Summary of the October Learning Circle on strengthening the link between Gendered and Child poverty

SMALLWOODTRUST

EARLY EDUCATION AND CHILDCARE COALITION

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The October Learning Circle brought together funders, advocates, policy leads, and frontline practitioners to explore the deep and interdependent links between women's and children's poverty. Through open dialogue and reflection, participants examined what meaningful, joined up responses could look like when rooted in empathy, lived experience, and a shared commitment to systemic change. All conversations were grounded in the principles of fairness, respect, equality, dignity, and autonomy.

The day began with an invitation to listen closely to lived and learned experts. Panel discussions offered strategic insights from key organisations alongside frontline experiences from practitioners and young people.

Key Takeaways from the Panel Sessions

1. **The Interdependence of Women's and Children's Poverty**

Participants highlighted that child poverty cannot be addressed without tackling women's poverty. When mothers face exclusion, low pay, unsafe work or insecure immigration status, children experience the consequences directly. Policies such as the two child limit, No Recourse to Public Funds, childcare eligibility thresholds and fragmented welfare systems were identified as reinforcing inequalities. Speakers called for robust gendered and child impact assessments in policymaking, supported by accountability mechanisms to prevent these from becoming token exercises.

2. **Beyond Income: Poverty as a Lived and Relational Experience**

Speakers emphasised that poverty is not solely financial. It is also about time, emotional capacity, safety and wellbeing. One described poverty as "a full body and soul experience", with trauma often passed across generations. Another noted that "there are people on the streets dying of childhood trauma; if it doesn't come out now, it comes out somewhere".

A powerful personal story illustrated how poverty, domestic violence and experiences of care can erode attachment and stability. The speaker described how a strong relationship with their mother protected them from harms their siblings, who remained in care, experienced. Participants reflected that any child poverty strategy must recognise and support family relationships as central to resilience and long term recovery.

3. **Frontline Realities and Systemic Strain**

Practitioners described their work as crisis management within overstretched systems. Families face compounding challenges including stigma, language barriers, fear of child removal, health issues and complex bureaucracy. Despite low pay and exhaustion, frontline workers remain trusted connectors and vital sources of support.

4. **Safety, Abuse and Financial Insecurity**

Financial instability and domestic abuse often overlap, trapping women and children in unsafe situations. Organisations providing essential support also face insecurity due to short term funding, limiting their ability to respond.

5. **Towards Ethical and Joined Up Solutions**

Participants called for trauma informed, whole system approaches linking housing, childcare, welfare, health and economic justice. Lived experience must meaningfully shape strategy, and participation should be resourced ethically to avoid tokenism or retraumatisation.

A cross cutting theme was the need to balance meeting urgent needs with the long term work of systemic change. Participants agreed that both must progress together for solutions to be effective and sustainable.

Collaborative Learning Tables

Participants then moved to collaborative learning tables, each focused on a key theme.

- **Theme 1: Caring Responsibilities and Women's Labour Market Participation:** Discussions stressed the need for joined up welfare services and universal access to childcare so that families do not fall through gaps during life transitions. There were calls to remove barriers to economic participation, including the rollback of flexible working, and to value care as essential economic labour.
- **Theme 2: Large Families and the Two Child Limit:** There was agreement that evidence of harm caused by the two child limit is now clear. Participants expressed concern that public narratives such as "you should only have children if you can afford them" continue to dominate and shape policymaking more than evidence of child poverty. The group called for reframing narratives to emphasise the long term social and economic benefits of supporting children.
- **Theme 3: Disability, Gendered Poverty and Caring Responsibilities:** Participants discussed the challenges disabled mothers and children face in navigating fragmented systems. They highlighted unintended consequences of funding rules such as childcare schemes that exclude meal costs and benefits systems that penalise people for trying work. There was consensus on the need to normalise flexible working and childcare options.
- **Theme 4: Race and Migration:** Structural racism was identified as a root cause of exclusionary policies including NRPF. Participants spoke about over policing in Black and Brown communities and the resulting fear and distrust of services. Funders were encouraged to take more risks, invest earlier and meet families' basic needs before expecting engagement in systemic change.
- **Theme 5: Violence Against Women and Girls:** Participants discussed how VAWG should be integrated into wider conversations on poverty and wellbeing. They noted that perpetrators are often main earners in households, creating financial and safety barriers for survivors. There was a call to better capture and communicate the long term economic and social value of prevention work.

Afternoon Sessions

Participants divided into two groups: funders and advocacy organisations.

Funders' Session

The funders' session explored the challenges and opportunities shaping funding for organisations working on gendered and child poverty. Participants reflected on how systems, language and funding structures influence the support that mothers, children and families receive, and how funders can work more collaboratively to support long term change.

- **Holistic and Intersectional Approaches:** Funders reflected on the siloed nature of funding across women's services, early years, family support and anti poverty work. Participants

emphasised the need for approaches that recognise the interconnected realities of women's and children's lives. Issues such as NRPF cut across sectors, reinforcing the need for collaboration between the women's sector and the early years sector.

- **Funding Structures and Thematic Silos:** Current funding frameworks, often organised into narrow themes, make it difficult for organisations to deliver holistic support. Participants suggested shifting towards funding that enables organisations to provide integrated services for families. There was also recognition that funders can help reduce competition created by siloed commissioning processes.
- **Applying a Gender Lens:** Participants discussed barriers to adopting a gender lens, including sector segmentation and the way funding priorities are framed. There was agreement that a gender lens is central to tackling inequality and should be embedded across funding strategies rather than treated as optional.
- **Resource Scarcity and Collaboration:** Resource scarcity often creates competition, undermining collaboration. Funders acknowledged their role in designing funding approaches that encourage cooperation and reduce zero sum dynamics.
- **Clarifying Systems Change:** Participants noted a lack of shared understanding of systems change across funders and frontline organisations. They highlighted that frontline work and systems change are connected rather than distinct. Multi year funding of five to ten years is needed to dismantle structural barriers and support long term strategies. Funders also recognised their role in influencing wider systems including social security, racial justice and migration.

Advocacy Organisations' Session

- **Understanding the Gaps:** Advocates discussed disconnects between government policy and the lived experiences of women and families. They highlighted how policy silos and emerging issues, such as AI related job losses, could deepen gender inequality. Participants emphasised the need to value long term outcomes, not just short term cost savings.
- **Short Term Funding Cycles:** Twelve month funding cycles keep organisations in survival mode, limiting collaboration and long term planning. Participants identified trust based, flexible funding as essential.
- **Balancing Urgent and Long Term Work:** Frontline organisations noted that intensive, relational work is undervalued because it does not scale neatly. Measures of impact are often too narrow to capture real change.
- **Strengthening the Women's Sector:** Participants discussed how the women's sector can strengthen its influence in areas dominated by economic or child focused organisations. Coalition building and long term investment were identified as critical.
- **Collaboration and Power Sharing:** Genuine collaboration requires time, trust and resources. Participants noted that funders sometimes underestimate the cost of coordination and relationship building.
- **Embedding Lived Experience:** Participants stressed that lived experience must shape priorities rather than be included tokenistically. Ethical participation requires time, flexibility and emotional and financial support.

Closing Session

Participants reconvened to reflect on stakeholder engagement within their fields. They considered which stakeholders hold power and how best to communicate vision and ambition. Everyone was invited to complete a pledge card outlining individual commitments and next steps.

Your commitments

Thank you to everyone who completed a commitment card during the session. Below is a selection of **some** of the commitments shared on the day.

"Talk to people and organisations outside the usual suspects and be brave enough to talk about the tough issues even if it gets us in trouble."

"Intentionally involving women's organisations in the work we do at National Children's Bureau, particularly around our poverty work, and considering matters like gender impact when developing policy."

"To integrate some of the learning from today into the implementation of the new strategy."

"To speak with the policy and influencing team about how we apply a gendered lens to our child poverty work and consider how we embed the voices of children and mothers in this work."

"Securing funding for our policy team to continue fighting for single parents and their children."

"Who aren't we speaking to that we should?"

"Reaching out to more London charities that are women's orgs to join our child poverty network."

"Sharing what I've heard today and starting an internal conversation about the importance of women and girls."

"Continuing to have a conversation with people I've met for the first time. Shared experiences and ideas with to incorporate them in my approach."

"Recognise the gendered element of our work and children's food policy."

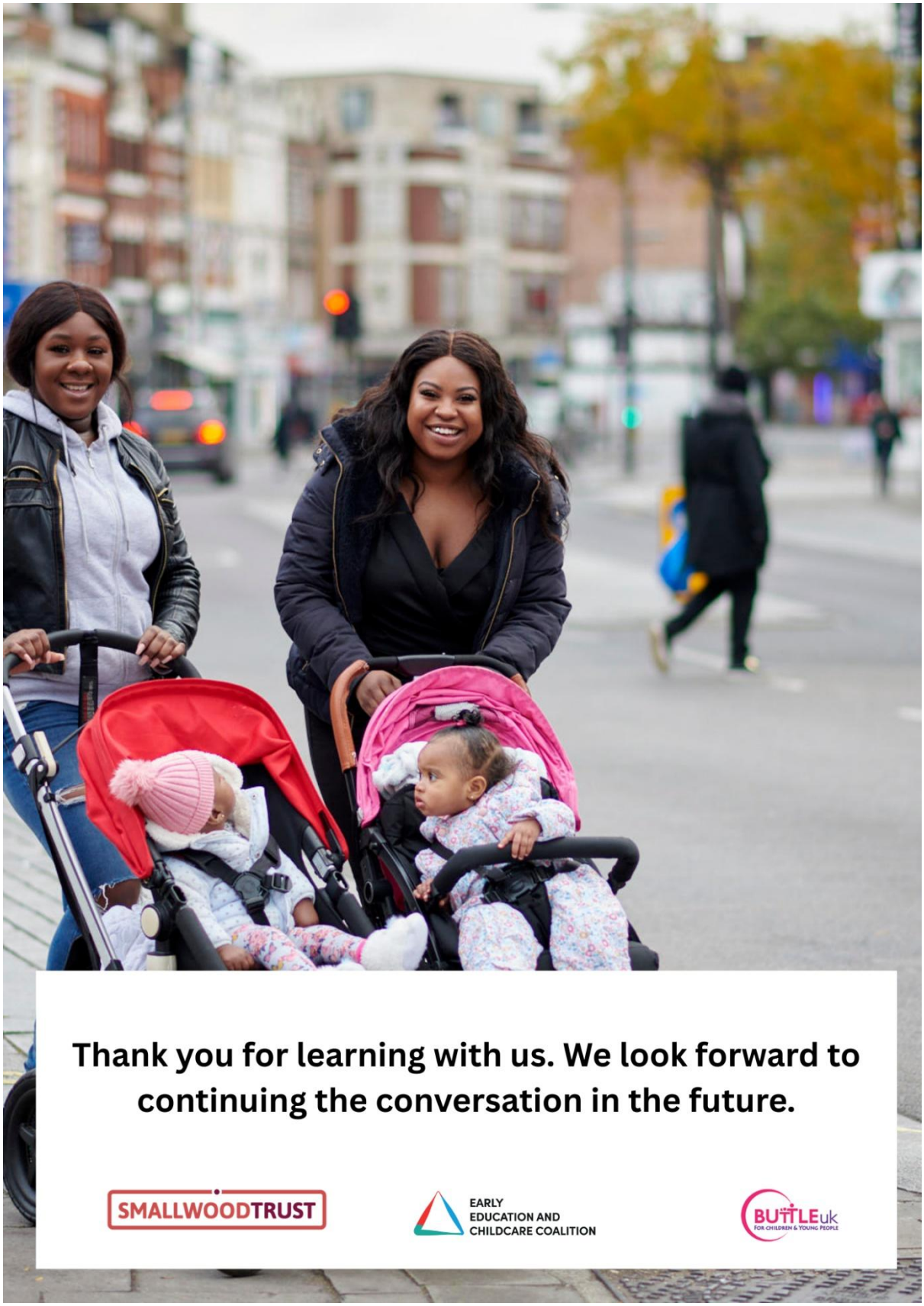
"Better recognise intersecting factors and experiences relating to poverty."

Reflection often continues after the event. If you have thought of additional commitments or would like to refine the ones you made, you are warmly invited to share them with us. We look forward to reconnecting in a few months to hear about your progress and explore how we can support you.

Articles and Posts Shared

https://www.smallwoodtrust.org.uk/news/when-women-thrive-children-do-better-reflections-from-our-learning-circle-on-gendered-and-child-poverty/
https://www.linkedin.com/posts/activity-7393567576817295360-cK_J
https://www.linkedin.com/posts/chelseasemou_genderlens-childpoverty-womensresilience-activity-7389278609829425152-QZjB
https://www.linkedin.com/feed/update/urn:li:activity:7386798752692330497
https://www.linkedin.com/posts/dr-ambreen-shah_if-you-took-a-gendered-lens-to-your-work-activity-7387019991671386112-Khrp
https://www.linkedin.com/feed/update/urn:li:activity:7388875740848525312

Reading Resources Reading resources on gendered and child poverty
https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/10XydIXNffZtfmhik-rU-tu9lvUVjdijR



Thank you for learning with us. We look forward to continuing the conversation in the future.

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