WGI Synthesis Report #2: Learning from a turbulent time

Contents

The Women and Girls Initiative

The National Lottery Community Fund (The Fund), is the largest community activity funder in the UK, thanks to money raised by National Lottery players. The Fund created the Women and Girls Initiative (WGI) in 2016, investing £44.7 million in order to enable a stronger women and girls sector through:

• Increased provision of holistic, person-centred approaches for women and girls;

• A greater number of women and girls being supported through the provision of improved specialist support;

• Increased role and voice for women and girls in co-producing services;

• Better quality of evidence for what works in empowering women and girls.

Between three and five years of project funding was awarded to 62 Women and girls' organisations across England in order to deliver specialist, tailored work. The projects funded through the WGI support some of those hardest hit by the Covid-19 situation. They include women and girls who have suffered violence and abuse, have been exploited, trafficked or fled war zones. Some are homeless, have mental health or drug or alcohol issues and most are facing multiple disadvantages with very few resources. To find out more about the WGI, see Diving into the Women and Girls' Initiative.

WGI Learning and Impact Services

In January 2018, The Fund awarded the WGI Learning and Impact Services contract to the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations (TIHR), DMSS Research (DMSS) and the Child and Woman Abuse Studies Unit (CWASU) – the partners. The partners are delivering a programme of support to projects with the aim of capturing and sharing learning, and creating a stronger community of services that has greater influence on decision-making structures across England. This programme has so far included:

• One-to-one support for projects;

• An online learning hub for projects to enable collective conversations;

• Action Learning Sets/Network meetings;

• *MS*terclasses, workshops and webinars;

• Regularly published blogs, reports and briefings;

• The planned national conference in 2020 was replaced with online community calls and additional blogs focused on Covid-19.

This document is the eighteenth public output produced by the partners. It includes learning shared in the following 10 outputs produced during 2020:

1. Women's mental health: The essential contribution of feminist services since 2018: A briefing paper

2. Partnership working for women and girls: A briefing paper

3. "It's been a game changer!" The impact of National Lottery funding on women and girls' projects

4. Residential services for women survivors of abuse and multiple disadvantage. Implications of the Covid-19 Pandemic: Where are we now?

5. Increasing the voice and influence of girls and young women.

6. Blog 1: Covid-19 and the Women and Girls Initiative

7. Blog 2: Virtual support and vulnerability in the women and girls sector

8. Blog 3: A woman's place is in the (on-line) world?

9. Blog 4: Supporting staff in the women and girls' sector

10. Blog 5: Responding to and learning from changes during Covid-19

Executive Summary

The Women and Girls Initiative (WGI) is a £44.7 million investment in the Women and Girls Sector by The National Lottery Community Fund (The Fund).

It is funding 62 projects between 2016 and 2021 to help strengthen the sector. In addition, The Fund has contracted Learning and Impact Services, in order to offer a programme of support to projects, including capturing and sharing learning.

'The WGI Synthesis Report #2: *Learning from a turbulent time*' reflects on some of the challenges, achievements, opportunities and concerns shared by projects during 2020. It focuses primarily on what has been learnt from the experience of responding to the Covid-19 pandemic, bringing together key messages from blogs and briefings produced during the year. The report ends by looking to the future, considering what would help projects to emerge as strongly as possible from the pandemic experience.

Key challenges included:

• Technological barriers – including a lack of hardware, software and data needed to provide and receive support.

• The disproportionate impacts of the pandemic on women and girls, particularly on women's mental health, on access to justice and on Black and minoritised women, which increased pressures on already stretched services.

• The potential increased risk for girls and young women of increased exploitation and abuse.

• Balancing the effects of the pandemic and the difficulties of working from home for staff, with meeting the higher demand for support.

Key achievements included:

• The sector's quick mobilisation and adaptation of services that could be delivered remotely or face to face in a Covid-safe way when many other services closed.

• Partnership working with statutory, private and community organisations to help meet immediate pandemic-related needs, such as provision of safe housing and food parcels.

• The multiple ways in which organisations supported staff by increasing informal staff calls, formal supervision, clinical support, and adapting employment policies around flexible working and sick leave.

Key opportunities included:

• Women mobilising to support each other when there was less day-to-day contact with staff, building solidarity and connections.

• Some women and girls preferring support online or by phone or finding it more accessible than travelling to appointments – many organisations wish to retain some form of this support in the future.

• Working via phone or online was felt to equalise some relationships between staff and those being supported.

• The requirement to move some services online necessitated organisations' upgrading of technical capacity and skills.
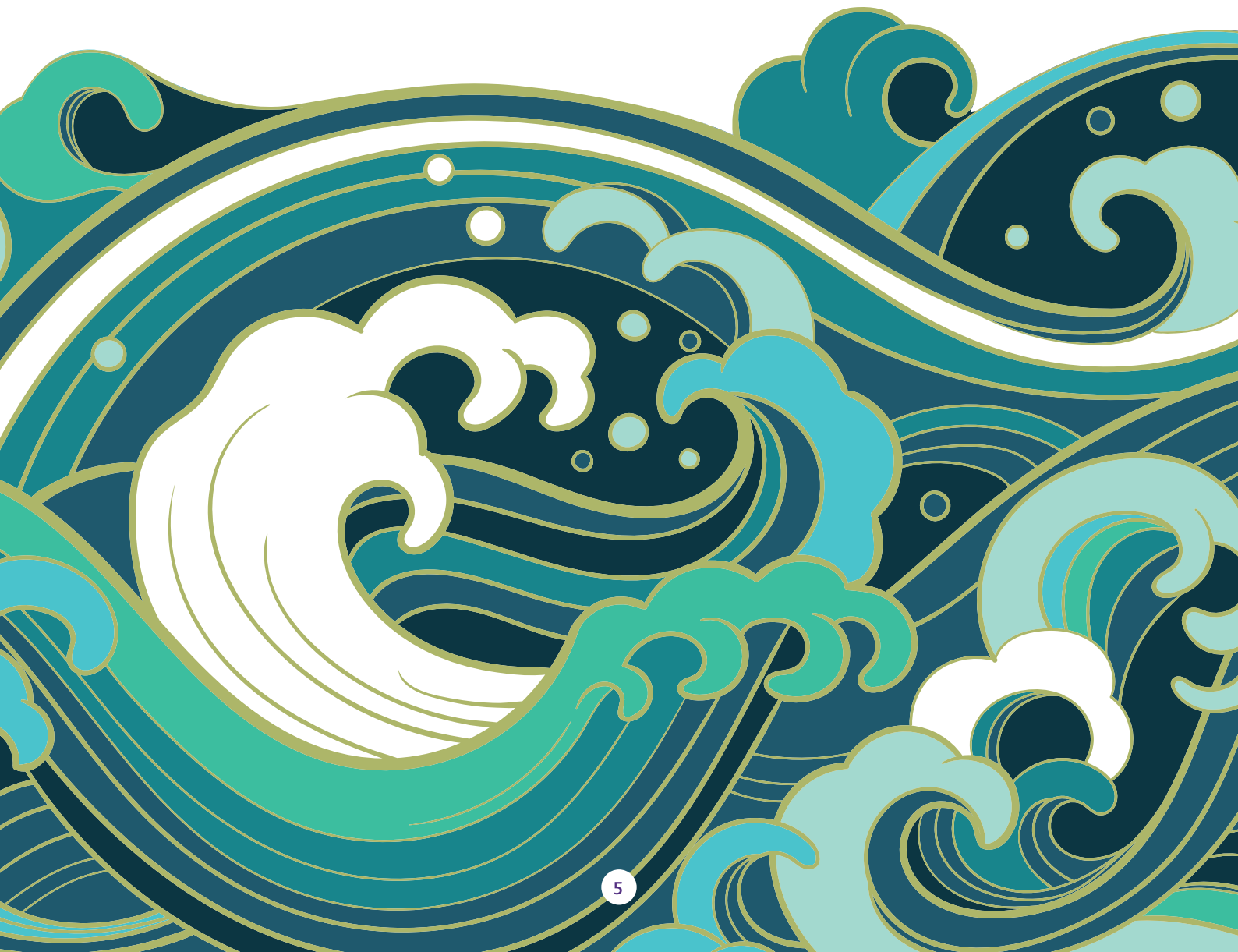
Key concerns included:

• The potential long-term emotional, social and economic impacts of the pandemic on women and girls, staff, the sector and wider communities.

• The sustainability of services and funding.

Reflections on what has been learnt

Many WGI projects were quick to respond in the face of a national crisis. They have several strengths that seemed to enable this. For instance, the holistic, trauma-informed practices that were already embedded within projects meant that staff had the expertise to understand the impacts of the pandemic on women and girls, and how best to support within this context. Likewise, projects already worked flexibly to support individual needs and so perhaps found it easier to adapt support. They could move from centre-based activity to outreach work quickly compared to statutory services who might have been more restricted to respond dynamically.

The future, in the context of the pandemic, is still uncertain. However, there is hope and potential for services to develop, based on new learning – such as adding remote methods of delivery alongside face-to-face work, building on the partnership successes achieved, and harnessing the voice and involvement of women and girls to help design and deliver services. There is likely to be the need for increased staff support as organisations move beyond crisis mode. Projects will also be looking to diversify funding sources to enable service sustainability.

The increased awareness of domestic violence and violence against women and girls over the past year highlights the need for funders to retain a gender lens when awarding funding. This will help enable the sector to undertake its vital, specialist work with women and girls as society recovers from the pandemic. In the meantime, as the WGI enters its final year, the Learning and Impact Services will continue to support projects to tell their stories about the role they are playing as we all move into the next phases of living with Covid-19.

1. Introduction

Purpose and scope of this report

'The WGI Synthesis Report #2: *Learning from a turbulent time***'** summarises learning and insights gathered through the Women and Girls Initiative (WGI) Learning and Impact Services during 2020. It follows on from the WGI Synthesis report #1, which shared some of the learning, achievements and challenges of WGI projects during their first two years of funding. The aims of this report are to:

• Highlight some of the achievements, challenges, opportunities and concerns shared by WGI projects during 2020, as drawn from reports and blogs produced during the year;

• Reflect on the experience and learning from 2020, exploring what this might mean for WGI projects, the women and girls they work with and for sustainability over the next year and beyond.

'Learning from a turbulent time' focuses primarily on what has been learnt from WGI projects' responses to the Covid-19 pandemic, in order to best continue supporting women and girls across England. It is intended to be useful for WGI projects, The Fund, other women and girls' sector stakeholders, and for the continued delivery of WGI Learning and Impact Services, to support planning and delivery in the next year and beyond.

This section begins by introducing what was known about some of the WGI's challenges and successes identified prior to the pandemic. It then gives an overview of the adaptations made during the year against the backdrop of moves in and out of lockdown. This sets the context for the rest of the report which in Section 2 looks at key achievements, challenges and learning during 2020 before considering what this might mean for the future.

Learning and insights gathered before the pandemic

As the WGI Synthesis Report #1 illustrated, funded projects were working well overall towards the programme's goal – empowering women and girls to take control of their lives. Successes to date included the ability to provide holistic, specialist support available at the time, in the ways, and for as long as needed to meet the needs of women and girls. The use of relational, flexible and trauma-informed approaches, supporting a variety of practical, emotional and social needs was working well. Projects reported improvements in confidence, wellbeing, relationships and employment opportunities for the women and girls they were supporting. However, there were also challenges including high demand for and stretched capacity of services, the emotional demands on staff, and funding and resource pressures.

Of the 62 projects funded, 14 had completed in 2019. At the start of 2020, 18 projects were due to complete in the year and the remaining 30 projects in 2021. In recognition of this, the Learning and Impact Services partners designed a full programme of activity for 2020, to make the most of projects' abilities to engage with activities and contribute to data gathering whilst still funded. Activities would support projects with their evaluation work and provide resources and space for staff to advocate for their work and the benefits it brings to women and girls. As Covid-19 became prominent in the UK, some activities had either already completed or were underway as lockdown restrictions were brought in.

Five WGI publications were produced and shared online, that draw mainly on insights gathered before the pandemic. These considered the following areas:

1. **The contribution of feminist services to women's mental health**

2. **The impact of receiving WGI funding on grant holders**

3. **Learning from partnership working for women and girls**

4. **Increasing the voice and influence of girls and young women**

5. **Residential services for women survivors of abuse and multiple disadvantage: implications of the Covid-19 pandemic.**

A summary of each briefing's key messages can be seen in Appendix 1. Learning shared in these documents also inform reflections shared in Section 2.

As the pandemic hit the UK

During early to mid-March, the Learning and Impact Services team re-scoped their remaining activity for 2020, to focus on gathering learning during the pandemic and sharing this through a series of blogs. It is important to also note that on 17th March, The Fund issued a statement from the CEO, about being flexible with regards to the usual terms and conditions associated with their grants. In acknowledgement that society was in the face of an immediate crisis and that communities needed to be able to mobilise quickly to meet the needs of their local populations, The Fund quickly enabled projects to adapt their budgets for immediate needs as well as delay activities, including reporting, where needed. The availability of new emergency funding for charities and community groups was also welcomed by projects, some of whom successfully applied for help with additional Covid-related costs and needs. This flexibility and support helped enable projects to support women and girls with the additional impacts of the pandemic, rather than adhering to a project plan that might not be relevant at this time.

Into and out of the first lockdown: March to October 2020

When the first national lockdown was implemented on 23rd March 2020, buildings were closed, face to face delivery was halted and WGI projects had to re-vision and re-fashion their services. The series of blogs published between May and October 2020 disseminated what was going on for projects, the effects of the pandemic on the women and girls they were supporting, the service adaptations being made, learning as well as hopes and fears for the post-Covid-19 future. Below is an overview of some of the pandemic effects and adaptations made, whilst the next section reflects on what has been learnt and what this might mean for the future.

The effects of Covid-19 on women and girls

Projects shared specific examples of the impacts of the pandemic and the varying restrictions on the women and girls they were working with. These stories highlighted some of what could be seen in the national media around domestic violence[1], as well as the non-Covid related risks for young people (such as increased vulnerability to abuse and exploitation[2]) and the higher mental health impacts of the pandemic for women. Further examples, such as being unable to easily switch from receiving face-to-face to online support, are included in Blog 2: Virtual support and vulnerability in the women and girls sector.

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[1] E.g. https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/apr/12/domestic-violence-surges-seven-hundred-per-cent-uk-coronavirus

[2] Eleni Romanou and Emma Belton. (2020) Isolated and struggling: social isolation and the risk of child maltreatment, in lockdown and beyond. London: NSPCC

In a sector that is predominantly staffed by women, the impacts on staff wellbeing could also be seen to be particularly high, as many project staff held the responsibility for home-schooling and/or supporting vulnerable relatives or friends. This is discussed further in Blog 4: Supporting staff in the women and girls sector and the challenges presented by these effects are considered in Section 2.

Overall, it seems, many women and girls supported by WGI projects had other concerns that were now being exacerbated by the pandemic, as illustrated in Toni's story.

Toni's story

Eighteen-year-old Toni had a highly stressful experience of the first lockdown. During this time: she gave birth to her child; was admitted to hospital with suspected cancer; lived with her mother for a time despite a difficult relationship; and now lives alone with her baby. During the first lockdown it was a huge struggle to get information and help, with Toni being alone during much of this frightening time, with limited input from maternity services and the NHS (including CAMHS) because of visiting restrictions.

Toni identified her project worker, Nicole, from a WGI funded women's centre as key to her survival. Nicole had already been a consistent figure in her life for the last four years, helping her make sense of her abusive relationship without feeling blamed. Nicole was there supporting Toni to leave, during the aftermath of the relationship and throughout the lockdown. Toni reflected that "[Nicole] never left me" when most other professionals did. *This story has been anonymised to protect confidentiality.*

Examples of adapting practice

WGI projects mobilised resources and adapted practice to continue addressing existing and new pandemic-related issues, including through:

• Accessing emergency funding from national and local funders including The Fund and local foundations, businesses and through individual donations.

• Developing new outreach services including food parcel deliveries and physically distanced check-ins.

• Purchasing equipment and software for staff, volunteers and women and girls such as mobile phones, tablets, phone credit, white noise machines (to enable private calls to take place).

• Sending craft packs, sewing kits, other materials in advance of online sessions, where women and girls could continue to create together.

• Appointment-only services outdoors (for instance in the centre car park) or moved online.

• Extending telephone services to meet higher demand.

Projects delivering vital face-to-face services, such as refuges and street-based work, continued in a Covid-secure way, as illustrated within Blog 1: Covid-19 and the Women and Girls Initiative.

As the first lockdown restrictions eased, some WGI projects restored some face-to-face work. Many projects continued developing their remote support, updating relevant policies and taking time to reflect and plan for the upcoming winter period. Having been through the first wave of the pandemic, there was some time to take stock and get ready for the winter.

2. Learning from a turbulent time and its implications

This section highlights key challenges, achievements, opportunities and concerns reported by WGI projects and shared through blogs and briefings published during the year. It goes on to offer final reflections and considerations, looking towards 2021 and beyond.

Challenges

One of the biggest challenges faced was that the sector was already reliant on the commitment, energy and goodwill of individual staff to 'go the extra mile' in doing their work, without necessarily enough resource behind them. During the pandemic's first wave, many organisations were reliant on smaller teams whilst some staff were furloughed, had to shield and/or needed to provide childcare at home. In terms of supporting staff, this additional pressure created a new dimension for managers when thinking about how the whole staff team was doing.

Other key challenges experienced during and since the first lockdown, for WGI projects and the women and girls they support, included:

• Women falling through the gaps of government support, for instance losing zero hours jobs and not being eligible for furlough or other support schemes. This led to an increase in new referrals for many projects, and a greater complexity of need to support.

• The potential increased risk for girls and young women of exploitation and abuse – as statutory services became remote, there were reports of less intervention and support from statutory professionals available as well as reduced access to, for instance, sexual health services if needed.

• Difficulties in establishing a private, confidential space from which to speak freely (for those providing and receiving remote support from home).

• The blurring between home and work - particularly a challenge for staff working with traumatised clients and/or those who might be at immediate risk.

• Technological barriers – including a lack of access to hardware, software and data needed to provide and receive support; building trust online when the online space might have previously been experienced as abusive; a lack of confidence and for some, language skills, that are needed to access technology platforms. Blog 3: A woman's place is in the (on-line) world? explores this area in more depth.

• The reality that staff, as well as women and girls they worked with, were facing the effects of the pandemic to different extents. Balancing their own needs with the higher level of demand for support could present a tension for individuals and organisations.

• The disproportionate impacts of the pandemic[3] – many WGI projects work with women and girls already facing multiple disadvantages. The effects of the pandemic on, for instance, women's mental health[4], on access to justice[5] and on Black and minoritized women in the UK[6], have exacerbated challenges in relation to, for instance, increased demand and need. Project staff have also expressed concern about how they might approach the potential long-term impacts and implications once the pandemic has eased.

Whilst this report is primarily based on data gathered up until October 2020, a further challenge noted during the growth of the pandemic's second wave in November was that project staff were getting increasingly fatigued from the relentlessness of the workloads faced since March. At the time of completing this report (January 2021), it is important to highlight this as an increasing risk factor in terms of resilience of organisations and their teams as 2021 progresses.

Achievements

One of the most impressive achievements of WGI projects was how they mobilised quickly and effectively, in partnership with statutory, private and other third sector organisations and groups, to meet immediate pandemic-related need. For instance, the Residential services for women survivors of abuse and multiple disadvantage briefing describes how the WGI project Greater Manchester Women's Support Alliance worked with the devolved Greater Manchester Combined Authority and other organisations to provide trauma and gender-informed accommodation for women during the first lockdown. Together, the partners were not just providing beds but ensuring that these were in safe spaces and with support attached. This example shows how women's needs could be met in a safe, high quality and speedy way, highlighting what can be achieved when there is political support and collective effort.

Other achievements that stood out included:

• The ways in which organisations supported staff to continue their very difficult work in personally challenging circumstances, for example through setting up frequent, informal calls for staff, increasing supervision, flexible working and reinforcing messaging around 'open-door' policies. In some cases, clinical supervision was implemented or increased. For example, A Way Out commissioned their psychologist to design a staff wellbeing programme, which was well received. Blog 4: Supporting staff in the women and girls sector shares further examples and resources to support organisations.

• Rapidly implementing Covid-secure processes and practices to enable safe provision for those women living in refuges and/or requiring essential face-to-face support.

• How organisations changed their delivery models as necessary – for example from being building-based to outreach working; moving from advocacy and support to delivering food parcels and doing doorstep check-ins.

• The quickness with which organisations increased their capacity and skills for working online, moving from office and face-to-face work to home-based support, in some cases within a day or two, appearing almost seamless.

• The way that projects worked to fill gaps in statutory support with the help of donations and grants. This included stepping in to provide digital hardware and software for access to education and online support, providing language translation of government messages, adapting and undertaking safeguarding assessments remotely.

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[3] https://www.centreformentalhealth.org.uk/sites/default/files/2020-07/CentreforMentalHealth_CovidInequalities_0.pdf

[4] Almeida, M., Shrestha, A.D., Stojanac,D., Miller, L.J. (2020). The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on women's mental health. Archives of Women's Mental Health. Available at: https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s00737-020-01092-2

[5] https://www.endviolenceagainstwomen.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Access-to-Justice-for-Women-Girls-during-Covid-19-Pandemic.pdf

[6] https://www.kcl.ac.uk/a-multiple-pandemic-black-and-minoritised-women-at-the-crossroads-of-violence-homelessness-and-covid-19

- Projects increasing the support available for women, such as extending helpline hours and setting up new online activities, despite a lack of resources and a lack of confidence in using online platforms.

- The 'stepping up' of the sector to meet women and girl's needs, when many other services closed or moved to fully remote support.

Opportunities arising in 2020

Notwithstanding the many difficulties associated with experiences of 2020, there were some opportunities that came out of the lockdown in relation to the empowerment of women and girls, and in some areas of service and organisational development. These included:

- Some groups of women mobilised to support each other due to having less day-to-day contact with staff and a lack of physical space to meet. They built greater connections and solidarity, whether living in the same building or as part of online groups, as described in Residential services for women survivors of abuse and multiple disadvantage and Blog 5: responding to and learning from changes during Covid-19.

- Working via phone or online was felt to equalise some relationships between staff and those being supported - for some, it feels easier to talk about uncomfortable subjects without being physically present. It is also more accessible for some women and girls – for instance by taking away the need to travel to a centre to receive support.

- The requirement to move some services online necessitated organisations' upgrading of technical capacity and skills. As a sector primarily focused on delivering support face-to-face, many noted that offering online support was welcomed by some women and girls – for instance WhatsApp was popular with some young women. This success has led to many projects wanting to continue such support as part of blended service delivery in the future – offering support in the way that suits the individual, whether face to face or remote.

- Partnerships with other organisations and multi-agency working became easier in some cases as some statutory staff were more available. During the first lockdown in particular, shared priorities were clearly present, potentially making it easier to make things happen – for instance in getting women accommodated or arranging food deliveries. Now that these partnerships are in place, they can be built on for supporting future potential needs.

- The increased profile as a result of media coverage and government responses to concerns raised about increases in Domestic Violence, has perhaps supported organisations in generating funding and other support from local businesses and groups. With concerns about sustainability beyond the pandemic[7], it is hoped that this increased awareness will lead to greater support in the future.

Concerns for the future

During conversations with project staff in 2020, concerns were raised about the future long-term emotional, social and economic impacts of the pandemic. With impacts for women and girls, particularly Black and minoritised women, disproportionate to the general population, this could lead to further crises as we emerge beyond the immediate crisis. Likewise, many staff have expressed fears about organisational sustainability and funding. If there is less funding available as a result of the economic impacts of Covid-19, there is the potential for this to disproportionately disadvantage women and girls sector organisations. Historically the sector has been under-funded and struggled to be successful in attracting large funding pots in competition with other more well-resourced charities.

[7] E.g. Women's Resource Centre (2020). The crisis of Covid-19 and UK women's charities. Available at: https://www.wrc.org.uk/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=a1f51f03-fb60-4dab-b352-c2cb54bd0552

At the time of writing, the national vaccination programme is beginning its roll-out which brings hope. It is anticipated that whilst organisations and individuals get more accustomed to new ways of working, the resilience of many organisations and individuals will be severely tested in the coming months and beyond. Although it is impossible to know for certain the longer-term impacts, the challenges and opportunities encountered during the pandemic are expected to be felt long into the future. Based on what has been shared so far, some reflections and considerations follow. These are written to support projects in their navigation of the next year, as well as to inform The Fund and the ongoing delivery of Learning and Impact Services.

Reflections on what has been learnt

The rest of this report is written from the perspective of the Learning and Impact Services partners, based on data and insights gathered and shared through the briefings and blogs published in 2020.

WGI projects span the smallest grassroots groups to large, national organisations. As mentioned in the report introduction, some projects had completed prior to the pandemic and almost all projects will have completed by the end of 2021. Therefore, the experience of Covid-19 will have been different across the 62 projects, with some able to mobilise and adapt more quickly than others. However, it seems that overall, the WGI projects were able to act quickly to implement the protocols, procedures and processes necessary to continue meeting the needs of women and girls, adapting and working in partnership with others flexibly, increasing the variety of ways in which support could be accessed and the types of support on offer.

Sector strengths

A number of strengths have been suggested as to the reasons why women and girls sector organisations were able to respond so well. Perhaps as we move beyond the pandemic, there will be some time for greater reflection on and interrogation of these elements, which are summarised as follows:

• **The lived experience within WGI projects:** A detailed understanding of women and girls' needs, in many cases because of the lived experience of staff, the involvement of women and girls in co-production of services, and the long-term support provided, meant that WGI projects could draw on this knowledge in re-designing services appropriately and continuing to offer support through the pandemic.

• **Understanding the impact of the pandemic on women and girls:** WGI projects were already working in holistic, trauma-informed ways, able to respond to crises in women's lives. This meant that there was the expertise in place to be able to understand how the sudden onset of the pandemic would impact women and girls and to be able to respond to this crisis effectively.

• **The flexible models of delivery within WGI projects:** Because projects already delivered flexibly, adapting support to meet the needs of individual women and girls, they were able to make further changes as needed in the face of this crisis, when statutory services might have been much more restricted in their ability to work dynamically.

• **Existing remote support provision:** A number of WGI projects already ran telephone helplines and support, so had some skills and services in place that could be more easily adapted to the new circumstances.

• **The commitment of staff:** This cannot be underestimated. Keeping residential services functioning, and/ or moving provision of support to remote methods, working from home, reflects the necessity of the times but also the willingness and flexibility of staff to prioritise the needs of women and girls over their own situations. The way in which many organisations increased support for staff wellbeing demonstrates awareness of this.

- **The existence of WGI:** Whilst not necessarily a strength within the sector, being in receipt of three to five years of WGI funding, (which for over half of WGI projects had over a year left to run), perhaps gave WGI projects a stronger start to the pandemic than they otherwise would have had. They had access to project funds that could be immediately re-allocated to the needs of the pandemic in the first instance. However, the upcoming end to the WGI and the necessary focus of funders in the past year on emergency funding needs, mean that ensuring sustainability beyond the pandemic could be a challenge.

Having considered sector strengths, it is also worth noting that the relatively low levels of digital skills and confidence within the sector; organisational financial insecurity; and an over-reliance on the goodwill of staff are possible weaknesses that could present risks for organisations wanting to develop services and provision in the coming years. It is possible that organisations will become (if they haven't already) re-focused on survival rather than growth, which could overshadow the achievements made through WGI funding.

Looking to the future

Because of the fluid nature of the context within which this report is written, it is difficult to know what the landscape will be like as the country moves out of crisis management towards living with Covid-19. Many projects have raised concerns around increased inequalities, poverty and mental health needs as society recovers from the first year of the pandemic. Points made here are therefore intended to be of use when considering how projects might emerge as strongly as possible from this experience and how funders might support this to meet the anticipated needs of communities into the future.

Service development

1. There is a need for the **continued development of technological skills and resources** for delivery of both on- and off-line support in future. When safe to do so, it is likely that there will be a demand for and a rush to return to face-to-face work. However, it will be important not to neglect the very real opportunities offered by the embedding of more remote forms of support. Loneliness was a growing issue before the pandemic hit, and so having identified new ways of making connections not reliant on being physically present, these new tools can be used in future to support women unable to attend in person. This is likely to require some organisational investment and development to grow this additional offer.

2. **Harnessing the voice and involvement of women and girls** in designing and delivering support in the next year and beyond, will continue to be important. Women and girls bring expertise from their lived experience and can gain skills and other benefits through active involvement. These include reduced social isolation, improved employability and empowerment to take the lead and be heard. This will also be invaluable for communicating to other stakeholders.

3. There is the potential to **build on partnership successes** in supporting some of the most vulnerable communities during the pandemic. Combining the strengths of different partners will hopefully bring greater benefits, in an economic and effective way, to those being supported. However, as before the pandemic, it will be important for projects to be confident in the leadership and organisational strengths they bring to any partnership as well as the income necessary to sustain this work, to prevent being undervalued and unrecognised for their contributions.

Organisational sustainability

1. **Supporting staff** coming out of this experience, giving opportunities to take stock, reflect on and process the experience of working during this time will be key. Thinking about how this can be planned for in advance may help sustain staff with the challenges of the present, as well as help ensure that the impact of and learning from the work is not forgotten as the situation moves from crisis response.

2. **Reviewing organisational purpose and function** to consider how the pandemic has impacted on the needs of women and girls, and the services required to support these will help organisations check that strategic focus, organisational structures and resources are tailored appropriately for the future beyond the current crisis.

3. Building on successes achieved in **diversifying funding sources** during the pandemic will also support future sustainability. If this is seen as connected to partnership building and awareness raising, it may be possible to integrate the development of funding relationships with these strategic aims, where relevant.

Considerations for funders

1. Aligned to the need for WGI projects to check organisational purpose and function is the need for funders to **retain a gender lens** when awarding funding in the future. This includes an interest in the role of gender-specific services, and services 'led by and for', within partnership and other funded projects. This will help support the sector's sustainability and ability to continue to best meet the needs of women and girls.

2. As highlighted previously, WGI projects were able to use their resources to meet the needs of the current context. Funders, through **flexing grant conditions** and establishing emergency grants, trusted projects to do what was needed without having to satisfy numerous conditions or demonstrate innovation in the funding application. Coming out of the pandemic, resources within the sector are likely to be under even more stress than they are currently. Reviewing funding application processes for longer-term funding pots to enable money to be directed to where it can be of most use, and to the organisations that know their communities best, rather than to those who are most proficient at the writing of funding applications, may support a quicker recovery from the pandemic and those organisations that may have been disproportionately impacted and involved in the coronavirus response.

Finally, as we look to the future it is worth remembering that sustainability for WGI projects was identified as an issue before the pandemic. The potential is that increased awareness of domestic violence and the inequalities that have been exacerbated through Covid-19, will result in more targeted funding and greater resources ring-fenced for the vital support required by women, girls and society as a whole for recovery and healing. However, there is the danger in the rush to get back to 'normal' that this could mean women and girls organisations get forgotten. It is hoped that the partners support for WGI projects in getting their messages across will help mitigate against this and that past barriers to funding and support for women and girls will be actively addressed by funders and commissioners, working in partnership with the sector.

3. Conclusion

'*Learning from a turbulent time*' has brought together key learning from WGI projects during 2020. As illustrated in the report, and the blogs and briefings on which it was based, WGI projects had several strengths that seemed to enable their quick mobilisation and adaptation in the face of a national crisis. However, there were also some challenges and disproportionate impacts of the pandemic felt by women and girls, and those organisations supporting them. Overall, projects increased flexibility to meet the needs of women and girls, for instance delivering food parcels, providing technical equipment and offering support in new and previously un-imagined ways.

As the WGI moves towards its end in 2022, with many projects due to complete in the coming year, existing concerns around sustainability and maintenance of provision are increasing. These concerns are exacerbated by the wider economic and social impacts of the pandemic and expectations that recovery will need a concentrated effort and targeted resources. However, it is hoped that issues such as domestic violence receiving greater public awareness, the upcoming Domestic Abuse Bill and Violence against Women and Girls Strategy will help create the climate for women and girls sector organisations to be enabled to undertake their vital role in the recovery from the pandemic. The Learning and Impact Services will continue to support WGI projects over the coming year to tell their stories about the role they are playing as we move into the next phases of living with Covid-19. In addition, support with areas such as staff wellbeing, evaluation and digital communications will continue. As the WGI enters its final full year of activity, the partners will seek to build on the learning from this and previous reports to understand its overall impact for the organisations and the women and girls supported, bearing in mind the context as it continues to develop.

Appendix One

A summary of WGI briefings published in 2020

It's been a game-changer: The impact of National Lottery funding for women and girls projects

As 2020 began, there was evidence that against the backdrop of a challenging financial and social context, the WGI funding had been a much needed and valued investment. It had enabled new services to be offered and existing provision to be extended to new geographic areas or for new groups of women and girls. During progress reviews with 35 out of 62 funded projects in early 2020 (predominantly pre-pandemic), qualitative data was gathered on the impact so far of having received WGI grants. "It's been a game changer!" gives examples of some of the differences WGI funding has made to organisations.

Impacts felt by organisations included:

• Being enabled to move from survival to growth.

• Having an increased status and profile locally and nationally.

• Having a stronger voice, in partnership with other WGI projects.

• Strengthened networks of support and learning across the sector.

• More capacity for co-production with women and girls with lived experience.

Women's mental health: the essential contribution of feminist services

The *MS*terclass: Feminist approaches to the mental health needs of women and girls took place in January 2020 and led to a subsequent briefing. It shared some of the extensive research evidencing the gendered inequalities that negatively impact mental health, for instance the disproportionate effects of austerity policies (UK Women's Budget Group, 2018)[8]. However, as the briefing details, the trauma and gender-informed provision of support offered by WGI projects enable women to:

• Be heard and have safe conversations with other women.

• Make sense of, and normalize, their responses to trauma and oppression.

• Re-frame their responses to unreasonable events as right and reasonable.

• Acknowledge and celebrate their survival and resilience.

• Reject previous ways they have been labelled, blamed or punished.'

You can read more about the value of such specialist services to women and girls in Women's mental health: the essential contribution of feminist services.

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

Partnership working for women and girls

Partnership working had been identified as an important aspect of meeting the needs of women and girls and a success for projects, but also an area that brought challenges. Three of the largest WGI partnership projects – Women's Lives Leeds, Greater Manchester Women's Support Alliance and Sheffield Women and Girls Partnership – met in early April to share their learning, which was disseminated in Partnership working for women and girls: A briefing paper.

Whilst mainly drawing from learning developed pre-Covid-19, it is hoped this will be a useful resource as projects increase partnership working to help ensure sustainability and development of services, playing to different partners' strengths. Two benefits of partnership working identified were:

• The increased capacity for new and different ways to support women and girls, and

• Developing and sharing of good practice across partner organisations.

One of the challenges identified was the time it takes to build trust between partners when they might be competitors for the same contracts. Learning points reported by the three projects included the need to build partnerships on shared values and common aims. Having these in place provides a stronger footing for addressing the inevitable challenges faced in any partnership endeavour.

Increasing the voice and influence of young women and girls

A group of WGI organisations funded to deliver support for young women and girls continued to meet before and during the lockdown that began in March. Whilst the group supported each other with ongoing issues of adaptation to the pandemic, they also explored what they had been learning through their WGI projects about co-production specifically with young women and girls. They identified a lack of literature on the subject and the gender-specific factors to consider when approaching co-production with young women and girls, some of whom will have experienced trauma, abuse and may lack confidence in their own views and opinions. Increasing the voice and influence of girls and young women: A briefing paper brings together insights from these discussions, together with a set of common principles and values, and examples from projects. It shares some of the successes and challenges involved in trying to increase the voice and influence of girls and young women within their support/recovery journey, the design, governance and evaluation of projects and policy and practice more widely. The briefing ends with a series of provocations designed to support those seeking to develop this work. For instance:

• Are you able to support the development of skills and confidence in girls and young women who wish to contribute more?

• Have you checked out if girls and young women are doing this to please you or because they really want to?

• Are you genuinely open to learning from, and with, girls and young women and doing what you can to put their ideas into practice?

Residential services for women survivors of abuse and multiple disadvantage: implications of the Covid-19 pandemic

An Action Learning Set of projects funded to provide residential services met before and during the first lockdown, to share approaches, challenges and concerns in relation to the present and future of specialist accommodation for women and girls. This briefing shared their reflections on what was made possible during the first lockdown, such as the mobilisation to accommodate women[9], and what can be learnt from the experience. It describes why women need accommodation and what services should be like following the impact of the Covid-19 crisis on their lives. It concludes with a discussion of opportunities that have been created by the pandemic and the challenges that remain. Key points made in the briefing are that:

• Knowledge and understanding of trauma and the workings of gender and other social inequalities are absolutely critical to effective work and service development.

• Women with lived experience, helping each other, should continue to be at the heart of the sector.

• When necessary, improvements in service provision can be achieved in a very short time.

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[9] https://www.theguardian.com/news/audio/2020/may/19/how-coronavirus-led-to-rough-sleepers-being-housed-in-hotels