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Putting Identity and Inclusion at the Heart of Gender–Equality Work

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Introduction

On 11 October, we mark the eighth annual International Day of the Girl, a global celebration created to raise awareness of the challenges and triumphs of girls around the world and increase their equal access to opportunities. In part, it advocates for dismantling specific areas of gender-based inequalities such as access to education, employment, legal rights, and protection from discrimination and gender-based violence.

While the fight for gender equality is global, it can be easy to focus on the global south. In fact, the UK lags behind many EU states in its efforts to tackle this issue,¹ as illuminated in Plan International UK's 2020 study on the state of women and girls in the UK. Its survey of more than 1,000 girls aged 14 to 21 showed that 60 per cent believe men are treated better than women in the UK. These girls noticed differences in treatment in the media (72 per cent), at school (41 per cent) and even at home (22 per cent).² Furthermore, studies show that gender inequality is heightened for women who face other forms of inequality – such as racial or religious discrimination.³ This is why, as with many complex social challenges, an intersectional approach is needed to tackle the roots of inequality.

So, What Can Be Done to Address Gender Inequality in the UK?

In all its forms, inequality and its impact on peaceful co-existence is one of the core global challenges that the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change was set up to tackle. This report provides a summary of four years of delivering the Compass project, which set out to understand and address some of the systemic barriers to social integration faced by young ethnic minority women growing up in the UK.

The project was conceived in 2016 by a secondary-school teacher in East London, who had witnessed the aftermath of the decision made by three young women from Bethnal Green to travel to Syria to join ISIS in 2015. Like others, she wondered what had led these young women to this decision and what could be done to prevent more young women being radicalised. Since those early days, the counter-extremism sector has learned a lot about the gender-based push and pull factors driving radicalisation, such as academic and family pressures, systemic barriers to accessing work and education opportunities, broader social discrimination and an individual lacking a sense of purpose and belonging.⁴ This combination of factors can make young people vulnerable to a variety of outcomes, including long-term unemployment, sustained deprivation, domestic violence, poor mental health and susceptibility to extreme narratives fuelled by these grievances. The radicalisation of women in what was a male-dominated conflict was often overlooked, or the women involved painted as passive victims rather than active agents of their own decisions.⁵

The Compass Approach

Keen to contribute to the nascent evidence base on gendered approaches to preventing extremism and promoting social cohesion,⁶ Compass set about understanding the interconnected and complex challenges that young women experience during transition to adulthood as part of a minority community in the UK. Its aim was to generate evidence-based policy recommendations on how to improve these young women's chances of meaningful participation and belonging in UK society. To do this, we took an intersectional approach to engage families, schools, higher-education establishments and future employers in the journey.

At the heart of Compass was the mentoring of young women aged 14 to 15 with a bespoke curriculum designed to support them during a critical juncture in their academic journey – beginning their GCSEs and making decisions about their future careers. This package of support exposed them to a diverse range of inspiring female mentors who could help them to learn and grow. The mentoring activities focused on improving competencies such as self-awareness, confidence, sense of belonging and critical thinking skills. The project was structured around three main components:

- **Raising and broadening aspirations.** This is not to say the young women we would come to work with were not ambitious already – they were. In fact, we wanted to capitalise on that hunger to succeed by providing access to knowledge about further education and career options they may not have known existed.
- **Dismantling barriers to further education and career choices.** We wanted young women and their families to be informed of the realities so they could navigate access to opportunities. This meant collaborating with universities to design and deliver bespoke workshops about higher education and do campus visits.
- **Understanding identities.** Early design discussions with young women made it clear we needed to embrace discussions about multiple facets of identity and create activities that enabled the young women to explore their sense of self, reflect on concepts of gender, race and religion, and share the real and perceived barriers experienced growing up as someone with an intersectional identity in 21st century Britain.

Growth of the Project

In its first year, Compass worked with 51 young women from four schools in East London. After four years, we had reached just under 500 young women from eight schools in two cities thanks to critical partnerships with committed organisations.

- To provide access to young women, we worked with eight schools⁷ from London and Luton, situated in some of the most deprived areas of the UK, including Tower Hamlets, Newham, Redbridge and Brent. Our schools have been essential to the project's success, trusting us in the early days when we were establishing our approach and championing the project when we wanted to grow and evolve.
- Four universities⁸ worked with us to help overcome communication barriers that prevent students from ethnic minority and low-income backgrounds from having knowledge about and access to the best universities, apprenticeships and work experience. After these sessions, 79 per cent of parents said they felt more confident in helping their daughter overcome potential barriers to higher education.
- To recruit volunteer mentors, we worked with a range of public and private sector organisations.⁹ We trained and retained 179 professional women as mentors, with many volunteering over several years. In total, these women volunteered 1,228 mentoring hours. Two schools also benefitted from having their mentoring sessions in the offices of Clifford Chance Law Firm, providing students with exposure to a professional working environment.

Compass was an adaptive project, meaning its monitoring, evaluating and learning practices have been central to how we learned about the impact of the activities and flexed the design based on regular feedback and evaluation findings. Based on our analysis of four years of data, we found three consistent themes. First, exposure to a diverse group of mentors can inspire young women to broaden their horizons; second, that exploring your identity and feeling more confident in your own skin is crucial to feeling happier and believing you are capable of success; and finally, that young women need to be supported to feel able to step out of their comfort zone and be heard. These emerging lessons are explained in more detail below.

Exposure to Diverse Role Models Helps to Shape Aspirations

A critical obstacle to achieving gender equality is the underrepresentation of women in positions of power and influence.¹⁰ As long as women – especially those from underprivileged backgrounds – are not represented, the rising generation will fail to see themselves reflected and this acts as a barrier to them believing it is possible.

We found that exposing young women to a pool of diverse role models helps to broaden their horizons of what is possible. We used a group mentoring model, with each group of 12 young women mentored by six professionals. The mentees benefitted from building relationships with women from different backgrounds who had navigated their own challenges based on religious beliefs, ethnicities, age and gender to achieve their own goals. Hearing these stories helped our students' concerns feel relatable and surmountable, as reflected by feedback from the mentees:

"It has helped me understand how and why men and women are treated differently. Not only has it helped me reflect on my own personality and identity, but it has also given me an insight on what I want my future to be and what to expect as a young woman."

"It has opened many opportunities concerning my future, by meeting many motivational, wonderful women who have opened my eyes to the sheer number of possibilities that I have that I would never have had even shed a thought on."

Case Study

One young British Somali woman from Brent told us at the beginning of the project that she didn't realise that a woman could be an engineer. Days later, she met one – and was positively surprised that *"a black woman can be an engineer"*. She said, *"Compass makes it seem easier and more possible to achieve what you want, getting the degrees and careers you want, how every career can be for everyone. For example, engineering is normally associated with men, but the mentor made it seem possible that women can do it as well."* Stereotypical views of gender roles were reflected by the majority of young women at the start of their involvement in the project. They had fixed ideas about roles suited to men and women (eg, male jobs being those in the fields of tech, engineering, construction, politics, architecture). Consistently, at the end of the intervention we found that young women had less binary views about careers based on gender. As one young woman said: *"This project made me see that the characteristics that [are associated with] males can also be seen within females as well, like females are STRONG! INDEPENDENT! BRAVE! ALL EQUAL!"*

As well as exposure to role models, the mentoring sessions provided complementary practical skills designed to support the young women as they transition to the workplace. The mentoring sessions offered a safe space to practice interview questions, to visualise their aspirations and plan actions to achieving them and discuss key areas of personal growth. In our final year, 96 per cent of participants said they gained a new competency through the project, specifically increased confidence, better communication, social and interpersonal skills and interview skills. Mentees reflected that: *"I have a clearer idea of what I need to do in order to achieve my goal"*, and *"I identified what I struggle with and how to fix that"*. Overall, 73 per cent of the final-year students believed they had become more confident in achieving their personal and professional goals as a result of the

project. One said: *"I'm even more passionate about changing society views on us females. Breaking down barriers. Made me more comfortable being a woman. Making me so proud to be a female. Not letting anyone tell me I can't do something because I'm a female."*

Exploring Identity Is Empowering

Our project resources and training content was designed to effectively engage young women to unpack the concept of intersectional identities, belonging and self-acceptance. This aimed to help participants identify and champion the benefits of multi-faceted, dynamic identities and learn from one another in a safe space where judgement was suspended, all questions were welcome and vulnerability was encouraged as the route to compassion and self-worth. We heard participating young women discussing similarities and contrasts between their ethnic identities, referring to the intersection of the cultural norms and practices of their parents' countries of birth and the UK, where they were born. We heard that, in many ways, they were juggling two sets of expectations and aspirations. This included for example balancing cultural norms of women's roles at home against a context of British cultural practices experienced through their school and social lives.

Compass aimed to explore the relationship between identity and empowerment as one of the key evaluation questions at the start of the project. We wanted to understand the link between feeling empowered and confident, and whether this could lead to someone feeling more valued by and actively wanting to participate in society. Our data suggests that young women who understand who they are and who feel more confident in their own skin are better able to articulate their aspirations and are more motivated to achieve them, including overcoming any obstacles they may face. One student reflected on the positive impact that exposure to her mentors had on her perception of identity-based barriers: *"Some of the mentors spoke about how they overcame cultural barriers and how got they were they are. That was interesting, especially when they came from similar backgrounds. It was eye-opening."* Our content on intersectional identity aimed to help participants understand that identity has many aspects and can change over time. At the end of our final year, 93 per cent of mentees felt that Compass had increased their awareness of different aspects of identity. Data across the four years consistently shows that exploring their identity increases students' confidence to pursue their aspirations because it helps breakdown barriers and misconceptions. As one student said, *"This session helped me to feel more open about my identity and that more people should be breaking stereotypes and not letting them define us."* Another reflected on how Compass helped her think about the concept of identity: *"That's something that links people together, makes them realise that it does have value in some way, and we are different but are special in every single way."*

We also explored identity in last component of the project, in which the young women were connected with inspirational female role models, including a Senior Programme Manager who works in Silicon

Valley, a Nigerian motivational speaker and businesswoman and an American academic, author and politician, with similar intersectional identities via videoconferences. These opportunities aimed to expose young people to success stories from a range of contexts and give them a chance to ask questions and share their own hopes and fears. Following this activity, one young woman reflected that: *“People make us think [certain aspects of] our identity are burdens. Compass has helped us realise they’re not.”*

Stepping Outside of Your Comfort Zone to Find Your Voice

As the project evolved, our volunteer mentors became increasingly courageous in challenging the young women they were mentoring, supporting them to step outside of their comfort zone in order to grow. Our mentors were trained to deliver activities such as “circles of influence” (an exercise that helps participants to prioritise where to invest their energies). In the final year, 94 per cent of mentors said they had developed and enhanced their skillset through participation in the project, citing communication, teamwork, empathy, facilitation and leadership. As our mentors developed, so did the young women. When asked about the biggest change that she identified in herself, one young woman said: *“Stepping outside of my comfort zone. I was new in this country. Because of Compass, I learned to believe in myself.”*

For many of our participants, fear of being judged and of failure was a constant barrier to their own progression – so we included content that advocated “feeling the fear and doing it anyway”. We took them on trips outside of their local community with visits to university campuses, the London Southbank’s [Women of the World Festival](#) and corporate office spaces. In the third year of delivery we also delivered a two-day Advocacy Workshop which enabled 50 young women to participate in a tour of the Houses of Parliament, sessions about creating change and public speaking, and a panel discussion with influential women in policy. A more subtle approach was to include them in the design of the project itself. We always asked their opinions about things (from naming the project to feeding back on the content) and we always listened. One young woman from George Green school said: *“They told us that even if we don’t get it, you can still try. Even if you fail, you still had a go, you learn from your mistakes, and do better at it. Even if you go for a career, if you don’t get it, you shouldn’t just give up but keep trying to get into it and be resilient.”*

What we didn’t predict was the bond that formed within some the mentoring groups, between both the mentors and the young women, seeing them championing each other and praising without being prompted. Our mentors told us that over time their mentees were finding connections and friendships where previously there were none, for example: *“The girls were more open than last time. They asked questions of the mentors and didn’t object too much to sharing their thoughts – even if we prompted them to share, they didn’t resist.”* This is a testimony to the safe space, free of judgement, that our mentors created, as reflected by one mentee who said: *“I feel as though I’m being heard, instead of just being listened*

to. *I'm not as alone as I think I am.*" We heard from teachers that the students taking part in Compass became more comfortable speaking up in class. We heard from the young women that they were stepping into leadership roles at their school and pushing themselves out of their comfort zone in a way that they wouldn't have before the project. We saw young women move beyond goal setting into taking action, reaching out about work experience or asking for support with campaigns they wanted to run in their schools. We also had mentors putting themselves forward for promotions they wouldn't have otherwise considered.

Integration Is Not a One-Way Street

Increasing the understanding of our mentors and partner organisations about the realities and challenges that women from minority backgrounds face in terms of accessing education and employment opportunities was a key outcome of the project. Our partners were acutely aware of the need to engage this demographic to increase the diversity of their student bodies and workforces. They just lacked detailed understanding of the issues these women face and know-how on how, practically, to make a difference. Participating in the project undoubtedly gave mentors skills in communication and relationship building which are valuable to their career development. But participation also gave employers insight into the untapped potential of the talent pool of young ethnic minority women. At the end of the final year, 58 per cent of mentors indicated that their awareness of the challenges faced by young black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) women had increased through their participation in Compass. One mentor (who participated for three years) said that she now realised: "*The underrepresentation in society and the media,*" and, "*the complexity of their [young women's] identity, that is challenging but amazing, I am much more aware of it.*" In some cases, our mentors have taken action in their workplace, advocating for teams to attend unconscious-bias training and kickstarting conversations with HR departments regarding the hiring process to ensure that diverse talent was being found and cultivated. This is just one example of the role education establishments and employers can play in breaking down the barriers that exist for talented young women to be valued and included.

Conclusion

Compass is now coming to a close after four years. As a testament to its impact we are working with our partner organisations to hand over the project resources so that more young women can continue to benefit from its approach. We are also working with another mentoring organisation, [SEO-London](#), who support underserved young people to succeed, so that our talented pool of 100 mentors can continue to work with Compass schools.

On the eighth International Day of the Girl, titled “My Voice, Our Equal Future”, we must celebrate the achievements already made to progressing the rights of girls and women, such as a narrowing of the gender gaps in access to education and a decline in child marriage and female genital mutilation.¹¹ However, we still have a long way to go in the push for gender equality, especially with the impact of Covid-19 and the subsequent lockdown disproportionately affecting girls and women. As a result of the pandemic we know that young women and girls living in poverty, with disabilities or in rural, isolated locations are more likely to be pulled out of school first to compensate for increased care and domestic work at home.¹² In order to find solutions to these issues, we need an explicit focus on collecting and analysing girl-focused, girl-relevant and sex-disaggregated data, and using this information to inform key policy and programme decisions. Only then can we adequately measure and understand the opportunities and challenges girls face, and identify and track progress towards solutions to their most pressing problems.

The programmatic data and testimonies we have gathered from four years of Compass delivery have shown us that tackling gender equality and the empowerment of young women, particularly those from ethnic minority backgrounds, requires a multi-pronged approach that engages multiple stakeholders across education and public and private sectors. Moreover, the process of change requires time and can happen incrementally. Much like an iceberg, much of the work happens under the surface, first through shifts in how girls and young women think about themselves and their place in the world, culminating in outwardly visible changes in actions, such as newfound courage to demand the changes they want to see for themselves, without seeking permission to do so.

Footnotes

1. ^ <https://www.theguardian.com/inequality/2017/oct/11/uk-no-further-forward-on-tackling-gender-inequality-eu-league-table-shows>
 2. ^ <https://plan-uk.org/media-centre/at-the-turn-of-the-decade-gender-inequality-still-affects-majority-of-uk-girls-reveals>
 3. ^ <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2020/6/explainer-intersectional-feminism-what-it-means-and-why-it-matters>
 4. ^ <https://rusi.org/publication/occasional-papers/what-can-work-and-what-has-not-worked-women-centric-pcve-initiatives>
 5. ^ <https://institute.global/insight/co-existence/collections/gender-and-extremism>
 6. ^ See, for example: <https://rusi.org/publication/occasional-papers/what-can-work-and-what-has-not-worked-women-centric-pcve-initiatives>
 7. ^ Central Foundation Girls School, Crest Academy, Denbigh High, George Green's School, Lea Manor School, Mayfield School, Plashet Girl's School, St. Paul's Way Trust School
 8. ^ Bedfordshire University, King's College London, University of Surrey, St. Mary's University
 9. ^ Cineworld and Clifford Chance Law Firm, Facebook, Hines, Westminster Foundation for Democracy, The Financial Services Compensation Scheme and Care International
 10. ^ <https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2015/01/14/chapter-3-obstacles-to-female-leadership/>
 11. ^ <http://undocs.org/E/2017/66>
 12. ^ <https://interactive.unwomen.org/multimedia/explainer/covid19/en/index.html>
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