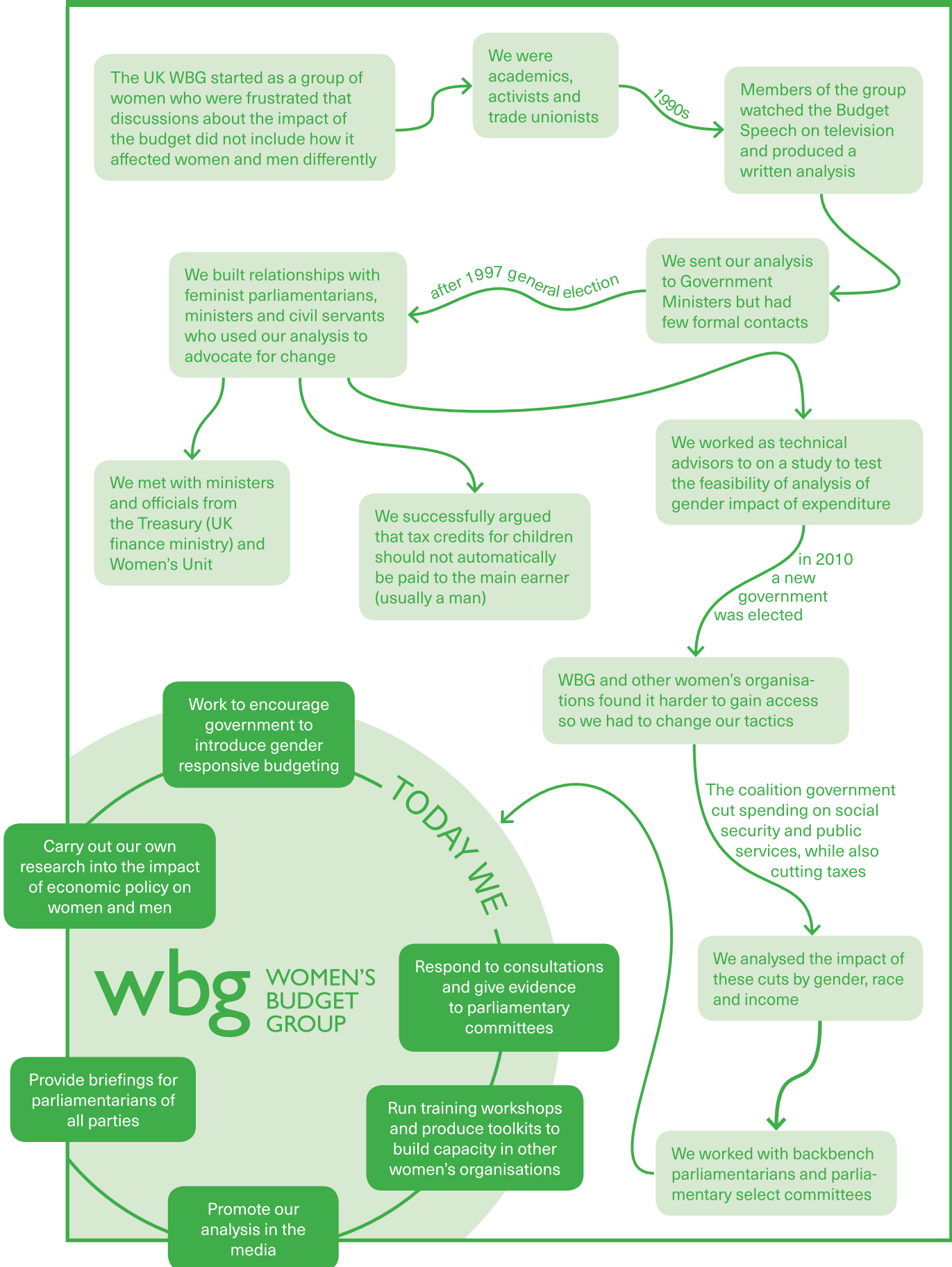


CASE STUDY 6: ENGAGING WITH NATIONAL GOVERNMENTS

Engaging in dialogues with national government, parliament and public bodies.



COMMUNICATING THE ANALYSIS

CASE STUDY 6: ENGAGING IN DIALOGUE WITH NATIONAL GOVERNMENT, PARLIAMENT AND PUBLIC BODIES

THE EARLY YEARS

The Women's Budget Group's relationships with and access to government has fluctuated over the years. During the early 1990s, wBG sent copies of its gender analysis of the budget to government and opposition parties every year and requested meetings with ministers and shadow ministers. wBG managed to secure the occasional meeting with the Treasury, but was not able to establish a formal dialogue.

During this period, backbench women MPs from the Labour party (then in opposition) held a series of meetings with women's organisations to discuss policies to promote women's equality. Some of these women's organisations were active members of wBG. Following the 1997 election of a Labour government several of these women MPs became ministers. The newly elected MPs included many women with a background in women's organisations. These women parliamentarians and ministers were able to promote the work of wBG to their colleagues, help set up meetings for wBG with Treasury ministers and officials and advise on how best to present their case. The Women's National Commission, a government body which acted as a link between the women's sector and the government, was re-organised and played a key role in gender mainstreaming.

LATE 1990S TO 2010: WORKING TO FURTHER ECONOMIC INDEPENDENCE FOR WOMEN

Under the Labour government wBG had regular meetings with Treasury ministers and officials and was consulted on the gender impact of new policies. Ending child poverty was one of the main priorities of the Labour government which meant that wBG had most influence where it was able to argue that a policy change would help reduce child poverty. For example, in 2005 wBG published a report, 'Women and Children's poverty: making the links', which argued that tackling women's poverty was critical if the government was to end child poverty.³⁹ Although the report also pointed out that women's poverty was an important issue it was the link between women's poverty and child poverty that was most persuasive with government.

The Women's Budget Group's work on tax credits (see *Case study 2: Social Security*) led to a changed relationship with government for the organisation.

39. wBG, (2005), Women and Children's Poverty, Making the Links, available online at [http://www.eif.gov.cy/mlsi/dl/genderequality.nsf/0/12D2A22FAC60DA74C22579A6002D950A/\\$file/wbg_womens_and_childrens_poverty.pdf](http://www.eif.gov.cy/mlsi/dl/genderequality.nsf/0/12D2A22FAC60DA74C22579A6002D950A/$file/wbg_womens_and_childrens_poverty.pdf)

With tax credits we were invited inside the Treasury because we had expertise they wanted. So, there was a sense in which we moved from being outside criticising to a much more complicated half in half out engagement over the reconstruction of this area of policy. And there were occasions where we were asked would we promise not to share what we knew if we were invited to comment before things were public. This was complicated for a group that had always understood itself to be outside and whose leverage was always to be an external critic. We agreed to go half inside and not to talk about some of the changes to tax credits before Budget day, which was important because it enabled us to have discussions, but it created tensions within the group.

WBG member

The UK Women's Budget Group has had most influence on issues where there are shared objectives with the government of the day.

There is an issue around how issues are framed. Do we frame them to fit with the government agenda or do we try to set our own agenda? For example, the Labour government was very keen on the business case for women's equality. But this may not help for those issues where there isn't a business case.

WBG member

WORKING WITH OFFICIALS

A key factor for WBG in gaining access to government was through relationships with supportive civil servants. One civil servant in the Equality Unit (now Government Equalities Office) describes how she worked with WBG in an interview that highlights the multiple ways in which gender equality policy and gender budgeting has to be framed and the vulnerability to institutional and political contexts.

"When I first came across WBG I was leading on gender mainstreaming across the civil service. And government departments were resistant, the data wasn't available, they thought that gender was nothing to do with them.

When I met WBG I was incredibly impressed because they were talking about money. The women's sector often doesn't talk about money. So, the idea that there was this resource of academic experts who could provide evidence about the economics of women's rights was extraordinary to me. I thought I am sure I can get people in government interested in this. This is evidence that can be used to promote mainstreaming.

So, my role for a number of years in WBG was to be the helpful civil servant who could connect them up with people and processes. I would get them invited to things, consultations that were happening. I would help draft their responses, using language that would resonate with the people they were trying to persuade. I also helped WBG set up a programme of meetings with the Treasury, both ministers and officials.

What helped make this happen was that there were feminist ministers in the Treasury who wanted to develop policies for women's equality, so WBG provided the evidence to support their work to push for this within the department and government more generally. Some of these women ministers had long standing relationships with women's voluntary organisations from when they were in opposition. It also helped that the Labour government was very aware of the need to win the support of women voters. We were able to argue that doing this sort of gender analysis would improve policy-making – preventing unexpected consequences. This is an

argument based on efficiency rather than morality, but it helps convince people who might not listen to other women's organisations.

Things changed after 2010. The Women's National Commission was closed so there was no official mechanism for the women's voluntary sector to engage with government. The Coalition government didn't continue the meetings with the Women's Budget Group. I think this shows you have to be prepared to adopt different strategies depending on the context. If the national government isn't interested you may have to focus on local government, or take a different approach, using public opinion and the media to put pressure on from the outside."

GENDER ANALYSIS OF EXPENDITURE PROJECT

In 2003/04 WBG members acted as technical advisors to a joint Treasury/Department of Trade and Industry pilot project to 'test the feasibility and added value of gender analysis of expenditure'.

The project involved a gender analysis of two programmes funded by the Small Business Service; a programme to provide support for small enterprises in disadvantaged areas and among groups that were under-represented in business ownership and a mentoring project for start-up businesses. The pilot also analysed the New Deal for Lone Parents and the New Deal for people aged over 25.

WBG debated the pros and cons of this. We were concerned that accepting funding from the Treasury might jeopardize our independence. But we also saw this as an important opportunity to learn from the inside how government evaluated expenditure programmes and how gender analysis might be incorporated. So, we agreed to a specific, limited project, that examined one programme in each of two government departments.

Unfortunately, civil servants tended to regard the project as an unwelcome addition to their workloads and their participation was sporadic. They tended to think that their department already treated women and men equally and saw no need for additional gender analysis. We learned that the enthusiasm of the official who championed the project and the agreement of two ministers to the project did not mean that participating officials would share this commitment. **We also learned that many officials did not really understand what gender analysis means.**

We learned that looking at programmes in isolation prevented us from looking at the bigger picture. We could not analyse what areas of expenditure were increasing, what areas were falling, what new initiatives were needed to reduce gender inequality. Officials did not see the need to go beyond counting how many women and how many men participate in a programme, in relation to their numbers in the target group. They agreed on a need to collect this data and argued that in many cases they already were doing so.

This project did not lead to the government undertaking and publishing a gender impact assessment of government budgets – this would have required much stronger political leadership. The project did help WBG to realize the importance of looking at the cumulative impact of budgets, and the adequacy of funding, as well as the distribution of funding between women and men.

POST-2010 AND A CHANGE OF CONTEXT

The election of the Coalition government in 2010 led to a significant change in WBG's relationship with government. In this new era, the Women's Budget Group lost its 'insider' status, with new ministers choosing not to continue the meetings that had taken place under the Labour government. The Women's Budget Group was not alone in this regard. The Coalition government also disbanded the Women's National Commission.

The Coalition's austerity policies led to cuts to social security benefits, tax credits and public services, all of which have had a disproportionate impact on women (see *Case study 4: Cumulative Impact Analysis*). The Treasury has failed to publish meaningful analysis of the gender impact of its policies.

Since 2010 analysing the gender impact of austerity has been central to WBG's work. We have produced reports, briefings and responses to government consultations. This work has been used by other civil society organisations in their campaigning and advocacy.

WBG provided evidence to support the Fawcett Society, the UK's leading organisation campaigning for gender equality, in a Judicial Review of the Emergency Budget. They effectively wanted to sue the government. The Judicial Review sought to challenge the validity of the Budget by arguing that the government had failed to give due consideration to equalities impacts, as required under the 2010 Equality Act. The Women's Budget Group provided evidence of how to undertake such an assessment and what it would show.⁴⁰

Although the Judicial Review was unsuccessful it led to the establishment of a working group by the Equalities and Human Rights Commission to improve the quality of equality impact assessments by government. This Fair Financial Decision-making Working Group was made up of academics, Treasury officials, and a Women's Budget Group representative.⁴¹

This new context led to a change in approach for WBG. Increasingly, the focus shifted to external advocacy through the media and other non-governmental organisations. WBG still shares its analysis of the budget and other economic policies with government, but now works more closely with backbench MPs and members of parliamentary select committees. The group has been asked to provide evidence and briefings to opposition parties. WBG has moved from a partial 'insider' strategy to holding the government to account through parliament and the media.

Our experience shows that **it is easier for organisations such as WBG to bring about changes if they are in line with government policy**. If the government does not reverse the policy of cuts to funding of public services, despite evidence of the harmful impacts on women, especially those most disadvantaged, it is necessary to take a long-term view, and work with other organisations to try to ensure that opposition parties, which might in future form a government, will prioritise increased spending on services that are so important for gender equality.

It's important to ask yourself what type of evidence is most likely to persuade decision-makers to adopt a more gender equal policy or get significant media attention to force action. Figures showing how men and women are differentially impacted by a policy can be powerful, particularly if it's the first time an analysis has been undertaken. Sometimes, however, it is stories and case studies that will be more persuasive as they can 'humanise' an issue.

WBG member

40. The Guardian, (2010), The Fawcett Society takes the cuts to court, available online at <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2010/oct/22/yvette-cooper-fawcett-society-cuts>

41. EHRC, (2015), Fair Financial Decision Making: progress report, available online at <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/publication-download/future-fair-financial-decision-making-report>