



Why Women's Centres Work: An Evidence Briefing

Introduction

“*There is compelling evidence that women centred ways of doing things can benefit statutory agencies and voluntary bodies – and ultimately save the public purse millions.*”

Clare Jones, National lead Women Centred Working

This evidence briefing has been developed as a resource for Women's Centres, to support their conversations with commissioners at a local and regional level. It is intended to help commissioners, service providers, funders and professionals understand how Women's Centres can play a key role in meeting the needs of women in their communities. It is the third public output produced as part of the Learning and Impact Services provided to projects funded under The National Lottery Community Fund's Women and Girls initiative (WGI). The WGI was created by the Fund in 2016, in order to invest in services for women and girls across England.

This briefing is the outcome of a collaborative learning initiative which brought together representatives from seven Women's Centres to explore the value and impact of the Women's Centre approach.

It provides:

- A brief description of the Women's Centre approach
- An outline of why Women's Centres are needed and the benefits they offer
- A summary of the evidence in relation to how and why they work
- Quotes from women who have received support offered by Women's Centres



What are Women's Centres?

Women's Centres provide information, advice, support and training or education in safe, women-only spaces. Many women accessing Women's Centres face multiple challenges and their work therefore covers a wide range of issues such as health, violence and abuse, employment, education, rights, and criminal justice issues. Services and activities provided by Women's Centres vary according to the needs of their community, but often include:

- One to one holistic support
- Drug and alcohol support
- Counselling and psychotherapy
- Domestic Abuse programmes
- Group work
- Courses and workshops
- Drop in sessions
- Sign-posting to other services / sources of support

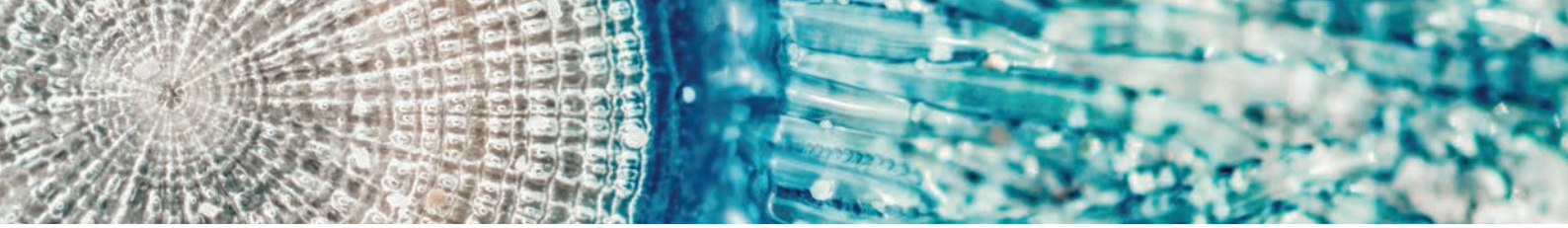
Women's Centres first appeared in the 1970s to provide a local base for campaigning, consciousness raising and to house support services such as incest survivor groups and Rape Crisis Helplines. A number have operated continuously ever since while others have been more recently established. There are currently around 50 such centres in England and Wales with a strong focus on providing support for the most disadvantaged women in their communities. Their work continues to be underpinned by a commitment to addressing gender discrimination and all forms of inequality.

Why are they needed?

Globally, women are disproportionately affected by poverty, discrimination, inter-personal violence and exploitation. Women have fewer economic assets than men and limited participation in influencing economic and social policies. Women also perform the bulk of childcare and household work and have less access to education and economic opportunities than men in their societies (UN Women, n.d.). Despite some important increases in women's equality in the 20th Century it is still the case that women in Britain are likely to:

- Earn less money than men
- Undertake certain kinds of paid work (e.g. lower paid, personal services)
- Enjoy less progression at work
- Have less freedom and leisure than men
- Spend more time looking after people

(McNeish and Scott, 2014)



For some women and girls these structural factors, combined with gendered life experiences, such as being a victim of violence, lead to extremely difficult lives. Women may be dealing with multiple issues at any one time, such as:

- Homelessness
- Involvement in prostitution or sexual exploitation
- Mental health problems
- Domestic violence
- Drug and alcohol problems
- Contact with the criminal justice system

The **impact of violence** against women and girls is both immediate and long-term: physical, mental and social. Violence and abuse affect women's well-being and prevents their full participation in society. It has consequences for their families and communities and results in a range of costs to society, including greater needs for health and social care, legal intervention and losses in productivity (UN Women n.d.).

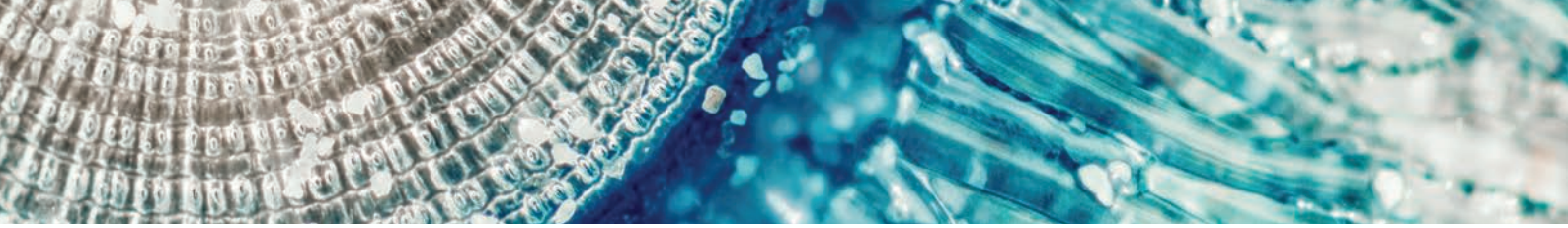
“If I didn't get help from [the Women's Centre] I would've ended up back in a relationship with my ex-boyfriend and taking the abuse for the rest of my life.”

Gender also intersects with other inequalities, particularly poverty and race. Research has highlighted how women in poverty are more likely than other women to have suffered physical and sexual abuse. In Britain there are an estimated one million women who are both in poverty and have experience of extensive violence and abuse in their lives (McManus and Scott, 2016). It is women who experience the most extensive abuse and violence who are most likely to face other adverse circumstances such as poor mental and physical health, disability, substance dependence, poverty and debt, poor housing and homelessness (Scott and McManus, 2016). Women facing such **multiple disadvantage** need services which understand the whole picture of these interrelated issues.

Some groups of women experience greater inequality and marginalisation as a result of being both female and enduring the impacts of racism, homophobia and disability. Therefore, Women's Centres' services led by and for specific communities of women (such as black, Asian and minority ethnic women, lesbian, older and younger women, lone mothers, mental health survivors etc.) are crucial. Women's Centres are often able to reach women who would not otherwise engage with services, either in the public or third sectors.

Mainstream service delivery models **do not address the complexity of many women's lives**. To get support, women may need to access multiple and often fragmented services across a range of organisations in different locations. Mainstream services rarely have staff whose training ensures they have an in-depth understanding of the impacts of inequalities, violence and abuse on women's lives.

Most public services regard themselves as providing 'gender neutral' services which often fail to meet women's needs. In some, women and girls will be in a minority and so receive services designed largely with men's needs in mind. While both genders may face multiple disadvantages, **women are much more likely to have experienced domestic abuse and sexual violence and be the main carers for children**.



How and why do they work?

By integrating and tailoring services around women's specific needs, women centred ways of working can get to the root causes of, and help unlock solutions to, complex problems facing women with multiple disadvantages (Caroll and Grant, 2014).

Evidence suggests that women facing multiple disadvantages need services informed by a set of **principles which underpin Women's Centres** (McNeish and Scott, 2014; Caroll and Grant, 2014), as summarised below.

1. Values driven, gender and trauma informed

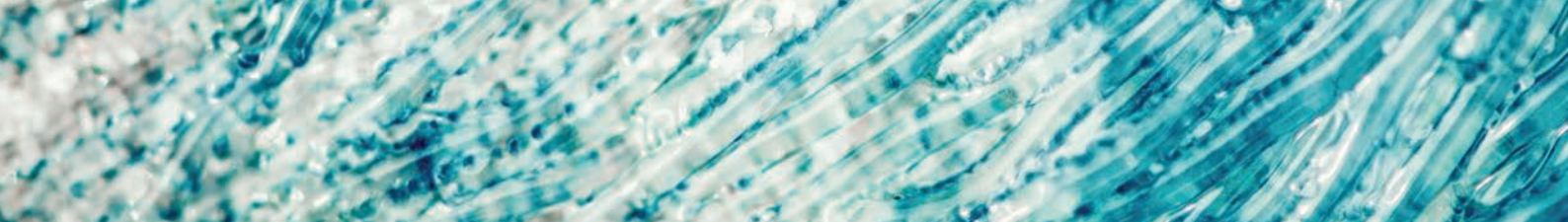
The **values and approaches** informing the delivery of women centred working are as important as the delivery itself. Women's Centres use a **gendered and 'trauma informed' approach** which recognises the wider socio-political influences in women's lives. This approach recognises that the trauma of abuse is a significant factor for many women, but that a variety of other experiences resulting from racism, poverty, being gang-involved, losing a child to care or going to prison can also result in trauma. **Taking account of trauma** and addressing the psychological impact of this is therefore vital if services are to meet women's often complex needs (Caroll and Grant, 2014). Core to the approach are: understanding the dynamics of power and inequality, trauma awareness, safety, trustworthiness, choice and collaboration, and the building of strengths and skills. Understanding that the personal is also political and not just the result of individual inadequacy or misfortune enables women to shed guilt and self-blame.

2. Relationship based

Women's Centre support is rooted in relationships. Staff take a non-judgemental and respectful approach that emphasises a fundamental equality between themselves and women accessing their services. They are concerned to understand women's whole lives and the changes they are seeking to achieve for themselves rather than 'problem-solving' from a professional perspective or delivering a standardised 'intervention'. Staff may also play a key role in **advocating with external agencies** (e.g. local safeguarding teams) on behalf of women and raising the awareness of gender-specific needs amongst other professionals. Women's Centres fully recognise the importance of other relationships in women's lives and support them in building networks of support and good relationships with children, partners and friends. In particular, they develop opportunities for peer-led and mutual self-help in a safe, trusted environment.

3. Women only

In recognition that women's needs are different from men's and, that non-gender specific services can be positively damaging to some women, Women's Centres provide **women only spaces**. Feedback from women suggests that women value support provided in women's spaces highly and that this is crucial to facilitating emotional and physical safety for women, especially those who have experienced violence or abuse (McNeish et al, 2016). **Women only spaces** also serve to support women's self-development and the collective building of skills, knowledge and confidence to challenge discrimination (Robson and Spence, 2011).



“The staff are gentle, they’re loving, they’re firm, they make us laugh, they’re knowledgeable. You just feel, I feel, understood. I feel like I can trust them and feel like they really care.”

4. Holistic, tailored and multi-agency

Holistic approaches view each woman as a whole person and tailor provision to her individual needs and life experiences – rather than just in relation to her mental health difficulties or her responsibilities as a parent. This means women do not need to identify specific issues to receive services. Women’s Centres can provide a ‘one stop shop’ for access to information and support across health, debt, employment, legal issues, training and education and undertake the collaborative and proactive working with specialist organisations and other professionals that this requires. Staff have a thorough understanding of how issues are interrelated and of the needs of specific groups e.g. Specialist BME services for BME women are valued highly.

5. Empowerment, strengths based and co-produced

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.

The role of **peer support networks** (women supporting each other as peers, volunteers, workers) and enabling women to have a voice (i.e. develop the confidence to speak out and share their experiences and views) are also core mechanisms for building a strength based approach. In providing an environment that promotes empowerment through discussion, shared analysis and access to new and enriching opportunities, women develop both greater independence and a sense of solidarity (WRC, 2011).

“I have learnt about power, both inside and outside of myself, about moments of feeling powerless, and learning to be powerful, to use power well, to stand for myself and others. Why don’t they teach this in schools?”

“We come together here – listen to each other – learn from each other and get strong. You learn you deserve better and have things to offer. That living can be more than just surviving.”



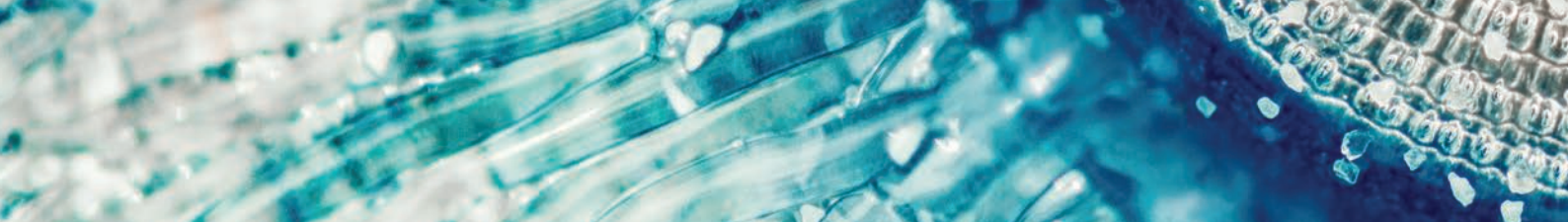
What's the evidence base for Women's Centres?

The Women's Centre approach is underpinned by a commitment to enabling women's empowerment through holistic, participatory approaches that see each woman as a whole person and provide support for the multiple and varied needs of each individual. Such an approach is in line with internationally recognised definitions of, and means of achieving, women's empowerment. For example the United Nations (UN, 2018) defines women's empowerment as having five components:

- Women's sense of self-worth
- Women's right to have and to determine choices
- Women's right to have access to opportunities and resources
- Women's right to have the power to control their own lives, both within and outside the home
- Women's ability to influence the direction of social change to create a more just social and economic order, nationally and internationally

The European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE, 2018) identifies key tools for empowering women and girls which mirror the approaches and activities of women's centres:

- Education / training
- Awareness raising
- Building self-confidence
- Expansion of choices
- Increased access to and control over resources
- Actions to transform the structures and institutions that reinforce and perpetuate gender discrimination and inequality



What difference do they make?

Numerous evaluations and studies of the work of Women's Centres have highlighted a range of benefits and positive outcomes for women accessing them. There are also reported benefits for the wider health, social care and criminal justice systems and evidence that Women's Centres are both preventative and cost effective.

“Volunteering [at the Women's Centre] has enhanced my life, brought fun and purpose, as well as a great deal of life skills learning and tools that have helped me consider maybe finding paid work after years of illness, medication and lack of self worth. Time for me to live.”

Brief details of the findings from a range of studies and references for each are provided below:

- The importance of women's centres as ideal locations in which to provide holistic services for low-risk women offenders with complex needs was first recognised in **Baroness Corston's report *Women with Vulnerabilities in the Criminal Justice System*** (Corston, 2007). The review identified the value of community-based alternatives to prison and recommended their expansion nationally.
- ***Women at the Centre, an impact report by the Centre for Welfare Reform*** (Duffy and Hyde, 2011) found that:
 - 80% of women showed substantial improvements in mental health.
 - Almost all the women reported a significant improvement in their life as a whole (an average 66% improvement from when they first engaged).
 - Women also identified improvements across other dimensions e.g. relationships, work, housing, neighbourhood, money, physical health.
 - Re-offending among those accessing women centred support was cut to less than 5%.
- ***The New Economics Foundation's Women's Community Services: A Wise Commission*** (NEF, 2012), showed that women's community services could support clients in making positive changes to their lives and reducing demands on other service such as police, courts, offender management whilst improving outcomes for their children. It also found that: "Women's Centres produce improvements in wellbeing and can be a viable and effective setting for providing mental health interventions to meet client needs" and concluded that: "Women's community services can significantly improve the well-being of vulnerable women, and in doing so help them achieve long-term changes in their lives".
- ***An evaluation by the Institute for Criminal Policy Research The development and impact of community services for women offenders*** (Radcliffe and Hunter, 2013) examined six community-based services for women offenders and describes women's centres as "viable and effective settings for providing interventions" and showed how a number of women had moved on to mainstream adult education settings, volunteer placements and work as a result.



- **An evidence review by DMSS Research *Women and Girls at Risk: evidence across the life course*** (McNeish and Scott, 2014) reported evidence from a number of service evaluations and research involving women at risk which supported the model of integrated, holistic, one-stop, women centred services.
- **The evaluation of 'The Way Forward' project** run by the Women Centre Calderdale and Kirklees to support disadvantaged 15-24 year olds reports on the project's success in providing a gendered, personalised and preventative approach to working with young women at risk (Warwick-Booth et al 2015).
- In 2015, the **Ministry of Justice Data Lab** assessed the impact on re- offending of support provided to female offenders by Women's Centres throughout England. The one year proven re- offending rate for 5973 offenders who received support provided by Women's Centres throughout England was 30%, compared with 35% for a matched control group of similar offenders from England. This was based upon analysis of information that has been supplied by 39 Women's Centres throughout England to NOMS (MOJ, 2015).
- **A Justice Data Lab analysis of the Brighton Women's Centre** looked at the re-offending behaviour of 44 women who were supported by Brighton Women's Centre's Inspire programme after receiving a community sentence. The overall results show that those who received support had a lower frequency of re-offending than those who did not (MOJ, 2017).
- **A Social Return on Investment (SROI) analysis** conducted by Women's Resource Centre and the new economics foundation (WRC, 2011) found that for every pound invested into their services, women's organisations can generate, over five years, between £5 and £11 worth of social value to women, their children, and the state. This figure was calculated based on data from a range of five frontline women's organisations.

“*Safety, both physical and emotional, is a key benefit of women-only services. As a result, women feel supported and comfortable. They become empowered and develop confidence, greater independence and higher self-esteem. They are less marginalised and isolated and feel more able to express themselves. Women using these services feel that their voices are heard and listened to. Through sharing their experiences with other women to make sense of the world together, they develop a sense of solidarity.*”

Women's Resource Centre, 2011

This briefing was written by Sara Scott and Sarah Frost, DMSS Research, with the involvement of the Women's Centres' Action Learning Set (ALS), which met during 2018. ALS members were:

- **Aspire Learning, Support and Wellbeing, Chester-le-Street**
- **The Nelson Trust Women's Centre, Gloucester, Swindon and Bridgwater**
- **Nia, London**
- **Stockport Women's Centre, Stockport**
(as co-ordinator for the Greater Manchester Women's Support Alliance)
- **WomenCentre, Calderdale and Kirklees**
- **Women's Community Matters, Barrow-in-Furness**
- **WOW! Women's Centre, Isle of Wight**

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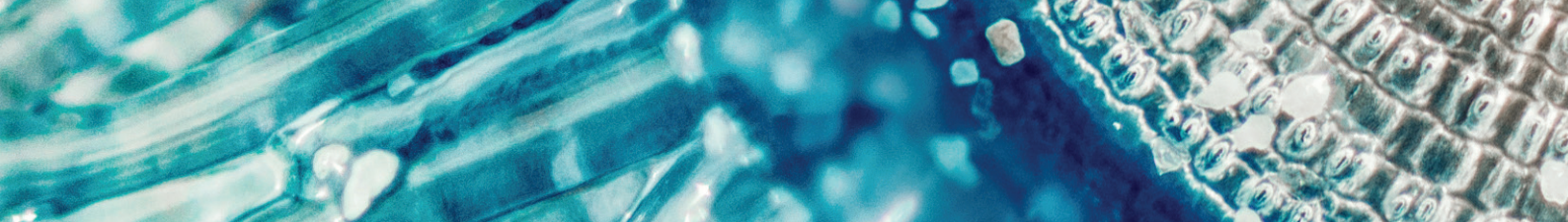
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