about outcomes and learning, along with whole system capture. Interactions, discussions and support have been invaluable. Information produced and opportunities really useful."
Snowdrop Project

"Even though our funding ended in 2019 we've stayed in touch and have really valued being invited to the training & support events by the learning partnership. The briefings have been really helpful – have used these in several arenas."

---

[37] WGI Synthesis Report #2: Learning from a turbulent time
[38] 'It's been a game changer' The impact of National Lottery funding on women and girls' projects

> *"We like the overall evaluation of the WGI. Lots of products and different aspects of learning. We need external people with expertise who get it and can pull it all together to be usable. We like peer support and discussion. Staff have found everything they attended really useful and all on the same wavelength, which is important."*
> **Project 1325**

Learning points for the future

- **Having a learning partner as part of a programme**, and especially a team with deep understanding of the issues and the sector that responds to them, adds to both knowledge and outcomes.

- **A learning and impact team can offer significant contributions** to funding initiatives, through sharing learning, developing capacity and supporting projects. Our experience of getting to know each other more deeply over time and discovering the strengths of different partners contributed to our successful interventions.

- **Consistency has been a real benefit** with many projects commenting about the stability that we provided – as none of the key members of the learning and impact team changed over the period of five years. This was unusual and helped develop trust. Thinking and learning together with groups created the conditions for developing accessible and useful products which were used by projects, for example, the briefing papers which arose from action learning groups.

- **The flexibility of the Fund in how we best used our resources**, especially but not only in response to the pandemic, meant that we were able to tailor our support according to need over time. This allowed us to offer appropriate just-in-time responses where required, while still working to the overall brief.

- **The significance of the 18-month hiatus for embedding learning**. There were a number of areas, apart from the disruptions of COVID-19, that could have strengthened our contributions. The WGI funding coincided with internal re-organisation of the Fund, with grant management moving from a centralised, nationally focused team devolving the WGI down to six regions. This initially created some confusion for projects and delayed the awarding of the evaluation and contract. Naturally this also delayed early learning from the programme.

- Whilst we welcome the more open, flexible approach to grant management in the Fund, **there are implications of not having any baseline or standard reporting requirements for WGI**. Funded projects were not required to provide data on who they worked with which meant that we were unable to quantify beneficiary numbers, demographics and outcomes nationally and gain a full picture of the reach of the Initiative and its impact. This tension was discussed in frequent, open conversations with contract leads at the Fund, in partnership with Learning and Impact Services team members. There is real learning for the Fund – and other commissioners – from this experience. Evaluation commissioners need to have a clear idea from the outset what they would like to learn from the implementation of an initiative such as WGI but also the limitations of what is possible. It was nearly impossible to collect baseline and performance

data which would facilitate a programme evaluation, from organisations and projects as diverse as those funded via WGI. Any analysis is further complicated by the fact that for some organisations it is difficult to isolate the impact of interventions on individuals and groups because of the interactions between a number of different funding streams.

- The learning for the Fund, and others, is potentially, **that there needs to be a middle way between learning/self-directed evaluation and the kind of performance data that many funders have required to date**.

Concluding thoughts

There were many challenges that were faced by women and girls, the staff leading projects to which they were attached and the Learning and Impact Services team over the five-year period of the WGI. The approach the Learning and Impact Services team took of working closely with individuals and groups and creating a range of options for participation which were responsive to the broader context, has created in-depth and rich learning.

In part the approach could be seen as a way of responding to the lack of standard monitoring data. While this meant that there were limitations in ensuring conventional evaluation activities took place, it also gave rise to the team developing creative methods of gathering and synthesising data and making it useful to the sector. In particular we would highlight the creation of the action learning group activities, which provided a trusted reflection space for participants and a deep learning opportunity for peers. They also provided a great source of data and evidence. The multiple briefing papers that were developed with and from these groups are testament to their success.

What also contributed to success more generally was that the partnership team were **well established and known for their work with women and girls, on evaluation and supporting organisations in the voluntary sector**. Knowledge and even experience of the challenges faced by the sector ran deep. An all-female team, with diverse skills and experiences, sharing some of the passions, values, experiences and commitment of those we were supporting, have perhaps also been important ingredients. In general project staff were inclined to trust the team rather than hold them at arms-length, and shared their own experiences readily.

All in all, the WGI has created a legacy that is more than the sum of its parts.

6. 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, but also through the Learning and Impact Services support provided.

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. While it was not possible to quantify outcomes such as increasing the amount of provision, or of increasing the numbers of women and girls, there are numerous stories of the ways in which projects developed their approaches to working holistically, with some increasing the types, depth and length of specialist support available for women and girls. Many developed new ways of involving and working co-productively with women and girls. And many organisations have reported how their networks, influence and sustainability have grown as a result.

This chapter goes on to summarise key successes and challenges, as reported in previous chapters, followed by learning points and recommendations for:

- Women and girls' projects and organisations
- Funders and commissioners
- Anyone interested in learning more about how holistic, specialist support works and why it's important.

Learning points and recommendations are drawn from the analysis of WGI project reports as well as blogs, briefings, and reports created as part of the WGI Learning and Impact Services.

Key successes

Supporting a stronger sector

- The WGI was successful in reaching and supporting a diversity of organisations, from the smallest groups to the largest national bodies. Just under half of funded organisations (29) had not previously been supported by the Fund.
- Some organisations were at risk of closure before receiving funding, others were run by volunteers only. Projects reported that they strengthened, developing internal infrastructures, consolidating work and investing in their staff and systems.
- WGI funding (and the impact of the pandemic) enabled organisations to increase support
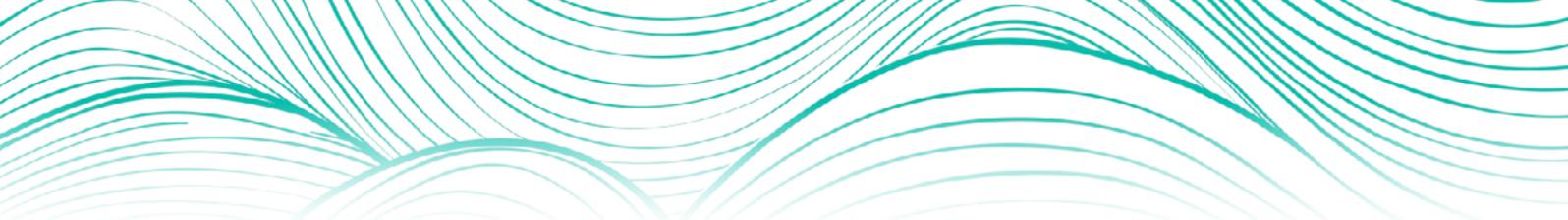
for staff wellbeing, such as offering clinical supervision and/or reflective practice support. New job roles were created where needed, so that pressures on staff members were addressed as best as possible, within resources available.

- Because of the stability offered by the length of funding (for those funded for five years), and the trust that having a grant from the Fund can communicate, projects reported success in accessing new and bigger funding streams.

- Also linked to the above point, the funding supported projects to take calculated risks, and adapt as needed, which supported a high quality of work, and helped organisations increase in confidence.

- Investment in learning and impact services helped support projects to become better networked with and learn from each other through different activities, including the sharing of evidence about what is needed when supporting women and girls.

- The wealth of evidence and learning gathered will leave a lasting legacy for projects and the wider world to draw on, in the form of reports, blogs, briefings and other resources developed through the WGI. This can help inform future work and thinking.

Whilst 90% of organisations have been successful, to date, in gaining further support from the Fund, there has been a sadness expressed by some project staff that this form of ring-fenced funding will not be continuing. In addition, concerns have been expressed that the wider funding context has become more challenging than it was pre-pandemic, with fears that the investment of the WGI may not prevent services shrinking or closing. However, the Fund has also invested in developing its staff teams' understanding of women and girls work, the need for it and how best to fund it. This has perhaps been fruitful in increasing the number of women and girls' organisations, and in particular the smaller, 'by and for' specialist organisations, to continue with funding success since the WGI and is not to be underestimated.

Supporting women and girls through WGI funding

- Many projects have reported how women and girls have been able 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.

- Providing holistic support within values-driven, specialist organisations helped create the environment for growth at an individual and collective level and enabled a range of outcomes including better networks, support and community and improved mental health and wellbeing.

- Being available for women and girls as and when they needed, even after moving on from support, was seen to help women and girls progress more than shorter term funding.

- Enabling women and girls to take the lead within projects, connecting with and supporting each other, and co-producing activities where possible, were reported as integral to achieving greater empowerment.

- Where co-production was not suitable, projects often found other ways of supporting women and girls to use their voices, express needs and wishes, and be heard, which might have been a unique experience for many.

Better understanding and evidence of how best to support women and girls

The investment in the WGI has helped bring together evidence and learning about what works best when supporting women and girls. Aside from this report, a range of outputs have been produced to support funders and services when designing support that makes a difference to women and girls. Building on these and the points listed above in summary, the key ingredients of successful projects identified are:

- 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.

- Linked to the above, 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.

Key challenges

Meeting increasing needs with fewer resources

- The increasingly challenging social and economic contexts during and since the WGI have had a disproportionate impact on women and girls, in particular Black and minoritised women and girls, leading to an ever-increasing demand for support. This links to the next challenge.

- Further to the under-resourcing of the sector, and with other services shrinking or being closed, projects sometimes struggled to stretch the resources available to meet demand. During and since the pandemic began, there was also a sense that fewer funding pots were available.

- Beyond the general challenges presented by COVID-19, a particular challenge during this time was that women who had not needed support beforehand, were needing help, and there was an increasing complexity of needs faced.

Organisational challenges for projects

- Recruiting and keeping staff in post has, and continues to be, a challenge because of low salaries, skills gaps, high workloads and the emotional impact of the work.

- Partnership working often takes more time to develop and maintain. When inevitable conflicts arise, if there is a mismatch of values and ethos, it can take a lot of staff time to resolve. Some projects found this to be draining and detrimental to the work.

- For projects funded less than five years, it was more challenging to sustain activities and outcomes, because of the time it takes to set projects up, the time needed to understand what works and what doesn't and then to use this learning in future funding bids.

General challenges for the WGI

- The disruption to work and relationships at the time of the Fund's restructure, was felt to have an initial negative impact. This was particularly for those organisations whose funding ended soon after this time, as they missed the support from Funding Officers when trying to plan for project sustainability.

- The delay to the commissioning of learning and impact services meant some projects completed a year after our work started. This led to a feeling that we were sometimes playing 'catch up' with the projects.

- Without some consistent monitoring across projects, it has not been possible to quantify some of the achievements of the WGI that might otherwise have been reported – such as numbers of women and girls supported and basic demographic details of who was supported.

Learning points for the future

This section includes learning points, having delivered learning and impact services for the WGI, analysed the data reported on in previous chapters and reviewed the successes and challenges.

Programme design and Theory of Change

- The assumptions, activities, outcomes and goal for the WGI (as illustrated in the Theory of Change) have been overall relevant and supportive to strengthening the sector and empowering women and girls, bearing in mind the following caveats.

- This report has demonstrated that not all women and girls do want to or can be co-producers all of the time, but value having a range of opportunities to have their voices heard and used to influence policy and practice, including through co-production wherever possible.

- The language of 'risk' and 'need' are both debated, on several levels. Risk has been a recent framing of domestic abuse, and is implicated in the increase of short term, time-limited responses. This is in tension with holistic responses that adapt to the needs and context of each person. It also has limited relevance when speaking about sexual harassment, which the majority of women and girls encounter. Need has been adopted by some as an

alternative, but it too can lead to thresholds which demarcate some and not others as 'in need' of support. Both framings are not survivor led, where the point at which they reach out for support, it should be available.

- Long-term funding needs to be for at least five years, to enable enough time for projects to set up, stabilise, learn, plan and prepare for sustainability.

- As well as articulating the ultimate goal of empowering women and girls, the Theory of Change could usefully also include the programme intention to enable a stronger women and girls' sector. Whilst this was embedded into the programme design, it was not articulated in the Theory of Change. In addition, we would add that programmes like WGI need to enable a stronger sector that is led by, representative of, and collectively supporting, the diversity of women and girls in England.

Project set up and management

- New projects take longer to set up and to then start achieving outcomes than is usually anticipated. Partnerships also often take more time to establish and to maintain than is budgeted for. It is worth adding time and resource into project plans, beyond what is initially anticipated, to account for this work.

- It is easy to underestimate the level of staffing, and other resources, needed to deliver project aims. And it is easy to overestimate the numbers of people who will be supported through any new service. Therefore, consideration and communication is needed between funders and organisations around what can realistically be achieved within the resource available.

- There can be a misconception that volunteers and co-producers reduce the workloads of staff but, particularly in early phases, the workload may increase. Projects may need encouragement to adjust budgets and increase staffing.

- A few projects reflected that it is important to stop and change course when needed. Being brave when something isn't working can be to stop trying to force it to work, but to re-think, use the learning, and do something different.

- Some projects reflected that no matter how 'right' they might get it, there is always lots to learn. Humility, good partnerships, reflective practice and a learning culture are key to continuing to do good work that learns from and empowers women and girls.

Ways of best meeting needs

- 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. Therefore, the greater the variety of support available, the better that a diversity of changing needs can be met.

- Whilst triaging women's support needs in a first meeting - and then being referred on - worked for many women, for some it was not suitable. Therefore, some projects learnt that if they knew a woman had a complexity of needs and was traumatised, it was better to match them from the beginning with the key person they hoped would offer ongoing support. This

helped in building relationships and trust.

- Support for women and girls needs to feel relatively seamless, enabling individuals to access what they need and progress through different 'projects' without facing bureaucratic barriers. Whilst support and provision may be managed as 'projects' for administrative reasons, it is important that this doesn't lead to siloed working. Keeping the use of funding and resources flexible and adaptable to the needs of individuals, fostering good relationships between different staff teams, and maintaining light-touch, consistent administration and monitoring approaches can help minimise barriers between different support and progression routes on offer.

- Supporting women and girls to transition on from intensive support can be key to sustaining positive outcomes for a longer time. For instance, some projects learnt that women temporarily housed by projects benefited from getting support once they moved to a new home, to help with 'resettlement', and enabling a smoother transition.

Protecting staff wellbeing

- In casework, it may be helpful to distribute complex caseloads across a number of staff, rather than refer everyone to a dedicated specialist complex needs worker. This is because a stigma can be felt by women who may need, or be referred to, a specialist. It also means that skills for this area of work can be developed across the team, increasing overall support available, whilst protecting the wellbeing of specialist staff who have a more balanced caseload.

- Having at least two named support workers for women and girls ensures that support is more available when needed, and helps protect staff health and wellbeing, knowing that they are not the only person someone is relying on.

- Prioritising support for the mental health and wellbeing of staff as well as the women and girls being supported, is essential to enable staff to sustain themselves. Providing specialist counselling provision and mental health support as part of services on offer was reported as important for many organisations.

Recommendations

For projects

- Before partnership work begins, ensure that partners' values and approaches match well enough beforehand. This includes agreeing methods for how challenges will be managed between partners - e.g., for resolving conflicts, when partner commitments are not met, and for how overall project failings and project successes will be dealt with (depending on the scale of the partnership).

- If there are not already processes in place, it is important to find ways of gathering and reporting demographic data of women supported in a consistent, light-touch way. This will help improve understanding of who is supported, and who is not getting support. Basic engagement data also helps provide evidence of demand, need, and changing demand levels.

- There is always a limit to what can be achieved, and so it is important to build in brakes to the work, for staff and volunteers to take a step back. Otherwise the work can become relentless, impacting health and wellbeing of team members and the sustainability of support. Review and reflection points also help in making sure that the work is achieving what is needed in the most appropriate way, enabling adaptations to be made where needed.

For funders

Supporting the sector:

- The initial research, consultation and listening work that the Fund undertook in the design of the WGI reaped benefits through outcomes achieved. To ensure funding achieves the most impact, continued research and listening to the sector will help ensure that future funding programmes adequately take account of sector needs and strengths, helping best meet the needs of different communities of women and girls, as they may evolve.

- To come together with other funders, with organisations that may apply for funding, and with other sector 'experts' to address how the whole system could work better together in the interests of women and girls, and through continued support to women and girls' organisations, collectively, as a sector with a shared identity. This might be in the form of a panel that meets intermittently and which can then inform the work of both funders and organisations. The 'panel' might usefully review and reflect on questions such as: What does the landscape look like now? What does the ecosystem need to look like? What are the support needs of women, girls and organisations now? How can funders and the sector work together better, to build understanding, learn from experience and share commitments to action? Outcomes might include SWOT analyses, theories of change, and collaborating to ensure that funders and organisations are effectively meeting needs, filling gaps and not duplicating where this might not be needed. A starting point might be to review the questions considered at the start of the WGI, the programme Theory of Change, and learning shared in this report. This would help in exploring what has changed,
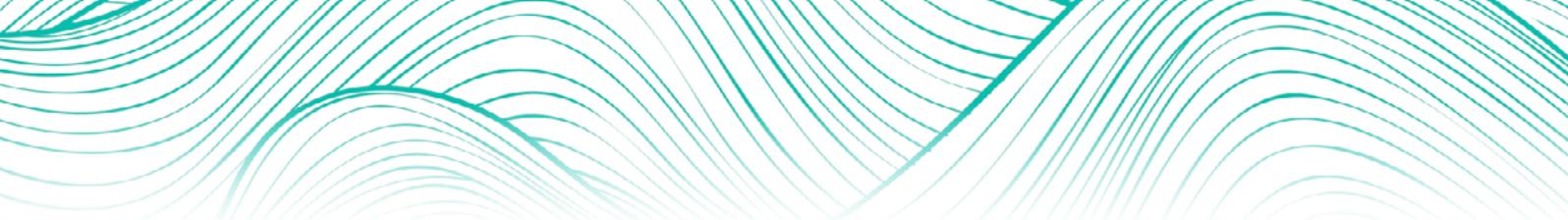
if anything, and what needs to be attended to now.

- Alongside project funding, to continue supporting the capacity of the women and girls sector which has been traditionally underserved. This is particularly the case for smaller, community-based organisations, and 'by and for' led organisations. It is important to ensure that these organisations also have access to some larger grants, not just as consortia partners, so that structural inequalities are addressed. Support might include funding or facilitating peer support, leadership and organisational development, internal staff training (e.g. around working with funders; evaluation etc.) and infrastructure support.

Funding requirements:

- Supporting and requiring projects to collect monitoring data (including demographics of those supported) in a consistent, but proportionate way is important so that the sector can continue to build evidence and build confidence in its ability to demonstrate need.

- Particularly when resources are ever tighter and stretched, the sector needs funders and commissioners to better coordinate together to define what reporting would be most helpful, and how projects could be supported to share the same information with different funders. This would maximise efficiencies in administration and management resources. Is it possible for funders to agree a consistent ask, to protect project delivery and staff wellbeing?

- Whilst supporting and advocating for co-production is important, it's also important to ensure projects are not compelled to use the language of co-production when it is not appropriate or there is not the time or resources allocated to it. The WGI's use of language around increasing voice and influence was appropriate and could be worked with in different ways dependent on needs, wishes and capacity.

Commissioning of learning and evaluation partners/contractors:

- Commissioning learning and impact services at the same time as awarding project funding will help ensure that projects are perhaps clearer on this aspect of the funder's support from the start. It might also be helpful for projects when designing and setting up evaluation activities. Having some delay beyond the end of projects is also desirable to allow for programme delays, final overall reporting and time for reflection. This has been a benefit of the later start to this contract for WGI, despite the difficulties in starting so long after projects began.

- Embed flexibility within the contract and encourage contractors to respond to emerging needs, as they develop during the programme, rather than becoming too focused on contract deliverables which might not be appropriate as projects get underway.

- Whilst some basic monitoring data is helpful, avoid compelling projects to collect the same, standardised, quantitative outcomes data when working on complex, multifaceted issues with diverse communities, which require tailored, holistic work. It is unlikely to generate meaningful data as these measures are not designed for and often do not work in such circumstances and it was refreshing that there was not this requirement for the WGI.

For both projects and funders

- To continue addressing the workforce development needs of the sector. Some unacceptably low salaries and a lack of appropriately skilled staff is leaving some areas of the sector (and some geographies) struggling to provide the services needed. A particular area for consideration is the training and development needs for working with perpetrators, as there is a need to increase the pool of staff able to work with this group, to contribute to building evidence of what works and addressing gaps in provision.

- Ensuring there is a budget line within all projects funded to do WGI type work that is focused on supporting staff wellbeing, and ensuring that it is spent as needed, is also key. If this is missing, it makes the work more unsustainable and contributes to difficulties with recruitment and retention of staff.

- Budget for partnership work– both including a budget line for direct costs (building relationships; ways of working etc.) and allocating staffing resources for partnership meetings and other activities. This work always takes more time and budget than expected and needs appropriate resourcing to make the most of such work.

- Staff time needs to be fully funded for monitoring and evaluation. All roles should have some responsibility for this to ensure learning is captured and shared.

Final considerations

The WGI has added tremendous value to the sector but the issues it aimed to address have not gone away - neither for women themselves nor for organisations. So even if there is no other dedicated funding stream there would be great value in the Fund's continued support to women and girls' organisations, collectively, as a sector with a shared identity. That would mean supporting the continued development of networks for peer support and learning across related projects, opportunities for learning and skills development, engagement of women and girls with lived experience as full participants, and opportunities for collective influencing. The Fund's increased knowledge, gained through the WGI, around how to work with women and girls effectively, puts it in a good position to be able to offer this kind of support.

Finally, whilst the WGI can be seen as offering a blueprint for how to fund and deliver meaningful and impactful work that makes a big difference to women and girls, the wider social and economic context is increasingly challenging and difficult. Therefore, it is worth funders, funded organisations, researchers and other specialists involved in the sector reviewing the anticipated needs over the next ten years and how these can best be met together, in a holistic way. With likely rising demand and needs, the response will need to meet these challenges in a robust way, with longer term, empowerment perspectives driving how this is approached.

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.

References

1. Agenda Alliance, Vision Consortium (2023). Underexamined and underreported: Suicidality and intimate partner violence: Connecting two major public health domains. Available at: https://www.agendaalliance.org/documents/138/Underexamined_and_Underreported_Briefing.pdf

2. Boyle, D., Harris, M. (2009). The Challenge of Co-production: How equal partnerships between professionals and the public are crucial to improving public services. London: NESTA. Available at: https://www.nesta.org.uk/report/the-challenge-of-co-production

3. Co-creation.org.uk (2019). Co-creation: Exploring openly, honestly, with understanding, love and compassion the challenges and opportunities of cocreation, coproduction and service user involvement. Supported by The National Lottery Community Fund. Available at: https://www.tnlcommunityfund.org.uk/media/insights/documents/Cocreation-Booklet-WEB-V2.pdf?mtime=20191219155809&focal=none

4. Close the Gap, Engender (2021). Joint briefing on the impact of COVID-19 on women's wellbeing, mental health, and financial security. Available at: https://www.closethegap.org.uk/content/resources/Close-the-Gap-and-Engender-Joint-briefing-on-the-impact-of-COVID-19-on-womens-wellbeing-mental-health-and-financial-security.pdf

5. Coy, M., Kelly, L. (2016). Islands in the Stream: An evaluation of four London independent domestic violence advocacy schemes. London: Trust for London & Henry Smith Charity. Available at: https://trustforlondon.org.uk/research/islands-stream-evaluation-independent-domestic-violence-advocacy-scheme/

6. Femicide Census (2020). Available at: https://www.femicidecensus.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/010998-2020-Femicide-Report_V2.pdf

7. NPC. (2015). Times of change: What grant-makers and philanthropists need to know about public sector commissioning. Available at: https://www.thinknpc.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Times-of-change_Public-sector-commissioning-briefing.pdf

8. Rathbone, A., Pallan-Jhalli, S.T., Clay, H., Codner, R., Bourne, T., Gregory, S., Turner, F., Morris, E. (2018). All together now; A toolkit for co-production with young people for use by Wolverhampton service providers, commissioners and schools. HeadStart Wolverhampton, Wolverhampton, UK: City of Wolverhampton Council. Available at: https://www.boingboing.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/All-together-now-a-toolkit-for-co-production-with-young-people.pdf

9. SCIE (2022). Co-production: What it is and how to do it. Available at: https://www.scie.org.uk/publications/guides/guide51/what-is-coproduction/defining-coproduction.asp

10. Tucker, J. (2017). The Austerity Generation: the impact of a decade of cuts on family income and poverty. London: Child Poverty Action Group. Available at: https://cpag.org.uk/sites/default/files/files/Austerity%20Generation%20FINAL.pdf

11. Westmarland, N., Kelly, L. (2023). Standards for domestic abuse perpetrator interventions. London: Home Office. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/standards-for-domestic-abuse-perpetrator-interventions

12. Women's Budget Group (2018). The impact of austerity on women in the UK. Available at: https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/Development/IEDebt/WomenAusterity/WBG.pdf

Authors:

Heather Stradling
Camilla Child
Sara Scott
Di McNeish
Liz Kelly

With support from
Anna Sophie Hahne
and Nicola Stokes