Underfunded, under resourced and under the radar: the state of the women and girls' social sector

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ROSA PRO BONO ECONOMICS

PBE is a think tank that uses economics to improve lives. Through analytical expertise and a close connection with the social sector, we help charities, funders, firms and policymakers tackle the causes and consequences of low wellbeing in the UK. PBE works closely with the economics profession to achieve its aims, building relationships between over 600 economist volunteers and supporting over 600 charities and social purpose organisations since 2009.

Rosa is a leading UK-wide funder of the women and girls sector in the UK. Our vision is for a society in which women and girls are safe, healthy and equal. Our mission is to contribute to improving the lives of women and girls by drawing in and distributing funding and resources to the women and girls' sector, by strengthening organisations and by using our voice to achieve change. Since our inception in 2008, we have distributed over £11 million to women-led organisations, reaching over 400,000 women and girls.

Contents

Summary

The women and girls' social sector plays a vital role in supporting women and girls at every stage of life. This diverse sector encompasses organisations of all sizes, from local community groups to women's healthcare providers, as well as education and empowerment programmes for young women and girls. Many of these organisations focus on supporting women who experience additional disadvantage, including survivors of domestic abuse, refugees and asylum seekers. Despite differences in size, location and focus, these organisations share a common overarching mission: improving the welfare and wellbeing of women and girls.

There are an estimated 7,400 registered charities in the UK run by, and for, women and girls, as well as over 300 community interest companies (CICs). Even though this is likely an underestimation of the sectors' wider activities, it still suggests that women and girls' charities account for at least 3.5% of registered charities. As women-led organisations, they bring expert knowledge and experience to their cause. And yet, as this report highlights, they often operate at full capacity and with limited resource.

In the summer of 2024, Rosa, the UK funder for women and girls, commissioned Pro Bono Economics (PBE) to conduct a comprehensive survey to help them better understand the depth and breadth of challenges currently facing the women and girls' sector. This report captures key findings from the survey and offers insights into the sector's operations, challenges and aspirations.

The survey reveals a sector that is underfunded, under resourced and under the radar. Women's and girls' organisations face considerable pressures, often disproportionately so, compared with the wider charity sector. Demand for services has surged, with 91% of the organisations that completed the survey reporting an increase over the past year, and 93% expecting demand to continue to grow. However, financial constraints are a critical barrier to meeting increased need. Over half (52%) of respondents identified funding sources as their top concern. Worryingly, 44% of respondents predicted they might not meet future demand. A funding environment that fosters competition over collaboration has further exacerbated these challenges, with 43% of respondents citing competition for funding as a major issue for their organisations. Pressures around costs and demand have already forced more than a quarter (26%) of respondents to reduce services, reflecting the strain on capacity across the women and girls' sector.

Despite significant challenges, the sector remains committed to making meaningful and lasting progress in the lives of women and girls. Organisations across the women and girls' sector are determined not only to continue delivering specialist services, but also to strengthen their advocacy and influencing work. Respondents highlighted the importance of funding and data to better amplify the sector's work and impact.

The future of the women and girls' social sector will depend on forging strong partnerships. Survey responses highlighted that working in collaboration, rather than in competition, organisations – from grassroots community groups through to large national charities – can better meet the needs of women and girls. Crucially, achieving systemic and long-term change requires that the sector is fully heard, and its expertise is properly valued. This means ensuring that the voices of women-led organisations are central to policy discussions and that funding reflects the scale and significance of their work. The women and girls' sector must be recognised as vital to tackling the inequalities that persist for women and girls across the country, and that outcomes, ultimately, improve.

More than

9 in 10

respondents experienced increase in demand for services in the previous year

52%

respondents cite funding sources as their organisation's top concern

With 59% not having sufficient staff to meet their organisation's objectives, the sector's workforce of women is at risk

26%

Black and/or minoritised women and girls' organisations cite rising costs as a top concern

The women and girls' sector offers expert support to women and girls who need it most

Women-led organisations provide specialism and expertise precisely because they are led by women. Typically embedded in the communities they serve, these organisations are uniquely positioned to understand and meet the service users' needs. The majority focuses on delivering services, with almost three-quarters (74%) of survey respondents describing service delivery as their organisation's primary function. Whether offering emergency refuge, shelter and/or counselling for survivors of domestic abuse, providing training and mentorship to girls, or providing clinical services for women going through the menopause, the survey respondents all deliver essential services that support women and girls, including for those that need it most. Some organisations also undertake campaigning, influencing and advocacy work, with 12% respondents indicating that this is their primary focus.

An estimated 7,400 registered charities in the UK are run by, and for, women, as well as over 300 community interest companies (CICs). Even though this is likely to be an underestimation of the sectors' wider activities, it still suggests that women and girls charities account for at least 3.5% of registered charities.[1] Many of those identified are small grassroots organisations, with the most common being social associations, followed by those devoted to ending violence against women and girls, or focusing on women's health.[2] Yet, much of the work carried out by the women and girls' sector remains under the radar for policymakers and funders. The breadth and depth of information and data on organisations varies widely depending on factors such as organisational type and focus, size and membership, existing funding structure and location in the UK.

Understanding how women's and girls' organisations operate is just as important as knowing their numbers. This report draws on insights from a comprehensive online survey conducted in the summer of 2024, aimed at

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[1] C Damm, L Dowrick & C Harris, Mapping the UK Women and Girls Sector and its Funding: Where Does the Money Go?, Centre for Regional, Economic and Social Research and Rosa, April 2023
[2] Ibid

taking the sector's temperature, exploring key topics such as demand, funding and staffing, as well as hopes for the future.

While the survey findings are not designed to be wholly representative, the responses from the various women and girls' organisations provide a valuable snapshot that sheds light on their perspectives. As one respondent said: "we want our voices to be heard."

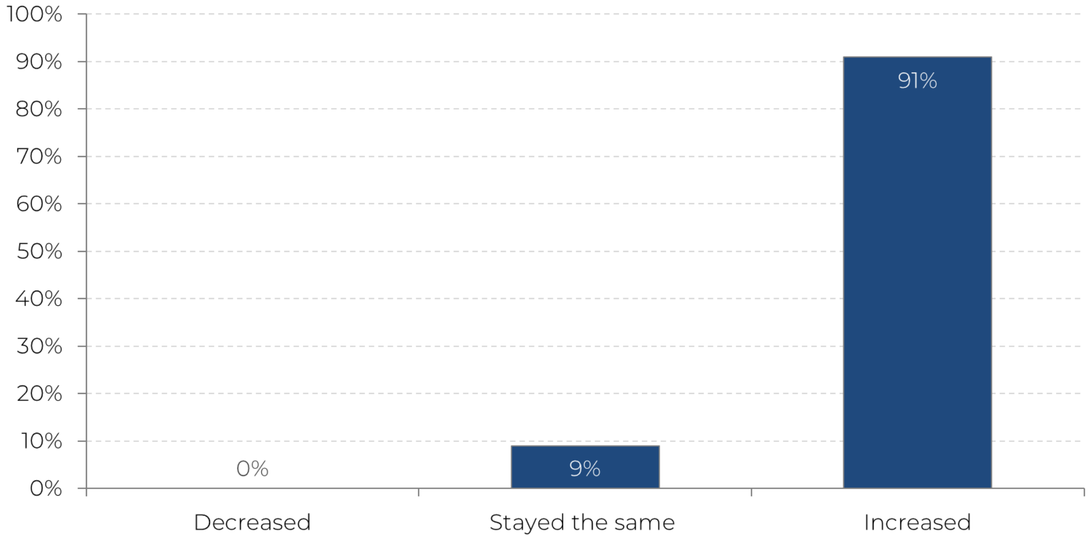
Demand is the most pressing issue facing service delivery organisations

The vast majority of respondents have experienced rising demand for their services in the last year

Survey respondents reported a significant rise in demand for their services, a trend consistent with the broader charity sector, in which demand has been steadily increasing, exacerbated by the pandemic and cost of living crisis.[3] However, women's and girls' organisations may have been, disproportionately, more likely to experience rising demand, with over nine in 10 (91%) of respondents reporting an increase in demand for their services in the previous 12 months, as shown in Figure 1. This is comparatively higher than the wider charity sector, in which only 65% of all charities reported an increase in demand.[3]

Figure 1. Over 9 in 10 (91%) of respondents experienced an increase in demand

Respondent's experience of demand over the last 12 months



Source: PBE analysis of Rosa Survey, 19 June – 24 July 2024.

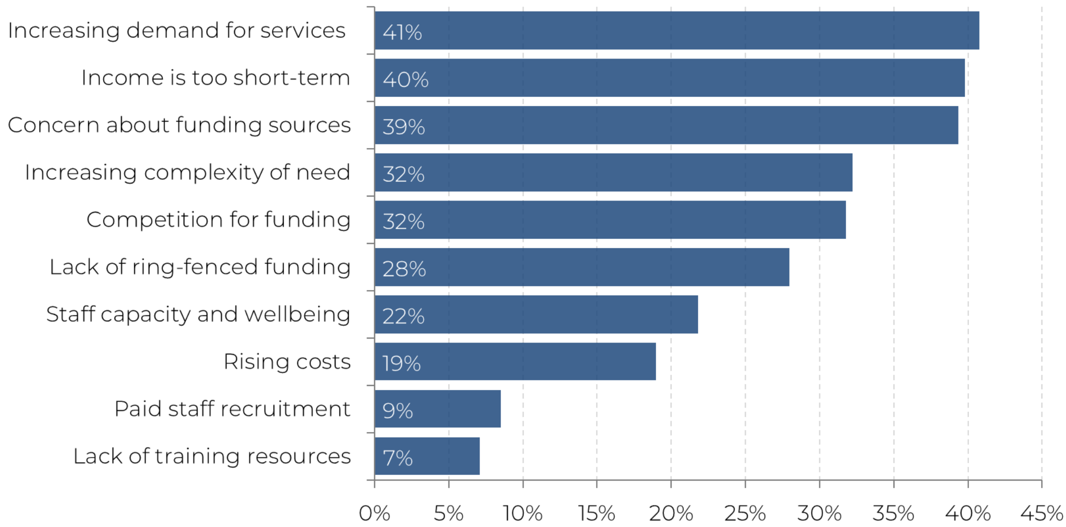
The scale of demand in the women and girls' sector is felt to be the sector's biggest concern (see Figure 2). Over two in five (41%) respondents said that

[3] PBE analysis of PBE and NTU VCSE Sector Barometer Survey, Wave 7 2024

increasing demand for services was one of the top three concerns affecting the sector.

Figure 2. The increase in demand is the one of the biggest concerns facing the sector

Respondent' most important sectoral concerns



Notes: based on the responses to 'Please select the top three most important concerns currently affecting the women and girls' sector'. Top 10 responses only shown.

Source: PBE analysis of Rosa Survey, 19 June – 24 July 2024.

However, it is not just the number of women and girls in need that worries organisations – it is also the nature of that need. As shown in Figure 2, almost one-third (32%) of respondents indicated that the increasing complexity of need is a sector-wide concern. Many noted a concern that complexity of need requires sustainable resources and well-equipped staff, as explained by one organisation working to end male violence against women and girls:

> *"We are also encountering a huge increase in complexity of needs, and this is having a knock-on effect on staff who are often not equipped to deal with such high levels."*

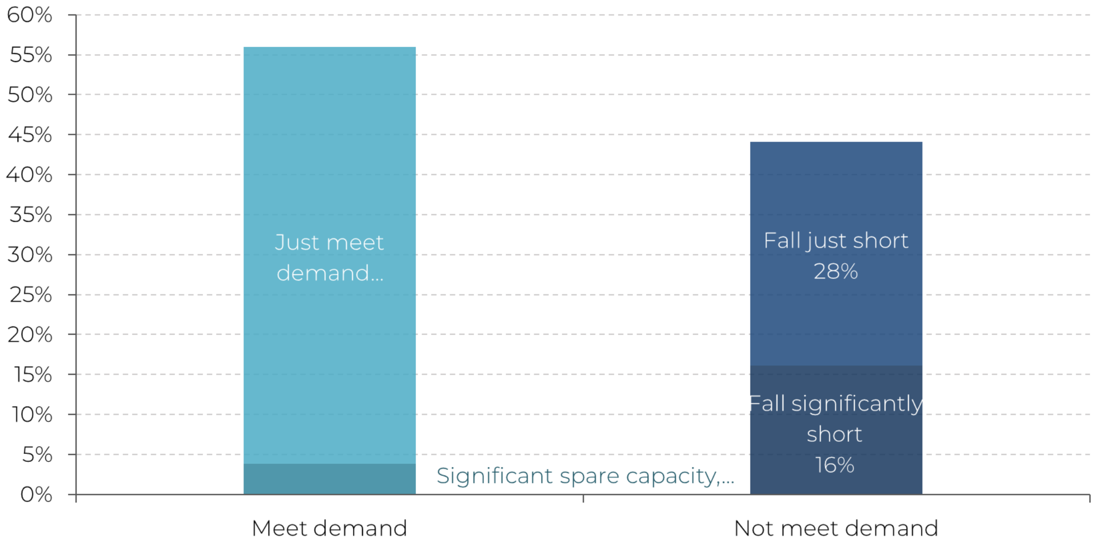
Organisations did not expect service demand to show any signs of slowing down. Of the respondents, 93% expected demand to rise over the next 12 months, but only 7% expected demand to stabilise and remain at the current high levels. Notably, none anticipated a decrease in need, with a medium-sized charity based in Scotland adding it was "working at over capacity to meet the needs of service users."

The sector is worried about its capacity to respond effectively to meet women's and girls' needs.

Respondents made clear their concerns about whether the sector would be able to provide women and girls with the specialist support they need. While over half (52%) expected to be able to meet the growing demand, many, as shown in Figure 2, indicated that this was only "just meet demand", which suggests that many organisations are operating under significant pressure. Additionally, this figure is relatively low compared to the broader charity sector, in which 64% expected to meet demand.[4]

Figure 3. Respondents are worried about being able to meet demand, with 44% expecting to fall short.

Respondents' expectation to meet demand over the next 12 months



Notes: based on responses to 'Over the next 12 months, do you expect demand for your services to…'

Source: PBE analysis of Rosa Survey, 19 June - 24 July 2024.

Alarmingly, more than two in five (44%) of respondents expected to fall short of meeting demand, including 16% anticipating a significant shortfall.

[4] PBE analysis of PBE and NTU VCSE Sector Barometer Survey, Wave 7 2024.

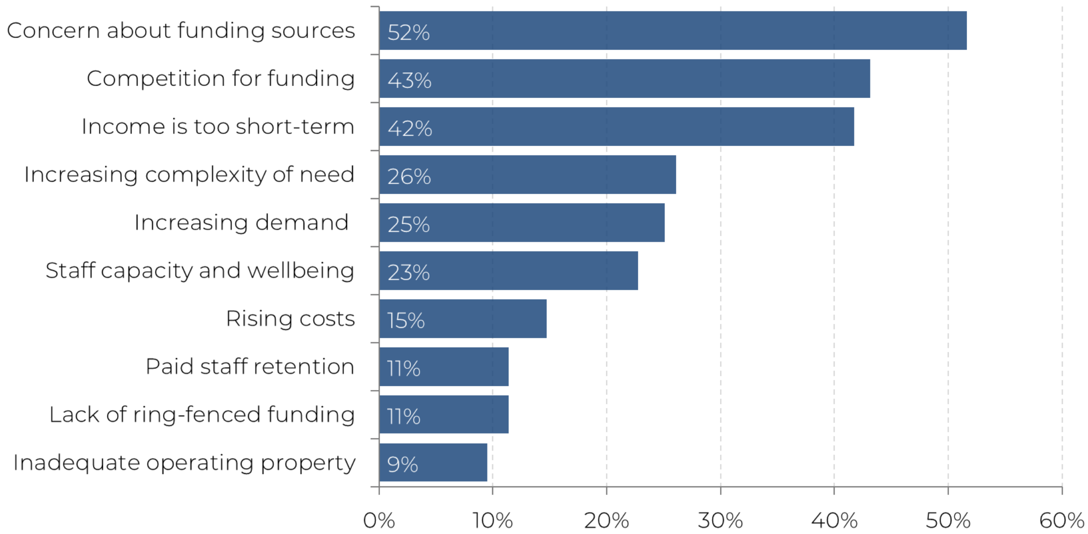
With limited funding options, organisations face doing more, with less

Funding and income-related issues have dominated respondents' concerns about their own organisations and operations.

Figure 4 shows that the top three most important concerns identified by respondents were: concern about funding sources (52%); competition for funding (43%); and the short-term nature of income (42%). Notably, more than one in 10 respondents also identified rising costs (15%) and lack of ring-fenced funding as important concerns (11%).

Figure 4. Funding and income dominate respondents' organisational concerns.

Respondents' most important organisational concerns

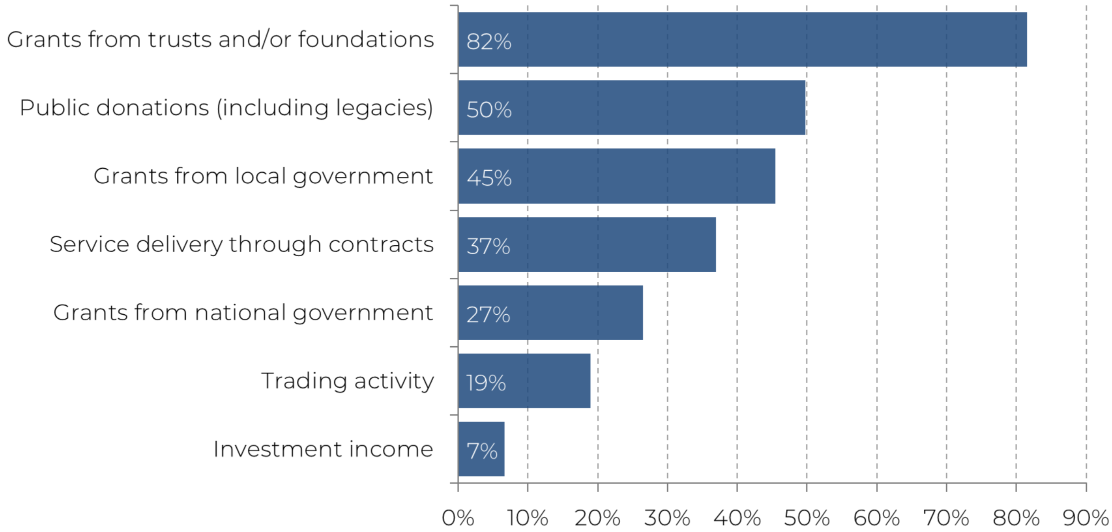


Notes: based on responses to 'Please select the top 3 most important concerns currently affecting your organisation?' Top 10 responses only shown.
Source: PBE analysis of Rosa Survey, 19 June - 24 July 2024.

These concerns may reflect the sector's heavy reliance on a narrow range of funding streams, which may not provide the long-term security required by organisations to meet growing demand. As shown in Figure 5, trusts and foundations were identified as a critical funding source for many in the sector. More than four in five (82%) respondents receive this type of funding, making it the most common form of financial support.

Figure 5. Trusts and foundations are a big source of respondents' funding.

Respondents' funding sources



Notes: based on responses to 'Do you currently receive any funding from the following? Please select all that apply.' (Other/blanks excluded)
Source: PBE analysis of Rosa Survey, 19 June - 24 July 2024.

Respondents also made clear the smaller, but still important, role that government funding plays, with 45% receiving local government grants, 27% receiving central government grants, and 37% engaged in contracts to deliver public services. Other income sources were also prevalent. Half (50%) of respondents also relied on public donations, but fewer than one in five (19%) engaged in trading activities and just 7% reported income from investments.

Many respondents expressed frustration with the availability and allocation of funding by local and central government.

Government grants and public service contracts were frequently perceived as favouring larger, generalist organisations, often at the expense of smaller, specialist providers. For example, the statutory duty placed on local authorities to provide refuge and accommodation to domestic abuse survivors was perceived to favour organisations that do not primarily focus on women and girls.[5] Additionally, many respondents also described an increasing trend for local authorities to bring services in-house, bypassing the social sector entirely, as part of cost-saving measures.

[5] For further example of concerns regarding in-house commissioning see: Women's Aid, The Domestic Abuse Report 2023: The Annual Audit, January 2023

Yet, even when contracts were secured by women's and girls' organisations, these were more likely the large organisations included among the respondents.[6] This may reflect a broader pattern that has been reported across the social sector, in which smaller organisations are often overlooked and under-recognised, while larger organisations can dominate due to their capacity to meet administrative and procurement requirements.

The complexities of the commissioning process have created a challenging operating environment for many smaller organisations for women and girls. In some cases, smaller organisations may be subcontracted under larger generalist organisations, which may obscure their contributions to service delivery. As stated by one refuge providing accommodation for survivors of domestic abuse, its work may not be evident in the data, as it is "being funnelled through a much bigger, generic homelessness charity."

However, some respondents suggested that even when they were contracted to deliver services, the importance of the work they carried out was not recognised, leaving them vulnerable to cuts when finances were tight. An organisation working to end male violence against women and girls explained:

> *"We are the only women-led organisation in our area and already we have had to merge and change. Having to compete against larger organisations is soul destroying, especially when commissioners say you work well but then don't recommission you."*

Another organisation led by, and for, Black and/or minoritised women and girls highlighted that the commissioning process simply "doesn't work" for much of the sector, meaning "trust and foundation grants provide a lifeline to small organisations."

Relying on trusts and foundations for funding brings other challenges.

Respondents highlighted the resource-intensive nature of grant applications, which required significant time and effort to complete, along with the burden of ongoing reporting requirements. Many pointed out that

[6] Analysis of funding sources by income level, where statistical difference was found at 95% confidence.

these challenges were exacerbated by the short-term nature of most grants, which typically lasted no more than one or two years.

This has created a pervasive sense of scarcity within the sector, leading to competition rather than collaboration, with one organisation, which is working to end violence against women and girls, responding:

"Stop making us compete with each other and expend so much of our time clamouring for piecemeal funding... women and girls are turning to us more and more. Invest in us, so we can do our work."

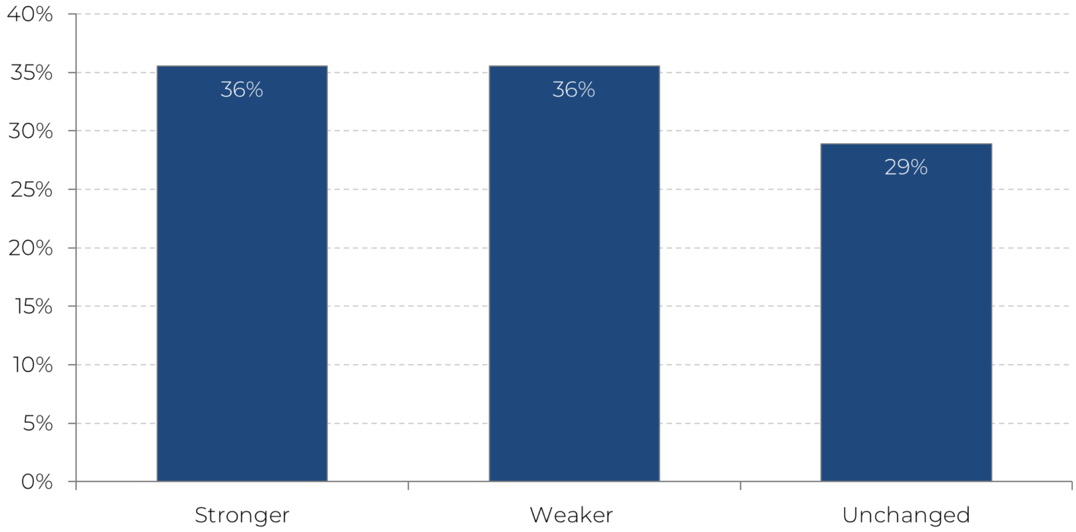
Mounting pressures are having an impact on the sector's finances and workforce

Despite efforts to adapt, much of the women and girls' sector remains financially precarious.

As Figure 6 illustrates, only one-third (36%) of respondents reported an improvement in their financial position over the previous 12 months. The majority (64%) experienced either no change or a deterioration in finances, highlighting the ongoing strain that many have faced across the sector, and will continue to do so, as demand will only grow.

Figure 6. Only 36% of respondents experienced a strengthening in their finances.

Respondents' current financial position, compared to the previous year



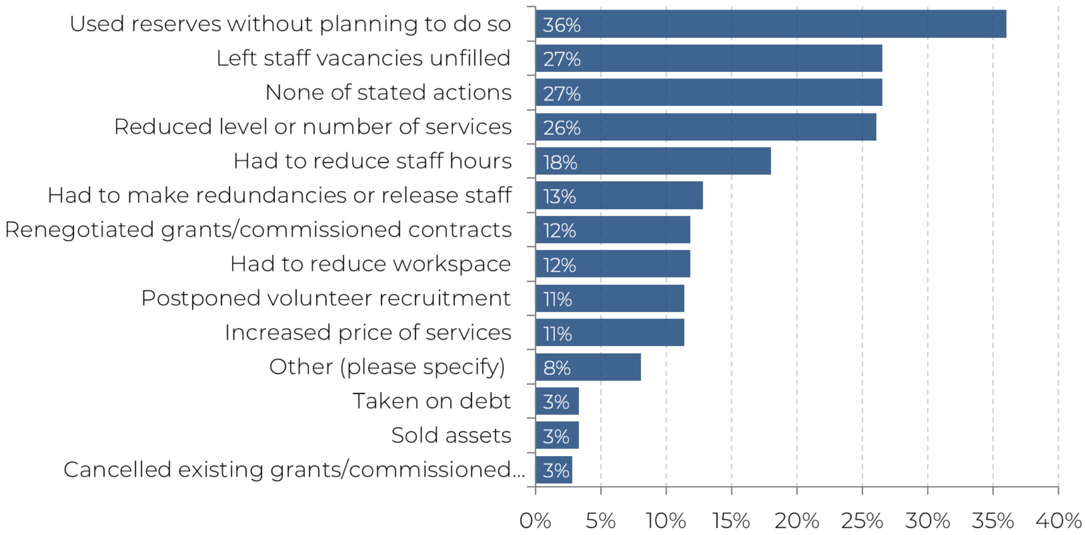
Source: PBE analysis of Rosa Survey, 19 June - 24 July 2024.

Given pressures around costs and levels of demand, particularly since the pandemic, many respondents have made difficult compromises.

While Figure 7 shows that 27% of respondents took no actions in response to the pressures the faced, 73% had to compromise in some way. This included 36% drawing on financial reserves to address shortfalls. However, this is not a viable option for all. In response to another question on finances, nearly one-quarter (24%) of respondents reported that they do not hold any financial reserves.[7]

Figure 7. Reserves, staffing, and services have all been impacted by wider pressures.

Actions taken by respondents in the face of pressures



Notes: based on responses to 'Given pressures around costs and levels of demand since the pandemic, has your organisation taken any of the following steps? Please select all that apply.'

Source: PBE analysis of Rosa Survey, 19 June - 24 July 2024.

Without these financial buffers, organisations have turned to other strategies and have taken different steps. Staffing has been a particular area of compromise: almost one in three (27%) respondents leaving staff vacancies unfilled; one in five (18%) reducing staff hours; and more than one in 10 (13%) resorting to redundancies. In specifying 'other' actions taken, responses included "closing the office and reviewing all contracts" and "working at over capacity to meet the needs of service users."

An organisation working to end violence against women and girls explicitly linked funding concerns to staffing insecurity:

> *"We know that the competition for funding and the short-term nature of funding is a barrier to the women and girls' sector working more collaboratively."*

[7] In response to survey question "does your organisation hold financial reserves? Yes/ No"

"This insecurity is reflected in salaries, fixed-term contracts and short-term projects within the sector, and this prevents services from retaining staff and prioritising wellbeing, learning and development."

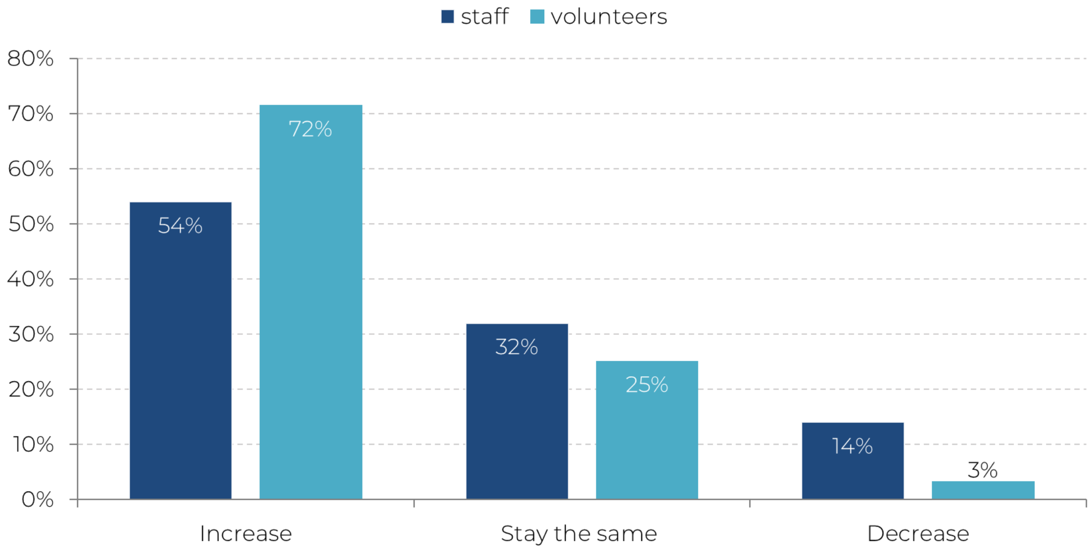
The consequences of these adaptations have extended beyond internal operations. More than one-quarter (26%) of respondents have had to reduce the level, or number, of services they offer and, worryingly, one in 10 (11%) have increased service prices. Such measures risk excluding the women and girls who rely on these services, creating barriers and reducing support for those who need it most.

Women's and girls' organisations are responding to rising demand by increasing staff and volunteers.

Given the picture painted of a sector that is facing rising demand with deeply constrained resources, it could be expected that those working in the sector to take the strain. Instead, many organisations are still pushing forward to meet demand, despite the concerns around staffing insecurity.

Figure 8. Over half (54%) of respondents have increased volunteering levels.

Respondents' staffing and volunteering levels in the previous 12 months



Notes: 'staff' column based on responses to 'Over the last 12 months, has the number of staff in your organisation…' (N=173); 'volunteer' column based on responses to 'Over the last 12 months has the number of volunteers in your organisation…' (N=151)

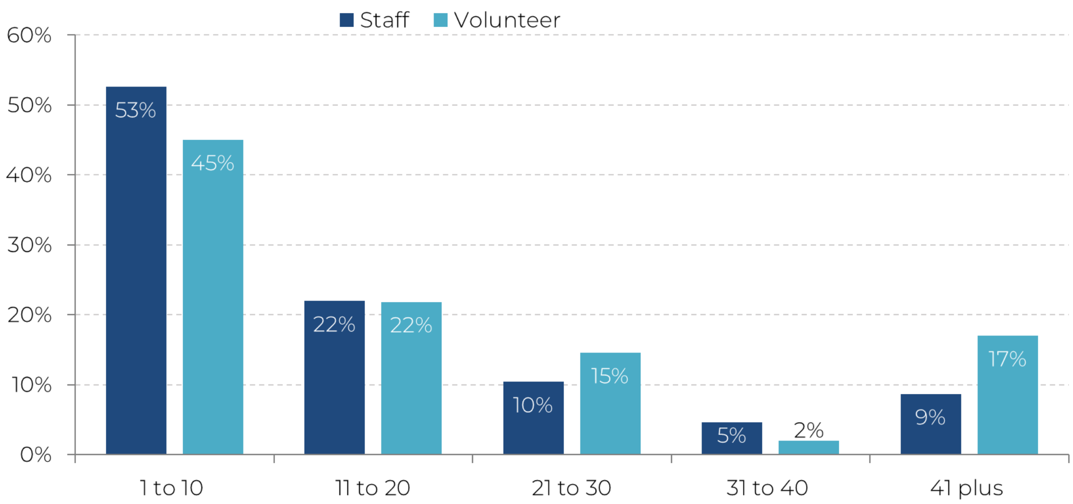
Source: PBE analysis of Rosa Survey, 19 June - 24 July 2024.

Almost half (47%) of respondents have increased staff numbers over the last year. As Figure 8 illustrates, while 39% of respondents experienced no change in staff size, only 14% reduced the size of their teams. Interestingly, over half (54%) of respondents also reported an increase in volunteer numbers over the same period. This finding is striking, given that volunteering rates across the charity sector are currently at an all-time low.[8]

The respondents' ability to tap into volunteers corroborates previous research, which found that the women and girls' sector is more strongly characterised by volunteerism, compared to the broader charity sector.[9]

Figure 9. Respondents rely on small teams of women to deliver services.

Respondents' workforce size



Notes: 'staff' column based on responses to 'how many people do you employ on a part-time basis and 'how many people do you employ on a full-time basis (N=173); 'volunteer' column based on responses to 'how many people volunteer for your organisation?' (N=151).

Source: PBE analysis of Rosa Survey, 19 June - 24 July 2024.

This may, partly, reflect the smaller size of organisations within the women and girls' sector. For example, as shown in Figure 9, more than half (53%) of respondents relied on small teams of between one and 10 employees –

[8] B Kitson, Adapting for success: Flexibility could hold the key to volunteer recruitment and retention, Pro Bono Economics, May 2024.

[9] C Damm, L Dowrick & C Harris, Mapping the UK Women and Girls Sector and its Funding: Where Does the Money Go?, Centre for Regional, Economic and Social Research and Rosa, April 2023.

more than double the proportion of organisations of the same size in the wider charity sector (25%).[10]

Organisations are still struggling to keep pace with rising demand.

Despite some boosts to staff and the number of volunteers, respondents were clear that the increases in recruitment have still not been enough to mitigate existing pressures. Nearly three in five (59%) respondents reported their number of paid staff was insufficient to meet their primary objectives, while nearly half (47%) reported a shortage of volunteers to deliver their work effectively.

Moreover, caution should be taken when considering boosts in volunteering. As previous research has noted, volunteering plays complex roles in women's lives and a rise in volunteering activity is only positive if it is not used to substitute paid staff.[11] Indeed, when digging further into the responses, it seems that volunteering and recruitment boosts have not (thus far) led to improvements for existing staff and volunteers. High turnover, low salaries and long hours are the norm. For organisations whose staff members and volunteers are drawn from the communities they serve, this lack of stability has a, particularly, pronounced impact. A small women's group said:

> *"We're doing some amazing projects, which the community loves, but it also means that we're devaluing the skills of women by not paying them for the work or paying a pittance."*

[10] N Tabassum and K Mehrotra, UK Civil Society Almanac 2024, National Council of Voluntary Organisations (NCVO), November 2024.
[11] For wider discussion around women and volunteering, see: C Damm, L Dowrick & C Harris, Mapping the UK Women and Girls Sector and its Funding: Where Does the Money Go? Centre for Regional, Economic and Social Research and Rosa, April 2023; R Gomez et al., Women and the charity sector, Pro Bono Economics, November 2023.

The sector remains determined to build capacity and stability, to reach more women and girls

Despite challenges, respondents remained resolute in their mission to support women and girls. When asked what their priorities would be if resources or funding were increased, it is not surprising that the most common response was to expand service delivery. Some respondents also highlighted that this would enable organisations to effectively support women with complex needs. As one women's health organisation noted, longer-term funding of spaces allows women to "go at their own pace and engage over flexible timescales. They can address multiple issues in one space. This leads to more meaningful and long-lasting change."

Respondents across the sector share a hope to consolidate and innovate, as well as to reach more women and girls.

As shown in Figure 10, many organisations also highlighted the importance of innovation and diversification. If they had more resources or funding, 45% would expand influencing and advocacy work, and 43% would diversify funding streams.

Responses throughout the survey highlighted the interconnected and holistic nature of the work undertaken across the sector. Service delivery cannot be separated from advocacy and campaigning, but 'work hand in hand', addressing immediate need while striving for long-term system reform.

Figure 10. Respondents want to not only deliver more services, but to also advocate and influence, and diversify funding sources.

Most popular areas and topics respondents would focus on with more resource or funding

Notes: response to 'If your organisation had greater resources or funding, what are the top 3 areas you would focus on?' Other/blank excluded.
Source: PBE analysis of Rosa Survey, 19 June - 24 July 2024.

Respondents emphasised that ring-fenced funding, where the government set aside funds specifically for the sector, is essential for reform. By guaranteeing resources for specific initiatives, ring-fenced funding was felt to reduce competition for limited funding, while allowing organisations to focus on delivering high-quality services and plan strategically, rather than constantly seeking new sources of income. Additionally, ring-fenced funding was thought to demonstrate the government's recognition of the sector and, as one respondent noted, "supports us to attract funding from other sources."

Building partnerships and enhancing data skills is also perceived as important for the sector.

Respondents also expressed interest in enhancing skills in data collection and impact measurement. As shown in Figure 10, one-quarter (25%) identified this as desirable.

Almost one-quarter (24%) also expressed a desire to build alliances and partnerships, reflecting a shared commitment to collective effort in addressing the diverse needs of women and girls. Indeed, a large organisation that focuses on women's health emphasised its hope for more collaboration and intra-sectoral support:

"We'd like to see more bespoke support for grassroots / disabled people's organisations to help them develop and implement effective systems & processes as they grow… (organisations) have sprung up out of need and experiences of injustice – but their leaders might not have prior experience of managing (and growing) a third sector organisation – this is really important to put organisations on the right track and ensure their resilience and sustainability into the future, while preserving the wellbeing of those who run them."

Different types of organisations face unique challenges

The women and girls' sector, like the women and girls it supports, is not a monolith. Each organisation plays a distinct role, offering tailored support to address the unique needs of specific groups. Many of the organisations that responded to the survey provide culturally sensitive and generation-specific support for women and girls in local communities.

Responses from two key types of organisations have been explored – those led by, and for, Black and/or minoritised women and girls, and those dedicated to supporting girls aged 17 and under – to examine whether different subsectors of women and girls' organisations face varying challenges.[11]

Black and/or minoritised organisations

Respondents representing Black and/or minoritised women and girls' organisations reported some distinct challenges and trends:

- Black and/or minoritised groups were significantly more likely to have experienced an increase in demand for services, at 97% compared with 88% of non-Black and/or minoritised groups.
- All (100%) of Black and/or minoritised groups expected demand to increase, compared to 90% of non-Black and/or minoritised groups. Black and/or minoritised organisations were also significantly more likely to expect to be able to meet demand, compared with non-Black and/or minoritised groups.
- Black and/or minoritised organisations were more likely to be smaller, in terms of income, than non-Black and/or minoritised organisations. This may simply be a case of those who responded to the survey, rather than representative of the sector, but it is a potential further avenue of research.

- Black and/or minoritised organisations were significantly more likely than non-Black and/or minoritised organisations to have organisational concerns about rising costs (26% compared to 10%); inadequate property and premises (17% compared with 6%); and lack of resource for staff development (12% compared with 2%).
- Black and/or minoritised organisations were less likely than non-Black and/or minoritised organisations to have organisational concerns about increased complexity of need (17% compared with 29%); and staff capacity and wellbeing (15% compared with 26%).
- Black and or/minoritised organisations were more likely than non-Black and/or minoritised organisations to have reduced staff hours (27% compared with 13%); and postponed volunteering recruitment (18% compared with 9%) in response to wider pressures.
- Black and/or minoritised organisations were more likely than non-Black and/or minoritised organisations to want to focus additional resources and funding on developing organisational strategy (32% compared with 14%); and improving system and processes (32% compared with 16%).

Girls' organisations

Over one-third (34%) respondents focused specifically on supporting girls aged 17 and under.

- Girls' organisations were more likely than non-girls' organisations to report that their organisations finances had "somewhat declined" in the previous 12 months (34% compared with 23%).
- Girls' organisations were less likely to express organisational concerns about staff retention than non-girls' organisations (17% compared with 26%).
- Girls' organisations were more likely than non-girls' organisations to have staff vacancies unfilled (34% compared with 22%); renegotiated grants or contracts (23% compared with 6%); and reduced workspace (17% compared with 8%) in response to wider pressures.
- Girls' organisations were more likely than non-girls' organisations to want to focus additional resources and funding on attracting more funding from other sources (52% compared with 37%).

While the sample size limits the drawing of definitive conclusions, the information still offers valuable insights into the varied experiences and priorities, as well as highlighting important avenues for further research, particularly in areas such as funding, staffing and infrastructure needs.

Conclusion

Women's and girls' organisations are crucial to driving and delivering positive change in women's and girls' lives and in wider society. Individually, women's and girls' organisations do everything from providing services to individual women and girls, to securing, protecting and advancing women's and girls' rights. Collectively, these organisations contribute to changing systems by shifting attitudes, culture, law and practice, which improve women's and girls' lives and benefit wider society. It is a sector that is diverse and dynamic, meeting the unique needs of women and girls, while creating opportunities for them to thrive. Yet, this vital work is taking place against a backdrop of significant challenges, including rising demand, shrinking resource and increased competition for funding.

The pressures are undeniable. With many organisations already reducing services, the women and girls' sector is straining to meet the growing needs of those they serve to the risk of the women that work within it.

Despite the challenge, the sector's commitment to its mission to support women and girls remains, as ever, steadfast. Organisations are not only advocating for sustainable funding models but are also pushing for meaningful change and collaboration. Respondents to this survey made clear their desire to continue to advocate and influence, collect data and develop research. They want to work across the sector, in partnership with different groups with varying expertise. They also want to be taken seriously by local and national partners, and have their voices heard and their services acknowledged.

The vision is clear: a collaborative and well-resourced sector is one that can respond to growing demand, while safeguarding the integrity of specialist services. Achieving this requires funders' support and adequate infrastructure, so that organisations can adapt and innovate. It also points to an important coordinating role for the government – one that it should be eager to take up as it continues to set out its opportunity mission. A well-supported and united women and girls' social sector is not just essential, but is a powerful force for change that must not be overlooked.

Methodology

The data collected and presented in this report is based on the responses of 211 women and girls' organisations to the first "state of the women and girls' sector" survey, conducted between 19 June and 24 July 2024.

The survey was aimed at providing a snapshot, rather than a full representation, of the women and girls' sector.

To identify responses from women and girls' organisations, as defined by Rosa[12], respondents were asked four yes/no questions:

- Is the principal objective of your organisation to work with women and/or girls?
- Are the majority of your organisation's clients, beneficiaries or service users women and/or girls?
- Does your organisation have a Board of Trustees (or similar) where the Chair is a woman, and most of the members are women?
- Does your organisation have a leadership team (employees and/or volunteers) in which the majority are women?

For those respondents who answered "yes" to all four questions, the organisations were identified as women and girls' organisations. This included registered charities, voluntary associations, unregistered societies, and community interest companies. Only responses to the full survey were included in this analysis.

Given the overlapping and intersectional nature of the women and girls' sector, respondents were asked to select the top three main focuses of their organisation.

- 46% respondents selected working to end violence against women and girls as one of their three main focuses.
- 31% respondents selected gender inequality as one of their three main focuses.

[12] https://rosauk.org/about-us/, accessed 07 March 2025

- 25% respondents selected working with women who face additional or multiple disadvantages as one of their three main focuses.

As well as determining the main focuses of the organisations, the survey asked about organisations' priority groups, including whether their organisations identified as being led by, and for, Black and or minoritised women and girls; and whether their organisation focused on girls and/or women. It should be noted that there is likely to be some crossover within these two organisational types.

- Over three in 10 (31%) respondents identified as led by, and for, Black and/or minoritised women and girls.
- 34% respondents reported their organisations supported girls up to the age of 17 years.

Confidence intervals were used to explore the nuances and differences of responses from these two types of organisations, given the small sample size. They provided a range within which the true value is likely to fall, ensuring that conclusions are more reliable despite limitations in the sample size. Data is reported only where there is up to 90% confidence.

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