



## **Briefing**

### **The women's VCS and its stake in the social inclusion agenda**

**April 2008**

## **About the Women's Resource Centre**

The Women's Resource Centre (WRC) is a charity which supports women's organisations to be more effective and sustainable. We provide training, information, resources and one-to-one support on a range of organisational development issues. We also lobby decision makers on behalf of the women's not-for-profit sector for improved representation and funding.

Our members work in a wide range of fields including violence against women, employment, education, rights and equality, the criminal justice system and the environment. They deliver services to and campaign on behalf of some of the most marginalised communities of women.

There are over ten thousand people working or volunteering for our members who support almost half a million individuals each year.



We welcome the government's commitment to eliminating child poverty by 2020 and acknowledge the positive impact that measures such as Tax Credits and increased benefits for low-income families have had on levels of poverty. We believe that increasing employment opportunities, improving public services and enhancing the provision of good quality, accessible childcare will greatly improve the situation for many families.

Furthermore, we welcome government strategies that go beyond the constraints of material poverty to recognise social exclusion. The Reaching Out report and Social Exclusion Task Force, in working to a definition that recognises a complexity of problems linked to people's experience of social and economic disadvantage is a positive move forward.<sup>1</sup>

The women's voluntary and community sector (VCS) is an important agent in accomplishing the government's plans to tackle social exclusion. The sector contains a wealth of expertise. It has a long history in providing support services to some of the most marginalised, vulnerable and 'hard-to-reach' women and girls in the UK today, many of whose experiences are compounded by the discrimination they face because they are women. This includes structural inequalities that, for example, make it harder for women to juggle caring responsibilities with decent labour market prospects, as well as more insidious inequalities that are enacted through personal relationships to keep women in positions of disempowerment. The women's VCS works to empower women and provides a wide range of holistic services to improve their social, civic and economic engagement. This needs to be recognised by central government, especially in their policy and funding strategies on social inclusion.

Much evidence cites the endemic nature of male violence against women and this is borne out in the high proportion of women who have experienced violence that present to women's organisations.<sup>2</sup> It is one of the biggest barriers to women's social inclusion, empowerment and autonomy and so should form a part of the analysis and design of the next National Action Plan.

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<sup>1</sup> The definition used by the Social Exclusion Task Force is: "Social exclusion is about more than income poverty. It is a short-hand term for what can happen when people or areas have a combination of linked problems, such as unemployment, discrimination, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime and family breakdown. These problems are linked and mutually reinforcing. Social exclusion is an extreme consequence of what happens when people don't get a fair deal throughout their lives, often because of disadvantage they face at birth, and this disadvantage can be transmitted from one generation to the next."

<sup>2</sup> In WRC's [why women?](#) report 82% of interviewees mentioned violence against women in connection with their work. Domestic violence was most often mentioned, but also rape, childhood sexual abuse, female genital mutilation, harassment, homophobia (physical abuse), forced marriage and 'honour' killings. WRC (2006) [why women?](#) (London: WRC) p.21

## What is the women's sector?

It is estimated that there are 30,000 women's organisations in the UK, working on a variety of issues (e.g. violence against women, health and social care, training and employment, campaigning and advocacy etc.) and providing services to different groups of women including BME women, refugee and asylum seekers, older and younger women, disabled women and lesbian/bisexual/transgender women.

While their women-only status is seemingly self-explanatory in the case of service provision for survivors of male violence, this has not stopped some local authorities from demanding organisations open out their services to men in a misguided notion of gender equality. The Gender Equality Duty, which came into effect in April 2007, can be misinterpreted to mean that treating women and men equally means treating them the same. However, equal treatment does not necessarily result in equal outcomes. Without proper needs-assessments, this can mean women's services are threatened because of a failure to take account of the gendered nature of violence.

The case for women-only service provision in the field of violence against women is more easily understood than for women-only services more generally, which are often seen as divisive and separatist. WRC's report entitled 'why women-only? The value and benefits of women-only services' published in October 2007 sets out to dispel these myths and explore how and why women-only services are important in a range of areas, such as training and employment, (mental) health, counselling and support groups. The report found that they have far-reaching benefits, providing both physical and emotional safety whilst working within a framework of empowerment. It found that women want to choice to access women-only services, and that there is a particular need for minority women to run their own specific services because they experience greater marginalisation due to the intersectional nature of their experiences.

In spite of these findings and the excellent track records of many of these services, they are at risk because they are misunderstood and not valued in an era of perceived gender equality. In 2002/3 only 1.2% of central government funding to the VCS went to women's organisations<sup>3</sup> despite making up 7% of registered charities. The funding crisis facing the women's sector is exacerbated by the trend in commissioning services that favours generic organisations over those providing specialist services.

<sup>3</sup> Mcroft and Zimmeck (2004) *Central government funding of voluntary and community organisations 1982/83*, (London: Home Office Research, Development and Statistics Directorate)

## Gender-neutrality

Women's voluntary and community organisations (VCOs) already play a big part in delivering long-term solutions to tackling social exclusion at a grassroots level. The lack of any meaningful gendered analysis in government policy documents should not make us overlook the fact that experiences of poverty, exclusion and diminished opportunities are largely gendered experiences, in other words, women experience these differently from men. Consequently, policy solutions need to take this into account – not as an add-on but at the centre of their development.

The gender neutrality of government analyses silences the gendered nature (and therefore needs and solutions) of the groups identified as 'at-risk'. This is even more pertinent in light of the Gender Equality Duty that states that public bodies must actively promote gender equality and tackle discrimination in all of their practices.

Women's organisations are key stakeholders in the social inclusion agenda, and should be utilised as experts in their relative fields. They offer immediate practical support and long-term empowerment and personal development in a safe, women-only environment to help young girls and women gain (economic) independence. Women's organisations could make a crucial contribution to the social exclusion action plan but at present their role is neither explicitly acknowledged nor supported.

The 'Reaching Out' report and 'Families at Risk' paper published by the Social Exclusion Task Force in 2007 identified many issues that have an important gender component such as teenage pregnancy, children in care, lone parenting, mental health of mothers and early years support – without acknowledging gender inequality, particularly gendered violence, as a key causal and exacerbating factor in these problems. The National Action Plan 2006-8 did not include violence against women as a key cause and symptom of women's inequality in the section on tackling discrimination. Government strategy will be less effective unless this is remedied and women's organisations, as frontline service deliverers, are effectively engaged with as part of the solution.

## Eliminating child poverty

Women are 5% more likely to experience poverty than their male counterparts<sup>4</sup>. Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) women face even greater risk, as is reflected by the higher number of BME women currently living in poverty in the UK<sup>5</sup>. The Women's Budget Group Report<sup>6</sup> demonstrated that women's poverty is intimately linked to the well-being of children. Fawcett, Unite the Union and Oxfam have recently launched their 'Keeping Mum' campaign, which exposes the links between women's and children's poverty. It cites that mother's low income is the source of 70% of child poverty.<sup>7</sup>

Women are still the primary carers of children in this country and make up over 90% of lone parents; a fact that is mentioned in the 2006-8 National Action Plan but not expanded upon aside from the repercussions on childcare. As the 'managers of poverty', women tend to take on the burden of family poverty in order to shield their children from its harmful effects, and do the practical work of distributing scarce resources. Therefore, improving women's income by closing the gender pay gap and increasing the availability of decently paid part-time work for women will place women in a better position to lift themselves and their children out of poverty.

Another crucial link in the child poverty agenda is that between violence and family poverty. The violence perpetrated against women (sexual, physical, and economic - at home or outside the home) complicates women's experience of poverty and inevitably the poverty of their children. The impact on children living in a fearful and insecure environment created by such violence is great and the risk of these children being taken into care heightened. One in three child protection cases show a history of domestic violence<sup>8</sup>. The 'Families At Risk' report also shows that children experiencing parental conflict and violence are more likely to be delinquent and commit criminal offences<sup>9</sup> - entering into a cycle leading to their social exclusion in later life.

<sup>4</sup> Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2000) *Poverty and Social Exclusion in Britain*, (York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation), p.23

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

<sup>6</sup> Women's Budget Group (2005) *Women's and Children's Poverty: Making the Links*, (London: WBG)

<sup>7</sup> <file:///WRC->

<DC/Publications/Friday%20Bulletin/May%2009/Mother's%20income%20the%20source%20of%2070%25%20of%20child%20poverty.htm>

<sup>8</sup> Hester, M, and Pearson, C (1998) *From Periphery to Centre: Domestic Violence in Work with Abused Children*, (Bristol: Policy Press)

<sup>9</sup> Ibid

Moreover, the impact of violence or the threat of violence on the physical and mental health of women themselves affects their ability to seek employment and training, and ultimately provide for their children and make the best decisions for their families. Women in violent relationships can experience profound feelings of isolation and low self-esteem. These feelings are often compounded by their economic dependence on an abusive partner; a result of women's disadvantaged position in the labour market and their disproportionate childcare responsibilities. The increased level of stress and depression associated with managing poverty is hence magnified by the violence perpetrated against women.

Obstacles to social inclusion specific to women, including vulnerability to poverty, inadequate childcare provision, violence and women's low pay compared to men, all help to entrench the cycle of poverty. For many women this situation may be worsened by immigration issues and language or cultural barriers to accessing mainstream services.

Women's VCOs are helping women break the cycle of poverty. Women's front line services, community and self help groups are playing a vital role in increasing women's access to employment, education or training opportunities that can ensure their economic independence and transform their lives and the lives of their children.

They do this directly by offering education and training opportunities to disadvantaged women, and indirectly by providing an environment where self-esteem and confidence is raised, and opening up access to routes out of poverty. Services run by women, for women are reaching out and supporting some of the most marginalised and vulnerable women living in the UK, not only through service provision but also through facilitating their access to mainstream services. Services do this practically by advising on benefits, immigration, entitlements, childcare and health services, and through simply increasing the confidence of vulnerable women to seek out the help they are entitled to themselves and engage in the wider community.

Research conducted by WRC in 2006 demonstrated the reach of women's VCOs in tackling child poverty. Examples include:

- **Rape and Sexual Abuse Support Centre (RASASC)**, staffed by specially trained personnel, provides face to face counselling to women who have experienced rape and/or sexual abuse helping to reduce the isolation felt by survivors and improving women's mental health and the lives of their children.

- Mothers support groups like **Mamas and Babies** provide an environment in which new mothers find the support and encouragement they need to continue education while bringing up their children.
- **Hillcroft College** delivers education specifically for women, helping women to overcome a lack of confidence, or a disbelief in their ability to achieve.
- **The Asian Women's Resource Centre** provides free counselling, advocacy, outreach services and runs support groups for Black and minority ethnic or refugee women. With an understanding of specific cultural and/or religious factors affecting women, the centre empathetically encourages women's personal and professional development.
- **Creative And Supportive Trust** provides education, training, advice and support to women who are either ex-offenders or at risk of offending. The trust helps women to develop skills and the confidence to make changes in their lives.

Women's organisations succeed in tackling child poverty because they have at their core an understanding of the many interlocking problems facing women. Because they recognise the gendered nature of family poverty, seeing first hand inequality, discrimination and violence and the ensuing isolation of women that it feeds, they are especially well-placed to intercept the cycle of family poverty. Twenty-seven per cent of the organisations participating in the WRC study gave examples of their work contributing directly to women securing employment<sup>10</sup>. Many more tackle poverty through empowering women to transform their lives, which undoubtedly creates a better environment for children.

The services provided by women's organisations are highly professional models of good practice, many providing training to actors in the private and public sector. Moreover, they are cost effective. The activity of women's VCOs, working to relatively small budgets, has an impact beyond their scale, contributing to savings on statutory spending on health, criminal justice, social security and on children in care.

The work of women's organisations in the VCS is far reaching and vital to the elimination of child poverty and social exclusion. Yet many face an ongoing funding struggle. The organisations participating in the WRC study identified a lack of policy dialogue, and a lack of awareness and recognition of the importance of the work of women's organisations on the part of government as a major factor impacting the worsening funding to the women's sector.

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<sup>10</sup> Women's Resource Centre (2006) *Why Women?* (London: WRC), p.39



We therefore ask that the Department for Work and Pensions, along with other key government departments:

- Work to ensure increased and sustainable financial support to women's organisations in the VCS
- Recognise women's VCOs as stakeholders in the child poverty agenda and actively work with and consult them on policy formation, and commit resources to this endeavour.

Not only are women's organisations providing vital services and transforming the lives of women and families, but are also campaigning to eliminate the inequalities that perpetrate poverty. We ask that the Department for Work and Pensions and Department for Children, Schools and Families join us in this by:

- Including a gendered analysis of poverty and prioritising the ending of gender discrimination and violence against women as part of a strategy on child poverty and social exclusion
- Work closely with the Ministers for Women, promoting more joined up thinking on eliminating women's and children's poverty.

In acknowledgment of the intrinsic links between the poverty of children and that of their mothers, the government needs to commit to:

- Banning the dismissal of pregnant women
- Increasing maternity and paternity entitlements to the same level as the minimum wage
- Making gender pay audits compulsory for all organisations
- Increasing the number of hours mothers can work without losing their benefits from four to sixteen
- Introducing measures to encourage fathers to be more involved in children's upbringing.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> These recommendations are taken from Fawcett, Oxfam and Unite the Union's 'Keeping Mum' campaign

## Increasing labour market participation

Women's organisations are important because of their ability to empower women to enter the labour market and to overcome barriers they may face. Specialist BME women's organisations cater to women with similar experiences that are often not acknowledged or tackled by mainstream service providers.

### Case study

The total funding received by the Rape and Sexual Abuse Support Centre (RASASC) in 2005-6 was just under £23k. However a cost benefit analysis of their work found that the total economic cost of delivering their services was over £82k.<sup>12</sup> The difference was covered by the leverage achieved by organisations like RASASC and their ability to make an impact beyond their scale.

*"We are a value for money service because our clients are able to come off benefits, get back into the workplace, reduce and in some cases stop self harming, reduce and stop drug/alcohol abuse, get their children out of care, reduce and stop psychosomatic illnesses, reduce incidences of crime, this is a huge cost benefit to society..."* Yvonne Traynor, Director of RASASC

### Case study

*"I had a letter yesterday from a client who came to see us last year to say thank you. She said she had been sober now for nine months and had become a trustee on a local parent's organisation. She's now got a full-time job and just wanted to thank us because she remembers what was said in the groups and that the information was so useful."* Women's Alcohol Centre/Alcohol Recovery Project

### Case study

*"One woman who got involved right at the very beginning had just got out of a ten year marriage which was very violent. She'd been hospitalised a number of times by her violent ex-partner and through the support that she received from the centre, she was able to put in context her experience of violence and abuse, to name it as domestic violence and recognise it wasn't her fault. She became a volunteer and she undertook a lot of training courses. She applied and was successful in achieving a paid post within the centre as volunteer support officer – she's made the circle from desperation living on benefits, to a fulfilling career for herself."*

Winner Project/Preston Road Women's Centre

<sup>12</sup> Women's Resource Centre (2006) *The Economic and social impact of the women's voluntary and community sector*, (London: WRC)

## Improving access to quality services

### **The shift from grant giving to commissioning**

More competition in the provision of services is having a detrimental effect on the women's sector, as well as the wider voluntary sector, because of the trend in commissioning larger, generic service providers at the expense of smaller, specialist voluntary organisations. This bid at efficiency savings mean that specialist services are forced to close that in turn means a loss of expertise formerly held within the sector.

The nature of the VCS is changing rapidly with many organisations concerned about their future sustainability within the commissioning and procurement environment. Grants represented 52% of government funding to charities in 2001/02, but only 38% in 2004/05. Contracts, on the other hand, increased from 48% in 2001/02 to 62% in 2004/05.<sup>13</sup>

Government funding for the voluntary sector has only risen by 1.5% since 2001 and 37% of government funding is going to charities with incomes over £10 million. Contracts have increased by 62%.

Seventy-nine per cent of voluntary organisations said they did not believe the tendering process was fair or transparent when they bid against in-house providers. Forty per cent of charities did not bid for contracts because of the bureaucracy involved.<sup>14</sup> This is worrying when local authorities, such as Waltham Forest, have shifted their entire open grants programme to commissioning services.<sup>15</sup>

A further disincentive for voluntary sector involvement is that only 12% of them get full cost recovery for the public services they deliver. The financial and bureaucratic costs of engaging in public service delivery mean that 64% of charities who do not currently deliver public services would not consider doing so in the next twelve months.

<sup>13</sup> National Council of Voluntary Organisations (2007) *UK Voluntary Sector Workforce Almanac*, (London: NCVO)

<sup>14</sup> NAVCA (2007) *Frontline Hopscotch: VCS engagement in delivering change for young people: a jump start or a step back?* (London: NAVCA)

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.walthamforest.gov.uk/commissioning-programme-2007-2010.pdf>

## Local government

Local authorities are a key source of funding for the VCS. For example, research into funding for domestic violence refuges in London showed that, on average, they receive 68% of their total funding from local authorities, such as Supporting People contracts.<sup>16</sup> This over-reliance on local authorities places the VCS in a vulnerable position because of the lack of diverse funding sources. Therefore, local government plays a crucial role in the security and sustainability of the VCS.

There also appears to be a gap between the government's aims to promote quality of services and added-value within the commissioning process and the realities of tight budgets for local authorities that undermine these aims. The three percent efficiency savings that all local authorities must implement over the next three years<sup>17</sup> means that commissioning at a regional and sub-regional level (rather than locally) is more likely because of the reduced managing and administration costs.

Furthermore, it was understood that local authorities and commissioners had little understanding of how the VCS works, and that commissioners were becoming more prescriptive in their tenders by seeking to place larger and larger contracts, thus precluding smaller, local VCS involvement.

Local Strategic Partnerships are the key decision-making bodies for local areas. However, women are under-represented on these and therefore issues as they affect women may be overlooked at a local level.<sup>18</sup>

## Threats to voluntary sector's 'added-value'

One of the major added-values of VCOs is their ability to plug gaps in mainstream service provision by reaching out to the most marginalised and socially excluded. They are able to do this because of their perceived separation from the state. Their independence is crucial to their added-value in service delivery. However, only 26% of organisations delivering public services felt they were free to make decisions without pressure to conform to their funders' wishes,<sup>19</sup> 69% said local groups were afraid to campaign in case their funding was affected, and 59% said that local bodies were not demonstrating that they understand independence.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Women's Resource Centre (2007) *Funding of London Women's Refuges Report for London Councils*, (London: WRC)

<sup>17</sup> As announced in the Comprehensive Spending Review 2007

<sup>18</sup> Oxfam, Urban Forum and Women's Resource Centre (2007) *Where are the women in LSPs? Women's representation in Local Strategic Partnerships*, (London: Urban Forum)

<sup>19</sup> Charity Commission (2007) *Stand and Deliver: the future for charities delivering public services*, (London: Charity Commission)

<sup>20</sup> Compact Voice (2007) *Stronger independence, Stronger relationships, Better outcomes*, (London: NCVO)

## Tackling health inequalities

The endemic levels of violence against women are a major public health issue and one the government has been slow to act upon cross-departmentally. It is a health issue because of the physical and emotional injuries that are sustained, that lead to a plethora of other problems such as mental health issues, lost income, the cost to health services and the criminal justice system, child protection cases and so on. However, the Department of Health has been reluctant to fund violence against women services that already exist, which has led to increasing pressure on women's organisations to drastically reduce their services (even though demand is increasing) or in many cases, close down.

With violence against women (including domestic violence, sexual victimisation and stalking) affecting *at least* 45% of women<sup>21</sup> at some point in her life, this issue is one of the most serious in terms of keeping women isolated, vulnerable, subject to mental health problems, and affecting their ability to parent effectively. The connection between violence against women and social exclusion needs to be explicitly made in terms of the emotional, mental and material effects these crimes and behaviours have on women;

*"The effects of sexual abuse permeate every part of a woman's life and cost the health service, social services, police, etc. over £77,000 per woman. Around 60% of women in prison have been the victims of sexual violence, a high percentage of women in domestic violence situations were abused as children. The health service treats women for mental health problems, psychosomatic difficulties, self harm, self injury, alcoholism, drug abuse. Social Services become involved when they find that they are unable to look after themselves, let alone their children. The effects are far-reaching and yet the cause of the problem – the abuse itself – is seen by our PCT as not even a low priority, but it has no priority."*<sup>22</sup>

This is confirmed by the government's own report on sexual violence and abuse which states that,

*"Long term consequences of sexual violence and child sex abuse include post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety and panic attacks, depression, social phobia,*

<sup>21</sup> Walby, S and Allen, J (2004) Domestic violence, sexual assault and stalking: Findings from the British Crime Survey, Home Office Research, (London: Development and Statistics Directorate), p.vi

<sup>22</sup> Traynor, Y (2006) from Rape and Sexual Abuse Support Centre quoted in Women's Resource Centre's Response to Third Sector Commissioning Task Force 'No Excuses. Embrace Partnership now. Step towards change!' (London: WRC), p.6 <http://www.wrc.org.uk/downloads/Policystuff/DoH%20Response%20Oct%2006.doc>

*substance misuse, obesity, eating disorders, self harm and suicide, domestic violence and in some cases, offending behaviour.”<sup>23</sup>*

The ‘Reaching Out Action Plan’ identifies looked after children, mentally ill people and families with complex problems as key groups subject to social exclusion. Yet there is no mention of how violence is usually always implicated in these. Ignoring this crucial element in policy documentation shows a lack of joined-up, cross-departmental awareness of how gender inequality facilitates violence against women, which in turn fosters an unequal underclass of women whose needs are not being met by statutory services.

### **Reducing re-offending**

The National Offender Management Service (NOMS) brings competition into offender services by commissioning from the private, voluntary and public sectors. NOMS should tap into the expertise of the women’s VCS to tackle re-offending of women offenders. Very few of the current service provider-mix provides services exclusively for women ex/offenders. The women’s VCS provides a gamut of (preventative) services that while not perhaps catering specifically for women ex/offenders, still work with thousands of women labelled ‘at-risk.’ The women’s VCS is important and relevant in terms of meeting the cross-cutting needs of many women, including ex/offenders. These issues, often labelled as ‘complex,’ include: domestic violence, sexual assault and abuse, drug and alcohol dependency, mental illness, housing, immigration, support, counselling and advocacy.

The high levels of domestic and sexual abuse in the lives of women offenders, as well as other needs that are different from male offenders, warrants specialised services. The Corston Report details these differences (although does not go into detail about BME women) and her suggestions have been largely accepted by government, at least in theory. Pilot support services such as the women-only ‘Together Women Project’ (TWP) need to be rolled out across the country. Long-term solutions need sustainable funding.

<sup>23</sup> Home Office (2007) *Cross Government Action Plan on Sexual Violence and Abuse*, (London: HM Government), p.iii

### **Case Study**

Creative and Supportive Trust (CAST), based in Camden, offers educational services for women leaving prison and other socially excluded women. Its aim is to develop the skills and confidence that will allow them to take control of their lives and make the changes needed to re-engage with their communities.

CAST provides tailor-made education and support to 120-140 women ex-offenders per year, at a cost of around £2,000 per client. Whilst reduction in re-offending is not an explicit aim of CAST's work, evidence from both CAST's client evaluation and research of other similar projects suggest that reduction in re-offending is a highly likely outcome.

If CAST's work results in averting just four further episodes of one year's imprisonment (at a cost to the state of £410,000) it will more than break even.

CAST's survey of its clients indicates a strong preference for women-only services, both within the organisation and from other agencies. Indeed, 44% of CAST's clients indicated they would not use the service if it was mixed.

As indicated in the description of the organisation's work by the Chief Inspector of Prisons, CAST provides a specialist and highly effective service that is hard to find elsewhere.

### **Tackling discrimination**

#### **People from black and minority ethnic groups and community cohesion**

The National Action Plan 2006-8 states that there will be a greater emphasis on tailored initiatives that meet the specific needs of particularly disadvantaged communities, rather than treating all communities the same. However, the Cohesion Guidance for Funders that came out of the Department for Communities and Local Government goes against this by promoting a shift away from 'single-group' issues, which it wrongly presupposes works against community cohesion by being divisive. They are consulting on this at the moment and we would have concerns that this guidance is antithetical to what was set out in the NAP. It has ambiguous legal status with an absence of reference to equality legislation and the Compact. It raises concerns over the focus on funders to determine balance of bonding and bridging in absence of any community input and is actually discriminating against BME groups and is contradictory. In moving towards a colour blind approach there is a danger that mainstream provision will further exclude and isolate needs of the most vulnerable.

Local authorities could use the guidance to support their own agendas. Last but not least, the independence of the third sector is being undermined; this is not just a BME or sub-sector issue but impacts on all voluntary groups as its focus is on all charities and third sector to be inclusive and accessible.

Tailored initiatives to meet the needs of marginalised groups means the government needs to commit to funding the women's and BME sectors as key service providers and agents for social inclusion. As things currently stand, this is not happening.

### **Case Study**

Southall Black Sisters was established in 1979 to meet the needs of black (Asian and African-Caribbean) women. Their aims are to highlight and challenge violence against women and empower them to gain more control over their lives and live without fear of violence. SBS is currently facing the threat of closure as a result of the local authority's (Ealing) decision to withdraw funding as of April 2008. The local authority's decision is based on the view that there is no need for specialist services for black and minority women and that services to abused women in the borough need to be streamlined.

In April 2008, a High Court judge granted SBS users permission to proceed with legal action against Ealing Council for its failure to have proper regard to its duties under the Race Relations Act. The Council has failed to consider the adverse impact that its decision to stop funding SBS will have on black and minority women. The judge also granted an injunction to stop the Council making any decisions on the funding of domestic violence services until the case is concluded. A Judicial Review is underway.



## Actions for government

- The women's VCS needs to be recognised by the Department for Work and Pensions and Cabinet Office as integral agents in tackling social exclusion. They need long term, sustainable funding for the ability to bid on an equal footing for public sector contracts.
- Commissioning in public services, particularly around excellence in children's and family services, need to actively target women's organisations that have the expertise and experience of service provision for women as carers.
- A cross-Departmental, integrated violence against women strategy needs to be developed in recognition of the fact that this is one of the biggest factors in women's social exclusion.
- Women's prisons should be abolished and replaced with multi-functional custodial centres to address the causes of their social exclusion. The women's sector should be engaged in this process as service providers.
- 'Cohesion' guidance needs to be consistent across government departments. The well-meaning but misguided Cohesion Guidance should be scrapped as it will have an adverse effect on social inclusion.

Please contact [kiran@wrc.org.uk](mailto:kiran@wrc.org.uk) should you require further information about the WRC or would like to discuss the issues raised in this briefing.

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The **why women?** campaign is speaking up for women's organisations, which do great work for women and society as a whole, but are under threat from lack of funding. We are calling on the government to put gender back on the agenda. Find out more and sign up to support women's organisations at our **why women?** campaign at [www.whywomen.org.uk](http://www.whywomen.org.uk)