Girls Only:
A review of the work of Girls United,
Tower Hamlets 2004-2006

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Introduction

In 2004, The Children’s Society’s ‘Children’s Voice’, a children’s participation project in Tower Hamlets, set up Girls United, a forum for Bangladeshi and Somali girls and young women aged 13-19. The project was jointly funded by local funders, the Jack Petchey Foundation and the City Parochial Foundation, and by The Children’s Society.

Research had shown the need for such a project in Tower Hamlets where girls’ and young women’s issues were not visible. The girls and young women felt they were being treated differently from their brothers and had more domestic responsibilities. This was confirmed by the girls and young women we interviewed at Girls United, a number of whom are helping to care for younger sisters and older family members. Further, Children’s Voice had a younger group, called ‘Children’s Choice’, funded by the Children’s Fund, but there was nowhere for thirteen-year-old girls to move on to when they reached that age. Many girls and young women did not feel able to use youth clubs, as the Local Authority youth provision was largely dominated by boys.
Girls United was set up to respond to the specific needs of Somali and Bangladeshi girls and young women, who were not able to go out after school and whose parents were concerned that they should not be in a mixed gender group. Parents had concerns regarding safety and the project was able to liaise with these parents to reassure them that Girls United was a safe place for their daughters. The project also provided transport. Through outreach into schools, Girls United targeted girls and young women who may not otherwise be able to go out after school.

“Basically they (parents) don’t want them to be exploited… so we invited the parents to come and see. We would go up and introduce ourselves to them. We gave them written information as well.”

(Senior project worker)

Issues identified in Tower Hamlets by staff at Girls United and by other professionals we interviewed

1. Youth programmes are mainly mixed, and dominated by boys.

2. Activities are not responsive to girls’ wishes and needs.

3. Parents may not allow Somali and Bangladeshi girls to go to these clubs.

4. Transport issues – some Somali and Bangladeshi girls need to be picked up from projects. The clubs do not open until 5.30pm and none of the girls and young women is allowed to be out after that in winter (after dark).

5. Poverty and low educational outcomes (an issue that is improving for Bangladeshi girls, more than for boys).
6. Drugs, crime, guns, sex work – these are high in the Borough so it is harder for girls to be allowed outside the home. Parents are ‘fearful’ of children being involved in crime or becoming the victims of crime.

7. Somali young women are ‘the next generation’. The Somali community is now facing some of the issues the Bangladeshi community faced.

8. There is a need to bridge the social and job segregation between Canary Wharf wealth and jobs and unemployment in other areas.

9. There is a need to develop young women’s aspirations.

The research for this review, carried out by The Children’s Society Research Unit with the staff of Girls United, forms the basis of this report, which aims to explore and record the best practice developed by the project, as well as record the views of young participants past and present, external professionals, and current and previous project staff who have been involved with the project. Further, through questionnaire-based interviews and focus groups, the girls and young women have suggested a set of recommendations for statutory and voluntary youth agencies in Tower Hamlets, on how work with girls and young women should continue to develop. These recommendations are included later in this report.

Five examples of the activities carried out by Girls United are discussed below, and an attempt has been made to collate the learning over the lifespan of the project. The report also contains general feedback on Girls United, and on the recommendations for statutory and voluntary agencies about future work with girls and young women in Tower Hamlets (and
elsewhere) made by participants, activity facilitators and other professionals in the Borough.
Background to the project

The Girls United forum was set up to enable girls and young women to discuss issues affecting them in Tower Hamlets, and to gain a voice, in order to influence change in their local communities. The project particularly targeted girls and young women who had no opportunity to go out after school. They offered transport and, where necessary, liaised with parents in order to get permission for the girls and young women to attend. Sometimes this meant bringing the parents to the project so they could see it was a safe place. The main concern of parents was that the girls and young women should not be meeting with boys. Girls United aimed to give these girls and young women a voice in what happens for them in Tower Hamlets, and to address some of the shared and different issues between the two ethnic groups. As Somali and Bangladeshi Muslims, they were separated by cultures but joined in their faith. The project aimed to bring girls and young women from two ethnic groups together. Over the life of the project, girls and young women found they were able to work together (according to a previous project worker, this was not always easy in the early stages), and the girls and young women particularly have told
us how much they appreciate this opportunity to get together and form cross-cultural friendships.

**Recruitment**

The project recruited girls and young women from the Bangladeshi and Somali communities by

- going into schools to target heads of year to suggest girls and young women who might benefit from the group
- speaking in school assemblies
- targeting the more vulnerable girls and young women who were not allowed to go out at all after school
- providing transport to and from the meetings
- liaising with parents.

**Staffing**

Throughout the lifespan of the project, there have been staffing issues. These included the lack of an administrator and gaps and changes in management, sometimes for a number of months. At the time of writing, the current programme manager has now been in post for over nine months, and senior project worker Yasmin Haque, who has largely developed and co-ordinated the project, has been the consistent presence throughout its lifetime.
The Project

The project was started in 2004 with an introductory meeting held on 3 February 2004 attended by 30 girls and young women – 23 of whom were Bangladeshi and 7 Somali – between the ages of 11 and 19. The majority were between 13 and 18 years of age. They had two consultation meetings to discuss the issues that most affect their lives, and they requested a long list of training and activities. Out of these suggestions, as well as through approaches by professionals, there followed a number of sub-projects which are detailed below. These sub-projects included inter-agency events, at times facilitated by outside professionals as well as by project staff. The girls and young women also came up with names for the forum. Eventually, ‘Girls United’ was decided upon.

The distinct activities which formed the sub-projects extended over a period of time from a month to a year. These included projects on Somali health awareness, participating in a London-wide consultation on the Youth Matters green paper and making a DVD with the police which explored important issues, including gender and race, and offered an insight into the different career opportunities the Metropolitan Police offer minority ethnic young women. In addition, there was a project about forced
marriage, a film project that explored issues associated with skin bleaching, training in presentation, report writing and interview techniques, as well as a design project. These are just a few of the activities that took place over the three years. The projects were participatory and hands-on, and are described in more detail in Chapter 5.

**Girls United Project 2004-2006**

- Somali Health workshops focusing on Female Genital Mutilation (FGM)
- Training in presentation, report writing and interview techniques
- Involvement in The Children’s Society’s Children and Young Peoples’ Participation Initiative (CHYPPI)
- Participation in an International Women’s Day event
- The Children’s Society Corporate Induction Day (The Children’s Society)
- ‘SKIN’ Project – film project concerned with the practice of skin bleaching in relation to self-identity and community values
- Make-up
- Forced marriage sub-project
- Local Democracy Week 2006
- An Open Evening with a local councillor
- Cheque and certificate presentation – The Jack Petchey Foundation
- Mentoring
- Participating in a London-wide consultation on the Youth Matters green paper
- Recruitment and selection of project staff
- Fashion and Design sub-projects
- Metropolitan Police film project
- Other activities included: Eid and Christmas party, trip to Thorpe Park, leaflet design, Tower Hamlets Youth Service Consultation, Amp 06 (local authority annual youth participation event), Tower Hamlets Mayoral Event
Review of the work of Girls United

The objectives of the review were to

1. enable girls and young women who are past and present members of the group to reflect on their involvement and achievements with Girls United

2. collate and disseminate best practice of girls' and young women’s participation work developed over the last three years

3. enable girls and young women to come up with a set of recommendations for Tower Hamlets council to continue girls and young women specific participation work

4. celebrate the achievements of the individual girls and young women and of the project as a whole

5. use the best practice the project has built up to influence future project planning and inform funding bids.

How we carried out the research for the review

As a retrospective review carried out at the end of the project between December 2006 and February 2007, the methods used to collect information had to be flexible. For the purpose of the review, a researcher
interviewed the current staff of Girls United. The senior project worker contacted previous participants of the project and carried out nine brief questionnaire-based interviews in order to gain the former participants’ views on the project, the project activities and their recommendations for future work with girls and young women in Tower Hamlets. At the same time, a researcher from the Research Unit carried out six telephone interviews with a list of professionals who have special knowledge of the project, to gain their perspective and recommendations. The project was also able to set up two focus groups of girls and young women — one of an older group who were former members and one of younger members who currently attend. The focus groups were held on Monday 5 February 2007. The girls and young women who have participated in this review are Bangladeshi and Somali and, at the time of interview, between the ages of 13 and 21. Desk research of records of activities and annual reports, as well as a previous evaluation, was also undertaken.

A feedback session was held on 26 February 2007, attended by seven members of Girls United aged 13 -15. These girls and young women gave feedback on the findings, gave further recommendations and suggested titles for the report. The majority (four of seven) favoured the title ‘Girls Only’.
Sub-projects

As mentioned above, the smaller projects ran for a number of weeks (or even months in the case of the police project) and took the form of a series of activities, in which the girls and young women were able to participate. Below, five of these sub-projects are highlighted as case studies, and illustrate some of the aims, processes and outcomes of the work of Girls United, as well as those of the specific activities.

A. Somali Health Awareness Sub-project - June 2004

Background

This project was conducted in partnership with Tower Hamlets Social Services and Primary Care Trust, and had Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) in the Somali community as a major part of its agenda. This event was attended by Somali women and girls only, and was divided into two workshops, one for girls and young women and one for girls, young women and older women.
The acting project manager at that time led this sub-project, in conjunction with guest speakers from The London Black Women’s Organisation, the PCT, London Royal Hospital, Social Services and Tower Hamlets Education Department. There was a gynaecologist present and a Somali former project worker from Girls United.

The topics covered included

- how FGM was not a custom based in religion but a cultural one
- the effects of FGM, the reversal treatment options that may be available
- legal aspects of FGM
- how the services can be accessed.

The FGM workshops were carried out before the summer holidays because FGM is usually performed during the holidays, when young women are taken abroad.

The first workshop was with the younger women and professionals, where young women were informed of the law and of what options might be open to them. The second workshop was with the younger and older generations of women and professionals, where two Somali facilitators worked in the Somali language.

“There were no men present – none would attend – but the women talked about men and said men were not really happy with the procedure.”  
(Project staff)

“So the older women who came were quite shocked as well … that they can be charged and imprisoned.”  
(Project staff)
The aims of the sub-project were to

1. raise awareness of FGM and the effect it has on young women

2. inform young women and older women of the Female Genital Mutilation Act 2003, whereby transporting a female abroad to undergo FGM became a crime, punishable by up to 14 years imprisonment

3. enable girls and young women to become peer motivators and peer educators on the matter of FGM

4. inform girls and young women what services, including reversal treatment options which can help women who intend to have babies, are available to them and how to access them.

Things that went well

– the project’s perspective

• The young women met a gynaecologist who told them, ‘you can come to us’.

• The older women were saying ‘we should stop’.

• Participants were talking about the issue openly.

• The young women found out about reversal treatment options.

• The second workshop, which included the older generation of women and professionals, was more interactive than the workshop with younger women – it was suggested this was because the older women were more confident and could speak more openly. There were two Somali facilitators, and it was in their language.

• It was good for the Somali women to meet the professionals and vice versa.
Things that did not go so well
– the project’s perspective

- There was concern that even though the older women were saying “we should stop” they still believed in FGM. Nevertheless, it did inform them of the long-term health effects as well as the legal position.

- The project would have preferred it if attendance had been higher.

- It was harder to get the older women together for the second workshop. Although invited, the girls’ and young women’s parents did not attend. Nevertheless, given that there was an older women’s group, they now know each other and can pass information on to each other.

Outcomes

- Over 50 women attended the workshops and, if they did not already know, learned that FGM is not an Islamic practice but a cultural one.

- They learned that there are reversal treatment options available in Tower Hamlets as well as in some other Boroughs, and contact details were given for support and advice.

- They learned about the effect FGM has on women’s health, and that FGM is regarded as child abuse in the UK.

- Through the workshops, which were with two generations of Somali women, the older women heard for the first time that if they take girls and young women abroad for FGM they are breaking the law.

- The workshop offered the girls and young women a voice, in that it enabled them to talk about FGM openly and share their views.
Professionals were able to hear from the girls and young women themselves about how they felt.

“It was good for them to hear from the girls and young women themselves. Workshops about this are often full of professionals.”  
(Project Staff)

Young women’s feedback

“FGM has nothing to do with religion.”  
(20-year-old)

“This new law should be able to stop FGM.”  
(18-year-old)

“The older people should be educated about the heath issues of FGM.”  
(19-year-old)

“This law was new to a majority of young women, they were shocked but at the same time agreed with it.”  
(from the audience at the event)

Older women’s feedback

“I am glad that we women have come together to discuss the issues of FGM once and for all.”  
(36-year-old woman)

“There should be more programmes for the Somali community, more education about FGM and more awareness, and also should know that it’s a sensitive subject and should be dealt with appropriately.”  
(27-year-old woman)

“We as the Somali community are very disappointed to why this new law has not been known to the people, 90% of the population just found out about the new law.”  
(from audience at the event)

“Somali men should be educated in the subject FGM.”  
(from the audience at the event)

Professional feedback

“I found the workshop very hopeful, and needed, but it didn’t target the people it wanted. The older people are the ones that should be targeted and more work should be done with the older people…there should also be more advertising and information.”
Learning points and recommendations

- The project concluded that information should be given out in schools to the parents so that they know that to take a child out of the country for FGM is unlawful. There is a need for general awareness-raising that FGM is illegal, and this process should include advertising and information programmes on the subject.

- There is a need to educate schoolteachers because the girls and young women who have had the procedure may have a problem with PE. The girls and young women said that this information should be given to schools.

- The older people need to be informed more widely about the health issues of FGM.

- Some of the participants said they would like to involve some male representation from the Somali community in future workshops, because they need to be educated in these issues.

- It is hard for the girls and young women alone to speak out on such a sensitive issue. The issue needs to be tackled on a community basis.

“We quickly became aware that it was just a step too much to expect girls and young women to speak up in their communities.”

(Project staff)

B. Forced Marriage Sub-project – August 2005

Background

Sometimes parents, even if they change their perspective on things, feel pressurised to honour marriage agreements they have made a long time ago and as a result some young women may believe they are going to the
parent’s country of origin for a holiday, and find they are expected to marry when they are abroad. In this case, the young woman might be required to stay abroad until her partner has a visa. Alternatively, she may be pressurised to come back to the UK and find employment, in order to earn the money to support the partner initially and bring him to the UK to get a visa. Young women in this situation sometimes get help to run away but, as a result, they become isolated from their community.

There was confusion about the difference between forced and arranged marriage and, because it has been happening for a long time, some participants thought it had some connection with religion.

There can be issues for the young women who become the oldest daughter in a household, where older sisters have already married. The girls and young women have been brought up in the UK, and there may be a big communication gap between themselves and their parents. Without a sister, they may have no-one to talk to. It is accepted that fathers are head of the household.

“Me, I have to help out my mum, I’m the eldest in the house, all the rest are married off” (Participant in focus group)

Some families who are having difficulties with younger children, especially in relation to behaviour which is regarded as unacceptable, may look to marriage as a means of resolution.
The forced marriage workshops

The two workshops were facilitated by Nazmun Choudhury, Project Officer, Tower Hamlets Domestic Violence Project. The age range of the girls and young women who participated was 14 - 16. Staff liaised, where necessary, with parents and sent out letters asking for permission for their daughters to attend.

Techniques used in the workshops included a questionnaire, and video and written materials. Girls and young women worked in pairs and in the wider group.

A Home Office video about girls and young women who were taken to Bangladesh for the purpose of forced marriage was shown. It showed how, with the help of the Home Office, they were able to return to the UK. In such cases, the young women were then provided with housing. There was some discussion among the girls and young women who were present, as they were concerned about how the young women in the video were managing without their community and without parents, who would reject them because they would be ashamed.

Participants were informed what help was available, and how to access it.

The aims of the workshops were to

1. raise awareness and understanding of forced marriage, and its distinction from arranged marriage
2. inform participants that forced marriage was not an Islamic practice
3. inform girls and young women of their legal position and legal remedies, including arrangements in countries abroad
inform them about services available in Tower Hamlets that offer support to threatened or abused women
inform the girls and young women, so that they could recognise forced marriage if they came to experience it.

Things that went well

- Girls and young women found out there was help – but they thought it would still be difficult if they were in a village and their parents had possession of their passport.

“It is difficult to get help if you don’t have support. In the video the girl had a sister. But what if you are on your own?”

- The girls and young women who attended were able to pass the information on to others.

Things that did not go so well

- The trainer and project thought that fewer girls and young women than expected attended.

- The project staff thought some may not have come because of their fear of what their parents might think. “parents will think we (project) are brain washing”.

- As with the FGM sub-project, the project would like to have a male presence at such a workshop should it be held in the future. Some Imams are talking about forced marriage, but the problem is seen to be ‘at ground level’.

- The trainer felt there was “some resistance from Somali young women to the idea that forced marriage happens in their community”, but they did nevertheless listen and take part, and so she felt they took ideas away. (The trainer did add that the practice
of forced marriage happens less in the case of Somali girls and young women).

- The girls and young women were given a booklet about where to get help. This information is also given out in schools in Tower Hamlets, so teachers have information about who can help. None of the participants felt comfortable taking these booklets home, as they did not wish older family members to see them.

- Some girls and young women felt that, although the trainer was informative, she talked too much about the legal position. They would have liked time to reflect on the issues.

**Outcomes**

- The Bangladeshi girls and young women liked the fact that the Somali girls and young women were also involved in this situation, and they realised it was not just an “Asian issue”. (Girls and young women)

- The workshop helped the girls and young women to think about the difference between arranged and forced marriage. (Girls and young women)

- Girls and young women became comfortable and opened up. (Trainer)

- It opened up many other discussions about ‘cultural transitions’ – for instance, generational differences. (Trainer)

- Girls and young women had the opportunity to explore and understand the process of how their existing relationships affect a future marriage, including ones their parents suggest. They could consider how they can involve their parents in a relationship and vice versa, in order that the relationship does not become abusive. (Trainer)
• It provided the girls and young women with a language to be able to describe their experience (Trainer)
• It informed them about their rights and how to use them. (Trainer)
• They became aware that forced marriage was not a religious custom. (Project)(Young women)
• They became aware that the Home Office would help them when they got home. (Project)
• Those who did not know discovered the difference between arranged and forced marriage.
• The trainer says she was alerted to issues for that particular age group. Marriage was not something coming up for them in the near future, but in due course it would.

“So they (parents) are also aware of what the issues are, the issues for their girls and young women, so they can safeguard their girls’ and young women’s interests and how they can best support and protect them as well.” (Trainer)

Learning points and recommendations
- the trainer’s perspective
  • The trainer was from a Bangladeshi background, and suggested that a Somali co-trainer would have been useful.
  • It is important to work with parents as well on this issue.
  • From the project’s perspective, mediation can be the solution. The young person’s safety is what comes first. Sometimes, there can be violence, honour killings.

- the girls’ and young women’s perspective
• The girls and young women think there should be more information on TV.

• They need their parents to be informed on these matters, and would welcome training that involved their parents.

• They too felt that it would be helpful to involve some male representation from the communities so that men too would be aware of these issues.

• “We needed our parents there because it is their generation (that perpetuates this)”  
  (Girls and young women)

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**Comments from girls and young women made through focus groups and questionnaires**

“We had a forced marriage workshop which was interesting because I didn’t know the difference between forced and arranged marriage.”

“It has given us more courage to talk to people about these subjects - like forced marriage. When you hear about (it) you can show you know more. I never speak to my mum about that – it’s embarrassing.”

“I've spoken to my friends about forced marriage.”

“I've spoken about it to my brothers and sisters.”

“Somali girls and young women (were) involved – not just Asians.”

“(facilitator) talked too much – most of what she talked about was the legal side of it. Not much about how a young woman feels.”
Background

Members of Girls United took part in the making of a short film about identity, image and a concept of beauty based on skin colour and the use of skin bleaching products.

In an interview, the senior project worker described how, in Bangladesh and Somalia, the common image of beauty is to be ‘fair skinned’. This is a cultural pressure on young women and many of them use skin lightening products such as ‘Fair’ and ‘Lovely’. Skin lightening products can damage not only the skin, but also physical health. It is thought that young women who habitually use such products may have low self-esteem and lack self-confidence. The film project aimed to challenge such concepts of beauty, and to allow the girls and young women to explore their feelings and views on the issue. The workshops were facilitated by a freelance Bangladeshi film maker, Sanchita Islam. Interestingly, none of the participants in the workshop used skin lightening products but, in their DVD, they did describe this cultural pressure on them.

“You know it is always the mother’s fault if the child is dark – why didn’t she get her mother’s colour?”. If I was told that by my brother I would be upset. I wish more girls and young women and more persons would talk about these issues”.

(Project worker)

“It is so stereotypical, my family are educated but this thing is still there. The bride is beautiful – she’s got light skin”.

(Project worker)
The aims of the workshop were to

1. challenge the concept of beauty based on light skin
2. raise the awareness of girls and young women of the damaging effects of skin bleaching
3. encourage girls and young women to engage in a creative process with a facilitator who is a film maker and learn about the film-making process
4. encourage girls and young women to express their views
5. enjoy being photographed and on camera
6. be participatory and establish a dialogue, involving the girls and young women throughout.

Things that went well

– the facilitator’s perspective

• The workshop enabled the girls and young women to talk about an issue they do not generally talk about.

• They learned about the damaging effects that bleaching products can have on the skin.

• Participants learned new skills, including photography, and participated in the film-making process.

– the girls’ and young women’s perspective

• The girls and young women who made the DVD said they enjoyed the experience, and felt they had worked hard.

• They felt it gave them an opportunity to question their own ways of thinking.
Things that did not go so well

- Project staff reported that, at the initial meeting, 10 to 15 girls and young women were present but, when it came to making the DVD, most of the girls and young women did not want to be in it. Three young women agreed to take part.

- The facilitator wanted someone who had direct experience of bleaching their skin to participate, but no-one came forward.

- The girls and young women enjoyed the process, but felt they wanted the DVD to feel like a more “finished” item.

Outcomes

“Although (they spoke) about own experiences, because some of the girls and young women were not fair, what their experiences were, was of the obsession of being white in Bangladesh, Somalia, why that is – it went beyond this whole notion of skin bleaching and just this whole notion of image and beauty, and the fact that there aren’t enough role models – you don’t see Somali women on the cover of Vogue or Bangladeshi women on Elle, and why is that?”  
(Facilitator)

“People don’t talk about it but it gave us a reason to point out our views”.
(Focus group)

- From the project’s viewpoint, the members made a film, learnt new skills including photography as well as participating in the film-making process.

- They developed their self-confidence.

- They learned that such preparations are generally bad for the skin but if they do want to use them it is necessary to buy them from a proper shop.  
(Project)

- The girls and young women decided beauty comes from within.  
(Girls and young women)
• Sanchita Islam was a good role model – the girls and young women were impressed by her. She showed them some things about the techniques of filming. (Project)

• The skin bleaching and the lightness of skin issues became conscious concerns they could examine and discuss (rather than being accepted as a normal value). (Girls and young women)

Learning points and recommendations

• Parents should have their own workshop. As with forced marriage, it is an issue people do not want to talk about, and one that is largely perpetuated by an older generation. (Girls and young women)

• There was little difference between Bangladeshi and Somali girls and young women in relation to the issues – to be beautiful is to be fair in both communities. (Facilitator)

• It would have been good to have a workshop of females and males. The problem might be that males would feel obliged to be diplomatic and avoid addressing the issues. (Project staff)

Girls’ and young women’s comments on the ‘SKIN’ project

“We shouldn’t be happy with people disowning themselves” (Focus group)

“I did a skin project…people bleaching their skin, putting themselves down because they are dark. They compare themselves (to others)” (Focus group)

“(it was about) Are we happy with who we are?” (Focus group)

“We get to actually question ourselves” (Focus group)

“The only disappointment was there was no introduction (on DVD) and no names of the cast… It would be off-putting to outsiders” (Focus group)
“We needed our parents – we knew these things but it’s our parents need convincing” (Focus group)

“That would be good – someone Bengali to explain to parents” (also for marriage) (Focus group)

D. Series of Design Workshops – June to July 2006

The members took part in a research and design sub-project, which included T-shirt design and decoration, fabric printing and researching and gathering information on historical Asian and African costumes, colour and fabric design. A day trip was organised for the girls and young women to visit the Victoria & Albert Museum, Oxford Street and Covent Garden to explore Asian and African influences on present-day fashion. The design project was held over a period of six weeks, and was mainly facilitated by a staff member with art and design skills. The members presented their work during “An Afternoon with Girls United” in August 2006. This was held for parents, local service providers, funders and a local councillor, along with the special presentation of a cheque from Jack Petchey, to celebrate the work of Girls United.

The aims of the work were to

1. explore the influence of Eastern design on Western fashion
2. research this impact on design through visits to museums and shops as well as on-line
3. learn creative skills
4. use a mixture of art materials
5. assist each participant to design and decorate a T-shirt
6. showcase the results of the work.

**Things that went well**

- The girls and young women were enthusiastic about the visits.
- They enjoyed being together in one group.
- They enjoyed an activity-based sub-project.

**Things that did not go so well**

- Although most parents were proud, there may have been a lack of encouragement on the part of one or two parents.

> “I felt embarrassed. Mum looked in my wardrobe and saw it (the T-shirt) and started laughing her head off”

(Young woman participant)

**Outcomes**

- Members learned new skills and designed their own T-shirt.  
  (Project)
- They had a trip to the V&A and other places of interest.  
  (Project)
- They received a Certificate of Achievement from The Children’s Society’s Director of Children and Young People’s Services.  
  (Project)
- Parents were very impressed because they presented at the event – they were also impressed by the T-shirts. They did not know their daughters could do things like that.  
  (Project)
• The girls and young women wanted the workshops to continue, as they wanted to carry on making cushions and other things.

  (Girls and young women)

• The girls and young women would like more of these creative activities.

  (Girls and young women)

• This was one of the most popular activities, especially with the girls and young women in the younger focus group.

  (Girls and young women)

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Learning points and recommendations

• The younger group were able to respond more positively to an activity-based sub-project.

• The girls and young women preferred to work as a whole group.

• They recommend more arts/crafts based activities and ‘practical’ work.

• They respond well to activities that include trips, especially as many of them are unable to get out of Tower Hamlets.

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Girls’ and young women’s comments on the fashion and design sub-project

“(It was) really fun and creative, we got to go to a museum.”

“I designed my own T-shirt and received a certificate.”

“The best part when we come here we’d go on trips.”

“(It was) wicked we looked at different designs, materials, patterns and went to a garden.”

“(It was) very creative we got to use different materials, paint and fabric and used the Internet.”
Background

The Metropolitan Police film project explored issues including gender and race, and offered an insight into the different career opportunities that the Metropolitan Police can offer minority ethnic young women. This longer project involved a freelance film producer and three project workers, and gave rise to a DVD entitled ‘does blue suit me?’. A school community police officer co-ordinated the arrangements within the Metropolitan Police for Girls United to interview and film female employees of the Met about their roles within the organisation. Between three and eight girls and young women were involved per session. The participants interviewed police officers and civilian staff - high ranking, community support, office-based, air support unit, and airport (armed) officers. They interviewed the highest ranking female Asian officer in the force. They also collected the views of young people in the streets about police and took these back to a Superintendent. The girls and young women chose the themes for the interviews: ‘What’s it like for women in a male-dominated job’ and also ‘What’s it like for ethnic minority women working in a white-dominated job?’ The film-making workshops involved

- Monday after-school workshops – mainly at the premises of Girls United
- training sessions, which included watching other videos and filming each other
• going out on location – shoots in police stations and at the airfield

• reviewing and editing.

The aims of the project were to

1. break down barriers and challenge stereotypes that there is a racist male-dominated culture of the police, as well as stereotypes about Bangladeshi and Somali girls and young women

2. use a camera and produce a DVD that will be used by police in community relations and recruitment, and would also be used by The Children’s Society to show how they are managing to work with other organisations

3. introduce girls and young women, who have no knowledge of the police, to the police

4. enable the girls and young women to hold a camera and get familiar with editing.

Things that went well

• The girls and young women were excited about being taken to see a police helicopter and going to the airport to meet women who were armed police officers.

• They enjoyed the interviewing processes and confronting new situations.

• “We went on a police boat, went to see the police horses and interviewed the police.” A number of girls and young women thought the police boat was the best part of the process.

• They thought that “interviewing our parents about the police in their country (was fun)”. 
• Producer said the co-ordination was good. (This was praise for the Metropolitan Police co-ordinator).

• According to the producer, smaller crews of two to three maximum worked well. This conflicted with the desire of the participants to be in one group (see below)

• Producer felt she managed to keep participants’ interest in editing, a process from which young people often tune out.

Things that did not go so well

• From the producer’s perspective, the girls and young women were occasionally antagonistic towards each other – but she described this as normal teen behaviour.

• For her, the groups were sometimes too large. On the other hand, from the project’s perspective, there had been some difficulty because of the numbers that could work on editing. It meant that the girls and young women had to be split up. This caused some friction as the girls and young women wanted to do everything together.

• The girls and young women were concerned that women wear the same police uniform as men, “men’s trousers”. There was also a new hat for Muslim women which they thought looked like a Sikh turban.

• The questions were scripted and, on the day, some of the participants wanted to ask their own questions.

• Some of the girls and young women expressed boredom with the editing process (although they later said they appreciated having learned this).
“Some (of us) were naughty because the editing was boring when the basic project filming was really interesting. But when we got to the editing bit …..”

• A senior police officer said the girls and young women expressed embarrassment about having the DVD shown at school, as they were concerned about being teased.

• From the police perspective it would have been good to have had more cooperation from the police.

• There was an issue for the police in setting boundaries for the young women – there were some difficulties in managing the group.

Outcomes
– the police perspective
• (The police were exposed to) able, feisty, go-getting young women” – they made the police aware of how able they are. (Police)

• The police achieved their aim of ‘interacting with faith communities and of successfully supporting a project for young women’. There was a real learning process for officers. (Police)

“It will be good to show the DVD to other young women and say ‘This is a group of young women who took the initiative and made things happen, and you could do it too.’”  (Police)

• The project touched a small number of young women, but there is the potential for them to speak to others about the experience. (Police)

• Projects opened up relationships with mothers. Mothers became less resistant to the idea of girls and young women becoming police officers. (Police)

• It broadened young women’s views and now they’ve seen a “human side” to the police. (Police)
• They have seen that women police officers can have families. This insight might be extended to other careers. (Police)

• They may have taken away a perception that women of their own faith are performing roles that they thought were potentially against that faith. (Police)

• The police officer hoped the girls and young women would become a bit more daring, as their confidence is boosted. (Police)

• The police officer felt it was an honour to work with the group. (Police)

**Police quotes**

“This is not just a DVD we’ll put away, this is something we’ll actively use in youth clubs and internally”.

“They’re in a position to say: ‘Well actually I went to see the police’ … and they’ll be able to say: “Well actually I can tell you about that first hand … we interviewed a female officer … and she said ‘Actually I am quite happy in the police.’ They can pass that information on. That makes more of an impact rather than me saying it.”

“Sometimes you think: ‘We’re touching such a few people at a time’, but hopefully the knock-on effect will be positive”.

— the producer's perspective

• Over a period of time, the girls’ and young women’s views changed. At the outset, no young women would have considered joining the police but, during the course of the project, their attitude softened. They had changed their attitude towards the police and would now call on them. (Producer)

• Meeting the armed female officers made the girls and young women think differently about the police – the helicopter and the boat impressed them. It helped them reconsider roles that may be open to women.
• Towards the end, the young women enjoyed being serious and saying things to camera. The film process itself, and learning about the wider media industry, suggested future careers, from make-up artists to accountants and directors.

• The young women chose to investigate the police from their particular angle, and there is a permanent record of it – so to this degree, they had a voice.

- the girls’ and young women’s perspective

• The girls and young women enjoyed meeting each other.

“(It) helped us speak out more – ask questions” (Girls)

• It broadened their perspective on what jobs and roles might be open to them.

• It changed their views about the police.

• Although they were not particularly positive about the editing process in the focus group, a number of girls and young women were very positive at the feedback session about the learning experience from this.

“I learned how to do editing that would help me if I wanted to work in media” (Girls)

Learning points and recommendations

– the producer’s perspective

• According to the producer, it was usually good not having too many girls and young women on the same day. It was important to get the right mix, but she did not know how it would work until she went out with them.

• While engaging in this kind of work, some girls and young women need one-to-one attention.
Girls and young women liked Girls United generally because they chose what they could do, but this piece of work came with a remit, within which the workshop leaders and girls and young women worked. This was hard at times.

It was a good idea to have alternative activities, such as arts and crafts, for those days when too many turned up – that worked well.

“If they had a real problem now, they wouldn’t be scared to call the police and explain it to them”.

“They haven’t really verbalised it but it inevitably opens up other careers options, such as the Met Police, or helicopter, or in films”

“Viewing television slightly more critically – that everything is constructed, nothing is just ‘as is’ on TV”.

(Producer)

—the police perspective

Because some girls and young women later claimed they thought the DVD was just for them, the police pointed out the importance of clarity at the outset about the use of the DVD. There were issues for the participants about being visible on screen. There is a need to make those issues clear, and subject to consent.

The most important learning for the police was to think ‘outside the box’. They wanted to engage with young people and had to do it in an innovative way.

“There was some real learning about that this was a job that they could conceivably do, and that there are some great role models for women and minority women in the organisation who are able to do that”.

“There were questions that hadn’t been asked before. From either side. I don’t think the police have asked themselves why ethnic minority women do not want to join the police. Hopefully some of those questions will have been answered and it will be useful for us.”

(Police)
“They asked one of the sergeants: ‘Do you have any friends that aren’t police officers. She laughed and said: ‘Most of my friends aren’t police officers. Those kinds of preconceptions that police officers go around in packs or gangs. They’ve seen a human side.” (Police)

– the project’s perspective

Given the situation that only a few at a time could work on editing, a project worker suggested that “If we’d had more workers we could have all gone out and met up at the end of the day”.

– the girls’ and young women’s perspective

Although at first they were negative about the experience, a number of participants later celebrated the fact that they had learned to edit. This implies that reflections on, and feedback from, an event can change over time.

Girls’ and young women’s voices

“We experienced life of the police, what they deal with every day.”

“We had a negative (view) of the police, not many of us had good views, its now the reverse.”

“I would like to be a lawyer or a police woman.”

“(We) learned that police officers are nice people and they’re really not judgmental about what people look like.”
Other activities where girls and young women gave feedback

Other activities, about which the participants have commented, include presentation skills, a consultation on Youth services and a make-up workshop.

A. Presentation, report writing and interview techniques – August 2004

A number of previous members said, in telephone interviews, how much they had enjoyed this workshop. They felt they benefited greatly from the presentation skills. They interviewed leading people in Tower Hamlets and The Children’s Society’s leader on diversity strategy.

“(I) felt very important interviewing local MP and local councillor and making visit to the police station”

“We were able to do practical work, not just training. (It was good) to be able to carry out an interview with the local MP, Leader of the Council, Tower Hamlets Mayor and visit Bethnal Green Police Station”

A former project worker and acting project manager suggested that the outcome was that they

- met adults they did not normally meet
• initiated two-way communication where the adults also learned a lot.

Workers carried out an evaluation with the ‘decision makers’, who said the process had given them opportunities to hear young people’s point of view.

B. Consultation on Youth Services and Facilities in London – October 2005

Members took part in a consultation run by The Children’s Society’s Children and Neighbourhoods project, a London Youth Consultation. This work was commissioned by the London Assembly to research young people’s access to quality youth services and facilities. A member of Girls United joined with other young people to present Londoner’s views on youth services to the London Assembly Health and Public Services committee.

“I was able to express my feelings and present the youth report to the Health and Public Service Committee. I felt very excited that I was given the opportunity to visit the Mayor’s office (London) and was presented to very important people. It was amazing to see the building.”

C. Make-up – July 2005

This workshop included a step-by-step demonstration of skin cleansing and how to apply make-up suitable for day and evening. The girls and young women were given an opportunity to practise on themselves and
each other. Some of them commented that it was their favourite workshop.
Girls United

Girls United – an overview

- the professionals’ perspective

- Professionals felt that Girls United successfully provided a space for Bangladeshi and Somali girls and young women to develop and express their views, through enquiry and discussion.

- They saw Girls United as a means of educating other members of the community, as young women were able to pass on their learning.

- While the project worked with a relatively small number of young women on each activity, the decision makers and professionals who were targeted in those activities often came into contact with the views of girls and young women from these communities for the first time. The girls and young women therefore represented Bangladeshi and Somali girls and young women to institutions.

- The project provided a space for Muslim girls and young women whose parents would not wish them to attend mixed youth provision. The experiences they had during the project changed their views about the roles that may be open to women, and the possible career choices they could make. The girls and young women gained confidence.
Girls and young women have been enabled to gain a better understanding of their rights.

They have had an opportunity to develop the ability to make informed choices.

The girls and young women went to new places, including environments of power, and broadened their horizons. They gained practical skills – such as video camera use and media awareness.

Professionals hoped that increased confidence would enable

- assertiveness around key issues, such as forced marriage
- new horizons in terms of aspirations regarding jobs and suitable careers
- more confidence in the public sphere.

It was thought that the situation for girls and young women in Tower Hamlets had undergone some improvement.

"The issues that were prevalent in 2004 are not as visible now…. Those girls and young women have now moved on. I'm assuming that those girls and young women have got the confidence that they gained through Girls United and the skills they have gained have equipped them to get better out of life"

(former Girls United Project worker)

They generally felt that the kind of work done by Girls United could be replicated and developed across the Borough for girls and young women.

Some praised it as the only project of its kind in Tower Hamlets, bringing together minority ethnic young women on the basis of voice.

Some external professionals thought that longer term funding, beyond three years, was needed.
Projects around voice are successful when they are culturally sensitive, without being hidebound by stereotypes about the constraints of culture.

What the girls and young women said they valued most about Girls United

- They gained confidence.
- They learned new skills.
- Their experiences opened up new possibilities in terms of career choices.
- It changed their views.
- It was fun as well as, at times, hard work.
- They met people they would not otherwise have met.
- They had the opportunity to go on trips, and visit places outside Tower Hamlets – something they could not generally afford to do.
- Somali and Bangladeshi girls mixed with each other and celebrated the opportunity to do so.
- They were able to use their voices to influence policy and service provision for young people in the Borough.
- It helped them speak out more and ask questions.
- It was a safe place.
Girls’ and young women’s voices on Girls United

“(It was) a mixed group of two cultures that are the same religiously but different in culture and getting to know about others and making friends.”

“Giving an opportunity for young girls to go out of Tower Hamlets and a girls-only project.”

“It’s our project.”

“(I) experienced new things I’ve never seen before.”

“We know it’s safe and close.”

“Now every Monday I’m going to stay at home bored.”

“Getting to know others, socialising, different points of view.”

“Learning more, more laid back and fun than school.”

“I feel confident about speaking in groups.”

“More courage to talk about subjects with other people.”

“I feel confident in speaking in groups now… it helps especially in college. It has given us more courage to talk to other people about those subjects like forced marriage. When you hear about it you can show you know more.”
Shared views about future work

Recommendations made by professionals and young people

• Professionals universally expressed concern over the lack of engagement of girls in Local Authority youth projects. Girls United members and professionals felt strongly that, if Girls United could not continue, there should be similar provision for girls and young women.

• They agreed on the need to provide activities that were interesting for girls in particular, so more girls would come.

• External professionals, Girls United staff and members all suggested working with parents as well.

• They suggested that girls and young women need a safe place to go to, and support to talk about personal issues – access to counselling and advice.

• A number of professionals agreed with the girls and young women that the time allotted to them by mixed gender services should be the same as that allotted to boys and young men. There is a need to have a service available that is appropriate for girls.
• They thought that information (both written and verbal) needed to be provided in Bengali and Somali, so that parents would be informed about where their daughters were going and reassured that it was a safe place. There is a need for staff from Bangladeshi and Somali backgrounds, so they can speak to parents who cannot speak English.

• Transport issues were repeatedly mentioned, as parents worry about their daughters’ safety at night in Tower Hamlets.

• Mixed gender services need to offer equal access for girls and boys. In order to establish this equality, there is a need for separate, well-thought out provision to enable Muslim girls and young women to participate.

• Work is being carried out locally in schools to give young people access to training schemes, but there need to be initiatives regarding job opportunities and training for girls and young women, making links with Canary Wharf.

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**Key recommendations from the girls and young women for statutory and voluntary youth agencies in Tower Hamlets**

• Some facilities are currently concentrated in particular areas – there needs to be a more evenly distributed provision, at least one club in every area. Without transport and liaison with parents, who would not otherwise allow them to go, what is available is not accessible to them.

• Clubs need to be held before dark, because some girls and young women are not allowed out – also, most of them do not have time with college commitments. They should start at 4 pm in winter and 5.30 pm in summer.
• There is a specific need for single sex provision for some girls to be able to participate. They suggest that access to mixed gender facilities should be equal in terms of the percentage of time available to them – girls could have their own days.

• There is a need for sports provision for girls and young women – football, and fitness centre sessions, for example. Muslim girls need to have separate swimming sessions for parents to allow them to go.

“Equal opportunities because if the project is based in a youth centre then the girls and boys should be able to use the centre on an equal basis. Not four days for boys and one day for girls.”

• Staff who can speak Bengali and Somali (so they can communicate verbally and in writing with parents who do not speak English).

• Opportunities for parents to be involved, so they receive training on issues like FGM, attitudes to skin bleaching and forced and arranged marriage. They are the generation who perpetuate these things.

• They should have different nights for parents and their children as well, even if just for an hour - “Most mothers are stuck at home”. This should include opportunities for mothers to learn English.

“They will be more willing for girls to go if they (parents) are getting something out of it. Then they could help girls with homework”

• Girls like activities that are fun as well as educational.

• Practical activities – more art and drama activities.

• Free trips are an encouragement to participate.

• They like activity-based sub-projects.

“Things that are active instead of sitting in one place”
• There should be TV advertising - more about youth work on ITV, Asian channels and in newspapers.

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II Girls United are proud that one of their former members has recently been elected as Deputy Young Mayor of Tower Hamlets.
Final words from girls and young women when they were asked what they had gained from Girls United

“(It) helped us ask questions.”

“(It) helped us speak out more.”

“(it gave me) more courage to talk about subjects with other people.”

“I feel confident about speaking in groups.”

“(It gave me) confidence and (I) was able to go out of the house and meet people”

“Getting to know others, socialising, different points of view.”

“(It offered) a mixed group of two cultures that are the same religiously but different in culture and getting to know about others and making friends.”

“(It gave the) opportunity for young girls to go out of Tower Hamlets and a girls only project.”

“I have experienced new things I’ve never seen before.”

“It’s our project.”

“We know it’s safe and close.”

“Learning more, more laid back and fun than school.”

“It helped me for college as we do a lot of group work.”

“I was able to express my feelings and present the youth report to the Health and Public Service Committee. I felt very excited that I was given the opportunity to visit the Mayor’s office (London) and was presented to very important people. It was amazing to see the building.”

“I would like to be a lawyer or a policewoman.”