



WORKING WITH GIRLS & YOUNG WOMEN AFFECTED BY GANGS

Practice insights

July 2020

INTRODUCTION

This briefing has been developed as a resource to support services working with girls and young women (G&YW) who are vulnerable to the influence of gangs, abuse and crime. It presents key insights and evidence relevant to policymakers, commissioners and practitioners that emerged from the 'I Define Me' Programme (IDM) funded by Comic Relief between 2017 and 2020. Under the IDM programme, nine non-profit organisations in three countries, Colombia, South Africa and the United Kingdom, implemented projects specifically for G&YW affected by gangs. Information about the organisations and projects involved in the IDM initiative is available at the end of this document. What worked for the projects is presented as a resource for practitioners and can be found [here](#).

This briefing pays tribute to all those, who are typically women, working with G&YW affected by gangs in recognition of the challenges and emotional toil they face and to G&YW striving to improve their lives in difficult circumstances.¹ The aim of this briefing is to contribute to these endeavours by improving understanding of what can be done across continents and in local areas.

Millions of G&YW live in areas where gangs are pervasive and powerful. Growing up with violence profoundly impacts their lives and makes them vulnerable to harm, violence, abuse and exploitation. Gendered power relations increase women's risks of experiencing violence which are exacerbated by poverty and racism.² These G&YW live with high levels of distress and reduced life chances. Unaddressed issues and lack of protection from services increase feelings of insecurity, rejection and anger. Many are unable to access community-based initiatives that offer safe environments where they can better understand their situation. An urgency remains to improve the lives of these G&YW before they reach adulthood.

1 National Lottery Community Fund (2019) Why Working with Girls and Young Women Matters. An Insights Briefing, See <https://www.tavinstitute.org/news/why-work-with-young-women-and-girls-matters/>

2 D. McNeish and S. Scott (2014) Women and Girls at Risk: Evidence across the Life Course. London: Lankelly Chase.

In this brief, you will find information and discussion on:

- support and services provided by the IDM projects
- what the IDM projects learnt about the lives of G&YW affected by gangs across different contexts
- the principles and values IDM projects used to guide and inform their work
- insights about what worked in supporting gang-affected G&YW to make positive changes in their lives
- the important role of partnerships and support systems in responding effectively to G&YW
- the value of reflective learning.

DEFINING A GANG

While no single definition exists about what a ‘gang’ is, G&YW in many parts of the world confront similar sets of circumstances where they live: typically there are powerful social groupings, well-known in the community, that identify with a common name or sign, and that play a dominant role in criminal activity and in community life. For the purposes of this briefing, such groupings are referred to as ‘gangs’.

Using the term ‘gang’ is not always conducive. The projects quickly flagged that placing the ‘gang’ label on any group or project resulted in immediate stigma. This proved to be a stumbling block to engaging with G&YW, and with key services such as schools and youth centres, who were cautious of being associated with ‘gang problems’. As a result all projects and Comic Relief agreed to change the original title of the whole initiative (‘Girls and Gangs’) to ‘I Define Me’ – a name suggested by some of the girls themselves.

SUPPORT AND SERVICES PROVIDED

IDM projects contributing to this brief typically work with G&YW aged 12 to 25 years growing up in adverse circumstances, socially marginalised and with experiences of traumatic life-changing events. The provision of services varies across IDM projects from those ‘at risk’ to those incarcerated and being rehabilitated and can include the following:³

“ Using the term ‘gang’ is not always conducive. The projects quickly flagged that placing the ‘gang’ label on any group or project resulted in immediate stigma. ”

3 All the quotations in this document are from practitioners who participated in the IDM learning workshops

Description of key approaches

ONE-ON-ONE SUPPORT		<p>One-on-one individualised support on a regular and/or needs-basis is a feature of many of the projects. The support of a trusted adult (whose engagement is consistent overtime) is a cornerstone of the work to help them rebuild relationships, heal past wounds and nurture aspirations.</p> <p><i>“A lot of our work is mentoring... Everyone has a gift, but often it is hidden. We needed to go deeper to remove obstacles...”</i></p>
GROUP WORK		<p>Group work serves to build emotional support among peers, group trust, self-worth, social identity and solidarity.</p> <p><i>“We believed that creating a supporting sisterhood would bring about sustainable change even beyond this project. The girls also reported group work as being the most valuable aspect of the programme.”</i></p>
CREATIVE ACTIVITIES		<p>Many projects used sports and artistic activities to attract and retain G&YW into their programmes, to introduce them to a new peer group, develop new personal skills, compete with the perceived ‘attractions’ of gang life, and have fun.</p>
FAMILY WORK		<p>Engaging with the families of the G&YW is often crucial to support their growth. Family work encourages communication and constructive relationships, and an ongoing supportive environment for change outside the project, while also providing project workers with a better understanding of the girls’ and young women’s circumstances. It can also help to address the inter-generational trauma that may underpin girls’ and young women’s familial experiences. ‘Family’ should not just be understood in the traditional sense of the nuclear family but can also include the extended family members that a girl or young woman is close to.</p> <p><i>“Sometimes families would not support participation in the project. We realised that if we wanted to have more impact, we needed to engage with families. We have incorporated this into our programme, and it is working well”.</i></p>
REHABILITATION & REINTEGRATION SUPPORT		<p>Some projects engage with G&YW who are in rehabilitation, living in places of safety or shelters, or who have been detained or imprisoned due to their gang involvement. Some projects support G&YW to manage and/or abandon substance abuse. Projects realised the critical importance of helping participants reintegrate back to their families and communities after the residential time is over.</p>
EDUCATION AND UPSKILLING		<p>Some IDM projects offer girls and young women the opportunity to develop skills and qualifications, positive role models, and support them to access education, training and work as an alternative to gang-related activities.</p>
GENDER-LENS AND SOCIAL JUSTICE		<p>Some projects include a social justice or activist orientation, encouraging girls and young women to address the broader social systems of racism and patriarchy by engaging with, and challenging those in positions of power and authority delivering services and to become change agents amongst their peers and local communities.</p>

EVERYDAY LIVES OF GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN AFFECTED BY GANGS

IDM projects identified multiple and cumulative risk factors that attract G&YW to gangs, which are common across different countries and contexts:



Available research supports these findings^{4,5}.

- 4 Karen Hughes, Katherine Hardcastle & Clare Perkins (2015). *The mental health needs of gang-affiliated young people*. Centre for Public Health, Liverpool John Moores University. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/771130/The_mental_health_needs_of_gang-affiliated_young_people_v3_23_01_1.pdf
- 5 Lorraine Khan, Helena Brice, Anna Saunders & Andrew Plumtree (2013). *A Need to Belong: What leads girls to join gangs*. London: Centre for Mental Health. See https://www.centreformentalhealth.org.uk/sites/default/files/2018-09/A_need_to_belong.pdf

IDM projects soon discovered that the complexity and depth of issues faced by many G&YW in gang-affected areas were even greater than expected. On a daily basis, they negotiated their way through multiple problems and forms of deprivation, including poverty, dysfunctional and unsafe living arrangements, low educational expectations, bullying, inequality, pressures of social media (including the gap between presented self and lived experience), vulnerability to crime, as well as physical, psychological and emotional scarring, often involving inter-generational trauma. As a result, G&YW often develop elaborate coping strategies including substance abuse, drug-running, alcohol dependency, and self-harm. Above all, they live in fear, fear of sexual violence and fear of intimidation.

“ We found in some cases, girls became involved in gangs because they were sent by their parents who were in debt to a gangster. The girls became repayment and they believed they had to do it to protect their families. Hence, extreme poverty is a strong risk factor. ”

Relationships with gangs and gang members is complex. Some live with gang members in their families and households through no choice of their own, others are directly or indirectly affiliated with a gang due to territory, friends, romantic partners or historical ties.

For some, gang allegiance is necessary for their survival and safety and can be seen as a ‘positive’ choice to provide young people with many things they desperately crave: a sense of belonging, a sense of protection, excitement and adrenaline, status and access to money. Not every girl or young woman thinks of herself as being ‘part of’ a gang but is strongly associated with gang cultures. Those ‘at risk’ are restless, feel socially disconnected and under-valued.

In sum, the G&YW have varied, fluid and nuanced identification patterns with respect to gangs and IDM projects learnt that there was a danger in seeing gang-affected G&YW as victims waiting to be ‘rescued’ from the evils of gangs. The roles gangs play in impoverished neighbourhoods are often complex and paradoxical. The same gang leader who uses young girls to distribute drugs may be paying the fees for another young woman to go to university. It became clear that for many girls and young women, maintaining a strategic relationship with a gang was a rational choice.

“ When we are our real, authentic selves, when we bring real issues, a genuineness and trust results – we develop respect for each other. ”

VALUES AND PRINCIPLES THAT FACILITATE PROGRESS

IDM projects understood that there is no blueprint for working with G&YW affected by gangs. Furthermore, building interventions based on a purely ‘deficit’ view of gang affiliation would fail to take into account the actual drivers and experiences of the G&YW and therefore be limited and even harmful in their effectiveness. Instead, they found that *how* interventions are implemented is as important as *what* interventions entail. The following values and principles were found to be useful and applicable to different contexts:

- **Flexible, adaptable and non-judgemental:** Every girl and young woman’s ‘life picture’ is uniquely complex and constantly evolving. IDM projects respond with flexibility and patience by building trust with the young person without judgement. Projects also tailor their approach to match the needs and aspirations of every G&YW, gradually moving away from a rigid number of set sessions per individual to a more fluid service provision that accommodates each girl or young woman’s needs.
- **Using trauma-informed approaches:** IDM projects worked with empathy, compassion and trust, recognising that many of the G&YW experience trauma and need support in managing their own feelings.
- **Empowerment and solidarity:** G&YW are empowered to claim their rights, recognise the power they carry within and to work with others to address the systemic factors that push them towards associating with gangs.
- **Reaching out:** Practitioners realise the importance of reaching out to G&YW “where they are” rather than just relying on more traditional referral or walk-in routes. This approach enables practitioners to better understand their everyday lives and relationships within communities.
- **Co-production:** The IDM programme encouraged G&YW to co-design interventions to better understand and address their specific needs and lived experiences.
- **Systemic, holistic approach:** Projects found ways to work with participants’ multiple and complex vulnerabilities by responding to the experiences of the individual, their family and home circumstances and relationships with their social, economic and environmental contexts, and by expanding their services or partnering with other organisations.
- **Strengths-based approach:** The IDM projects are guided by the belief that every individual has assets, abilities and aspirations that can be harnessed for self-development.
- **Gender equality and social justice:** Some IDM projects desire to change gender expectations that normalise gender inequalities and develop competencies of G&YW to exercise power necessary to challenge dominant gendered norms.⁶

“ Enabling young people to shape provision for themselves and how it empowers them to see themselves differently. ”

6 McNeish, D., and Scott, S. (2014) *Women and Girls at risk. Evidence across the life course*. London: Lankelly Chase.

KEY DIMENSIONS OF THE WORK WITH GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN

IDM projects identified the following dimensions to be critical in supporting G&YW to achieve positive outcomes.

SAFETY

IDM practitioners adopted non-judgemental, empathetic approaches to working with G&YW, deliberately avoiding negative labels and stigmatisation. Substantial efforts were made to ensure project spaces were seen as 'safe' and supportive. This was both in terms of the physical space (whether that be the physical institutional context or in locations where the G&YW already felt comfortable (parks, cafes etc)) and the environment created female only spaces, confidentiality, allowing space to just 'hang out'.

TRUST

Through extensive dialogue, IDM projects recognised that a trusted adult is the cornerstone of relationship-based work with G&YW. This is a consistent finding from research and practitioner evidence.⁷ The real window of opportunity only opens when this trust is established, and this can take time, patience and persistence. Key to this is the stability and consistency of this relationship, avoiding changes of key workers involved that can immediately undermine that trust.

BELONGING

IDM projects support G&YW to develop an alternative sense of belonging by helping them to identify and build on their strengths to create positive social networks and peer support systems. Through community-building activities, G&YW found non-gang related sources of affirmation and formed new relationships with peers, project facilitators and other members of the community.

ALTERNATIVES TO 'GANG LIFE'

Gangs often play a significant role in fulfilling emotional and basic needs that are not met within the home. IDM projects offer G&YW alternative ways to meet their needs. These include adrenaline-inducing activities such as rock-climbing, stage performance and wilderness therapy; and cultural and artistic activities to appeal to their cultural interests, for example graffiti artists, rappers, slam poets, designers and other creative artists. These activities also help them realise their own strengths and capabilities.

SELF-CARE OF PROJECT WORKERS

Project workers become key role models and trusted partners for G&YW, which often places huge pressure on them. To be able to deliver on the trust and consistency that is so central to these interventions, investing in support for practitioners to process high levels of distress is paramount.

⁷ National Lottery Community Fund (2019) *Why Working with Girls and Young Women Matters. An Insights Briefing*, See <https://www.tavinstitute.org/news/why-work-with-young-women-and-girls-matters/>

KEY DESIGN ELEMENTS OF AN IMPACTFUL PROJECT

IDM projects identified the following design features as valuable for extending the scope and impact of their work.

PARTNERSHIPS: 'IT TAKES MORE THAN A VILLAGE'

Providing holistic support includes fostering relationships with community organisers and influencers, the police, schools, rehabilitation services, health institutions and other social services. These organisations play a crucial role in providing G&YW with access to services and opportunities.

Some key **lessons learned** regarding forging partnerships include the following:

- Forming partnerships around **common values and principles**, rather than simple pragmatism, proximity or convenience.
- **Identify the right advocates** within institutions who have the authority to support the interventions as required.
- Recognising that many institutions have **different mindsets and attitudes** towards girls and young women affected by gangs and time is needed to establish common ground, if this is possible.
- **Direct participation of girls and young women** in institutional settings, for example to inform service reviews or improvements.
- **Relationship-building** is an essential project activity in itself and needs adequate time to develop.
- Working with girls and young women within the juvenile system requires forming constructive relationships with institutions' staff first. Only when both organisations have a **mutual understanding** of the changes that they expect to see in the young people can a mutually reinforcing collaboration begin.
- For institutional partners to truly commit, the IDM projects found that their interventions had to be **mutually beneficial** for both organisations.

ADVOCATING ON SYSTEMIC ISSUES

When available, statutory services are not always conducive to the needs of G&YW and this places them at a higher risk of gang abuse and violence. Projects rebuild the self-confidence of G&YW and often act as a bridge for them back into mainstream services; however, without structural changes in the way services are designed and provided, there is a risk that girls and young women fall out again once the support net that the project provides comes to an end.

It is therefore important that projects working with G&YW not only partner with local services but also advocate for a more conducive policy environment and statutory service practice for the needs of G&YW. Examples include becoming involved in multi-sectoral forums or collaborating with authorities around joint messaging and data. Bringing G&YW to share their experiences directly with decision makers in conferences and round tables can serve to enrich the discussion while empowering the young women.

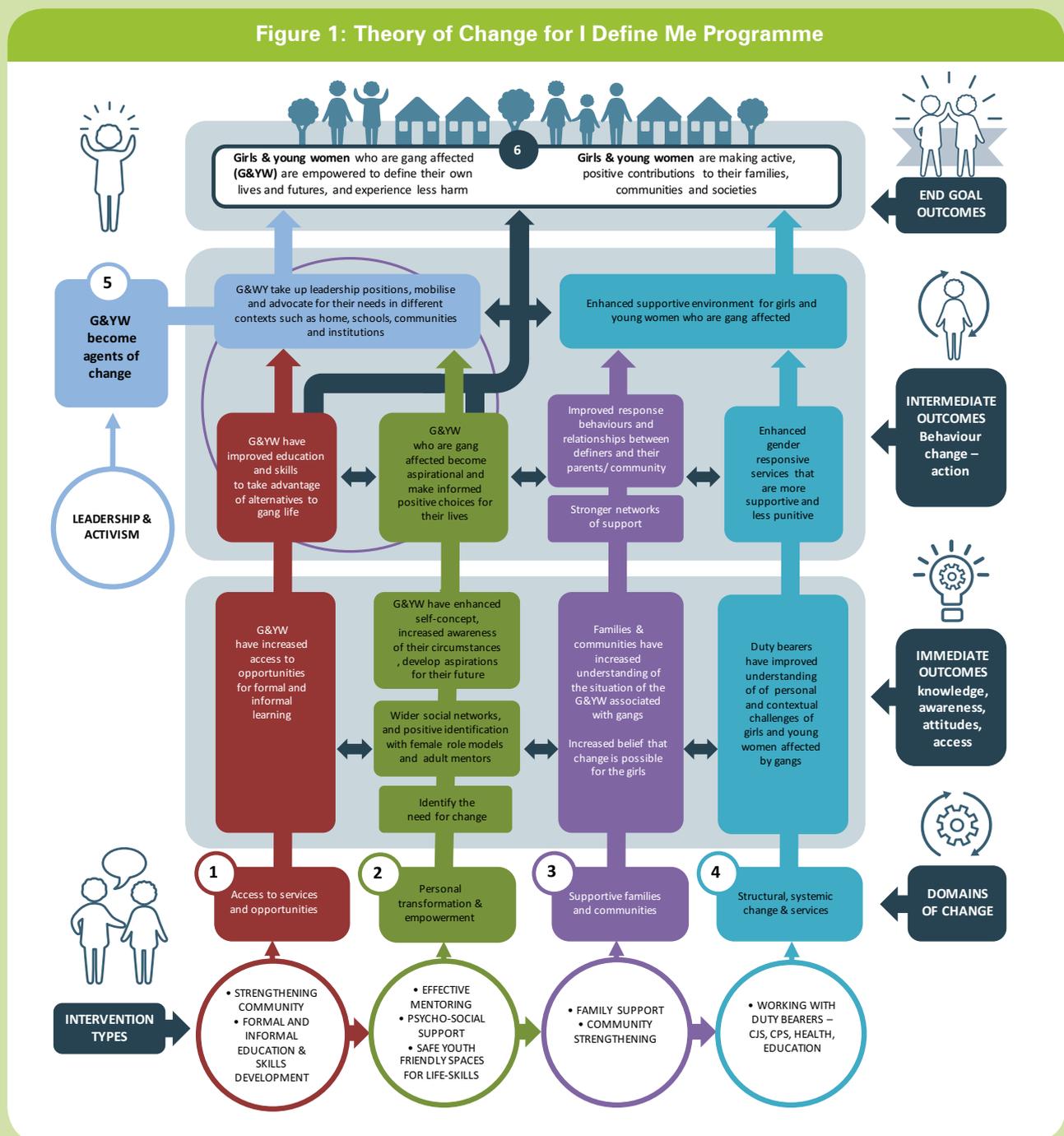
PLANNING, MONITORING AND EVALUATION

Social change outstrips our models

With the help of learning facilitators, practitioners drew up a shared Theory of Change (ToC) for the IDM programme. The ToC illustrates five domains of change which practitioners identified as complementary and mutually reinforcing. Whilst projects did not necessarily contribute to all five domains, the ToC was a planning tool used to identify various overlapping steps and routes of change that enable G&YW to define their own lives.

IDM practitioners soon learnt that the reality of social change is not as linear and conclusive as illustrated in the ToC. Projects reported, for example, that a change in the level of knowledge or awareness of adverse issues did not always lead to a change in behaviour (i.e. avoiding risk or harm). Some projects reported instances of 'relapse' by G&YW. However, the ToC provided a valuable foundation and common reference point to generate learning questions for the IDM projects to assist them in their practice and reflection.

Figure 1: Theory of Change for I Define Me Programme



Different monitoring and evaluation approaches, similar challenges

Each IDM project has its own approach to monitoring and evaluation (M&E). Practitioners use an array of different data gathering methods and frameworks for analysing their findings. Many of the interventions included in the IDM initiative tended to be more creative, flexible and experiential, which raised challenges for using more traditional, formalised and structured M&E approaches.

Many projects found that mixed-method approaches, which draw on quantitative and qualitative data, are most valuable because they allow for a rich understanding of the nature of change and how it happens. Projects collect and collate information about participants from several sources including self-administered questionnaires completed by a girl or a young woman, interviews with parents/guardians and workshop facilitators to understand improvements from several perspectives. It was also valuable to make the M&E consistent with and scaffolded on the intervention, i.e. the artistic outputs of a participant in a graffiti project, for example, could be used as one source of evidence to illustrate her progress.

One key insight is that including practitioners' experiences and reflections, as well as those of the G&YW themselves, into M&E processes during the review of projects enhances learning and empowers practitioners to engage with M&E and confidently make necessary adjustments in their work in an ongoing fashion.

M&E posed several challenges:

- It quickly became clear in all projects that the **level of change expected at the start needed to be quickly reassessed**, given the time necessary to build engagement and trust and the complexity and severity of issues these G&YW face.
- Projects rapidly realised that what seemed like trivial or minor changes from outside the project, were actually **very significant indicators of step changes** for the G&YW themselves (for example shifting from physical violence to verbal reactions when upset).
- Because of the paramount importance of the relationships formed with the G&YW, the impacts of data collection on these relationships needed to be considered very carefully and **flexibility to trial, adjust and change tools was required**.
- **Good intentions to establish baselines** at the start of projects often **became unfeasible**. For example, it is difficult to administer questionnaires before participants trust practitioners and this takes time. Because projects are constantly learning, refining their approaches and adjusting indicators, different baseline data than initially envisaged is invariably required.
- Juggling large case loads and trying to build trust makes it difficult for **frontline project staff to have time** and develop skills to administer systematic tests.
- IDM projects noted that **most of the learning** acquired during the duration of the project **had been experimental** (coming directly from implementation as opposed to formal M&E processes).

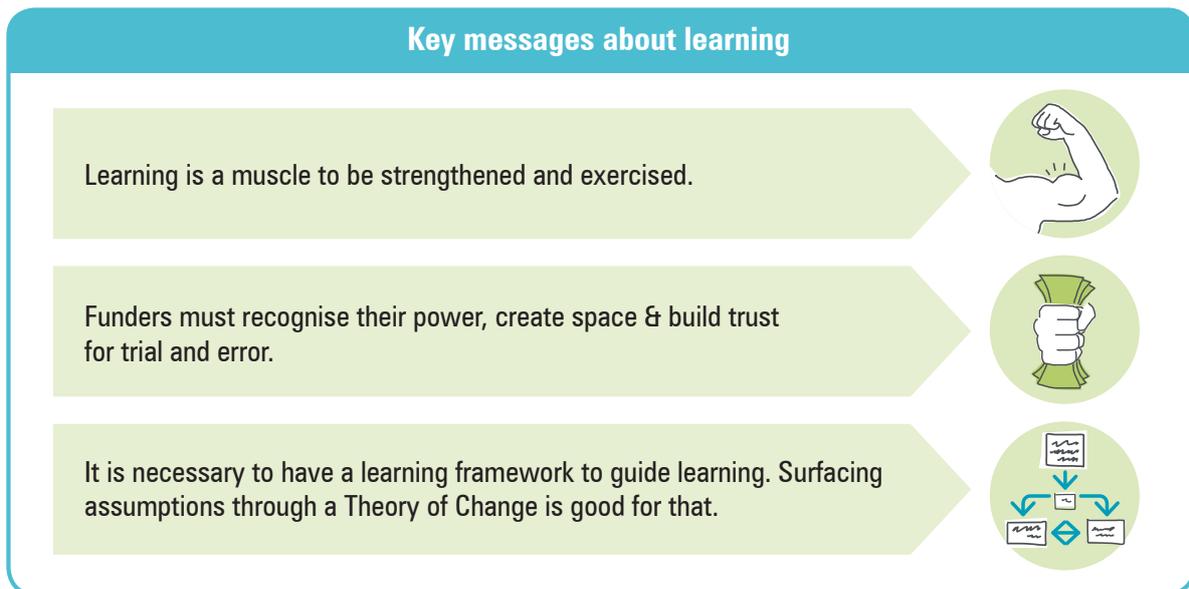
It was therefore critical for projects to have the flexibility to adjust, experiment and adapt their M&E frameworks over time to both recognise the types and levels of change that are realistic and meaningful and find the right combination of tools and sources of information to understand meaningful change without damaging the intervention itself.

Focus on learning

Learning facilitation was integral to the initiative and independent facilitators were appointed to co-ordinate the process. Learning co-ordinators facilitated discussions within projects using a plethora of information sources including project workers' observations, experiences, challenges and the formal M&E data. Comic Relief explicitly assured projects that it was genuinely committed to learning and that practitioners could engage in honest discussions evaluating their own work and adapt their projects.

Opportunities were also created outside of projects' hard-pressed work environments to step back and refocus on the bigger picture. Practitioners from all nine projects across three continents physically gathered three times over the three-year IDM period and they also convened more frequently in facilitated virtual workshops. All workshops used creative, analytical and experiential techniques and participants helped to co-create the agendas and content for the mid-term and final workshops.

This process was vital in enabling projects, collectively and individually, to continually adapt their interventions. It validated experiences across contexts; provided cross-fertilisation of ideas and approaches; built solidarity amongst often pressurised staff; and provided a space that explicitly valued learning and the discussion of blockages and weaknesses for the improvement of interventions, rather than having to just prove success and performance based on pre-defined, fixed ideas of predictable change.⁸



“ Learning facilitation was integral to the initiative and independent facilitators were appointed to co-ordinate the process. ”

⁸ Further information on this learning process can be found in the accompanying 'IDM Learning Journey' brief.

IMPLICATIONS FOR MANAGERS

TAILORING SUPPORT TO EACH GIRL AND YOUNG WOMAN

Working effectively includes creating different entry points for the young person, experimenting with multiple approaches, trying different engagement strategies and designing targeted interventions tailor-made for each individual.

LISTENING AND TIME

G&YW benefit from being given the time and space to develop trusting relationships and being allowed to make incremental changes for themselves.

PRIORITISING REFLECTIVE LEARNING

Routinely timetabling time for reflection, learning and adaptation amongst practitioners and front-line workers enables projects to remain relevant and responsive to the changing needs of the G&YW.

PRIORITISING THE WELL-BEING OF FRONTLINE WORKERS

Frontline workers are vital for building trust and stability with the young person, and they constantly absorb confrontational emotions and feelings of anger and despair. Maintaining these intense and complex relationships without adequate processing can lead to burnout. Investing in support for practitioners to process high levels of distress and improve their well-being is integral to the delivery of high-quality services and activities.

SHOWCASING

Organising events and celebrations publicly recognises achievements and talents and conveys G&YW positively.

WORKING IN PARTNERSHIP

Meaningful partnerships allow projects to expand and deepen their services through good referral networks. Partners can also team up and advocate for wider systemic change for girls and young women.

Training referral agencies to encourage participation in IDM projects and capacitating complementary organisations that projects refer girls and young women on to improves the impact of projects. Advocating for the clustering of projects in an area can facilitate the provision of holistic support services, joint advocacy and even planning for shared outcomes.

INFLUENCING DECISION-MAKERS

Insights and evidence from G&YW and the projects they are involved in should be shared directly with partner agencies and statutory bodies. Project staff, and the G&YW themselves, are important sources of knowledge, skills and advice and can be included in local and national round tables, consultations and decision-making forums to develop longer-term solutions to the systemic issues facing these G&YW.

CONCLUSION

Working with G&YW who are gang affected is as complex as their lives are complicated. There can be no blueprint as each individual is different. However, recognising that *how* interventions are implemented is as important as *what* the intervention entails is vital, and there are some important principles that must inform the work. It is also critical to recognise that real change can only occur if a systemic approach is adopted. Ultimately, the G&YW must make the most rational choices given their circumstances; no matter how much an individual may want to change, unless their environment is conducive to change, benefits gained through these services may not be sustained. Partnerships and targeted interventions are thus critical, and the voices of practitioners and the G&YW themselves must be strengthened in programme design and wider advocacy efforts.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This insights briefing is the result of a three-year learning process supported by Comic Relief, with Jake Grout-Smith and Anya Stern playing a leading role. The learning facilitators were instrumental in designing the learning process and extracting these insights. The learning facilitation team was led by Southern Hemisphere, and comprised Dena Lomofsky, Wilma Wessels, Elena Mancebo, Orla Cronin and Bill Sterland. This briefing was written by Erica Coetzee, Elena Mancebo, Alice Sampson and Dena Lomofsky. Design and layout by Jaywalk Design.

We extend our thanks to the IDM project practitioners whose insights created this briefing. The projects in this IDM cohort are:

- **La Familia Ayara**, Colombia – with their project, *Destino Crew (Destiny Crew)*.
- **Children Change Colombia**, in partnership with **Tiempo de Juego (TDJ)** and **Fundación CRAN** – with their project, *Change the Game: Preventing and Reducing Risks to Girls in Gangs*.
- **YMCA Bogotá**, Asociación Cristiana de Jóvenes ACJ, Colombia – with their project, *Support and Rehabilitation of Girls and Young Women Linked to Gangs in Bogotá*.
- **Gaia Foundation** in partnership with **Usiko**, **Ruben Richards Foundation**, and the **Ihata Shelter**, South Africa – with their project, *I Define Me*.
- **Action Aid South Africa** in partnership with the **Bonteheuvel Joint Peace Forum** and **Women for Change Mitchell's Plain**, South Africa – with their project, *Providing Girl-Led Alternatives to Ganging in the Western Cape*.
- **Spurgeons Children's Charity**, United Kingdom – with their project, *BeLeave*.
- **RedThread**, in partnership with King's College Hospital and St George's Hospital, United Kingdom – with their project, *The Teachable Moment in A&E: Young Women's Service*.
- **Manchester Metropolitan University**, in partnership with **Positive Steps**, UK – with their project, *Getting out for Good: Preventing Gangs through Participation*.
- **Wolverhampton Voluntary Sector Council**, in partnership with **Base 25**, **Catch 22**, **EYES**, **Gazebo**, Gloucester Street Community Centre, **Hope Community Project**,
- **New Park Village Football Development**, **Square Pegs Round Holes CIC**, United Kingdom – with their project, *Girls Allowed*.

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