

# SEEING THE INNER ME

What Young Women Want  
from Child Sexual Abuse  
& Exploitation Services

## Acknowledgements

Women and Girls Network thanks every young woman who gave up her time to participate in this research project. Your insights, humour and wisdom gave this project life and inspires us all to do better in our work and in our campaigning. We cannot name you here but you know who you are! We are so inspired by you young warriors and so grateful that you are the future.

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All illustrations in this document are created by Soofiya, and young women who have received services from Women and Girls Network. The photographs are taken from the Women and Girls Network office

# INTRODUCTION

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In October 2017, Women and Girls Network received funding from the Centre for Expertise on Child Sexual Abuse to support improved evaluation processes in work with young people.

Between January and April 2018, Women & Girls Network (WGN) conducted focus groups and interviews with 38 young women in West London, to understand the characteristics young women want in school and community-based child sexual exploitation (CSE) services, what outcomes young women want these services to support them to achieve, and how WGN's existing model of support can be improved to better reflect young women's needs and aspirations.

WGN Young Women's Team works with 11-17 year olds (up to 21 if young women are care leavers) who are at risk of or have experienced any form of violence against women and girls (VAWG). They are brave survivors navigating complex worlds at a young age. However, these young warrior women are often misunderstood, judged and blamed for the hurt they have experienced. Our work is about creating space for all young women individually and collectively to bring about change in their own lives, but more importantly in the world around them that has let them down, abused them, and/or hurt them. This project is about amplifying, elevating and honouring these brave young warrior voices, their words and their journeys.

Young women (YW) who participated in the project were all under the age of 18 and come from a diverse range of backgrounds,

experiences and settings including mainstream schools, pupil referral units, and youth centres. The majority of participants were black and minority ethnic (BME) young women.

There was so much shared by the young women that will continue to inform WGN's work in a myriad of ways over the coming years and we are very grateful to the project participants for their time, energy and wisdom. One of the key outcomes of this project has been creation of the Making Space: WGN Young Women's HER model, capturing the ethos and approach of the YW service, as well as detailing the areas of support in our Advocacy work. Making Space is a 'little sister' to WGN's Holistic Empowerment Recovery model designed for adult women. The Making Space framework can be found on Page 16-18.

This report captures some of the key learning from the project to share beyond our organisation to inspire improved intersectional young-women centred practice across all services that come into contact with young women dealing with issues around child sexual abuse/exploitation.



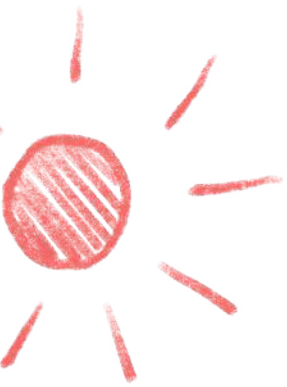
# HOW YOUNG WOMEN SEEK HELP



When thinking about seeking help for a problem, young women said that they would seek help informally in the first instance, through friends and sometimes through family members. While some suggested they would talk to a mother or sister, others felt that their parents wouldn't understand, would blame them, or would "hate" or feel ashamed of them.



When asked about formal help-seeking, young women expressed little confidence in teachers or other school staff. They worried that teachers would break their trust by telling their parents or other teachers, that they would lose control over what happened next after they shared information, or that they would then be viewed by the school as a "victim." By contrast, young women spoke positively of Childline as an anonymous service that is available online and open when other services aren't; and felt that charities like WGN are trustworthy because they are "experts" on violence against women.



***"[A teacher] might tell other teachers what's going on and then teachers will treat you differently... they treat you as if you're a victim and some people don't want that"***

*- school focus group participant*

***"I hid my situation [having been raped] for a few years. That's when matters got worse, [when] it all came out. Why did I even speak? Everything changed, I just felt like [my family] hated me"***

*- interview participant*

Several evaluations of CSE services have emphasized the importance of involving parents and carers and seeing them as safeguarding partners (Bovarnick et al, 2017b; Edinburgh & Saewyc, 2009; Luke et al, 2017; Scott et al, 2017a, Scott et al, 2017b; Shuker & Ackerley, 2017). It is important to note that in this evaluation, young women had different views on whether they would want their parents involved, and for some young women, believing that their parents would find out was a barrier to them seeking help from statutory agencies.

***“ I feel it’s the process that gets you to the point where you actually break [and get support]. Before, even if there was help available, I would be to shy to go”***

*– interview participant*

Despite saying they would be unlikely to seek help from school, young women noted that they would also be unlikely to come directly to WGN without an introduction from someone they trusted. One young woman, who was referred to WGN by her social worker, described it as a “process” to get to the point of being ready to engage with WGN’s services: ***“It’s a stage by stage process to like open up and have***

***a different mind-set-calm down and look at the world differently” (interview participant).*** In the framework this period of allowing time for young women to feel in control of their decision to come to us for support is represented as ‘Connecting’.

***“I think it’s the introduction that matters the most. I think you need to like advertise yourself to like certain areas – hospitals, like if someone felt like they needed help as a woman, they could go to certain areas such as GPs, pharmacies, somewhere where you know you’re safe, confidentially and no one else would know”***

*– interview participant*



Others suggested that WGN needed to work with the police and schools to ensure those statutory agencies made referrals. As in other evaluations, it is clear that young women value voluntary services for their independence (Bovarnick et al, 2017b; Gilligan, 2016), but are more closely connected to statutory services and therefore may rely on them to make connections to voluntary services. As in other evaluations, this suggests the importance of a strong multi-agency, partnership approach to CSE (Bovarnick et al, 2017b; Luke et al, 2017; PHE, 2017; Scott et al, 2017a).

In considering ways to improve promotion, young women suggested that WGN attend school assemblies to talk about their services, and that promotional materials such as posters should show actual images of WGN’s services



so that they know what to expect, be more colourful and have accessible text size, and emphasise that the service is confidential, offers counselling, and what age ranges are served. Interestingly, although young women described Childline’s online services, they didn’t talk about seeking help online for gender-based violence services like WGN. They also noted the importance of the name of services in creating a first impression of what it would be, such as the “girls group” in their school: “Girl’s group: nah, it sounds cringy.” This highlights the potential benefits of co-designing services with young women (Scott et al, 2017, Scott & Skidmore, 2006).

## HOW A SERVICE SHOULD LOOK, FEEL AND SMELL

Young women were asked to discuss their ‘ideal’ service, and what they value in WGN’s services. Young women consistently talked about wanting a place that made them feel comfortable, happy and relaxed.



They spoke about this being conveyed in the physical space through beanbags and sofas, being bright and sunny, informal, and feeling “playful” or “childish.” They noticed and appreciated the many small details that made WGN seem welcoming, such as nice smells (lavender oil, Florida water, fresh flowers), hot drinks, background music, affirmation cards, and seeing other young women’s drawings on the walls. Young women wanted a comfortable space wherever they met, whether at WGN’s offices, at school, or elsewhere.

The qualities of the physical space of services is rarely explored in evaluations of CSE services, and yet it is clear that it is very

important to young women.

Young women who had received one-to-one support from WGN liked that they were given a choice of where to meet the first time, and that they could meet in a coffee shop because it felt relaxed and like they were *“just meeting a friend.”* One young woman articulated the importance of perceived neutral meeting places: *cause [in a café] it’s not like when someone brings you to their office and they are outnumbered... there’s bare of you and one of them, but when you bring them to a café its just you (interview participant).* They also preferred the option to meet somewhere convenient to them, whether close to their home or their school. This is consistent with other CSE evaluations, which have noted the importance of offering a choice of venue and





**“YW are coming to you. [I] got a text from [the WGN worker] and she asked if I wanna meet in a coffee shop, and I was like ‘Oh that’s not what I thought it would be like, I thought we’d be in a room’... [When we met] she was just like quite cute, yeah just friendly – it was like meeting a friend, do you know what I mean?”**

**—interview participant**



**“But you also gotta give them their own space... too many conversations, too many phone calls, it’s just too much at once, gets too confusing. So maybe once a week or like once a fortnight or something like that would be alright, ‘cause it’s not that bunched up, is it?”**

**—interview participant**

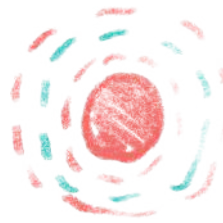


timing (Harris & Roker, 2017), and availability outside standard hours (Gilligan, 2016; Scott et al, 2017a). Young women had differing views on frequency of support, and some reacted negatively to what they perceived as overly frequent contact that increased the sense of pressure they felt. Other evaluations have found, however, that high intensity is a key component of effective CSE services (Bovarnick et al, 2017b).

The need to feel comfortable and relaxed carried through to the characteristics they want staff to have. Perhaps the most consistent finding in CSE evaluations is that strong relationships between support workers and young people are the most important factor in service efficacy (Bovarnick et al, 2017a; Bovarnick et al, 2017b; Brodie et al, 2016; Edinburgh & Saewyc, 2009; Harris & Roker, 2017; Luke et al, 2017; Scott, 2016; Williams et al, 2017). Young women in this evaluation said it was important for staff to be friendly, warm and welcoming, and to have a “happy buzz”. They appreciated that WGN staff are “real” and open with them, and that they share aspects of their own lives too. They wanted workers to be slightly older and more experienced than them, but still close enough in age to have been through similar pressures, such as with social media. It was important to young women that WGN staff are all women, who they perceive as being better able to understand the pressures women and girls face. It was also important to minority ethnic young women that WGN has minority ethnic staff, who can speak their language and who young women felt can better understand the pressures they face within their families.

Most of all, young women (YW) value that WGN’s services are confidential and that they can trust WGN staff: YW are coming to you **‘cause they are scared and they know that you’re not gonna tell their parents. You**

*need to be secret about it. Like this building is good 'cause you wouldn't know it was even here (interview participant).* In seeking help, they want to have someone they feel able to talk to and have a "normal" conversation and "get out" their concerns and frustrations. It's important that staff focus on listening to them and aren't taking notes while they're talking. This confidentiality is so crucial, that young women suggested they wouldn't trust online video counselling if it was offered, because they would worry it would be recorded. Young women had differing preferences for group work or one-to-one support, suggesting that having both options available is important. For group work, young women valued the opportunity to make new social connections, so feel it's important to have fairly small groups.



# WHAT CONTENT YOUNG WOMEN WANT SERVICES TO COVER



***“Instead of having people come in to deliver sessions we could maybe create some of our own sessions, about the stuff we know about”***

*— focus group participant*

***“Talk about more like society today- not the 1900’s or whatever that bollocks. Like what’s happening today, how can we change today”***

*— interview participant*

Young women spoke about the range of pressures they face along a continuum of gendered violence, from pressures to conform to family, peer and social expectations of how they should behave, to sexual harassment by male peers at school, to abuse in their intimate relationships. They spoke positively about how WGN staff addressed these pressures, both through groupwork topics and through one-to-one support.

It was important to young women that sessions aren’t too prescriptively planned, and that staff were responsive to what they wanted to talk about on a given day. Young women attending school groups suggested that they would like the opportunity to create their own sessions. It was important to them that topics focused on current issues and the present day, not historical issues, and helped them understand what they can change – not just in their own lives, but in the wider world. This is consistent with findings in other evaluations that suggest that co-design with young people may increase service effectiveness (Scott et al, 2017; Scott & Skidmore, 2006).

Young women appreciate learning ways to protect themselves, such as being encouraged to delete social media and understanding harm in relationships. It’s important to them, though, that despite the serious subject matter that they are able to have fun. Young women described enjoying watching films and then discussing them in a group, doing creative activities, and having a safe space created so that they feel able to talk openly in a group. School group participants suggested a range of activities away from school to help them bond with each other, including sports, going to restaurants,





*“[In the first session] I was like ‘Oh this is all a load of rubbish, what am I doing, why have I been transferred to this?’ Towards the end of the session I was like, ‘She’s cute, I wanna see her again! I absolutely loved it, it opened my eyes to different ways of thinking’”*

— interview participant

having a sleepover, or having a movie night.

Other evaluations have noted the importance of service content addressing multiple vulnerabilities (Bovarnick et al, 2017b), being locally informed (PHE, 2017), including sexual health education (Edinburgh & Saewyc, 2009), providing support to continue education (Reid, 2014; Scott & Skidmore, 2006), and building resilience (Bovarnick et al, 2017b; PHE, 2017).



## OUTCOMES: WHAT'S IMPORTANT TO YOUNG WOMEN




Statutory commissioning and multi-agency efforts around CSE services are predominantly focused on safety and preventing immediate harm, yet this was not an outcome that young women highlighted themselves. Rather, young women interviewed in this evaluation focused on longer-term outcomes that reflect a more encompassing change in their lives.

Young women overwhelmingly saw the primary goal of seeking help from a service like WGN as being empowerment, self-actualisation and greater integration of self. They spoke about having a more positive self-perception, self-respect and self-confidence,




***“I used to be shy, I used to let everyone walk all over me and now I don’t”***

— interview participant



***“She helped me see the inner me, something I’ve never seen before, like I don’t know how to explain it, it was quite deep ”***

— interview participant



***“[WGN] changed me in a positive way, [I’m] more empowered as a woman”***

— focus group participant

feeling proud of yourself and not caring what others think of you, and learning from your experience to become a “better version” of yourself. They described the freedom they felt in having the space and support to explore themselves. In the Making Space framework, the correlating aspect of Advocacy work is called ‘Me -Time’ (See page 16-17).

Young women described wanting to feel more connected to other people. They want both to be able to trust other people, and to be trusted by others. They spoke about feeling more confident in interpersonal relationships: as a result of WGN’s support, more able to be assertive and less shy, and more able to understand what’s important to them in their interpersonal relationship.

***The strength to keep going is other people’s strength that helps you build yours (interview participant).***

In Making Space, this work area is referred to as “Mutuality”.

Improved mental health was also seen as a key outcome, described by young women as feeling happy and free, not self-harming or blaming themselves, feeling acceptance and not being “heartbroken”, and being able to enjoy life and have fun. This is a consistent area of work throughout the Advocacy journey in line with the Making Space ethos of Trauma-informed and Holistic Practice.

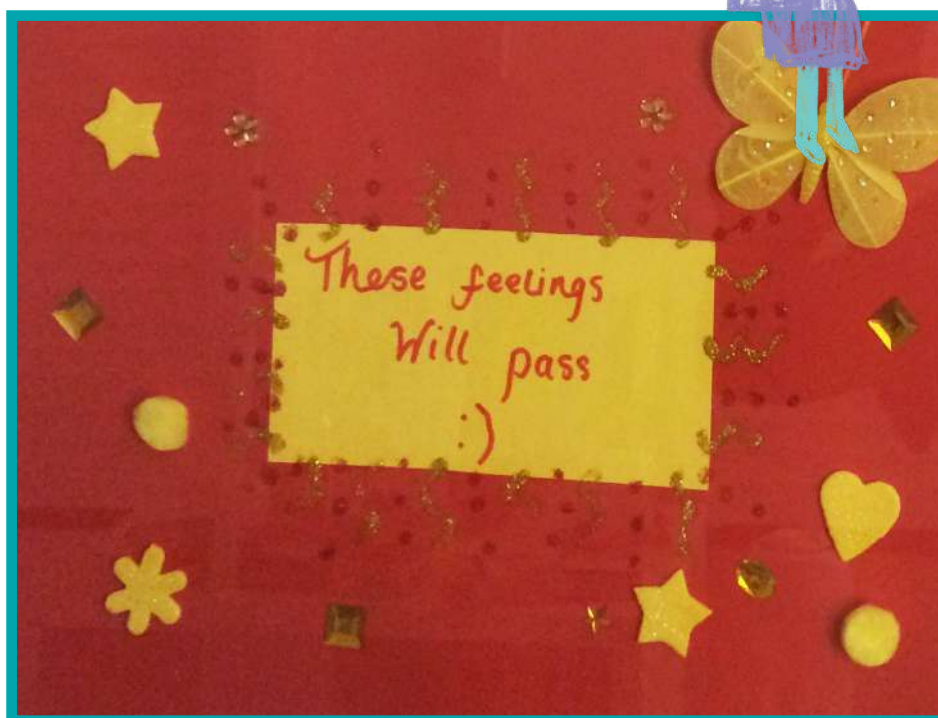
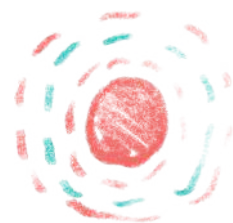
Young women talked about the importance of being listened to and believed: ***Just a talk a little chat about what happened- cause you can’t like bore your friends with that stuff.. Well, I could but I choose not to so if there’s like an older person that works like no-one knows it’s***

*better then cause you can work like round it if you know what I mean (interview participant).* The affirmation and relief of being listened to came through strongly as young women described feeling like *'a weight off my shoulders' and 'breaking free from chains'.* *I want women to leave that room feeling like she is important- their lives DO matter (interview participant).* Again, this is a consistent element throughout our Advocacy Work, represented in the framework as "Mutuality".



Young women talked about being better understood by the services and other adults around them as a key outcome: *You gotta help them change their environments - like if they're in a bad situation or a bad place then you guys can help them out.* This is critical to WGN's trauma-informed approach of looking at the system around a young person as the problem, rather than the young person herself. In the framework this is represented as "Action".

Finally, young women also talked about an outcome of being better able to help others, including better understanding violence against women and girls, being able to direct friends to appropriate support, and being able to share their experience to help others. This is the "Community" and "Knowledge" aspects of the framework.



# IMPLICATIONS FOR SERVICE DEVELOPMENT

## Publicising the Young Women's Service

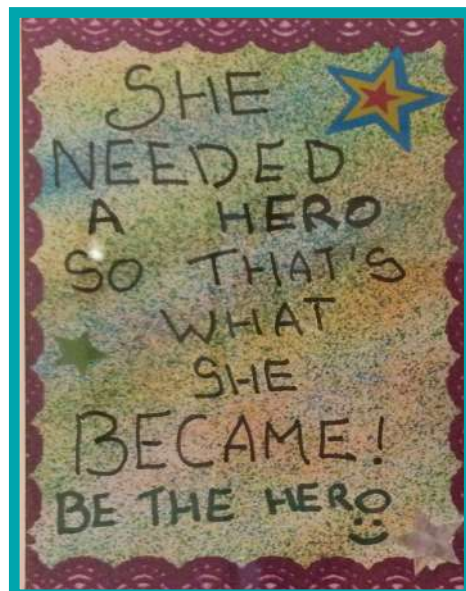
- Perceived confidentiality is a key factor in whether young women choose to seek help from services. Communicating the confidentiality of WGN's services should be a key component of marketing, and the implications for confidentiality (real or perceived) should be considered in developing new services, such as online video counselling or involving parents and carers.
- Publicity materials should provide as much information as possible about what young women can expect from engaging the service, including actual photos of interior spaces if possible.
- Publicity efforts may be improved by co-designing services with young women from the start, for example, in naming the service.
- Statutory agencies such as school, the police, and children's services should be well-informed about WGN's services and be able to provide detailed information about the type of support young women will receive there.

## Outcomes

- Longer-term outcomes around empowerment and self-actualisation are very important to young women, and WGN should continue to advocate strongly for commissioners to fund the longer-term support required to achieve these outcomes.

## Service delivery

- Young women want flexibility in when and where they can access services, and appreciate online services that are more convenient. In developing online services, however, young women will need to feel confident in WGN's ability to protect their confidentiality online.
- Young women have ideas for group-work content and would appreciate the opportunity to be involved in creating sessions. They value flexibility in both group and one-to-one content, and space to raise issues of most concern to them.
- WGN's ethnically diverse, women-only staff is a key strength of the service for young women, and commissioners should ensure WGN are able to support and retain this workforce.
- WGN's welcoming and comfortable physical spaces are extremely important to young women, and funding should continue to support the maintenance and development of these spaces.



# MAKING SPACE: ADVOCACY SUPPORT JOURNEY



## Reflection

Looking at our journey together, saying goodbye, moving on

## Action

Taking control, making decisions, understanding what's happened, attending appointments with you so you are not alone

## Me-time

Getting to know yourself, seeing different view-points, seeing and learning to love the real You

## Pause

If you need to take a break, we'll be here if/when you want to come back

## Exploring

Getting to know each other, stepping into your world

## Knowledge

Self care, Violence, Trauma, Self soothing, Women's health, Services and Your Rights

## Work we do with professionals and other adults in your life

**Community:** Strengthening positive connections with services, family and friends

**Safety:** Reducing risks and increasing safety in the situation around you

**Action:** Advocating on your behalf with other agencies and family/friends to make change happen

**Knowledge:** Helping adults around you understand more about you, your experiences, Violence, and Trauma

## Connecting

Meeting for the first time, understanding our role and your time to decide on whether this is right for you

## Safety

Taking care of ourselves, valuing ourselves, building on strengths, understanding it's not your fault!

## Intensive

When life is intense and you need additional support we'll be here for you



**Confidentiality + Trust**





# MAKING SPACE: ETHOS AND APPROACH



## Holistic

Mind Body and Spirit



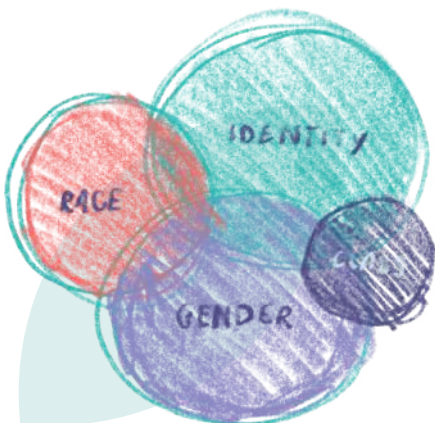
## Rights-based

Know your rights, fight  
for your rights!  
Knowledge is power!



## Therapeutic

Supporting growth,  
healing and development



## Intersectional

Seeing and  
celebrating diversity



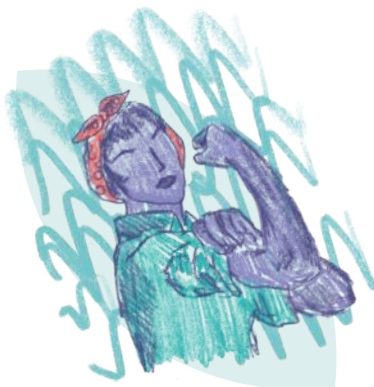
## Trauma informed

What's happened to you,  
not what you have done



## Mutuality

Connection to yourself/  
connection to others.  
Relationships of care, respect  
and kindness



## Strengths

We believe in you, we'll  
support you to believe in  
yourself



## Rebellion

Change is possible and  
necessary! We celebrate  
your resistance



## Feminist & gender responsive

The world is gendered, our  
work must be too

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