

I DEFINE ME

Resource for practitioners working with girls and young women affected by gangs

This resource draws from the experiences, methodologies and collective learning of 9 projects working with girls and young women (G&YW) in Colombia, South Africa and the United Kingdom.

[Click here](#) to learn more about the IDM initiative.

To learn more about the purpose of this resource and how to use it, [click here](#).

Some of the pages of this resource have been translated into Spanish. [Read them here](#).

HOW TO NAVIGATE THIS RESOURCE CLICK, DON'T SCROLL

This resource is not intended to be read like a book by scrolling through the pages chronologically.

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Acknowledgements

**COMIC
RELIEF**



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How the system lets G&YW down

Working to improve the system for G&YW

Values and principles

CENTRED AROUND G&YW
TRAUMA-INFORMED SOLIDARITY
CO-PRODUCTION AGENCY
Optimism Systemic
Holistic

NOTHING ABOUT US, WITHOUT US!

Supporting personal transformation of G&YW

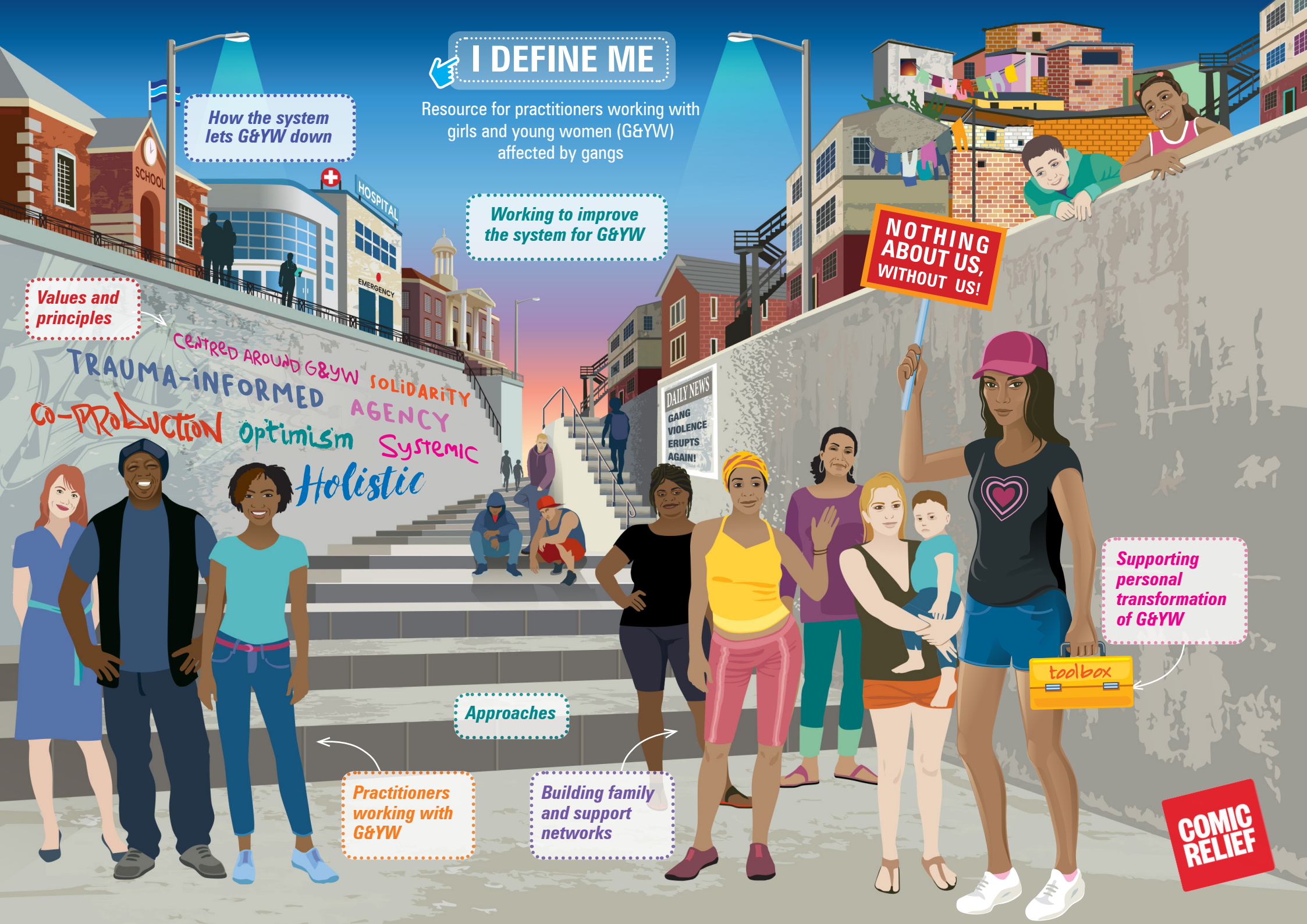
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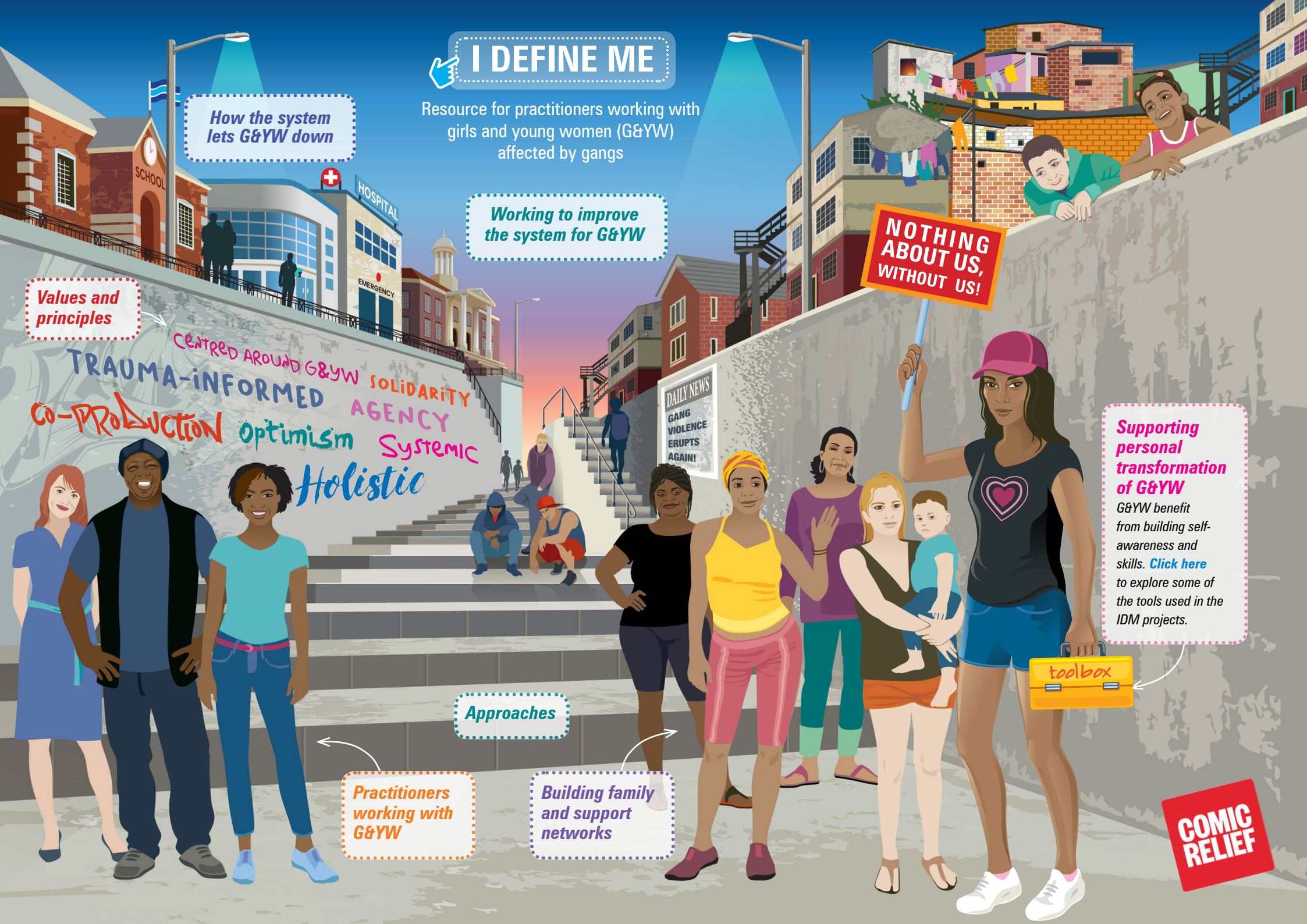
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Supporting personal transformation of G&YW

G&YW benefit from building self-awareness and skills. [Click here](#) to explore some of the tools used in the IDM projects.

toolbox

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G&YW need people in their lives who can provide solidarity and understanding. To read more, [click here](#).

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[Click here](#) to find out more about practitioner learning and self-care.

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Values and principles To read more about the values and principles of the IDM projects, [click here](#).

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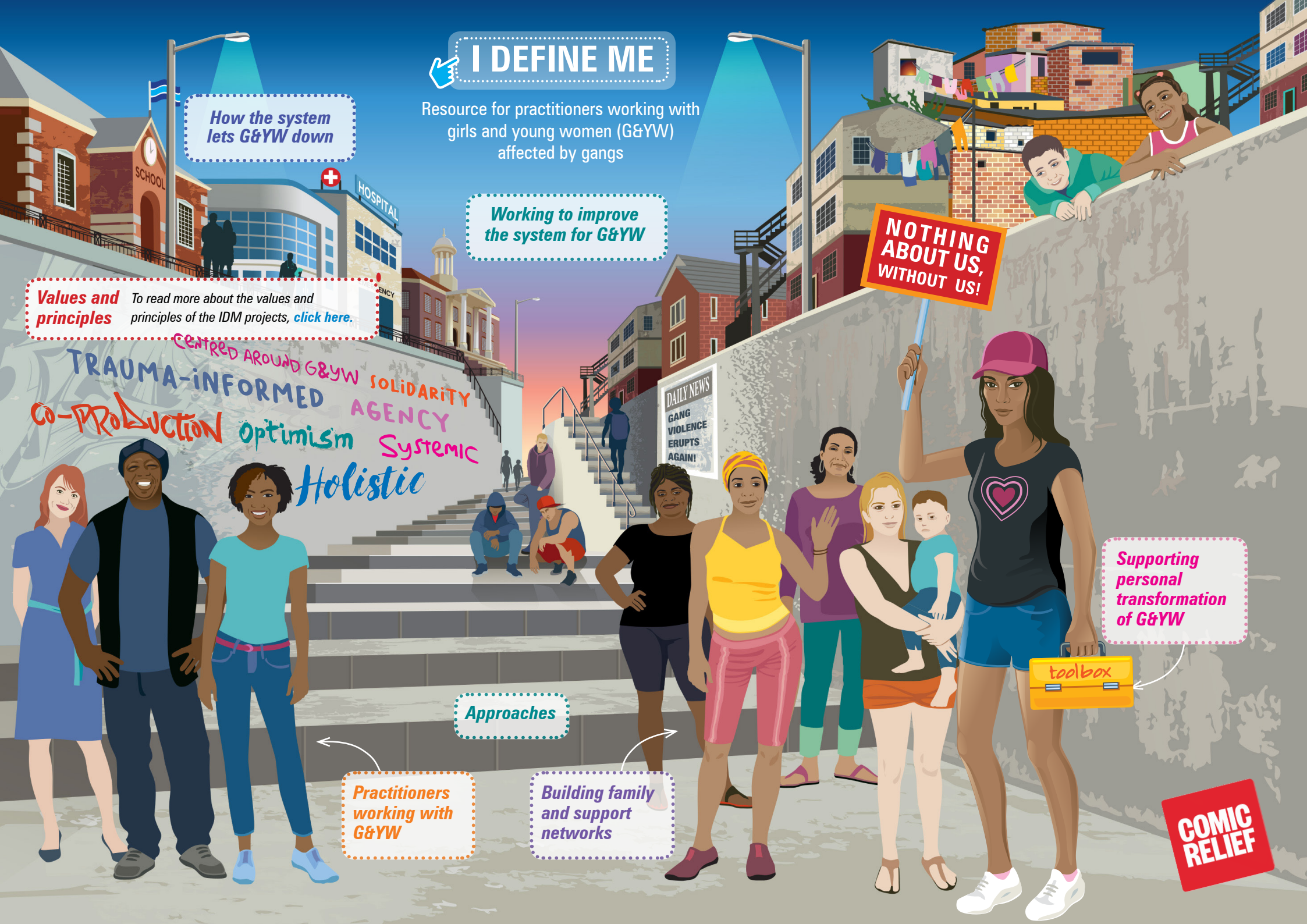
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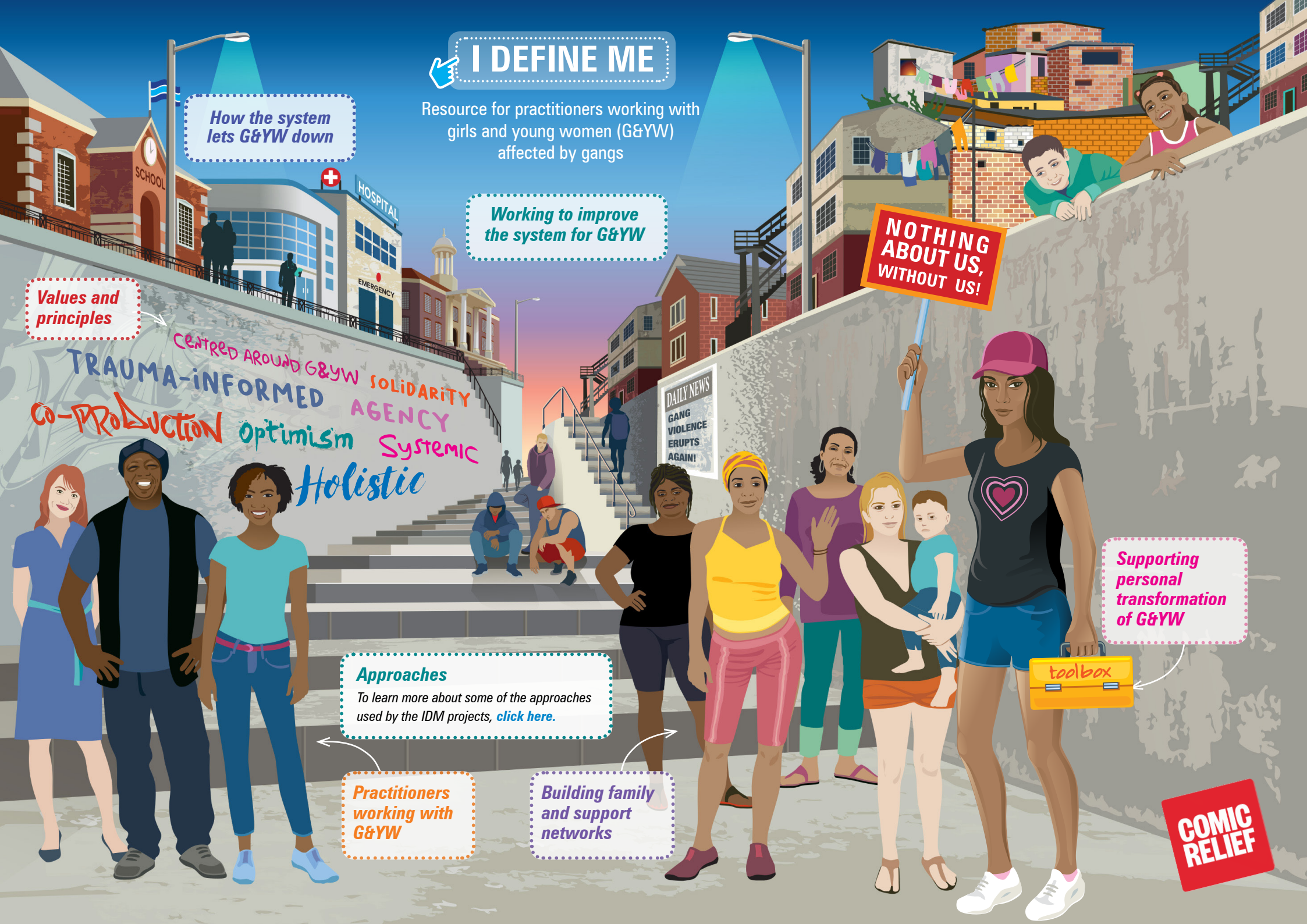
To learn more about some of the approaches used by the IDM projects, [click here](#).

Practitioners working with G&YW

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COMIC RELIEF



SUPPORTING PERSONAL TRANSFORMATION OF GIRLS & YOUNG WOMEN

All the IDM projects were involved, in one way or another, in the personal transformation of the G&YW who participated in their activities or initiatives. Through the course of their work, the IDM projects identified a broad range of qualities and skills that were important to improving the well-being of G&YW. These included G&YW having a positive vision of their future, aspirations and motivation, a sense of agency, the ability to trust and build healthy relationships. Another key theme was helping G&YW to develop social consciousness and gain a broader perspective on the socio-economic structure and social systems of which they were part. Essential skills for G&YW to better navigate their own lives included problem-solving and communication skills, emotional resilience and collaboration, advocacy, entrepreneurship and leadership skills, as well as participation in vocational and education programmes.

Based on the experiences of the IDM projects, the following factors were identified as important for G&YW to develop self-awareness and a positive sense of agency:

- Being able to confront entrenched memories and experiences of negative feedback and replace or complement them with more positive ones;
- Coming to recognise, own and trust their own strengths and abilities;
- Participating in activities and contexts (for examples, sport or creative arts) through which they learn more about themselves and question their own limiting beliefs;
- Being able to make constructive contributions to society by, for example, getting involved in a social cause or helping those in need in the community;
- Developing a habit of self-awareness – being able to analyse and reflect on their own choices and experiences in different contexts; and
- Taking part in activities or challenges that help them to recognise themselves as agents of change in their own lives.

Below you will find links to some of the exercises and tools used by IDM projects to support self-awareness and personal transformation amongst G&YW affected by gangs.

- [Building emotional resilience](#)
- [Developing healthy relationships](#)
- [Building trust](#)
- [Understanding oppression](#)
- [Taking responsibility](#)
- [Problem-solving](#)
- [Improving self-concept \(Spanish\)](#)
- [Addressing substance abuse \(Spanish\)](#)
- [Building relationships of trust \(Spanish\)](#)

Please note that some of these tools are from organisations not part of the IDM initiative and we gratefully acknowledge these sources.



I DEFINE ME

refers to a collection of projects working with girls and young women (G&YW) in Colombia, South Africa and the United Kingdom. It is an initiative of **Comic Relief**, in partnership with the following organisations:

- **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*.

[Click here](#) to read more about the background of the **I DEFINE ME** initiative.

[Click here](#) to read more about the **nine projects** involved.

[Click here](#) to find out more about the values and principles underpinning the **I DEFINE ME** interventions.

Southern Hemisphere, a development consultancy based in Cape Town, together with **Framework**, a collective of consultants supporting the not-for-profit sector, were responsible for guiding the learning journey of the IDM projects. [Click here](#) to see the Theory of Change developed by the practitioners working on IDM projects across different contexts.

WHO LIES AT THE HEART OF I DEFINE ME?

The **I DEFINE ME** projects all aimed to support girls and young women who faced challenging circumstances. Initially the initiative was framed to target G&YW 'involved in or affected by gangs', but very quickly the projects realised that this terminology was both ambiguous and harmful. No consensus exists on what is meant by a 'gang' and many of the G&YW who could benefit from the interventions did not see themselves as 'part of a gang' or even 'affected by gangs'. In addition, the stigma attached to being associated with a 'gang' created an unnecessary obstacle for project workers when they first engaged with G&YW and when they sought cooperation from service providers. In the UK, the language of G&YW at risk of criminal exploitation is increasingly being used to describe this group. The IDM projects also noted that the pervasiveness of gangs differed from context to context. In some areas where they worked, gang activity was part of every aspect of everyday life, while in other contexts, it was less pervasive.

I DEFINE ME focused on supporting girls and young women who had experienced social and economic disadvantage, marginalisation, exclusion or stigmatisation, neglect or exploitation, or lived under constant threat of it. Many had direct experiences of violence, abuse, neglect or exploitation. Often they found themselves in circumstances marked by intergenerational trauma, deprivation and vulnerability. These were G&YW who faced complex, interlocking challenges and had usually been let down by the social system in multiple ways. For some, associating with a 'gang' was a rational choice to increase personal security, resilience and belonging. [Click here](#) to read a report on what the IDM projects learned about working with G&YW affected by gangs.

ABOUT THIS RESOURCE TOOLKIT

This resource serves as a repository for some of the key learning insights and materials from the **I DEFINE ME** projects. By clicking on different headings in the rich picture, you will find links to various project reflections, guidelines, tools, approaches and materials pertaining to different aspects of the projects' work with girls and young women. It is intended as a vehicle for on-going learning and exchange. By using a rich picture format, the aim is to emphasise the inter-connectedness of the various dimensions of this kind of work - from the personal and family domains, to community networks and service providers, to working with the system as a whole.

CLICK, DON'T SCROLL – HOW TO NAVIGATE THIS RESOURCE

To move around this resource, click on the labels and links. The content is not intended to be read like a book by scrolling through the pages chronologically. The structure is more like a mind map, inviting you to explore the various themes organically. At the bottom of the pages, you will find either a back button or a continue button. To return to the previous page, click the back button.

WHO IS THIS RESOURCE FOR?

The material collected here is primarily aimed at practitioners or project staff who work with G&YW by providing support, empowerment, skills development or other forms of assistance. This resource is therefore a means for the practitioners involved in the **I DEFINE ME** projects to share their insights and tools with one another, but also to share these more broadly with practitioners facing similar challenges in other projects and in other countries.

While the broad aim is to share insights and learning across contexts, we recognise that some approaches and materials will only be relevant to, and suitable for, certain regions, localities, types of organisations and target participants.

WHAT KIND OF INFORMATION WILL YOU FIND IN THIS RESOURCE?

The content hub of this resource is the RICH PICTURE screen, which you will find [here](#).

Various themes and sub-themes can be accessed from the RICH PICTURE screen. The IDM practitioners found that these various aspects of their interventions were intricately interconnected - and that it was necessary to work across all the domains and themes listed here:

- Tools used by IDM projects to support personal transformation amongst girls and young women affected by gangs;
- Some of the approaches to working with G&YW designed and implemented by IDM projects;
- Cross-cutting issues especially relevant to practitioners working in the field, such as self-care, monitoring, evaluation and learning;
- The values and principles that underpinned the IDM projects;
- Ways of strengthening family and community networks for G&YW;
- Reflections on how the system lets G&YW down; and
- Ideas on what practitioners can do to help improve the system for and with G&YW.

CREATING WINDOWS OF OPPORTUNITY

Projects that aim to benefit G&YW affected by gangs often look for 'windows of opportunity' to engage with them. Project workers need ways to identify G&YW who are at risk or in danger and could benefit from the interventions or services they have to offer. Sometimes such interventions are geared towards reducing threats to the safety or wellbeing of G&YW. Amongst the IDM projects, the primary focus has been on supporting G&YW to build resilience, to develop awareness of themselves and society, and to make informed decisions (whatever those may be).

WHAT IS A 'GANG'?

How projects define and describe their target participants is important. The IDM projects noted that many girls and young women did not think of themselves as 'being in a gang' or even being 'at risk'. There is generally no consensus on what a 'gang' actually means and no single definition that can be applied to all circumstances. The project workers found that referring to 'gangs' was in fact a drawback when engaging with G&YW and with service providers. Gangs, and their impact on communities, also differed from context to context. In some areas where IDM projects were implemented, gang activities and allegiances were so pervasive as to be inseparable from everyday life. In other contexts, the influences of gangs were less dominant in the overall social fabric.

To read (in Spanish) about how one IDM project conducted research and grappled with the definition of gangs in their context, [click here](#).

A WINDOW OF OPPORTUNITY IS NOT A SINGLE EVENT

There has to be a moment when a girl or young woman first becomes aware of a project or intervention that offers her support and/or an avenue to empower herself. This initial meeting point could occur during any stage of what practitioners call 'the continuum of care':

- As part of a **prevention** initiative, for instance while raising awareness among G&YW in schools, in youth clubs or through extra-mural programmes;
- During **early intervention**, for instance when school counsellors, social workers or child protection officers meet with G&YW who may be at risk;
- As part of a **statutory, residential or alternative care** intervention, for example when a girl or young woman is admitted to hospital, approaches a women's shelter, is placed in a correctional facility or a home for children in need of care; or
- During the **reunification and aftercare** stage, when the focus falls on building self-reliance, for instance by helping G&YW gain access to education and work opportunities.

Ultimately the aim is to empower G&YW at each stage of the continuum of care – and to do so, these initial meeting points are, of course, essential. Sometimes they represent a formal step in the legal duties of state agencies. In other instances, they're part of the outreach efforts of civil society organisations. However, as essential as they are in the process of engaging with G&YW, they do not, in and of themselves, equate to windows of opportunity. The implementation of the IDM projects showed that a longer process was generally needed before G&YW were in a position to respond meaningfully to the assistance being offered to them. In addition, the G&YW involved in a project might leave and return numerous times over the duration of the intervention - which meant that windows of opportunity ideally had to be open-ended in order to respond adaptively to their needs.

continue

A WINDOW OF OPPORTUNITY IS DIFFERENT FOR EVERY INDIVIDUAL

For an initial meeting point to become a window of opportunity, G&YW have to decide for themselves that they are open to the services or activities that form part of an intervention. This is pivotal – for without it, the girl or young woman will have no real agency or autonomy in the process. There is no single element or motivating factor that can serve as a sure-fire window of opportunity for all girls and young women: each one faces a unique set of circumstances and will be motivated by a different constellation of issues and needs. For one young woman it may be imperative to build a personal bond with a case worker or mentor. For another, it may be the need to realise that she has the potential to succeed at something. Therefore, projects seem to fare better at creating real windows of opportunity for G&YW when they recognise and work with what is personal and specific to each individual.

CREATING A WINDOW OF OPPORTUNITY IS A PROCESS – AND IT CAN BE SLOW

For G&YW in challenging circumstances to open up to the possible benefits of an intervention, they often have to confront their past experiences of being let down by others and by the system. This is a process that usually requires an investment of time and patience from project workers. From the outside, it might look like a girl or young woman is resistant or indifferent to taking part, or that she is showing only the smallest, most incremental shifts in attitude. Yet on the inside, she may be going through an intense internal process of risk assessment and re-framing. Providing appropriate, patient and consistent support during this process lies at the heart of what it means to create windows of opportunity for G&YW. It is about holding conducive conditions in place for G&YW to decide for themselves that they are ready to participate in initiatives that can help them. Sometimes it can take months for an individual girl or young woman to feel ready to pick up on an offer of assistance.

CONDITIONS CONDUCIVE TO OPENING UP WINDOWS OF OPPORTUNITY

The insights from IDM projects show that windows of opportunity take various forms, are individually specific and often slow to develop. However, across countries and contexts, certain commonalities can be seen in the conditions that support the development of windows of opportunity for G&YW affected by gangs. The following four elements seem to be important in assisting G&YW to make those critical choices to open up to the assistance being offered to them:

Relationships of trust

between potential participants and project worker(s) lay the groundwork for windows of opportunity. It is often through such relationships that the G&YW begin to improve their self-concepts and identify the need for change. *For more information on how to build relationships of trust, [click here](#).*

Enhanced self-awareness

is important for G&YW to reflect on their lives and recognise their own power to make choices. For those who have always received negative feedback about themselves, there is a need to discover their own strengths and capabilities. *[Click here](#) to learn more about supporting personal transformation amongst G&YW.*

Alternative pull factors

are needed for G&YW to opt for experiences that can compete with the attractions of 'gang life'. Being part of or on the fringes of a gang provide G&YW with benefits like protection, excitement, a sense of belonging, camaraderie, romantic partners and access to drugs and money. Viable windows of opportunity need to offer alternative experiences or opportunities that are equally or more alluring to G&YW. *To read more about projects that offer alternative pull factors, [click here](#).*

Support networks

play an important role for G&YW to decide to open up to help being offered, and to sustain changes in their lives. If there is nobody in a girl's family or environment that can support her, any changes she tries to make may seem impossible to see through. Support networks can be found inside and outside traditional or immediate family structures. *To find out more about working with support networks for G&YW, [click here](#).*

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS OF TRUST

Based on the IDM projects' experiences, here are some guidelines for building trust between G&YW and project workers:

- Check in with what she knows rather than making assumptions about her.
- Offer her tools and information, and check that she can use them. This includes psycho-social tools, like ways of managing anger and dealing with anxiety. It also includes practical information, for example about contraception and access to services.
- Help her and those around her to express their emotions and to respond more effectively to one another. This could include the use of creative techniques like interpretive art, role-playing and experiential learning tasks.
- Provide safe spaces.
- Enable mutual support to develop amongst the G&YW themselves. As they learn to support one another, their experiences of trust will also be strengthened. As an added benefit, they may also then become part of each others' ongoing support networks. [Click here](#) to read more about building support networks.
- Understand and acknowledge that many G&YW make informed decisions to become involved in gangs. Rather than judging, enquire into what informed those decisions.
- Treat her as a person with agency and not as a social problem or a passive victim.
- Develop individualised interventions that are geared to the specific circumstances and experiences of each girl and young woman. Make sure you adapt to her needs and timing, rather than imposing a strict schedule or dosage of interactions.
- Identify her grey areas and find ways to work with them: this may call for exploring her need to belong, her role in society, her sense of identity. Focus on the positives rather than the negatives and suggest ways to boost and develop these.
- Avoid stigmatisation and labels.
- Encourage her to consider how she can make a positive contribution to her society, for example by telling its stories, creating something meaningful like a piece of mural art or theatre, or assisting people in need.
- Explain that she has a right to certain things – for example, to education and health care. She doesn't have to earn these rights by behaving in a certain way. State service providers have the duty to make sure she can exercise these rights.
- Challenge and support her to believe that change is possible.
- Model resilience and reliability to show you're there to support her over the longer-term. Remember that the process of building trust and supporting personal transformation is not linear or predictable. G&YW might leave and return to a project several times and knowing they can do so, may also deepen their trust.

Project staff working with G&YW also need support and self-care. *To read more about looking after the well-being of project workers involved in this terrain, [click here](#).*

ALTERNATIVE PULL FACTORS

Projects face the challenge of offering G&YW immediate experiences and visions of the future that are more compelling than being in or associated with gang life. Why is a bright and positive future not as attractive as being in or on the fringes of a gang? It is important to recognise that many G&YW have taken what they see as active decisions to associate with gang life. There are perceived (and real) benefits to being involved with gangs that can easily be seen to outweigh the possible advantages of other life choices. In order to compete with this, little is achieved by 'preaching' about the negatives of gang life. Instead, G&YW need realistic alternatives that offer them equivalent or competing advantages:

ATTRactions OF 'GANG LIFE'	HOW PROJECTS CAN OFFER POSITIVE ALTERNATIVES
Risk and excitement	Recognise that attraction to risk is a typical part of teenage social development and actually produces 'feel good' effects in the brain. Adrenalin-inducing activities can be positive as long as the risks are managed and boundaries are in place to safeguard G&YW. Projects can offer their participants alternative experiences that involve risk and excitement – for example, rock-climbing, acrobatic performance or wilderness therapy.
Sense of belonging	Support G&YW to develop an alternative sense of belonging by helping them to identify strengths in their situations and build on these to create social networks and peer support systems. Encourage positive community links through existing organisations and networks, like youth leadership initiatives. Work with family members or others in the young woman's environment to strengthen existing positive relationships. <i>To read more about building support networks, click here.</i>
Perceived level of trust and status in gang hierarchy	Enter into dialogue with G&YW, recognising that relationships of trust are essential for project interventions to achieve beneficial outcomes. Empower G&YW to make positive contributions to society by, for example, doing volunteer work to help the elderly. Offer programmes that encourage G&YW to take ownership of their situations, build strong peer relationships and come to see themselves as agents of change.
Avoiding negative judgments from 'mainstream' society	Adopt non-judgemental, empathetic approaches to working with G&YW, deliberately avoiding labels and stigmatisation. Explicitly affirm their value and worth. Check in with what G&YW know, don't make assumptions. Provide safe spaces. Form relationships with frontline service providers like schools and the police, then work with them to actively include those G&YW that would typically be excluded or let down by the system. In some IDM projects, G&YW challenged society's preconceptions about them by getting involved in community work and showing that they wanted to make a positive contribution.
Social and cultural capital	Draw in facilitators and mentors who appeal to the cultural interests of G&YW, for example graffiti artists, rappers, slam poets, designers and other creative artists. Work with existing community spaces, including youth networks, cultural projects and youth leadership initiatives so that the G&YW can build up their own collection of contacts, resources, access to advice, back-up and opportunities. The IDM projects found that it was important to offer localised opportunities for these pull factors to be sustained. For example, joining a small local sports club or drama group was often more realistic and durable than constantly travelling long distances to participate in bigger or more illustrious projects.

BUILDING FAMILY AND SUPPORT NETWORKS

When girls and young women decide to make changes to improve their safety or wellbeing, the social environment in which they live has a huge impact. It is much easier to sustain difficult life choices if you know you can call on family, friends and community networks for advice, a sense of belonging and positive feedback along the way. It is undoubtedly more challenging (although not impossible) to make changes on your own and sustain your own path of personal transformation. Realistically, many G&YW may not be able to rely on their immediate families for support. Sometimes their families are dysfunctional, violent, non-existent or themselves involved in or associated with gangs. In many contexts, the social system which should provide alternative support systems is severely over-burdened, inefficient, or largely inoperative. Therefore for many G&YW, the road to survival and change ends up being much harder and more lonely than it could be.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY 'FAMILY AND SUPPORT NETWORKS'?

Support networks consist of people who can give attention to and encourage a girl or young woman through the challenges of life. These are people she can call on for help, but also ideally people she has consistent and easy access to. It is essential to think beyond the traditional notion of family when identifying support networks for G&YW. Where immediate family members can't or don't provide such support, alternative networks can often be created. A support network might include, for example, a grandparent or other relative in the extended family, teachers, neighbours, mentors, friends, project workers (like those involved in the IDM interventions) and any other individuals who have the best interests of a girl or young woman at heart.

BENEFITS OF WORKING WITH FAMILIES AND SUPPORT NETWORKS

For several IDM projects, working with G&YW – together with their family members and/or alternative support networks – seems to be a key factor that consolidates positive changes in participants' lives. Engaging with their support networks appears to boost the personal transformation of G&YW in the following ways:

- **Providing continuity.** Families and support networks can help G&YW to weave what they are learning through project interventions through to other parts of their lives. Without this, it may be difficult for them to apply new skills and behaviours in contexts outside of the project itself.
- **Keeping participants enrolled.** Families and support networks can motivate G&YW to stay involved in project activities. For some IDM projects, the retention of G&YW increased significantly when families became involved. One project reported that repeated attendance grew from 60% to 95% once families were included.
- **Taking collective responsibility.** Through their involvement, families and alternative support networks can better understand that what seems like 'the girl's problem' is actually a collective one. In this way, they themselves can become part of the solution.
- **Deepening contextual understanding.** Families and support networks can give project workers deeper insight into the context within which a girl or young woman grew up and/or ongoing challenges in her everyday environment.
- **Building resilience.** G&YW and their families are often economically vulnerable. While project workers don't have the power to change these economic realities, they can help families and networks to identify and implement strategies to become more self-sustaining and resilient.
- **Sustaining change.** The involvement of support networks and families often consolidates positive change for G&YW. It increases the likelihood of sustaining the transformation journey beyond the intervention itself.
- **Uncovering 'disguised compliance'.** Project staff have opportunities to identify family members who are merely pretending to support the girl or young woman in order to avoid suspicion or to diffuse an intervention. *Guidance on what to do in such a situation can be found [here](#).*

continue

WAYS OF WORKING WITH FAMILIES AND SUPPORT NETWORKS

There are many ways to design interventions for engaging with the families and support networks of G&YW affected by gangs. Based on the experiences of the IDM projects, the following techniques are worth exploring further:

- **Building networks among families.** Hosting meetings or activities for multiple families can help to develop connections and peer support amongst them. It also provides a forum for celebrating successes and discussing issues of common concern.
- **Mixing families.** Bringing families who have been resistant to change together with those who have made progress can help to build positive peer family support.
- **Starting small.** Recognising that sometimes, the support network for a girl or young woman may have to start with just one friend, community member or relative. Through participation in project activities, G&YW can slowly build up their contacts and support networks over time.
- **Addressing inter-generational trauma.** Supporting family members to acknowledge and come to terms with their own experiences of abuse, neglect and marginalisation so as to better support and connect with the G&YW in their lives. Some of the IDM projects found it important to extend the interventions to family members, as this unlocked barriers and created a new basis for relationships with G&YW.
- **Highlighting risk.** Some IDM projects found that family members were reluctant to get involved because they didn't want to acknowledge or confront the risks being faced by their daughters (or other G&YW in their lives). Once the people around a young woman recognise the risks in her situation, they are often more actively supportive.
- **Immersion activities.** Spending structured time away from the environments in which they normally live can give G&YW and their support networks a much-needed opportunity to interact in a deeper way.
- **Reflective team working.** Here a social worker and psychologist work together with a girl or young woman and her family or support network. The aim is to bring their different skills together to identify the best approach for supporting that family.
- **Collaborative conversations.** Project workers make a point of using vocabulary that is familiar to the family, so that the latter may feel more comfortable to express exactly how they feel.
- **G&YW as facilitators of family participation.** Several IDM projects found that once they had built trust with their participants, some G&YW themselves brought their family members to join in project activities. The G&YW after all had the best sense of how open family members would be and when the timing would be right to start working in the family domain.
- **Bringing in other agencies.** Other agencies can sometimes help project staff to make contact with the families or support networks of the G&YW. Working with multiple agencies can also increase the chances of sustaining change by reinforcing positive feedback across more contexts or settings. In addition, when multiple role-players are involved, it is sometimes more feasible to tackle systemic problems together – for example, to change procedures that act as obstacles for marginalised G&YW to re-integrate into schools. *For more information on working towards systemic changes that aim to benefit G&YW [click here](#).*

The following resources (in Spanish) explain how one IDM project went about [building support systems for G&YW](#) and [creating networks between families](#).

HOW THE SYSTEM LETS GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN DOWN

Girls and young women involved in or affected by gangs around the world have vastly different contexts, challenges and experiences. However, they have one thing almost universally in common: they have usually been let down and excluded by the system – be it the schooling system, social services, protection services, health system, justice system and sometimes, by their own families, faith-based organisations and communities. At the same time, the system continues to recreate the conditions that push new generations of G&YW into circumstances that compromise their own development and opportunities in the first place.

WHAT IS 'THE SYSTEM'?

The system is the way a society is organised and how it operates. It includes formal structures, like state institutions and the services they offer. It also involves the economy and the way resources and assets are generated and shared. The system operates in the open as well as behind the scenes, in the unspoken 'rules of the game' that keep social arrangements in place. In all of our societies today, the system tends to reinforce existing hierarchies and consolidate inequalities - for example in the form of racism and sexism. For G&YW, coming up against 'the system' might, for example, mean trying to enrol in a school or college, apply for a social grant, open a bank account, apply for a job, apply for identity documents, lay a charge at a police station, gain custody of or access to her children, rent an apartment or apply for social housing, claim child support, access contraceptives, get a safe abortion or join a rehabilitation programme, among many other possibilities.

SYSTEMIC OBSTACLES THAT REINFORCE ONE ANOTHER

- By the time G&YW get involved in interventions like the IDM projects, they have usually already experienced multiple exclusions and marginalisations over the course of their lives. This creates a snowball effect of cumulating disadvantages and backlogs, often stretching back over several generations. When they try to make changes to improve their safety or wellbeing, they are typically confronted, once again, with a social system that is largely hostile or indifferent towards them and their families. The promise of personal transformation and a brighter future can be very difficult to sustain when it seems every institution or opportunity is designed to exclude you.
- Many service delivery agencies have problematic and disempowering approaches to G&YW they see as being 'involved in gangs'. They tend to treat them like troublesome 'delinquents' who cannot be trusted and/or extend little empathy to them, simply following bureaucratic procedures and rules.
- It is common for G&YW to fall between the cracks of different state institutions, or to be sent endlessly from one agency to another. Typically the various service providers (where these even exist) operate in isolation and do not communicate effectively (or at all) with one another.
- Sometimes G&YW do not meet the eligibility criteria to access certain services. There is frequently little recourse or information about how they could respond to this challenge and find ways around it.
- In general, services are fragmented and there is no single place where G&YW can access integrated, youth-friendly and empowering advice that takes their whole situation into account. In addition, service providers often fail to support G&YW over time and instead tend to cut them off at arbitrary points, based on age or threshold criteria.
- Trying to negotiate the system is time-consuming and often means having to spend money on transport, copying documentation and so forth. In some cases, there are also application fees. The costs, complexity and chronic logistical hurdles can feel insurmountable and lead G&YW to simply give up on accessing these services or opportunities.

To find out more about what practitioners can do to help address the systemic challenges facing G&YW, [click here](#).

Read some [recommendations for policy-makers](#) from G&YW in Colombia (in Spanish).

WHAT PROJECTS CAN DO TO HELP IMPROVE THE SYSTEM FOR G&YW

Systemic problems are difficult to address exactly because they are so deeply embedded in social and economic structures. The systemic obstacles faced by many G&YW affected by gangs are multi-dimensional and mutually reinforcing – and they fall beyond what project workers can typically control or ‘fix’. Efforts to change any one part of the system can produce resistance from other parts and the intractability of the system as a whole can be deeply frustrating for G&YW, as well as the practitioners trying to support them. Systemic changes seldom happen quickly; they tend to require tenacious and long-term strategic attention.

Nonetheless, the IDM projects found that it was essential to address the systemic dimension, in addition to working at the individual, family and community levels. Gains at these levels could so easily be undermined by on-going failures in the system. From the experiences of the IDM projects, here are some suggestions of things practitioners can do to put the spotlight on systemic problems and work towards improving the system for and with G&YW:

- **Smooth the way:** Project workers can sometimes engage directly with service delivery agencies on behalf of a girl or young woman, in order to smooth the road for her. However, it can also be risky for project workers to act as mediators for G&YW to access formal services and opportunities. If the system is still set up to fail them, these attempts can threaten the relationship of trust built up through the project.
- **Offer strategic support:** Project workers can help G&YW gain a holistic picture of the various institutions and services, eligibility criteria and requirements - and then assist them in planning how to access what they can and deal with setbacks. Again, there is a danger if project staff seem to speak too much on behalf of the services, and come to be seen by the G&YW as ‘part of the system’.
- **Walk alongside G&YW individually:** Be sure to tailor access to services and opportunities to the individual circumstances and needs of each girl or young woman, rather than enforcing a uniform schedule or set of ‘solutions’.
- **Develop girls’ and young women’s understanding of the social system:** Through training and awareness-raising initiatives, G&YW gain broader insight into the society in which they live, into inequalities and where they come from, and the drivers that keep economic and political differences in place. This knowledge allows them to see their personal situations in a broader context and to participate in trying to change the system, if they choose to.
- **Facilitate girls’ and young women’s advocacy:** One of the most powerful ways to draw attention to systemic problems is to enable G&YW to speak out about their experiences and advocate for better services and opportunities. Consider providing G&YW with focussed training on how to communicate effectively with service providers, policy-makers and other duty-bearers. Also keep in mind that participating in advocacy activities can be time-consuming and expensive for G&YW. Include measures to reimburse them for their costs and time. Of course, G&YW should have meaningful opportunities to participate not only in advocacy, but also in the design and evaluation of projects aimed to benefit them.
- **Influence actual improvements in service delivery:** The IDM projects realised that if the G&YW participating in their interventions continued to be marginalised by service providers and social systems, existing cycles of exclusion would simply be reinforced. It therefore became a priority for project workers to make strategic efforts to influence the system itself and advocate for improvements in services to G&YW, especially those previously excluded.
- **Identify ‘inclusion agents’ at the local level:** Countries have different systems of government and the decision-makers that have power over services and opportunities for G&YW are sometimes located at local level, at provincial level, and/or national level. However, when trying to catalyse strategic changes, especially with limited resources, it often helps to work at the community level first. Look for local role-players - be they from schools or government agencies, faith-based organisations or non-governmental organisations – who can act as ‘inclusion agents’. Encourage them to listen to the voices of G&YW and to make changes that improve what they offer or how they work. Starting at the local level can deliver more visible results more quickly, and in this way reinforce the hopes of G&YW that positive changes in the system are in fact possible.
- **Co-ordinate advocacy at multiple levels:** Successes from advocacy at the local level have the potential to expand to a larger scale. It is often at the national (or sub-national level) that policy and budget changes can be made to improve services, revise eligibility criteria, create new opportunities targeted at G&YW, and so forth. Team up with other organisations and create networks that have the necessary geographical reach and political clout. Invest time in developing a clear, united advocacy message and present compelling evidence to support your case.
- **Be patient:** The entire system affecting G&YW in society cannot be transformed overnight. Changing entrenched practices, policies, structures and beliefs takes time. Resistance and setbacks are inevitable along the way. Yet even small gains and improvements are important.

PRACTITIONERS WORKING WITH GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN AFFECTED BY GANGS

One of the objectives of the I DEFINE ME initiative was for practitioners to learn from their work with G&YW involved in or affected by gangs. Over the three year period, the practitioners came together as a cohort of projects to exchange ideas and compare approaches, which also inspired them to experiment with various learning methods and tools within their individual projects. The need to create deliberate opportunities for learning emerged as an important theme of the IDM initiative, as well as the importance of self-care for those working in highly demanding and traumatising environments. Below you will find some brief observations about:

- Learning as a cohort of IDM practitioners;
- Learning within the individual IDM projects; and
- Self-care for practitioners.

Learning is a muscle to be strengthened and exercised.

Funders must recognise their power; create space & build trust for trial and error.

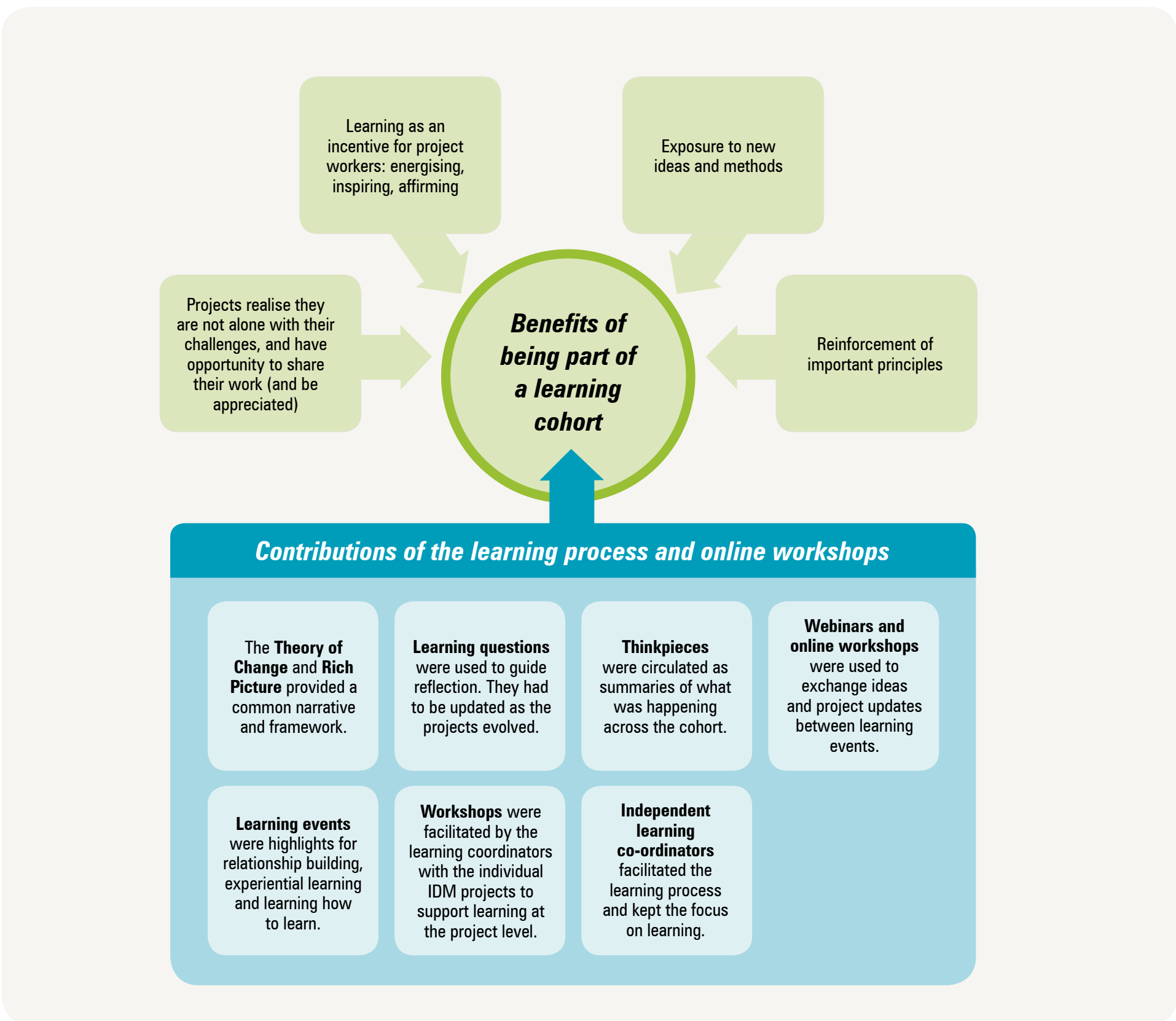
It is necessary to have a learning framework to guide learning. Surfacing assumptions through a Theory of Change is good for that.

Key messages about learning

LEARNING AS A COHORT OF PRACTITIONERS

Reflection can easily be side-lined or overlooked under the pressures to deliver, especially in projects providing always-urgent support to G&YW in challenging circumstances. In the IDM initiative, dedicated opportunities were created to bring the practitioners from Colombia, South Africa and the United Kingdom together outside of the projects’ hard-pressed work environments and deadlines.

Three collective learning events were held: one at the start in London, one after 18 months in Bogota and one towards the end of the three-year period in Cape Town. All workshops used creative, analytical and experiential techniques and participants helped to co-create the agendas and content. The overall aim of these events was for the practitioners to reflect, exchange information and insights, compare and discuss their approaches and adjust their own projects in the light of what they were learning. It was therefore important that frontline workers – those actually implementing the IDM projects – were involved in these processes of reflection and adaptation. They identified the following benefits to being part of a learning cohort:



Bottle of emotions

Use:

Understanding emotions and behaviours.

Why:

Exploring emotions and strategies for managing / coping with more intense / complex feelings.

Aim:

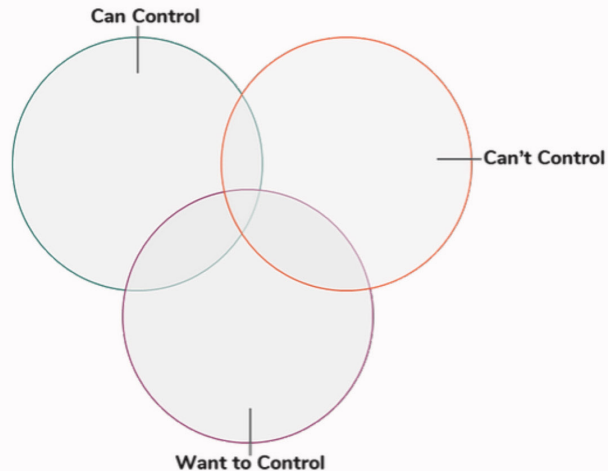
Raise awareness in girls and young women (GYW) of those particular feelings.

Description and application:

Some intense feelings can explode, becoming too much to handle. Ask GYW to identify feelings they do not share, follow this across different situations and explore how these explosions can look when it comes to their behaviours. Identify patterns-triggered by events – bottled up emotions; outward reactions, and then explore coping strategies that are realistic, specific and manageable to support emotional regulation.



Control Cycles



Use:

Understanding how we feel.

Why:

To highlight both the choices we have to make and the choices we are free to make, exploring how these impact our lives and those around us.

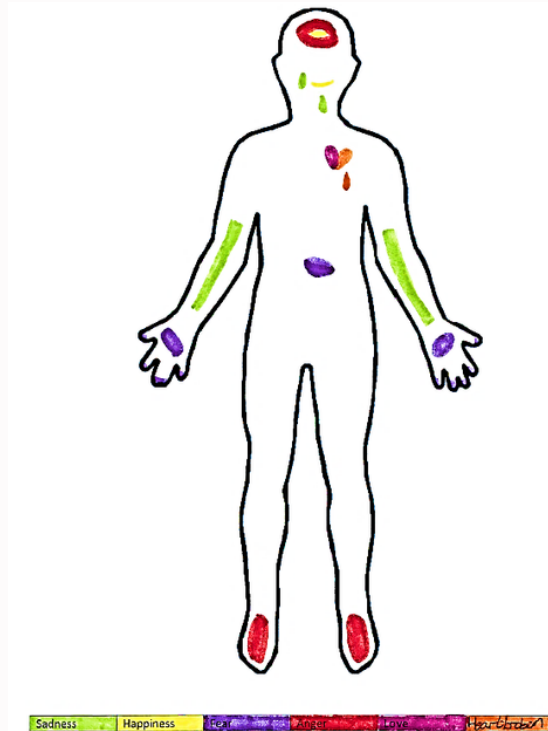
Aim:

To support greater awareness in girls and young women (GYW) and to understand their feelings and how they influence their behaviour.

Description and application:

Consider situations in GYW lives where they feel they do not have any control, those they can let go and those they can't. This tool may be used to focus on a specific event, a specific day or even themes/patterns in their life.

How do I feel?



Use:

Focus on bodily reactions or sensations and emotions.

Why:

Used to identify emotional and physical reactions to situations that may inform behaviours or actions.

Aim:

To raise the girl and young women's (GYW) sense of emotional understanding and its impact on their body.

Description and application:

This tool helps the GYW reflect on and visually communicate how various emotions affect them. Explore this by, drawing on situations that may activate various physical reactions. For example, anxiety from exam stress causing sweaty palms. GYW can add their own emotions or sensations specific to their experiences.

continue

The Mind Bully

Use:

Acknowledge negative thoughts and create options for change.

Why:

To promote healthy understanding of emotions and emotional regulation.

Aim:

Identify and reduce negative thinking patterns and their impact.

Description and application:

The mind bully is the negative thoughts we carry. They can be persistent and loud, trying to pull us into the pit of fear and despair. We feed the bully, thereby making it stronger and bigger by listening and paying it attention, believing what it says and reacting through how we feel and how we act and behave. Firstly, help the GYW to notice and acknowledge the mind bully; by letting go of the rope, it has no power to pull them towards the great pit. Challenge and support the GYW to question what they are being told to think. Shift the focus of attention to goals, hopes, a hobby, for example.



Relationship Mountains

Use:

Relationship building.

Why:

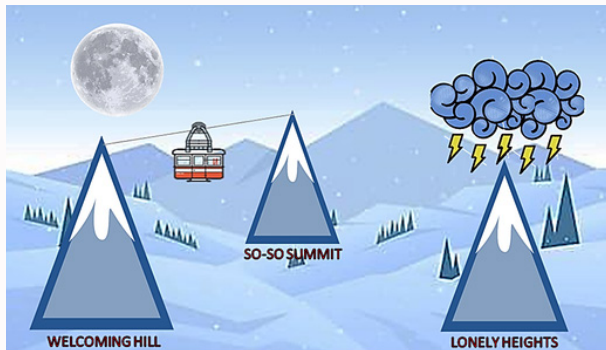
Used to ascertain the positive as well as negative relationships in girls, and young women's (GYW) lives..

Aim:

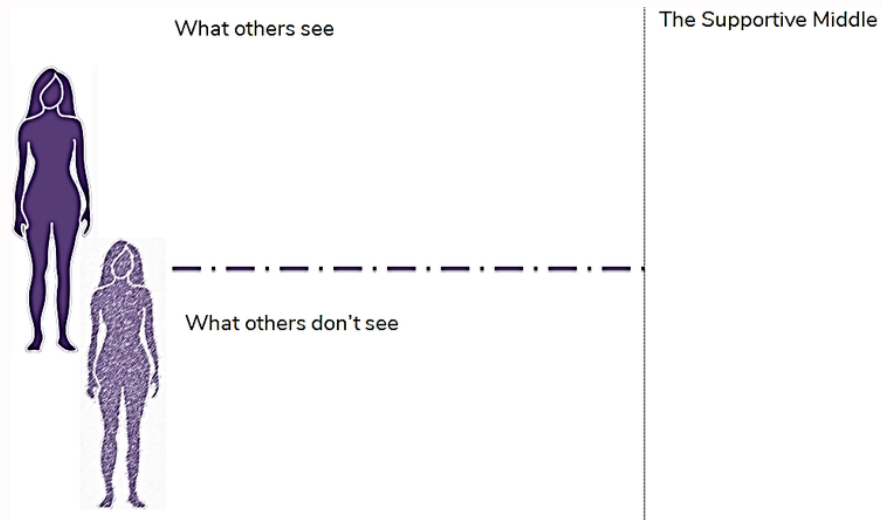
To encourage GYW to identify the reasons as to why specific people in their life are either positive or negative.

Description and application:

Welcoming Hill: This initial mountain allows us to focus further on the relationship of positive people in the GYW's lives, exploring themes of trust, emotional and practical support and those who encourage self-esteem building. **So-So Summit:** We then ask GYW to discuss who they would place on the second mountain; this identifies the people in their lives that they trust, although not as close as the people on the first mountain. This is open for discussion as the GYW are able to self-reflect on why selected individuals on this mountain are not on the first one. The 'cable cart' symbolises the connection between the GYW and their selected people; this explores their ability to control who they have either full or partial contact with. **Lonely Heights:** The third mountain is used to place individuals in their lives that are negative. This helps to assess and visually identify those people who are negative influences on the GYW.



What others see / don't see



Use:

Exploring self esteem, confidence and image.

Why:

To explore differences in behaviour and attitudes; from what is shown to everyone or outside, to how they perceive themselves.

Aim:

To build a stronger sense of self.

Description and application:

Generally this is a self reflective tool which can be used to explore how the girls and young women (GYW) view themselves and how they feel they are viewed. The Supportive Middle: this is a space for reflecting in a collaborative way on how to achieve change for example, to be able to express emotions more, trust others and so on. This section may also identify key adults or strategies to bring about that change.

CLEANING UP THE MESS

This is an experiential learning course using the learning process of Kolb's cycle of experiential learning, (1994), where learners participate in the exercises, reflect on their experience and then use these reflections to formulate or generate new understandings. Frameworks and models are fed in and tested via action through the exercise. Participants take the learning and test it for themselves in real life situations, reflection and application are critical to check the richness of the course work.

A key focus of this tool is on participants examining their own relationship to conflict so that they can better resource themselves and find solution driven opportunities which then change the way they relate. The emphasis on examining our own thoughts, emotions and assumptions which become habit forming may provoke discomfort on the part of the participant. It is however vital that participants understand that while the content is therapeutic in nature it does not replace formal therapy. The work needs to be guided with confidence and skill in order to establish and ensure a safe environment in which participants challenged and change become possible.

A tool to support yourself

The question we ask,

1. Why is it so difficult to apologise when you have made a mistake?
2. Whose responsibility is it to restore the relationship when it breaks down?
3. What will it cost you to apologise for the mistake you have made?
4. What support do you need to fix it? Who do you need the support from?

CLEANING UP THE MESS

1. Identify – search for mistakes that you have made

2. Acknowledge – what you have done

3. Take Responsibility – accept it as your own

4. Clean up the Mess – have the conversations you need to have, do what you have to do

5. Put steps in place to make sure it doesn't happen again

Experience Machines

Use:

Person-centred approach to enhance problem-solving skills.

Why:

To identify positive and negative aspects of girls and young women's (GYW) experiences, as well as exploring and deconstructing experiences to find possible solutions

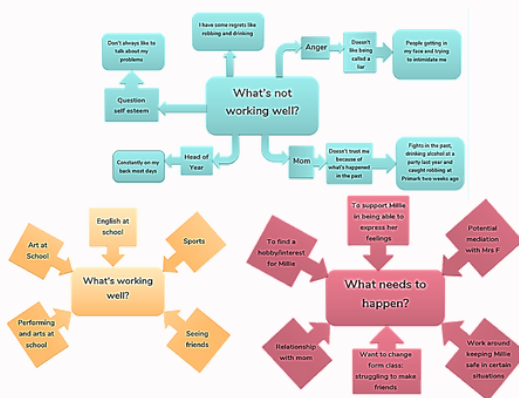
Aim:

To encourage GYW to take control of their solutions and develop their problem-solving skills.

Description and application:

What's working well: Ask what is going well in a GYW's life. This can involve anything that they are happy/ content with at the moment and may feature their friendships/ relationships, school life and home life, for example. Then ask what is not going so well in their life at the moment. This encourages GYW to openly discuss what they are concerned about; and might include bullying, harmful relationships and exploitation, for example.

GYW are then encouraged to find solutions for these concerns/ problems. This places a lot of emphasis on the GYW to problem solve as well as making them feel positive about having a say on their future. To challenge GYW to explore various avenues and options, focusing on both negatives and positives.



I DEFINE ME – BACKGROUND TO THE PROGRAMME

In 2016, Comic Relief, a UK-based funder supporting projects across the UK and internationally, launched a funding call, seeking to identify projects in different countries that were working, or wanted to work, with girls and young women (G&YW) who were involved in, or affected by, gangs. The aim would be to fund such projects over a 3-year period, while also drawing the participating organisations together as a learning cohort that could reflect on, and learn from, one another’s experiences and practices.

WHY GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN AFFECTED BY GANGS?

Prior to I DEFINE ME, Comic Relief had already been involved in funding a range of interventions for young people involved in gangs, mainly through their Sport for Change work in the UK. It had also funded (and continues to fund) various initiatives, internationally and in the UK, that support young people experiencing or at risk of child sexual exploitation and gender-based violence, as well as projects advancing women’s and girls’ rights more broadly.

Through this work, Comic Relief become aware of the experiences of G&YW associated with gangs. At the same time, they found that whilst much work was being done with boys and men in gangs, very little direct attention was being given to G&YW who were involved in or affected by gangs. To address this gap, Comic Relief awarded grants to [nine projects](#) to implement multi-partner, collaborative approaches that would affect change in the lives of such G&YW, their families and communities.

WHO ARE G&YW ‘AFFECTED BY GANGS’?

Very little information is available on G&YW involved in or affected by gangs around the world. What the limited research does reveal is that G&YW are affected by gangs in numerous ways, whether through direct membership of a gang, having family members, romantic partners or friends who are in gangs, being voluntarily or forcefully drawn into gang-related activities, living in an area where gang allegiance is necessary, amongst other possibilities. G&YW generally have to navigate a range of harmful environments, which can expose them to high levels of sexual exploitation and criminal activity. While circumstances naturally vary across countries, common risk factors for G&YW becoming involved in gangs include:



**All quotations are from frontline workers at the IDM learning event in Cape Town, 2019.*

LEARNING BY AND THROUGH THE IDM PROJECTS

The projects that formed part of the IDM initiative used a broad range of approaches, tools and methodologies to work with G&YW in the UK, Colombia and South Africa. The practitioners involved came together at the beginning of the three-year process, in the middle and again towards the end to share and compare experiences and reflect on key learning questions. The entire IDM initiative was therefore underpinned by the desire:

- To support organisations to explore and learn from their work with G&YW, so as to further improve the effectiveness and outcomes of this work; and
- To encourage the development of a body of learning for the sector about working with G&YW across multiple contexts, seeing what is common to all contexts and how practices and experiences were adapted in different contexts.

To read more about the learning journey of the IDM initiative, [click here](#).

I DEFINE ME – PROJECT PROFILES

Project Title: BELEAVE

Location: Birmingham, UK

Organisations involved: Spurgeons

Summary of project: Spurgeons is a children's charity working across the UK and offering whole family support to vulnerable young people. This project worked in partnership with the Police and Schools in Birmingham to support the whole family of girls at risk of becoming involved in gang activity, or already affected by gangs. The partners worked together to build a network of support and to establish positive alternatives for the girls, working on encouraging what already works in their lives.

Project Title: CHANGE THE GAME - PREVENTING & REDUCING RISKS TO GIRLS IN GANGS

Location: Bogota, Colombia

Organisations involved: Children Change Colombia (lead), Tiempo de Juego, CRAN

Summary of project: Gang members are role models for young people in poor communities in Bogota. The context of violence in families means many girls flee abusive homes. Once they are on the streets, they are vulnerable to gangs, are used to carry drugs, carry out robberies and in sex work. It is hard to leave gangs, so girls either end up in extreme danger or prison. This project worked with girls in residential care and their families to address the reasons behind their behaviour, to develop a life plan, and receive tailored support to achieve their goals. The project also worked in communities to prevent girls from joining gangs, to build their confidence and aspirations and bring about safer communities.

Project Title: DESTINO CREW

Location: Bogota, Colombia

Organisations involved: Familia Ayara

Summary of project: Working across three districts of Bogota blighted by violent gang activity, this project supported young women in prison and those in communities involved in or at risk of gang activity. Using hip hop (specifically rap, breakdance, DJ-ing, graffiti and art), the project addressed the aspirations of the girls, helping them in creative ways to understand and talk about the risks they faced and what they wanted for the future. This equipped the girls to continue making positive life choices outside the gangs and to provide support to other young people at risk. The project intervened at key points in the girls' lives, using mentoring and music, to build healthy, safe communities.

continue

I DEFINE ME – PROJECT PROFILES *(continued)*

Project Title: GETTING OUT FOR GOOD

Location: Oldham, UK

Organisations involved: Manchester Metropolitan University (lead), Positive Steps

Summary of project: Young women who are associated with gangs are at high risk of violence, sexual exploitation and criminal activity. Manchester Metropolitan University, along with a range of partner agencies, delivered a project that worked with young women at risk of joining gangs in Oldham. The project provided mentoring support along with drama activities and access to sports such as football and boxing. Young women built social networks of support and developed confidence, skills and resilience. They were also supported to find positive alternatives to gang involvement.

Project Title: GIRLS ALLOWED

Location: Wolverhampton, UK

Organisations involved: Wolverhampton Voluntary Sector Council (lead), Base 25, Catch 22, EYES, Gazebo, Gloucester Street Community Centre, Hope Community Project, New Park Village Football Development, Square Pegs Round Holes CIC

Summary of project: This project was a city-wide partnership in Wolverhampton comprising of community groups, youth charities, the police and the Council, (through the Safer Wolverhampton Partnership). The participating organisations built on their existing work to support girls and young women aged between 9 and 19. This involved helping them to develop healthy relationships, and enabling them to make positive choices, where possible to ensure that they could be safe from gangs and distance themselves from gang activity. The project offered a combination of group work, one to one support, focused theatre, film and sports activities, and family support based in the community.

Project Title: I DEFINE ME PROGRAMME

Location: Cape Town – Stellenbosch, Cape Flats – Lavender Hill, Heideveld, Mitchell's Plain, Hanover Park, Worcester Prison

Organisations involved: Usiko, Ihata, Ruben Richards Foundation

Summary of project: The Cape Flats is home to communities of black and coloured people who live in the legacy of discrimination resulting in poverty, malnutrition, poor life expectancy, social disintegration, shortfalls in education and other social services. This has supported the formation of dangerous gangs. This project worked to befriend and support girls who had been involved in gangs. It assisted them to develop their self-esteem, resilience and sense of self-worth by providing mentoring. Families and schools were strengthened to provide support to the girls. The ultimate goal of this project was for fewer girls to be involved in gangs and for more girls to complete their schooling, be employed and lead safer lives.

continue

I DEFINE ME – PROJECT PROFILES *(continued)*

Project Title: PROVIDING GIRL-LED ALTERNATIVES TO GANGING IN THE WESTERN CAPE

Location: Bonteheuwel and Mitchell's Plain, Western Cape, South Africa

Organisations involved: ActionAid South Africa (lead), Bonteheuwel Joint Peace Forum and Women for Change Mitchell's Plain

Summary of project: The Cape Flats is home to a great number of violent gangs, many of whom are behind the rising death rates in this area. Lack of access to jobs, services, poor quality education and poor family relations mean that many girls are either joining gangs or becoming involved with gangs through drug abuse and addiction. This project worked with two local organisations in the townships of Bonteheuwel and Mitchell's Plain to strengthen their response to addressing the issue of gang culture. They worked with a cohort of girls supporting them to learn about their rights, have access to peer support and become organised so they could campaign against gang violence.

Project Title: SUPPORTING AND REHABILITATING GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN ASSOCIATED WITH GANGS IN BOGOTA

Location: Ciudad Bolívar/Bogotá, Colombia

Organisations involved: YMCA Bogotá

Summary of project: The largest concentration of gangs is in Ciudad Bolivar, an area characterised by female headed households with limited male support, poverty, high levels of sexual abuse, crime and gang activity. Through a holistic and multi-sectoral approach, this project worked to rehabilitate ex-gang members (of which 70% were young women) by developing a safe, alternative future through positive life choices. The gang members were assisted to develop coping mechanisms so as to reduce harm, violence and abuse, leading to reduced risk of young women and men joining gangs, and working to strengthen the government response to vulnerable girls and young women.

Project Title: THE TEACHABLE MOMENT IN A&E: YOUNG WOMEN'S SERVICE

Location: London, UK

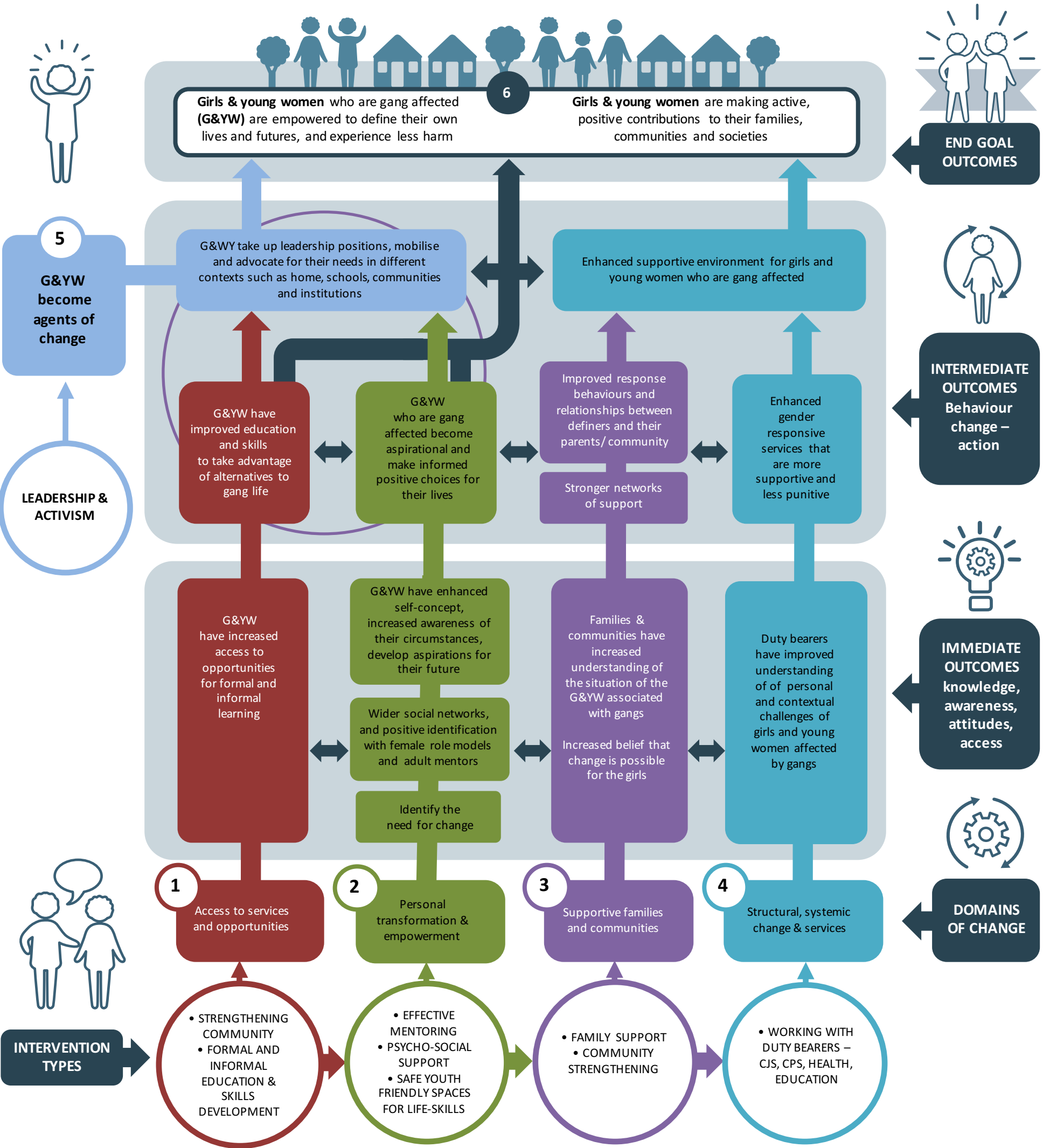
Organisations involved: Redthread Youth Ltd.

Summary of project: Girls and young women associated with gangs have often had chaotic life experiences including poverty, mental health issues, violence and neglect. Redthread used the 'Teachable Moment' of Accidents & Emergencies (A&E) at South London's Major Trauma Centre to reach vulnerable girls, by embedding two girls' workers to support them at a time of crisis. The girl's workers facilitated practical interventions such as seeking housing, anger management, alcohol rehabilitation and financial independence through long term holistic support. As a result, girls and young women had greater access to appropriate support services, leading to positive and safe decision making and increased mental well-being.

The I DEFINE ME Theory of Change

During the IDM process, opportunities were created for project practitioners to reflect on ‘how change happens’. More specifically, they considered and reviewed their assumptions about how they were bringing about change for and with the G&YW involved in their projects. This gave the projects regular opportunities to revise the design of their interventions over the three-year period, so as to make sure they were being as effective as possible.

Right from the start, it was clear that working towards meaningful improvements for the G&YW would not be easy or simple. A shared IDM Theory of Change (ToC) was co-created with the project practitioners, as shown below. It illustrates some of the complexity and multiplicity of change required for G&YW affected by gangs, as identified by the prationitners. Each of the projects also mapped their own Theories of Change and illustrated where these intersected with, and contributed to, the overall ToC.



The Theory of Change provided a valuable foundation and common reference point to generate learning questions for the IDM projects. However, by around half-way through the IDM process, some practitioners were finding the ToC too limited to reflect their actual everyday experiences with G&YW affected by gangs. It became clear that the pathways unfolding through and with the projects’ participants were a great deal more messy and unpredictable than the ToC could capture. Change for these G&YW occurred in a non-linear, idiosyncratic fashion: the process for one was often entirely different and even contradictory to the process of change for another. Each girl or young woman in fact required her own tailor-made and holistic ToC. In order to respond to this non-conformity and non-linearity of change, the IDM projects had to learn to constantly adapt and re-strategise how they were working. They came to be guided more by a common set of **values and principles**, rather than by a common or overarching approach to change.

To further acknowledge the diversity of ‘how change happened’ in the experiences of the IDM projects, we decided to create this Rich Picture resource. The aim has been to illustrate the complexity of change for different girls and young women, without imposing a single pathway through the material collected here.

I DEFINE ME

refers to a collection of projects working with girls and young women (G&YW) in Colombia, South Africa and the United Kingdom. It is an initiative of **Comic Relief**, in partnership with the following organisations:

- **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*.

[Click here](#) to read more about the background of the **I DEFINE ME** initiative.

[Click here](#) to read more about the **nine projects** involved.

[Click here](#) to find out more about the values and principles underpinning the **I DEFINE ME** interventions.

Southern Hemisphere, a development consultancy based in Cape Town, together with **Framework**, a collective of consultants supporting the not-for-profit sector, were responsible for guiding the learning journey of the IDM projects. [Click here](#) to see the Theory of Change developed by the practitioners working on IDM projects across different contexts.

WHO LIES AT THE HEART OF I DEFINE ME?

The **I DEFINE ME** projects all aimed to support girls and young women who faced challenging circumstances. Initially the initiative was framed to target G&YW 'involved in or affected by gangs', but very quickly the projects realised that this terminology was both ambiguous and harmful. No consensus exists on what is meant by a 'gang' and many of the G&YW who could benefit from the interventions did not see themselves as 'part of a gang' or even 'affected by gangs'. In addition, the stigma attached to being associated with a 'gang' created an unnecessary obstacle for project workers when they first engaged with G&YW and when they sought cooperation from service providers. In the UK, the language of G&YW at risk of criminal exploitation is increasingly being used to describe this group. The IDM projects also noted that the pervasiveness of gangs differed from context to context. In some areas where they worked, gang activity was part of every aspect of everyday life, while in other contexts, it was less pervasive.

I DEFINE ME focused on supporting girls and young women who had experienced social and economic disadvantage, marginalisation, exclusion or stigmatisation, neglect or exploitation, or lived under constant threat of it. Many had direct experiences of violence, abuse, neglect or exploitation. Often they found themselves in circumstances marked by intergenerational trauma, deprivation and vulnerability. These were G&YW who faced complex, interlocking challenges and had usually been let down by the social system in multiple ways. For some, associating with a 'gang' was a rational choice to increase personal security, resilience and belonging. [Click here](#) to read a report on what the IDM projects learned about working with G&YW affected by gangs.

WAYS OF WORKING WITH FAMILIES AND SUPPORT NETWORKS

There are many ways to design interventions for engaging with the families and support networks of G&YW affected by gangs. Based on the experiences of the IDM projects, the following techniques are worth exploring further:

- **Building networks among families.** Hosting meetings or activities for multiple families can help to develop connections and peer support amongst them. It also provides a forum for celebrating successes and discussing issues of common concern.
- **Mixing families.** Bringing families who have been resistant to change together with those who have made progress can help to build positive peer family support.
- **Starting small.** Recognising that sometimes, the support network for a girl or young woman may have to start with just one friend, community member or relative. Through participation in project activities, G&YW can slowly build up their contacts and support networks over time.
- **Addressing inter-generational trauma.** Supporting family members to acknowledge and come to terms with their own experiences of abuse, neglect and marginalisation so as to better support and connect with the G&YW in their lives. Some of the IDM projects found it important to extend the interventions to family members, as this unlocked barriers and created a new basis for relationships with G&YW.
- **Highlighting risk.** Some IDM projects found that family members were reluctant to get involved because they didn't want to acknowledge or confront the risks being faced by their daughters (or other G&YW in their lives). Once the people around a young woman recognise the risks in her situation, they are often more actively supportive.
- **Immersion activities.** Spending structured time away from the environments in which they normally live can give G&YW and their support networks a much-needed opportunity to interact in a deeper way.
- **Reflective team working.** Here a social worker and psychologist work together with a girl or young woman and her family or support network. The aim is to bring their different skills together to identify the best approach for supporting that family.
- **Collaborative conversations.** Project workers make a point of using vocabulary that is familiar to the family, so that the latter may feel more comfortable to express exactly how they feel.
- **G&YW as facilitators of family participation.** Several IDM projects found that once they had built trust with their participants, some G&YW themselves brought their family members to join in project activities. The G&YW after all had the best sense of how open family members would be and when the timing would be right to start working in the family domain.
- **Bringing in other agencies.** Other agencies can sometimes help project staff to make contact with the families or support networks of the G&YW. Working with multiple agencies can also increase the chances of sustaining change by reinforcing positive feedback across more contexts or settings. In addition, when multiple role-players are involved, it is sometimes more feasible to tackle systemic problems together – for example, to change procedures that act as obstacles for marginalised G&YW to re-integrate into schools. *For more information on working towards systemic changes that aim to benefit G&YW [click here](#).*

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BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS OF TRUST

Based on the IDM projects' experiences, here are some guidelines for building trust between G&YW and project workers:

- Check in with what she knows rather than making assumptions about her.
- Offer her tools and information, and check that she can use them. This includes psycho-social tools, like ways of managing anger and dealing with anxiety. It also includes practical information, for example about contraception and access to services.
- Help her and those around her to express their emotions and to respond more effectively to one another. This could include the use of creative techniques like interpretive art, role-playing and experiential learning tasks.
- Provide safe spaces.
- Enable mutual support to develop amongst the G&YW themselves. As they learn to support one another, their experiences of trust will also be strengthened. As an added benefit, they may also then become part of each others' ongoing support networks. [Click here](#) to read more about building support networks.
- Understand and acknowledge that many G&YW make informed decisions to become involved in gangs. Rather than judging, enquire into what informed those decisions.
- Treat her as a person with agency and not as a social problem or a passive victim.
- Develop individualised interventions that are geared to the specific circumstances and experiences of each girl and young woman. Make sure you adapt to her needs and timing, rather than imposing a strict schedule or dosage of interactions.
- Identify her grey areas and find ways to work with them: this may call for exploring her need to belong, her role in society, her sense of identity. Focus on the positives rather than the negatives and suggest ways to boost and develop these.
- Avoid stigmatisation and labels.
- Encourage her to consider how she can make a positive contribution to her society, for example by telling its stories, creating something meaningful like a piece of mural art or theatre, or assisting people in need.
- Explain that she has a right to certain things – for example, to education and health care. She doesn't have to earn these rights by behaving in a certain way. State service providers have the duty to make sure she can exercise these rights.
- Challenge and support her to believe that change is possible.
- Model resilience and reliability to show you're there to support her over the longer-term. Remember that the process of building trust and supporting personal transformation is not linear or predictable. G&YW might leave and return to a project several times and knowing they can do so, may also deepen their trust.

Project staff working with G&YW also need support and self-care. *To read more about looking after the well-being of project workers involved in this terrain, [click here](#).*

WHAT PROJECTS CAN DO TO HELP IMPROVE THE SYSTEM FOR G&YW

Systemic problems are difficult to address exactly because they are so deeply embedded in social and economic structures. The systemic obstacles faced by many G&YW affected by gangs are multi-dimensional and mutually reinforcing – and they fall beyond what project workers can typically control or ‘fix’. Efforts to change any one part of the system can produce resistance from other parts and the intractability of the system as a whole can be deeply frustrating for G&YW, as well as the practitioners trying to support them. Systemic changes seldom happen quickly; they tend to require tenacious and long-term strategic attention.

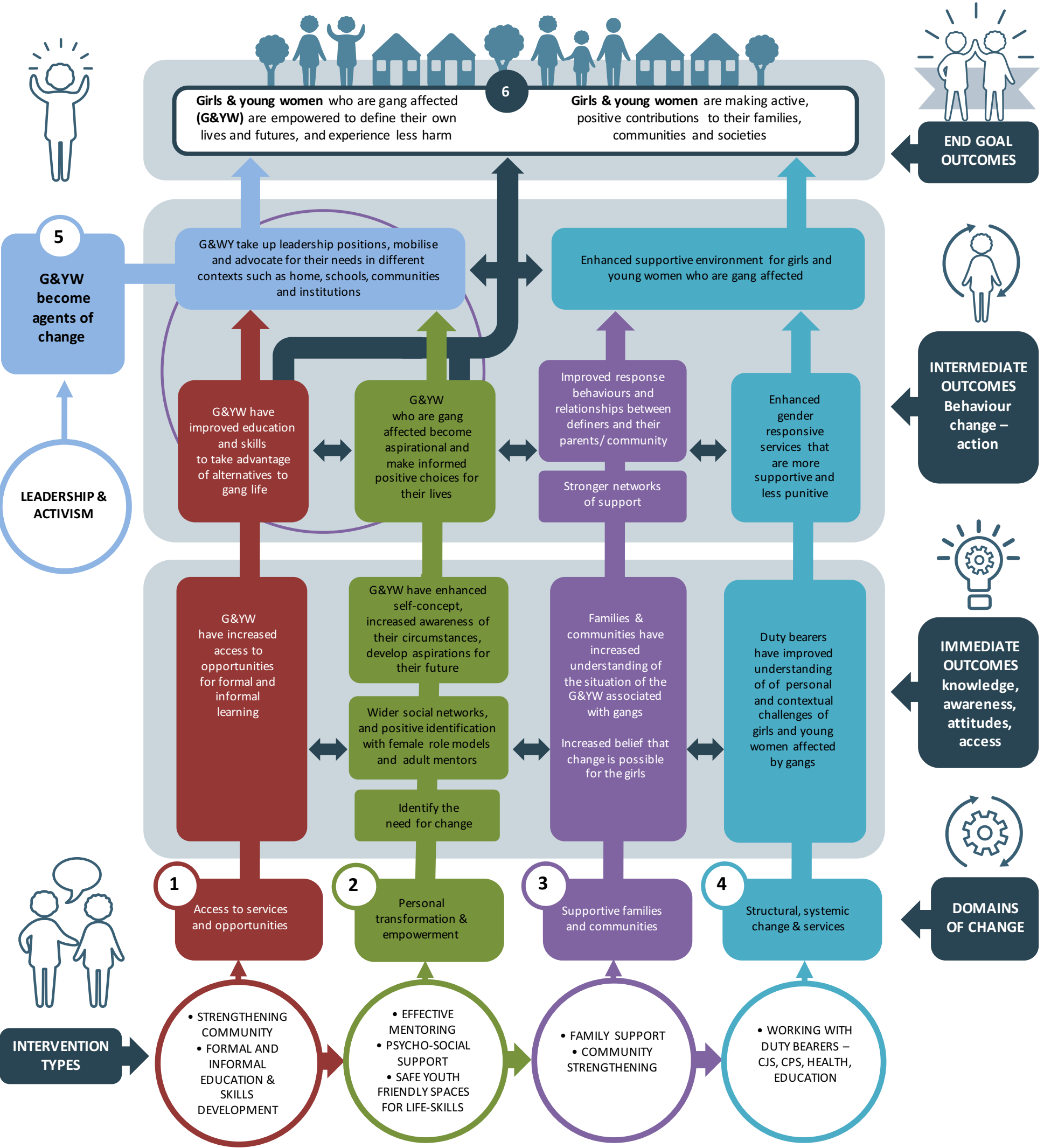
Nonetheless, the IDM projects found that it was essential to address the systemic dimension, in addition to working at the individual, family and community levels. Gains at these levels could so easily be undermined by on-going failures in the system. From the experiences of the IDM projects, here are some suggestions of things practitioners can do to put the spotlight on systemic problems and work towards improving the system for and with G&YW:

- **Smooth the way:** Project workers can sometimes engage directly with service delivery agencies on behalf of a girl or young woman, in order to smooth the road for her. However, it can also be risky for project workers to act as mediators for G&YW to access formal services and opportunities. If the system is still set up to fail them, these attempts can threaten the relationship of trust built up through the project.
- **Offer strategic support:** Project workers can help G&YW gain a holistic picture of the various institutions and services, eligibility criteria and requirements - and then assist them in planning how to access what they can and deal with setbacks. Again, there is a danger if project staff seem to speak too much on behalf of the services, and come to be seen by the G&YW as ‘part of the system’.
- **Walk alongside G&YW individually:** Be sure to tailor access to services and opportunities to the individual circumstances and needs of each girl or young woman, rather than enforcing a uniform schedule or set of ‘solutions’.
- **Develop girls’ and young women’s understanding of the social system:** Through training and awareness-raising initiatives, G&YW gain broader insight into the society in which they live, into inequalities and where they come from, and the drivers that keep economic and political differences in place. This knowledge allows them to see their personal situations in a broader context and to participate in trying to change the system, if they choose to.
- **Facilitate girls’ and young women’s advocacy:** One of the most powerful ways to draw attention to systemic problems is to enable G&YW to speak out about their experiences and advocate for better services and opportunities. Consider providing G&YW with focussed training on how to communicate effectively with service providers, policy-makers and other duty-bearers. Also keep in mind that participating in advocacy activities can be time-consuming and expensive for G&YW. Include measures to reimburse them for their costs and time. Of course, G&YW should have meaningful opportunities to participate not only in advocacy, but also in the design and evaluation of projects aimed to benefit them.
- **Influence actual improvements in service delivery:** The IDM projects realised that if the G&YW participating in their interventions continued to be marginalised by service providers and social systems, existing cycles of exclusion would simply be reinforced. It therefore became a priority for project workers to make strategic efforts to influence the system itself and advocate for improvements in services to G&YW, especially those previously excluded.
- **Identify ‘inclusion agents’ at the local level:** Countries have different systems of government and the decision-makers that have power over services and opportunities for G&YW are sometimes located at local level, at provincial level, and/or national level. However, when trying to catalyse strategic changes, especially with limited resources, it often helps to work at the community level first. Look for local role-players - be they from schools or government agencies, faith-based organisations or non-governmental organisations – who can act as ‘inclusion agents’. Encourage them to listen to the voices of G&YW and to make changes that improve what they offer or how they work. Starting at the local level can deliver more visible results more quickly, and in this way reinforce the hopes of G&YW that positive changes in the system are in fact possible.
- **Co-ordinate advocacy at multiple levels:** Successes from advocacy at the local level have the potential to expand to a larger scale. It is often at the national (or sub-national level) that policy and budget changes can be made to improve services, revise eligibility criteria, create new opportunities targeted at G&YW, and so forth. Team up with other organisations and create networks that have the necessary geographical reach and political clout. Invest time in developing a clear, united advocacy message and present compelling evidence to support your case.
- **Be patient:** The entire system affecting G&YW in society cannot be transformed overnight. Changing entrenched practices, policies, structures and beliefs takes time. Resistance and setbacks are inevitable along the way. Yet even small gains and improvements are important.

The I DEFINE ME Theory of Change

During the IDM process, opportunities were created for project practitioners to reflect on ‘how change happens’. More specifically, they considered and reviewed their assumptions about how they were bringing about change for and with the G&YW involved in their projects. This gave the projects regular opportunities to revise the design of their interventions over the three-year period, so as to make sure they were being as effective as possible.

Right from the start, it was clear that working towards meaningful improvements for the G&YW would not be easy or simple. A shared IDM Theory of Change (ToC) was co-created with the project practitioners, as shown below. It illustrates some of the complexity and multiplicity of change required for G&YW affected by gangs, as identified by the prationiters. Each of the projects also mapped their own Theories of Change and illustrated where these intersected with, and contributed to, the overall ToC.



The Theory of Change provided a valuable foundation and common reference point to generate learning questions for the IDM projects. However, by around half-way through the IDM process, some practitioners were finding the ToC too limited to reflect their actual everyday experiences with G&YW affected by gangs. It became clear that the pathways unfolding through and with the projects’ participants were a great deal more messy and unpredictable than the ToC could capture. Change for these G&YW occurred in a non-linear, idiosyncratic fashion: the process for one was often entirely different and even contradictory to the process of change for another. Each girl or young woman in fact required her own tailor-made and holistic ToC. In order to respond to this non-conformity and non-linearity of change, the IDM projects had to learn to constantly adapt and re-strategise how they were working. They came to be guided more by a common set of **values and principles**, rather than by a common or overarching approach to change.

To further acknowledge the diversity of ‘how change happened’ in the experiences of the IDM projects, we decided to create this Rich Picture resource. The aim has been to illustrate the complexity of change for different girls and young women, without imposing a single pathway through the material collected here.

ALTERNATIVE PULL FACTORS

Projects face the challenge of offering G&YW immediate experiences and visions of the future that are more compelling than being in or associated with gang life. Why is a bright and positive future not as attractive as being in or on the fringes of a gang? It is important to recognise that many G&YW have taken what they see as active decisions to associate with gang life. There are perceived (and real) benefits to being involved with gangs that can easily be seen to outweigh the possible advantages of other life choices. In order to compete with this, little is achieved by 'preaching' about the negatives of gang life. Instead, G&YW need realistic alternatives that offer them equivalent or competing advantages:

ATTRactions OF 'GANG LIFE'	HOW PROJECTS CAN OFFER POSITIVE ALTERNATIVES
Risk and excitement	Recognise that attraction to risk is a typical part of teenage social development and actually produces 'feel good' effects in the brain. Adrenalin-inducing activities can be positive as long as the risks are managed and boundaries are in place to safeguard G&YW. Projects can offer their participants alternative experiences that involve risk and excitement – for example, rock-climbing, acrobatic performance or wilderness therapy.
Sense of belonging	Support G&YW to develop an alternative sense of belonging by helping them to identify strengths in their situations and build on these to create social networks and peer support systems. Encourage positive community links through existing organisations and networks, like youth leadership initiatives. Work with family members or others in the young woman's environment to strengthen existing positive relationships. <i>To read more about building support networks, click here.</i>
Perceived level of trust and status in gang hierarchy	Enter into dialogue with G&YW, recognising that relationships of trust are essential for project interventions to achieve beneficial outcomes. Empower G&YW to make positive contributions to society by, for example, doing volunteer work to help the elderly. Offer programmes that encourage G&YW to take ownership of their situations, build strong peer relationships and come to see themselves as agents of change.
Avoiding negative judgments from 'mainstream' society	Adopt non-judgemental, empathetic approaches to working with G&YW, deliberately avoiding labels and stigmatisation. Explicitly affirm their value and worth. Check in with what G&YW know, don't make assumptions. Provide safe spaces. Form relationships with frontline service providers like schools and the police, then work with them to actively include those G&YW that would typically be excluded or let down by the system. In some IDM projects, G&YW challenged society's preconceptions about them by getting involved in community work and showing that they wanted to make a positive contribution.
Social and cultural capital	Draw in facilitators and mentors who appeal to the cultural interests of G&YW, for example graffiti artists, rappers, slam poets, designers and other creative artists. Work with existing community spaces, including youth networks, cultural projects and youth leadership initiatives so that the G&YW can build up their own collection of contacts, resources, access to advice, back-up and opportunities. The IDM projects found that it was important to offer localised opportunities for these pull factors to be sustained. For example, joining a small local sports club or drama group was often more realistic and durable than constantly travelling long distances to participate in bigger or more illustrious projects.

BUILDING FAMILY AND SUPPORT NETWORKS

When girls and young women decide to make changes to improve their safety or wellbeing, the social environment in which they live has a huge impact. It is much easier to sustain difficult life choices if you know you can call on family, friends and community networks for advice, a sense of belonging and positive feedback along the way. It is undoubtedly more challenging (although not impossible) to make changes on your own and sustain your own path of personal transformation. Realistically, many G&YW may not be able to rely on their immediate families for support. Sometimes their families are dysfunctional, violent, non-existent or themselves involved in or associated with gangs. In many contexts, the social system which should provide alternative support systems is severely over-burdened, inefficient, or largely inoperative. Therefore for many G&YW, the road to survival and change ends up being much harder and more lonely than it could be.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY 'FAMILY AND SUPPORT NETWORKS'?

Support networks consist of people who can give attention to and encourage a girl or young woman through the challenges of life. These are people she can call on for help, but also ideally people she has consistent and easy access to. It is essential to think beyond the traditional notion of family when identifying support networks for G&YW. Where immediate family members can't or don't provide such support, alternative networks can often be created. A support network might include, for example, a grandparent or other relative in the extended family, teachers, neighbours, mentors, friends, project workers (like those involved in the IDM interventions) and any other individuals who have the best interests of a girl or young woman at heart.

BENEFITS OF WORKING WITH FAMILIES AND SUPPORT NETWORKS

For several IDM projects, working with G&YW – together with their family members and/or alternative support networks – seems to be a key factor that consolidates positive changes in participants' lives. Engaging with their support networks appears to boost the personal transformation of G&YW in the following ways:

- **Providing continuity.** Families and support networks can help G&YW to weave what they are learning through project interventions through to other parts of their lives. Without this, it may be difficult for them to apply new skills and behaviours in contexts outside of the project itself.
- **Keeping participants enrolled.** Families and support networks can motivate G&YW to stay involved in project activities. For some IDM projects, the retention of G&YW increased significantly when families became involved. One project reported that repeated attendance grew from 60% to 95% once families were included.
- **Taking collective responsibility.** Through their involvement, families and alternative support networks can better understand that what seems like 'the girl's problem' is actually a collective one. In this way, they themselves can become part of the solution.
- **Deepening contextual understanding.** Families and support networks can give project workers deeper insight into the context within which a girl or young woman grew up and/or ongoing challenges in her everyday environment.
- **Building resilience.** G&YW and their families are often economically vulnerable. While project workers don't have the power to change these economic realities, they can help families and networks to identify and implement strategies to become more self-sustaining and resilient.
- **Sustaining change.** The involvement of support networks and families often consolidates positive change for G&YW. It increases the likelihood of sustaining the transformation journey beyond the intervention itself.
- **Uncovering 'disguised compliance'.** Project staff have opportunities to identify family members who are merely pretending to support the girl or young woman in order to avoid suspicion or to diffuse an intervention. *Guidance on what to do in such a situation can be found [here](#).*

continue

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Acknowledgements

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CORE VALUES AND PRINCIPLES UNDERPINNING THE IDM PROJECTS

Values and principles emerged as very important aspects of project design and implementation. These were refined as the projects progressed with their interventions and fully understood that there could be no blue-print for working with G&YW, who were living complex lives with challenging histories and uncertain futures. It therefore became all the more important for the IDM interventions to be infused with values and principles, rather than formulas. The following shared values and principles were central to guiding the IDM's work with very different G&YW in very different contexts and circumstances:

USING TARGETED APPROACHES CENTRED AROUND G&YW

Services were tailor-made to the needs and aspirations of G&YW - individually and collectively. This meant constantly acknowledging that their lives were complicated, and responding with flexibility and patience. We also had to recognise that *how* things were done was just as important as *what* was done. Often seemingly small changes had significance for the G&YW themselves, even when these seemed negligible or unimportant from the outside. It also became clear that pre-determined dosage models and timelines were too inflexible - for example, having 12 workshop sessions with all the participants over 3 months. It was necessary to be much more responsive to the actual needs of the G&YW and realise that some participants would leave and return to a project several times.

"When we, as project workers are our real, authentic selves, when we bring real issues, a genuineness and trust results – we develop respect for each other."

USING TRAUMA-INFORMED APPROACHES

Project workers needed to work with empathy, compassion, authenticity and trust, recognising that many of the G&YW had experienced trauma. To **build trusting relationships**, project workers had to ensure that they were non-judgemental and didn't fall into victim-blaming.

DEVELOPING AGENCY

The IDM projects encouraged their participants to recognise their agency and recognise their leadership potential. Many G&YW explored and adopted transformational leadership roles as they made changes in their own lives and also helped others to change.

OPTIMISM

The IDM projects maintained an optimistic outlook and championed the unwavering belief that change was possible for everyone.

SOLIDARITY

G&YW were encouraged to recognise the power they carried within, and to cooperate with others to address the systemic factors that pushed them towards associating with gangs. They also developed relationships of mutual understanding and support with other G&YW, thereby building organic networks of peer solidarity that could continue to serve them after the conclusion of the IDM projects.

continue

OUTREACH

Practitioners involved in the IDM projects realised the importance of reaching out to G&YW “where they were” and not only waiting for walk-ins. This also allowed the practitioners to better understand their contexts and the relationships the G&YW had within the community.

CO-PRODUCTION

The IDM initiative valued the agency of G&YW to co-produce the interventions and shift from participation to decision-making within projects.

USING SYSTEMIC, HOLISTIC INTERVENTIONS

The IDM projects adopted more systematic approaches to dealing with the different and complex problems being experienced by G&YW. They focussed on multiple risk factors, across the individual, family, social, community and institutional terrains. For example, some IDM projects found it essential to start working with the families of the G&YW. Some considered ways to also work with men (brothers, fathers, uncles), in order to change the pattern of violence, while remaining girl & young women centred. To read more about building family and support networks, [click here](#).

USING STRENGTHS-BASED APPROACHES

The IDM projects were guided by the belief that every individual had assets, abilities and resources, however minimal, which could be harnessed for self-development.

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

I DEFINE ME

Resource for practitioners working with girls and young women (G&YW) affected by gangs

How the system lets G&YW down
[Click here](#) to read more about some of the systemic challenges facing G&YW.

Working to improve the system for G&YW

Values and principles

CENTRED AROUND G&YW
TRAUMA-INFORMED
CO-PRODUCTION
SOLIDARITY
AGENCY
Optimism
Systemic
Holistic

NOTHING ABOUT US, WITHOUT US!

Supporting personal transformation of G&YW

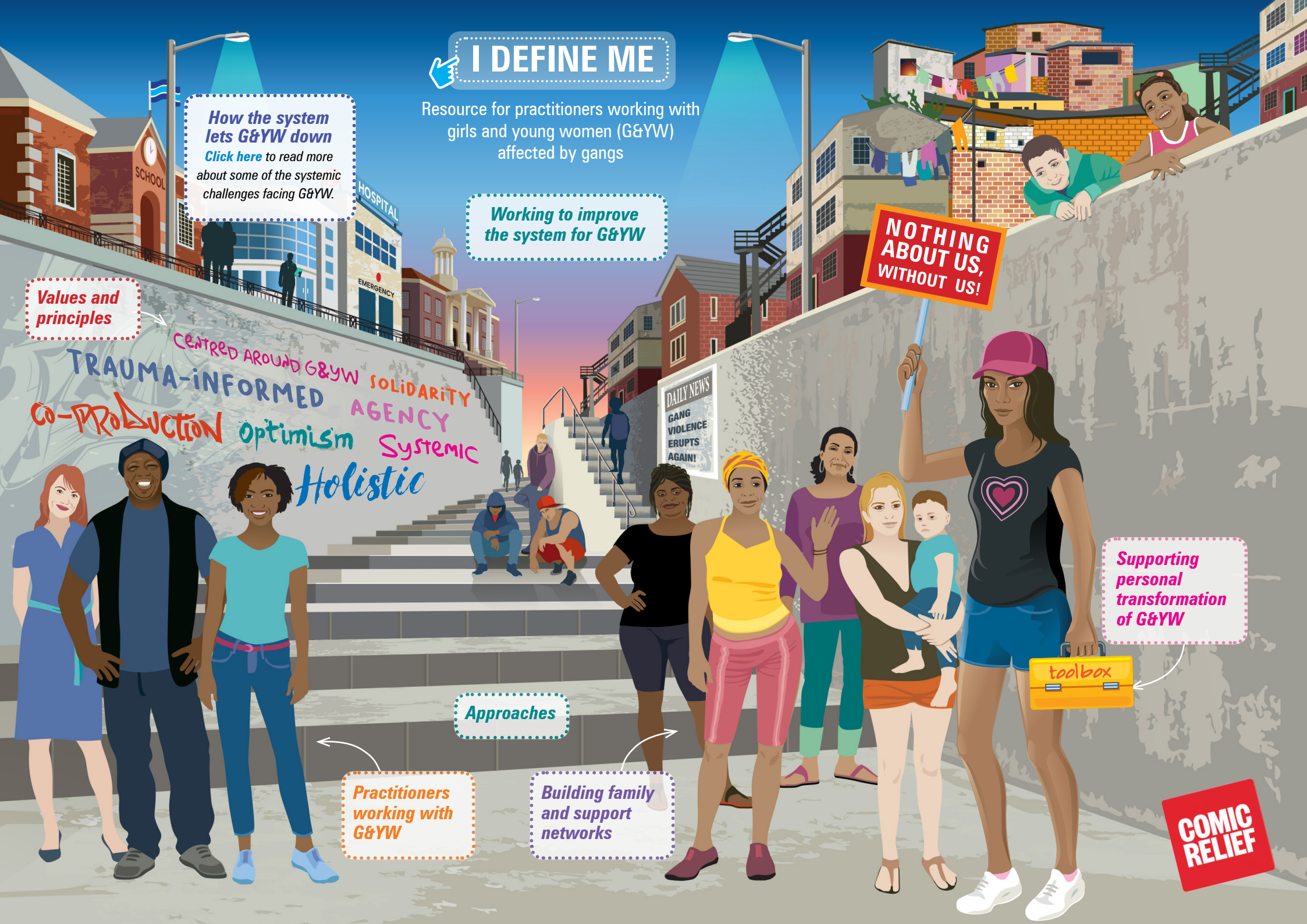
Approaches

Practitioners working with G&YW

Building family and support networks

toolbox

COMIC RELIEF



I DEFINE ME

Resource for practitioners working with girls and young women (G&YW) affected by gangs

How the system lets G&YW down

Working to improve the system for G&YW

Click [here](#) for some ideas on what practitioners can do to address systemic challenges.

Values and principles

CENTRED AROUND G&YW
TRAUMA-INFORMED SOLIDARITY
CO-PRODUCTION AGENCY
Optimism Systemic
Holistic

NOTHING ABOUT US, WITHOUT US!

Supporting personal transformation of G&YW

Approaches

Practitioners working with G&YW

Building family and support networks

toolbox

COMIC RELIEF



APPROACHES TO WORKING WITH GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN AFFECTED BY GANGS

The learning process attached to the IDM projects allowed the practitioners to regularly reflect on the assumptions they were making about how change was being brought about for and with G&YW affected by gangs. Over the course of the three-year period, the projects revised and adapted the design of their interventions to make sure they were as effective as possible.

A key insight emerging from the process was that there was no single solution or 'best approach' for working with gang-affected G&YW, given the complexity of their lives. In order to build relationships of trust and provide consistent support and continuity, many projects were built around mentoring with G&YW. The projects increasingly adopted more targeted, individualised, trauma-informed and holistic approaches. They found that it was useful to offer multiple 'windows of opportunity' to suit the needs of different participants. The projects also experimented with diverse methods and with broadening their offerings in terms of activities for participants. Some of the approaches the IDM practitioners combined and adapted to their contexts included:

- Various kinds of individual and group therapy, and nature therapy.
- Several approaches to mentoring, including mentoring with an adult and peer mentoring.
- Getting G&YW involved in voluntary work and in making contributions to community life.
- Strengthening relationships amongst G&YW and developing networks of peer solidarity.
- Providing safe spaces.
- Skills development programmes.
- Offering fun activities as alternative pull factors to gang involvement.
- Addressing substance abuse.
- Working with families to improve communication and facilitate healing.
- Building support networks, including with local community organisations.
- Using sport and creative expression as vehicles for change.

The following links provide further information (in English and Spanish) on approaches and activities shared by the IDM projects for the purposes of this resource:

- [Creating windows of opportunity](#)
- [Wild space intervention camps](#)
- [The 'teachable moment'](#)
- [Offering alternative pull factors](#)
- [Using the arts for social transformation \(Spanish\)](#)
- [Using sport for personal transformation](#)
- [The Rich Picture as a prompt for discussion \(English\)](#)
- [The Rich Picture as a prompt for discussion \(Spanish\)](#)
- [Activities that pull G&YW \(Spanish\)](#)
- [Types of interventions \(Spanish\)](#)
- [Changing the game \(Spanish\)](#)

WHAT PROJECTS CAN DO TO HELP IMPROVE THE SYSTEM FOR G&YW

Systemic problems are difficult to address exactly because they are so deeply embedded in social and economic structures. The systemic obstacles faced by many G&YW affected by gangs are multi-dimensional and mutually reinforcing – and they fall beyond what project workers can typically control or ‘fix’. Efforts to change any one part of the system can produce resistance from other parts and the intractability of the system as a whole can be deeply frustrating for G&YW, as well as the practitioners trying to support them. Systemic changes seldom happen quickly; they tend to require tenacious and long-term strategic attention.

Nonetheless, the IDM projects found that it was essential to address the systemic dimension, in addition to working at the individual, family and community levels. Gains at these levels could so easily be undermined by on-going failures in the system. From the experiences of the IDM projects, here are some suggestions of things practitioners can do to put the spotlight on systemic problems and work towards improving the system for and with G&YW:

- **Smooth the way:** Project workers can sometimes engage directly with service delivery agencies on behalf of a girl or young woman, in order to smooth the road for her. However, it can also be risky for project workers to act as mediators for G&YW to access formal services and opportunities. If the system is still set up to fail them, these attempts can threaten the relationship of trust built up through the project.
- **Offer strategic support:** Project workers can help G&YW gain a holistic picture of the various institutions and services, eligibility criteria and requirements - and then assist them in planning how to access what they can and deal with setbacks. Again, there is a danger if project staff seem to speak too much on behalf of the services, and come to be seen by the G&YW as ‘part of the system’.
- **Walk alongside G&YW individually:** Be sure to tailor access to services and opportunities to the individual circumstances and needs of each girl or young woman, rather than enforcing a uniform schedule or set of ‘solutions’.
- **Develop girls’ and young women’s understanding of the social system:** Through training and awareness-raising initiatives, G&YW gain broader insight into the society in which they live, into inequalities and where they come from, and the drivers that keep economic and political differences in place. This knowledge allows them to see their personal situations in a broader context and to participate in trying to change the system, if they choose to.
- **Facilitate girls’ and young women’s advocacy:** One of the most powerful ways to draw attention to systemic problems is to enable G&YW to speak out about their experiences and advocate for better services and opportunities. Consider providing G&YW with focussed training on how to communicate effectively with service providers, policy-makers and other duty-bearers. Also keep in mind that participating in advocacy activities can be time-consuming and expensive for G&YW. Include measures to reimburse them for their costs and time. Of course, G&YW should have meaningful opportunities to participate not only in advocacy, but also in the design and evaluation of projects aimed to benefit them.
- **Influence actual improvements in service delivery:** The IDM projects realised that if the G&YW participating in their interventions continued to be marginalised by service providers and social systems, existing cycles of exclusion would simply be reinforced. It therefore became a priority for project workers to make strategic efforts to influence the system itself and advocate for improvements in services to G&YW, especially those previously excluded.
- **Identify ‘inclusion agents’ at the local level:** Countries have different systems of government and the decision-makers that have power over services and opportunities for G&YW are sometimes located at local level, at provincial level, and/or national level. However, when trying to catalyse strategic changes, especially with limited resources, it often helps to work at the community level first. Look for local role-players - be they from schools or government agencies, faith-based organisations or non-governmental organisations – who can act as ‘inclusion agents’. Encourage them to listen to the voices of G&YW and to make changes that improve what they offer or how they work. Starting at the local level can deliver more visible results more quickly, and in this way reinforce the hopes of G&YW that positive changes in the system are in fact possible.
- **Co-ordinate advocacy at multiple levels:** Successes from advocacy at the local level have the potential to expand to a larger scale. It is often at the national (or sub-national level) that policy and budget changes can be made to improve services, revise eligibility criteria, create new opportunities targeted at G&YW, and so forth. Team up with other organisations and create networks that have the necessary geographical reach and political clout. Invest time in developing a clear, united advocacy message and present compelling evidence to support your case.
- **Be patient:** The entire system affecting G&YW in society cannot be transformed overnight. Changing entrenched practices, policies, structures and beliefs takes time. Resistance and setbacks are inevitable along the way. Yet even small gains and improvements are important.

SUPPORTING PERSONAL TRANSFORMATION OF GIRLS & YOUNG WOMEN

All the IDM projects were involved, in one way or another, in the personal transformation of the G&YW who participated in their activities or initiatives. Through the course of their work, the IDM projects identified a broad range of qualities and skills that were important to improving the well-being of G&YW. These included G&YW having a positive vision of their future, aspirations and motivation, a sense of agency, the ability to trust and build healthy relationships. Another key theme was helping G&YW to develop social consciousness and gain a broader perspective on the socio-economic structure and social systems of which they were part. Essential skills for G&YW to better navigate their own lives included problem-solving and communication skills, emotional resilience and collaboration, advocacy, entrepreneurship and leadership skills, as well as participation in vocational and education programmes.

Based on the experiences of the IDM projects, the following factors were identified as important for G&YW to develop self-awareness and a positive sense of agency:

- Being able to confront entrenched memories and experiences of negative feedback and replace or complement them with more positive ones;
- Coming to recognise, own and trust their own strengths and abilities;
- Participating in activities and contexts (for examples, sport or creative arts) through which they learn more about themselves and question their own limiting beliefs;
- Being able to make constructive contributions to society by, for example, getting involved in a social cause or helping those in need in the community;
- Developing a habit of self-awareness – being able to analyse and reflect on their own choices and experiences in different contexts; and
- Taking part in activities or challenges that help them to recognise themselves as agents of change in their own lives.

Below you will find links to some of the exercises and tools used by IDM projects to support self-awareness and personal transformation amongst G&YW affected by gangs.

- [Building emotional resilience](#)
- [Developing healthy relationships](#)
- [Building trust](#)
- [Understanding oppression](#)
- [Taking responsibility](#)
- [Problem-solving](#)
- [Improving self-concept \(Spanish\)](#)
- [Addressing substance abuse \(Spanish\)](#)
- [Building relationships of trust \(Spanish\)](#)

Please note that some of these tools are from organisations not part of the IDM initiative and we gratefully acknowledge these sources.



BUILDING FAMILY AND SUPPORT NETWORKS

When girls and young women decide to make changes to improve their safety or wellbeing, the social environment in which they live has a huge impact. It is much easier to sustain difficult life choices if you know you can call on family, friends and community networks for advice, a sense of belonging and positive feedback along the way. It is undoubtedly more challenging (although not impossible) to make changes on your own and sustain your own path of personal transformation. Realistically, many G&YW may not be able to rely on their immediate families for support. Sometimes their families are dysfunctional, violent, non-existent or themselves involved in or associated with gangs. In many contexts, the social system which should provide alternative support systems is severely over-burdened, inefficient, or largely inoperative. Therefore for many G&YW, the road to survival and change ends up being much harder and more lonely than it could be.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY 'FAMILY AND SUPPORT NETWORKS'?

Support networks consist of people who can give attention to and encourage a girl or young woman through the challenges of life. These are people she can call on for help, but also ideally people she has consistent and easy access to. It is essential to think beyond the traditional notion of family when identifying support networks for G&YW. Where immediate family members can't or don't provide such support, alternative networks can often be created. A support network might include, for example, a grandparent or other relative in the extended family, teachers, neighbours, mentors, friends, project workers (like those involved in the IDM interventions) and any other individuals who have the best interests of a girl or young woman at heart.

BENEFITS OF WORKING WITH FAMILIES AND SUPPORT NETWORKS

For several IDM projects, working with G&YW – together with their family members and/or alternative support networks – seems to be a key factor that consolidates positive changes in participants' lives. Engaging with their support networks appears to boost the personal transformation of G&YW in the following ways:

- **Providing continuity.** Families and support networks can help G&YW to weave what they are learning through project interventions through to other parts of their lives. Without this, it may be difficult for them to apply new skills and behaviours in contexts outside of the project itself.
- **Keeping participants enrolled.** Families and support networks can motivate G&YW to stay involved in project activities. For some IDM projects, the retention of G&YW increased significantly when families became involved. One project reported that repeated attendance grew from 60% to 95% once families were included.
- **Taking collective responsibility.** Through their involvement, families and alternative support networks can better understand that what seems like 'the girl's problem' is actually a collective one. In this way, they themselves can become part of the solution.
- **Deepening contextual understanding.** Families and support networks can give project workers deeper insight into the context within which a girl or young woman grew up and/or ongoing challenges in her everyday environment.
- **Building resilience.** G&YW and their families are often economically vulnerable. While project workers don't have the power to change these economic realities, they can help families and networks to identify and implement strategies to become more self-sustaining and resilient.
- **Sustaining change.** The involvement of support networks and families often consolidates positive change for G&YW. It increases the likelihood of sustaining the transformation journey beyond the intervention itself.
- **Uncovering 'disguised compliance'.** Project staff have opportunities to identify family members who are merely pretending to support the girl or young woman in order to avoid suspicion or to diffuse an intervention. *Guidance on what to do in such a situation can be found [here](#).*

continue

WAYS OF WORKING WITH FAMILIES AND SUPPORT NETWORKS

There are many ways to design interventions for engaging with the families and support networks of G&YW affected by gangs. Based on the experiences of the IDM projects, the following techniques are worth exploring further:

- **Building networks among families.** Hosting meetings or activities for multiple families can help to develop connections and peer support amongst them. It also provides a forum for celebrating successes and discussing issues of common concern.
- **Mixing families.** Bringing families who have been resistant to change together with those who have made progress can help to build positive peer family support.
- **Starting small.** Recognising that sometimes, the support network for a girl or young woman may have to start with just one friend, community member or relative. Through participation in project activities, G&YW can slowly build up their contacts and support networks over time.
- **Addressing inter-generational trauma.** Supporting family members to acknowledge and come to terms with their own experiences of abuse, neglect and marginalisation so as to better support and connect with the G&YW in their lives. Some of the IDM projects found it important to extend the interventions to family members, as this unlocked barriers and created a new basis for relationships with G&YW.
- **Highlighting risk.** Some IDM projects found that family members were reluctant to get involved because they didn't want to acknowledge or confront the risks being faced by their daughters (or other G&YW in their lives). Once the people around a young woman recognise the risks in her situation, they are often more actively supportive.
- **Immersion activities.** Spending structured time away from the environments in which they normally live can give G&YW and their support networks a much-needed opportunity to interact in a deeper way.
- **Reflective team working.** Here a social worker and psychologist work together with a girl or young woman and her family or support network. The aim is to bring their different skills together to identify the best approach for supporting that family.
- **Collaborative conversations.** Project workers make a point of using vocabulary that is familiar to the family, so that the latter may feel more comfortable to express exactly how they feel.
- **G&YW as facilitators of family participation.** Several IDM projects found that once they had built trust with their participants, some G&YW themselves brought their family members to join in project activities. The G&YW after all had the best sense of how open family members would be and when the timing would be right to start working in the family domain.
- **Bringing in other agencies.** Other agencies can sometimes help project staff to make contact with the families or support networks of the G&YW. Working with multiple agencies can also increase the chances of sustaining change by reinforcing positive feedback across more contexts or settings. In addition, when multiple role-players are involved, it is sometimes more feasible to tackle systemic problems together – for example, to change procedures that act as obstacles for marginalised G&YW to re-integrate into schools. *For more information on working towards systemic changes that aim to benefit G&YW [click here](#).*

The following resources (in Spanish) explain how one IDM project went about [building support systems for G&YW](#) and [creating networks between families](#).

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I DEFINE ME – PROJECT PROFILES

Project Title: BELEAVE

Location: Birmingham, UK

Organisations involved: Spurgeons

Summary of project: Spurgeons is a children's charity working across the UK and offering whole family support to vulnerable young people. This project worked in partnership with the Police and Schools in Birmingham to support the whole family of girls at risk of becoming involved in gang activity, or already affected by gangs. The partners worked together to build a network of support and to establish positive alternatives for the girls, working on encouraging what already works in their lives.

Project Title: CHANGE THE GAME - PREVENTING & REDUCING RISKS TO GIRLS IN GANGS

Location: Bogota, Colombia

Organisations involved: Children Change Colombia (lead), Tiempo de Juego, CRAN

Summary of project: Gang members are role models for young people in poor communities in Bogota. The context of violence in families means many girls flee abusive homes. Once they are on the streets, they are vulnerable to gangs, are used to carry drugs, carry out robberies and in sex work. It is hard to leave gangs, so girls either end up in extreme danger or prison. This project worked with girls in residential care and their families to address the reasons behind their behaviour, to develop a life plan, and receive tailored support to achieve their goals. The project also worked in communities to prevent girls from joining gangs, to build their confidence and aspirations and bring about safer communities.

Project Title: DESTINO CREW

Location: Bogota, Colombia

Organisations involved: Familia Ayara

Summary of project: Working across three districts of Bogota blighted by violent gang activity, this project supported young women in prison and those in communities involved in or at risk of gang activity. Using hip hop (specifically rap, breakdance, DJ-ing, graffiti and art), the project addressed the aspirations of the girls, helping them in creative ways to understand and talk about the risks they faced and what they wanted for the future. This equipped the girls to continue making positive life choices outside the gangs and to provide support to other young people at risk. The project intervened at key points in the girls' lives, using mentoring and music, to build healthy, safe communities.

continue

I DEFINE ME – PROJECT PROFILES *(continued)*

Project Title: GETTING OUT FOR GOOD

Location: Oldham, UK

Organisations involved: Manchester Metropolitan University (lead), Positive Steps

Summary of project: Young women who are associated with gangs are at high risk of violence, sexual exploitation and criminal activity. Manchester Metropolitan University, along with a range of partner agencies, delivered a project that worked with young women at risk of joining gangs in Oldham. The project provided mentoring support along with drama activities and access to sports such as football and boxing. Young women built social networks of support and developed confidence, skills and resilience. They were also supported to find positive alternatives to gang involvement.

Project Title: GIRLS ALLOWED

Location: Wolverhampton, UK

Organisations involved: Wolverhampton Voluntary Sector Council (lead), Base 25, Catch 22, EYES, Gazebo, Gloucester Street Community Centre, Hope Community Project, New Park Village Football Development, Square Pegs Round Holes CIC

Summary of project: This project was a city-wide partnership in Wolverhampton comprising of community groups, youth charities, the police and the Council, (through the Safer Wolverhampton Partnership). The participating organisations built on their existing work to support girls and young women aged between 9 and 19. This involved helping them to develop healthy relationships, and enabling them to make positive choices, where possible to ensure that they could be safe from gangs and distance themselves from gang activity. The project offered a combination of group work, one to one support, focused theatre, film and sports activities, and family support based in the community.

Project Title: I DEFINE ME PROGRAMME

Location: Cape Town – Stellenbosch, Cape Flats – Lavender Hill, Heideveld, Mitchell's Plain, Hanover Park, Worcester Prison

Organisations involved: Usiko, Ihata, Ruben Richards Foundation

Summary of project: The Cape Flats is home to communities of black and coloured people who live in the legacy of discrimination resulting in poverty, malnutrition, poor life expectancy, social disintegration, shortfalls in education and other social services. This has supported the formation of dangerous gangs. This project worked to befriend and support girls who had been involved in gangs. It assisted them to develop their self-esteem, resilience and sense of self-worth by providing mentoring. Families and schools were strengthened to provide support to the girls. The ultimate goal of this project was for fewer girls to be involved in gangs and for more girls to complete their schooling, be employed and lead safer lives.

continue

I DEFINE ME – PROJECT PROFILES *(continued)*

Project Title: PROVIDING GIRL-LED ALTERNATIVES TO GANGING IN THE WESTERN CAPE

Location: Bonteheuwel and Mitchell's Plain, Western Cape, South Africa

Organisations involved: ActionAid South Africa (lead), Bonteheuwel Joint Peace Forum and Women for Change Mitchell's Plain

Summary of project: The Cape Flats is home to a great number of violent gangs, many of whom are behind the rising death rates in this area. Lack of access to jobs, services, poor quality education and poor family relations mean that many girls are either joining gangs or becoming involved with gangs through drug abuse and addiction. This project worked with two local organisations in the townships of Bonteheuwel and Mitchell's Plain to strengthen their response to addressing the issue of gang culture. They worked with a cohort of girls supporting them to learn about their rights, have access to peer support and become organised so they could campaign against gang violence.

Project Title: SUPPORTING AND REHABILITATING GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN ASSOCIATED WITH GANGS IN BOGOTA

Location: Ciudad Bolívar/Bogotá, Colombia

Organisations involved: YMCA Bogotá

Summary of project: The largest concentration of gangs is in Ciudad Bolivar, an area characterised by female headed households with limited male support, poverty, high levels of sexual abuse, crime and gang activity. Through a holistic and multi-sectoral approach, this project worked to rehabilitate ex-gang members (of which 70% were young women) by developing a safe, alternative future through positive life choices. The gang members were assisted to develop coping mechanisms so as to reduce harm, violence and abuse, leading to reduced risk of young women and men joining gangs, and working to strengthen the government response to vulnerable girls and young women.

Project Title: THE TEACHABLE MOMENT IN A&E: YOUNG WOMEN'S SERVICE

Location: London, UK

Organisations involved: Redthread Youth Ltd.

Summary of project: Girls and young women associated with gangs have often had chaotic life experiences including poverty, mental health issues, violence and neglect. Redthread used the 'Teachable Moment' of Accidents & Emergencies (A&E) at South London's Major Trauma Centre to reach vulnerable girls, by embedding two girls' workers to support them at a time of crisis. The girl's workers facilitated practical interventions such as seeking housing, anger management, alcohol rehabilitation and financial independence through long term holistic support. As a result, girls and young women had greater access to appropriate support services, leading to positive and safe decision making and increased mental well-being.

CORE VALUES AND PRINCIPLES UNDERPINNING THE IDM PROJECTS

Values and principles emerged as very important aspects of project design and implementation. These were refined as the projects progressed with their interventions and fully understood that there could be no blue-print for working with G&YW, who were living complex lives with challenging histories and uncertain futures. It therefore became all the more important for the IDM interventions to be infused with values and principles, rather than formulas. The following shared values and principles were central to guiding the IDM's work with very different G&YW in very different contexts and circumstances:

USING TARGETED APPROACHES CENTRED AROUND G&YW

Services were tailor-made to the needs and aspirations of G&YW - individually and collectively. This meant constantly acknowledging that their lives were complicated, and responding with flexibility and patience. We also had to recognise that *how* things were done was just as important as *what* was done. Often seemingly small changes had significance for the G&YW themselves, even when these seemed negligible or unimportant from the outside. It also became clear that pre-determined dosage models and timelines were too inflexible - for example, having 12 workshop sessions with all the participants over 3 months. It was necessary to be much more responsive to the actual needs of the G&YW and realise that some participants would leave and return to a project several times.

"When we, as project workers are our real, authentic selves, when we bring real issues, a genuineness and trust results – we develop respect for each other."

USING TRAUMA-INFORMED APPROACHES

Project workers needed to work with empathy, compassion, authenticity and trust, recognising that many of the G&YW had experienced trauma. To **build trusting relationships**, project workers had to ensure that they were non-judgemental and didn't fall into victim-blaming.

DEVELOPING AGENCY

The IDM projects encouraged their participants to recognise their agency and recognise their leadership potential. Many G&YW explored and adopted transformational leadership roles as they made changes in their own lives and also helped others to change.

OPTIMISM

The IDM projects maintained an optimistic outlook and championed the unwavering belief that change was possible for everyone.

SOLIDARITY

G&YW were encouraged to recognise the power they carried within, and to cooperate with others to address the systemic factors that pushed them towards associating with gangs. They also developed relationships of mutual understanding and support with other G&YW, thereby building organic networks of peer solidarity that could continue to serve them after the conclusion of the IDM projects.

continue

OUTREACH

Practitioners involved in the IDM projects realised the importance of reaching out to G&YW “where they were” and not only waiting for walk-ins. This also allowed the practitioners to better understand their contexts and the relationships the G&YW had within the community.

CO-PRODUCTION

The IDM initiative valued the agency of G&YW to co-produce the interventions and shift from participation to decision-making within projects.

USING SYSTEMIC, HOLISTIC INTERVENTIONS

The IDM projects adopted more systematic approaches to dealing with the different and complex problems being experienced by G&YW. They focussed on multiple risk factors, across the individual, family, social, community and institutional terrains. For example, some IDM projects found it essential to start working with the families of the G&YW. Some considered ways to also work with men (brothers, fathers, uncles), in order to change the pattern of violence, while remaining girl & young women centred. To read more about building family and support networks, [click here](#).

USING STRENGTHS-BASED APPROACHES

The IDM projects were guided by the belief that every individual had assets, abilities and resources, however minimal, which could be harnessed for self-development.

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

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS OF TRUST

Based on the IDM projects' experiences, here are some guidelines for building trust between G&YW and project workers:

- Check in with what she knows rather than making assumptions about her.
- Offer her tools and information, and check that she can use them. This includes psycho-social tools, like ways of managing anger and dealing with anxiety. It also includes practical information, for example about contraception and access to services.
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- Provide safe spaces.
- Enable mutual support to develop amongst the G&YW themselves. As they learn to support one another, their experiences of trust will also be strengthened. As an added benefit, they may also then become part of each others' ongoing support networks. [Click here](#) to read more about building support networks.
- Understand and acknowledge that many G&YW make informed decisions to become involved in gangs. Rather than judging, enquire into what informed those decisions.
- Treat her as a person with agency and not as a social problem or a passive victim.
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- Identify her grey areas and find ways to work with them: this may call for exploring her need to belong, her role in society, her sense of identity. Focus on the positives rather than the negatives and suggest ways to boost and develop these.
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- Challenge and support her to believe that change is possible.
- Model resilience and reliability to show you're there to support her over the longer-term. Remember that the process of building trust and supporting personal transformation is not linear or predictable. G&YW might leave and return to a project several times and knowing they can do so, may also deepen their trust.

Project staff working with G&YW also need support and self-care. *To read more about looking after the well-being of project workers involved in this terrain, [click here](#).*

BUILDING FAMILY AND SUPPORT NETWORKS

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For several IDM projects, working with G&YW – together with their family members and/or alternative support networks – seems to be a key factor that consolidates positive changes in participants' lives. Engaging with their support networks appears to boost the personal transformation of G&YW in the following ways:

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CORE VALUES AND PRINCIPLES UNDERPINNING THE IDM PROJECTS

Values and principles emerged as very important aspects of project design and implementation. These were refined as the projects progressed with their interventions and fully understood that there could be no blue-print for working with G&YW, who were living complex lives with challenging histories and uncertain futures. It therefore became all the more important for the IDM interventions to be infused with values and principles, rather than formulas. The following shared values and principles were central to guiding the IDM's work with very different G&YW in very different contexts and circumstances:

USING TARGETED APPROACHES CENTRED AROUND G&YW

Services were tailor-made to the needs and aspirations of G&YW - individually and collectively. This meant constantly acknowledging that their lives were complicated, and responding with flexibility and patience. We also had to recognise that *how* things were done was just as important as *what* was done. Often seemingly small changes had significance for the G&YW themselves, even when these seemed negligible or unimportant from the outside. It also became clear that pre-determined dosage models and timelines were too inflexible - for example, having 12 workshop sessions with all the participants over 3 months. It was necessary to be much more responsive to the actual needs of the G&YW and realise that some participants would leave and return to a project several times.

"When we, as project workers are our real, authentic selves, when we bring real issues, a genuineness and trust results – we develop respect for each other."

USING TRAUMA-INFORMED APPROACHES

Project workers needed to work with empathy, compassion, authenticity and trust, recognising that many of the G&YW had experienced trauma. To **build trusting relationships**, project workers had to ensure that they were non-judgemental and didn't fall into victim-blaming.

DEVELOPING AGENCY

The IDM projects encouraged their participants to recognise their agency and recognise their leadership potential. Many G&YW explored and adopted transformational leadership roles as they made changes in their own lives and also helped others to change.

OPTIMISM

The IDM projects maintained an optimistic outlook and championed the unwavering belief that change was possible for everyone.

SOLIDARITY

G&YW were encouraged to recognise the power they carried within, and to cooperate with others to address the systemic factors that pushed them towards associating with gangs. They also developed relationships of mutual understanding and support with other G&YW, thereby building organic networks of peer solidarity that could continue to serve them after the conclusion of the IDM projects.

continue

OUTREACH

Practitioners involved in the IDM projects realised the importance of reaching out to G&YW “where they were” and not only waiting for walk-ins. This also allowed the practitioners to better understand their contexts and the relationships the G&YW had within the community.

CO-PRODUCTION

The IDM initiative valued the agency of G&YW to co-produce the interventions and shift from participation to decision-making within projects.

USING SYSTEMIC, HOLISTIC INTERVENTIONS

The IDM projects adopted more systematic approaches to dealing with the different and complex problems being experienced by G&YW. They focussed on multiple risk factors, across the individual, family, social, community and institutional terrains. For example, some IDM projects found it essential to start working with the families of the G&YW. Some considered ways to also work with men (brothers, fathers, uncles), in order to change the pattern of violence, while remaining girl & young women centred. To read more about building family and support networks, [click here](#).

USING STRENGTHS-BASED APPROACHES

The IDM projects were guided by the belief that every individual had assets, abilities and resources, however minimal, which could be harnessed for self-development.

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

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BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS OF TRUST

Based on the IDM projects' experiences, here are some guidelines for building trust between G&YW and project workers:

- Check in with what she knows rather than making assumptions about her.
- Offer her tools and information, and check that she can use them. This includes psycho-social tools, like ways of managing anger and dealing with anxiety. It also includes practical information, for example about contraception and access to services.
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I DEFINE ME

Resource for practitioners working with girls and young women (G&YW) affected by gangs

How the system lets G&YW down

Working to improve the system for G&YW

Values and principles

CENTRED AROUND G&YW
TRAUMA-INFORMED SOLIDARITY
CO-PRODUCTION AGENCY
Optimism Systemic
Holistic

NOTHING ABOUT US, WITHOUT US!

Supporting personal transformation of G&YW

Approaches

Practitioners working with G&YW

Building family and support networks

toolbox

COMIC RELIEF

back

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WHAT PROJECTS CAN DO TO HELP IMPROVE THE SYSTEM FOR G&YW

Systemic problems are difficult to address exactly because they are so deeply embedded in social and economic structures. The systemic obstacles faced by many G&YW affected by gangs are multi-dimensional and mutually reinforcing – and they fall beyond what project workers can typically control or ‘fix’. Efforts to change any one part of the system can produce resistance from other parts and the intractability of the system as a whole can be deeply frustrating for G&YW, as well as the practitioners trying to support them. Systemic changes seldom happen quickly; they tend to require tenacious and long-term strategic attention.

Nonetheless, the IDM projects found that it was essential to address the systemic dimension, in addition to working at the individual, family and community levels. Gains at these levels could so easily be undermined by on-going failures in the system. From the experiences of the IDM projects, here are some suggestions of things practitioners can do to put the spotlight on systemic problems and work towards improving the system for and with G&YW:

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- **Be patient:** The entire system affecting G&YW in society cannot be transformed overnight. Changing entrenched practices, policies, structures and beliefs takes time. Resistance and setbacks are inevitable along the way. Yet even small gains and improvements are important.

CORE VALUES AND PRINCIPLES UNDERPINNING THE IDM PROJECTS

Values and principles emerged as very important aspects of project design and implementation. These were refined as the projects progressed with their interventions and fully understood that there could be no blue-print for working with G&YW, who were living complex lives with challenging histories and uncertain futures. It therefore became all the more important for the IDM interventions to be infused with values and principles, rather than formulas. The following shared values and principles were central to guiding the IDM's work with very different G&YW in very different contexts and circumstances:

USING TARGETED APPROACHES CENTRED AROUND G&YW

Services were tailor-made to the needs and aspirations of G&YW - individually and collectively. This meant constantly acknowledging that their lives were complicated, and responding with flexibility and patience. We also had to recognise that *how* things were done was just as important as *what* was done. Often seemingly small changes had significance for the G&YW themselves, even when these seemed negligible or unimportant from the outside. It also became clear that pre-determined dosage models and timelines were too inflexible - for example, having 12 workshop sessions with all the participants over 3 months. It was necessary to be much more responsive to the actual needs of the G&YW and realise that some participants would leave and return to a project several times.

"When we, as project workers are our real, authentic selves, when we bring real issues, a genuineness and trust results – we develop respect for each other."

USING TRAUMA-INFORMED APPROACHES

Project workers needed to work with empathy, compassion, authenticity and trust, recognising that many of the G&YW had experienced trauma. To **build trusting relationships**, project workers had to ensure that they were non-judgemental and didn't fall into victim-blaming.

DEVELOPING AGENCY

The IDM projects encouraged their participants to recognise their agency and recognise their leadership potential. Many G&YW explored and adopted transformational leadership roles as they made changes in their own lives and also helped others to change.

OPTIMISM

The IDM projects maintained an optimistic outlook and championed the unwavering belief that change was possible for everyone.

SOLIDARITY

G&YW were encouraged to recognise the power they carried within, and to cooperate with others to address the systemic factors that pushed them towards associating with gangs. They also developed relationships of mutual understanding and support with other G&YW, thereby building organic networks of peer solidarity that could continue to serve them after the conclusion of the IDM projects.

continue

OUTREACH

Practitioners involved in the IDM projects realised the importance of reaching out to G&YW “where they were” and not only waiting for walk-ins. This also allowed the practitioners to better understand their contexts and the relationships the G&YW had within the community.

CO-PRODUCTION

The IDM initiative valued the agency of G&YW to co-produce the interventions and shift from participation to decision-making within projects.

USING SYSTEMIC, HOLISTIC INTERVENTIONS

The IDM projects adopted more systematic approaches to dealing with the different and complex problems being experienced by G&YW. They focussed on multiple risk factors, across the individual, family, social, community and institutional terrains. For example, some IDM projects found it essential to start working with the families of the G&YW. Some considered ways to also work with men (brothers, fathers, uncles), in order to change the pattern of violence, while remaining girl & young women centred. To read more about building family and support networks, [click here](#).

USING STRENGTHS-BASED APPROACHES

The IDM projects were guided by the belief that every individual had assets, abilities and resources, however minimal, which could be harnessed for self-development.

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

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS OF TRUST

Based on the IDM projects' experiences, here are some guidelines for building trust between G&YW and project workers:

- Check in with what she knows rather than making assumptions about her.
- Offer her tools and information, and check that she can use them. This includes psycho-social tools, like ways of managing anger and dealing with anxiety. It also includes practical information, for example about contraception and access to services.
- Help her and those around her to express their emotions and to respond more effectively to one another. This could include the use of creative techniques like interpretive art, role-playing and experiential learning tasks.
- Provide safe spaces.
- Enable mutual support to develop amongst the G&YW themselves. As they learn to support one another, their experiences of trust will also be strengthened. As an added benefit, they may also then become part of each others' ongoing support networks. [Click here](#) to read more about building support networks.
- Understand and acknowledge that many G&YW make informed decisions to become involved in gangs. Rather than judging, enquire into what informed those decisions.
- Treat her as a person with agency and not as a social problem or a passive victim.
- Develop individualised interventions that are geared to the specific circumstances and experiences of each girl and young woman. Make sure you adapt to her needs and timing, rather than imposing a strict schedule or dosage of interactions.
- Identify her grey areas and find ways to work with them: this may call for exploring her need to belong, her role in society, her sense of identity. Focus on the positives rather than the negatives and suggest ways to boost and develop these.
- Avoid stigmatisation and labels.
- Encourage her to consider how she can make a positive contribution to her society, for example by telling its stories, creating something meaningful like a piece of mural art or theatre, or assisting people in need.
- Explain that she has a right to certain things – for example, to education and health care. She doesn't have to earn these rights by behaving in a certain way. State service providers have the duty to make sure she can exercise these rights.
- Challenge and support her to believe that change is possible.
- Model resilience and reliability to show you're there to support her over the longer-term. Remember that the process of building trust and supporting personal transformation is not linear or predictable. G&YW might leave and return to a project several times and knowing they can do so, may also deepen their trust.

Project staff working with G&YW also need support and self-care. *To read more about looking after the well-being of project workers involved in this terrain, [click here](#).*

BUILDING FAMILY AND SUPPORT NETWORKS

When girls and young women decide to make changes to improve their safety or wellbeing, the social environment in which they live has a huge impact. It is much easier to sustain difficult life choices if you know you can call on family, friends and community networks for advice, a sense of belonging and positive feedback along the way. It is undoubtedly more challenging (although not impossible) to make changes on your own and sustain your own path of personal transformation. Realistically, many G&YW may not be able to rely on their immediate families for support. Sometimes their families are dysfunctional, violent, non-existent or themselves involved in or associated with gangs. In many contexts, the social system which should provide alternative support systems is severely over-burdened, inefficient, or largely inoperative. Therefore for many G&YW, the road to survival and change ends up being much harder and more lonely than it could be.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY 'FAMILY AND SUPPORT NETWORKS'?

Support networks consist of people who can give attention to and encourage a girl or young woman through the challenges of life. These are people she can call on for help, but also ideally people she has consistent and easy access to. It is essential to think beyond the traditional notion of family when identifying support networks for G&YW. Where immediate family members can't or don't provide such support, alternative networks can often be created. A support network might include, for example, a grandparent or other relative in the extended family, teachers, neighbours, mentors, friends, project workers (like those involved in the IDM interventions) and any other individuals who have the best interests of a girl or young woman at heart.

BENEFITS OF WORKING WITH FAMILIES AND SUPPORT NETWORKS

For several IDM projects, working with G&YW – together with their family members and/or alternative support networks – seems to be a key factor that consolidates positive changes in participants' lives. Engaging with their support networks appears to boost the personal transformation of G&YW in the following ways:

- **Providing continuity.** Families and support networks can help G&YW to weave what they are learning through project interventions through to other parts of their lives. Without this, it may be difficult for them to apply new skills and behaviours in contexts outside of the project itself.
- **Keeping participants enrolled.** Families and support networks can motivate G&YW to stay involved in project activities. For some IDM projects, the retention of G&YW increased significantly when families became involved. One project reported that repeated attendance grew from 60% to 95% once families were included.
- **Taking collective responsibility.** Through their involvement, families and alternative support networks can better understand that what seems like 'the girl's problem' is actually a collective one. In this way, they themselves can become part of the solution.
- **Deepening contextual understanding.** Families and support networks can give project workers deeper insight into the context within which a girl or young woman grew up and/or ongoing challenges in her everyday environment.
- **Building resilience.** G&YW and their families are often economically vulnerable. While project workers don't have the power to change these economic realities, they can help families and networks to identify and implement strategies to become more self-sustaining and resilient.
- **Sustaining change.** The involvement of support networks and families often consolidates positive change for G&YW. It increases the likelihood of sustaining the transformation journey beyond the intervention itself.
- **Uncovering 'disguised compliance'.** Project staff have opportunities to identify family members who are merely pretending to support the girl or young woman in order to avoid suspicion or to diffuse an intervention. *Guidance on what to do in such a situation can be found [here](#).*

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WAYS OF WORKING WITH FAMILIES AND SUPPORT NETWORKS

There are many ways to design interventions for engaging with the families and support networks of G&YW affected by gangs. Based on the experiences of the IDM projects, the following techniques are worth exploring further:

- **Building networks among families.** Hosting meetings or activities for multiple families can help to develop connections and peer support amongst them. It also provides a forum for celebrating successes and discussing issues of common concern.
- **Mixing families.** Bringing families who have been resistant to change together with those who have made progress can help to build positive peer family support.
- **Starting small.** Recognising that sometimes, the support network for a girl or young woman may have to start with just one friend, community member or relative. Through participation in project activities, G&YW can slowly build up their contacts and support networks over time.
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- **Immersion activities.** Spending structured time away from the environments in which they normally live can give G&YW and their support networks a much-needed opportunity to interact in a deeper way.
- **Reflective team working.** Here a social worker and psychologist work together with a girl or young woman and her family or support network. The aim is to bring their different skills together to identify the best approach for supporting that family.
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- **Influence actual improvements in service delivery:** The IDM projects realised that if the G&YW participating in their interventions continued to be marginalised by service providers and social systems, existing cycles of exclusion would simply be reinforced. It therefore became a priority for project workers to make strategic efforts to influence the system itself and advocate for improvements in services to G&YW, especially those previously excluded.
- **Identify ‘inclusion agents’ at the local level:** Countries have different systems of government and the decision-makers that have power over services and opportunities for G&YW are sometimes located at local level, at provincial level, and/or national level. However, when trying to catalyse strategic changes, especially with limited resources, it often helps to work at the community level first. Look for local role-players - be they from schools or government agencies, faith-based organisations or non-governmental organisations – who can act as ‘inclusion agents’. Encourage them to listen to the voices of G&YW and to make changes that improve what they offer or how they work. Starting at the local level can deliver more visible results more quickly, and in this way reinforce the hopes of G&YW that positive changes in the system are in fact possible.
- **Co-ordinate advocacy at multiple levels:** Successes from advocacy at the local level have the potential to expand to a larger scale. It is often at the national (or sub-national level) that policy and budget changes can be made to improve services, revise eligibility criteria, create new opportunities targeted at G&YW, and so forth. Team up with other organisations and create networks that have the necessary geographical reach and political clout. Invest time in developing a clear, united advocacy message and present compelling evidence to support your case.
- **Be patient:** The entire system affecting G&YW in society cannot be transformed overnight. Changing entrenched practices, policies, structures and beliefs takes time. Resistance and setbacks are inevitable along the way. Yet even small gains and improvements are important.