



A Women and Girls Initiative briefing

Feminist Co-production

Introduction

This briefing has been developed as a resource for women and girls' sector projects and to help commissioners, funders and service providers understand the history and principles of feminist co-creation. It briefly sets out the origins of feminist co-production, highlights a number of journeys undertaken by Women and Girls initiative (WGI) projects, and summarises the commitments and principles they have identified as core to their co-creative practice.

This is one of a series of public outputs produced as part of the learning and impact support provided to projects funded by The National Lottery Community Fund's (The Fund) 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. The briefing is the outcome of 5 years collaborative learning through a series of WGI Msterclasses¹, action learning meetings and workshops.

¹ We called these 'Msterclasses' to emphasise that they were about women learning from other women and part of feminist co-creation practice, and thereby differentiate them from 'Masterclasses' which are traditionally hierarchical and patriarchal means for 'masters' to pass on established knowledge.



Since the inception of the WGI, the active involvement of women and girls has been a key theme. At the outset The Fund was clear that it wanted to see the voices of women and girls at the heart of the initiative. One of the very first learning events which we hosted as the WGI's Learning and Impact Services partner was called 'Participation, co-production or revolution?' and it's a theme we've returned to throughout the initiative. A further aim of the initiative was for projects to share learning with each other, and with the support of the Learning and Impact Services team, insight and evidence has been co-produced and captured in a series of publications (see Resources section).

In her introduction to one of the first WGI 'Msterclasses' in 2018, titled 'Catching the Wave', [Liz Kelly](#) challenged us with the question 'What has happened to the 'we' in women's organisations?'² 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.*”

The early development of women's organisations such as women's centres, refuges and helplines took place in the 1970's and 80's, but the sector underwent major changes from the 90's onwards. A host of factors (which we discuss later in this briefing) contributed to undermining women's collective action and re-shaping our groups and organisations.

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 and this briefing is therefore based on the conversations that have taken place and the thinking that has emerged over the past five years.

² This was also the subject of a blog written by Liz Kelly following the Msterclass and available at: www.tavinstitute.org/news/liz-kelly-have-we-lost-the-we



The origins of feminist 'co-production'

In the beginning, the 'second-wave' women's movement was made up largely of consciousness-raising (CR) groups. Their purpose was to bring women together to discuss their experience of inequality, oppression and discrimination and work out what to do about it:

“ *The purpose of listening to women's feelings and experiences was not therapy, was not to give someone a chance to get something off her chest... it was to hear what she had to say. The importance of listening to a woman's feelings was collectively to analyse the situation of women, not to analyse her.*”
(Sarachild, 1978)

This emphasis on the centrality of women's lived experience and the need to act collectively to challenge and change things lies at the very heart of feminism. It wasn't called 'co-production' or 'co-creation' but it was a forerunner of both.

The 'women's movement' meant movement by and for women, and the origins of the women and girls' sector are in women 'doing it for themselves' – self organising to address their own oppression:

- The first refuges were squats
- Rape Crisis began as a phonenumber answered by volunteers
- Women's groups provided pregnancy testing, learned self-examination and self-defence
- Incest survivors met each other and 'broke the silence' around child sexual abuse
- Women established co-operatives and collectives to publish books and magazines, print posters and make films.

It was widely considered that in order to seriously challenge the oppression of women, and undermine patriarchal authority, women were going to have to do things differently: build new structures and create new ways of working. As Audre Lorde put it:

“ *For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us to temporarily beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change.*” (Lorde, 1983³)

³ In Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldua (eds) *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Colour*. NY: Kitchen Table Press



Feminist collectives were 'flat' structures. They rejected the need for 'leadership' and hierarchies and embraced democratic decision making. However, few such organisations survived in the same form into the 1990s. This decade saw a huge rear-guard reaction against feminism. It often appeared that as soon as women gained any power, or simply showed up in public, society pushed back by reducing them to misogynistic stereotypes. The backlash also aimed to undermine progress women had made in the previous decade by maintaining that women were worse off because of it – stressed and overworked trying to juggle career and family - and that the women's movement was to blame. Feminists were portrayed as hairy harridans who were unable to get a man and the 'F-word' became a dirty word from which many women preferred to disassociate themselves.

Grant-giving by local authorities was replaced by the formal commissioning of services. Women's projects and organisations, in need of funds to pay the phone bill, re-roof the refuge or pay their staff, began to dilute and disguise their feminism, presenting themselves as more conventional and mainstream. In order to compete for funding in a newly competitive commissioning landscape, many redesigned themselves and professionalised their service provision.

At the same time, the very success of the women's movement in raising public concern and getting violence against women acknowledged and on the policy agenda, led to competition for 'ownership' of the issues and a variety of claims about how to address them. Academics, medics and children's charities began to dominate public discourse on rape, child sexual abuse and domestic violence. Childline was established by the BBC and British Telecom; police forces and hospitals collaborated to open 'rape suites' and Sexual Assault Referral Centres (SARCS). And as it became clear that boys and men could also be victims of sexual and domestic violence, women's projects sometimes came under pressure to provide services for both sexes.

To maintain any kind of voice and influence in the field, many specialist services toned down their feminism and moderated their demands. However, this was only partly effective as a strategy for organisational survival. Funding went increasingly to mainstream agencies which didn't threaten the gender status quo: women's refuges survived on a shoestring, rape crisis centres shrank, and women's centres closed.

In the nineties and noughties the women's movement was in eclipse, but it has risen again in the form of a new wave of activism amongst younger women and a revitalisation of the women and girls' sector. The #MeToo movement is the most recent example of feminism making a comeback - with social media being used to highlight and address rape culture and sexual harassment.

The media revolution has facilitated mass organising and campaigning, making space for a plethora of voices and perspectives. In turn this has aided the growth of a wave of feminism that is much more inclusive of Black and minoritised women and girls, and a greater appreciation of the intersections of different forms of oppression. It has re-invigorated the feminist principle of listening to what women have to say about their lives and making this the jumping off point for changing the world.



What does reclaiming the 'we' mean?

In our first WGI co-production workshop 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.*”

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.⁴ 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:

“ *It's the trendy terminology so you have to use it. I resent it sometimes because it makes us sound like we are doing something new and jumping on the bandwagon when we are doing what we have done even when it was not fashionable.*”

In the WGI Masterclass, 'Catching the Wave' we discussed how women's lived experience of oppression, violence and abuse can at times be misused, dismissed, ripped-off or put on a pedestal by organisations. Working with co-creative processes helped ensure that it was not exploited and was used to further women's collective interests.

In a co-production action learning 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 coming 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. It's about not 'othering' other women as 'victims' or 'sex workers' or 'clients'.*”

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:

⁴ See also The National Lottery Community Fund supported Co-Creation booklet (2019) www.tnlcommunityfund.org.uk/media/insights/documents/Cocreation-Booklet-WEB-V2.pdf?mtime=20191219155809&focal=none



“ 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’.”

There was concern that in reclaiming the ‘we’, inequality in skills, training, experience and personal circumstances must not 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.⁵ Therefore, reclaiming the ‘we’ necessarily 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.”

⁵ Group support is particularly valued for enabling understanding of the commonality of experiences, providing inspiration from others’ journeys, and enabling survivors to ‘give something back’. Scott S and McNaughton-Nicholls C (2015) What do survivors of violence and abuse have to say about mental health services?, London, UK: NatCen. www.dms.co.uk/pdfs/REVA-Brief-4-Guidance-for-commissioners-FINAL-071015.pdf



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 is 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.”⁶

Reclaiming the ‘we’ in practice

“ The ‘we’ is about women growing, learning and changing together. Knowing that your experience isn’t unique – not the result of you being personally weak or flawed – but common, and the result of male power, privilege, entitlement.”

WGI projects have shared many of their journeys towards reclaiming the ‘we’. The following are some examples:

Aspire Women’s Centre in County Durham had 5 years WGI funding for a Volunteer & Support Services Co-ordinator.

“ 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 are now highly trained and lead all kinds of groups - mainly on-line through the pandemic. Workers are not invited (unless they need support themselves) so they are all entirely peer led.”

The Aspire ‘volunteers’ are mainly women with lived experience and over the 5 years 32 of them have been active in front line support work. Aspire see training as both a ‘leveler’ 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.”

WGI projects with girls and young women have been at the forefront of co-creative activity from the outset. **The Chamomile 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. **The Blossom project in Stockton-on-Tees** initially designed a project for young women and asked them what they thought of it. The response was that they wanted time to think about what they wanted

⁶Lisa Ward (2022) Presentation for WGI Webinar 2: Lived experience in the sector: How do we better enable a ‘we’?



and design it for themselves. The staff stepped back and the young women developed a peer support group whereby they planned and led their own sessions supporting one another.

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'.

“ *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.*”

In some instances the 'reclaiming of the we' had involved 'coming out' as a survivor-led service. 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.*”

RISE in Brighton emphasized 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.*”



The WGI Learning and Impact Services Team have supported co-production by taking the topic as a focus for workshops and Masterclasses, by encouraging the involvement of women and girls in learning events, and by using participatory methods - such as action learning meetings - to co-create evidence and insights that have then been shared in co-produced briefings such as this. 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 artwork.⁷

Commitments and principles

Women involved in the WGI have identified the following commitments and principles - through action learning 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.
- 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.
- We accept our vulnerabilities, as well as recognising and valuing our own strengths and those of others.

⁷ "Where she was to where she is now: Celebrating the Women and Girls Initiative" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sGG6uc3Mvk8>



- Taking care of our own emotional and physical well-being is seen as 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 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'.

In Conclusion

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 strength-based approach.

Funders and commissioners need to recognise and value the origins, principles and commitments of feminist co-production and understand why it is part of 'what good looks like' in the women and girls' sector. 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.

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Resources

The key briefings from the Women & Girls Initiative are available here:

[Increasing the voice and influence of girls and young women](#)

[Women's Mental Health – The Essential Contribution of Feminist Services](#)

[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](#)

[Sanctuary and freedom: The power of transformational spaces for women and girls](#)

[Women and Girls Initiative Learning and Impact Services \(2022\), Lisa Ward, Webinar 2: Lived experience in the sector: How do we better enable a 'we'?](#)

Other reading and references:

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Gains, F., Culhane, L., Eseonu, T. and Sanders, A. (2021). *Mind the Gap. Getting Women's Voices into Policy Making*. Manchester: University of Manchester

Analysis of knowledge and experience regarding how women can be better represented and involved in policymaking, and why this is important.

documents.manchester.ac.uk/display.aspx?DocID=48993

Curvers, S., Hestbaek, C., Lumley, T. and Bonbright, D. (2016) *User Voice. Putting People at the Heart of Impact Practice*. London: NPC

How charities can best harness the views and needs of their beneficiaries in order to improve their impact.

www.thinknpc.org/resource-hub/user-voice-putting-people-at-the-heart-of-impact-practice/

Co-Creation (2019) *Co-Creation: Exploring the challenges and opportunities* London: Supported by The National Lottery Community Fund

One step beyond co-production is here named as 'co-creation'. The report highlights what works and what doesn't if you are attempting genuine and radical equality in the design and delivery of the help and support people really want. For more information about this project see [here](#)

www.tnlcommunityfund.org.uk/media/insights/documents/Cocreation-Booklet-WEB-V2.pdf?mtime=20191219155809&focal=none