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GIRLS SHIFT DIGITAL: REFLECTING ON THE IMPACT OF MOVING ONLINE IN GIRLS' CREATIVE YOUTH PROJECTS

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by: Amanda McBride & Sarah Ralph, August 26, 2020

Over the past months, countless youth organisations and charities have adapted their services to support vulnerable young people who are unable to access face-to-face provision during the COVID-19 pandemic. At the same time, the organisations are also facing financial difficulties due to the crisis. What follows is an account of the processes and challenges of adapting specifically girl-centric creative-cultural programmes to the UK's lockdown conditions. Using two organisations which we are both involved with as case studies, we explore the challenges and limitations of how the projects are shifting the delivery of their programmes online. Girl-Kind North East and the Young Women's Film Academy are projects located in the North East of England, and provide girls with spaces to produce and showcase creative work. The projects differ in multiple ways (such as their foundational origins, organisational structure and funding), but both are underpinned by a feminist commitment to amplifying North East girls' voices through creative production, and employing girl-made artefacts as tools for social action in their wider communities. There is also some overlap in the personnel and activities of the two organisations, which is significant in relation to our ensuing discussion.

As the authors of this study, we are researchers based at Northumbria University in the North East region, with strong links to both organisations. Sarah Ralph co-founded the Girl-Kind North East project in 2017 (alongside Sarah Winkler-Reid, Newcastle University), and is also Chair of Trustees of the Young Women's Film Academy. Amanda McBride first volunteered with Girl-Kind North East in 2017 and joined the team as a research assistant the following year to coordinate and deliver its school-based workshops. As part of Girl-Kind's annual programme, the Young Women's Film Academy are commissioned to deliver a 'Film-in-a-Day' workshop with some of the project's participants.

As lockdown was announced in the UK on the 23 March 2020, and planned in-person activities and events for both organisations inevitably were cancelled, we—alongside our colleagues and project partners—thought carefully about what alternatives were needed and possible, and how we could continue our work within the new reality of the COVID-19 crisis.

The Girl-Kind North East annual programme begins by posing this question to the young women who participate in the project: *What do you think are the challenges and opportunities of being a girl in the North East?* This single question opens up a wealth of girl-led ideas and creativity. What we investigate here is in effect an amended version of this question, posed inwardly. As researchers and leaders within the organisation, we decided to engage in a reflexive process of questioning the challenges and opportunities of adapting the delivery of our activities during a social, economic and public-health crisis, and via the use of semi-structured interviews we provide the space and prompts for some of our colleagues at the Young Women's Film Academy to do the same. Through these reflexive exercises, we consider what new digital technologies that enable remote connection with our girl participants can teach us about the projects' more customary face-to-face formats. We also evaluate their place, potential, and resilience as vehicles for feminist activism within already vulnerable communities that are disproportionately impacted by the crisis.

In this article, we propose that an inclusive, safe and supportive *in-person* space remains crucial when working with girls and young women who are vulnerable or experience the greatest challenges in life. We do so by situating the two projects in the context of current scholarship about feminist digital networks. We then examine Girl-Kind North East and the Young Women's Film Academy to offer accounts of the background histories, infrastructure and work of the organisations, before examining and reflecting upon the specificities of their shift to operating online during England's lockdown. Our approach to this reflexive exercise parallels that of Fraser et al. (2016) in their evaluation of the Girls Action Network organisation in which all the authors had all been involved, as a means of 'looking back to look forward', or rather taking stock of the *now* to think of the future of the organisation. Thus we close with a discussion of the insight and learning garnered by both organisations as a result of the impact of COVID-19 and moving online, and how this might be acknowledged and actioned moving forward in their post-pandemic, in-person work.



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Digital Feminism and Girls' Online Spaces of Activism

The enforced digital shift experienced by numerous girls' organisations and charities as a consequence of COVID-19 in both the UK and beyond we see as inevitably connecting with and elucidating recent discussions around digital feminism, and girls' activities and social action online. Feminist scholars and cultural critics have noted the increased visibility of feminism in the digital era, and while theoretical discussions abound over whether this 'renaissance' is a continuation of the third wave, or the beginnings of the fourth (Keller 2012 & 2016; Schulte 2011), there is consensus regarding the vast, varied and frequently digital form that contemporary feminism now takes.

Feminist engagement in and with digital technologies has been diverse: this is a complex and multivocal terrain (Darwin & Miller 2020). While some scholars champion the capacity of online platforms to reach new audiences and to foster solidarity, others see a continuation of existing structural inequalities manifest through new forms. Take, for example, #MeToo, one of the most high-profile digital feminist movements of the past few years. The hashtag, originally created by Black activist Tarana Burke, provided a means of solidarity for survivors of sexual violence, and made visible the widespread nature of sexual violence and harassment. The social media content shared with this hashtag, and the coverage from the print and broadcast media, were an undeniable expression of consciousness raising among survivors around the world. However, as Trott suggests, the digital feminist networks enabling #MeToo are subject to the same problematic power dynamics evident throughout popular feminism's history. The movement arguably reproduces the 'colonial violence and oppression within mainstream neoliberal feminism and academia' (2020: 1). In short, 'digital networks do not empower marginalised voices equitably' (2020: 16).

The wider context of feminism online is that it takes place across platforms that are ostensibly neutral; as such, social media users are only ever one click between viewing a rallying call to feminist activity and the worst kind of anti-feminist, or objectifying rhetoric. The necessity of the individual to engage critically with these messages becomes paramount. Heartening in this regard is research by Feltman and Szymanski (2018), which demonstrates that feminist beliefs have a buffering effect in terms of

self-objectification following Instagram use. It is important to note that these feminist beliefs may very well have been provided by others on Instagram: as Jackson argues in her study of young women's digital media, the internet is 'a key tool to connect girls with feminism and with other feminists in local and global contexts' (2018: 32). The digital realm then might be considered a double-edged sword exposing users to prolific online misogyny (Eckert 2018; Ging & Siapera 2018) and the tools to challenge and resist it.

Taft has argued that '*girl* activists' ideas, stories, and theoretical contributions ... remain largely hidden from view' (2011: 4, our emphasis), and while there has been some increase in attention to girls' feminism and activism, most recent feminist digital activism scholarship has focused on adults. A notable exception is research by Jessalyn Keller (2012 & 2016) which explores teenage girls' blogging on a range of feminist websites, arguing that blogs provides opportunities to embrace new understandings of community, activism, and even feminism itself. Importantly, she notes that while digital participation by young women has particular appeal to those with limited resources – including those whose lack of said resources are due to structural factors such as their age, gender and race—'it is not accessible to everyone' (2016: 266). Thus, for some marginalised groups, financial constraints can make in-person participation difficult, for example, if they cannot afford transport to events far from their home. For others, meanwhile, regular access to a computer and consistent internet signal is unattainable.

These issues around access are key to the girl projects we are both involved in, even under non-lockdown conditions; we recognise that the cost of transport can limit young women's participation, so the Young Women's Film Academy has funded travel costs in the past to enable people to attend sessions. While the move to online delivery can in some ways improve access, there are still numerous considerations for project organisers who know that the most disadvantaged young people may not have access to the technological hardware—smartphones, tablets, laptops, computers—needed to participate. Furthermore, even if they have access to suitable devices, they may not have Wi-Fi or data to access online platforms which require a consistent internet connection.



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Girl-Kind North East: Context and History

The Girl-Kind North East project (henceforth Girl-Kind) was co-founded by Sarah Ralph (senior lecturer at Northumbria University) and Sarah Winkler-Reid (lecturer at Newcastle University) in July 2017 as a cross-institutional initiative working with girls and young women aged 11 to 18 in schools and youth groups across the North East of England, UK. The impetus for founding the project was twofold.

First, the 2016 report ‘The State of Girls Rights in the UK’ by children’s development organisation Plan UK found that ‘a girl’s location is critical’ across many different aspects of her life. Both this report—and its 2020 follow up—demonstrated that the North East of England is among the most challenging places to be a girl in the country based on statistical analysis of life expectancy, reproductive health and educational outcomes. Structural inequalities impact on girls’ lives through their access to resources, opportunities, and rights. But girls and young women are more than what limits them. Both authors had conducted qualitative research on girls’ lives and experiences growing up in Britain, and encountered them as active, skilled and critical meaning-makers. Their research findings suggested that there was value in

establishing a space where girls could explore what means to grow up in the North East region without framing the reality of their lived experience as troubled or less than.

For example, Sarah Winkler-Reid's social anthropological research challenges negative representations of young people. Drawing on 14-months fieldwork in a London secondary school for students aged 11-18, she focuses on how young people create adult-free social realms. Through the breaking and reforming of friendships, young people tenaciously shape themselves and each other into acceptable persons, in addition to offering one another love and support (Winkler-Reid 2016). She subsequently proposes an anthropological approach to girls' complex relations with each other and the world around them that starts from everyday life rather than the assumed primacy of media images (Winkler-Reid 2017). Meanwhile, Sarah Ralph's on-going research considers how media products are utilised within familial and close peer relationships and everyday social interactions. Her detailed qualitative study of mothers and daughters' shared relations to film stars demonstrates the roles stars play as a 'currency of communication' in two-way familial relations, particularly as daughters transition to adulthood (Ralph 2015a). She argues for a move towards an 'action'-centred exploration of how media products are used and function within social interactions between girls and women, over the life cycle of their personal relationships (Ralph 2015b).

Building on both authors' research, they developed the distinctive Girl-Kind approach to supporting girls and young women. Together, we argue that adult-defined assumptions obscure the reality of young people's lives, and problem-centred interventions lessen young people's agency. In Girl-Kind's supportive environment, girls develop their ideas and enact their own solutions to problems, and so are able to build confidence in their ability to sustain themselves and each other. Using contemporary media content and forms as a currency of communication, as well as encouraging creative arts and media making, enables the girls to articulate their diverse experiences and create connections with each other, as well as their wider communities.

Currently, the main Girl-Kind programme runs annually between September and early December. The four-part structure of the programme (Safe Space and Ideas; Explore and Create; Expression and Platform; Reflection and Future) involves a series of workshops, culminating in a Celebration Day held in October for UN International

Day of the Girl. The schools and youth groups themselves decide on their own cohort: from the group size (be it eight or 40), the year group(s), and the particular needs of the girls selected to participate. They also provide a physical space for the workshops, and schools offer a place in the school day outside their normal timetable for the girls to take part.

As previously noted, the first workshop starts with one open question: ‘What are your experiences of growing up as a girl in the North East of England?’ Working together in groups, the girls then decide what topic or theme they want to focus on, and how they want to express it to others. A further structured workshop provides both creative materials and support to help develop their creative intervention or social action. Their projects are impressively diverse. They include dance performances, poetry, animations, photography exhibitions, hand-made goody bags and even a life-sized ‘scarecrow’ girl. At the Girl-Kind Celebration Day, the girls present the work they have created to family, friends and invited special guests who have the power to influence change in the local area.

Since its inception, the main Girl-Kind programme has also included a ‘Film-in-a-Day’ workshop in conjunction with the Young Women’s Film Academy. Each year, 12 girls from across the partner schools come together to develop and film a short film that reflects an aspect of their shared lived experiences. This offers the girls a chance to experience filmmaking and become familiar with professional film equipment. Interested girls are encouraged to develop their skills at the Young Women’s Film Academy’s regular Saturday Club. Their short films are then premiered at the Girl-Kind Celebration Day. The project also holds one-off events throughout the year in addition to the main programme, such as a ‘Screen Takeover’ for 60 girls involving a workshop and screening at a local independent cinema on the theme of comfortable and uncomfortable spaces.

Each year so far, Girl-Kind has more than doubled the girls they have been able to work with, and in three years since 2017 over 300 different girls have participated in Girl-Kind activities. The expansion of the project, in cohort size and geography (it now reaches across the whole North East of England region), has been possible because of support from an increasingly large team of women academics based across both universities in Newcastle, and community worker partners who have run Girl-Kind in the south of the region.

Girl-Kind has retained stable funding streams since its inception, with financial support from the universities' centralised impact and departmental research budgets, as well as grant assistance from the UK Economic and Social Research Council's Impact Accelerator Award scheme.

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Girl-Kind's 'Digital Shift': From a Standing Start

The introduction of social distancing measures in mid-March 2020 had no direct impact on Girl-Kind's core programme delivery, which takes place in the autumn each year. However, we had several one-off events planned for spring 2020—such as a second 'Screen Takeover' event in partnership with the Tyneside Cinema—which we cancelled or postponed indefinitely in response to the UK government's guidance. The closure of schools on the 20 March, followed by the Stay at Home direction on the 22 March, prompted the core Girl-Kind team to come together to consider what action we might feasibly take to support our Girl-Kind alumni at the time. We aimed

to create an online space to encourage and support the girls' reflections on their current situation; provide the opportunity for them to share their thoughts and feelings through creative arts and craft activities; and offer each other—and their wider peer communities—advice and coping strategies. This titled the newly created online project GK@Home, which was hosted on the digital productivity software site Padlet. Padlet is a specialist platform commonly used in educational contexts that works as an online pin-board, with the possibility of posting multimedia notes in the form of text, gifs, images, music/audio files and videos.

During the preliminary development stages of GK@Home, a range of practical and speculative issues arose which prompted us to reflect on the process of moving online as a multifaceted and complex endeavour. Institutional factors were the first challenge, and a slew of paperwork and endless email chains with our universities' various professional administrative departments and divisions were wrestled with by members of the Girl-Kind team. Issues included substitute budget approval for the spend on subscription to Padlet, substantial ruminations around the platform's legal contract in relation to data processing and data protection, and the more complex issues of consent and online safeguarding, which required alterations to existing ethical approval for Girl-Kind. While obviously imperative and necessary, in our case the delays caused by bureaucratic administrative burdens (which are typical in higher education institutions) meant we were not able to 'strike while the iron was hot' and contact our participant schools with information about the new programme until five weeks into lockdown.

The pause created by the wait for these supplementary institutional requirements was, however, neatly filled by a new consideration. With Girl-Kind, a project contact or teaching lead in the schools we work with mediates our contact with girl participants, with whom we have no formal mode of direct communication (although a handful of girls follow our social media channels). This meant that promoting the GK@Home resource was in the hands of teachers working under their own set of complex, unique and difficult conditions. Thus, in turn, how teachers contacted Girl-Kind alumni emerged as a primary concern for us, as we were unsure whether any Girl-Kind mailing lists existed that teachers could straightforwardly access. Each school we work with manages their Girl-Kind cohort differently, and we have always encouraged autonomy rather than imposing standardised systems onto teachers and schools. We recalled a number of teachers describing how they had reminded participants of workshops informally via word-of-mouth, or by sending notes to form teachers

during form registration on the morning of sessions. Girls would even occasionally be sent out of our workshops to find girls who had forgotten to join the session. It was also the case that with changes of school staff over the three years of Girl-Kind, the current teaching contact might not have access to previous cohort listings—who we also wished to welcome to participate in GK@Home. We were concerned that the task of creating a mailing list to communicate our new resources was likely time-consuming during a period of emergency when other educational and welfare tasks had to be prioritised. Once we had disseminated our GK@Home resource information to the teaching lead via email, we had no real notion of whether that information would then reach the girls. While one school responded to let us know it was included on a school newsletter, it became apparent that one cohort of girls have never received the materials sent to their coordinating teacher. Throughout the three years, we have run Girl-Kind we had always understood and acknowledged the significance to its success of the commitment and efforts of individual teachers at partner schools. The shift online crystallised that this—and they—are in fact critical.

While Girl-Kind has always had a social media presence, it principally has not been aimed at the girls who participate in the project, but rather used as a platform to share updates on our work with an adult audience of academics, supporters and other youth work or education practitioners. Our workshops are built around in-person, co-collaborative engagement with the young women, and any online or digital content that emerges from their Girl-Kind projects are independently created and girl-led. Given the diverse range of schools and girls we work with—from an independent all-girls' school to a few rated 'Inadequate' by Ofsted, girls from Year 7 (aged 11) to Year 11 (age 16) and cutting across ethnic groups – intersectional considerations in terms of access, perspective and resources, are at the forefront of our mind in the design and delivery of the in-person programme. In developing a remote, online space, these concerns became more acute, and we understood that it would be the most marginalised young women who were at greatest risk of further disadvantage. To mitigate issues of regular access to computers, with home-schooling already dominating time on screens and siblings jostling for use etc., we ensured the platform we chose worked well on phone screens. Given the nature of the offline creative activity, we felt that our new, online resources were unlikely to significantly drain mobile data in the instance that the girls did not have Wi-Fi at home.

While concerns regarding limited access to digital technologies were an immediate thought for a project located online, there were other resource issues less easily remedied with considered platform choice. For example, throughout the main Girl-Kind programme we have been aware that certain individual girls – and cohorts of girls – were accomplished in ‘creative’ activities. They come from homes with plentiful supplies of craft materials, access to musical instruments, alongside parental support, guidance and/or expertise to support their activities and hobbies. Others, though, were seemingly overwhelmed by the workshop craft supplies we provided at their request, and the exclamation of ‘you brought all this *for us?*!’ has been common throughout the three years of the project. Thus, while many girls happily worked on their projects independently, with little practical support or need for reassurance, others were ‘stumped’ by looking at a blank piece of paper, and self-censored from the outset. For these girls, the in-person, face-to-face aspect of workshops was vital. This was due to the proximate encouragement that could be offered by the Girl-Kind facilitators—and often their teachers, who sat in on the workshops. However, no less importantly, the less confident girls could observe ostensibly more confident girls in their group *having a go*, being unsuccessful on a first attempt, grabbing another piece of paper or craft material, or starting again. During Girl-Kind 2019, very few girls worked on solo projects (just two that we can identify out of a cohort of around 140), and the group aspect of their projects provides mutual support, inspiration and confidence. They can share in the success of their ideas and creations without the individual worry or responsibility if it does not work out.

The import of the in-person, collaborative dynamic of the Girl-Kind workshops meant that we were apprehensive about motivating girls to contribute to GK@Home without the group work nature of the main programme. The energy of our Girl-Kind participants is astounding and workshops are habitually a joy to be in. However, we were acutely aware that this liveliness was generated through the in-person workshop design (initially through the encouragement and support of facilitators and teachers, and increasingly through their own small groups of peers). Our main programme cultivates an atmosphere of safety, acceptance and, as mentioned, *having a go* and this cannot be easily replicated online. The posting of a creative contribution online in an ostensibly ‘finished’ state to be seen by others is very different from the in-person development of an idea where there is time to gain feedback and reassurance during its creation before the final version is then presented. This made GK@Home a much more ‘high risk’ participatory experience for girls, which might lead even those with

well-established creative skills to hesitate in posting their makes, while those lacking in creative confidence or practice may not produce anything at all. When the project went 'live,' we discovered our apprehensiveness was well founded. Amand—acting as moderator for the GK@Home Padlet—watched in real time as a participant/visitor to the site was shown to be posting something to the board, but then deleted it, and has subsequently not returned to re-post.

For many young people, online interaction fatigue had likely already set in by the 20th April when GK@Home finally launched. After more than four weeks of lockdown weariness, home schooling and being socially distanced from their friends, it seemed almost inevitable that the interactivity of online participation was a step too far for many of our Girl-Kind girls. For us, it indicates the importance of human bodies in a shared space, where, for example, we might talk to each other, use body language such as smiles, and generate an atmosphere of mutual excitement and sharing. We have some hope though, that Girl-Kind alumni may have visited GK@Home and made creations inspired by it offline, even if they have not wished to open themselves up to the discomfort of online scrutiny and judgement about their makes. We will be unlikely to find out until we can once again be in a shared space of safety and acceptance with the girls and ask them directly.



Young Women's Film Academy: A Brief History

The Young Women's Film Academy (henceforth YWFA) is a registered charity working with young women predominantly from disadvantaged backgrounds in North East England. It was an initiative originally conceived by documentary filmmaker Emily Barber and actor Charlie Hardwick, both women from the North East involved in the media industries, and with a mutual recognition of the need for a specialist academy aimed at those who would not ordinarily get the opportunity to develop filmmaking and storytelling skills in this region. The central ethos of the YWFA on inception was to encourage girls and young women from the North East to tell stories about their lives and experiences that commonly go unexpressed or unheard. In keeping with this principle, the first film produced through the initiative (*Torn Together* 2010) was a short film funded by the British children's charity Barnardos that explored the relationship between mothers and daughters from the perspective of young female carers. A co-collaboration with a group of young carers aged 12 to 19, the film used documentary re-enactment as well as drama to portray the challenge of maternal mental health issues and their impact on mother-daughter relations.

The YWFA was further fostered and developed when Clara Shield, who had acted as the film and drama skills mentor on *Torn Together*, expanded the project with the community interest company she founded, Little Big Butterfly. Under her guardianship, the YWFA continued to make unique, young women-led short films on a diverse range of subjects that were funded through community foundations, charitable grants, and local and national organisations. Films have included *Chloe* (2016), on the theme of courage and depicting the experience of a young woman discovering her pregnancy, and *Lexi, Jo and Amy* (2017) exploring emotional abuse in teenage romantic relationships and its impact on their friendships.

The YWFA was in due course awarded charitable status in 2018, and currently operates as a charitable incorporated organisation (CIO). Its portfolio of work now includes: short-term outreach film project working with young women in communities across North East England; an on-going 'Saturday Club' offering the

opportunity for continued engagement with the YWFA and open-ended film-making training; and school holiday provision that is open to all young women aged 12 and over regardless of their film-making experience.

Young women participants of the YWFA are an extremely diverse group but face different contexts of disadvantage in their lives. They are all young women that have experienced or currently struggle with their mental health, self-confidence and overall well-being, and/or have additional educational and complex emotional needs (such as being young carers, school non-attenders, or are young refugees). The YWFA offers a safe environment for them to engage, discuss themes related to their personal experiences, and express these via a creative medium. It gives them an active voice to tell stories from a young person's perspective and in their own lexicon. The films they produce are made co-collaboratively with an all-female mentoring crew of industry professionals. Within a structured programme of activity, they undertake research on self-selected issues, have masterclasses with filmmakers in particular styles and genres, and then work together with the mentors to create their short film. In the YWFA's more recent iteration, the films produced are also used to highlight issues of oppression or hardship to other young women in the North East through screenings and workshop programmes delivered to local schools and youth groups.

YWFA Moves Online: Maintaining the Momentum

Alongside our Girl-Kind reflexive undertaking, Amanda interviewed three members of the YWFA delivery team to ask their thoughts on the coronavirus emergency and what it has meant for the work of the charity: Clara Shield, the Operations and Development Manager; Lucy Wood the Resident Drama Worker; and Denise Moura, a Trustee and volunteer for the Saturday Club. While 'friendship as method' (Tillman-Healey 2003) has been advocated by some scholars within qualitative research as a means to reduce the hierarchical separation between researcher and participant, we felt that Sarah's established relationships with the YWFA team, and preceding knowledge of at least some of the processes and challenges of the shift online, might lead to omissions of detail and context in these interviews were she to conduct them. The three interviews, similar to our own reflections on Girl-Kind, highlighted the huge range of considerations that had to be made in responding to the lockdown restrictions and a move to online delivery for this kind of girls' project.

The YWFA also had events and activities planned for March 2020—such as the premiere of the charity’s latest short film—that were cancelled or postponed. However, they swiftly moved all regular sessions for their Saturday Club to online delivery, with workshops or ‘meet-ups’ taking place via Zoom. Pre-existing online communications from the pre-lockdown period, such as using text messages to arrange the girls’ attendance and a WhatsApp group for the Trustees, allowed for quick discussions and approvals for the new delivery format, and setting up a WhatsApp group and online meet-ups with the girls. Without the burdens of larger institutional bureaucracy and administrative hoops to jump through, the YWFA were at a distinct advantage to Girl-Kind, and their Saturday Club continued without missing a single session:

LUCY: ... [G]oing online was just the next step. I know Clara who I work with was on it straight away, she was like ‘right let’s get online’. We didn’t miss a Saturday Club, it rolled onto the next group, we did it that week we were like ‘right let’s get online, let’s get on with it’.

CLARA: [Saturday Club] has become part of their routine, of their day, part of their weekly life. They have found friendships through that. In terms of the support networks and connections, I was really keen that now we’ve established this really nice group of young women, we need to find a way of maintaining that and so we just had to hope that if we offered an online version of the Saturday Club, they would still continue.

As Clara emphasises, ‘dropping out’ of these particular girls’ lives was not an option, and there was a commitment expressed by all three women of the YWFA to make the best effort they could to maintain consistency of contact. This was enabled by the sense of connection that team members shared with each other, and with other practitioners working with young people. For example, Lucy began researching ways to adapt the usual icebreakers used at the beginning of in-person sessions to an online activity by exploring YouTube videos and her pre-existing youth work contacts. The importance of learning from other charitable and youth work organisations was echoed by Clara, particularly in terms of amending in-person safeguarding policies and best practice for working with young people online.

All three YWFA team members reported that the Saturday Club's online atmosphere has been overwhelmingly positive during the sessions they have held since the first online workshop on the 21st March, and engagement has – in the main – been steady from girls who were already regular attendees. However, there are concerns akin to those of the Girl-Kind team that the impact of lockdown is not felt equally across the core YWFA cohort. For instance, Clara shared that a long-time attendee has not joined online sessions at all:

One of our longest attending members has ... we've not seen her. At all. ... So that's a perfect example of where it's not worked – the coronavirus and the impact – that's where vulnerable, isolated young people who've got mental health issues are obviously really struggling. She sent me a really long message at the beginning just saying it was awful. So yeah, that's not so good.

As well as this specific case, there are other disparities in members' ability to commit and focus on the online workshops, which Clara notes are broadly related to variations in socio-economic background among the group. For example, cramped housing conditions impact some girls, and sharing a bedroom means that by accessing YWFA in its online mode some young women cannot achieve the 'time out' that it typically affords them. Clara also described a young woman ready to attend a workshop having to leave just as it was starting, because her mother needed the phone and the household only had one smartphone. While the YWFA have been able to reallocate funding to remedy the concern that the young women may not have enough data to attend Zoom meetings, there are fewer, if any, ways to overcome the concerns regarding young women getting time away from their everyday lives and being able to engage privately away from their family. A central aim of the YWFA is to amplify young women's voices and share aspects of their experience, including parts of their lives that are challenging and which require an atmosphere and space of safety for open discussion. This may be more difficult to achieve in the presence of siblings or family.

While the YWFA team have always been aware of the disparities in family circumstances of the young women who attend Saturday Club, the move to an online delivery has made this—as Clara describes it—'very stark'. Their concern is that it has likely become more visible and perceptible to the young women themselves, and the more egalitarian, neutral environment of the in-person workshop sessions has been eroded. Therefore while the charitable outcomes regarding developing film-making

skills are still met using online delivery, the more holistic and girl-centred vision of promoting the well-being of the YWFA is lost in the process, and it is the already more vulnerable who are least likely to benefit.

Of the changes since lockdown, the YWFA's use of WhatsApp has had unequivocal support from the entire team, and this is something they agree that they will keep in future. The ease of using WhatsApp, alongside its lack of formality (no subject line, greeting or sign off required), have encouraged additional communication among the girls, as well as between the girls and the YWFA team. As Lucy explains, the girls 'can have a chat and a giggle whenever they want', and Denise notes that she has had increased contact with Saturday Club members: for example, answering questions about tasks they have been set as 'homework'. It has also made it possible for the team to contact everyone at once, and has also made certain aspects of administration easier, such as posting links to Dropbox files or to Zoom meetings on the thread. If the Saturday Club had already become 'part of their lives' in its in-person format, the new WhatsApp thread seems to have encouraged this with the young women able to stay in touch with each other outside of the Saturday Club hours in a dedicated online space.

In terms of the other YWFA provision – such as school holiday sessions—the team are honest that achievements have been mixed. There have been two stand-alone projects during school holidays, and these are typically a way to recruit new girls to the regular Saturday Club. During the Easter break, the YWFA hosted a transatlantic project, bringing together girls in the North East with a group of girls in California to share their experiences of lockdown. Online workshops on filmmaking skills with mobile phones were shared and girls from both groups submitted content for the final piece. The project was a success, particularly as three new girls from the North East joined after seeing online advertisements. However, there were issues in terms of engagement in the following May half-term holiday (when schools in England typically give students a week off) with sessions cancelled due to low uptake. The reasons for this are likely multiple: the government eased restrictions on meeting people in different households for the first time since the lockdown in March, and there was good weather. Young people may have been taking advantage of the opportunity to see their friends in parks and to be outside of the family home. Clara also noted that many girls had domestic demands on them at home as well as school coursework to contend with. Furthermore, white and non-disabled girls, and those without chronic health conditions might 'know that they're really low risk [in terms

of their physical response to the coronavirus]. They know they're in a category where it's not too concerning. So when you put all those factors together it's no surprise that we are where we are and they're not coming online'.

Overall the YWFA has done extremely well to continue its provision during the coronavirus emergency and as well as continuing to use WhatsApp threads for the groups, members of the team are keen to retain aspects of their work style. Denise explicitly notes that the current circumstances have 'opened our eyes to many possibilities which we were not considering before', such as international collaboration. Clara, too, noted how working online has alerted them to the possibility of using this method of delivery as an outreach tool for young women:

I do think there is probably a whole group of girls out there who have various degrees of social anxiety, where at the beginning they may just like to participate online to learn film-making and technical skills but not have to come at meet a group, because that might just be a bit beyond their reach. So I've been thinking a lot recently about all of the work we do and when you're creating our workshops and our resources, making sure they're filmed and they're available online to watch as a kind of YouTube video, or some other link.

YOUNG WOMEN'S
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The Impact of COVID-19: Insight & Learning

Threaded through our reflections and interviews about the shift to online working due to COVID-19 are insights and lessons for both Girl-Kind North East and the Young Women's Film Academy as they move into the post-lockdown phase of their girl-centric creative projects and programmes. Though there is still uncertainty about when social distancing restrictions in England will end—and when and how Girl-Kind and the YWFA will be able to resume large group in-person sessions with the girls and young women they work with—we have been able to evaluate the organisations' responses to COVID-19 and consider how they can negotiate online spaces in future.

The Girl-Kind team believe that much can be learnt from the achievement of the YWFA move online, particularly the Saturday Club. For girls' work online to be successful, organisations need to establish a clear and usable communication infrastructure and in-person relations first. We recommend a more networked approach than Girl-Kind has at present, which relies on variable systems of communication and contact with girls owing to the dependence on school teaching leads as mediators and disseminators. In future, we will seek to introduce an in-person 'induction' during our core programme to our online platform—be that Padlet or an alternative—so that the online aspect of the project is symbiotic with our in-person work. The hope is that when introducing the online space we can offer the face-to-face encouragement that is so vital to the sessions, and establish the *having a go* ethos in the digital realm.

Girl-Kind's future work could also benefit from the YWFA's successful use of direct group communications via WhatsApp as a means to reassure and encourage participation in the online Saturday Club workshop sessions. Though university protocols and administrative procedures are unavoidable, modifying Girl-Kind's existing consent sheets, parental information and opt-out letters, and data processing/protection documentation from the onset of the core programme to allow for more direct communication with the girls we work with (while scrupulously observing online safeguarding guidance) should be a relatively straightforward adaptation that would seemingly pay dividends.

However, while acknowledging opportunities for learning about working online with girls, our study has also made the 'digital divide' visible, as pre-existing inequalities among the young women we work with continue to put the most vulnerable girls at a

disadvantage in online space. That vulnerability may be through socio-economic circumstances, or through issues of well-being and self-confidence, or, frequently, both. Thus, the importance of an inclusive, safe and supportive *in-person* space remains crucial. In conjunction, we feel that the emotional, affective and embodied dimension of girls' youth work and feminist activism needs greater acknowledgement and emphasis. Our reflective exercise has highlighted that the challenges of connecting with girls during the COVID-19 crisis are often due to uneven opportunities to connect digitally owing to limited technological access, issues of privacy and safety, self-confidence, and the need for proximate support and encouragement from adults and peers. Work by Schuster (2013) has shown how despite the various benefits online work affords young feminists, it has contributed to a generational divide among activists in her sample in New Zealand. Yet the work of Girl-Kind and the YWFA illustrates that in supporting working class and socio-economically disadvantaged girls as activists and creators, an intergenerational element with in-person support and reassurance is critical. We feel this is a really important perspective to be taken up in future scholarly discussions and debates on digital feminism and girls' online social action and activism.

Notes

[i].

The current core Girl-Kind team consists of co-founders Sarah Ralph and Sarah Winkler-Reid, plus two Research Assistants, Tessa Holland (Newcastle University) and Amanda McBride (Northumbria University), who have co-run the Girl-Kind 2018 and 2019 programmes. In addition to this, Girl-Kind's community worker partners Dianne Casey and Sarah Crutwell have run Girl-Kind in schools in the south of the region since 2018, and Associate Professor Mel Gibson (Northumbria University) has brought her expertise in comics and visual fiction to one-off workshops at the Day of the Girl Celebration event.

[ii].

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