

“This service is for the working girls. Without it they’d be really stuck...They’d have nowhere.”

Tackling violence against women and girls
experiencing multiple disadvantage:
Learning through service delivery for
practitioners, funders and policymakers

**COMIC
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Executive Summary

Women who have suffered or are suffering from abuse, violence and trauma face disproportionately higher rates of 'multiple disadvantage', including mental health problems, poverty, homelessness, substance and/or alcohol misuse, criminal offences and prostitution/sex work, and are more likely to come from Black and minoritised communities or have a disability. In partnership with the UK's Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), Comic Relief funded eight UK organisations from 2020-2022 to maintain and expand support for women and girls who are experiencing or are at risk of violence and abuse and who face additional barriers in accessing services. Research was carried out by Against Violence and Abuse (AVA) to capture projects' learnings and to develop collective knowledge around 'what works' in terms of service delivery and funding practice when tackling violence against women experiencing multiple disadvantage. This report examines 1) what the programme achieved, 2) lessons arising through service delivery that are helpful for practitioners, and 3) lessons that are helpful for funders and policymakers working in this space. In so doing, it formulates a list of recommendations for practitioners, funders and policymakers working to address violence against women experiencing multiple disadvantage.

Recommendations for practitioners

- Invest in targeted outreach, promote services at community level, protect your community footprint, foster a range of referral sources, and provide services at the point of need in order to reduce the multiple barriers to access for women experiencing multiple disadvantage.
- Ensure staff are adequately trained and supported so they have the skills and capacity to carry out holistic trauma informed engagement that demonstrates the 'Core Conditions' with women accessing the services.
- Maintain the accessibility of services, for example by installing informal access points and/or drop-in centres, try to keep case workers consistent, provide safe and private spaces and practice confidentiality.
- Provide both in-person support alongside online support, and offer service users the choice of their preferred method, as a way to broaden your reach as much as possible.
- Develop and protect mechanisms for training former service users, and safely and appropriately create opportunities for them to work and volunteer in the services.

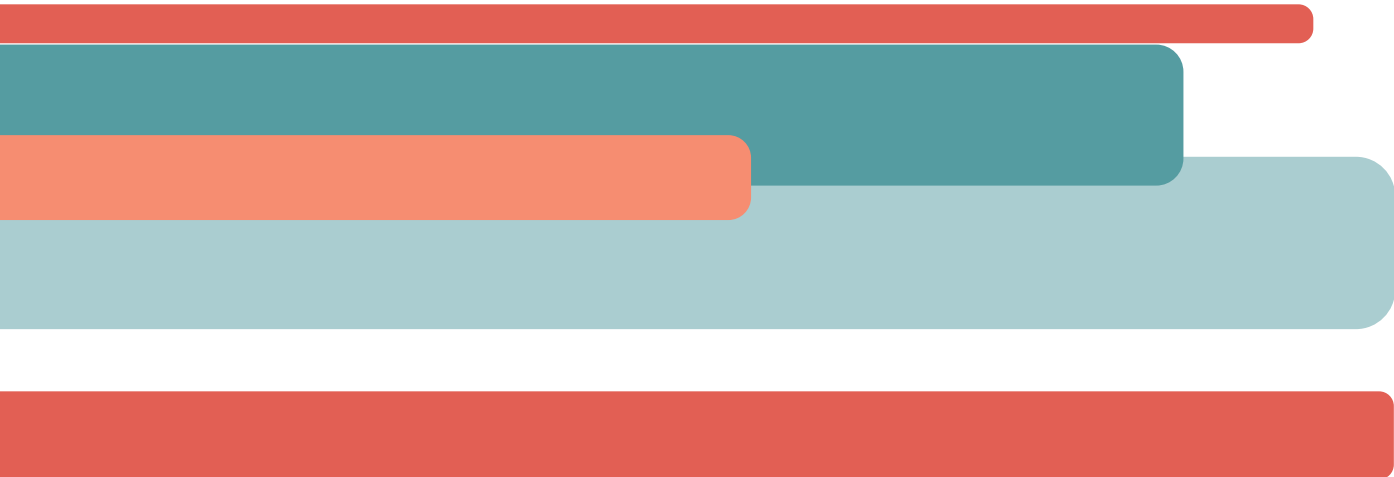
Recommendations for funders and policymakers

- Practice flexible philanthropy that is rooted in a trust-based paradigm and recognises the high level of expertise and strong track record of organisations, offer funding for wraparound services where applicable, and place emphasis on the needs of the partners and not just those of the funder, for example by keeping reporting requirements as light-touch as possible.
- Recruit specialist programme staff and/or invest in training so there is subject knowledge expertise of the funding stream, prioritise employee retention and fill vacant programme lead roles as quickly as possible.
- When releasing a call for funding, try to announce the upcoming call beforehand, allow sufficient time for applications, and try to avoid deadlines that fall in the school/religious holidays. Ensure that there is enough turnaround time between the awarding of funding and commencement of work.
- Provide multi-year funding opportunities where the same amount of short term funding is available over a longer period of time, and ensure that it covers indirect project costs (overheads).
- Ask funded partners to consider what progress looks like for them, and how to meaningfully measure and report impact in ways that account for the nuances and complexities of working with women experiencing multiple disadvantage.



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Introduction

Approximately one in 20 women have experienced extensive physical or sexual violence and abuse across their life course, compared to one in every 100 men¹. This equates to 1.2 million women in England alone. Research shows that women who have suffered or are suffering from abuse, violence and trauma face disproportionately higher rates of ‘multiple disadvantage’². More than half have a common mental health condition, 52% have a disability and need help with everyday activities, one in five have experienced homelessness, and one in three have an alcohol problem and are eight times more likely to be drug dependent than women with little experience of violence and abuse.

The term, multiple disadvantage, refers to multiple and intersecting barriers which include, but are not limited to, homelessness, poverty, drug and alcohol misuse and addiction, prostitution/sex work, contact with the criminal justice system, mental ill-health, and individual and systemic experiences of discrimination and racism³. The relationship between gender-based violence and multiple disadvantage is cyclical: women dealing with these issues are more likely to suffer abuse, and in turn, abuse is more likely to exacerbate their disadvantages. When these intersectional identities combine, they create unique sets of barriers and limitations on women and girls’ everyday realities.

Experiences of multiple disadvantage often lead to the marginalisation of women from the statutory services that are purported to help them, such as the police or social services. Misogyny, stigma, racism, classism and other forms of oppression combine to limit women’s access to support services whilst perpetrators limit women’s ‘space for action’⁴ and ‘reaction’⁵. Despite the higher needs of women experiencing multiple disadvantage, dedicated support services designed for women experiencing multiple disadvantage are generally scarce across the violence against women and girls (VAWG) service landscape⁶.

The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic intensified the already limited provision of services for women with multiple disadvantage, against a backdrop of an increase in VAWG, particularly domestic abuse and domestic homicide⁷. The repeated lockdowns throughout 2020 and 2021 restricted survivors’ access to universal and statutory services, exacerbated racial inequality, increased food poverty, caused disproportionately high numbers of female redundancies, and left women experiencing multiple disadvantage under-protected and rarely considered in policy agendas.

1. AVA (2019) *Breaking Down the Barriers: Findings of the National Commission on Domestic and Sexual Violence and Multiple Disadvantage*. AVA.

2. *ibid*.

3. Scott, S., & McManus, S. (2016) *Hidden Hurt: Violence, Abuse and Disadvantage in the Lives of Women*. DMSS Research.

4. Sharp-Jeffs, N., Kelly, L., & Klein, R. (2018) Long journeys toward freedom: The relationship between coercive control and space for action – Measurement and emerging evidence. *Violence Against Women*, 24(2), 163-185.

5. Donovan, C., & Barnes, R. (2020) *Queering narratives of domestic violence and abuse*. Springer International Publishing.

6. AVA (2017) *Mapping the Maze: Services for women experiencing multiple disadvantage in England and Wales*. AVA.

7. UN Women (2020) *The Shadow Pandemic: Violence against women during COVID-19*. UN Women.

To improve the lives of disadvantaged women and girls, the UK's Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) established the Tampon Tax Fund, consisting of money raised through taxation on feminine sanitary products, to be redistributed across the non-profit sector. In partnership with DCMS, Comic Relief funded eight organisations in the UK – five in England and one each in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland – to maintain and expand support for women and girls who are experiencing or at risk of violence and abuse and who face additional barriers in accessing services due to their multiple disadvantage. These organisations are listed below.

- [The Angelou Centre](#)
- [Cambridge Women's Resources Centre](#)
- [Edinburgh Rape Crisis Centre](#)
- [Swansea Women's Aid](#)
- [Together Women](#)
- [women@thewell](#)
- [Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland](#)
- [The Women's Centre Cornwall](#)

Average annual income across the organisations at the time of writing was £858,000. Grants started in early 2020 and ranged in duration from 17 months to 26 months. The average grant amount was £147,000. Project interventions included case management, referrals, mentoring, counselling and group work alongside advocacy and training. For more information on each of the projects, please refer to Annex A.

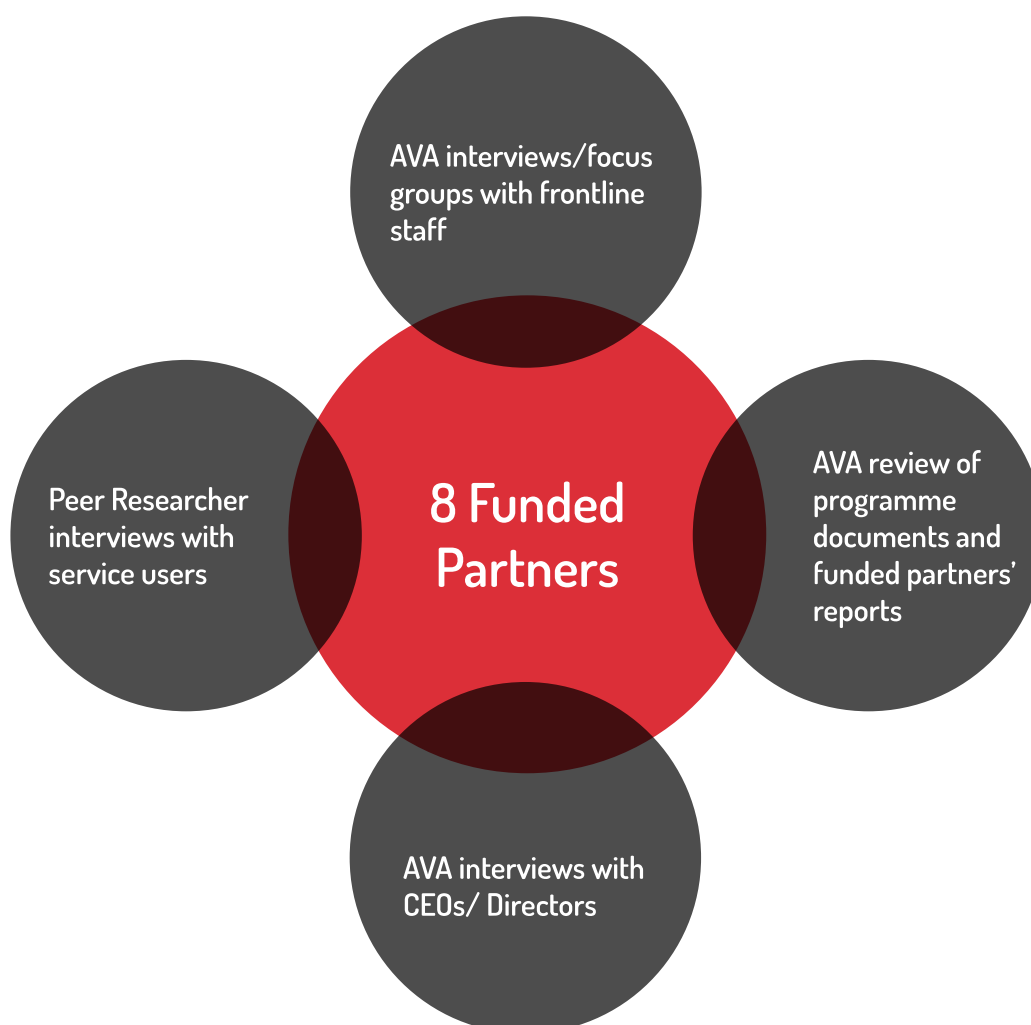
Comic Relief commissioned Against Violence and Abuse (AVA), a leading UK feminist organisation working to end VAWG through training, consultancy and advocacy, to conduct an evaluation of the programme from April 2021 to March 2022. The purpose of this report is to share learnings across the projects and develop a collective knowledge around 'what works' when tackling violence against women experiencing multiple disadvantage. The evaluation's findings are summarised in this report, which explores:

- 1. *what the programme achieved,***
- 2. *lessons arising through service delivery that are helpful for practitioners, and***
- 3. *lessons that are helpful for funders and policymakers working in this space.***

In so doing, it formulates a list of recommendations for practitioners, funders and policymakers working to address violence against women experiencing multiple disadvantage.

Research Methodology

AVA engaged the eight funded partners through four different research methods, as presented in the diagram



To ensure participatory learning that validates and centres the voices of those with lived experience of multiple disadvantage, AVA deployed their survivor-led research methodology. Eight 'Experts by Experience' were recruited, trained, remunerated and supported by AVA as Peer Researchers, and subsequently conducted interviews with eighteen service users across the programme portfolio. This innovative survivor-led research methodology aims to centre the voices and experience of women with multiple disadvantage who have survived violence and abuse, so that the research process itself helps empower both researcher and interviewee. In addition, use of researchers with lived experience helps reduce the power divisions between researcher and subject and can facilitate more open and honest dialogue as the interviewer is more informed about the subject matter due to their own lived experience. As part of AVA's approach to trauma informed social action, we believe this method offers meaningful, relational engagement opportunities for survivors in addition to enhancing the quality of research in the women's sector.

As a trauma informed organisation, AVA start from the position of 'do no harm' in our approach to research. We took steps to ensure the emotional and physical safety of the peer researchers, service users and funded partner staff. We designed interview questions and focus group topic guides to cover systemic issues, service access, service provision and the wider impact of Covid-19, rather than on individual experiences of violence and abuse. We tested questions to ensure they would not be upsetting or triggering to service users and staff. All interviewees gave informed consent to participate in the research and were given the chance to opt out.

AVA is grateful to the funded partner staff who, facing significant pressures and unprecedented levels of demand during the pandemic, generously gave time to AVA to learn with us, shape these reports and co-produce the recommendations. This report is dedicated to you for your creativity, courage and stamina.

A Note on Language

Language in the VAWG sector is politicised and contested, as it conveys positionality and power relations. Where possible, AVA have employed the language used by the speaker about their own experiences. This may result in inconsistencies in the language used across the report, as one woman might feel that the term 'victim' is appropriate for her current state of mind and situation, while another may feel that 'survivor' is a better reflection of her status. AVA endeavours to ensure that the use of language humanises women, is non-judgemental and respects how they choose to describe their experiences.

Summary of the Programme's Achievements

The evaluation found that the programme led to numerous outcomes and had wide-ranging impacts on the lives of women and girls experiencing violence and multiple disadvantage. In total, 1,995 women directly benefited from the programme, meaning that they experienced a measurable positive outcome as a result of their participation. The feedback from the service users about their experiences of the support was overwhelmingly positive.

"It gave me perspective, it gave me goals. It makes you look at your situation differently." – Service User

As a result of the programme, 567 women attended one-to-one or group counselling sessions and 593 women were informed about their rights and about the availability of services in their communities. In addition, 838 frontline workers were trained and/or upskilled, which helps ensure the sustainability of quality service provision after the programme end. 660 service users underwent some form of engagement with statutory services, such as the police, healthcare, rehabilitation or legal aid. According to the funded partners, this is significant, because many women experiencing multiple disadvantage often feel excluded from accessing such services or are reluctant to do so.

"They make you want to better yourself. There's five of us, with the help of them [funded partner staff], that have managed to keep all babies [ie. social services have not removed their children] and go clean [from substance abuse]." – Service User

The lifestyles of women experiencing multiple disadvantage often mean their health and security are at increased risk which is further exacerbated by their proximity to violence and abuse. For this most marginalised group, the most significant impact from accessing dedicated VAWG services has been an increase in their sense of safety. The projects reported a reduction in the risk and vulnerability of 871 service users as a result of the programme.

"I've been off the streets [as a sex worker]...for two years now but I still use the service because I've learned that if I didn't have her [case worker] to ring sometimes, I'd go mad." – Service User

In addition, 899 women saw an improvement in their overall physical and mental wellbeing, 743 felt their confidence and resilience had increased, and 476 women reported feeling less isolated than before.

"I just sort of feel now that there's a support network there and it's always there if I need it, which is amazing." – Service User

Lessons for Practitioners

This section explores the key factors at service delivery level that contributed to the programme's successes and failures, and highlights recommendations for those working to deliver services to women and girls experiencing VAWG and multiple disadvantage.

Accessible, outreach-based support that responds to women's needs at the initial point of contact is key to engaging women experiencing multiple disadvantage, given their lack of trust in statutory services

"They came to me and offered the help." – Service User

A key driver behind the projects' successes in reaching women experiencing multiple disadvantage was the fact that they operate in proactive and accessible ways and are rooted in the communities in which they exist. Women with experience of multiple disadvantage often have lived experience of discrimination and alienation from people and services, and thus no reason to trust them. They therefore may be less likely to seek help independently. The closer the services are, both physically and emotionally, to the women they intend to help, the greater the chances that women will engage. Some services approached women directly, for instance by driving out to speak to women on the street.

"They come out to us in the car. You have your meeting in the car or you go for coffee and do it that way." – Service User

Other services have an open door, self-referral policy and work hard to build a community footprint and a strong network of professionals to encourage women to access services. Many women described their experience of being referred or recommended to the services by mental health professionals, community nurses, the police, mothers, friends, other 'street-based' friends and housing authorities.

"So I came here and I just filled out a form about myself to refer myself. And from there, they just offered me all different kinds of classes and all different kinds of help to try and rebuild myself." – Service User

A key success factor for many of the projects was their determination to provide support to service users at the point of need, circumventing waiting lists for this target group due to the urgent nature of their condition. Most services found they had only a small window to demonstrate they could meet these women's needs hence the justification for prioritising access to their services for women experiencing multiple disadvantage.

"I thought I would wait quite a while, but due to my circumstances I got support quite quickly." – Service User

Maintaining the open-door policy after the initial point of engagement was a critical factor in sustaining the support offered to the women. Due to their complex needs and situations, the projects found it challenging to persuade users to consistently engage with the services, but found that keeping a constant presence reassured the service users that support was available when they were ready for it.

“They’ve gone above and beyond for me since I needed them at the start.”
– Service User

Fostering safe and welcoming environments was important in facilitating positive engagement with service users. Even small interventions that create a cosy atmosphere, such as offering cups of tea, made a big difference.

“I’m trying to sort my life out...But they’re still there for me, you know? They check in and give me anything I need.” – Service User

***Recommendation for practitioners:** Invest in targeted outreach, promote services at community level, protect your community footprint, foster a range of referral sources, and provide services at the point of need in order to reduce the multiple barriers to access for women experiencing multiple disadvantage.*

Women experiencing multiple disadvantage would benefit most from tailored and trauma informed service provisioning which demonstrates the ‘Core Conditions’ of empathy, congruence and unconditional positive regard

“I feel very safe with my worker and the service. I felt from the first time we met [she has] a warming and caring energy. With my worker I know I can be myself and share all of my emotions and thoughts as I know I will not be judged.”
– Service User

Most mainstream services are not able to respond to the complex needs of women experiencing multiple disadvantage⁸. This diverse group are traditionally less visible than other service users and do not appear in many policy agendas or dedicated funding streams. Interventions were successful in this programme because the women experiencing multiple disadvantage were supported by trained practitioners with the requisite skills to address their specific range of needs through bespoke, gendered and needs-led holistic services, rather than ‘one size fits all’ models.

8. Homeless Link (2018) Promising Practice from the Frontline: Exploring gendered approaches to supporting women experiencing homelessness and multiple disadvantage. Homeless Link.

“They guided me... They told me the options that were available. Never ever forced anything upon me. They told me, ‘Look, this is what we can do. This is how we can help you. This is the help we can get you. Do we want that? Are you ready for it?’” – Service User

The women responded well to the various services on offer to them, including one-to-one counselling sessions, group work, going out for walks, socialising and building relationships with other survivors, educational courses, financial or housing support and legal assistance. One project invited survivors to share their stories of domestic abuse creatively through poetry, music and art, which made a positive impact.

“I just have kind of really naturally began to flourish within that environment.”
– Service User

Many frontline staff emphasised the importance of ‘trauma informed’ practice that recognises the impact of trauma and actively prevents re-traumatising clients in service settings that encourage healing. Women experiencing multiple disadvantage have often developed complex trauma after years of abuse, rejection and exploitation, which may be compounded by the physical and emotional impacts of substance abuse, child removal, poverty and homelessness.

“Pandora’s box had been opened and I had no choice [to seek help] as I needed to get some things out. It was eating me up inside.” – Service User

Women experiencing multiple disadvantage can lose their sense of self-worth, and exposure to de-humanising systems may lead them to expect judgement about their lived experiences. Service users expressed their appreciation for the way the staff demonstrated the person-centred ‘Core Conditions’⁹ of empathy, congruence and unconditional positive regard.

“As soon as we walked in, she made us feel comfortable.” – Service User

The genuinely caring, respectful and non-judgemental attitudes from support staff helped encourage the women to engage with the services and open up to receiving support.

“It’s just a nice place to be and not feel judged.” – Service User

Recommendation for practitioners: Ensure staff are adequately trained and supported so they have the skills and capacity to carry out holistic trauma informed engagement that demonstrates the ‘Core Conditions’ with women accessing the services.

9. Rogers, C. R. (1957) The Necessary and Sufficient Conditions of Therapeutic Personality Change. *Journal of Consulting Psychology*, 21, 95-103.

Building service users' long term trust and sense of safety is central to making progress

"They have absolutely been my rock." – Service User

Due to the instability that can characterise the lives of women experiencing multiple disadvantage, their recovery is dependent on reliable services that provide a long term sense of security and access to a safe space whenever needed. In interviews, multiple service users emphasised the importance of knowing that services would not shut them out and that they were free to return whatever life threw at them.

"[My relationship with my case worker] meant she was able to sort of sense in my voice just how I was feeling that day. And it's that support that you just couldn't really get anywhere else." – Service User

Successful working relationships between service workers and users was crucially important in reducing women's fear of using the services and encouraging their continued engagement. A number of women noted how beneficial it was that their case worker remained the same throughout their recovery.

"I liked that my support worker was solely for me – she didn't change. I felt that there was total ease about it." – Service User

Another key factor for successful practice was the availability of private spaces where users felt safe, in order to facilitate open and honest discussions.

"Safety is four walls – the environment is [crucial] for our women." – Funded Partner Staff

Faith in the confidentiality of the service was also critical, so that service users felt psychologically safe to continue their journey of recovery. This meant that case workers needed to retain client confidentiality and administrative staff needed to secure the privacy of their personal details. It also meant a need for discretion from other service users, which practitioners emphasised for everyone's mutual benefit.

"[I feel] very comfortable because I know [support worker]. It's easier for me because...I can get on with it and I can talk to her about anything." – Service User

Recommendation for practitioners: *Maintain the accessibility of services, for example by installing informal access points and/or drop-in centres, try to keep case workers consistent, provide safe and private spaces and practice confidentiality.*

Online support can broaden the reach of services by enabling them to access more people, but can also make it harder to build rapport and facilitate confidential environments

“It’s a testament to our key workers that women followed us into remote working. We used a video platform or telephone to maintain appointments. Some women said it suited them more, and others said they couldn’t access [services].” – Funded Partner Staff

As with most sectors, the numerous Covid-19 pandemic lockdowns throughout 2020 and 2021 compelled the projects to shift to remote working. Although many organisations continued to work with people face-to-face where possible, much of the service delivery (counselling, group work, mentoring, etc.) was provided over the phone, via instant messaging or through videocalls. Many of the funded partners demonstrated impressive resourcefulness in maintaining the services, for example by delivering food parcels, supplying laptops and sending art equipment, so women could continue to engage with the sessions from home. Remote service provision received mixed reviews from frontline staff. On one hand, many support workers pointed to its potential in eliminating commuting times and allowing them to speak to people who may not have otherwise sought support.

“With the extra pressure of the pandemic, and childcare being crammed and home schooling and everything, it really has been such a benefit that we have the means to reach [service users] through the screen.” – Funded Partner Staff

On the other hand, online delivery was seen to have limitations as women experiencing multiple disadvantage have specific needs that often means they require in-person support. Several service staff raised the importance for service users to socialise informally with other service users from similar backgrounds to help their recovery, which is less easy to facilitate virtually.

“Our women aren’t mainstream. The therapeutic value for women is being with us in the community with other people, learning to sit with other women. Our work is challenging but if we can’t do it face-to-face we are never going to be able to work through those challenges.” – Funded Partner Staff

Some service workers felt that virtual support provision interfered with building rapport and creating confidential environments.

“Building up the relationship, working with them, building that trust, took a lot longer.” – Funded Partner Staff

If service users did not have access to a safe space, speaking to them via phone or video calls also posed practical challenges.

“I did find that difficult because of the nature of...what I was trying to discuss or help them with. First of all, if they’re at home and they’re doing the phone call, I don’t know if the perpetrator is near them, if the children are there, if they can talk freely, if they can talk openly, honestly. A lot of the time they’d have to shut the call off.” – Funded Partner Staff

There was disquiet amongst some funded partner staff that the acceleration to remote service provision during the pandemic would now become the norm in order to reduce costs.

“I recently saw a government consultation on victim funding. A key element of services was around digital delivery as a funding solution. We’re in a rural area and we already receive less funding, but we’ve got a real fear that decision makers will want rural services that are digital only.” – Funded Partner Staff

Support staff were concerned that a permanent move online would mean that some women are left behind because they have limited access to technology.

“Unless we are really careful, the inequality will only grow...It will cut women out.” – Funded Partner Staff

There was agreement across the projects that face-to-face services are still generally preferred by service users and workers alike when working with women experiencing multiple disadvantage, and that online provision should be regarded as complementary to in-person support, and not replace it altogether.

“We do want to keep the mix, because some women prefer [online services], but we will always need to hang on to face-to-face”. – Funded Partner Staff

Recommendation for practitioners: *Provide both in-person support alongside online support, and offer service users the choice of their preferred method, as a way to broaden your reach as much as possible.*

Allowing adequately trained survivors to work as practitioners can improve the quality of services, and be an important step in encouraging their post-traumatic growth

“Several [support staff] have gone through similar issues to what the women have gone through.” – Funded Partner Staff

A number of the funded partners have trained women who have transitioned out of the service to return to work there as paid staff or volunteers. These women clearly felt at home in these environments and wanted to give back to help others as they themselves had been helped. According to both the staff and the women, allowing former service users to assist with case work can have a positive impact on all parties. The background of these staff often helps them gain an understanding of the situation, adds to their empathy and diminishes the perceived gap between professional and beneficiary.

“They have been very skilful and they know what they are doing and are very good at their job.” – Service User

Many women reported a deeper sense of connection with the service when they see themselves reflected in the identities of the staff. The importance of a shared experience between service worker and user is particularly acute in specialist Black and minoritised services that are led ‘by and for’ the women they serve, because of the additional intersection of racial discrimination.

“We’ve got quite a lot of lived experience, so obviously we’re able to understand what the issues are and make sure that they’ve got the best support in place.” – Funded Partner Staff

For many women, entering the service as a staff member or volunteer is an ultimate act of empowerment and a conclusion of a service journey. It can offer an opportunity to make meaning from their experience and put good use to their newly found empowerment and confidence.

“Next month I’m actually starting my mentor class so I can volunteer here after that.” – Service User

Recommendation for practitioners: Develop and protect mechanisms for training former service users, and safely and appropriately create opportunities for them to work and volunteer in the services.

Lessons for Funders and Policymakers

This section explores the key factors at the funding level that contributed to the programme's successes and failures, and in so doing, highlights recommendations for funders and policymakers working in the VAWG and multiple disadvantage space.

Flexible and trust-based grant management is a significant enabler for service providers, particularly during volatile operating environments, such as Covid-19

“[The partnership with Comic Relief] showed that funders are really there for us.”
– Funded Partner Staff

Overall, the projects felt positively about their partnerships with Comic Relief. It was appreciated that the funding complemented their existing work and did not require completely new projects. In doing so, funded partners were able to scale up what was already working rather than divert their often limited resources towards a new initiative.

“[The funding from Comic Relief was] complementary [to our existing work] – it allowed us to provide wrap-around services to those on statutory contracts [which] is a skeleton service which can't [fully] meet women's needs.” – Funded Partner Staff

The funded partners appreciated what they felt was a high level of trust demonstrated in them as service providers, and that their expertise as long established providers was respected. Some funded partners felt that this was the first time they had experienced this kind of response from a funder.

“It rebalanced the power. They might not have seen it, but I felt it – it challenged the established power structures, levelled things out a bit and has...given us a new confidence.” – Funded Partner Staff

The outbreak of Covid-19 had major impacts on the funded partners; while some had to temporarily halt their services, others saw a vastly increase caseload, not only due to increases in VAWG rates but also because many statutory services closed their doors leaving them as the only service operating in the area. In this context, the flexibility shown by Comic Relief, in lessening the reporting burden for example, was considerably helpful and prevented putting extra pressure on already stretched staff teams.

“[Comic Relief were] really flexible – we were able to get an extension, we got crisis funding to help [supply] women with technology, they let us off some reporting, which was really nice and...there was flexibility on [achieving] the targets.” – Funded Partner Staff

Funded partner staff observed that funders sometimes seem more concerned with a project's value to themselves as a way of trumpeting their own glory, rather than the needs of end beneficiaries, but that this was not the case with Comic Relief staff who were perceived to show care for the partners and the women they were working with.

"Comic Relief had less ego attached to our work." – Funded Partner Staff

Recommendation for funders and policymakers: Practice flexible philanthropy that is rooted in a trust-based paradigm and recognises the high level of expertise and strong track record of organisations, offer funding for wraparound services where applicable, and place emphasis on the needs of the partners and not just those of the funder, for example by keeping reporting requirements as light-touch as possible.

Specialist programmes benefit when they are overseen by specialist funder staff who remain in post

"[Comic Relief programme lead] knew her stuff and that was good. I didn't have to explain the basics to her. If you're going to have a specialist funding stream, you should have specialist funding officers. It made a real difference." – Funded Partner Staff

Funded partner staff appreciated the fact that the Comic Relief programme lead had expertise in VAWG and multiple disadvantage, as it strengthened the donor support they received. For example, she helped the funded partners develop realistic outcomes, timescales and milestones that were cognisant of the nature of the problem. The specialist knowledge of the programme lead brought valuable insight, indirect capacity building and a two-way learning relationship where discussions did not simply revolve around budgets and expenditure.

"I wasn't talking to a wall – she got more info more quickly, asking the right questions and I'm sure we all got more out of it." – Funded Partner Staff

Some projects said they found it challenging when the programme lead left her role at Comic Relief, as it led to gaps in communication and a sense of uncertainty. One funded partner questioned whether the reports they submitted "were even read" when the programme lead role was vacant, which was disheartening.

Recommendation for funders and policymakers: Recruit specialist programme staff and/or invest in training so there is subject knowledge expertise of the funding stream, prioritise employee retention and fill vacant programme lead roles as quickly as possible.

Short funding application windows with deadlines that fall in school holidays are particularly challenging for women's sector organisations, as are short project start-up periods

"I came back from holiday and I had only two days to respond [to the call for funding proposals]. It meant that I had hardly any sleep those days. You shouldn't be in that position." – Funded Partner Staff

Organisations across the VAWG sector are often overstretched and under-capacitated. When Comic Relief's call for funding applications was launched with a short response time of just a few weeks, it put additional pressure on the already overworked teams. The tight proposal deadline also limited the capacity of organisations to produce high quality project proposals that involved consultation with service users.

"We're a small team, [so] it was compressed hard work. We all had to contribute, and it took a lot of thinking time. It was a real team effort to offer the information in the way required." – Funded Partner Staff

The vast majority of employees in this sector are women, and this brings additional implications with regards to capacity. Women hold most caring responsibilities in society and carry out significant additional unpaid work. On average, women do 60% more unpaid care work than men, equating to approximately 26 hours per week¹⁰. For this reason, releasing the call for proposals during the summer holidays was particularly inconvenient. Most of the projects struggled with the timing of the funding call as it fell in the middle of the school holidays when many staff were on leave. Teams therefore struggled to mobilise the additional hours required to submit their bid on time.

"[The application process] was frantic – only a four to six week window, with a closing date at the end of August. We [were surprised about the August deadline because] we know that for women's organisations the end of August isn't good... We didn't know that the bid was coming – it was news to us, we hadn't scheduled for it at all, and it was a lot of hard work." – Funded Partner Staff

Furthermore, the short amount of time between being awarded funding and being required to commence work was problematic for organisations, due to the time it took to recruit and train staff.

Recommendation for funders and policymakers: When releasing a call for funding, try to announce the upcoming call beforehand, allow sufficient time for applications, and try to avoid deadlines that fall in the school/religious holidays. Ensure that there is enough turnaround time between the awarding of funding and commencement of work.

10. Office for National Statistics (2016) Women shoulder the responsibility of 'unpaid work'. Office for National Statistics.

Short term project-based funding cycles can erode the stability of services and the morale of staff, and may risk doing harm when tackling violence against women experiencing multiple disadvantage

“If we only have one year funding, we can’t go out there and spread the word and then say ‘Sorry, bye!’ – It needs to be long term.” – Funded Partner Staff

The deep frustration at the short term nature of funding for this programme, and the prevalence of short term funding for this sector in general, was universally felt by service workers and service users alike. During the Covid-19 pandemic, the VAWG sector saw an injection of short term investment through recovery funding and in response to the rising VAWG rates due to lockdowns. While this was welcomed, funded partner staff were concerned about investment “falling off a cliff edge” without long term contingency plans. Short term funding cycles involving work that ends almost as soon as it starts jeopardises the stability of the organisations to such an extent that some project staff questioned whether it is worth receiving the funding in the first place.

“I have to ask myself, ‘Should I even apply for it?’...If you’re lucky enough to get it, you’re frantically trying to sustain it...The management and fundraising hours it takes to make a service sustainable is ridiculous.” – Funded Partner Staff

Many of the project staff cited the detrimental role of short term funding on job security, staff turnover, morale, stress and burnout.

“If you want to attract high quality staff on a short term project, it’s really hard.” – Funded Partner Staff

Services require specialist, skilled workers, yet the pervasiveness of short term employee contracts disincentivises organisations to invest in long term training and development.

“The work that we do requires at least 15 half days’ accredited training. We have trained loads of staff who are now no longer working for us...It’s deeply frustrating.” – Funded Partner Staff

Partners were grateful to Comic Relief for funding core organisational costs in this programme, but noted that investment into full cost recovery was often not attractive to funders, which damages the sustainability of specialist services.

“I get very tired of not being able to put proper costs into a funding bid. Where do we go to cover the gaps?” – Funded Partner Staff

Doubts about services’ longevity was seen to damage working relationships and partnerships between funded partners and statutory services, such as commissioners and councils, which play a critical role in supporting women with multiple disadvantage.

“We would have wanted to work with other groups – that’s what extreme multiple disadvantage women need. But we have struggled to make the impact in the time available – they don’t know we’re consistent.” – Funded Partner Staff

While short term funding can pose challenges for non-profits in general, it is regarded as particularly inappropriate when working with women experiencing multiple disadvantage because of their chronic and complex needs.

“For women with Multiple Disadvantage in particular, we know the importance of long term relationships. These are women who have had dysfunctional relationships with services for decades, been let down by other services and lived precariously – those things don’t get resolved quickly, short term intervention don’t work. Trusting relationships take a while for those particular women [so] the sustainability of service is really important”. – Funded Partner Staff

As discussed previously, there is a heightened need for these services to be stable and reliable to help foster service users’ long term sense of safety. In this context, safety is not necessarily a one-off experience, but rather the transformative feeling that service users have constant access to a safe space whenever they should need it, yet this sits at odds with the reality of short term funding. Several service workers claimed that funding unpredictability can add to users’ sense of insecurity.

“I hate telling someone, a survivor, that we’re not sure if we are going to be around next year...It can be really, really harsh – so difficult and re-traumatising.” – Funded Partner Staff

Staff turnover resulting from short term contracts can damage the long term relationships between case workers and service users, which are needed to create bonds of trust. When staff leave, it can be time consuming to restart the trust building process.

“When a staff member leaves it triggers their abandonment issues – it can be very challenging and really set them back. We almost have to start all over again and [it] makes them feel very vulnerable.” – Funded Partner Staff

Ultimately the repeated stop-start cycles of short term funding are less cost effective in the long term.

“If there is more constant funding, and people are able to access the service in a more timely fashion, and a more smooth fashion, then I do think that probably reduces the long term need.” – Funded Partner Staff

Recommendation for funders and policymakers: Provide multi-year funding opportunities where the same amount of short term funding is available over a longer period of time, and ensure that it covers indirect project costs (overheads).

Standard programme monitoring mechanisms often overlook the complexities of addressing violence against women experiencing multiple disadvantage

“The challenge for services like ours is that the impact can be really small. Our impact is that women had a safe place to come to...It doesn't feel like we're changing the world for funders, but we are – it's just slow and hard to communicate that.”
– Funded Partner Staff

A shared reflection across the funded partners was that Comic Relief's monitoring mechanisms were inappropriate for working with women experiencing multiple disadvantage, due to the specific nature of this group. Funders often expect that indicators of progress can be measured under macro outcomes, such as 'number of women whose wellbeing has improved' or 'number of women who have access to justice', yet the projects found the focus on broad outcomes did not allow them to capture the importance of their work in bringing about “minuscule but fundamental changes” in women's lives that are arguably more meaningful when doing this kind of work.

“You're asked for a lot of detail [which] doesn't reflect the project or the impact which is fundamental to women.” – Funded Partner Staff

When working with women who live with, among other things, the weight of entrenched systems of discrimination, physical and mental health conditions and distrust of institutions, progress often looks different than it does when working with other groups. It can be a challenge demonstrating 'progress' when the 'progress' is that there is no decline or deterioration in a woman's state of being.

“Well, it hasn't got worse, so that's a sign of progress. They are alive – that's progress.” – Funded Partner Staff

Comic Relief's standardised monitoring forms were found by many staff to be limiting as they did not reflect the services' hard work bringing women into services and fostering the necessary sense of safety to persuade survivors to continue their journey of recovery.

“The Outcomes Star doesn't capture the little bits of progress that go into the work...We have no way to map the pre-engagement work that happens before you can even get to the form.” – Funded Partner Staff

When working with these women, the journey towards rebuilding their lives is not a smooth process: steps towards change can be very slow and not incremental or unidirectional.

“It's two steps forward, four steps back and change that does come is small.” – Funded Partner Staff

In addition, 'change' can be hampered by numerous external factors, for example, if women are reliant on statutory agencies for referrals. Furthermore, when service users initially engage with the support, the nature of their conditions often means they regress. Simplistic outcome measurement tools are not always flexible enough to take account of this.

"Women with multiple disadvantage are often not aware of all the issues they are living with. Our work increases their awareness...Sometimes [the outcomes are] actually lower at the end of the work than before." – Funded Partner Staff

Recommendation for funders and policymakers: Ask funded partners to consider what progress looks like for them, and how to meaningfully measure and report impact in ways that account for the nuances and complexities of working with women experiencing multiple disadvantage.

Response from Comic Relief

February 2022

Comic Relief is constantly learning and adapting its approach to funding. A lot of this learning comes directly from organisations: we solicit anonymous feedback from applicants and from funded partners throughout the lifecycle of investments to help us improve our funding practices. The recommendations in this report are clear and actionable, and we welcome the feedback in helping us to improve our approach. These findings are particularly relevant for our continued work supporting the VAWG sector, for example through our 'Supporting and Sustaining Specialism' programme which supports services led by and for Black and racially minoritised women.

- We have signed up to the Institute for Voluntary Action Research (IVAR) Flexible Funders pledge and are working to adopt more open and trusting practices in line with their commitment areas. We know many of our funded partners have experienced increased demand and reduced capacity during the Covid-19 pandemic so we have put in place light-touch reporting, additional emergency funding and additional flexibility around budgets and timelines on many of our programmes.
- We recognise the value of ensuring VAWG programme leads have skills and experience in this area and we recruit specialist staff for this kind of work where possible. Like all funders, we encounter regular staff turnover, however we have a range of employee benefits to encourage staff to stay and we do our best to fill roles on a timely basis when there are vacancies.
- We are currently reviewing our funding application journey to ensure the application processes are proportionate, transparent and as undemanding as possible. We endeavour to announce funding opportunities in advance of application windows. This has not always been possible due to time constraints, however we are continuing to explore how we can improve this going forward. The feedback about inconvenient funding windows and impractical timeframes is well received, and we have tried with recent funding calls to ensure these do not fall over school and/or religious holidays.
- Our unrestricted grants are all three to five years in duration. It is only on co-funded programmes where the duration is shorter, which is largely down to co-funder requirements. We encourage all applicants to take a Full Cost Recovery approach in their applications and are fully committed to providing core funding that can build organisational capacity as well as support specialist services. For example, we have recently awarded top-up funding to partners that they can use for core costs or direct project costs.
- We work closely with funded partners to develop realistic and meaningful outcomes that work for their context because we know it is often the case that modest outcomes about maintaining the current state or preventing things from getting worse are sufficient in demonstrating progress. We are working towards incorporating that into our learnings framework. In addition, we encourage qualitative outcomes and indicators that can paint a narrative picture of change particularly for complex client groups receiving bespoke support. Our reporting forms now contain more space for nuanced, non-numerical signs of progress.



Annex A: Summary of the Projects funded through this Programme

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Organisation	Investment	Location	Short summary of work
The Angelou Centre (partnership)	£250,000	England - North	<p>The Positive Change Partnership</p> <p>This specialist black led feminist consortium addresses a critical gap in sexual violence provision and provides critical trauma informed intensive support from crisis to recovery for Black and minoritised victims/survivors of sexual violence and exploitation with complex and often unheard or unmet needs. Their particular focus is black women and the experience of sexual violence, but their work addresses the needs of women with multiple needs as defined in the call for funding.</p>
Swansea Women's Aid	£178,898	Wales	<p>SWAN Project</p> <p>This project continues and increases the frequency of Swansea Women's Aid's outreach services to female street-based 'sex workers'. This is achieved through the continuation of 2.5 support worker posts, recruitment and training of a large pool of volunteers and the introduction of a formal Volunteer Coordinator post. This direct work is complemented by institutional advocacy for the needs and rights of these women across Swansea's multi-agency forums.</p>
Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland (partnership)	£172,418	Northern Ireland	<p>Hear Her Voice</p> <p>In this partnership, Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland works with its nine member groups to undertake a comprehensive consultation with survivors of domestic abuse. They gather insight and data to inform a comprehensive understanding of their needs and experiences, integrate learning into organisational infrastructure and implement activities including strategy, policies, advocacy and influencing. The overarching aim is to ensure that there is a shared understanding of survivors' current needs across the whole system in Northern Ireland and to build better intra- and inter-organisational infrastructure to effectively respond to these.</p>
Edinburgh Rape Crisis Centre	£172,418	Scotland	<p>Trauma informed support for women survivors of sexual violence experiencing multiple disadvantage</p> <p>This project supports 750 women survivors of sexual violence in Edinburgh, East and Midlothian to improve wellbeing, resilience, safety and life opportunities in the aftermath of rape and sexual abuse, through the provision of specialist emotional and practical support, advocacy, outreach and information. The grant funds additional capacity for its existing trauma-focused service, helping to meet high demand, and particularly targets women who face greater difficulties accessing support due to living in poverty, or are from Black and minoritised communities and/or are experiencing high levels of mental ill health due to the trauma they have experienced.</p>

Organisation	Investment	Location	Short summary of work
Cambridge Women's Resources Centre	£136,000	England - East	<p>Turning the Corner</p> <p>The project aims to reduce serious harm for up to 60 women who are involved in street-based prostitution in Peterborough, have mental and physical health problems, are involved in serious substance and alcohol misuse, homeless and experience ongoing violence, abuse and exploitation. The project provides trauma-focused support to help them to reduce harm from drug and alcohol abuse, minimise harm from/stop street based sex working, and start to access other services to build a safer future.</p>
The Women's Centre Cornwall	£132,479	England - South	<p>Giving Something Back-Tackling rural isolation of women involved in the CJS through Peer Mentoring</p> <p>This project trains and supports peer mentors to support women with multiple and complex needs who are involved in the Criminal Justice System. The women supported are helped to address the issues behind their offending and take steps towards a positive future. The aim is for mentors to gain in confidence and skills and to empower them through giving back to help others.</p>
Together Women	£70,000	England - North	<p>Restore Project</p> <p>The Restore Project is designed to meet the needs of women experiencing multiple disadvantage. It offers two new dedicated case workers to support women referred for help through the statutory Liaison and Diversion pathway of the criminal justice system. Individualised, trauma informed packages of support are offered for up to nine months within an established, safe, women-only environment to help women overcome the detrimental effects of domestic/sexual abuse, low level crime and poverty.</p>
Women@thewell	£60,000	England - London	<p>Delivering training co-developed by women affected by prostitution and trafficking</p> <p>This project builds capacity across the system of services that surround women affected by trafficking, street-based prostitution and sexual violence. Current practices marginalise these women from mainstream provisions so, based on insight gained through their unique reach to survivors, Women@thewell have developed a training and consultancy package to support partners to build and embed intra- and inter-organisational infrastructures to identify survivors, offer help and join-up responses. The aim is to better equip organisations to engage and safeguard so that professionals are more capable and confident to implement safe, trauma informed practices and women feel better supported and informed.</p>