

# why women?

The women's voluntary and community sector:  
 changing lives  
 changing communities  
 changing society

## Executive Summary

The Women's Resource Centre initiated this study to explore the question that many women's organisations are asked time and time again – “why women?” Today, perceptions that women and men are now equal are stronger and more widespread than ever, despite evidence to the contrary.

## Research method

This study used semi-structured interviews with workers from 44 women's voluntary and community organisations, as well as analysis of data from annual reports and evaluations of the organisations. In addition, a brief literature review was carried out, looking at previous research on women's organisations, and recent studies on the position of women in the UK. The aims of this research project were:

- To explore why women's organisations exist and the problems they work to address.
- To provide evidence for the need for women's organisations, including the long-term impact on service users.
- To explore the 'added value' of women's organisations.
- To explore the links between women's organisations working in different fields (e.g. violence, drugs/alcohol, employment etc).
- To explore the barriers facing women's organisations that impede their work.

There has been little quantitative or large-scale research into the women's voluntary and community sector in the UK. However, studies have looked at the social and economic impact of women's centres (Taillon, 2000); highlighted the persistent under-funding of the women's sector and under-prioritisation of women's needs in public policy (Soteri, 2001; Hodgson, 2004; Davis and Cooke, 2002); and found that black and minority ethnic organisations are more likely to close or move and experience a less secure existence than other groups within the voluntary sector (Davis and Cooke, 2002). This study uses interviews with women's organisations to draw together some of the 'evidence of need' that women's organisations are often asked to provide, and to highlight the work that they are doing.

## Problems - women's inequality

Overview of research into women's inequality in the UK  
 Despite major developments in the last forty years such as the Sex Discrimination Act, the legalisation of abortion and the criminalisation of rape in marriage, women's inequality is still deeply entrenched in the UK.

45% of all women in the UK have experienced some form of domestic violence, sexual assault or stalking

This is evident in indicators including:

- The gender pay gap in the UK is one of the highest in Europe (Bellamy and Rake, 2005) and recent women graduates earn 15% less than men who have the same qualifications (Equal Opportunities Commission, 2004).
- Almost half (45%) of all women in the UK have experienced some form of domestic violence, sexual assault or stalking (Home Office, 2005a). The proportion of rape allegations resulting in a conviction has dropped from 24% in 1985 to 5.6% in 2002 (Kelly et al, 2005).
- The cost of domestic violence to the state, employers and individuals is estimated to be £22.9 billion per year (Walby, 2004).
- The number of women in prison rose threefold between 1993 and 2003, while 70% of women prisoners experience mental health problems and half have been victims of sexual abuse (Social Exclusion Unit, 2002).

Problems described by women's organisations

In this study, interviewees from women's organisations were asked to describe the social problems they work to address, and asked about the gendered nature of these problems, i.e. how these issues affect women differently from men. Their responses illustrate the effects of the headline statistics above on individual women's lives, and highlight the complex nature of problems such as sexual abuse and multiple discrimination. They discussed the following issues:

- Violence against women.
- 'No recourse to public funds' rule.
- Mental health problems.
- Employment discrimination.
- Institutional sexism – gender neutral policy fails women.
- Dependency making women vulnerable.
- Extreme poverty.
- Multiple oppression.
- Exclusion from high-level decision-making.

## Solutions - what women's organisations do

The women's organisations in this study provided a wide and varied range of activities from front-line services to capacity building of other voluntary and community organisations to policy and campaigning.

Four categories of organisations began to emerge: front-line, small community groups, second tiers and campaigning organisations. The majority of organisations overlapped categories. Five organisations were selected from the 44 interviewed in the study to illustrate the types of services and activities delivered.

1. Positively Women is an organisation led by and for HIV positive women offering a structured volunteer programme which encourages ex-service users to work within the organisation. Service users often move to the support group and then are likely to become a volunteer or a paid member of staff.

2. Tower Hamlets Women's Aid provides a combination of crisis and community services for women affected by domestic violence. Whilst the refuge service ensures that women are safe from perpetrators of violence in the short-term through offering temporary accommodation, the community services ensure that women have access to information and support to enable them make informed decisions about their lives and achieve long-term outcomes of living without violence.

3. Hillingdon Women's Centre (HWC) is part of a long tradition of women-only spaces and women's centres which came into being in the 1970s and 1980s. It provides an integrated approach which broadens the scope of service provision to women, ensuring that service users are offered support in a variety of different ways. HWC caters for needs that women in the community have identified themselves and this needs-based approach has meant that the centre has been a women-only space since its inception.

despite its very limited resources, the BWMHP has supported many women during their recovery from mental illness, helping them to maintain good mental health and progress into community participation, education and employment

4. The Black Women's Mental Health Project (BWMHP) is a self-help group run by one part-time paid worker, volunteers and social work students on placement. BWMHP provides home visits, hospital visits, emotional support, referrals to counselling and a helpline. The staff and volunteers regularly visit all the women patients in the local mental health trust hospital and participate in national debates and consultations on mental health issues. Despite its very limited resources, the BWMHP has supported many women during their recovery from mental illness, helping them to maintain good mental health and progress into community participation, education and employment.

5. The Women's Environmental Network (WEN) was founded by women who felt that women's environmental concerns were marginalised and ignored. WEN is a campaigning organisation which enables individuals to use their consumer power as a force for positive environmental change, by informing, educating and empowering women and men. WEN has had a successful campaigning history.

## Solutions - the impact of women's organisations

### Changing lives – the impact on women

The interviewees gave numerous examples of how women's lives have been transformed by the work of the organisation. Impacts included long-term freedom from violence, improved mental health, and economic independence through training and employment.

"Women's lives have been completely controlled by their violent partner. [...] When they've left here, they have been able to manage their own affairs, they have been able to deal with their own children, they've been able to run their lives and that's a huge impact on their life." (Tower Hamlets Women's Aid)

### Changing communities – the impact on communities

The organisations in this study also spoke about the impact of their work on women's families and communities, for example children being able to be looked after by their parents rather than social services, and women playing more active roles in their communities.

"Women end up in much more fulfilled positions in their lives both in work and in relationship terms and are therefore better mothers, better sisters and better workers. But also they are able to contribute to their community in the broadest possible way - by being better neighbours and better volunteers. I think it is also not uncommon for them to leave the role of victim and help someone else along." (Haringey Women's Forum)

### Changing society – the impact on government

Historically, women's organisations have made enormous contributions to the transformation of society in the UK, for example by lobbying for laws to protect women and children and by winning the right to vote. Data from the interviews in this study indicate that women's organisations today continue to advocate on behalf of women and achieve important changes to policy and practice. Achievements included:

- Improved access to domestic violence services for disabled women.
- Employee rights for migrant domestic workers.
- Increased protection for trafficked women and asylum seekers.

## Solutions - the added value of the women's sector

From the interviews, the key features of women's organisations that emerged are:

- Provision of women-only space.
- Focus on empowerment and independence.
- Service user involvement and high level of peer support.
- Integrated 'one-stop-shop' service
- Needs-based approach.
- Reaching 'hard to reach' women.

### Provision of women-only space

The most obvious feature that women's organisations provide that is rarely offered by mainstream organisations is women-only space, whether for service users or those running the organisation.

"There are women that I have known for 10-15 years, and I've seen what Powerhouse has done for them in terms of the confidence and the growth. I don't think that would have been achieved if it wasn't a women-only space." (Powerhouse)

One interviewee described the experience of a woman who had tried to access support from a mainstream voluntary and community organisation:

"He gave her half an hour of his time and told her she had to 'get on with her life', that was probably 'the best thing for her'. This was quite appalling"

"[A woman who had been raped] had gone to one of the larger mainstream organisations and she said she got to speak to a male volunteer there. He gave her half an hour of his time and told her she had to 'get on with her life', that was probably 'the best thing for her'. This was quite appalling. [...] These mainstream organisations are often quite well funded and well respected but on the ground the experience is somewhat different, depending obviously on which branch you go to." (Anonymous)

### Focus on empowerment and independence

Twenty-one organisations (48%) refer to empowerment of the women they work with. Empowerment was often described as the process whereby women become able to advocate for themselves:

"Success is a woman who actually feels able to articulate her own needs. So she's not only taking what you offer, but she's actually able to say is 'What I need for me is...'" (women@thewell)

### Service user involvement and high level of peer support

The peer-support or self-help element was central to many organisations in this study. Five (11%) of the interviewees – usually managers of the organisations – were ex-service users themselves. Their experience offers invaluable insight into the benefits of ex-service user involvement in women's organisations:

"I am an ex-service user. I had my first son in the refuge - that was 11 years ago, when I suffered from domestic violence. I was pregnant at the time and my midwife called the police and they put me in a refuge. I had my son in the refuge. I didn't have my immigration papers, and my husband didn't want to give them to me - he was abusing

“At that time I didn’t know my rights as a woman. [My husband] told me if I called the police they would deport me, and I believed him. So now, I let women know that they have rights as a human being, as a citizen”

me physically, financially. I was damaged. From the refuge I was able to get my indefinite leave to remain. I went to university, got my degree, and then I felt like giving it back. Therefore, I work here. So I’m a living example. At that time I didn’t know my rights as a woman. [My husband] told me if I called the police they would deport me, and I believed him. So now, I let women know that they have rights as a human being, as a citizen.”  
(Elevate)

#### Needs-based services

Twenty per cent of organisations in this study offered a wide range of different services all under one roof. They performed the function of a traditional ‘women’s centre’, although most did not use that description. It was not uncommon for organisations with under ten staff (sometimes under five) to provide support on domestic violence and rape crisis, benefits information, legal and immigration advice, interpretation, training, pregnancy testing, job search support, and to run support groups.

“They are looking for an organisation that does more than one thing and therefore can unwrap any and many of their various problems. They can be in more than one of our services at once, they can be in our counselling programme at the same time as having their housing dealt with, and I think that’s really reassuring for them...they can come to the same building once a week and they get to know the staff and build a rapport with them.” (Haringey Women’s Forum)

#### Reaching the ‘hard to reach’

Because of the ways women’s organisations work – providing women-only space, strong connections between service users and staff, needs-based services – they often work successfully with women that are not accessing other services. For example:

“In our experience young women that have been ‘written off by the system’, that are in care, seen as challenging, disruptive etc provide very positive feedback on SERICC’s services. We believe this is because we work from a women-centred approach, using language that they feel comfortable with, they don’t feel judged. Often when these young women are referred from statutory services we are told that they’re ‘trouble makers’, they are ‘aggressive’, they do this, they do that, they won’t turn up, and they’ll muck you about. We have had none of these problems with any of the young women. It’s obviously linked to the way you actually work and the way you present yourself as a service.” (South Essex Rape and Incest Crisis Centre)

## Barriers - women’s organisations’ exclusion from funding

This research identified barriers women’s organisations face, in common with the rest of the voluntary and community sector, which were:

- Short-term funding.
- Limited capacity for fundraising and bureaucracy.
- Funders’ failure to implement full-cost recovery.
- Increased competition for funding.
- Premises.

However, the interviews also identified barriers that are specific to women’s organisations such as the lack of political priority given to women/gender, policy failing to meet women’s needs and a lack of awareness of the women’s sector.

women's organisations are reporting that gender equality and women's issues have disappeared off the political agenda

#### Gender not on the agenda

Increasingly, women's organisations are reporting that gender equality and women's issues have disappeared off the political agenda. Many of the interviewees believed that there exists a widely held view that women and men are equal, despite the persistent and overwhelming evidence to the contrary

"Women-only organisations are not seen as necessary anymore. There is some sort of blindness going on in society, a lot of people don't see the need for a women-only centre [...] I don't know why that is because I know the abuse of women and girls is much worse now." (Women's Alcohol Centre/Alcohol Recovery Project)

#### Policy is failing women and is impacting on funding

This study found a clear link between policy decisions and their impact on funding. Women's organisations identified both the importance of women's sector representation on decision making bodies and of ongoing engagement with government to influence its public policy decisions. For example, organisations commented that although domestic violence is now recognised as important (after decades of lobbying), sexual violence almost never appears on funding criteria, although there is a clear need for rape and sexual assault services.

#### Lack of recognition and awareness of the women's sector

Many of the research participants spoke about the lack of recognition and awareness of what women's organisations do and/or why they exist. They felt that women's organisations are routinely overlooked and marginalised because they are women's organisations.

"Whatever we do or try to put forward, it's initially judged by the fact that it's a women's organisation, so already people make assumptions - they've got their own way of measuring the standards of women's organisations and that in itself leads to being discriminated against when it comes to accessing big pots of funding." (Zimbabwe Women's Network)

## Conclusion and recommendations

This research has illustrated how women's organisations transform women's lives and society, and found that the key features of women's organisations that make them effective include the provision of women-only services, focus on empowerment and a high level of self-help and service user involvement. Women's organisations often work at 'grass roots' level with the most marginalised people in society and are usually established because a need is identified where mainstream services are inappropriate or non-existent. They have proved to be powerful agents for social change – adding considerable value to the government's equalities agenda by reaching women and their families otherwise inaccessible to government agencies or who have fallen through the 'safety net'.

However, the unique contribution of women's organisations to the welfare of society is under threat. The interviews in this study indicated serious and worsening funding problems for the women's voluntary and community sector. Some of these problems are in common with other community groups, such as short-term, insecure funding and the failure of funders to implement full cost recovery. But other barriers holding women's organisations back from achieving their full potential are unique to this sector.

Interviewees reported a lack of political will for the outcomes they are seeking to achieve because of the myth that women's inequality is no longer a problem

Interviewees reported a lack of political will for the outcomes they are seeking to achieve because of the myth that women's inequality is no longer a problem. The government must ensure gender is firmly reinstated on the political agenda. It must acknowledge the systematic disadvantage women face because of their gender and publicly recognise the essential services and expertise the women's sector provides to address this.

#### Recommendations

- The Home Office should develop a cross-departmental strategy on sustaining the women's sector. This should include:
  - A commitment to adequately resource the women's sector engagement with government.
  - A women's sector funding needs analysis, with particular attention to women's organisations led by and for: lesbian, bisexual and transgender; black and minority ethnic; disabled; younger and older women; women's faith and other marginalised women's organisations.
  - Research to measure the economic impact of the women's sector.
  - A commitment to invest in women's organisations through retaining grant giving, not just 'buying' services from them.
- The Treasury should carry out regular gender and other equalities analyses of spending on the voluntary and community sector, including the Invest to Save, futurebuilders, and Capacity Builders programmes.
- The Treasury should explicitly address funding for women's organisations, and other equalities organisations, in its forthcoming revised guidance on financial relationships with the 'third sector'.
- The Home Office, Office of Government Commerce and Equal Opportunities Commission should produce guidance to help public bodies ensure that procurement and other funding for the voluntary sector does not unfairly exclude women's organisations and other marginalised groups.
- The Home Office and Compact Working Group should jointly assess how well the Compact and Compact Plus meet the needs of women's organisations.
- The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister and Local Government Association should provide guidance to local authorities and Local Strategic Partnerships on working with the women's sector and other equalities groups.
- Local authorities should carry out regular gender and other equalities analyses of local funding for the voluntary and community sector.
- Local Strategic Partnerships should ensure that women's organisations are actively involved in developing their local Sustainable Community Strategy and the priorities for their local area.
- The National Audit Office should undertake a second audit of the relationship between public bodies and the voluntary and community sector, with particular attention to women's; gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender; age-based; black and minority ethnic; faith; and disability-led organisations.
- The Women and Equality Unit, Equal Opportunities Commission and Commission for Equality and Human Rights should state publicly and explicitly that the Gender Equality Duty requires public bodies to consult with women's organisations as stakeholders and experts in promoting gender equality.
- The Commission on Equality and Human Rights should provide guidance to public bodies on working with women's; disability-led; age-based; black and minority ethnic; gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender; and faith organisations.
- The Commission on Equality and Human Rights should have equitable ringfenced funding for gender equality, all other equalities groups.

- Government funders should collect and analyse gender and other equalities disaggregated data on service users, volunteers and employees from the voluntary and community organisations they fund.
- Funders should name 'women' as a priority group in funding criteria when targeting equalities groups and in needs assessments.
- Funders should ensure that they fund advocacy, campaigning and policy.
- Public bodies should conduct gender and other equalities impact assessments of proposed changes to funding policy, to assess how they affect the women's sector and other equalities groups.
- Public bodies should improve their expertise on gender equality and deliver gender training to all staff.
- Public bodies should conduct gender impact assessments (disaggregated data) on public services, employment and policy. Race, disability, sexuality, age, religion and income impact assessments should also be carried out and all statistics disaggregated by gender.
- The inspectorate bodies (such as the National Audit Office, Audit Commission and Ofsted) should meet their requirements under the forthcoming Gender Equality Duty by ensuring all auditing of public bodies includes equalities disaggregated data and gender impact assessments.
- The government should set and achieve a new date by which all statutory funders should adopt Full Cost Recovery as a standard model [since April 2006 target has not been met].
- The government should develop, fund and implement a cross-departmental, national Gender Equality Strategy and a national Violence Against Women Strategy.
- The Home Office should either repeal the 'no recourse to public funds' rule or provide adequate funding to cover the costs to women's refuges and individual women created by the rule.
- The government should safeguard the provision of single-sex services in the voluntary sector by clarifying the current inconsistencies between the Sex Discrimination Act, European regulations and the Equality Bill.

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References are detailed in the full report which is available from [www.whywomen.org.uk](http://www.whywomen.org.uk).

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