Routes to power & influence for UK women's organisations

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Why we commissioned this research – a funders view

This report came about as a result of a conversation between a group of UK funders, all of whom have a track record of funding the women's voluntary and community sector.

We wanted to understand the opportunities for small and grassroots women's organisations to catalyse change for women, what works well at the moment and where more support is needed. Post-pandemic, and as the cost of living crisis builds up speed, we were already aware that:

- the women's VCS is massively under-funded [1], has fared badly through austerity and is particularly vulnerable to further cuts post-pandemic
- throughout the conversations about the impact of the pandemic and recovery from it, the specific impacts on women have received relatively little attention or subsequent commitments for change
- the need for, and benefits women and girls gain from, gender specific services is often not recognised by broader funding and commissioning processes
- marginalised women face multiple intersecting barriers to fully participating in "economic, social and cultural life" and "decision-making which affects their lives"[2]
- despite increased attention to participation in decision making and policy making in recent years[3], marginalised women are often unheard and unable to influence decisions and policies
- women's rights as a broader set of issues have fallen down the agenda, with fewer funders and other institutions identifying women as a priority group
- there are some local, regional, national and sub-sector-specific networks that bring together some women's organisations but provision of these is patchy and they can lack a clear link through to (and voice in) national conversations; funding for such networks has also been hard to find
- there is a lack of a co-ordinated voice talking to central government about women's issues - a gap left when the Women's National Commission was disbanded

Overall, we were keen to understand what women's organisations need to increase opportunities for transformational change, and what we and other funders could do to support this.

The research team focused on a few geographic areas, as well as talking to some national organisations to get a quick sense of what might be possible, rather than a comprehensive analysis of the picture across the whole of the UK. We were also aware of different research looking at funding into the women's sector (to be published in autumn 2022)[1] and wanted something which would complement that.

We asked the research team to focus on recommendations for funders (rather than for women's organisations) and to make particular efforts to hear from women from marginalised communities. We are pleased to hear strong voices from those communities throughout this report – what they have to say might not always make for comfortable reading but it is important that we hear them. The views in this report are of the participants and the research team and are not necessarily shared by all the funders involved. However, the report contains important insights, particularly about connectivity and power dynamics. It also includes clear feedback to both funders and commissioners about the impact of our own practices.

We are pleased to see a comprehensive list of recommendations for funders' action, focusing both on

[1] For information about this research, contact Louise Telford at Rosa UK

our own internal processes and priorities and on opportunities for us to co-ordinate and/or align our future activities to better support the sector.

We will be reflecting on the report findings and recommendations within our individual organisations. We will also share this report with a wider group of funders interested in supporting the women's voluntary and community sector and hope to make real progress on some of the issues raised. It is our intention that this is not just an academic exercise but rather a springboard for increased resources for the sector. The report will also be of interest to the women and girls sector and we will share findings with them.

In the meantime, we would like to thank all the individuals and organisations who gave their valuable time and expertise to this piece of work. Thanks also to the research team who have exceeded our expectations and given us a really helpful framework for our future actions.

This work is being steered by a group of funders which has included:
Comic Relief; Esmee Fairbairn Foundation; Lloyds Bank Foundation for England & Wales ; National Lottery Community Fund; Pilgrim Trust; Rosa UK; Smallwood Trust; Women's Fund for Scotland

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[1] Life-Changing & Life-Saving: Funding for the women's sector - Womens Budget Group (wbg.org.uk)
[2] European Commission on the Status of Women, March 201
[3] Bochel et al., 2008

Summary

Introduction

The aims of the research are:

- To better understand the scope and reach of the existing national, regional and local infrastructure serving the women's voluntary and community sector [WVCS].
- To identify routes to power and influence for small and/or grass roots women's organisations, and the barriers that impact the sector's ability to influence change at a policy level.

This research was conducted in spring and early summer of 2022. Principal information gathering was through 57 interviews with organisations and groups in the sector, across some UK geographies and in the four nations. We conducted interviews with actors in the VAWG (violence against women and girls) sector, and undertook a mini review of the migration sector, to act as a comparator to the wider WVCS [women's voluntary and community sector].

Connectivity in the women's sector

Locally, the WVCS appears to be reasonably well connected, at least in some locations, but there are significant gaps in connecting local and national actors. Applying an influencing and power building lens, key findings are that:

- Service delivery organisations tend to be hyper-connected locally in ways that allow for signposting and referral to others providing complementary support.
- Connections between local service delivery networks and power building / influencing work tend to be much weaker.
- Local organisations are often strongly connected, but tensions and limitations similar to those identified at national levels sometimes exist, around competition for funding for example.
- There is often weak connectivity between local organisations and national influencing work, especially for organisations based in England outside of London.
- Service provision and influencing work is more connected and collegiate in the devolved nations than in England. Connections *across* the four nations are not strong, however.
- Connections to wider sectors (i.e., beyond the WVCS itself) appear in general to be limited. Some interviewees spoke about involvement with broader coalitions beyond the sector, but these are patchy.
- The mainstream voluntary sector is typically poor at gendered (and broader power) analysis, and at foregrounding gender considerations when addressing their issues of concern.

Concentrations of power and resources in the sector

The people with most power over the sector sit outside it: the mainly male commissioners, policy makers, politicians and others who hold decision making power over the lives of women, and who constrain the space in which women's organisations can operate.

That said, within the WVCS itself some groups do hold substantial power, relative to others. According to multiple accounts, there's an issue around how power is concentrated with bigger organisations, which are invariably led by white, able-bodied, middle-class women. This power operates to disadvantage smaller organisations, for example in funding, including funding that is intended to target support to racially minoritised communities.

Some of these power imbalances are locked in through often longstanding interconnections, typically based on interpersonal relationships with each other, and externally with decision makers.

Race and racism featured prominently as an issue in ways sectoral power dynamics play out, but people described a range of other intersectional disadvantages (including disability and class) that also act as barriers to effective engagement. In general, across these intersections, those with lived experience do not feel listened to and respected by the more powerful actors. Those most affected by issues are not being appropriately involved in attempts to solve those issues.

All this is in the context that the vast majority of interviewees reported chronic underfunding, and constant firefighting of multiple crises, all of which draws attention away from the possibilities of investing in longer-term solutions work.

Linked to this, interviewees widely described the commissioning model as deeply problematic. The fact that money is often coming through commissioning from local authorities and government departments has a chilling effect on influencing work - because organisations are wary of "biting the hand that feeds them".

Issues and challenges facing women

The issues facing women are so deeply interconnected, it is difficult – and not always helpful - to separate them. Organisational siloing of issues may help with communications work, and identifying winnable objectives, but often does not meaningfully address problems, or their root causes.

The most significant issues cited by interviewees were poverty, gender-based violence and the threat of this, and access to affordable childcare.

Underlying all these issues are a set of challenges that make advancing issues of concern to women and the WVCS harder to achieve:

- Political systems typically disadvantage women, and more marginalised groups of women in particular. This disadvantage plays out in terms of who holds power in those systems, and how those systems operate. This applies to national and local government and to other institutions such as the Police, as well as statutory services more generally.
- Underpinning all this (and driving it) is a wider discriminatory, misogynist and racist culture, and the norms, attitudes and behaviours that flow from this. These contexts impact on women's day to day lives, affect whether issues are seen as important (or not), and how they are resolved.

Overview of current influencing

At the UK level, interviewees communicated a strong sense that the WVCS has not recently been successful overall in achieving change. Some pointed to examples of policy and legislative gains (or averting things from getting worse) but the overall picture is of an increasingly challenging rearguard defence of rights and livelihoods.

Given funding and resource constraints, there is only a limited amount of change-focused work occurring overall. Influencing work that is taking place tends to be focused on lobbying and policy work.

Many cited the Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) sector as relatively effective and successful, with some key relative strengths, including some positive mentions of the End Violence

Against Women (EVAW) coalition. However, interviewees typically didn't feel that it was achieving the impact they would like to see.

Westminster currently presents a tough political context by all accounts, and so this is not a surprising picture. Influencing outside of Westminster can be more effective in the current climate. We heard examples of local influencing approaches that have helped achieve change at local levels and in the devolved nations.

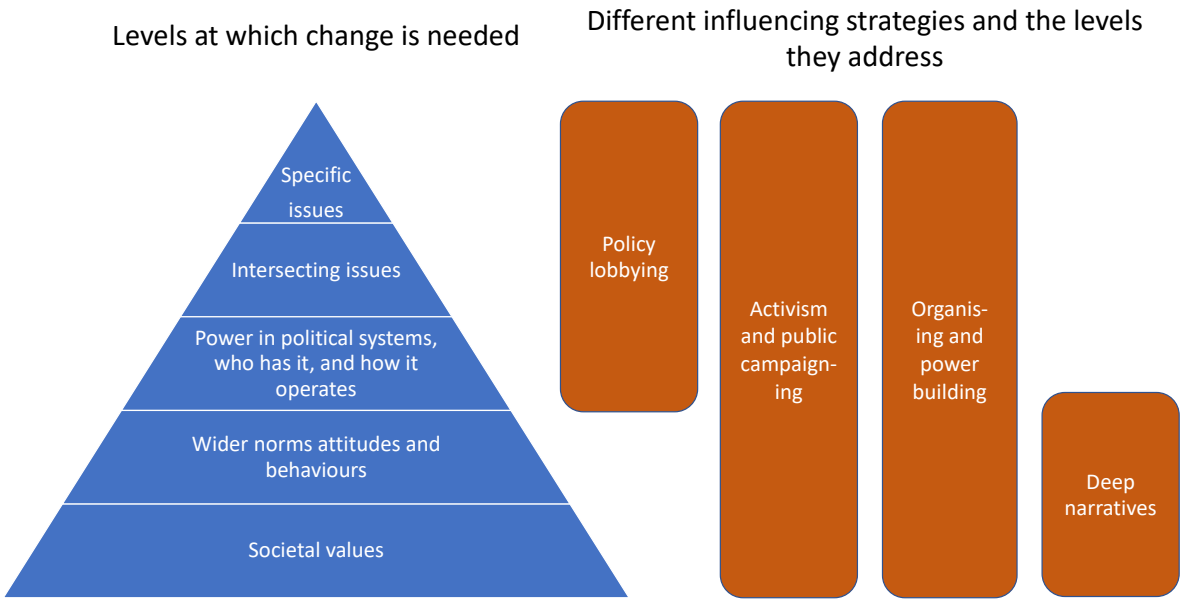
But even where good policy is notionally in place, there may be issues about how that policy is implemented, and how in practice it translates to improving women's lives. Actual benefits may still need to be claimed and fought for. And again, more marginalised and disadvantaged women may be less able to assert their rights.

Routes to power and influence

A healthy movement ecology normally demonstrates a wide range of approaches to making change. Considering the women's sector from this perspective:

- There is very little attention given to organising approaches – i.e., strategies that are focused on supporting leadership and building the agency of women with lived experience to advocate for themselves and build their own power.
- Activism and public campaigning seem currently under-represented elements across the sector.
- There have been some good examples of media and social media campaigns challenging dominant narratives, but there is room to do more in this area.
- There is a continuing need to challenge how (and by whom) political power is manifested through determining what is funded and how that funding is disbursed.

Marrying our analysis about the issues facing the sector and the strategies that are being - or could be - employed gives a summary picture along the following lines:



Policy lobbying work is an important part of the mix but can typically provide only a narrow route to influence. We think it makes sense to consider how this work can be complemented by a greater emphasis on strategies focusing on shifting power and on addressing attitudes, behaviours, norms

and values. These are necessarily long-term investments. The logic is that, over time, this work can shift the context in which policy making takes place, to move it to more favourable ground, particularly for more disadvantaged groups.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To bolster policy influencing work, funders should consider:

- increased investment in (a) organising programmes designed to build collective leadership [R1] (b) public campaigning [R2] (c) influencing work focused on improving decision-making structures and processes [R3] (d) work around narratives - focused more deeply on challenging and changing values [R4].

Infrastructure support (1) Capacity and representation

There are key moments in an organisation's development where bespoke support could be particularly useful. This points to the need in particular to provide funding support (a) individual change makers (b) un-constituted groups requiring micro-grants and (c) organisations and groups moving towards formalisation.

Organisations ideally need local conduits to support influencing work. These may not necessarily have to be institutions.

Interviewees identified many gaps in representation but possibly the starkest absence relates to a paucity of infrastructure supporting the representation of disabled women. This is a specific area that funders could usefully help address.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To address key challenges around capacity and representation, funders should consider:

- Funding streams that can reach beyond formalised organisations [R5].
- Funding specific posts in selected localities with a specific remit to work with local groups and organisations to channel, build and augment their routes to influence [R7].
- Dedicated funding to an infrastructure organisation or network representing disabled women, collaborating with existing organisations to develop this in a way that best meets their needs [R8].

Infrastructure support (2) Addressing barriers to effectiveness

By multiple accounts, poor pay and poor working conditions are endemic in the sector. Interviewees also presented a widespread sense of a crisis of individual and collective wellbeing, manifesting in burnout for example. In our judgement, based on what we have heard, these issues are more prevalent in the WVCS than they are across the wider voluntary sector. It will be important to try and address them, but they have complex and multi-faceted roots and there are no simple or single solutions.

We also found several intersecting fault lines in the sector, around which conflicts erupt, forcing organisations and grassroots groups to take sides and further hampering collaboration – particularly around sex work and trans inclusivity. In some ways, funders are uniquely well placed to take on a convening role, creating spaces to build understand and help foster relationships. There are some sensitivities to navigate, however, to do with the power dynamics at play (between funders and grantees for example). And expectations must be realistic. This is delicate work and would require sustained investment.

RECOMMENDATIONS
Funders should consider playing an active convening role to unblock key barriers to sector effectiveness, by:

- Holding a sectoral consultation to explore and co-develop practical proposals for how best to address endemic issues around pay, conditions and wellbeing [R6].
- Convening and holding space to address conflicts, build understanding and foster trust building [R9].

Grant making

There were very widespread calls for funders to provide unrestricted and longer-term funding We also heard many requests to make application processes easier, more accessible and better supported. Many suggested streamlining or redesigning reporting, including by being more flexible about how information is gathered from grantees.

Some pointed to the need for greater internal diversity within funding organisations. Movement on internal diversity needs to be accompanied by changes that ensure more equitable practices and processes.

This research points to gaps in funding, but a more systematic analysis of this would help ongoing decision making. One key dimension of this is around how funding flows to certain groups and less to others. Some interviewees suggested that funders need to be more serious about supporting diverse groups and centring marginalised voices.

More funding is needed that is explicitly about centring lived experience, especially for disabled and for racially minoritised women. But it must be managed and targeted to the right organisations; that is difficult and requires new ways of operating. The best and most obvious way to do this would be to delegate decision-making to leaders with lived experience. This is difficult to get right and so it would make sense to work in partnership with an organisation with expertise in designing and implementing such an approach.

RECOMMENDATIONS
In their funding and organisational practices, funders should:

- Review grantmaking practices with a view to (a) expanding unrestricted and longer-term funding, (b) making applications more streamlined, and (c) being more flexible around reporting and outcome expectations [R10].
- Create a pooled fund in which funding decisions are led by lived experience leaders applying an intersectional lens [R12].
- Bring more women of colour, disabled and working-class women to internal positions of power - into organisations and governance [R11].

Funders' roles in supporting an effective sector

We have set out several recommendations and suggestions about what should change. But it will be hard to shift the sector far without new funding. Whilst there are some obvious places to move money *towards*, it's not obvious where to move funds *from*. And this is at a time when some existing sources of funding for the WVCS are coming to a close. This all points to the importance of proactive efforts to engage potential new funders. Funding to the WVCS makes up only a tiny percentage of total funding to social justice work. Clearly, one aspiration must be to increase this percentage. But

another potential route to advancing issues affecting women would be to ensure that organisations outside the WVCS better represent women's interests.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Funders should:

- Encourage the wider funding community to provide increased funding for women-led organisations [R13].
- Provide funding for collaborations between organisations in the women's sector & broader coalitions to help ensure gendered analysis is embedded across coalitions' work [R14].
- Share learning and practice about how to apply a gendered lens well (and less well) in mainstream funding of influencing work [R15].

Whilst some recommendations we are making can be adopted and taken forward by funders individually, some would clearly benefit from a collective focus. As an input to funders' own considerations, we offer the following breakdown:

Degree of collectivity needed	Highest priority recommendations	Important recommendations
Can be taken forward by individual funders	Support development of enhanced infrastructure for disabled women [R8] Review grantmaking practices [R10] Diversify internally [R11]	Develop funding streams that can reach beyond formalised organisation [R5] Invest in posts with remits to be channels of local influence [R7] Fund collaborations with broader sector coalitions on key issues [R14]
Would ideally involve coordination of some kind	Engage with funders currently outside the sector to encouraged increased support of women-led organisations [R13]	Complement policy lobbying work by investing in: Building collective leadership [R1] Public campaigning [R2] Engagement around decision making structures and processes [R3] Challenging narratives [R4]
Would strongly benefit from funder collaboration	Explore solutions to pay, conditions and wellbeing [R6] Convene spaces to address conflicts and build relationships [R9] Create a pooled fund to invest in lived-experience-led organisations [R12]	Share learning about mainstreaming gender [R15]

It would be good if efforts to develop and shape the sector were undertaken collectively, not just by funders operating as a closed group. Expectations – and systems around tracking and assessing progress – will need take into account that results will be long term, and the dynamics will be complex.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Funders should

- Take forward appropriate recommendations through a collective decision-making process, involving others beyond the funding community [R16].
- Communicate expectations clearly and set up tracking and assessment processes that recognised the long term nature of the approach [R17].

1 Introduction

1.1 Aims and approach

This report was commissioned by a group of funders which has included: Comic Relief; Esmee Fairbairn Foundation; Lloyds Bank Foundation for England & Wales; National Lottery Community Fund; Pilgrim Trust; Rosa UK; Smallwood Trust; Women's Fund for Scotland.

The aims of the research are:

- To better understand the scope and reach of the existing national, regional and local infrastructure serving the women's voluntary and community sector
- To identify routes to power and influence for small and/or grass roots women's organisations, and the barriers that impact the sector's ability to influence change at a policy level

The research has taken a movement ecology approach, to look across the women's voluntary and community sector [WVCS] and assess how well its infrastructure is supporting the diverse actors to make change. The research team has explored the effectiveness of change making in the sector from the perspectives of power, relationships, conflicts, approaches taken and issues worked on, identifying areas of strength, issues and gaps.

The steer was to focus outside of the VAWG [violence against women and girls] specialist arm of the sector, based on the hypothesis that this is already stronger in influencing.

We have sought local, regional, national and UK wide perspectives on the existing WVCS infrastructure, sampling the sector in detail to extrapolate what we hope are representative findings.

The research has mainstreamed intersectional marginalisation across all case studies, making sure to give voice to organisations led by and working for racially minoritised women, deaf and disabled women, queer women, working class women etc., as well as focusing two case studies on issues in geographic areas.

1.2 Methodology

This research was conducted in spring and early summer of 2022. Principle information gathering was through 57 interviews with organisations and groups in the sector, across some UK geographies and in the nations. We began by interviewing some of the commissioning funders. Nationally, we conducted smaller case studies in Scotland[2] (with a disability lens), Northern Ireland and North Wales, as well as across organisations working in England or UK wide. Within England we focused on Manchester (with a racially minoritised lens), a comparison between Bristol and the wider Avon area, and Nottingham. We conducted interviews with actors in the VAWG sector, as a comparison.

We also conducted a mini-review of the migration sector, to see what could be learnt from its strengths, weaknesses and approaches - specifically around the role funders have played in wider trends around influencing and power building and in considering the infrastructure of that sector.

[2] We had hoped to speak to a larger number of organisations in Scotland but had trouble finding respondents comfortable with speaking to the disability lens.

Interviewees

Interviewees	#
Funders	4
UK or England-wide organisations	10
Bristol and Avon	8
Nottingham	8
Manchester (racially minoritised organisations lens)	7
North Wales	4
Northern Ireland (mini case study)	2
Scotland (disability organisations lens)	3
VAWG	5
Migration sector	6
Total	57

Further to these interviews, we held workshops with the group of funders commissioning the work and separately with some of the interviewees, to check and develop our initial findings.

We subsequently held a second workshop with the funder group to gather reactions to our suggested draft recommendations. We also received comments and feedback on a draft version of this report.

This report draws on all these sources.

Quotes in the report are from interviewees, given anonymously, unless the source is otherwise stated.

Part 1: Findings

2 Connectivity in the women's sector

2.1 How well is the sector connected?

The women's voluntary and community sector [WVCS] appears to be reasonably well connected locally, at least in some locations, but there are significant gaps in connecting local and national actors.

Some sub-sectors are much better networked. For example, the VAWG sector benefits from widespread refuge accommodation and other local projects, as well as an effective coalition campaign in EVAW [End Violence Against Women and Girls] and infrastructure organisations such as Imkaan (the only UK umbrella women's organisation dedicated to addressing violence against Black and minoritised women and girls). Other sub sectors are less well served, and some constituencies are very poorly represented through national infrastructure (such as disabled women). The picture in each of the nations is different. Overall, there is a limited sense of being part of a women's movement and of being connected into a wider women's sector.

Local connectivity and networking

Service delivery organisations tend to be hyper-connected locally in ways that allow for signposting and referral to others providing complementary support.

This helps ensure – as far as possible - a holistic approach to supporting women through collective provision of services, as typically single organisations are not able to provide everything that might be needed.

"As a small local charity, we try and take up/advocate on behalf of our older women with disabilities. We also try and signpost people to the correct agency, so that people know where to go to get the right type of support and information if we cannot assist with the issues".

This level of local interconnection between service delivery organisations reflects the fact that the issues affecting women's lives are so interconnected. We saw a similar picture in the migration sector, where local organisations tend to be connected to others locally providing support and advice around benefits and housing and homelessness for example.

Connections between local service delivery networks and both local and national power building / influencing work tend to be much weaker.

This reflects the fact that local service providers are typically woefully under-resourced to cope with levels of need for services and so unable to dedicate time and resources to wider action focused on influencing and power building.

Although it's a very challenging environment, we did see that some contexts make it more likely that services can be connected into local influencing and power building. For example:

- **Where there are local networks of networks** - such as Wonderfully Made Women and Mama Health and Poverty - two fantastic networks of service providing organisations in Manchester which connect with each other, providing interconnections for many small organisations. These networks have no real structure outside of regular meetings, at which the individuals attending decide if and when to collaborate organically, building power through this networking and influencing the local authority together at strategic points.

- **Where there is a strong local hub (meaning where one organisation connects in with multiple service delivery partners for their referral pathways), it makes it easier to then bolt on influencing and power building work**. Although we didn't look in any detail at the model, Coventry Women's Partnership is possibly interesting here, in that it provides an organisational home for multiple activities and actors, making it relatively more straightforward to develop an holistic analysis of the challenges women face, and what needs to change, which creates a good starting point for an influencing or power building strategy.[3]

- **Where there is a sector organisation providing a clear channel of influence that local service providers can connect to.** In the migration sector for example, City of Sanctuary UK is an initiative seeking to link communities, statutory organisations (including councils) and voluntary sector organisations and groups within local areas around common agendas of inclusion and solidarity. As such, it offers an entry point to local engagement/influencing for service delivery organisations and networks and a way to channel their intelligence to decision makers.

- **Where decision makers are receptive to influencing approaches, especially when there are structures in place to support that.** For example, through the Mayoral authority, Bristol has a Women's Commission, and Bristol Women's Voice is closely connected to the comission. Decision makers in the devolved? nations are similarly more receptive, as noted in section 6.2 below.

Grassroots groups had a good sense of mutual solidarity and collaboration across localities – as well as across issues over wider geographies - but they are often not well connected to the mainstream sector. Lack of collaboration between grassroots groups and established organisations may result from different working styles and sometimes incompatible positions and is further explained by some of the tensions we explore below (see section 3.2).

Despite some strong local connectivity of service providers, tensions and limitations similar to those identified at national levels do remain.

These revolve around competition for funding, domination of larger organisations and the challenges of working in an underfunded and overstretched sector.

"Power structures and processes locally stop smaller groups having influence".

"We don't feel very connected, but it's not because we don't try. We feel more connected nationally [where there is] less competition for funding".

"I feel connected, but to a very overstretched sector".

[3] http://www.fwt.org.uk/social/coventry-womens-partnership/

Local to national connectivity

We found plenty of gaps in the connectivity between national and local work, especially for organisations based in England outside of London.

Larger national organisations tend to be distanced from typically smaller local organisations, with tensions around power and resources acting as a barrier (see section 3.2).

For some, the legacy of the global pandemic forcing meetings online has helped organisations and groups geographically distanced from centres of power to engage.

We heard this from interviewees in north Wales and in Scotland for example. As one interviewee put it, "*The pandemic has been really helpful in terms of levelling up the powers within the geography of Wales … The move to digital meetings has been a real boom. We're worried it will change back".*

But conversely, the move to online engagement presents a barrier for some groups.

"Technology, social media and the climate of 'Influencers' makes it harder for older women with disabilities to be included and involved".

Where they exist, routes to influence and building power for local groups seem to be:

- **Through being connected to national organisations representing specific communities and/or constituencies - such as the Women's Aid Federation or Imkaan.**

"We have felt very isolated for a very long time. A Women's Aid conference helped us meet other organisations, including Imkaan and Southall Black Sisters. We are now members of Imkaan, which gives us a chance to meet other organisations".

- **Through being connected to organisations campaigning on a specific issue.**

For example, many interviewees spoke positively about the EVAW coalition supporting them and the wider VAWG sector to be comparatively well networked in collective campaigning work.

- **Through social media, connecting national campaigning to local experience**

This is done more organically online than through networks or organisations - for example as illustrated by the way Pregnant then Screwed has used social media to crowdsource lived experience of maternity-related work issues and then drive campaigns nationally bolstered by these examples.

- **Through national women's organisations - although this route is not necessarily working well.**

Interviewees from local organisations were sometimes complementary about some of the support they received from national women's organisations, for example around training and capacity building. But in describing how well those national organisations provided a route to influence, interviewees offered a number of criticisms, that they typically:

- did not act effectively as voices for the sector
- failed to build and share power
- operated as a blocker on external initiatives in areas that they believed should be led by them

"There is no real deep sense of building community, shifting power, no understanding of bringing

together a movement of organisations"

Overall, local interviewees expressed a view that national organisations prioritise their own interests over sectoral ones. Hence, they tended to express the feeling that no-one was convening and connecting the women's VCS well across the piece?, with collaborations tending to come through niche membership areas (such as Women's Aid), area focuses (like black and minoritised women experiencing violence), or coalition campaigns (like EVAW), often held outside the sector.

These criticisms reflect a sense from local organisations and groups that most national women's organisations aren't performing as they should. We discuss this further below (see section 3.2).

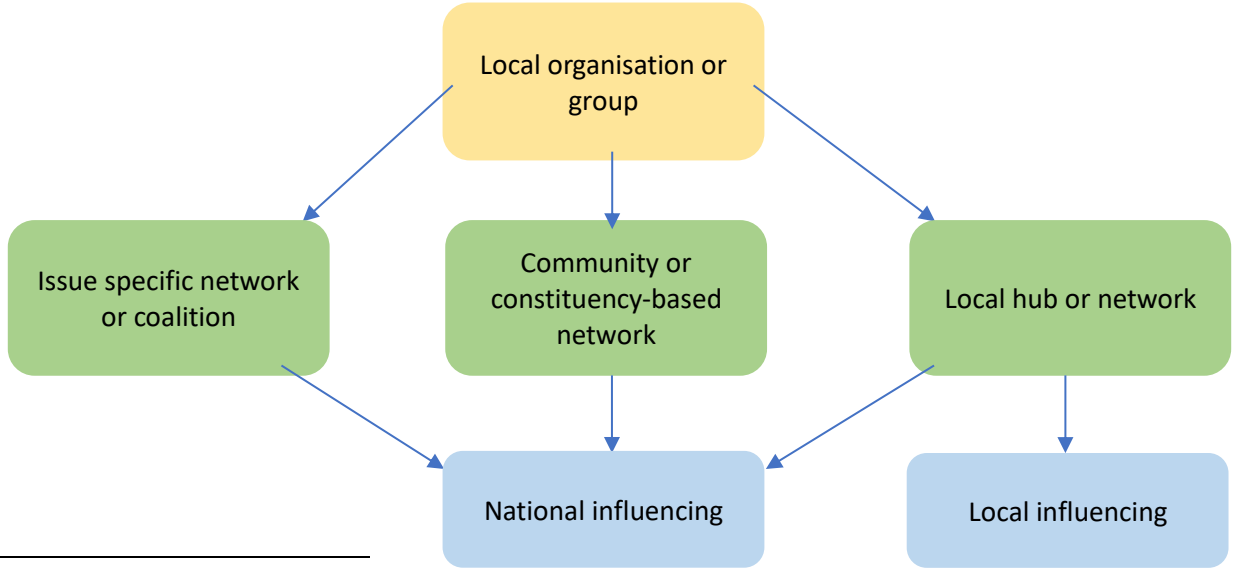
But it's also true that it is challenging to ask that under-resourced national organisations with multiple remits act as a channel for, and representative of, local organisations' experiences and agendas. For example, in the migration field, the Insight Hub operated by Refugee Action[4] seeks to make the barriers to involvement as low as possible by operating to a light touch model in gathering and sharing intelligence from local groups, using that information to identify trends and issues. We heard that this provided a useful resource during COVID, but that organisations have been less inclined to be actively involved since the height of the pandemic.

A possible lesson from this is that even where a national organisation covering broad agendas makes it as straightforward as possible for local organisations to be involved, engagement still may be limited.

One interpretation is that the natural routes for local organisations to be connected to national influencing would be either through (a) a local network that has national reach, (b) a national organisation, network or coalition that is issue specific, or (c) a national organisation or network that represents a particular constituency - rather than through connections to national organisations with a more generic remit.

It is also worth noting that sometimes local influencing is picked up nationally in a more organic way, such as the example of the successful campaign to make misogyny a hate crime in Nottingham, which seeded a national campaign.

Intermediary routes likely to be most effective in linking local organisations and national influencing



[4] https://www.ragp.org.uk/insight-hub

In the devolved nations

We found that in Wales and Northern Ireland, service provision and influencing work was much more connected and collegiate than in England. We don't have enough evidence to be confident in saying that this is the case too in Scotland, although it seems likely from what we heard.

There are strong interpersonal relationships as the sectors are much smaller, with much more partnership working. There is typically a culture of partnership which contrasts with the English culture of competition.

Wales

"Policy and campaigns professionals are very linked up because 'everyone knows each other' - lots of personal relationships are built up over time [in Wales]".

"We do a lot of partnership working, not just with people in the women's sector and not always in an overly formal way. Personal relationships are a big part of it. Wales is small so it's easier to keep relationships going".

Northern Ireland (NI)

"We are very collaborative in Northern Ireland. There's a relatively limited number of women's organisations, we have to come together to access funding".

"There's a certain amount of generosity in the sector. It's a cultural norm".

Connections *across* the four nations are not strong, however.

Some organisations, like the Women's Budget Group (WBG) & WRC have sister organisations in other nations. But in many places, connections are not strong. Partly this reflects the fact of increased policy divergence between the nations and the extent to which policy is devolved. But the lack of connection and representation was a concern for a couple of interviewees.

Connections to wider sectors

As noted above, organisations providing services are typically well connected to those outside the WVCS offering complementary provision.

From an influencing and power building lens, connections to wider sectors (i.e., beyond the WVCS itself) appear in general to be limited.

Connections are relatively stronger in organisations operating across England or UK wide than at a local level.

Some interviewees spoke about involvement with broader coalitions beyond the sector, but these are patchy examples and suggest that on the whole the women's sector is siloed from other related sectors.

For example, work on poverty is mainly conducted outside the women's sector, but with involvement

from organisations like the Women's Budget Group. There are links with some unions around conditions and pay. And several UK wide organisations spoke positively about involvement with coalition campaigning to oppose recent pieces of legislation on policing and migration. In some cases, at a local level women's organisations are connected to organisations like local Councils for Voluntary Services, where these still exist.

This tendency to be relatively siloed is not specific to the women's voluntary sector, however. It is also an issue in the migration sector, for example, as highlighted in some interviews, and reflected too in a state-of-the-sector analysis that identified "*huge scope for improvement in relation to both cross-sectoral strategic collaboration and joint working with organisations in other fields*".[5]

And we heard that the mainstream voluntary sector is typically poor at gendered (and broader power) analysis, and at foregrounding gender considerations when addressing their issues of concern.

Interviewees suggested this has improved a little post #MeToo and in response to #BlackLivesMatter movements, but this remains a big issue. There does seem to be a significant gap in terms of how well the mainstream sector applies an intersectional gender lens to issues of concern, and how well or how poorly this is factored into influencing and power building work.

One specific challenge in relation to this is that sectoral spaces that represent and amplify communities with specific shared identities are largely dominated by men:

"The race equality sector is dominated by men, also the disability space, unions, and working-class spaces".

2.2 Challenges to sector collaboration and connectivity

The WVCS has a great deal going for it - we talked to incredible staff from grassroots to larger organisations all over the UK who showed passion, expertise, commitment and strength. But there are a number of dynamics that make it hard in current circumstances for the sector to meet its potential.

Commissioning models and lack of funding militate against collaboration

"The women's sector is dominated by service providers, lots in a constant state of crisis, cowed by the state while serving the function of the shadow state, competing for year-long funding, undercutting others to hold onto jobs …"

The commissioning model was mentioned almost universally by interviewees as deeply problematic.

This is because:

- it fosters competition for funding, rather than collaboration
- smaller organisations are excluded from discussions with local authorities
- it is geared to big organisations, with smaller ones being subcontracted and underfunded to cover specific delivery, or bought in as junior partners with a tiny share of funding (as "bid candy")

[5] Grove-White and Kaye, 2020

- it encourages gender (and racial) neutralisation of contracts, favouring 'value for money' which means that larger generalist organisations benefiting from economies of scale and often delivering lighter touch support are able to undercut smaller specialist organisations.

"*Everyone's always trying to gender-neutralise things. We're constantly having to defend being a women-only service".*

"BAME [Black and Minority Ethnic] organisations are being used [by white led organisations] to access funding …"

It is one key element (among many) that contributes to chronic underfunding in the sector. This in turn helps embed and reinforce poor pay and working conditions of staff, contributing to the bigger picture of failure to address individual and collective wellbeing (see section 7.1 below), and ultimately to staff turnover and burnout.

The vast majority of interviewees reported chronic underfunding, and constant firefighting of multiple crises, all of which draws attention away from longer-term solutions work.

And for most, the situation is getting worse: *"The pandemic has increased the pressure on organisations massively".* All this makes partnership working harder, and especially linking services with influencing and power building initiatives.

"The sector is largely underfunded and often working flat out, with high levels of burnout and exhaustion, especially from service providers facing over a decade of cuts. This leaves little capacity for networking. People don't have time for meetings. Often networking that leads to successful campaigning comes about from going to non-essential looking events where you speak to others & find out there's something you all care about".

"Everyone is so stressed due to funding and time pressures. Any research and campaigning is difficult".

The fact that money is often coming through commissioning from local authorities and government departments has a chilling effect on influencing work.

Multiple interviewees spoke of the reluctance to *"bite the hand that feeds them".*

Conflicts are fuelled by polarisation, competition and clashing worldviews

We found several intersecting fault lines in the sector, around which conflicts erupt, forcing organisations and grassroots groups to take sides and further hampering collaboration.

Positions on trans rights and inclusivity are radically polarised.

Many interviewees commented to the effect that conversations around this are "*incredibly destructive … toxic and difficult"* and *"sucking the oxygen out of these issues".* We were repeatedly told that *"People have lists of organisations who agree and disagree with them and don't work with the others".* Although we note that the (limited) accounts we had from Wales and Northern Ireland seemed to indicate this conflict was not as much of an issue as it is in England.

Positions on sex work were similarly polarised.

The conflicts around this are not quite as substantial and toxic as those on trans inclusion. We heard, for example, that sex worker led organisations will not work with some national and local campaigning and service delivery organisations because they hold positions which contradict the needs and interests of sex workers, such as *"...class[ing] sex work as being sexual exploitation automatically".* The EVAW coalition did try to do some work bringing together organisations to discuss this conflict, but it does not seem to have been successful.

Connected to these conflicts, we found a split between grassroots and professional services, which has some generational elements.

For example, in Bristol some interviewees from local organisations said they didn't feel connected to the grassroots feminist movement in Bristol - or they denied there was a movement in the first place. Some also discussed the tensions that exist between the grassroots (who tend to be younger and 3rd/4th wave feminist) and professional organisations (that tend to be run by older 2nd wave feminists) who have different views on key topics such as decriminalisation of sex work and trans inclusion. This has resulted in a poor connection, and some hostility, between two key parts of the women's movement. Another interviewee talked of *"different generations at loggerheads"*.

Further, funding drives competition and was signalled by many interviewees as a serious barrier to collaboration.

"Funders want to fund organisations who know the answers. It turns into the 'Dragon's Den'. It's about marketing, competition".

We discuss other divisions – relating to tensions between big and small organisations [section 3.2], and to lack of shared vision, values and goals [section 6.1] – below.

3 Concentrations of power and resources

3.1 Power over the sector

The people with most power over the sector sit outside it: the mainly male commissioners, policy makers, politicians and other decision makers.

Interviewees told us that these external power holders are typically sexist and racist in their structures and behaviours.

"Asian male councillors particularly don't want to see Asian women in power".

"We are constantly ignored by local councillors but if a white person communicates on our behalf, they get a response".

We also heard that the voluntary sector is regarded by these decision makers as the poor cousin of statutory services and the private sector, being afforded little funding or respect.

"Women's centres are the only institution that has a full view of an individual woman's life, but they are dismissed because we are part of the voluntary sector".

Although this was a widespread problem, things are different in a few smaller, closer-knit

communities:

"We're a small community so … we're connected to schools, the police, the fire service".

3.2 Power within the sector

That said, within the women's VCS, some groups do hold substantial relative power. By multiple accounts from all case studies, there's an issue around how power is concentrated with bigger organisations, which are invariably led by white able bodied middle-class women.

Specifically, many interviewees reflected on how such organisations co-opt and exploit local, grassroots groups. Several described these women as privileged and perpetuating racism:

"Privileged women are not willing to fight for others who haven't got the same protections".

"Women without a real understanding of our needs are speaking for us".

This power operates to disadvantage smaller organisations, for example in funding, including in relation to funding intended to target support to racially minoritised communities.

This is because larger organisations can undercut specialist services completely or offer partnerships where specialist services are included as 'bid candy'[6] and may typically receive a tiny cut of the funding and decision making.

"Power sits with the large organisations with the larger incomes because funders trust them".

"It's problematic when they don't work in proper partnerships, when they use us to complete a tick box exercise".

"White women's organisations don't have to put in as much effort to get funding. We have to go the extra mile".

Some welcomed what they saw as a recent change in focus amongst some funders towards greater emphasis in surfacing and tackling intersection of disadvantage, but still felt that large organisations were not working well with the communities the money was intended to serve.

Several interviewees, based on experience, noted that they have determined not to work in these kinds of partnerships, and they are something organisations like Imkaan and Southall Black sisters have campaigned against, for example, through work such as the Anti-Racism Charter.[7]

Some of these dynamics are locked in through often longstanding interconnections between those in the sector with relative power. These connections are typically based on personal relationships with each other, and externally with decision makers.

This is a form of power based on social capital which can exacerbate iniquities, and close off space for others' influence. We found it mentioned across case studies as a problem.

[6] Hanson, Michele (2012)

[7] EVAW (2021)

"There are the 'same old faces' on all the Boards and in the meetings, they have been running the professional women's sector in [this city] for many years".

This is important because personalities and relationships comprise the underpinnings of the sector and its direction:

"It always depends on the individual women leading the organisations".

Race and racism featured prominently as an issue in relation to these sectoral power dynamics, but people described a range of other intersectional disadvantages which also act as barriers to effective engagement,

These include:

Geography
We found organisations based in London and Southeast England have a disproportionate amount of power, influence, funding and attention. Similarly, cities are better served than rural and ex coal mining areas. In Wales, the power imbalance between the south and north was stark - all the resources and organisations are very much concentrated in the south, to the point where we struggled to do a case study focusing just on the north. In Northern Ireland, organisations there feel completely ignored by Westminster - we heard from one that felt their voices were heard more strongly in the EU than the central British Parliament.

"North Wales services are just an extension of what's in South Wales, so it's not as good - they just send someone up here and don't understand the lay of the land".

Disability
There is a lack of women's disability organisations and infrastructure organisations, and subsequently the voices of disabled women across the UK are under-represented. Available data, based on an analysis of funding flows in London, reveals that funding to disabled women's organisations makes up less than 3% of total funding to women's sector organisations, for example.[8] Clearly there are some strong disability groups undertaking influencing work, but disability issues are poorly understood by the mainstream women's VCS and disabled women's organisations commented on the inaccessibility of funding processes as a barrier to accessing funding

Age
Older women can be excluded because of lack of access to and use of technology. Conversely, we heard that younger women are typically under-represented in terms of their interests and holding actual power in the sector, partly connected to the generational issues mentioned above in section 2.2 (e.g., with power lying with the generation of 2nd wave feminists).

"The old timers tend to be less radical and they're very well established … They founded most of the mainstream women's organisations so they're very protective of them and it's impossible to make an impact internally. They lead the conversations with the government, and they get watered down because they don't want to rock the boat too much. Nothing is going to change until they leave".

Class, LBGTQ+ women and non-native English speakers were also all mentioned as relatively poorly represented and supported within the women's VCS.

[8] Women's Resource Centre, nd

In general, across these intersections, those with lived experience are not listened to and respected by the more powerful actors. Those most affected by issues are not being appropriately involved in attempts to solve those issues.

This makes the sector less effective as it fails to adequately consider the in-depth needs of different demographics.

"There needs to be room … for new ideas and local approaches. There's a bit of an echo chamber, practitioners need to be brought into the room".

"Sadly ... 'by and for women' are listened to less than men".

One dynamic emerging is that when efforts to engage people with lived experience are made, this work can be poorly done, consulting a small number of 'spokespeople' who have become professionalised in talking about their issue, and who do not represent the majority of those affected.

"Everyone wants a lived experience group ... And who do they get? People ... who are professionalised and part of the sector ... get wheeled out. This is just concentrating power with people who speak in the way that the sector wants them to speak. As soon as money becomes available, it gets co-opted".

4 Issues and challenges facing women

4.1 Biggest issues facing women

The issues facing women are so deeply interconnected, it is difficult – and may not always be helpful - to separate them.

Issues around women's poverty, for example, are linked to a failed welfare system, housing issues, homelessness, debt, burden of unpaid care work, lack of affordable childcare, lack of flexible working and so on. These issues make physical and mental health issues more likely and can be both compounded and caused by domestic abuse, creating a vicious cycle. Intersectional oppressions based around identity (gender, ethnicity, sexuality, class, disability) increase these impacts and bring with them new challenges.

Organisational siloing of issues may help with communications work, and identifying winnable objectives, but may not be meaningful in addressing problems, or their root causes, holistically.

For example, we heard one criticism of an organisation that *"wanted to focus on domestic violence, and not deal with the aftermath"*.

This approach also raises questions about what progress actually looks like, and who determines that. For example, specific policy change may not make any meaningful difference in practice for women in absolute crisis and destitution, because of the multiple inter-relating problems they are facing.

"Who decides what counts as change? Was it addressing people's priorities? Destitution is a totalising experience, if one thing changes, then what's the actual impact [on people's lives]?"

In terms of issues facing women, the ones most cited by interviewees as the biggest were poverty, gender-based violence and the threat of this, and access to affordable childcare.

Other interviewees named as disproportionately affecting women include:

- Access to legal support
- Workplace discrimination
- Mental health issues
- Health inequalities, including menopause
- Cycles of low-level criminalisation
- Urban design and transport
- Time poverty / the burden of unpaid care work
- Low pay and insecure employment

Of course, all these things are interconnected. And we were told that the COVID pandemic made things worse, for example through increasing domestic violence and isolation.

Further issues particularly flagged as affecting specific communities included:

- Women with no recourse to public funds / insecure immigration status / women refugees
- Forced marriage, Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), modern slavery, 'honour' based violence.

The picture is complicated. Because these issues are interconnected, women struggling with one may find themselves quickly facing others.

"Multiple disadvantages pile up very quickly".

4.2 Political structures and systems

Underlying all these issues are the political systems that have decision making responsibility for resolving issues, and how those systems operate.

This is manifested through:

Lack of representation (e.g., in parliaments and governments).

Most parliamentarians, and senior managers in workplaces that employ women, are male - as well as white, older, able bodied, middle class and heterosexual.

"Women need to be at the heart of decision making".

How organisations with power actually operate, leading to cycles of distrust.

One stark example relates to the lack of trust in the police as an institution because of the inherent misogyny and racism the Met, for example, has repeatedly demonstrated. Further, some have offered the critique that failure of the Crown Prosecution Service to convict any meaningful percentage of perpetrators has resulted in the effective decriminalisation of rape.

How statutory services are set up and operate.

We heard examples of how statutory organisations and local authorities are not treating women with respect. Notably, in that groups of women facing intersectional oppressions (like black and

transgender women) often can't access appropriate specialist services, and generalists give them bad advice sometimes with serious consequences.

Lack of receptivity to women's voices and experiences.

Although there are some exceptions, women's organisations and women themselves are not being heard or listened to by decision makers or those in positions of power.

4.3 The broader social context

Underpinning all this (and driving it) is a wider discriminatory, misogynist, ablist and racist culture.

This results in a huge burden of unpaid care and emotional labour being placed on women, women's jobs being valued and paid less than men's, women's value being closely tied to their appearance, and VAWG remaining widespread - and so on.

"Generalised misogyny against women which then allows for things like sexual violence, domestic violence and other forms of violence against women and girls (VAWG) to occur … generalised misogyny is so widespread that it largely goes unnoticed or unrecognised unless people really press for change".

Much of this is bolstered by reactionary (including conservative and religious) movements, and so some of this is embedded in culture wars that often have gendered components. For example, one analysis of the recent Amber Heard / Johnny Depp abuse defamation trial coverage points to it being fuelled on social media by conservative media outlet The Daily Wire[9], spreading one-sided memes, videos and articles with a clear bias against Heard.

5 Overview of current influencing

5.1 The overall picture

Especially at the UK level, interviewees communicated a strong sense that the women's VCS is not effective overall in making change, although there were more mixed feelings about local influencing.

National level work in Wales and Northern Ireland was seen as effective, but this was not the case in England.

There is only a very limited amount of change focused work overall, and what there is tends to be focused on lobbying and policy work, which can provide only a narrow route to influence.

The limited focus on influencing work can be attributed to the fact that the sector is in crisis, struggling to survive, making it harder to make space for work beyond meeting immediate need, and also (to a lesser extent) the chilling effect of its dependence on statutory funding.

[9] McCool, 2021

Meanwhile, much of the influencing work that is taking place - through lobbying and policy - could be described as 'insider influencing', in that it is relies on persuasion, evidence and rational argument in achieving change (contrasted with more 'outsider' approaches that seek to drive change through pressure and public challenge).

Typology of insider and outsider groups[10]

Category	Description
Insider groups	Regarded as legitimate by decision makers and with good access to the corridors of power.
Outsider groups	Have objectives outside of the mainstream of political operation, and rely on protest and public routes to influence.

This typology has been criticised – notably in the argument that it can be a false distinction: if you have an independent base of power, you can operate more flexibly.[11] But for the purposes of mapping the overall sector, it's a useful shorthand for looking across strategies and tactics and identifying gaps.

Insider influencing approaches can be effective, but they tend to rely on a certain set of conditions being in place. This could include, for example, receptivity of the target, and the ability to draw on some kind of leverage that can shift a target's balance of motivations (to adopt a particular policy, or not). Where some or all of these are missing, additional pressure may be needed.

And insider approaches are typically insufficient if more transformational goals are sought. As Jane McAlevey puts it, "*Many small advances can be and are won … where the key actors are … lobbyists and public relations professionals … [but] small advances are all [this advocacy model] can produce*".[12]

Many consider the Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) sector as relatively effective and successful. But while interviewees agreed that the VAWG sector has some key relative strengths, some questioned if it was really the strongest part of the sector, and interviewees generally didn't agree that it was successful in the current context.

Interviewees widely credited EVAW (the End Violence Against Women coalition) for its work to build consensus and coalition.

"The VAWG sector has more solidarity and collectivism than in the women's movement more generally".

But interviewees expressed disappointment about how the sector has lost significant recent battles such as including women with no recourse to public funds in the recent Domestic Abuse Bill, including disabled women's needs in commissioning, or the state of policing, giving the example of Child Q.

[10] Grant, 2000

[11] Han, McKenna & Oyakawa, 2021

[12] McAlevey, 2016

"While we have a long history and have done incredible work things are changing, not for the better … work is being lost".

The issue of VAWG is of high media interest, partly fuelled by the #MeToo movement, the murder of Sarah Everard and other high-profile instances of abuse and misogyny. This means it is an issue higher on the government's agenda, which has made space for some campaigning progress if not success - such as:

- Winning extra funding for VAWG services during the pandemic.
- The Government Inquiry in response to the legal action taken against the Crown Prosecution Service for the 'effective decriminalisation of rape' - work led by EVAW.
- Some specific changes to local commissioning tender criteria to prevent bias against specialist organisations.
- The strong movement built opposing the Policing Bill, the role of Sisters Uncut and the work of Reclaim the Streets.
- The campaign resulting in Government contributions to the destitution fund hosted by Southall Black Sisters for women with no recourse to public funds who are escaping violence and abuse.

The recent creation of a new Domestic Abuse Commissioner role, sitting in the Home Office, gives more attention to issues of VAWG. But the fact that the role is not gendered, meaning that it is focused beyond the specific area of VAWG, points to a more problematic mainstreaming of domestic abuse, removing the gendered lens the sector has worked so hard to cultivate, and suggesting the VAWG sector lacks power overall.

5.2 Westminster policy work

At the Westminster level, it's a tough political context.

We heard that the Johnson Government has been hard to navigate, let alone influence, and that routes of engagement influence that had previously been fruitful have tended to be much less so in more recent years. One example was that some interviewees identified that links to Parliamentary Select Committees were less effective because the scrutiny those Committees brought was having significantly less effect on policy than previously.

Coupled with this, the structure of the sector is strongly influenced by statutory funding having a chilling effect on organisations against speaking out. It is therefore unsurprising that the sector is not achieving significant impact in Westminster.

Notwithstanding some isolated examples of policy success, interviewees told us that policy approaches targeting Westminster aren't typically working. At best, they are preventing things from getting worse, or softening legislation to make it less harmful.

"The traditional and typical approach to policy work is failing. It needs a rethink … Getting round the table … for small changes round the edges is insufficient".

There is a parallel here to the migration sector where a sectoral analysis identifies that, *"Over the last decade, the sector has collectively secured a range of significant [policy] changes … [however] overall policy direction has remained negative or worsened … [and the sector] is constantly facing new challenges in relation to the erosion of rights and services"*.[13]

[13] Grove White & Kaye, 2020

Still, for some it is important to continue to engage with Westminster, on the basis that:

- The sector must be ready when the opportunity arises, and it's hard to predict when and what that will be.
- It's important to have voices heard and represented when opinions are sought.
- Despite everything there can sometimes be some scope for influence.

Our conclusion is that while some ongoing Westminster engagement is necessary, more energy could be better directed elsewhere - such as towards local influencing, or building power, as set out below.

5.3 Influencing directed at other governmental, mayoral and council targets

Influencing outside of Westminster can be much more effective in the current climate.

Various interviewees pointed to examples of how locally networked influencing is in some cases delivering results – for example targeting local authorities and Mayors. Prospects of influencing the devolved governments of the nations (or at least Wales and Scotland) are also greater than those targeting the Westminster government.

For example, The National Advisory Council on Women and Girls [NACWG] was established by and commissioned to advise the First Minister on the wide range of issues relating to and experienced by women and girls in Scotland. NACWG highlights and helps drive forward action to tackle gender inequality in Scotland. Each year the Council creates a report from hundreds of conversations with women's organisations and community groups across the women's sector regarding their specific issues and experiences, and the report then goes to the First Minister's team with a set of recommendations for Parliament to act on. These recommendations were used to inform the structure of the Scottish Government's Human Rights Fund.

"I've been very impressed. When we had to do a funding application, I thought we were too small, we were actively encouraged to go for it, and had to fit into the framework which was the one that was co-created [from recommendations via the NACWG]... It was intersectional in every way. All really fascinating. I'm sure there are faults with it, but I haven't seen any."

We heard examples of local influencing approaches that have helped achieve change.

For example, Refugee Women of Bristol [RWB], which offers holistic support to 500 female refugee and asylum-seeking women in Bristol every year. 90% of their staff and all of their Board have lived experience of the asylum system.

RWB secured funding to undertake community engagement in Bristol through Forward, a national FGM campaigning organisation. RWB service users were trained in peer research and collectively undertook a major research project, which highlighted many hidden problems. They found that women felt forced to travel to London for FGM services as there weren't any specialist services in Bristol.

The women identified the generic sexual health clinic that was supposed to provide FGM services and did 'secret shopping' research. They found that FGM services were not clearly advertised, the reception wasn't even aware of the service, the environment felt intimidating and not culturally sensitive for women, and the clinic opening times were inconvenient for women with children.

RWB presented the research to the local NHS Trust. They also made films about women's experiences and organised a march through Bristol that attracted media attention.

Bristol Community FGM Clinic (the Rose Clinic) was commissioned a year later based on the research and it was the first community based FGM clinic in the UK. The clinic has since won an award because of the impact and many new community-based clinics have been opened since.[14]

Such influencing is most effective where there are structures in places to support it.

For example:

- The Bristol Women's Commission was introduced by the first elected Mayor in Bristol in 2012 who signed the European Charter of Women's Rights, which included a pledge to set up a Women's Commission. Bristol's Women's Commission is now facilitated by the Mayoral office with about 50 powerful members, who meet bi-monthly and coordinate through task groups. Bristol Women's Voice (BWV) works at a grassroots level and feeds into the Commission, making policy impact at a city-level.
- The Scottish Government Commission, led by First Minister Nicola Sturgeon, founded the National Advisory Council of Women and Girls in 2017. Each year, the Council creates a report from hundreds of conversations across the women sector, including 'wee circles' in which women can come together in their workplace or with friends as well as a mixture of grassroots and larger professional organisations. The report then goes to Parliament and provides the basis for recommendations. This listening work has directly informed the framework for funding of the women's sector.
- Welsh parliamentarians are required to meet the Welsh women's network quarterly by law.

Conversely, the Women's National Commission (established as an umbrella body to advise the Government on women's views, with representation across all four nations), was abolished back in 2010, leaving no similar structures either UK wide or in England itself.

5.4 Policy to practice

Even where good policy is notionally in place, there will invariably be issues about how that policy is implemented, and how in practice it translates to improving women's lives.

There is often a gap between policy and practice. Where there is insufficient funding to support comprehensive implementation, or because of how policy is shaped, interpreted and enacted. Policies that fail to properly factor in women's differential experiences of deprivation, discrimination, and trauma may end up only benefitting women who are in the best position to self-advocate for support they are notionally entitled to but won't get without a struggle, for example.

This is not a phenomenon specific to the women's sector. It has been identified as an area in the migration sector too for example, where it has been noted that *"Another area of influencing work where there is scope to increase impact is in relation to ensuring that campaign advances and 'wins' are translated into actual improvements in policy or practice. Significant policy breakthroughs require sustained follow-up to ensure commitments are honoured and deliver the tangible benefits to migrants/refugees that were expected"*.[15]

[14] More information at Refugee Women of Bristol (2022) and Bristol Against Violence and Abuse (2022)

[15] Grove White & Kaye, 2020

The kinds of responses needed here are to:

- Ensure policy is shaped with a clear intersectional lens.
- Build ongoing monitoring mechanisms into policy work, so that issues in implementation can be identified and resolved.
- Invest more in tracking and critique of policy implementation, resisting the temptation to move on once a policy has been secured.

5.5 Organising and building leadership

Looking across the sector, there is very little attention to organising approaches - focused on supporting leadership and building the agency of women with lived experience to advocate for themselves and build their own power.

Some groups, like Sisters Uncut are building power, bringing people together on and offline to collectively push for change, but we heard this work is "*... disconnected from the rest of the sector which is run by older feminists".*

Some groups seem to be effectively and nimbly using social media to channel lived experience, such as Pregnant Then Screwed, which can be viewed as a kind of organising. And locally we heard just a couple of examples that equate with organising:

- In Nottingham: "*We have … been involved in community organising, which has included things like 'Reclaim the Night.' Whilst this does not always change the wider picture, it helps to boost the women and organisations who take part, which is an enabler in its own right. We have seen other community organised initiatives actually create wider change and conversation … so this definitely has a place in raising energy, raising issues and helping women and organisations find their collective voice".*

- In Manchester one organisation talked about "*galvanising local people; creating community cohesion; bringing about social capital amongst grass roots individuals and organisations as well as the key stakeholders of our communities".*

But interviewees spoke about this mostly to reflect that it is missing.

This research sought to explore both influencing (through directly engaging with decision makers) and organising (through building independent sources of power). The latter is almost entirely missing from the WVCS.

This is not surprising given that it is time consuming and hard, and it doesn't deliver short term results, whilst meanwhile most of the sector is focused on fighting for its survival to meet the greatest needs. Coupled with this, women themselves are time poor, with often heavy burdens of unpaid care work.

And this also reflects wider realities. In other sectors, too, organising is only very scantily funded. A recent report by the Civic Power Fund reviewing funding from 47 organisations identified that just 0.3% of total funding is directly supporting community organising.[16]

[16] Cracknell & Baring, 2022

We think this represents a gap. Given the political context and the state of the women's sector, the women's movement needs much more power to be able to exert influence. One key route to building this power is through organising - building leadership of those with lived experience, providing training, strengthening relationships, building coalitions and networks.

5.6 Activism

Activism is a currently under-represented element of an overall sectoral influencing approach.

As some interviewees pointed out, a mixture of tactics and approaches to making change are necessary.

> *"It's a mistake to think about tactics as inherently more or less successful. Often change requires a mix. The suffragettes were direct action; the suffragists - meetings, rallies, protests, letters. Often campaigns are most successful where they have [both]".*

Activism can play an important role in achieving change, by creating ongoing drama, attracting media attention, and shifting public attitudes. Activism can include a whole range of tactics, from direct action (such as occupying and often obstructing a space) to fly posting and protesting. We're using the term to mean a range of campaigning activities which are challenging of power - this can be done in legal and illegal ways (and indeed, some supposedly illegal activities have been found by UK courts to be legal when undertaken to counter an extreme and obvious injustice).

The women's movement does encompass public campaigning, by organisations such as Pregnant then Screwed and Level Up, as well as a strong direct action collective in Sisters Uncut. But these are exceptions, and our view is that much more of this kind of work would be helpful as part of the overall mix.

It is probably worth noting two potential barriers to such activity in the women's sector. One being that there are higher considerations around the safety of women, often traumatised survivors, taking part in protest type activity. Work is needed to assess and mitigate risks to ensure such women are not re-traumatised by participating in actions, from men who may oppose them or the police themselves.

Another barrier is that the large amount of funding the WVCS receives from Police and Crime Commissioners is likely to have a chilling effect on consideration of activities the police would frown upon - including many fully legal activities.

5.7 Narratives

Some interviewees pointed to the effectiveness of campaigning to challenge dominant narratives, utilising social and traditional media.

For example, Level Up highlighted a weight loss company's *'Are you beach body ready?'* adverts, which were banned following social media campaigning.[17] And some pointed to more recent media and social media campaigns challenging the notion that women's safety is women's responsibility, for example.

[17] Sweney, Mark (2015)

Several interviewees identified the importance of shifting narratives as a way of making progress more likely.

"We feel that the media reflects what is in society and so by creating change and awareness here we are then able to create wider awareness and dialogues in society"

"Removing stigma enables change"

Although narrative work was seen as useful, interviewees also acknowledged that sometimes the women's VCS has got this wrong, citing the importance of clarity around objectives as part of any initiative around narratives.

Part 2: Analysis and implications

6 Routes to power and influence

6.1 The movement ecosystem

We took an ecosystem approach to explore the issues, change making approaches, connecting and power across the sector, drawing on methodology developed by Natasha Adams from previous research[18] and movement training work.

There were mixed views about how much the sector operates and feels like a movement.

Those that did tend to self-identify as part of the women's movement typically talked about that movement as relating to the specific community they were part of, rather than anything beyond that. For some, the movement did reach further than that – *"Knowing we are all working for women and that we have each other's backs"* – but most did not feel part of a wider movement, and some remarked on its absence or fragmentation.

"The movement is a dream, it's an aspiration".

We found that the typical characteristics of a social movement were essentially missing.

For example in that:

There's little sign of multiple issues being brought together

There are some small-scale, often issue specific, collaborations but not more than that:

"We're all doing our individual things - we need a big 'moment' to express our frustration through joint activism.

"It doesn't feel like there's a 'women's movement' because there are lots of different agendas and different analyses happening, and not much cohesion".

There are issues around how power is concentrated with bigger organisations, and around how conflicts play out.

Movements are effective when power is well distributed, but in the WVCS power is disproportionately held by established organisations, invariably led by white, able-bodied, middle-class women.

And in a healthy movement ecosystem, conflicts drive creative tensions rather than absolute polarisation. But the WVCS is a space riven by conflict - around trans inclusion, sex work and other issues, often along a generational divide, acting as a barrier to collaboration and movement building.

[18] Adams, 2019

Movements tend to coalesce around a common vision and there is little sign of this in the WVCS

"There isn't a vision for the work. There has to be a vision around liberation and empowerment, addressing class and race divisions. If you want change, there has to be a vision".

There are not clear strategies in place for achieving transformational change

"Funding challenges prevent organisations from thinking about the future, from … imagining challenges in next 3, 5 or 10 years"

"Lots of charities are just treading water and running on the comment news cycle, with no overarching strategy".

This is perhaps symptomatic of a sector operating in a challenging context and with limited or no spare capacity: "a lack of detailed, proactive strategic planning" was described as "a significant weakness" in the migration sector too.[19]

Relationships and connections across organisations and groups are partial and patchy at best

The WVCS in general (outside of some strong hyper-local or national examples) shows a lack of connection between:

- national and local actors
- actors across the nations
- marginalised (e.g., racially minoritised and disabled women) and more mainstream actors.

A healthy movement ecology normally demonstrates a wide range of approaches to making change and we found that this ecosystem is largely missing. It would typically include:

- Organising to build power and leadership, especially of those with lived experience (see recommendation 1).
- Outsider campaigning approaches, including activism (see recommendation 2).
- Structured mass engagement or mobilising (which is only happening around sporadic online campaigns or connected to specific moments, without being channelled into structures that can foster engagement) (recommendation 2).
- Bridge-building to connect different actors together, fostering collaboration between otherwise unlikely groups (outside of formal coalition work such as that of EVAW) (see recommendation 7).

Without a good spread of tactics, the movement is less likely to feel like a movement and less likely to achieve impact.

With all this in mind, we would recommend that funders should consider orientating investments in order to be able to:

R 1 Invest in organising programmes that are designed to build power through building collective leadership

This could be done:

- in specific local areas, connected to existing networks, or

[19] Grove-White and Kaye, 2020

- across nations/the UK on specific issues in areas that are connected and working together.

In addition, funders should:

R 2 **Consider investing in, or otherwise encouraging or facilitating, more public campaigning initiatives, including activism**

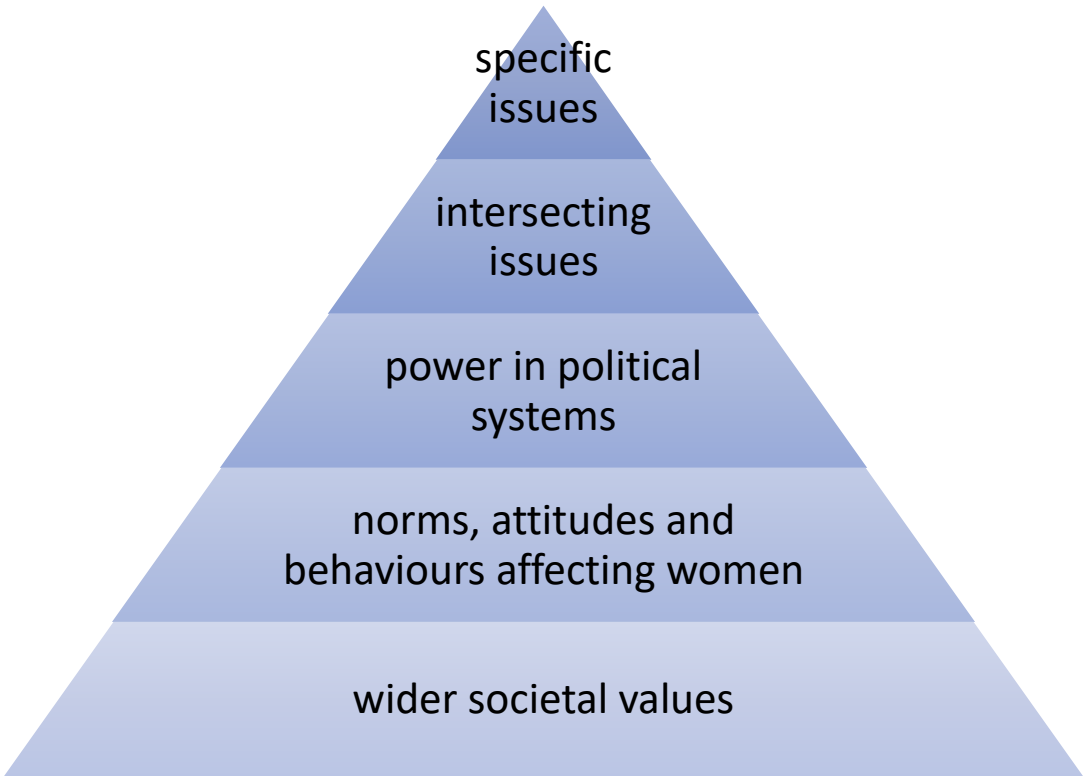
6.2 Considering multiple levels of change

Our findings reveal that the challenges women and the WVCS face operate at multiple inter-relating levels. Based on this, we suggest that any strategic response should explore interventions across these levels.

This means tackling, in tandem:

- Specific issues affecting women, and how they are more positively resolved in policy and practice.
- Intersecting issues affecting women, and how these can be collectively advanced.
- Power in political systems, and how the ways these systems operate can be more favourable to women's interests.
- Norms, attitudes and behaviours and how shifts in these can create an environment in which behaviours are less hostile and policy is more likely to be favourable.
- Wider societal values, and how these can be challenged and addressed, in ways that reduce the impacts of misogyny and other discriminatory behaviours and practices.

Pyramid summarising the levels of change



Broadly speaking, each of these levels sets the context for the levels above. For example, constraints in the political system make it much harder to 'win' on specific issues. And how the political system operates is in turn - to a great extent - a function of wider societal norms and attitudes.

Again, speaking broadly, timescales of likely change increase as you go down the pyramid. Specific issues tend to play out in policy arenas in the short- and medium-term (although that they may not always be definitively resolved) whereas contributing to shifting culture is very much a long-term proposition.

This speaks to the need to operate at all levels.

Continuing work on specific issues is obviously important; the strategy can't just be to focus on the underlying challenges and wait until they are resolved. But at the same time, addressing political, attitudinal and cultural barriers, if successful:

- Shifts the balance of motivations and incentives in policy making and makes positive change more likely, and
- Brings benefit in wider society, as attitudes and behaviours evolve.

This representation in the pyramid is consistent with Steven Lukes' analysis that power operates at different levels – not just at the most visible level, where power is manifested in terms of who prevails in policy decision making, but at deeper levels, under the surface and not so obvious. So power also plays out in the 'rules of the game', as manifested by how issues are considered to be a priority, or not, for example, and in who gets to resolve them (so called 'hidden power').

Underlying that, power shapes the way people understand their interests, and whose interests count (at the level of 'invisible power').[20]

There is a read across to the pyramid in this analysis.

Focus on issues and policy decision-making represents a battle of visible power, whereas addressing political, attitudinal and cultural barriers focuses more on the deeper hidden and invisible dimensions of power and how they play out.

Different strategies are clearly appropriate for different levels; in summary (and generalising):[21]

Strategies addressing different dimensions of power

Dimension of power	Manifestation	Relevance to pyramid level	Appropriate strategy
Visible	Bias in laws and policy	Specific issues Intersecting issues	Lobbying Research Campaigning Modelling
Hidden	Exclusion and de-legitimisation	As above, plus Power in political systems	Campaigning Organising & leadership building Networking, connecting and relationship building Organisation-building

[20] Lukes, 2005

[21] Adapted from Miller et al, 2006

Invisible	Socialisation and control of information	As above, plus Norms, attitudes and behaviours Wider societal values	Organising, education and empowerment Challenging narratives Movement building

Individual funders will have policies, and constraints, that shape particular organisational funding parameters.

But **collectively, in aggregation, it would be good if funders could operate to the principle that it's not about one strategy over another: it's about strategies in combination. There's a need for a whole spectrum of approaches to change.**

"It's not funders' job to choose between [strategies for change] but to look across and fill gaps".

"We need a collaborative approach using all channels and hitting every level".

And looking across these levels, the deeper ones seem very much to be holding the WVCS back, in terms of its capacity for influence. More focus on these deeper levels is therefore needed.

- **This means being strategic in addressing barriers around how political decision making currently takes place.**

A huge barrier to change in the sector is the manifestation of political power through determining what is funded, then how that funding is disbursed. We heard how commissioning processes are typically deeply problematic. And about the chilling effect that modes of funding have on influencing work as organisations are wary of 'biting the hand that feeds them'.

This points to the need for a body of work around how decision makers consult with the sector and make decisions about what to fund and how to give that funding. Learning around examples of relatively better practice could be shared from bodies such as the Scottish National Advisory Council on Women and Girls and the Bristol Women's Commission.

The success of this kind of influencing – around processes and structures – will depend on how receptive and willing to adapt decision makers are. By many accounts, that is limited in Westminster currently. But that can change, and it would be good to be ready if it does, given the rewards that would come from any change to dominant practices.

According to one contributor, the Procurement Bill currently going through parliament could be helpful to this, in that it references engagement with suppliers and people who access services.

At local level too, there may be specific scope to influence or work with local authorities, particularly mayoral authorities. One trend cited as being relevant to this is that some councils are taking a systems or asset-based focus to commissioning.

Offering match funding where there is good practice, and as an encouragement for statutory authorities and agencies that are willing to improve, could be one lever of influence here.

R 3 **Fund and support influencing work that is focused on improving decision-making structures and processes that impact on the women' sector (e.g., through promoting alternative commissioning models and improvements to tendering of services).**

- **Work challenging and reshaping dominant narratives can underpin progress on policy as it starts to lessen the extent to which societal attitudes and behaviour impact negatively on women's experiences, particularly disadvantaged women.**

We suggest there could be a clearer body of work around deep narratives, which "*sit beneath other more specific narratives - ones that we often reference when discussing particular social and environmental issues*". So, for example, the deep narrative underlying hostility to migrants could be described as 'fear of the other', which shows up in numerous ways, and impacts negatively on multiple groups, not solely migrants.[22]

Deep narrative work operates on a different – but complementary - level to ongoing work to frame single issues in ways that play out favourably in discourse, which campaigners would typically consider as part of a campaign communications and messaging strategy.

These deep narratives are strongly embedded in our culture, manifesting as values and norms, which are deeply held and hard to shift. So this is clearly a long-term commitment, not a short-term win, but such change would be critical to tackling embedded misogyny, helping to create and cement an environment that makes positive change more likely.

Approaches that can be casually dismissed as being about 'call out culture', 'identity politics' and 'woke' campaigning often represent an attempt to demonstrate these unconscious intersections of oppression that underlie contemporary British culture. Sometimes this is very effective, at others it is crudely applied in a destructive way (for example, fuelling conflict within communities and sucking energy out of possible collaborations).

It might be tempting to want to stay away from 'culture war' territory, but at heart these conflicts are commonly about power, and people who have it not wanting to give it up or share it, so it's hard to sidestep them whilst being true to marginalised constituencies.

We can again draw on experiences in the migration sector, where funders such as Unbound Philanthropy have been backing initiatives aimed at broad culture change.

"Culture change … feels like a new level of focus and investment for funders – it opens up a whole area of focus, spanning across issue areas. A deeper focus on narrative change enables bigger and deeper change to take place".

This includes initiatives that connect civil society groups with cultural change makers, as a route to influencing how issues are represented in broadcast media, for example: *"Social change makers and funders need to acknowledge the tremendous power embedded in who makes, drives and influences cultural content. The culture we consume influences how we think, feel, act and behave. We need to recognise that pop culture is a significant driver of change".*[23]

[22] From Taylor, 2021

[23] Sachradja & Zukowska, 2021

R 4 **Consider funding long-term bodies of work around narratives - with a deeper focus on challenging and changing values.**

7 Infrastructure support

7.1 Capacity building

Many organisations and groups have no realistic capacity to move beyond service delivery.

It's clear that creating space to do anything more than respond to ongoing crises will likely require additional funding. This would include funding to support advocacy, but also more generically to provide 'breathing space' for strategy and planning.

Although the overall need and strong call is for unrestricted funding (see section 8 below), funding for work beyond service delivery will need to be ring-fenced if the aim is to ensure resources are dedicated to influencing and power building work.

Even then, working out where to start is not straightforward*: "looking at the bigger, longer-term picture can be really difficult to do".*

Some interviewees suggested there could be potential efficiencies through organisations sharing resources – as in the example of a business development manager shared between four organisations working in a similar field; or one payroll that could do the HR for six organisations. This would be complex to set up but would directly address the issue that *"the people who are doing the doing, are also doing the admin*".

Training tended to be requested and appreciated by our interviewees, across a whole range of areas including campaigning, lobbying, media work, framing, and engaging people with lived experience to tell good stories - but without any clear consensus on what would be most helpful. Key here is being able to access a range of support, through it being provided and having money and time to attend.

"*Funders can be a strength where there is added value. For example, Lloyds offer an enhanced programme with access to free consultants and governance training and strategic planning support".*

There are key moments in an organisation's development where bespoke support could be particularly useful.

Specifically, the need often arises as an organisation reaches the point where it needs to establish more formalised structures.

As one interviewee described their organisational story, *"We became a charity because of funding. It was the right decision, but when you are small it's hard – finding a board of trustees, etc. etc. If you get it wrong, it's a big drop down. If funders would support the process, it would be amazing. It could help encourage more organisations led by marginalised communities. It's a daunting process".*

Support that the funders in the migration sector gave to We Belong, for example, in its journey from a loose group to being a formulated organisation could be learnt from and replicated.

There is also scope to provide increased funding to individuals operating as individuals or as part of an unconstituted group.

Seeding and supporting new actors is going to be important to help fill the gaps and create new energy. But we heard how many individuals who are driving change are often diverted from that work by the need to patch together pieces of funding to support the work.

More intentional support for these kinds of leaders could help them be more focused and more effective. The role of 'first funder' can be vital to a group's continuing development.

Possibly relevant to this are the findings from the Blagrave Trust's Challenge and Change fund in relation to funding individuals and unconstituted groups – and how that can fit with charitable purpose. The learning from this programme has been that, "*We need to understand and manage risks, but not overstate them … We assumed that the legal implications would be more complex than they were, but we were reassured by the framing and justification for the work by our charity lawyers"*.[24]

Vehicles like the Social Change Nest also provide some greater scope to fund non formalised groups by bypassing much of the bureaucracy that has historically been involved in such approaches.

Some also cited the need for micro-grants to cover basic costs.

These might range from room hire to costs of printing, etc. For voluntary groups even small costs can be prohibitive. Hence the call for *"Small, quick grants for grassroots groups (e.g., £500)"*.

R 5 **Consider how funding streams can best support (a) individual change makers (b) unconstituted groups requiring micro-grants and (c) organisations and groups moving towards formalisation.**

By multiple accounts, poor pay and poor working conditions are endemic in the sector.

"Women in the public sector are looked after better than us. Funders need to recognise the additional rights that come from being a woman [e.g., by better covering maternity costs]".

"Every organisation is working with half the resources they really need, afraid to ask for what they really need as they don't think they'll get it".

The gender pay gap[25] is well documented across the UK. Across the third Sector 29% of part time workers and 19% of women earn less than the living wage.[26] But in the WVCS the issue appears to be worse than the voluntary sector more generally. There are a variety of possible explanations for this:

- The commissioning model has relatively greater prevalence, encouraging under-bidding and locking in under-funding.
- The relatively small size of many organisations in the WVCS, with more part-time workers, fewer employees and less robust HR systems which may help protect pay.
- The fact that the WVCS is staffed almost entirely by women, exacerbating national trends, and exposing the sector to greater maternity costs.
- Women in leadership positions are much more likely to volunteer and undervalue their time and expertise, stemming from wider cultural trends and pressure on women to undertake unpaid labour. This results in the gender pay gap writ large across the structure of the sector

[24] Blagrave & The Centre for Knowledge Equity, 2022

[25] Office for National Statistics, 2021

[26] Richardson & Mahmoudi, 2021

itself.

Working conditions case study - Fair Treatment for the Women of Wales

This multi-award winning grassroots organisation started in 2014 and is proudly run by disabled women. The organisation campaigns against health inequalities and is recognised as a national leader by women's sector leaders, Welsh Parliament and NHS Wales.

The founder continues to be an unpaid volunteer and they have had one part-time member of staff (working 14 hours a week) who is paid £9.90 per hour. The paid member of staff volunteers on top of the hours she is paid for. She said that it's only possible to do such low paid work because she received some inheritance and therefore owns her home. The employee described how, despite having the skills and qualifications to work elsewhere for a higher salary, it was the kindness and flexibility offered by this organisation that made it attractive to her, as a disabled woman whose health issues need to be accommodated as part of her contract. Funding for her role ends in December 2022.

The organisation has struggled to secure core funding and continues to seek this. They have also asked for funders to pay for consultants to support them to complete funding applications; *"Processes need to be more inclusive, user friendly and accessible. It's so exhausting as a disabled person to jump through the hoops."*

Pay is key but many also flagged the need for clearer and better working standards.

Interviewees also presented a widespread sense of a wellbeing shortfall.

While some gain a sense of strength through solidarity, it was much more common to hear about burnout and a crisis of wellbeing. This is a wider sectoral issue[27] but seems particularly stark in the WVCS. The need here seems to go beyond one-off interventions, it's not just a question of providing training or discrete support. It's about wellbeing across the sector and how it's embedded in the work, and how the sector is perpetuating harms experienced in the wider world.

In our judgement, based on what we have heard, issues around pay and conditions are much more prevalent in this sector than they are across the whole voluntary sector.

Interviewees frequently talked about poor pay and working unpaid hours, and about HR policies that result in inadequate maternity pay.

According to some, the explanation for this could be that these issues manifest across the voluntary sector as a whole and are simply more visible and prominent in the part of the sector dominated by women. But there are likely additional exacerbating factors, not least the commissioning model that so many rely on for funding, and that locks in under-resourcing.

We can't be definitive about the reasons, but we do flag it as a major issue of concern, with WVCS as a sector ultimately replicating the gender dynamics that play out in wider society.

[27] Eg as referenced in Broome, 2022

It will be important to try and address issues around pay and conditions, as they are very much out of sync with how things should be. But these issues have complex and multi-faceted roots and there are no simple or single solutions.

Rather than offer a set of specific steps that each might partially address some of the problems here, we think it might be better to try and tackle this challenge in a holistic way, and with the participation of women from across the sector.

R 6 **Hold a sectoral consultation to explore and co-develop practical proposals for how best to address endemic issues around pay, conditions and wellbeing.**

7.2 Representation

Organisations ideally need local hubs and channels to support influencing work. These may not necessarily have to be institutions.

We describe the dynamics around this in section 2.1. And some discussion around this suggests that getting some things off the ground doesn't have to be a resource-heavy investment. One contributor suggested that the set up for Asylum Matters could provide a possible model for this.[28]

R 7 **Pilot funding of specific posts in selected localities with a specific remit to work with local groups and organisations to channel, build and augment their routes to influence.**

We identified some perceived weaknesses around representation through some mainstream women's organisations, with some local interviewees pointing to what they saw as performance or effectiveness issues. One relevant point of learning from the migration sector is that it is not necessarily a viable role for funders to seek to 'reform' existing organisations considered to be underperforming. As autonomous institutions, those questions are for internal resolution.

Interviewees identified many gaps in representation but possibly the starkest absence relates to a paucity of infrastructure supporting the representation of disabled women. This is a specific area that funders could usefully help address.

R 8 **Provide additional dedicated funding to an infrastructure organisation or network representing disabled women, collaborating with existing organisations to develop this in a way that best meets their needs.**

7.3 Facilitating networking, connections and collaboration

Many interviewees expressed an appetite for sharing learning, skills sharing, networking, etc.

Again, one of the key barriers is funding. We heard from several sources a desire for improved partnership working and more opportunities for networking and sharing good practice. But also the need for funds to enable them to get involved.

Relevant to this is the investment in bringing individuals and groups together in the migration sector, which has been supported over the long term, with a key purpose of building relationships and trust.

[28] https://asylummatters.org/about-asylum-matters/

"You need high degrees of trust between key actors – people have to be committed to going on a journey over a prolonged period … it has to be carefully designed".

In some ways, funders are uniquely well placed to take on this convening role. There are some sensitivities to navigate, however, to do with the power dynamics at play (between funders and grantees for example).

And expectations must be realistic.

Learning from the migration sector points to the purpose being to help build mutual understanding rather than pushing, or even encouraging, collaboration more directly:

"The point is to give a place where people can understand each other - It's more about understanding our shared context, our shared reality and how it bites harder on different parts of the field, this is what we are grappling with. The hope is that people will be clearer about, 'this is why we have decided to prioritise x, and in doing that we will try and make it useful to others. It's a lower bar. If you try to push towards anything more around a set of objectives, you will find people can't agree, unless it's really focused, e.g., around [a specific issue]. But even then, there will be disagreement".

"Immersive trips away have been very important, we do lots of sessions, case studies, research – the purpose has been about making a diagnosis but also about trust building. It's not actually about people having the same understanding of social change. It's more, 'let's meet and spend some time together'".

In relation to this, the emergence of the Asylum Reform Initiative in 2021 has been interesting. This involved the big national organisations working collectively, and there has been connection to wider sectoral efforts through Together With Refugees. By some accounts, it has involved long-term sustained effort to get that far:

"There have been at least 5 attempts to create campaign coalitions [before this], and they all collapsed … "

This is delicate work and would require sustained investment.

R 9 **Consider convening and holding space to address conflicts, build understanding and foster an environment of greater trust building (without imposing collaboration). As part of this, consider giving priority to networking involving women from grassroots groups and smaller organisations to build their social capital and connections across the sector.**

8 Grant making

8.1 Grant making practices

There were very widespread calls for funders to provide unrestricted and longer-term funding

This won't be a surprise. It's a universal and long-standing request.

It's a loud call in the migration sector too, for example as revealed in the analysis stressing how grantees regret the lack of access to unrestricted grants whilst also reporting that "*only one funder reported giving grants which had an average length of over three years*".[29]

And it's a need widely proclaimed in the environment sector, too, to take another example, where environment groups have expressed, *"a strong demand for more core and flexible funding, and for long-term funding".*[30]

But it remains a largely unmet need.

Research from 2020, for example, found that *"Of the 310 grants given to women's VCSOs, only 62 went to those that specified core or unrestricted … Of those 62 grants, 30 of them - 48% - were made by one funder, indicating the reluctance of funders to fund core/unrestricted costs".*[31]

So it remains a point of major disparity between what civil society organisations are asking for from funders and how funders are operating, in what's been called *"a sobering disconnect between attitudes of foundation leaders and the experience of non-profits".*[32]

There were also many requests to make application processes easier, more accessible and better supported.

"We don't have capacity to actually do what's required to access the funding. It's very demoralising and depressing".

"The whole process takes far too long".

"Get rid of the jargon and the buzz words".

Application processes can cause particular issues for women with English as a foreign language, including Welsh speakers.

We also heard some examples of good practice, such as funders reaching out to headhunt organisations and asking them to apply, and examples where funders have brought in consultant support in bid writing.

Many suggested streamlining or redesigning reporting, including by being more flexible about how information is gathered from grantees.

Reporting was a big issue for many, with several suggestions that verbal reporting and discussion would be a better way for them to feed back. At least offering that option would be widely welcomed.

"Make reporting easier, it's too time consuming".

"Come out and see what we do. Have some conversations".

[29] Grove White & Kaye, 2020
[30] Miller, Cracknell and Williams, 2017
[31] Women's Resource Centre, nd
[32] Buteau et al, 2020

We also heard various suggestions along the lines that funders should ideally be less instrumentally focused on narrowly defined results

"We need more bravery from funders to fund things that don't have a clear final product".

"Stop looking at numbers. The questions that funders ask should be, 'Is this organisation filling a gap? Have they progressed?' It's about mapping the journey".

"Trust in our expertise and experience".

R 10 **Review grant making practices with a view to (a) expanding unrestricted and longer-term funding, (b) making applications more streamlined, and (c) being more flexible around reporting and outcome expectations.**

8.2 Equity

Some pointed to the need for greater internal diversity within funding organisations.

"Funders are the whitest, most middle class [people in the sector] … and then they wonder about the sector, 'Why aren't they getting the traction?'"

The critique here is that there might be a tendency to question others' effectiveness from the vantage point of privileged people who do have access and influence.

Movement on internal diversity needs to be accompanied by changes that ensure more equitable practices and processes.

Funding organisations meaningfully addressing biases in staffing, attitudes and structures is likely to lead to increased support to more diverse organisations and groups, and more appropriate processes and practices to underpin that support.

R 11 **Bring more women of colour, disabled and working-class women to positions of power - into organisations and governance. This should include head hunting, positive action, shifting internal culture, peer mentoring, staff training, etc.**

8.3 Understanding the gaps in funding

This research points to gaps in funding, but a more systematic analysis of this would help ongoing decision making.

This notion that decisions should as far as possible be evidence based is consistent with the advice we heard from migration funders:

"Don't jump too early, put in enough time to analyse the need … create a rich picture from multiple sources. And look at where the existing money is going and who to. When you overlay market versus need, it gives you an idea of the gaps. But take the time, sometimes there is money flowing into spaces that aren't 'women's issues' – such as place based money".

It is also consistent with work already underway, led by ROSA[33] and funded by Esmée Fairbairn Foundation and The National Lottery Community Fund, to produce an analysis of funding flows in the sector. It would be good to make sure that the results of that process and this review are considered collectively in informing future investment strategies.

One key dimension of this is around how funding flows to certain groups and less to others. Some interviewees suggested that funders need to be more serious about supporting diverse groups and centring marginalised voices.

Drawing on available data, one illustration of this is the analysis of grant making to women's organisations in London in 2020, which revealed that funding to black and minoritised women's organisations represented just under 30% of the total.[34] According to the most recent census data, *"40.2% of residents identified with either the Asian, Black, Mixed or Other ethnic group"*.[35] These data points aren't directly comparable, but they do confirm the likelihood of under-representation.

Further, according to analysis of data provided in this report, the value of grants to white-led orgs were on average 75% higher than grants to organisations led by black and minoritised women.[36]

Average grant size to women's organisations [data from London, 2020]

	# Grants	Total grant funding	Average grant £
Total funding to women's organisations	310	£16,293,935	£52,561
Funding to black and minoritised women's organisations	130	£4,763,027	£36,639
Funding to white-led women's organisations	180	£11,530,908	£64,061

By some accounts, there have been greater efforts to channel more money to e.g., organisations led by black and minoritised women organisations in recent years. But there are some doubts about how well this is working out, given the strong analysis above that suggests this funding gets co-opted (i.e., by white-led organisations taking the bulk of the funding).

Any grant making should be done in such a way that smaller specialist organisations are centred over larger, generic organisations.

It's important to note that discussions also highlighted the need for funders to recognise their own conscious and unconscious prejudices and biases regarding marginalised groups. For example, Black women's groups felt that often funders and commissioners view them all 'the same', ignoring class, cultural and other differences, and too often only fund projects which fit racial stereotypes (such as those tackling knife crime, or tackling extreme deprivation).

[33] Louise Telford at Rosa is happy for anyone interested to contact her via email on louise@rosauk.org

[34] Women's Resource Centre, nd

[35] https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/uk-population-by-ethnicity/national-and-regional-populations/regional-ethnic-diversity/latest

[36] our analysis, set out in the table, drawing on headline data presented in Women's Resource Centre report

"They treat everyone the same and assume they know all about you but they only know racist stereotypes...so when they talk to us they come from a racist, colonial attitude".

More funding is needed that is explicitly about centring lived experience, especially for disability and for racially minoritised women. But it must be managed and targeted to the correct organisations; that is difficult and requires new ways of operating.

The best and most obvious way to do this would be for lived experience leaders to be part of the decision-making.

There are proliferating examples of good and less good practice in relation to this as funders are increasingly moving towards such a model: *"Inclusive grant making … remains a trend among foundations, with some investing more in developing participatory grant making mechanisms and seeking ways to shift more power to local organisations*".[37]

Given the sensitivies and challenges in getting this right, it would be good to work in partnership with an organisation with expertise in coordinating such work.

R 12 **Create, and delegate management of, a pooled fund in which funding decisions are led by women with lived experience, applying an intersectional lens.**

9 Funders' roles in supporting an effective sector

9.1 Attracting new funding

We have set out several recommendations and suggestions about what should change. But it will be hard to shift the sector far without new funding. Whilst there are some obvious places to move money *towards*, it's not obvious where to move funds *from*.

This is in the context that it's important to recognise the value of ongoing work, which can easily go under-appreciated.

In relation to this, many flagged issues with funders shifting funding criteria – and especially what's perceived as a disproportionate interest in innovation –

"We need funders to stop looking for new and innovative ideas. We need them to trust the women's sector and understand that we know what we're doing".

"We need continuity funding and not to keep having to do new work which is innovative".

And this is not a complaint specific to the women's sector:

"Funders are always looking for new stuff. Their starting point seems to be, 'nothing really works, what can we do differently?' … there are groups trying to reduce destitution, provide safety nets, that's still needed ... Funders don't like the crisis end, they say it's about dependency, but it's the

[37] Broome, 2022

reality".

We don't believe it would be straightforward or desirable to shift funds from where they are currently going. So then a key question is, *"Is there new money? Or are you moving the deckchairs? It's important to be honest about that. Sometimes moving the deckchairs is fine, but don't pretend its new money".*

In addition, two large sources of funding for work around women and girls are ending soon: the Tampon Tax Fund from the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, and The National Lottery Community Fund's Women and Girls Initiative.

This all points to the importance of proactive efforts to engage potential new funders.

R 13 **Engage with sympathetic funders, and with initiatives like the Civic Power Fund to encourage increased funding of women-led organisations.**

Funding to the WVCS makes up only a tiny percentage of total funding to social justice work.

Available data from London (from 2020) corroborates this widely held sense, pointing to women's organisations receiving less than 3% of total funding going to voluntary and community organisations.

Clearly, one aspiration must be to increase this percentage. But another potential route to advancing issues affecting women would be to ensure that organisations *outside* the WVCS better represent women's interests.

This gap currently manifests in multiple ways across influencing work – relating to the absence of gendered research and data, whose voices are heard or are absent in communications and influencing, how participation is encouraged or not, and whether policy demands are appropriately gendered.

For clarity, we are talking here about *influencing and power building* work, and how women's interests are represented in this, and how they can be better identified, articulated and integrated. We are not talking about service provision, and definitely not advocating that non-specialist providers should be delivering services to women.

Even so, we recognise that there are sensitivities here in that ambitions towards gender mainstreaming can – intentionally or unintentionally – result in women's voices being diluted, and in reduced funding to women's organisations.

Action on this should be seen as very much supplementary to work to boost the size and effectiveness of the WVCS, and any cross-sectoral initiative would need to be women-led and carefully planned and implemented.

R 14 **Provide funding for collaborations between organisations in the women's sector & broader coalitions (tackling poverty for example) to help ensure gendered analysis is embedded across relevant coalitions' work.**

R 15 **Share learning and practice about how to apply a gendered lens well (and less well) in mainstream funding of influencing work.**

9.2 Sensitivity to power dynamics

One final question for the group of funders commissioning this research is how much intention there is to operate collectively, to introduce and embed changes in how the sector operates and how effective it is.

Whilst some recommendations we are making can be adopted and taken forward by funders individually, some would clearly benefit from a collective – and sustained – focus.

As an input to funders' own consideration of the recommendations, and the routes to implementing them, we offer the following breakdown:

Categorising recommendations

Degree of collectivity needed	Highest priority recommendations	Important recommendations
Can be taken forward by individual funders	Support infrastructure for disabled women [R8] Review grantmaking practices [R10] Diversify internally [R11]	Develop funding streams that can reach beyond formalised organisation (R5) Invest in posts with remits to be channels of local influence [R7] Fund collaborations with broader sector coalitions on key issues [R14]
Would ideally involve coordination of some kind	Engage with funders currently outside the sector to encouraged increased support of women-led organisations [R13]	Invest in influencing strategies that can bolster policy lobbying (R1-4)
Would strongly benefit from funder collaboration	Explore solutions to pay, conditions and wellbeing [R6] Convene spaces to address conflicts and build relationships [R9] Create a pooled fund to invest in lived-experience-led organisations [R12]	Share learning about mainstreaming gender [R15]

It would be good if efforts to develop and shape the sector were undertaken collectively, meaningfully involving others beyond the funding community.

Again, if thinking about sectoral interventions, and how these are determined and then taken forward, there could be lessons from migration where funders initially collaborated as an exclusive group. These funders have more recently intentionally moved beyond that model, and would operate in a more participative way if starting out now.

This is reflected in the evolution of Migration Exchange which (put simply) initially operated as a

vehicle to support funder collaboration and strategy alignment but is now metamorphosing to be more community facing, to better help ground funder responses in community needs and priorities.

In terms of who is involved, the suggestion here was to think about:

- an inner core, leading the process,
- a wider decision-making group,
- broader engagement – through occasional check ins, etc.

At all these levels, there should be an appropriate mix of funders, community groups, and other experts – rather than just funders making the decisions – *"it's important to be thoughtful about who is in the room".*

R 16 **Take forward appropriate recommendations through a collective decision-making process, involving others beyond the funding community, with people from all four nations, a range of generations, and organisations led by and for women of colour, disabled women, etc.**

9.3 Tracking progress

Approaches to tracking and assessing progress and setting and communication around expectations will need to be sensitive to the task.

Results will be long term, and the dynamics will be complex, and so approaches to tracking progress and judging success need to be consistent with that. This means avoiding heavy handed results frameworks that start from unrealistic short-term expectations and are based on over-simplified notions of contribution:

"You have to trust the approach, make a judgement that it will make a positive difference. Don't say 'I will only invest on the precondition that it has x results', let's not pretend that's how change happens".

This could also mean ensuring that there is internal support and understanding. One experience in the migration sector was that Trustees initially provided backing for a broad and sustained approach, but had moments when they were less supportive, when results (in the short-term) were not evident.

R 17 **Be clear in communicating expectations, and then tracking progress, that work towards enhanced sector effectiveness should best be judged in the medium- and longer-term.**

In conclusion, the women's sector faces some significant challenges in maximising routes to power and influence. But there are a set of practical steps that funders can take to support WVCS organisations to go beyond survival so they are able to thrive, build power and achieve greater influence. In the current volatile and uncertain UK policy landscape, there is everything to play for, and the possibility of significant change remains on the horizon.

Appendix

Definitions

The women's voluntary and community sector:

- Organisations and grassroots groups run by and for women
- Generic organisations supporting women, women's issues and women's organisations (more or less a marginal part of 'the sector' depending on use or not of a gendered lens).

Funders and commissioners sit outside the sector - although adjacent and important to it.

Infrastructure

Organisations could be considered as primary 'infrastructure' organisations if they have membership across the sector and offer one or more of the following:

- capacity building activities
- networking and information sharing
- Representation - to funders decision makers and researchers
- advocacy, campaigning, activism or organising
- a vehicle for joint service provision

Secondary 'infrastructure' organisations are those that don't have any formal membership, but that do offer one or more of the above.

We are interested in the *functions* of infrastructure support, whether or not they are delivered or supported by organisations that define themselves or are otherwise defined as 'infrastructure organisations'.

Influencing

For the purposes of this project, influencing can be defined as any activities contributing to:

a) building power of women in general or groups of marginalised women in particular
b) building power of women's groups and organisations
c) women influencing decision makers
d) women's groups or organisations influencing decision makers

Building power might include organising approaches (building leadership, delivering training, strengthening relationships), narrative and framing work, mass mobilisations (e-actions, demonstrations), media work, community organising or activism (such as direct action or direct communication).

Influencing decision makers might include producing research, policy reports, direct lobbying, attendance of decision-making work groups, and/or engaging in meaningful consultations.

The above activities need to be deployed strategically to achieve power and influence - just seeing evidence of activity in these areas is far from a guarantee of it being an actual route to power or influence. Building power and influencing are often interrelated - they have been separated here to attempt to clarify but they overlap considerably.

WVCS Interviewees

Nottingham

1. Holly Slater, Service Coordinator at POW
2. Helen Voce, CEO at Nottingham Women's Centre
3. Zaynab Asghar, CEO at Nottingham Muslim Women's Network
4. Lisa Lenton, Chief Executive at SHE UK
5. Karen Jardine, Campaigns and Communications Officer at Notts SVS Services
6. Sarah Dagley, CEO at NIDAS
7. Sian Steans, activist at Nottingham Women for Change
8. Eva Codrington, Management support & Freedom programme facilitator at Nottingham Central Women's Aid

Manchester

1. Ehinor Otaigbe-Amedu, CEO at Wonderfully Made Woman
2. Professor Erinma Bell, Founder at Carisma
3. Janelle Hardacre, Fundraising and Marketing Officer at MASH (Manchester Action on Street Health)
4. Leah Chikamba, CEO at Angels of Hope for Women
5. Rose Ssali, Chief Executive-Support and Action for Women's Network (SAWN)
6. Khaldha Manzoor, CEO, and Rizwana Baleem, Trustee, at Rochdale Women's Welfare Association
7. Circle Steele 陳麗緣, Chief Executive Officer at WAI YIN society

Bristol and Avon

1. Christina Line, Development Manager at The Nelson Trust
2. Katy Taylor, CEO at Bristol Women's Voice
3. Ursula Lindenberg, Director of VOICES
4. Claire Bloor, CEO at Somerset and Avon Rape and Sexual Abuse Support
5. Sue Cohen, Board of Bristol Women's Commission
6. Jackie Longworth, Chair of Fairplay Southwest
7. Charlotte Gage, employee in women's sector for 15 years
8. Sue Mountstevens - Former Independent Police and Crime Commissioner for Avon & Somerset, Chair of Quartet Community Foundation

Wales

1. Natasha Davies, Policy and Research Lead at Chwarae Teg
2. Debbie Shaffer (CEO) & Dee Montague (Engagement Officer), Fair Treatment for the Women of Wales
3. Wanjiku Mbugua, Acting CEO at Bawso
4. Catherine Fookes, Director of Women's Equality Network Wales

Northern Ireland

1. Jonna Monaghan, Director of Women's Platform
2. Bronagh Hinds, Founder of DemocraShe

Scotland

1. Hannah Stevens, CEO at Elect Her
2. Anne Armstrong, CEO at North Ayrshire Forum on Disability/Access Ability Project
3. Lyndsey Ritchie, Project Manager at Youth 2000 Project

UK-wide organisations

1. Vivienne Hayes, Chief Exec at Women's Resource Centre (WRC)
2. Mary-Ann Stephenson, CEO at Women's Budget Group (WBG)
3. Mark Gale, Policy & Campaigns at Young Women's Trust
4. Janey Stevenson, Campaigner at Level Up & Founder at Sisters Uncut
5. Emma Holland-Lindsey, Head of Public Affairs at Women's Institute
6. Polly Trenow, Head of Programmes at Turn to Us and Freelance
7. Elio, Collective Volunteer at SWARM (Sex Worker Advocacy & Resistance Movement)
8. Shaista Gohir, Executive Director at Muslim Women's Network UK
9. Laura Seebohm, Chief Executive at Maternal Health Alliance
10. Analiese Doctrove, Head of Operations at Pregnant Then Screwed

VAWG

1. Deniz Ugur, Deputy Director at End Violence Against Women Coalition (EVAW)
2. Baljit Banga, Executive Director at Imkaan
3. Hannana Siddiqui, Head of Policy, Research & Fundraising at Southall Black Sisters
4. Jessica Southgate, Deputy CEO at Agenda
5. Harriet Wistrich, Founding Director at Centre for Women's Justice

Migration

1. Eiri Ohtani, Director at Right to Remain
2. Jonathan Ellis, Project Director, Detention Forum
3. Will Somerville, UK Director at Unbound Philanthropy
4. Sarah Cutler, Programme Director at Migration Exchange
5. Pauline Nandoo, Director at Southwark Day Centre for Asylum Seekers
6. David Farnworth, Managing Director, Bridge House Estates at City Bridge Trust (& previously at Diana Princess of Wales Memorial Fund)

Interviewee workshop attendees

1. Wanjiku Mbugua, Bawso
2. Bronagh Hinds, Gingerbread NI, The Women's Commission
3. Sue Cohen, Bristol Women's Commission
4. Polly Trenow, Turn to Us / Smallwood (previously WRC, Fawcett etc)
5. Rose Ssali, Support and Action for Women's Network (SAWN), & Maternal health & poverty
6. Holly Slater, POW
7. Hannah Stevens, Chief Executive of Elect Her (Scotland)
8. Dee Montague, Fair Treatment of Women in Wales

Funder interviewees

1. Rebecca Gill, Rosa
2. Paul Carbury, Smallwood Trust
3. Shona Blakeley, Women's Fund Scotland - staying for the first hour
4. Rowan Miller, The National Lottery Community Fund (TNLCF)

Funder workshop attendees

1. Cullagh Warnock, Pilgrim Trust
2. Anya Stern, Comic Relief
3. Caroline Howe, Lloyds Bank
4. Louise Telford, Rosa

5. Paul Carbury, Smallwood Trust
6. Shona Blakeley, Women's Fund Scotland - staying for the first hour
7. Annabel Durling, Esmee Fairburn
8. Rowan Miller, The National Lottery Community Fund (TNLCF) (workshop 1 only)

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