

Sanctuary and freedom: the transformational power of spaces for women and girls

This briefing has been produced as part of The National Lottery Community Fund's Women and Girls Initiative (WGI). The WGI was created by The Fund in 2016, using National Lottery funding, in order to invest in services for women and girls across England. It covers:

- // Insights from 31 WGI funded women and girl's projects
- // A brief exploration of gender, and public and private spaces
- // How physical spaces are created and experienced
- // How the emotional aspect provides women and girls spaces to be, to speak, be held, and rebuild their selves and lives
- // A short reflection on digital and virtual spaces within the pandemic.



Introduction

This briefing contains insights and evidence for women and girls' services, commissioners, service providers, funders and other professionals on the importance of creating the right physical and emotional spaces that have the power to transform the lives of women and girls. These spaces are integral to the processes of access, empowerment and rebuilding lives. The briefing has been co-created with nine WGI projects, and input from a further 22 including: specialist services on violence against women and girls (VAWG) and women's centres which offer advocacy and empowerment, counselling and therapy, learning and arts. The organisations work with young women, women travellers, street sex workers, women who have been trafficked, black and minoritised women including those with no recourse to public funds and women in poverty. Their shared insights and voices have been brought together for this briefing. The quotations in the text are from both women's projects providing support and from women accessing support.

Accommodation services, including refuges, are explored in an [earlier briefing](#), therefore are not a focus here (Women and Girls Initiative Learning and Impact Services, 2020).

WGI organisations define spaces as **physical** that are created and owned by women and girls and **emotional**, where women and girls are able to be, and be held so that they can speak and find their voice.

“ *I couldn't bear to look at myself... I now look in the mirror... know it was not my fault. I was treated like a human being, they listened to me and made me feel OK. (Women's Centre)*

“ *The worker welcomed me with such a smile and it felt like she wrapped her arms around me... instantly I felt safe and cared for... I became more confident and eventually became a volunteer. (Young women's project)*

Background

In the last months there has been another wave of anger about violence against women, as reported in the media: the murder of Sabina Nessa, who was walking for five minutes from her home to a pub; the trial for the murder of Sarah Everard, kidnapped and raped by a serving police officer, when walking home at night; the dismissal of two police officers who shared photographs of the dead bodies of Biba Henry and Nicole Smallman.

The fury these events unleashed operates on many levels which particularly impact women and girls, as shared by WGI projects as part of this briefing. For instance: how everyday experiences of violence against women are normalised and trivialised; the many ways women are blamed and made responsible for their own safety; concerns over inaction and lack of priority in public policy; the poor responses of the criminal justice system which create impunity; and, the way black women's lives appear to be worth less.¹ This reality affects women and girls' participation in education, work, and public life. It limits access to services, enjoyment of cultural and recreational activities, and negatively impacts their health and wellbeing.

There are few private or public spaces in which women are and feel completely safe, where they can experience freedom. As Fiona Vera-Gray has argued, women all too frequently trade freedom for safety.² Public and private spaces are gendered and perpetuate inequalities.³ Women rarely have access to separate and autonomous spaces and the ones they inhabit are often associated with motherhood, relationships and family. Public spaces are often etched with fear. Abuse occurs in all of these contexts, and for black and minoritised women racism is also an everyday reality across multiple spaces.⁴

WGI projects create spaces to meet the multiple needs of women and girls who have often experienced violence and abuse, combined with other forms of inequality. Therefore, spaces are specifically designed to offer respite; to create a sense of ease and belonging. They are integral to empowering women and girls, and the holistic support, that so many groups view as vital to their work. Women's Centres and services developed by and for⁵ minoritised women in the WGI programme most frequently cite specific attention to spaces but are not limited to them. Spaces are understood as creating access, safety and security, through the creation of warm, welcoming, inclusive and comfortable environments alongside the relational support that takes place within them.

¹ See EVAW, Imkaan, Rape Crisis England and Wales and Centre for Women's Justice, 2020; Kanyeredzi, 2018; Kelly, 1987; Vera-Grey, 2018.

² Vera-Grey, 2018.

³ Vera-Grey & Kelly, 2020.

⁴ Sima, 2016.

⁵ Shortened to 'by and for' in the rest of the document.

Physical spaces – creating and owning

The spaces where women seek support affect how they think, feel, what they can do and be, and indicate their value. Women seeking support from statutory services have remarked upon how such spaces are seldom full of warmth, rather they often feel cold and somewhat sterile, and have the potential to alienate.⁶ A failure to communicate that women and girls are welcome and seen when seeking help and support means it is impossible to feel at ease; an important frame of mind if difficult topics are to be aired, which limits what individuals are willing to disclose.

*Some physical spaces can be seen as stigmatising or revealing [their] victimisation.
(Leeway, domestic abuse service)*

Women who are abused can find it very difficult to feel safe in spaces as the abuse they have experienced can take place everywhere they go. (RISE, domestic abuse service)

Empowering spaces created for women and girls within the WGI programme have been described as a 'sanctuary' or as 'sacred': spaces that enable women and girls to rebuild, remake themselves and heal. The following section highlights some of the key themes that define how WGI physical spaces are created and experienced.

That these are spaces run by women, for women is considered vital by many organisations and the women who use them. These are dedicated spaces in which it becomes possible to begin to feel safe, in which you do not have to contend with everyday racism, and where you are not made to feel worth less.

Women supporting women. (Aspire, learning, support and wellbeing)

One25 came from women saying they needed a safe space. Women weren't coming in to get support from X organisation, they told our founder they didn't feel safe, needed space just for them. (One 25, street sex work)

*Women's space where they are in control of themselves and their bodies.
(Barrow Women's Community Matters, women's centre)*

Women only, protective, and nurturing. (Trevi House, women's centre)

Feeling more in control is fundamental to creating trust, which is one of the ways women start to feel safer. This has a specific meaning and resonance within 'by and for' services.

⁶Rouf et al, 2021.

Women only, and of the community. (One Voice for Travellers)

Are themselves women and of the community. (Latin American Women's Aid)

Physical spaces are carefully curated, sometimes in co-production, from the colour of paint and furnishings to what is displayed on the walls. Co-creation of spaces ranges from women being involved in the initial design to making the space one in which women's words and creations, including poems, stories and art, are prominent. Many of the 'by and for' groups talk about how essential it is for minoritised women to see themselves, and the cultures they belong to, reflected in photographs, paintings and posters.

That space (reception) belonged to them – [their] artwork on walls. (NIA, VAWG)

Making and displaying – worth. (Women at the Well, women in prostitution)

Built by and for young women. (Project 1325, young women)

A sense that physical spaces can communicate value and self-worth is a recurring theme, linked to the reality that violence and abuse makes women and girls feel that they are not valued, that their bodies and lives do not matter.

Unpleasant spaces reinforce how shit women [survivors] feel about themselves and their life... I felt proud of this space, in all my years in this sector I have never felt that before. (NIA, VAWG)

Women 'feel the space' – their worth, that they are valued.

(Aspire, learning, support and wellbeing)

Trauma informed and women centred approaches that create different spaces is crucial because this is the way that you tell people a different thing. You tell them you are unique, you have so much to give, we do not see you for your crime, we see you holistically. For our women, this might be the first time they heard this, and the first time felt heard, valued, and that they matter. (Women in Prison)

Welcoming, pleasant, warm and airy spaces help to create valuing environments, as does ensuring they are accessible.

Inclusive, warm, welcoming. Light and bright. (Snowdrop, human trafficking)

New central space, disabled accessible, light and airy. (Pathway, domestic and sexual violence service)

It feels homely, there is an informality about it, at the same time as being safe. It is like a sitting room, women can use the kitchen, they can sit in the garden. It makes women who are very tense begin to relax. (Latin American Women's Aid)

Discreet but in the community, easy to slip in. Homely, adolescent friendly. (Noa Girls, Jewish young women)

Safe, informal, known. Their home. (Hibiscus, 'by and for')

Safe, secure, reliable. A second home. (Women on the Wight, women's centre)

Spaces to connect are central to Women's Centres, and other organisations, combining the private and confidential alongside room to engage in shared activities. Space to do everyday things, to be creative, matters intensely to women who have no recourse to public funds or are otherwise surviving on extremely limited income and living in restricted accommodation. Sharing food and stories is a universal language that connects women and girls.

Informal. Growing, making, cooking – is nurturing and brings joy. (Room to Talk, women in the CJS)

Build community through range of activities, creating mutual support systems. (Hibiscus, 'by and for')

“ *Here I have space to be me, not someone's mum, sister, grandma, I can be daft or as needy as I want to be. If I want to cry I can. It's a very safe space for me. (Women's Centre)*

“ *The project makes you feel like you're a good person. (Young women's project)*

Emotional spaces – spaces to be and be held

The concept of emotional space reflects women and girls are invited to take time for themselves, and a commitment to hearing and holding survivors so that they can rebuild and heal. Empowerment takes place where women are supported, guided and facilitated, whilst remaining in control of their own choices.

The idea that these are spaces in which **to be** recognises how rarely women and girls have time to themselves. For many their sense of themselves has been controlled and defined by gendered cultural norms and by violence and abuse. The work of surviving, getting through the day, means they rarely have any space to just be with themselves, and for some to even have the ease to sleep. Many of the WGI projects report that providing spaces women can use when, and how they are needed, is a key aspect of their work.

I asked one woman what her favourite colour was and she paused and said she hadn't had a thought of her own for two years. (Barrow Women's Community Matters, women's centre)

Women are marginalised, many come from contexts where they are silenced - this is a space where they can speak and be heard. (Hibiscus, 'by and for')

It is rare for women to have a space in which they can just 'be'. With no expectations of doing or buying. (Women at the Well, women in prostitution)

Physical environment, to feel more at ease, comfy sofas to watch tv, if want to sleep on sofa, they can. That's exactly what they need, safe, without harassment, woken up and looked after, might be only time they get that sleep in a few days. (One 25, street sex workers)

The idea of holding space encompasses many aspects of practice in women's organisations: validating experiences and the emotions attached to them; making clear that this is a context in which they can talk about what they find the most difficult; that they will not be made to feel responsible for what has happened to them; that the wider contexts of their lives will be recognised; that they will be supported to explore their needs and find ways to meet them; that they are cared for and about.

Holding women. You could be in the lobby in court and that person will still feel safe because you're sat next to them – it's like I'm safe because you're here. (WILD, young parents project)

Holding space and respite. We talk of accompanying, walking with and are trying to better articulate what this means. (Women at the Well, women in prostitution)

Recognising that every woman's journey is different. If someone has no English, no recourse to public funds, has been trafficked, just getting on a bus would be massive. (Ashiana, 'by and for')

Held and trusted space to recognise and name emotions. Thinking space – to think clearly. (RISE, domestic abuse)

The Women and Girls Network (WGN) who provide holistic responses to VAWG refer to their spaces as 'sacred', respecting the mind, body and soul and explain holding space as: "*we are the container of the uncontained*".

In creating spaces where women connect with each other many groups see part of their roles as enabling the creation of communities in which women are able to care about and for each other, where women can be resourceful in creating together. One aspect of this is offering the possibility of involvement in actions and campaigns to end violence and abuse – that their voices can join with many others to demand change.

“ *... people come for a brew and a chat, women only, no abusive men, no-one kicks off... time away from everyone in the world here. (Women's Centre)*

“ *If it wasn't for this place, there would be a lot of people in a wrecky, horrible place. It is salvation, sanctuary... you have back up and you are not on your own (Women's Centre)*

“ *Everyone here is compassionate, the receptionist, everyone, no one ever makes you feel like you are wasting their time, that's been a strange experience for me. (Women's Centre)*

Digital and virtual Spaces – the pandemic

The pandemic heralded an increased emphasis upon digital and virtual spaces, resources that had been used previously, but less often for women and girls seeking support and sanctuary. Given the findings above the question is clearly whether digital spaces can replicate the physical and emotional spaces that make such a difference.

There is no doubt that virtual spaces have become a support option, and that this is preferable for some women and girls who might not be able to access physical spaces easily, especially women with a range of disabilities and mental health issues, who may prefer this mode. A number of projects suggested that they were able to continue community building and involvement, finding ways to conduct creative activities.

Women have been able to reach out to us who may not feel able to be in the physical space. (Pathway, domestic and sexual violence service)

Moved communities online, and continued familiar activities. (Hibiscus, 'by and for')

Also sent activities to people's homes – started the 'Byou Tapestry' – people embroidered and sent in their experiences of lockdown, each accompanied with a letter. Will exhibit it, is 28 metres long currently. Had global reach, had people sending things in from e.g. NZ. (Stitches in Time, participatory arts service)

That said there are limitations and concerns around confidentiality and safety, with many women and girls struggling to find locations at home where they feel comfortable and at ease to discuss violence and abuse. Some do not want to discuss these issues in the very spaces where the abuse is taking place. Many of the WGI organisations say it is much harder to recreate the holding and emotional spaces that their buildings provide.

For some women, they have really struggled without the building, not just access to tech, but if that's not how they interact with the world, they won't use it.

Aspire, learning, support and wellbeing)

Online has made safety and confidentiality challenging, also difficult to do translation. (Ashiana, 'by and for')

There was less space for her – safety and confidentiality complicated. (Nia, VAWG service)

The Women and Girls Network also reflect upon screens acting as a barrier in terms of the emotional work that is part of support, and that it takes longer to get to the 'hard work'.

In conclusion, digital spaces are an additional support offer for women and girls, especially for those where physical access is not possible, or challenging. WGI projects have been able to respond creatively and maintain support and connection digitally, in the main. However, digital spaces cannot replicate the combination of physical and emotional spaces, and relationships, that make such a difference. More evidence is needed on the outcomes that can be achieved for women and girls who access services entirely virtually. There are real concerns about safety and confidentiality for women and girls accessing support from private spaces where abuse has been, or is currently experienced.

“ *They don't know how grateful I am for their help... it's a place where you can be safe, not scared of anyone judging you... it's a comfort zone. No one can see in. (Women's Centre)*

“ *Continuity doesn't exist in social care and the NHS, you tell so many people the same problem again and again for nothing. To have one person who can deal with it all is so refreshing, it's transformed my life. (Women's Centre)*

“ *All the other services I've ever used look at problems in isolation, and address them in isolation too... which never works because all my difficult circumstances have always fed into each other and make the others harder to escape from. (Women's Centre)*

Conclusions – Investing in spaces

This briefing argues that the physical and emotional spaces created by women's organisations are part of what makes them both unique and effective: it is what their users value and what enables change. Considerable investment is required to create access, safety and security, through the creation of warm, welcoming, inclusive and comfortable environments alongside the relational support that takes place within them.

Spaces that are co-created, by and for women and girls themselves, where their words and cultures are on display, create the infrastructure for feeling valued, safe, and belonging in community. This, in combination with the creation of emotional spaces where women and girls who are survivors are invited to take time for themselves, experience commitment to being heard and held, so that they can rebuild and heal, is what works. Empowerment takes place where women are supported, guided and facilitated, whilst remaining in control of their own choices.

We hear the term 'not engaging' often from statutory services, which puts the responsibility on service users rather than service providers. This briefing outlines how the creation of the right physical and emotional spaces enables women and girls to engage, rebuild and recover. To invest in spaces and infrastructure is to invest in good/better outcomes and this should be central to commissioning and funding.

“ *A women's only space is so empowering. It helps me to be the best I can be. I had people believe in me when I didn't believe in myself. It is so important to have a place where you feel safe. (Women's Centre)*

“ *I've gone through abuse by men so to have men in a women's place I would feel deadly uncomfortable. I wouldn't feel safe at all... That's a big thing for me where I know I can come and it's just women, and I don't have to worry about a man being in the building. (Women's Centre)*

Contributors

This insights briefing was drawn together by Sue Botcherby (DMSS) and Liz Kelly, (CWASU). The groups that were part of the co-creation conversation were:

A Way Out www.awayout.co.uk
Hibiscus www.hibiscusinitiatives.org.uk
Leeway www.leewaysupport.org
SERRIC www.sericc.org.uk
The Zinthiya Trust www.zinthyatrust.org
Trevi House www.trevi.org.uk
Women Centre www.womencentre.org.uk
Women and Girls Network www.wgn.org.uk
Young Women's Outreach Project www.ywop.co.uk

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