

**“I can speak up for myself  
now”**

The experience of Women in the  
North East

Serving Tyne & Wear and Northumberland  
[communityfoundation.org.uk](http://communityfoundation.org.uk)

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## Introduction

**It seems strange that, in 2020, we still need to think about women’s equality. It’s over 100 years since the first women in the UK were able to vote, and 50 years since the Equal Pay Act (1970).**

And yet women continue to be under-represented in our political and civil society institutions and the gender pay gap is still with us.

These large picture concerns have real impacts on the lives of women and girls in our region, and across the UK. Women earn less than men at every stage of their career; the gender pay gap is at its widest when women hit 50<sup>1</sup> and women represent two-thirds of those with severe debt problems in the UK<sup>2</sup>. One in four women will experience domestic abuse in their lifetime and one in five will experience sexual violence<sup>3</sup>. Meanwhile more than half of all UK women have experienced some form of sexual harassment in the workplace<sup>4</sup>. Women are more likely to experience common mental health conditions than men and, while rates remain relatively stable in men, prevalence is increasing in women<sup>5</sup>.

Some women and girls face additional barriers because of their ethnicity, disability, age or other factors.

Shockingly, disabled women are twice as likely to experience domestic violence as non-disabled women<sup>6</sup>. Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) women are more likely to be living in poor households: in 2015/16, 50% of Bangladeshi households, 46% of Pakistani households and 40% of Black African/Caribbean households were living in poverty compared to 19% of White British households<sup>7</sup>.

Recognising the impact of these intersecting and overlapping identities is essential to understanding how inequality shapes the lives of women and girls in the North East. This report highlights local projects and services that are designed to meet the intersecting needs of women and girls in their area.

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<sup>1</sup> TUC 2018

<sup>2</sup> The Female Face of Poverty 2018 Women’s Budget Group

<sup>3</sup> The Home Office Ending Violence against Women and Girls Strategy 2016-20

<sup>4</sup> Still Just a Bit of Banter? 2016 TUC

<sup>5</sup> McManus et al 2016

**Sunderland Women’s Centre (SWC)** From its city centre base, SWC has been providing “cradle to the grave” community education opportunities to women for 30 years. Working in partnership with Sunderland College and others, SWC provides training in: basic skills; functional skills in maths and English and ESOL for women whose first language isn’t English. It’s warm, friendly and relaxed environment, experienced staff and free, on-site creche make it accessible to women who have struggled in other settings. The Centre responds to changing demands, recently developing work with older “WASPI” women who find themselves unexpectedly needing to find employment again toward the end of their working lives.

Project Manager Willa Allan says:

Our future plans include developing more wraparound services to support women’s learning including a listening ear service and welfare benefits advice.

## Austerity in the background

**It is important to acknowledge the impact of a decade of austerity on both women and women’s services.**

Cuts in benefits and public spending since 2010 have disproportionately affected women, and BAME women in particular.<sup>8</sup> Women have also borne the brunt of cuts to local government services as they were: more likely to depend on them; more likely to work in them and, when those services were cut, many women had to increase their unpaid work to fill the gaps (particularly in caring roles). The benefits cap, bedroom tax and “two-child rule” have all significantly affected women, meanwhile more than 75% of England’s local authorities cut spending on domestic violence refuges between 2010 and 2017.<sup>9</sup>

At the same time, cuts to women’s organisations’ funding were accompanied by an increase in the

<sup>6</sup> See <https://www.womensaid.org.uk/the-survivors-handbook/the-survivors-handbook-disabled-women/>

<sup>7</sup> Intersecting Inequalities 2017 Women’s Budget Group and Runnymede Trust

<sup>8</sup> The Female Face of Poverty 2018 Women’s Budget Group

<sup>9</sup> Triple Whammy: the impact of local government cuts on women 2019 Women’s Budget Group

demand for their services. Many statutory services introduced or raised their eligibility thresholds to accommodate only the most serious cases, following severe public spending cuts. So frontline third-sector organisations are now picking up the slack from these cuts, receiving people with high levels of unmet support needs who are turning to voluntary organisations as their last resort. Demand is also increasing from other sources; increased spending on prevention and awareness-raising campaigns on violence against women and girls, and the high-profile of the #MeToo movement and the Saville case, are leading more people to report abuse and seek help. This is a positive development, but without funding available for core support services to match the demand, the result has been longer waiting lists and greater pressure on women’s services.<sup>10</sup>

**Tyneside Women’s Health (TWH)** From its centres in Gateshead and Newcastle, TWH supports women around all aspects of their mental health. It provides one-to-one counselling, mental health courses alongside peer support groups and activities such as crafts and singing. TWH sees the enormous long-term impact that domestic abuse has on women’s confidence and mental health and how difficult it can be for women to recover and re-build their lives. It runs three groups (in Gateshead, Newcastle and North Tyneside) that specifically support women recovering from domestic abuse. One group member, Catherine, says:

I feel safe here and cared for. We have a laugh and I can be myself. I can talk more openly and no-one pities me. I can speak up for myself now.

TWH also runs a six-week course, Undoing the Damage of Domestic Abuse, supporting women to make positive changes to rebuild mental health and develop their confidence to negotiate healthy future relationships.

CEO, Elaine Slater says:

As we recover from the impact of Covid-19, we anticipate increased referrals for women affected by domestic abuse where relationships have broken down or situations worsened during lockdown. We strive to support these women by providing a safe, women-only space where they can benefit from mental health and peer support. On an annual basis we support approximately 620 women, and over one quarter of these women have been victims of abuse.

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<sup>10</sup> Life Changing and Life Saving: Funding for the Women’s Sector  
Women’s Budget Group

## Covid-19 in the foreground

**At the point of writing this report (late 2020) we have yet to see the long-term impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on our communities but concerns are already being expressed about the impact on women as responses to the virus magnify pre-existing inequalities.**

Women were more likely to be working in sectors that shut down during the pandemic; mothers were almost 50% more likely than fathers to have lost their job or quit during the pandemic, whilst among those doing paid work at home, mothers were more likely than fathers to be spending their work hours simultaneously trying to care for children<sup>11</sup>. As the job retention scheme ends, women are already more likely to have been made redundant instead of furloughed. Looking ahead, many companies that are large employers of women may not recover from the crisis, particularly in sectors such as hospitality, retail, childcare and tourism. Women are the majority of low-earners, those on zero-hours or part-time contracts, making them first in line to lose out on hours or contracts. This is of particular concern for BAME workers who are a third more likely than white workers to be in precarious work. There are also concerns that women who have requested furlough or taken unpaid leave because of childcare responsibilities may be more likely to be selected for redundancy.<sup>12</sup>

Lockdown has led to increased levels of domestic abuse, with a doubling in the number of domestic homicides in the early weeks. Domestic abuse services are already seeing increased demand as lockdown eases.<sup>13</sup> The picture is increasingly complex for these services as they deliver life-saving support through a mix of in-person and remote activity, whilst protecting front-line staff.

COVID-19 has had substantial negative impacts on mental health across the population. The biggest impacts have been on the gender and age groups – broadly women and the young – that already had relatively low levels of mental health<sup>14</sup>.

Initial research suggests BAME women are being hardest hit by the economic impact of the virus, with more BAME women expecting to be in debt after the crisis and more BAME mothers reporting they were struggling to feed their children than their white counterparts.<sup>15</sup>

Social isolation has badly affected disabled women, with a majority saying they have struggled to cope.<sup>16</sup> Many disabled women had to go without care during the crisis, a high proportion said they didn't know who to turn to for help during lockdown and have struggled to access basic necessities from the shops during lockdown.<sup>17</sup>

Post Covid-19, as UK society attempts to adjust to the new normal, there are further concerns that women's equality in the workplace has been set back by decades, with too little attention being paid to getting childcare, schools and care settings back to full capacity, again disproportionately impacting mothers and single parents.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Institute for Fiscal Studies May 2020

<sup>12</sup> Women's Budget Group 2020, Easing Lockdown: Potential Problems for Women <https://wbg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Easing-lockdown-.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2020/apr/22/every-abuser-is-more-volatile-the-truth-behind-the-shocking-rise-of-domestic-violence-killings>

<sup>14</sup> Institute for Fiscal Studies 2020

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/coronavirus-impact-on-bame-women>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/disabled-women-and-covid-19>

<sup>17</sup> Lisney et. al. (2020) The Impact of COVID 19 on Disabled Women from Sisters of Frida, Sisters of Frida <http://www.sisofrida.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/The-impact-of-COVID-19-on-Disabled-women-from-Sisters-of-Frida.pdf>

<sup>18</sup> Make Women Visible Fawcett Society June 20

**Your Voice Counts (YVC) Women’s Group**, open to learning disabled and /or autistic women who live in Gateshead, has been running for over 20 years. Most group members live in supported living or at home with family carers, some live independently and two are parents themselves.

The group is a safe and supportive environment for the women to look at the wide range of issues they face as disabled women including: hate crime, mate crime, discrimination, abuse, mental health, access to employment and lack of choice and control in their daily lives as well as the issues all women face relating to sexism. A number of the women are now Peer Educators with YVC , working on projects which they devise and then deliver to peers, most recently: “Be Cancer Aware” and “The 5 Ways To Wellbeing”.

There is also the opportunity for the women to learn about and discuss current issues and topics in a way that they can relate to and understand. The group support staff are skilled at breaking down complicated information and presenting information in a way that is easy to understand. When asked about what they liked about the Women’s Group, Paula said;

We can talk about different kinds of genders and sexualities like gay and lesbian for ladies. We talk about women’s bodies and how to look after them.

Sheila, almost without thinking said;

I feel safe!

**Apna Ghar (AG)** supports some of the most marginalised women: from BAME communities, asylum seekers and refugee women, some affected by insecure immigration status and with no recourse to public funds. Many of the women going to AG face overlapping inequalities based on gender, race, caste, class and/or poverty. Its unique range of support services focus on empowering women and strengthening families include: interpreting services; peer support mental health group; health and wellbeing group; one-to-one support; advice sessions; ESOL classes; health & social care training; asylum seeker support; healthy walks; health matters group; complementary therapies; exercise sessions and a youth group. Women are able to move through the different groups and services as their needs change.

Dr Shobha Srivastava MBE, Chair, highlights the terrible effect Covid-19 has had on her local community:

*“Most of the men work in restaurants and have lost their livelihood, also men and children have been at home all the time with nothing to do, however work for women has increased, domestic violence has increased, child to parent and grandparent violence has gone up too. We had to close the centre and furlough most staff except two who are helping with phone calls, activities for children etc. We did design the Eid card competition for children and baking kits for young women. A lot of work is going on online and by phone.”*

## Four inter-related themes

**This report looks at responses to gender inequality on women and girls in our region, focusing on four main themes: employment and training; health and well-being; safety; representation and voice.**

Whilst a useful way to look at provision across the region, there is of course huge overlap between all these themes and how they impact on women and girls. For example, we know that women and girls’ experience of violence and abuse impacts negatively on their mental and physical well-being.<sup>19</sup> The lives of women and girls, and the issues they face, do not fall neatly into such categories, this is why some of our most successful and effective services for women operate a “women’s centre model” with a fairly broad range of services and support provided under one roof. Women’s services usually describe this as taking a holistic approach, working with women on the inter-related issues they face.

**Women’s Health in South Tyneside (WHiST)** From its distinctive premises in the converted station house at South Shields metro, WHiST provides support services around mental, physical and emotional health to women across South Tyneside. Counselling is available on a range of issues, alongside a listening ear service provided by trained volunteers. It offers support groups for women dealing with: child protection issues; drugs and alcohol; abuse and violence and an enormous range of courses including: art and well-being; assertiveness; basic listening skills; community health and mental health matters; creative writing; food and healthy eating courses; gardening; improving self-esteem; relaxation; understanding anger. Partner organisations provide help around money matters, health, legal issues and completing benefit forms at the centre. There are even courses in complementary therapies, alongside a café, creche and garden.

Gender inequality also has an impact in many other areas, including sport, education, justice, housing, arts, culture and heritage, and there are some excellent local organisations focusing on work with women and girls in

these areas too. Changing Lives does ground-breaking work with women caught up in the justice system and with women who are sexually exploited. In the arts sector Sangini, Open Clasp Theatre Company and Company of Others all use artistic tools to explore the lives and amplify the voices of the women they work with.

**Open Clasp Theatre Company (OCTC)** is an award-winning women’s theatre company and a leading force in the North of England with a national and international reach. Its aim is to “change the world”, one play at a time by placing theatre at the heart of transforming the lives of disadvantaged women and girls. It makes truthful, risk-taking theatre informed by the lived experiences of women usually disenfranchised in both theatre and society. Its work is regularly performed in theatres, prisons, schools, conferences, and community centres. OCTC use theatre as a direct and impactful way of humanising the issues of women who have experienced violence, abuse and discrimination, aiming to support policy change and critical debate. Its production Rattle Snake - about coercive control in abusive relationships, was used to train police officers when coercive control became illegal. Key Change, which amplified the lived experience of women caught up in the criminal justice system was performed at the House of Lords.

One audience member said:

I attended your play yesterday and it blew my socks off! This was, by a country mile, the most engaging, impactful and thought-provoking training session I have had in my fourteen-year career in the police.

Artistic Director and Writer, Catrina McHugh says:

We are political, and by that I mean we are looking for the injustice, finding it and putting it on stage. Open Clasp work in a unique way, in that we don’t walk into any group with an idea; our job is to respond to the room, the women and then create.

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<sup>19</sup> <https://weareagenda.org/womens-mental-health-key-facts/>

## A focus on specialist women’s organisations

**This report looks at the work being done by local charities to support and empower women and girls and highlights the important role that local philanthropy can play.**

Much of the work is undertaken by specialist women’s organisations, which are led by women and work mainly, or only, with women and girls. Lots of other organisations also work with women and some of them are mentioned here too. However, specialist women’s organisations are a valuable community resource, providing services that are accessible and reach women and girls who might not otherwise seek help. Some of these organisations are focused in a particular area e.g. domestic abuse or employment, but many take a holistic approach providing support across lots of different issues and reaching the most marginalised women who tend not to engage with other services.

Women’s organisations succeed in working with many of the most disadvantaged women, helping tackle social exclusion and promoting community cohesion by bringing together women from different walks of life.

**The Young Women’s Outreach Project (YWOP)** has been working with young women aged 11 to 19 years across in the North East of England, since 1992. It works with young women and young mothers, supporting and guiding them through crises in their lives. These crises can include: finding out that they are pregnant; problems at school; mental health issues; rape; self-harm; violence or sexual exploitation; lack of confidence and self-belief. YWOP offers one to one support and group work: one to one work includes counselling, support around domestic abuse and child sexual exploitation, outreach support for young mothers and adaptable intensive support to meet a young women’s individual needs. Group work focuses on personal and social development. Once in a group many young women say they feel listened to, less alone and supported in the issues affecting their lives. They develop positive relationships, gain support from other

young women and learn coping mechanisms and strategies. YWOP supports young women until they feel that they are ready to take the next steps in life.

Specialist women’s organisations share a number of common characteristics which underpin their successful approach. Provision of services in women-only spaces or groups creates an environment where women and girls feel safe and able to relax. Many women appreciate and value women-only services; research shows many service users would not have accessed support spaces if they had not been women-only.<sup>20</sup> For some women these services enable them to share experiences and improve their confidence and self-esteem. For victims of violence against women and girls, women-only services can be crucial in enabling them to feel safe and access support. Many of those providing women-only services are content to let individuals decide if their services are appropriate for them, or as West End Women and Girls’ Centre puts it:

No matter who you are, what you look like, who you love, how much money you have, what your religious beliefs are or where you are from, if you identify as a woman West End Women and Girls Centre welcomes you.

Most women’s organisations offer some a range of un-threatening, easy to access courses, activities and groups e.g. cooking, crafts or confidence building, where women can get to know the people and the organisation and build trust, before starting to disclose, and seek help with, more difficult issues. This is a deliberate strategy as many women find it difficult to articulate and identify their needs and wouldn’t necessarily think what they were struggling with was, for example, domestic abuse or mental ill-health. By providing easy, non-stigmatising routes into their services, women’s organisations are able to reach women who might not otherwise ask for help.

Another strength of women’s specialist organisations are the opportunities they provide for peer support, through groups, courses, activities and drop-in sessions. Peer support can have a huge impact in helping women combat isolation, build positive relationships and

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<sup>20</sup> EHRC (2012) The impact of changes in commissioning and funding on women-only services

develop coping strategies and is hard-wired into the approach of most women’s organisations. Organisations encourage user involvement in all areas and women often go on to become volunteers, staff and even trustees within the organisation.

Based in Newcastle, **Angelou Centre (AC)** is a black-led women’s organisation which is committed to advancing the economic and social independence of black and minoritised women and children across the North East. AC provides holistic services to meet the needs of women and children in three distinct areas: training and employment; violence against women and girls (including domestic and sexual violence, abuse and harassment); social and creative activities. Its work on violence and abuse also includes specialist work on forced marriage, “honour-based” violence and trafficking. Alongside one-to-one support and advocacy, education and training courses, therapeutic support and social groups, AC also provides specialist refuge provision for black and minority women, including those with no recourse to public funds who face enormous additional barriers when seeking safety. The organisation is one of the few remaining black-led women’s organisations in the North East and works in partnership at a local, regional and national level. All AC projects are developed in consultation with its service users who are supported by a qualified, multilingual and culturally diverse team of staff and volunteers.

Most of the organisations mentioned in this report continued to find ways to support the women and girls they work with throughout the Covid crisis, even when their usual model of provision wasn’t possible. From moving therapeutic services to phone (Cygnus) and on-line (Northumberland Domestic Abuse Service), to pivoting to providing hot food for local families as a means of keeping in touch (West End Women and Girls’ Scrان 4 the Fam) or activity packs for children (Apna Ghar), these resilient, responsive organisations didn’t waiver in their determination to support the women they work with.

*N.B. There is a lack of local and regional data which is disaggregated by gender – this report therefore largely draws on national statistics – however, there is no*

*reason to believe the situation for women and girls is any better in the North East than it is elsewhere in the UK. The paucity of gender-disaggregated data and the massive impact of that gap on policy and practice across all areas of our lives is detailed in Caroline Criado Perez’ book, Invisible Women.*

## Health and Well-being

**Early in 2020 an influential report<sup>21</sup> found that women in the most deprived areas of England are suffering their lowest life expectancy for a decade.**

This is the first time in 100 years that national life expectancy growth has “flatlined”; the largest declines were seen in the poorest communities of the North East. Across our communities the link between poverty and ill-health is already well-understood and has been put into sharp focus by the impact of Covid-19. However, there are other factors that also impact on women’s health.

Women are more likely to be unpaid carers which can have negative consequences for their own health. A 2013 study found women were notably more likely to be unpaid carers than males and that the greatest gender difference was in the North East. The share of unpaid care provision fell most heavily on women aged 50-64. The general health of unpaid carers deteriorated incrementally with increasing levels of unpaid care provided.<sup>22</sup> It is not unusual for women to be caring for children at the same time as elderly relatives which can place additional strain on them.

Mental ill health among women is on the rise: one in five women experience a common mental health problem such as anxiety or depression (compared with one in eight men). BAME women face additional inequalities and challenges to their mental health, such as racism, stigma and increased levels of poverty, and are at particular risk of experiencing common mental health problems. Meanwhile young women are the highest-risk group for mental ill health.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Health Equity In England: The Marmot Review 10 Years On  
<sup>22</sup> Office of National Statistics 2013

<sup>23</sup> <https://weareagenda.org/womens-mental-health-key-facts/>

Women’s greater experience of domestic and sexual violence and abuse also impacts negatively on both their long-term physical and mental health. Women with extensive experience of domestic and sexual abuse (as adults or children) are more likely to have: an alcohol or drug problem; a range of physical health problems; high levels of mental ill-health; attempted suicide or self-harmed; an eating disorder.<sup>24</sup>

**Cygnus Support** provides much-needed mental health and wellbeing services to people from its base in Ashington and across Northumberland through outreach venues in Hexham, Berwick, Alnwick and Blyth. Although Cygnus works with both men and women, the vast majority of its client group is women. It offers counselling by phone, video call, or in person, and women bring a range of issues including abuse; anxiety; bereavement; body image; depression; loneliness; low self-confidence; low self-esteem; miscarriage; relationship and family issues; self-harm; stress and trauma. Cygnus has a specialist domestic abuse counsellor, a specialist young person’s counsellor and a team of counselling staff and volunteers, who collectively deliver almost 3,000 assessments / counselling sessions per year. Cygnus also delivers a Recovery Toolkit group-work programme for women recovering from the impact of domestic abuse.

Sylvia was in her 40s when was referred for counselling for long-standing anxiety which was affecting her socially and when attending formal appointments. She would always fear the worst in new or challenging situations and therefore avoided these. The counsellor spent time with Sylvia: exploring the origins of her anxiety; looking at how the mind works and can continue to see threats / dangers even after they have passed; looking at strategies to “retrain her brain” to assess safety and risk and practice challenging herself by setting gradually more challenging tasks to do between sessions. Whilst coming to Cygnus, Sylvia was faced with unexpected and potentially anxiety-provoking issues in her family and she coped extremely well, taking what was thrown at her in her stride, demonstrating a real increase in her emotional resilience.

The holistic approach taken by women’s organisations means that an individual woman’s health and well-being is seen in the context of her whole life. A woman will often approach a service with a “safe” issue, seeking some benefits advice or wanting to join a fitness class. Staff and volunteers understand that, through building trusted relationships over time, women feel safe enough to disclose the underlying issues impacting their health and well-being: the traumatic childhood bereavement; the controlling partner; the drug-addicted but much-loved child.

Centres offer fitness classes where it doesn’t matter about your size or how good you were at sports at school. They offer healthy eating sessions with an emphasis on nutrition, affordability and simplicity, rather than weight loss. Some use food as an opportunity to build links between women from different communities, others find opportunities for social enterprise. Increasingly centres offer gardening and other outdoor activities, recognising the positive impact on being outside on mental health. And whilst craft sessions can just look like a gentle leisure pursuit, organisations understand the therapeutic power of engaging in some (relatively mindless) activity, freeing up the mind to talk about and process difficult emotions.

Some organisations provide support to women with long-term health conditions, through groups and complementary therapies. Groups and courses that support women to manage and/or recover from common mental health conditions such as anxiety, stress and depression are especially valuable and report great outcomes. Meanwhile all these different activities contribute to women’s organisations’ role in combating the social isolation and loneliness that women and girls of all ages can experience.

**Northern Initiative on Women and Eating (NIWE)** is a specialist service focused on eating distress, including anorexia, bulimia and binge eating. It works across Tyne and Wear and Northumberland and offers a range of support including: information and signposting to other services; counselling; group therapy (for women aged 18+); HOPE - a support group for women aged 16+ providing therapeutic activities e.g. singing, craft nights,

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<sup>24</sup> Hidden Hurt, violence, abuse, and disadvantage in the lives of women DMSS research for Agenda, January 2016.

yoga; health workshops on issues such as mindfulness, self-esteem and anxiety. Whilst the service is open to men and women, the majority of people getting support at NIWE are women. NIWE staff also deliver training and awareness to professionals and community groups to increase understanding of eating distress.

## Safety

### Domestic and sexual violence, abuse and harassment are gendered crimes with women and girls being disproportionately affected.

1.2 million women experienced domestic abuse in the last year in England and Wales<sup>25</sup> and in the UK an average of two women a week die at the hands of their abusive partner or ex-partner. Whilst we know that men can also experience domestic abuse, female victims are more likely to experience repeated incidences of domestic violence and are more likely to be seriously harmed.<sup>26</sup>

It is estimated that 20% of women will experience sexual assault in their adult lives (compared to 4% of men).<sup>27</sup> In the last year alone, 3.1% of all women were victims of sexual assault or rape.<sup>28</sup> The vast majority of victims do not report their experiences to the police.<sup>29</sup> Many women who access specialist women's organisations will not access mainstream services, whether provided by other voluntary organisations or statutory agencies. For example, only 10% of survivors of rape and sexual abuse who access Rape Crisis Centres report their experiences to the police.<sup>30</sup>

Violence and abuse are serious criminal offences which have enormous, long-term impacts on victims and their families. Unfortunately, our criminal justice system finds it increasingly difficult to deal with the volume and complexity of these crimes and a relatively small

proportion of women see the offender successfully prosecuted.<sup>31</sup>

Specialist women's organisations are expert in supporting women who seek justice and protection from criminal justice agencies, helping them navigate what can be a long and difficult process. In reality, for many women, getting “justice” is often more about being believed and managing to recover and get on with their lives, something which specialist services are very good at helping with.<sup>32</sup>

**Newcastle Women's Aid (NWA)** offers advice and emotional support around domestic abuse, together with practical help and advice upon issues such as re-housing, health care, legal issues and benefits. NWA provides: a free support helpline; one-to-one specialist support focused on risk assessing, safety planning, coping, recovery and staying safe; group programmes promoting understanding of the dynamics of abuse to help women recover and regain control of their lives. It can also support children and has creche facilities to ensure uninterrupted support.

Nicole said:

When you are experiencing domestic abuse you feel like you are the only one who it is happening to. I immediately felt less alone just by being in the group surrounded by women sharing experiences similar to my own. Watching and listening to other women in the group was really good as I could see myself in them.

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<sup>25</sup> ONS (2017) Domestic abuse in England and Wales: year ending March 2017

<sup>26</sup> S Walby, J Towers and B Francis (2016) 'Is Violent Crime Increasing or Decreasing? A New Methodology to Measure Repeat Attacks Making Visible the Significance of Gender and Domestic Relations', *The British Journal of Criminology*, 56, 6(1), pp 1203-1234

<sup>27</sup> ONS (2018) Sexual offences in England and Wales: year ending March 2017

<sup>28</sup> Ibid

<sup>29</sup> Ibid

<sup>30</sup> WRC (2015) Women's organisations; the 'net beneath the net' <https://www.endviolenceagainstwomen.org.uk/rape-prosecutions-womens-groups-appalled-at-further-fall-in-numbers-and-head-to-court-again-against-cps/>

<sup>32</sup> <https://research-information.bris.ac.uk/en/projects/justice-inequality-and-gender-based-violence>

Manager, Elaine Langshaw, says:

Our life-saving and life-changing services are flexible to the needs of women and our community-based services eliminate the barriers some women face when trying to access support e.g. finance, childcare. Our services are steered by the women who use them and our user-led approach gives choice and control to women and girls.

When most of us think about domestic abuse services, we think about refuges which provide emergency accommodation for women and children fleeing violence. Whilst the first refuges were set up by small women’s groups in the 1970’s and 80’s, most are now commissioned by local authorities and often provided by large housing associations. Two specialist women’s organisations, WWiN and Harbour, continue to provide the refuges in Sunderland and North Tyneside. The vast majority of women affected by domestic abuse don’t, however, need a refuge, what they need is access to specialist information and advice to enable them to stay safe, and practical and emotional support to help them and their children to recover and get on with their lives. Specialist women’s organisations provide this advice and support, but also work in partnership with other agencies to raise awareness and increase understanding about domestic abuse. And just as those early women’s groups set up the first refuges (often battling prejudice and ignorance to do so), now specialist services continue to campaign for change, both at a local and national level.

Some local domestic abuse services are also able to provide support for children affected by domestic abuse in their family, children often witness violence and abuse (and are sometimes victims of it themselves) and this can have a significant impact on their own health, well-being and attainment. Acorns in North Tyneside is the only service in the area which predominantly specialises in this work with children and young people.

Rape Crisis Tyneside and Northumberland is the main provider of support for victims of sexual violence, abuse and harassment in our region, whilst Changing Lives and Bright Futures both provide specialist services for women who are involved in sex work and/or are sexually exploited.

### **Northumberland Domestic Abuse Services (NDAS)**

works across Northumberland providing one-to-one emotional and practical support by phone, webchat, email or face-to-face. Its practitioners cover the whole county and it works hard to ensure it can provide an outreach service for rural and outlying areas. It offers group support, delivering programmes to help women identify abuse and recover from the impact of domestic abuse and negotiate safer future relationships. It also supports children and young people who have been affected by the abuse at home. An important part of the work NDAS does is to raise awareness within communities and in wider society, to challenge abusive behaviours, tackle stigma and shift norms around violence and abuse and it trains professionals and community organisations to recognise signs of abuse and how to seek help.

Liz said:

You listened, understood and believed me. Without the support I would have given up and gone back to the relationship. NDAS was always there for me.

Service Manager, Karen Richardson, says:

Northumberland’s poor connectivity - affecting transport, mobile coverage and internet access - further isolates those living with abuse, limiting their opportunities to access support. Children and young people in abusive households are impacted by what they’ve witnessed at home, and abusive behaviours become normalised within the family. NDAS provides support to those in rural areas, with outreach services in safe spaces to meet rural need.

## Employment and training

### The position of women in the labour market, the design of social security and women’s roles within the family all contribute to women’s vulnerability to poverty.

Employment can be an important safeguard against poverty, but this is not always the case for women. Women’s employment rate has been at an all-time high in the UK, but women make up the majority both of low-paid employees and of part-time workers. Women are more likely to be employed in low paid sectors such as retail, social care and hospitality and less likely to work in higher paid sectors such as finance, engineering and information technology. The gender pay gap was 18.4% in 2017 and has remained stubbornly similar over the last 20 years.<sup>33</sup>

The **Millin Charity (MC)** works with women from the local community in the west end of Newcastle, a high proportion of whom are long-term unemployed, have English as a second language and have few or no qualifications. MC uses enterprise and entrepreneurship programmes to provide routes to financial independence, helping women to move out of poverty. Its projects use enterprise as a catalyst for change, enabling women to: build aspiration, confidence, self-esteem, knowledge and skills; gain qualifications through their unique range of accredited courses and increase their opportunities to become financially independent. *A Chance To Trade* supports women to fast-track their business ideas and start selling to the public, offering a range of accredited and non-accredited training, specialist enterprise workshops, one-to-one business advice and trading opportunities. MC also provides additional support to women whose businesses have been impacted by Covid-19.

Aisha has English as a second language and lives in the west end of Newcastle. When she first came to MC she had been unemployed for a long time. She was a survivor of domestic violence with a mental health condition. Making craft items at home had helped her

through difficult times, she wanted to sell her items to the public but lacked confidence and knowledge about how to do this.

I read about MC’s enterprise programmes on Facebook and made an appointment with an advisor. I explained my business ideas and how having bipolar disorder can make it difficult for me to commit to things, such as sales events. The course helped me with pricing products, branding, packaging and display. I now have a regular stall at a Newcastle market and sell on Etsy and Facebook. I’m so grateful for the support from this project. They really understand the support women need and were able to be flexible with me when my condition got in the way.

Chief Executive Sarah Miller says:

We want to ensure that women’s voices are heard at a regional and national level when enterprise services and support is developed to ensure it reaches those communities that can often be missed in the design of mainstream services.

Once in the workplace, some groups of women continue to face additional barriers, for example, despite qualifications, disabled women have lower participation rates in higher skilled jobs and work fewer hours than both non-disabled women and disabled men.<sup>34</sup>

Women are more likely to have caring responsibilities that impact on their finances: 58% of unpaid carers are women and women are more likely to have reduced working hours as a result of caring responsibilities.<sup>35</sup> 90% of single parents are women; single parent families are twice as likely to live in poverty as other families<sup>36</sup>

<sup>33</sup> The Female Face of Poverty 2018 Women’s Budget Group

<sup>34</sup> <http://www.sisofrida.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Disabled-women-Facts-and-Stats-2017.pdf>

<sup>35</sup> <https://www.carersuk.org/news-and-campaigns/features/10-facts-about-women-and-caring-in-the-uk-on-international-women-s-day>

<sup>36</sup> <https://www.gingerbread.org.uk/policy-campaigns/living-standards-and-poverty/>

Whilst addressing the underlying causes of these inequalities requires national action, local women’s organisations are working tirelessly to improve the life chances of women in their communities, providing:

- access to adult education and life skills courses in easy to access, non-threatening environments.
- confidence-building courses and activities.
- support around enterprise that recognises the specific challenges and opportunities that women have.

Some women face considerable barriers to entering or returning to the workforce. They may not have worked for many years because of caring responsibilities or health issues; they may lack formal qualifications and the confidence to walk into their local mainstream college; their first language may not be English. Local women’s organisations provide responsive and holistic interventions to work with individual women, understanding their individual strengths, circumstances and challenges. They excel at building women’s confidence and aspirations and helping them take the critical first steps on the path to employment or enterprise. In addition to the organisations featured in this section, others including the Angelou Centre, Apna Ghar, Cygnus Support, West End Women and Girls Centre and Women’s Health in South Tyneside all undertake work in this area as part of the wider support package they offer.

**Smart Works Newcastle (SWN)** opened in April 2018, since when over 400 women from across the North East have accessed its service. SWN supports local women back into work, helping them to gain financial independence and transform their lives. It provides free interview clothing and coaching, empowering women by giving them the confidence they need to succeed. So far, 66% of the clients SWN were able to contact went on to succeed at their job interview, within one month of visiting. The service is open to any North East women who has a confirmed job interview for a paid position or a year-long apprenticeship. SWN works with referral agencies, including Job Centre Plus, work programme

providers and charities working to support women back into employment.

## Representation and voice

**Despite women getting the vote 100 years ago, we continue to be seriously under-represented in the corridors of power, both locally and nationally.**

Only 41% MPs and 25% of council leaders in the North East are women. Nationally: women now make up 34% of MPs and 30% of cabinet ministers; only a fifth of senior civil servants are women and just over a third of permanent secretaries; women make up around a quarter of those in senior positions in the judiciary, but this falls to 17% for the Supreme Court; only 6% of the CEOs of FTSE 100 companies are women; women make up only 21% of national newspaper editors, with just four women in the top jobs. And whilst the situation is bad for women, it is much worse for BAME women and those with a disability.<sup>37</sup>

Representation matters; to use a current example, the lack of women in key cabinet roles is widely seen as a probable reason why childcare issues haven’t been prioritised in post Covid-19 recovery planning.

In response to this representation gap, grassroots groups like the Activate Collective are working to champion new voices in UK politics, sponsoring women who are community activists, carers, mentors and champions for other women, to stand for election.

Newcastle’s **West End Women and Girls Centre (WEWGC)** has been supporting generations of women and girls for nearly 40 years. Firmly established in the heart of its community, WEWGC provides: youth groups; women’s support groups; gardening and food projects and specialist support around domestic abuse. But perhaps what stands out most about WEWGC is its commitment to amplifying the voices of the women and girls it works with. Describing itself as a “welcoming, inclusive and bold family of women and girls working together to build power”, it has been developing “female pioneers, from Estate Matriarchs to teenage Peer Educators”, since 1981.

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<sup>37</sup> Fawcett: Sex and power 2020

It's latest project “Smash the Patriarchy” trains young women to be Gender Equality Peer Educators, providing political and social education to their peers about human rights, democracy, the law and gender equality. The Peer Educators deliver a Toolkit 4 Girls programme to other young women in schools, colleges, youth groups. The programme covers gender inequality, what it is like to be a woman, self-esteem, confidence building and campaigning.

Peer educators, Laura Christer and Rochelle Artus, say:

We started attending the older girl's youth group because we got to go on free trips in the summer. All of us in the youth group were in controlling and abusive relationships but none of us realised. Our youth worker started working with us around domestic abuse and coercive control and before long the penny dropped. We were shocked that nobody was talking to us about relationships and were passionate to change that. We trained as peer educators and started volunteering with other young women, raising awareness and challenging their beliefs around what is acceptable. This is how WEWG survives and thrives - bringing in women and girls from the community, offering them volunteering and training opportunities, then employing them. The women here know their community and their needs and help them engage with the centre.

Women's organisations have never been content to just sit around and pick up the pieces, they have always lobbied and campaigned for change, providing grassroots intelligence that fuels local and national policy change. The Angelou Centre campaigns both locally and nationally for changes to the treatment of BAME and migrant women and those with no recourse to public funds. Women's Aid member organisations in the region have contributed to the content of the Domestic Abuse Bill (2020).

At a local level, Tyne and Wear Citizens (TWC), which works with a diverse group of leaders from schools, universities, hospitals, mosques, churches, synagogues,

charities and other community groups, led a campaign to highlight BAME women's experience of harassment and hate crime on the Metro. Members took public action to “Reclaim The Metro” and won a Hate Crime Charter for public transport, jointly signed by Nexus, Arriva, Stagecoach & Go-North East. More recently TWC has been campaigning for hate crime laws to include those harassment and abuse directed at women.<sup>38</sup>

**Rape Crisis Tyneside and Northumberland (RCTN)**

provides free, safe, professional support, counselling, information and advocacy for women and girls over 13 who have experienced any form of sexual violence at any time in their lives. This includes women and girls who have experienced sexual violence or childhood sexual abuse recently and/or in the past. Based in Newcastle, RCTN works from community bases to ensure this service is accessible; support might be face-to-face, over the phone or by email. It runs support groups and provides specialist training for professionals.

RCTN also has an activists' group of local women, some of whom are survivors, all of whom are passionate about ending sexual violence. The group works to raise awareness about sexual violence against women and girls and to actively challenge the values, beliefs and behaviour which contribute to violence against women. The group developed and ran the [#WishISaid](#) campaign, aiming to get people talking about sexual harassment in public places. The campaign asks everyone to adopt a zero-tolerance approach to sexual harassment, making our bars, pubs and clubs safer places for women and men.

Volunteer activist, Jalna, says:

Activism has introduced me to a community of women who are endlessly supportive. My passion isn't just welcomed, it's encouraged. I have the opportunity to develop skills and to press for real change.

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<sup>38</sup>[https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/newcitizens/pages/3760/attachments/original/1599728331/Academic\\_Report\\_V.6\\_-\\_web\\_compress\\_3.pdf?1599728331](https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/newcitizens/pages/3760/attachments/original/1599728331/Academic_Report_V.6_-_web_compress_3.pdf?1599728331)

Volunteer Co-ordinator, Dawn Bowman, says:

We know rape culture and victim-blaming have an impact on the lives of women and girls, hindering their ability to cope and recover after sexual violence. Working with internalised rape myths, self-blame and disbelief is often where our work begins with women and girls who have experienced sexual violence. Activism which challenges rape culture and victim-blaming and raises awareness of our services also offers solidarity to women and girls who have experienced sexual violence and is an important part of our work. Our campaigns shine a light on areas of sexual violence which are under-researched (e.g. the experiences of older women). They also bring to the fore the real impact of everyday victim-blaming and shaming - our newest campaign #RollDownYourSkirt challenges the sexualised and sexist nature of school uniform policing.

## Conclusion

**In an ideal world we wouldn't need specialist provision for women, we would have real gender equality and women would be able to get their needs met through mainstream provision. Sadly, we are still a long way from such a utopia and are going to need our specialist women's services for a while longer.**

Two strands run through this report and underpin the importance of specialist provision for women. The complexity of women's lives which gets in their way when they are trying to improve their situation, think of Aisha whose route out of poverty through enterprise was complicated by her mental health problems, a complexity which is often compounded by the intersection of other identities, of ethnicity, disability and class. And the wonderfully accommodating and inclusive nature of many women's services: the women's centre where you can start going to the girls group because you like the trips and find yourself transformed, and transforming, as a peer educator of other young women; the theatre company which will work with you to draw out hard-earned wisdom from your most difficult experiences, then amplify that wisdom and shout it from the rafters, where even the law makers can hear it.

Despite the many challenges they continue to face, the specialist women's organisations across our region continue to provide a safe haven and a hand up to women who might not otherwise find the help and support they need.

## Let's talk

We hope that this report will inspire more of you to give to causes that address diversity and equality issues.

If you would like to discuss this report and what you could do to help, please contact us:

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