

**Towards the London Plan Examination in Public (EiP):  
Building the Case for Social Impact Assessment**

# Rooms of our Own

**DEVP0030**

**Practice in Urban Development Planning**

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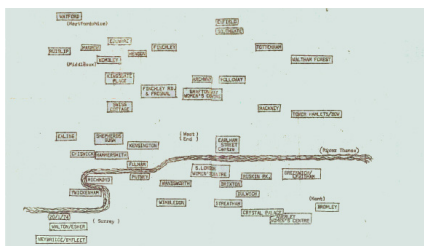
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# Executive Summary

Rooms of Our Own (RooO) is a non-profit social enterprise that seeks to provide accessible, affordable and secure spaces for the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) in the times of loss of these premises across London. RooO focuses on women-only spaces and recognises the importance of Women's Community Centres (WCCs) in London as a provider of essential life-saving services and as a hub for women to organise and campaign. Having lost their original site in Walthamstow they are now seeking a new site in North-East London. At a time when market forces define the future of cities, RooO, like many other women's organisations, do not have the support of authorities and struggle everyday to access a space to achieve their objectives.

**Figure 1.** Map of the spaces that were lost in London



Therefore, the challenge of RooO goes beyond providing a women only space, but also restoring recognition of different women's organisations. During the process of understanding the needs and aspirations of our community partner, we developed 'the snowball approach' which allowed us to engage with different women's organisations that have been affected by this situation within their particular realities. This report is supported by their voices.

According to the Women's Resource Centre,

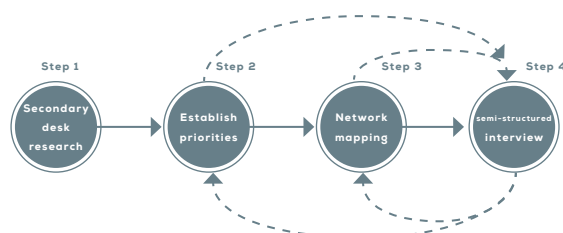
75% of women's organisations in London had to reduce or close services by March 2013. This loss of spaces for women has meant a decrease in services delivered, as well as a loss in recognition of the diversity of women's groups, their specific needs and the ability to act collectively.

The aspirations of RooO are built in a planning context of austerity that fails to secure land and space for communities. RooO is part of the community-led network of voluntary groups called Just Space (JS) who aim to include the perspectives of communities within the London Plan through the use of a Social Impact Assessment (SIA). To address their agenda, we propose the following definition of socially just planning:

**Socially just planning pursues democracy and disrupts oppression within society reshaping the physical and political space of the city. This approach to planning allows us to continuously redefine ourselves, our city and this symbiotic relationship.**

In the process of building an SIA inspired by our definition of socially just planning we propose the following methodology that will define the first Stage of a SIA.

**Figure 2.** SIA Stage 1 Methodology



### Step 1. Secondary desk research

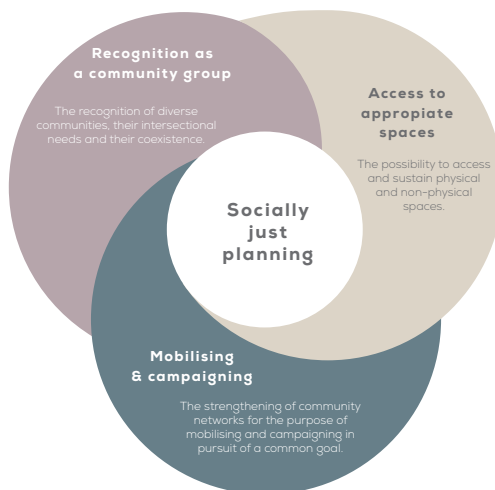
To understand the context of the current situation and gather existing research and data.

### Step 2. Establish priorities

Define major issues that are of concern to the community group(s).

Through the first discussion with different women's community organisations, we aimed to understand the different needs of women's groups that have, have lost or are searching for space. This allowed us to define the three priorities for RooO.

Figure 3. Priorities



### Step 3. Network mapping

Create a database of WCCs in London based on the following questions: who they are; where they are; what they do; their priorities; any existing network, and their contact details. This enables the self-recognition of the entire women's community sector as a network and scale-up at a city level.

### Step 4: Semi-structured Interview

To deepen our understanding of the value of these spaces, the causes of their loss and the struggle of obtaining them, we conducted semi-structured interviews. Figure 2 demonstrates a cyclical process that is continuously revising and supplementing the established priorities.

Within the process, we have found that WCCs are essential since they represent a safe space where the needs of women and their different identities are recognised and effectively addressed. Thus, a physical space allows women to share their experiences, create bonds among them, empower and ultimately determine their own lives. Nevertheless, the importance of these centres has not been recognised in the London planning process. This was reflected on the financial cuts and lack of support by the Greater London Authority (GLA) since 2010, where minority women's community groups were the most affected.

As such, the Draft London Plan does not sufficiently address the needs of the women's community groups in London, nor the different identities among them. The plan recognises the importance of community spaces, but it does not address their increasing loss or their real value. Furthermore, it understands social infrastructure in a narrow way, ignoring its potential to build stronger and supportive communities.

The SIA is not just a tool to understand a reality that other assessments fail to capture, but in its implementation process, the SIA empowers communities, strengthens networks and mobilises them.

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# 1. Introduction

Inequality is quickly becoming the norm in London. Despite the city's economic wealth, good public services and world-class education, women, particularly minority women, suffer from high levels of inequality and systemic violence. One of these inequalities is the increasing difficulty that women face when accessing community centres and, consequently, in fulfilling their urban existence. This is something that should be recognised and solved through the city planning process.

This report seeks to explore why community spaces are a key element of a socially just city, as they are essential in helping groups gain recognition and for citizens to defend their rights. Additionally, this report encourages the use of the Social Impact Assessment (SIA) as a tool to make London a city for all, defined by the vision and needs of its citizens.

This instrument should be used in the consultation process of the New London Plan. With the help of SIAs, groups who often suffer from urban inequalities may have a unique opportunity to bring attention to their needs and demand spaces of their own, spaces that allow them to pursue and achieve their full potential.

We have worked closely with Just Space (JS), a London wide network of voluntary and community groups working together to influence planning policy, and with Rooms of our Own (RooO), a social enterprise committed to expanding the provision of accessible, affordable, sustainable and safe facilities for the Voluntary and Community Sectors (VCS). We have also worked with various women's organisations with different challenges and scopes, but united by the same spirit: the right to be recognised as a community that needs physical and non-physical spaces for a more just city.

## 2. Context

### 2.1 Understanding the Current State of Women Community Centres in London

The Greater London Council (GLC) was established in 1965 as an administrative government body for the Greater London area. The GLC established special committees to represent women, ethnic minorities and the LGB community. The GLC's Women's Committee funded Women's Community Centres (WCCs) to address issues of domestic violence and family planning and the GLC frequently "found and leased central London spaces to activist groups" (Tobin 2017, p.12).

Despite the £30 million distributed by the Women's Committee over four years, women's groups still struggled to find resources and space (Weale 1999; Tobin 2017). Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government saw the GLC as a "wasteful and unnecessary tier of government" and in 1986 the GLC and Women's Committee were abolished (Webber, 2016). Although the Greater London Authority (GLA) was established in 2000, a Women's Committee was not reborn. Even at the national level, a dedicated body for women's rights called the "Women's National Commission" was dissolved under the coalition government of David Cameron and Nick Clegg. In the last thirty years, the UK has witnessed the active weakening of women's voices at the national and municipal levels across the political spectrum.

Despite an 83% increase in demand for women-only services in the last decade, funding has fallen by 50% (Corry 2018). In 2018, 24% of women's organisations surveyed by the WRC had no financial reserves left (Corry 2018). This trend correlates with austerity measures and welfare reform faced by local government and disproportionately passed onto the VCS.

This represents more than a loss of resources, but a loss of recognition, citizen empowerment and political participation. Community centres aim to help citizens support one another in achieving their full potential as well as addressing inequality and oppression. In the case of women's only community spaces, women and girls can seek assistance regarding violence,

legal support, poverty and welfare assistance, discrimination or healthcare.

## 2.2 A London Plan for Who?

The London planning process has been less inclusive than London Mayor Sadiq Khan claims and fails to speak to all Londoners, as we have seen with women's access to community spaces for example. However, the formal consultation process, including an Examination in Public (EiP)<sup>1</sup>, provides Londoners with an opportunity to comment on the plan and argue for necessary changes. As such, RooO has an opportunity to make a case for why the London Plan fails to include all Londoners.

Overall, RooO claims the Londoner that Mayor Khan refers to in his plan does not reflect the reality of the "whole range of women's and men's lived experiences, their contributions to shaping the city over the course of history, their multiple and intersecting social identities, diverse needs and aspirations, [and] social, cultural and community networks" (JS 2018). For RooO specifically, the London Plan's misconception of all Londoners can be seen in the plan's failure to recognise the importance and value of space for specific communities in London.

The London Plan also fails to mention the needs for specific communities<sup>2</sup> to meet privately in safe, permanent, affordable and accessible spaces (RooO 2018). Particularly in the age of #metoo and #timesup women centres are "not just there to deliver services," but provide an important avenue through which experiences can be shared and discussed, where women can advise each other and collectively identify ways forward (RooO 2018, p.3).

Finally, the Draft London Plan mentions Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) but never in conjunction with women and thus failing to acknowledge questions of intersectionality. Avoiding this discussion does not acknowledge the power structures in place that can compound oppression and merit particular attention. It is important to recognise diversity amongst London's women and their needs.

<sup>1</sup> RooO has been invited to the session on Social Infrastructure Policies S1-S3 [M51-M53] on Friday May 3rd, 2019 (week 9). The written statement is to be submitted by Friday March 1st, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> RooO calls for the plan to better understand the needs of specific communities in relation to the nine protected characteristics of the Equality Act 2010, which are age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, and sexual orientation.

## 2.3 Socially Just Planning Through a Social Impact Assessment

The current London planning process uses an Integrated Impact Assessment (IIA), which is comprised of a Sustainability Appraisal (including a Strategic Environmental Assessment), Habitats Regulation Assessment, Health Impact Assessment and Equalities Impact Assessment. The IIA fails to adequately understand the social effects that planning can have. In this context, the SIA can provide a more nuanced understanding of how planning affects Londoners. Our understanding of the SIA is based upon JS's guidelines laid out in their document *Community Led London Plan* (2013). SIAs aim to use indicators to assess how future developments will affect existing residents and businesses in an area and analyse what is already there, and what should be aspired to. Additionally, the indicators used in SIAs should be developed alongside the VCS to ensure that they reflect the priorities of relevant groups.

In the context of the London Plan, an SIA should be undertaken as a part of any IIA to assess how the Plan will affect Londoners. While the London Plan does discuss “social infrastructure”, it does not adequately understand how community spaces are more than just infrastructure but also interpersonal relationships throughout a community. It is for that reason that JS believes that the SIA should be a necessary component, alongside the Equalities Impact Assessment (EqIA)<sup>3</sup> in the planning process and any future IIAs as development often has considerable social costs such as displacement and relocation. JS further add that:

[SIAs] undertaken at a London-wide and local level could provide a more comprehensive analysis of how health, education, employment and accommodation inequalities are related and what planning policy approaches are needed to address these concerns (JS 2013, p. 67).

The scope of an SIA could also include space that has been lost. The SIA should not only be a mitigation strategy but instead seek to maintain existing space and find solutions on how to recover what has been lost. This issue is particularly relevant to RooO as women's community

<sup>3</sup> The EqIA a form of assessment undertaken during the development process to analyse whether plans or policies will disproportionately discriminate against a particular group. (City of London, 2014)



groups have experienced a considerable loss as a result of London's development and austerity. The SIA should document the effect that this loss has had on women and other groups, and allow them to contribute solutions on how to reverse this. The SIA should come before any future development plans are made so as to prevent further loss.

The SIA is a recognition of a collective right to transform the city and reshape the processes of urbanisation. In this instance, it gives London's communities a voice in the planning process. Developing indicators with the VCS and local communities in mind ensures a more equitable and bottom-up assessment of the effects of development and how to resolve them.

If Mayor Khan wants an inclusive London planning process then an assessment of how all Londoners are affected by development that ensures their input is necessary. The SIA is a key element that must be undertaken to ensure a more just planning process for London by guaranteeing all voices are heard, communities are not further disrupted and allow what has been lost to be recovered.

## 3. Theoretical Framework

### 3.1 Definition of Socially Just Planning

The difficulty for community organisations to secure a voice and accessible premises, expose the urgent need of a multifaceted understanding of social justice and therefore, socially just planning.

In order to address the real dimension of their struggle, one must consider the numerous concerns at hand. First, it is important to bring together the distribution of material and non-material goods, recognition of diversity and the capacity to participate in public affairs. This definition of socially just planning draws from various approaches which, if considered together, build a comprehensive and holistic understanding of justice. Here David Harvey's (2008) and Henri Lefebvre's (1991) ideas of "right to the city" is mixed with Iris Marion Young's (1990) concerns with institutional conditions and the recognition of different realities within social groups. These ideas are then integrated with Nancy Fraser's (2007, p. 27) emphasis

on participation and “social arrangements that permit all (adult) members of society to interact with one another as peers.”

All three authors pursue what Young (1990) calls “the values that constitute a good life”. This means: (1) the value to develop and exercise our own capacity and expressing our own experiences. Usually, this value is threatened by oppression characterised by systematic institutional processes that constraint self-development; and, (2) the value of participating in the determining our own action and conditions. This definition also borrows from Harvey’s (2008) conceptual development of our collective right to change ourselves by changing the city. Self-determination of citizens is only possible where domination is put in question and confronted, because domination is the social condition that which usually inhibit the possibility to self-determine and reshape urbanisation trends.

As such, social justice refers to the pursuit of democracy and the disruption of oppression within society.

Physical and non-physical spaces for social, cultural and political practices play a central role in the pursuit of social justice. Spaces of free interaction have the potential to strengthen ties within a social group and reduce inequality and discrimination. Through strengthened community networks, groups can mobilise and challenge the structures that restrict their strategic and practical needs. This is why physical and non-physical spaces are central to a just urban existence within a socially just society. A socially just society should enable and indeed prompt all citizens to defend their rights.

Local governments have the duties of distributing resources and ensuring a just use of space. Therefore, socially just planning acknowledges that public land belongs to the citizens as they have already paid for it through taxes and, as such, it is theirs to determine the use of. The right to access space for community groups to mobilise should not be seen as a luxury but the catalyst for citizen participation and the foundation for an equitable society. It is important to have “social infrastructures that serve as safe spaces for members of excluded groups that are subjected to prejudice, discrimination, and violence. Oppressed communities often endure extreme social and economic pressures that inhibit the formation of stable, enduring relationships” (Klinenberg 2018, p.160). A socially just society

not only offers the space for groups to convene but also give the conditions for financial independence from government structures. Without the latter, the possibilities for self-determination are reduced.

In sum, a definition of socially just planning that is both holistic and broad enough to address the needs and aspirations of community groups like RooO:

**Socially just planning pursues democracy and disrupts oppression within society reshaping the physical and political space of the city. This approach to planning allows us to continuously redefine ourselves, our city and this symbiotic relationship.**

## 3.2 Using SIA to Mobilise

If VCS actors are to help build a socially just city, they must go beyond demanding the redistribution of infrastructure, they must also address the inequalities that moments of loss and exclusion. When addressing the loss of community spaces for women across London, RooO brings attention to the oppression of a specific group in our society which Young (1990) claims is the only path towards social justice. In order to truly emancipate women, their oppression must be recognised and they must organise in order to break free from these shackles.

Young (1990) pays particular attention to embracing diversity within society in order to create opportunities for a shift in power. Recognising the unique injustices of women's groups is key, but recognising the differences within this group is equally important. Compounded with gender, race, sexuality, disability or religion, different forms of oppression can surface. The failure to acknowledge intersectionality is also the failure to shine a light on all forms of oppression and block the path towards social justice.

Through Stage one of the SIA, which is to develop a detailed understanding of the local context and the diverse communities involved, RooO can contribute to creating a unified identity and culture of solidarity amongst women's groups in London, overcome fragmentation and create alternative solutions for a more equal city. Borrowing from Harvey's (2012) analysis of the "Water Wars" of El Alto, Bolivia in 2000, we can see how strengthening and growing a women's network in London could serve as a mobilisation strategy. Harvey (2012) claims that the success of the protesters from El Alto lies in the relationships built at community or neighbourhood level. He writes, "in more diffuse urban settings, there has to be a conscious political attempt to construct, maintain and strengthen such links" (Harvey 2012, p.138).

Stage one of the SIA allows women's groups across the city to construct the very links Harvey (2012) refers to. The strengthening of these ties is made possible in a first instance through the survey which seeks to acknowledge the unique or overlapping struggles each woman's group faces. Respect is first established through acknowledgement, and a link may strengthen.

Thereafter, these groups might visit one another and develop a stronger understanding of the struggles associated with each group. This approach creates the basis for conflict resolution amongst such diverse players, allowing women's groups to mediate fragmentation within their network, without disregarding unique perspectives and falling prey to factionalism. Despite the ocean and the histories that separate El Alto and London, both cities share the same need for communal life to weave a common identity that overcomes tensions. Harvey argues (2012, p.148) "these cultural solidarities and collective memories enable unions to overcome tensions" and "promote a collective sense of self, which in turn enables them to be effective political subjects."

Strengthened ties within a movement can also create an alternative solution to the political structures at hand or the vision of the city currently proposed. These ties "can just as often be agnostic as harmonious, the face-to-face contacts are frequent and therefore incipiently strong" (Harvey 2012, p. 146). This would be a crucial development within any successful mobilisation because this network of women's groups will have to imagine and propose a city that speaks to their needs and desires. This can only be born through exchange and negotiation amongst the diverse actors within this network.

## 4. Research Process and Proposed Methodology for Stage One SIA

### 4.1 Research Framework

Our baseline study and needs assessment is based on Paulo Freire's (1970) concept of Participatory Action Research (PAR). Through the PAR approach, RooO sits at the heart of our research to ultimately enable community-driven research and data collections for the SIA (Coghlan and Brydon-Miller 2014). Over three months, the PAR approach allowed our group to continuously engage with RooO through a set of 'actions and reflections' to understand the context of women's community spaces in London and eventually support the first Stage of the SIA.

## 4.2 Our Process

In the first instance, we reviewed the draft of the London Plan and our community partners' response to understand their perspective. Alongside the secondary data analysis and literature review, we conducted an unstructured interview with Wendy Davis, founding director of RooO, to understand RooO's networks and history. Based on the first meeting with Wendy, our group developed a framework to define socially just planning.

In hopes to understand the impact of the women's community spaces and their closures, we conducted our first field observation at the Feminist Library on November 7th, 2018. We had an open discussion with five representatives from women's community groups in London: Wendy Davis from RooO, Marian Larragy from the Irish Women's Centre<sup>4</sup>, Magda Oldziejewska and Gail Chester from the Feminist Library, and Nadia Baksh from the London Black Women's Project. This discussion helped us identify key actors in London's women's community and understand the diverse functionalities of WCCs. Furthermore, the focus group discussion increased our understanding of RooO's priorities. Following this engagement, we co-established three priorities for our research with our community partners.

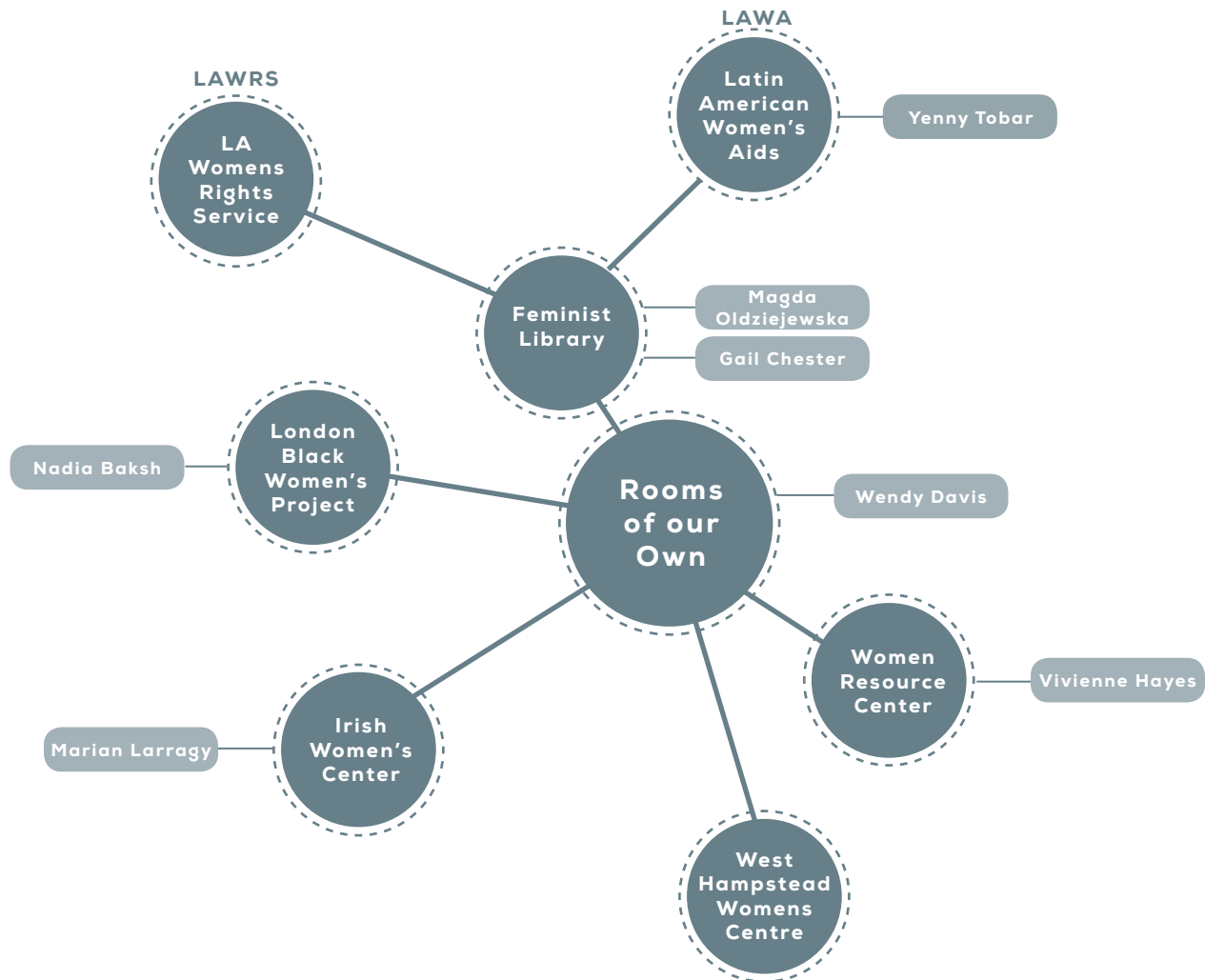
During a second event at the Feminist Library, we became acquainted with the West Hampstead Women's Centre (WHWC), the Latin American Women's Aid (LAWA), and Latin American Women Rights Service (LAWRS). All these connections gradually escalated and developed, growing like a rolling snowball (Heckathorn and Cameron 2017).

**Figure 4** Open discussion with our community partners.



<sup>4</sup>The Irish Women's Centre closed in 2012.

**Figure 5** Women's Community Center Network

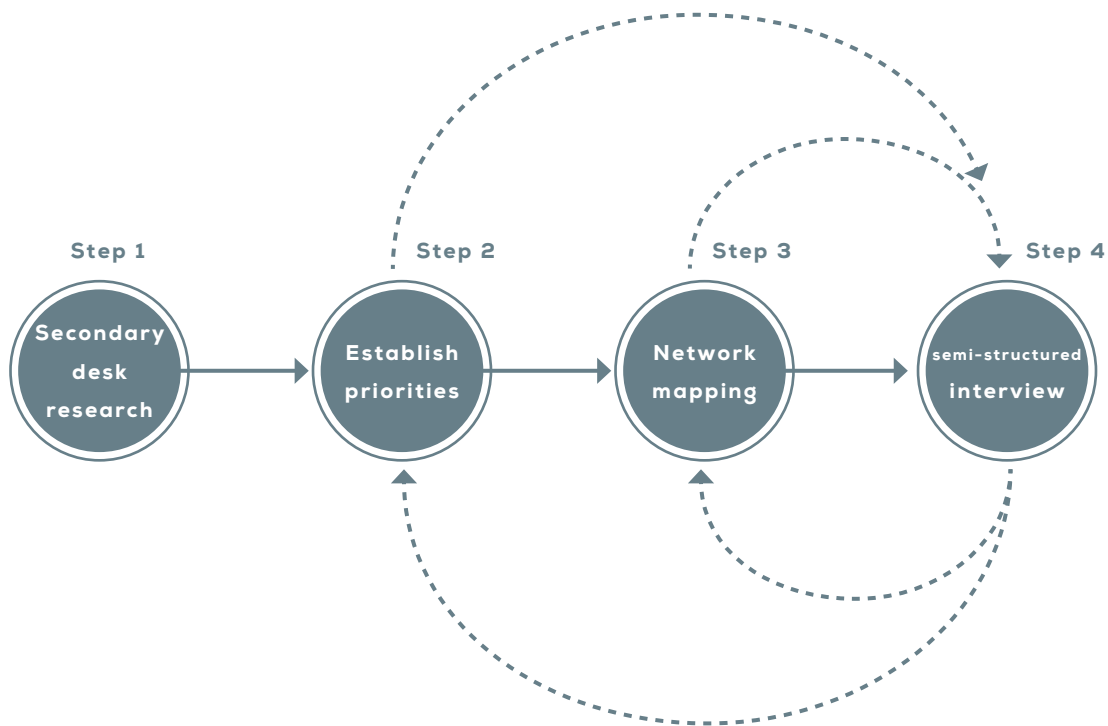


The semi-structured interviews were conducted with a set of questions which were clustered based on the value of space, the loss of space and challenges to finding and maintaining space. This structure draws an understanding of the nature of WCCs and the pillars that support them in their daily struggles. In total we conducted six interviews with Wendy Davis, director of RooO; Yenny Tovar, director of LAWA; Magda Oldziejewska, manager of the Feminist Library; Gail Chester, founder of the Feminist Library; Vivienne Hayes, CEO of Women's Resource Centre; Marian Larragy, former coordinator of the Irish Women's Centre. See Appendix A for the list of questions.

## 4.3 Proposed Methodology

Stage one of the SIA is to “develop a detailed understanding of the local context and the diverse communities involved” (Lipietz et al. 2018, p.19). Through the PAR framework, the methodology should be replicable and easily operational by other community groups. This process is likely to result in sustainable and autonomous community-driven research in pursuit of social transformation (Coghlan and Brydon-Miller 2014). The proposed methodology is composed of four steps and designed to analyse social infrastructure and could be replicated by others that face similar situations. See Figure 6 for the methodology.

**Figure 6** SIA Stage 1 Methodology



The methodology is designed and tested throughout our research process. To operate, each step can be selectively altered based on the context of the community. The steps are not segregated but intimately connected. Figure 6 demonstrates a cyclical process that is continuously revising and supplementing the established priorities.



**Step 1. Secondary desk research:** To understand the context of the current situation and gather existing research and data.

**Step 2. Establish priorities:** Define major issues that are of concern to the community group(s).

**Step 3. Network mapping:** Create a database of WCCs in London based on the following questions: who they are; where they are; what they do; their priorities; any existing network, and their contact details. This enables the self-recognition of the entire women's community sector as a network and scale-up at a city level.

**Figure 7** Network mapping



**Step 4: Semi-structured Interview:** Based on the co-creation of network mapping, it leads to the second step with the qualitative research method to enhance each community groups' narrative and investigate their value (Desai and Potter 2006). The semi-structured interview is conducted with the guideline questionnaire which is categorized as 'value of space', 'loss of space' and 'finding space.'

Outside the written form of the survey, we propose the film campaign that community partners film themselves, responding to the five suggested questions. This is a multifaceted and interactive approach not only functioning as a survey but mobilising the issues to grow its popularity in an easy and replicable way by using the social network platform.

What we observed throughout the initial process of the research was a informal network with a potential to strengthen mobilisation. This represents a room for maneuver with potential to evolve. As an example of our process, the common ground of each women's group was to be recognised by creating a stronger network. Our methodology had been arose from "the Snowball Approach" which is similar to "respondent-driven sampling" (Heckathorn and Cameron 2017).

**Figure 8** Round of interviews

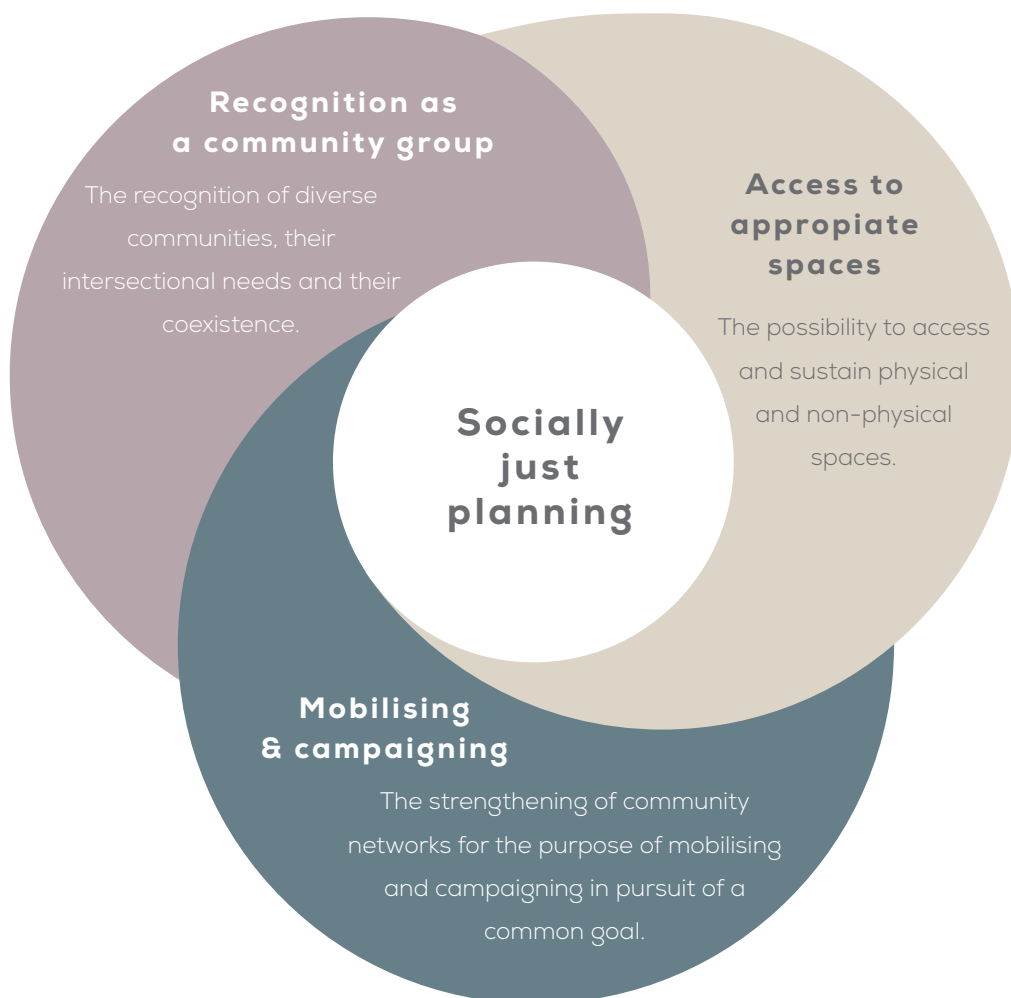


Based on this research and analysis, an initial proposal for stage two of the SIA is to measure the impact of community spaces, and their loss, at both the local and city scale. This can be done by looking at effects on mental health (e.g. sense of belonging, happiness, rates of depression, loneliness), physical health, employment (e.g. increase in unemployment, skills training), rate of gender violence, life expectancy, access to legal services, social well-being, and shifts in types of services (e.g. women's space to particular/general service VCS).

## 5. Priorities

Our understanding of socially just planning is multifaceted in order to respond to the three complex priorities co-created with our community partner, as illustrated in Figure 9.

**Figure 9** Priorities



It is important to acknowledge that firstly, the priorities are intimately interconnected and secondly, separated they are essential but incomplete.

The first priority, recognition as a community group, represents the pursuit for recognition of women's experiences and actions, of their specific needs and aspirations in multiple dimensions of the urban life. This pursuit involves women's struggle against different forms of oppression (sexism, racism, homophobia, transphobia, classism, xenophobia, etc.). It is important to understand that the first priority calls for the recognition of diverse communities, their intersectional needs, and their coexistence.

Here we acknowledge that recognition is crucial for the achievement of the other two priorities. After all, the lack of recognition and its reproduction within institutional spheres provokes unequal distributional patterns, which leads us to our second priority: access to appropriate physical and non-physical spaces and, more specifically, the possibility to sustain access to them.

Physical space plays a central role in contesting the right to the city, which is more than just access to urban resources. In *The Production of Space*, Henri Lefebvre (1991, p.26) claims that "(social) space is a (social) product". As such, physical space is a result of social relations, at the same time it reproduces them (Vaegas 2005). Processes of oppression and recognition become spatialised. For RooO, acquiring a physical space within the city means exercising a right to participate in decision-making and the distribution of resources. The access to appropriate spaces represents the right to reshape the city. Above all, it recognises the social infrastructure that underpins women's community spaces for the city and the importance of these spaces for transforming society into a more just and democratic one.

Continuing in a holistic approach with multiple entry points, we acknowledge that access to physical spaces is essential for the exchanges that enable women's empowerment and mobilisation. At the same time, the community can transform perceptions and interests in collective action, expressing their voices and influencing political processes and outcomes, thus reaching physical and non-physical spaces and recognition. Planning grounded in inclusivity, recognition of communities' specific needs, community empowerment and

engagement, contribute to the achievement of these priorities.

Given the political nature of the London planning process, the pursuit for recognition and access to sustainable physical and non-physical spaces is only possible when communities are engaged and mobilised. In this sense, the third priority, mobilising and campaigning, plays an important role. This priority focuses on the strengthening of community networks for the purpose of mobilising and campaigning in pursuit of a common goal.

According to our understanding of socially just planning, our multifaceted approach is fundamental to responding to the complexity of the community's claims. Lack of recognition, access and mobilisation results in a vicious cycle of institutionalised exclusion which is demonstrated in a loss of space and participation. On the other hand, the pursuit and achievement of these claims result in justice through distribution and recognition.

## 6. Preliminary Findings

### 6.1 Revelations and Aspirations

Based on our engagement with diverse WCCs across London, we have gained a better understanding of RooO's aspirations and their importance and value. This section is organised into findings on the value of women spaces, causes and effects of their loss, and the challenges in recovering them.

#### *6.1.1 Value of Women Spaces*

We have found women's community spaces are valuable because they provide specialised and diverse services where women with different identities and needs are recognised and addressed. In London there are WCCs that offer refuge to victims of domestic violence, provide legal aid, and protect and foster feminist culture. For example, the WHWC provide services for Asian, Somali and Irish women. During an interview with Vivienne (Hayes 2018, pers.comm., 11 December) from the WRC, she said that "women want specialised services provided by women that look like them, who speak their language and belong to their culture."

Furthermore, women's community spaces provide a space where women can feel safe and protected. This is especially established through the support network where women can speak safely to one another. It must be noted that interviewees interpreted safety in different ways. For Vivienne (Hayes 2018, pers.comm., 11 December) from the WRC, an important aspect of safety is a space that "doesn't have any state involved within it," whereas Wendy from RooO thinks that as long as the building and the activities within it are controlled by the women, having the state representatives into the space is acceptable in agreed circumstances.

By sharing experiences in a safe environment, women are also able to self-develop and empower themselves. It gives them an opportunity to learn, change their own lives and develop potential to grow and to change society. Thus, a physical space is essential to communicate efficiently and to create bonds and supportive relations. Magda (Oldziejewska 2018, pers.comm., 30th November) from the Feminist Library recalls from personal experience that "many young women come to the [women] space for the first time and realize how free they feel to talk when men are not around. I think this is the value of women's space."

It is important to note that we found that online space is very different to a physical space because coming together in a room creates some kind of 'magic'. Vivienne (Hayes 2018, pers.comm., 11 December) reinforces this by saying:

"There's nothing better than face to face because things happen, people develop relationships, the communication is more effective, is of higher quality, is verbal, physical and emotional. All this is lost digitally."

Similarly, we have found that women spaces bring value to the neighbourhoods beyond just the women they serve, as they contribute to maintain social cohesion, increase the well-being of and strengthen bonds between community members. In today's society, isolation and mental health are issues of concern. The destruction of community space that "is free and accessible makes the situation worse" (Oldziejewska 2018, pers.comm., 30th November).

### *6.1.2 Loss of women's spaces*

The loss of women's community spaces in London has been in part due to the lack of recognition of the VCS groups that specifically focus on London's women. Yenny (Tovar 2018, pers.comm., 30th November) from LAWA said the new political agenda has eliminated "everything which had a vision of political and human representation, as well as women's rights." According to Vivienne (Hayes 2018, pers.comm., 11 December), it is especially the minority women's community groups that are most affected by this "complete lack of political will."

The lack of political will and attention to women's community groups and centres has changed since 2010. As Vivienne emphasised, "the depoliticising, the 'us and them', the worker and the client, all that rubbish, is almost like the civil society is just an industry." She illustrated this point through the closure of the Women's National Commission.

Austerity cuts and changes to the GLA's financing schemes for the VCS have further caused the loss of space. Prior to 2010, the government financially supported centres through grants and subsidies, that even then were hard to maintain due to the demanding application processes. While there are currently some grants available, these are not a sustainable nor reliable source because they often have conditionalities and require annual applications which are resource and time intensive. The cuts in funding have "mainly affected women and have led to the closure of many women's services" (Oldziejewska 2018, pers.comm., 30th November). The Feminist Library has therefore established a friend-scheme (based on donations) to overcome this obstacle (Oldziejewska 2018, pers.comm., 30th November). Similarly, RooO has recently set up a donation site in order to fundraise for their proposed building.<sup>5</sup>

The lack of funding has been associated with the introduction of commissioned contracts for delivering specific services that the local government does not deliver. In this way, local councils with funds decide what community centres are meant to do, based on needs they determined. This also binds the community to keep in with the commissioner which ends up preventing them from freedom of speech. This process undermines the specific needs

<sup>5</sup> See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5EkOafuQmZ0&feature=youtu.be>

of several groups and critically affected smaller groups that lack the capacity to apply for these contracts.

Within this change of model, the needs of the communities are expected to be addressed through generic centres that supposedly respond to the needs of different groups, under the assumption that all women, regardless of identity or culture, face the same types of oppression and demand the same type of support, without any intersectional approach. However, the issue, as Yenny from LAWA expressed (2018, 30th November), is that within women we found several layers that can reinforce the way oppression is experienced, women are not homogenous, they express different identities and needs, and they experience inequalities differently within society. Without acknowledging intersectionality, there is a risk of creating structures that respond to the needs of some women, but not to the needs of all women.

### *6.1.3 Recovering or finding appropriate space*

To address the loss of space the government has often suggested that community groups colocate. However, according to Vivienne (Hayes 2018, pers.comm., 11 December):

Colocation cannot replace the loss. [WCCs] cannot be replaced and are not going to provide what women want or have an impact on women's needs... also, the presence of [the state] means women may not go there, so whose needs are going to be met then?... You cannot do this 'one size fits all'.

Colocation is frequently insufficient because women's spaces must be suitable to the needs of the groups it hosts. Moreover, Vivienne highlights how sensitive each group is to who and who is not in the room. In some cases, the presence of state agents alienates certain members of society while in other cases it attracts them. The physical characteristics of the space also impact the dynamic of the group, for example, Nadia Baksh from the London Black Women's Project says that for women with hijabs to feel safe taking off their headscarf the space should not have windows. In another example, the difficulty of finding suitable space has meant the Feminist Library has seen a change in function and now also host events that would otherwise be hosted in community centres.



Moreover, it is important to recognise that the way in which these women's spaces were previously sustained were not always ideal and, should not be a point of reference. Instead, groups should look for new ways to address their needs.

We need to look at how to repair some of the damage that has been done, only through women-only independent collective action have women's rights progressed (Hayes 2018, pers.comm., 11 December).

As Wendy from RooO suggests, it is about unifying the demands of the different WCCs to secure the strongest voice possible. This does not undermine the uniqueness of the intersectional needs. Rallying around a common struggle will make visible a larger problem and all the particularities within it.

**Figure 10** Reaching into our findings.



## 6.2 Findings as Addressed by the Draft London Plan

Based on the findings discussed above, we argue the Draft London Plan does not sufficiently address women's recognition, representation and access to physical and non-physical spaces.

Policy 1 of the London Plan's Good Growth<sup>6</sup> strategy is to build strong and inclusive communities (GLA 2017, p.12). How is this to be achieved if there is no explicit recognition of women and no acknowledgement of women's community spaces that work towards these goals? This closely relates to our findings that many women's community groups feel unrecognised.

This is connected to RooO's claim that the Draft London Plan does not give sufficient attention to the VCS and thereby fails to recognise the importance of a diverse, vibrant, and successful VCS that serves all Londoners in a holistic and inclusive way. Thus, RooO urges to have an entire chapter devoted to the VCS to accurately highlight the issues the sector is facing, but to propose ways forward.

We also found the widespread loss of women's space in London, which the London Plan fails to acknowledge. In fact, much of the loss of space has been caused by public bodies selling public infrastructure "to solve short-term cash-flow problems" (RooO 2018, p.4). The plan suggests more "unused or underused facilities" should be transformed into spaces appropriate for the VCS (GLA 2017, p.149). However, it is unclear to what extent these facilities are appropriate for the diverse needs, claims and visions of community and women groups. RooO instead suggests that within the London Plan a certain proportion of land is allocated to community space and that the GLA transfers some of its own physical assets to Community Land Trusts that can provide suitable community spaces (and affordable housing) (RooO 2018).

Beyond the difficulty of maintaining and finding suitable spaces for VCS, funding is another issue. Even for the few women's community groups that have been able to maintain their space, financing remains a constant struggle. The Draft London Plan does not mention anything about delivering a sustained fiscal effort to restore the community spaces. Therefore, RooO urges Mayor Khan to consider funding programmes to support the work of many groups in London and to help maintain and recover community spaces (RooO 2018).

<sup>6</sup> Mayor Khan introduced the concept of Good Growth in the Draft New London Plan and refers to "growth that is socially and economically inclusive and environmentally sustainable" (GLA 2017, p.6).

Overall, the lack of space and financing has led to thousands of VCS groups that are no longer able to successfully deliver their services and to foster well-being, inclusion, integration, and empowerment of Londoners. Yet “without a vibrant and successful VCS London will no longer be the great city it strives to be. Inequality will grow. Innovation will falter. Social problems will multiply” (RooO 2018, p.4). The widespread loss of space and associated inability of community groups to execute their services is a threat to the liveability of London.



## 7. Conclusion

We have discovered that women's community spaces have much greater meaning and value for Londoners than what the Draft London Plan currently acknowledges. WCCs are more than a community asset, a part of a social infrastructure, or a service provider, but these are spaces of empowerment for London's women's to change their own lives, redefine themselves and their communities.

This project has highlighted that the SIA uncovers the challenges in society that other types of assessments do not show. Stage one of the SIA has established a connection between the loss of WCCs (as physical space) and processes of oppression and lack of recognition. From our understanding, these processes are the primary cause of the maldistribution of space and capital for women.

In a planning process, it is important to acknowledge that communities are not homogenous. In our research, we have found that women's community groups have different needs, claims, and visions. Physical space should reflect the uniqueness of each group and support the different women's struggles against different forms of oppression. It is needed to acknowledge intersectionality.

Historically, WCCs have supported oppressed women by accumulating knowledge and experiences to campaign for social change and women's rights. Having a physical space is fundamental to accessing the political space for collective actions: "If you do not have that, you do not have a movement, you do not have strategic advocacy, you do not have campaigning" (Hayes 2018, pers.comm., 11 December).

In this context, the SIA is not just a tool to understand a reality that other assessments fail to capture, but in its implementation, the SIA empowers communities, strengthens networks and mobilises them.

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# Appendix A

## General questions

1. Why is it important that community centres exist in London?
2. What is particularly valuable about women's centres in contrast to other kinds of community centres?
3. Do you think there is a value to women centres that goes beyond serving women?
4. What kind of services and activities does/did the women centre provide?
5. How would you describe your priority group?
6. Does the group/space speak to different identities in your community/London and how?
7. Which are the main barriers for women to access the centres? How can these barriers be managed in order to guarantee access to any women?
8. What are/were the impacts of the center on:  
    The surrounding community?  
    London?
9. What is the responsibility of the state towards community/women centres (finance, physical space, etc.)?
10. (Considering the cuts in public services and funding...) what is a sustainable way to maintain your space.

## The loss of space

1. We are witnessing the loss of accessible community spaces in London, why do you think this is?
2. Is there something particular about women's centres that make them more vulnerable to closure?
3. Has the loss of physical space had an impact on the services that women centers are meant to deliver? If so, what is the impact?
4. How does this loss connect to other elements of your life?
5. What happened to the communities the centre served when it moved/closed?

## Finding space

1. What barriers exist to the maintenance and recovery of women's centres?
2. There is a trend towards colocation (e.g. providing community spaces within health centres or libraries), do you think such spaces can replace the loss of women's centres?

## Conclusion

1. Do you know of other women's groups and/or other women's spaces? Do you like these spaces and why/why not?