



Engaging the women's voluntary and community sector

A guide for public bodies

July 2011

Understanding and supporting
women and their organisations

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About the Women's Resource Centre

The Women's Resource Centre (WRC) is a unique 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 health, 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.

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Introduction

The purpose of this guide is to help public bodies engage more effectively with women's voluntary and community organisations (VCOs). We believe that in the current economic climate, it is vital that public bodies and the voluntary and community sector (VCS) work in partnership to deliver the best outcomes for their local communities.

Emerging Coalition Government policy on engagement between communities and public bodies is shaped by a drive for political and economic reforms at a national and local level and there is widespread political consensus that there must be greater citizen involvement in what happens in their localities.

Public bodies are dealing with significant cuts to their budgets and have to make tough decisions about how they can best serve their communities whilst simultaneously embracing the Government's vision for Localism and the 'Big Society'. Women's VCOs, with their local knowledge, expertise and track record of supporting women, families and communities, are ideally placed to support local authorities through this challenging period and beyond.

Many public bodies have already set out strategies and frameworks which outline the way in which they engage with the public. Engagement is carried out by public bodies for a variety of purposes, which include:

- improving planning and decision-making
- providing better quality services and value for money
- informing policy development
- enhancing local democracy
- contributing to the sustainability and resilience of communities.

This guide is informed by research carried out by the WRC with women's organisations. The organisations identified factors which helped or hindered their ability to influence change at a local level.¹

It provides practical advice on how public bodies can respond to the emerging Government policy on localism, community engagement and the 'Big Society' in relation to women and their organisations by:

- identifying and getting to know women's VCOs in their area
- building effective relationships with women's VCOs
- working jointly with women's VCOs to remove barriers to women's engagement

¹ Womens Resource Centre (2010) *Power and Prejudice: Combating gender inequality through women's organisations*. WRC: London.
http://www.wrc.org.uk/includes/documents/cm_docs/2010/w/1_wrc_power_and_prejudice_final.pdf

- maximising the use of information and expertise in the women's voluntary and community sector
- supporting the women's VCS to build its capacity.

Why engage with women's organisations?

"In many ways, the women's sector is a model of the Big Society we wish to build. That is a society in which we all work together to address problems, conscious that government has a role to play but that it does not have all the answers, and recognising the role played by charities, voluntary groups and others alongside central and local government. You're way ahead of us with this. The support services you provide and have been providing for over 35 years are invaluable to so many – thank you for all that you do."

Theresa May MP, Home Secretary and Minister for Women and Equalities, 2010²

Women are disproportionately affected by poverty and exclusion and therefore at a time of increasing austerity it is vital to engage with them. It is now widely known that the impact of the economic downturn and cuts in public spending is likely to have a disproportionate impact upon women.

- Women will suffer 72% of the tax and benefit cuts proposed by the Emergency Budget.³ In Coventry alone the 2010 budget will cost women almost £30 million.⁴
- Lone mothers will lose public services worth 18.5% of their income (6.8% for average household) by 2014/15.⁵
- The Office of National Statistics' labour market statistics bulletin (April 2011) shows that women across all age groups are bearing the brunt of joblessness.⁶ The Trades Union Congress has warned of a "*potential crisis in female unemployment*", particularly due to cuts in public sector jobs where women comprise 68% of the workforce.⁷

² May, Theresa (2010) Speech to the 36th Annual Women's Aid Conference. <http://www.womensaid.org.uk/page.asp?section=000100010015000800040002§ionTitle=Theresa+May%27s+Speech>

³ Cooper, Yvette (2010) *Women bear the brunt of budget cuts*.

<http://www.yvettecooper.com/women-bear-brunt-of-budget-cuts>

⁴ Stephenson, Mary-Ann and James Harrison (2011) *Unravelling Equality? A Human Rights and Equality Impact Assessment of the Public Spending Cuts on Women in Coventry*. Centre for Human Rights in Practice, University of Warwick and Coventry Women's Voices.

http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/law/chrp/projects/humanrightsimpactassessments/cwv/report/127948_cwv-chrp_report.pdf

⁵ Women's Budget Group and The Fawcett Society (2011) *The Impact on Women of the Budget 2011*. WBG and The Fawcett Society. http://www.wbg.org.uk/index_7_282363355.pdf

⁶ Office for National Statistics (2011) *Labour Market Statistics*. ONS.

<http://www.statistics.gov.uk/pdfdir/lmsuk0411.pdf>

⁷ Owens, Vicky (2011) *TUC warns of 'crisis in female unemployment'*. Financial Mail Women's Forum. <http://www.fmwf.com/media-type/news/2011/03/tuc-warns-of-crisis-in-female-unemployment/>

- 57% of those likely to be affected by proposed changes to legal aid are women, compared to 43% men. Sixty-five per cent of those who will lose legal aid for family law cases are women; this increases to 73% of education cases.⁸
- Cuts to housing benefits will have a disproportionate effect on women. In 2010 46% of housing benefit claimants were single women, compared to 20% couples and 33% men.⁹ Nine hundred and thirty thousand households will be affected by reforms to housing benefit; around 450,000 of these households will be families with children.¹⁰
- The London Economics Consultancy has estimated that with the new rates of university tuition fees, 70-80% of women students will not be able to pay off their student loans in the thirty years after they graduate.¹¹

Engaging with women's VCOs can help to ensure that local councils deliver the most appropriate and effective service provision for women and families in their local communities. Where women's organisations are able to participate in decision making processes, they are able to identify pragmatic, high quality and cost-effective solutions to support and improve the lives of women, families and local communities.

Research by Oxfam, Urban Forum and WRC on Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs) found that women chaired 28% of central LSP boards and 19% of other groups within LSPs. Women were most likely to be community representatives, thematic partnership representatives or administrators. However, the research found that even where women were represented on LSPs, they did not necessarily raise 'women's issues' or get 'gender on the agenda', with the exception of domestic violence and teenage pregnancy. Only 1.8% of VCS representatives on LSPs were from women's organisations. This highlights the need for women's organisations to be engaged in decision making to ensure the broad range of women's issues are raised and improve gender embedding generally in policy development.

Women's VCOs are a pathway to change for some of the most marginalised and vulnerable women in society. They have a significant impact on the lives of the women they work with, empowering women to take back control over their lives, which supports women to participate more fully in society. In addition to service delivery, women's VCOs are crucial in campaigning for women's equality and this remains a crucial function of the women's VCS.

There have been many advances in women's equality, poverty and disadvantage. However, there is still much to do. For example, only 22% of MPs are women placing the UK well behind countries such as Rwanda, Mozambique, Belarus, Cuba, New Zealand, Sweden and Germany.¹² In 2008 the Equality and Human Rights

⁸ Stephenson, Mary-Ann and James Harrison (2011) *Unravelling Equality? A Human Rights and Equality Impact Assessment of the Public Spending Cuts on Women in Coventry*.

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Asthana, Anushka (2010) *Ministers accused of 'burying' damning report on impact of benefits cuts*. The Observer. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2010/dec/05/housing-benefit-cuts-impact-dwp>

¹¹ Stephenson, Mary-Ann and James Harrison (2011) *Unravelling Equality? A Human Rights and Equality Impact Assessment of the Public Spending Cuts on Women in Coventry*.

¹² Cracknell, Richard and Richard Groat and John Marshall (2009) *Women in Parliament and Government*. House of Commons Library <http://www.parliament.uk/documents/commons/lib/research/briefings/snsg-01250.pdf>

Commission estimated that, at the current rate, it would take 200 years to achieve equal representation of women and men in parliament.¹³

Every minute, an incident of domestic violence is reported to the police and one in four women experience violence, harassment or stalking over their lifetimes.

25% of women who made an employment tribunal claim had been dismissed within hours of telling their employer about their pregnancy and one in five women returning from maternity leave were given lower grade jobs.

Across the UK, the mean full-time gender pay gap in 2010 was 15.5% for hourly earnings excluding overtime and 21.5% for gross weekly earnings.¹⁶

Women retiring this year will receive £6,500 less in pension than men and almost a third do not have a private or company pension compared to 10% of men.¹⁷

Almost 2.1 million pensioners living in poverty are women.¹⁸

Mothers' low incomes are the source of 70% of child poverty. Four out of ten children in poverty are in single mother households, and a further three out of ten are in households where the father works, but the mother is on a low income or no income.

40% of ethnic minority women live in poverty.

In a time of global economic crisis, the value and expertise of women-only and women-centred organisations in shaping policy and service delivery is vital.

¹³ Equality and Human Rights Commission (2008) *Sex and Power 2008*. EHRC: London.
<http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/advice-and-guidance/here-for-business/working-better/sex-and-power/>

¹⁴ Women's Aid Federation of England (2007) *Statistics*. WAFE.
http://www.womensaid.org.uk/domestic_violence_topic.asp?section=0001000100220036§ionTitle=Statistics

¹⁵ Equal Opportunities Commission (2005) *Greater Expectations: Final Report of EOC investigation into discrimination against new and expectant mothers in the workplace*. EOC.
http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/uploaded_files/eoc_pregnancygfi_summary_report.pdf

¹⁶ Perfect, David (2011) *Gender Pay Gaps*. Equality and Human Rights Commission.
http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/uploaded_files/research/gender_pay_gap_briefing_paper_2.pdf

¹⁷ Simon, Emma (2011) *Gender gap of £6,500 for women's pensions*. The Telegraph.
<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/finance/personalfinance/pensions/8517017/Gender-gap-of-6500-for-womens-pensions.html>

¹⁸ Women's Budget Group (2010) *A Gender Impact Assessment of the Coalition Government Budget*. WBG.
[http://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/documents/Women's%20Budget%20Group%20Emergency%20Budget%20Response%20\(June%202010\).pdf](http://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/documents/Women's%20Budget%20Group%20Emergency%20Budget%20Response%20(June%202010).pdf)

¹⁹ Fawcett Society (2008) *'Keeping Mum' campaign briefing*. Fawcett Society.
<http://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/documents/Keeping%20Mum%20-%20Final%20Website%20Briefing.pdf>

The legal and policy context

The Equality Act (2010)

The new Equality Act (2010) brings together and simplifies equality law that has been developed in various Acts and Regulations between 1970 and 2008 relating to race, gender and disability.²⁰ The Act also covers a range of other characteristics that are now protected from discrimination and a wider range of circumstances in which people are protected. The law protects people with the protected characteristics from discrimination in a wide range of areas, such as public functions, employment and the provision of goods and services. The nine "*protected characteristics*" covered by the Act are:

- age
- disability
- sexual orientation
- marriage and civil partnership
- gender reassignment (with a wider definition than previously)
- race
- religion or belief
- sex
- pregnancy and maternity

Public Sector Equality Duty - General Duty

Potentially the most important part of the Equality Act is the new Public Sector Equality Duty, which came into force in April 2011. The duty applies to eight protected characteristics:

- age
- disability
- sexual orientation
- gender reassignment (with a wider definition than previously)
- race
- religion or belief
- sex
- pregnancy and maternity

The Duty applies to all public bodies that are listed in Schedule 19 of the Act and others, including voluntary sector organisations that carry out public functions. The list includes ministers and central government departments, local councils, police authorities, NHS trusts, primary care trusts, governing bodies of maintained schools and institutions of further and higher education.

Their duty is to have due regard to the need to:

- eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and other conduct that is unlawful under the Act

²⁰ For a more detailed overview of the Equality Act see: http://www.wrc.org.uk/includes/documents/cm_docs/2011/e/equality_act_2010_briefing_update_march_2011.pdf

- advance equality of opportunity between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not
- foster good relations between persons who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.

The Act indicates that the "*need to advance equality of opportunity*" includes:

- removing or minimising disadvantage suffered by particular groups
- taking steps to meet different needs of particular groups
- encouraging participation by particular groups in areas of public life or other activity where they are under-represented.

The Act specifies that the "*need to foster good relations*" includes tackling prejudice and promoting understanding.

Positive action

The Act's approach to positive action recognises that some equality groups are disadvantaged in some areas of life as a consequence of past or current discrimination and exclusion.

The Act enables public, voluntary and community and private sector employers and providers of services to take steps to help particular groups overcome disadvantage, meet needs that are different from the needs of other groups or increase participation. Service providers include public authorities, schools and colleges, housing providers and associations. Therefore the Act makes it lawful to take positive action measures that involve different treatment of different equality groups which would otherwise be unlawful. However, for positive action measures to be considered lawful three conditions must be satisfied:

1. The employer or service provider must reasonably think that the group in question suffers a disadvantage, has different needs, or has disproportionately low level of participation.
2. The employer or service provider takes action with the aim of enabling or encouraging the group to overcome or minimise their disadvantage, meeting their needs, or enabling or encouraging participation.
3. The action is a proportionate means of achieving that aim - that is, that the action is both appropriate and necessary to achieve the aim.

Exceptions to the prohibition of discrimination

The existing legislation contains a large number of exceptions that relate to particular characteristics. The Equality Act extends some existing exceptions to apply to all protected characteristics, modifies or merely restates other exceptions.

These exceptions make it legal and appropriate to fund and provide women-only services.

The following are exceptions relevant to the work of women's VCOs:

- If an organisation normally provides services for one equality group only, it is lawful to continue to do so. A charity may provide benefits to one equality group, other than a group defined by colour, but only if this is within its charitable instrument and is a proportionate means of achieving a legitimate aim or for the purpose of preventing or compensating for a disadvantage linked to that equality group.
- The Act disallows discrimination by an association with 25 or more members that applies some form of selection of its members. A club or association may restrict their membership to one equality group only but cannot restrict membership to a group defined by colour. Under the Act an association could be only for retired women or only for retired African-Caribbean women, but it could not be an association for retired black women.
- This Act contains an exception to the general prohibition of gender reassignment discrimination in relation to the provision of separate- and single-sex services. Such treatment by a provider has to be objectively justified and must be a proportionate means of achieving a legitimate aim. Any exception to the prohibition of discrimination must be applied as restrictively as possible and the denial of a service to a transsexual person should only occur in exceptional circumstances. Policy relating to trans people should be applied on a case-by-case basis in order to determine whether the exclusion of a transsexual person is proportionate in the individual circumstances. An example included in the Explanatory Notes of the Act is of a group counselling session provided for female victims of sexual assault, where clients attending the group session are unlikely to do so if a male-to-female transsexual person was there. Exclusion of transsexuals would be lawful.
- Religion or belief organisations, other than those whose main purpose is commercial, may, subject to specified conditions, restrict who can be a member or who can participate in its activities based on a person's religion or belief or their sexual orientation. It is never lawful to impose restrictions based on sexual orientation where the religion or belief organisation is carrying out a contract with a public authority.
- In recruitment for a job, giving work to a contract worker or appointment to a public office, it will be lawful to require a person to have a particular protected characteristic if, having regard to the nature or the context of the work, to have that characteristic is required to do that work, and applying that requirement is appropriate and necessary.

The Localism Agenda

As part of the Government's 'Big Society' agenda, the Decentralisation and Localism Bill²¹ aims to empower communities and give local councils greater responsibility for meeting local need. According to the Government, a centralised approach to politics has been unsuccessful - local people have the greater understanding of local need and therefore, decision making and power should be further devolved to a local level. This, the Government believes, will also improve accountability and democracy within local government.

²¹ See: <http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/localgovernment/decentralisationguide>

The Compact

The Compact, renewed by the Coalition Government in 2010, aims to improve relationships between the public and third sectors (at all levels of government) for mutual advantage, and sets out guidelines for how both parties should work together to ensure that better outcomes are delivered. In addition, public bodies may have their own compacts with their local VCS, and codes of practice and guidance.

The Government makes a number of undertakings under five outcome areas:

1. A strong, diverse and independent civil society
2. Effective and transparent design and development of policies, programmes and public services
3. Responsive and high-quality programmes and services
4. Clear arrangements for managing changes to programmes and services.
5. An equal and fair society.

Of particular relevance to women's organisations are the following Government undertakings:

Engagement in decision making

- Ensure greater transparency by making data and information more accessible, helping organisations to challenge existing provision of services, access new markets and hold government to account.
- Consider the social impact that may result from policy and programme development, and in particular consider how these would impact local efforts to inspire and encourage social action and to empower communities.
- Work with organisations from the earliest possible stage to design policies, programmes and services.
- Ensure those likely to have a view are involved from the start and remove barriers that may prevent organisations contributing.
- Give early notice of forthcoming consultations, where possible, allowing enough time for organisations to involve their service users, beneficiaries, members, volunteers and trustees in preparing responses. Where it is appropriate, and enables meaningful engagement, conduct 12-week formal written consultations, with clear explanations and rationale for shorter time-frames or a more informal approach.

Equalities

- Work with organisations that represent, support or provide services to people specifically protected by legislation [e.g. women] and other under-represented and disadvantaged groups. Understand the specific needs of these groups by actively seeking the views of service users and clients. Take these views into account, including assessing impact, when designing and implementing policies, programmes and services.

- Acknowledge that organisations representing specific disadvantaged or under-represented group(s) can help promote social and community cohesion and should have equal access to state funding.
- Take practical action to eliminate unlawful discrimination, advance equality and to ensure a voice for under-represented and disadvantaged groups.

Funding

- If a programme or service is encountering problems, agree with the civil society organisation a timetable of actions to improve performance before making a decision to end a financial relationship.
- Assess the impact on beneficiaries, service users and volunteers before deciding to reduce or end funding. Assess the need to re-allocate funds to another organisation serving the same group.
- Where there are restrictions or changes to future resources, discuss with organisations the potential implications as early as possible, give organisations the opportunity to respond, and consider the response fully, respecting sector expertise, before making a final decision.
- Give a minimum of three months notice in writing when changing or ending a funding relationship or other support, apart from in exceptional circumstances, and provide a clear rationale for why the decision has been taken.
- Demonstrate how funding arrangements and financial support can allow smaller and specialist providers to play a greater part.
- Recognise that when organisations apply for a grant they can include appropriate and relevant overheads, including the costs associated with training and volunteer involvement.

What do we mean by 'engagement'?

Community engagement is the process of involving people in decisions that affect them. This can mean involving communities in the planning, development and management of services or tackling issues that affect people's lives in a specific community.

The Scottish Community Development Centre has defined community engagement as:

*"Developing and sustaining a working relationship between one or more public body and one or more community groups, to help them both to understand and act on the needs or issues that the community experiences."*²²

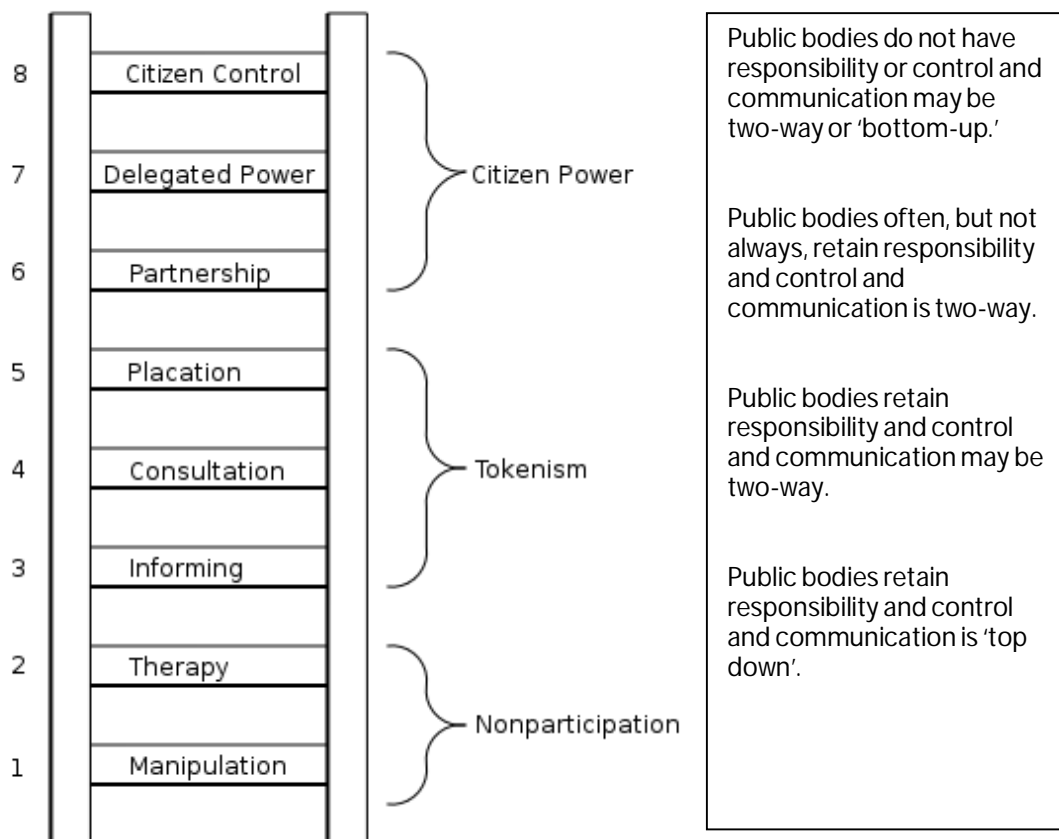
They have also developed ten standards for community engagement:

- 1. Involvement** – identify and involve the people and organisations with an interest in the focus of the engagement.
- 2. Support** – identify and overcome any barriers to involvement.
- 3. Planning** – gather evidence of the needs and available resources and use this to agree the purpose, scope and timescale of the engagement and the actions to be taken.
- 4. Methods** – using methods of engagement that are fit for purpose.
- 5. Working together** – agree and use clear procedures to enable the participants to work with one another efficiently and effectively.
- 6. Sharing information** – ensure necessary information is communicated between the participants.
- 7. Working with others** – work effectively with others with an interest in the engagement.
- 8. Improvement** – develop actively the skills, knowledge and confidence of all the participants.
- 9. Feedback** – feedback the results of the engagement to the wider community and agencies affected.
- 10. Monitoring and evaluation** – monitor and evaluate whether the engagement meets its purposes.

²² Scottish Community Development Centre. See <http://www.scdc.org.uk/national-standards-community-engagement/what-is-community-engagement/>

A critical feature of engagement is the nature of the relationship between public bodies and citizens (in this case women and girls), and agencies acting for citizens (in this case the women's VCS). The Government aims to create a responsive state which is accountable to responsible citizens.

Whereas the previous government aspired to passing power to local bodies and to citizens, the policy implications for the Coalition Government's model is that citizens are the first point of call, then communities and public bodies. Arnstein's 'Ladder of Participation' shows what this could look like in practice (see levels 6 to 8).²³



²³ Arnstein, Sherry R. (1969) *A Ladder of Citizen Participation* in *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*, Vol. 35, No. 4, July 1969. <http://lithgow-schmidt.dk/sherry-arnstein/ladder-of-citizen-participation.html>

How can public bodies engage with women's organisations?

Barriers

Throughout 2008 and 2009, WRC worked with four women's organisations on a participatory action research project on influencing local decision makers.²⁴ In this research, key barriers to engaging local public bodies included:

Lacking knowledge and confidence about how to engage locally

- do not know how to hold public bodies to account
- do not have strong links to other women's VCOs doing similar work
- not knowing where to start and who to contact
- do not have the knowledge of and confidence to use existing policy tools and frameworks.

Hitting a 'brick wall' with public bodies

- a lack of good practice in engagement by public bodies
- various forms of resistance from within public bodies' local partnership structures that got in the way of them having their voice heard
- many different kinds of obstacles, including blockers and gatekeepers not responding; lack of transparency and accountability in engagement processes and decision making; bureaucracy, red tape, and simple bad practice
- a gap between good policy not translating into good practice on the ground.

The contested issue of what counts as evidence and expertise

- key issues women service users were raising with women's VCOs were not being acknowledged by policy makers as valid forms of evidence
- data from women's VCOs was not being inputted into Local Area Agreements
- it was unclear about the criteria and who had the power to decide what data and evidence was valid and credible, and what is not.

Gender equality not on the local agenda

- gender equality was not understood or taken seriously enough at local level
- a lack of gendered analysis – public bodies did not understand the need to look at issues or policy through the 'lens' of gender, to understand the different life experiences and needs of women and men.
- women's VCOs constantly having to defend their women-only services and spaces.

²⁴ Womens Resource Centre (2010) *Power and Prejudice: Combating gender inequality through women's organisations*. WRC: London.
http://www.wrc.org.uk/includes/documents/cm_docs/2010/w/1_wrc_power_and_prejudice_final.pdf

The women's VCS is 'invisible'

- denial of any knowledge of women's services (despite their existence)
- local public bodies did not seek out women's VCOs as a key audience for consultations and action plans
- lack of understanding by many local decision makers about why women's organisations exist and the nature of their work in challenging women's inequality and supporting and empowering women.

Surviving financially

- fear that cuts to public services and the VCS will give public bodies a reason not to address local equalities work
- local commissioners rejecting women's VCOs because they do not work with men
- exhausted by the continuous and draining nature of constantly battling for funding and recognition of their work
- the backdrop for the constant challenge of fundraising for the organisations' survival was: a backlash against women's services; difficulty finding routes in to local discussions and decision-making; and disproportionately high levels of work required to contribute to the local agenda
- the constant pressure on organisations to survive impacts upon their ability to be strategic and outward-facing. Working constantly in survival mode isolates women's VCOs.

What can public bodies do?

Assist women's VCOs to increase their knowledge and confidence in decision making processes

- Disaggregate your data (by sex, race, disability, sexual orientation etc.) and make it widely available.
- Illustrate the differential impact of policies and services upon women and men. This shows that you have thought seriously about gender differences.
- Support the development of networks of women's VCOs.
- Provide information about 'who is who' in your organisation and who is responsible for what.
- Take the time to meet with women's VCOs or networks, and encourage those most senior in the organisation to do so. Even small gestures like this can significantly help to build better relationships.
- Be frank and honest about what issues/decisions can be influenced, what can't and why. Women's VCOs will appreciate knowing where they stand.
- If you are consulting on an issue, follow this up so that women's VCOs can see that what they have said has been heard and noted (e.g. a consultation outcome document). Women's VCOs often feel that they put a lot of energy

into responding to consultations only to be ignored. Explain how you can or why you can't implement their suggestions and ideas and why. Women's VCOs will appreciate a well evidenced and justified decision even if they don't agree.

- Provide accessible information about relevant policy tools and decision making structures.

Be proactive in engaging women's VCOs

- Identify the points of connection between your organisation and the women's VCS.
- Audit the impact of the women's VCS and the barriers it faces in dealing with public bodies.
- Provide a range of communication routes – web-based, partnership working, one-to-one contact with a named officer etc. Clarify and publicise what each route is for and monitor its effectiveness at reaching the women's VCS.
- Identify and get to know women's VCOs in your locality. Make sure databases of women's VCOs are comprehensive, accurate, up-to-date and consistent across the public body, with the correct contact person identified for each organisation.
- Invite women's VCOs in your locality to evaluate decision making structures, identify obstacles to having their voice heard and work jointly with you to find solutions to removing them.
- If bureaucracy and red tape is unnecessary then remove it.
- Work responsively and creatively with women's VCOs to translate government policy into good practice in your locality.

Embrace the opportunities to draw upon the evidence and expertise of the women's VCS

- Listen to the voices of women service users emerging from women's VCOs and acknowledge them as valid forms of evidence.
- Recognise that women's VCOs are vital sources of data, information and knowledge and work with them to unlock these sources to contribute to more effective service-planning, decision making and policies.

Actively promote gender equality

- Promote understanding of gender, power and equality within **all levels** of your public agency.
- Ensure that there are people working at a policy making level who have the ability to look at issues of policy through a 'gender lens' to see women and men's different life experiences and needs.

Promote better awareness and understanding of the women's VCS

- Promote understanding across your organisation about why women's organisations exist and the nature of their work in challenging women's inequality and supporting and empowering women. It is our experience that

many people in the public sector don't even know that a women's VCS even exists let alone why women's VCOs are important.

- Recognise women's VCOs as key audiences for consultations and action plans on a range of different issues and not just the 'usual suspects' of domestic violence or teenage pregnancy.

Recognise the value of women-only services and space

- Ensure that your organisation is clear about the necessity and value of women-only services and spaces.
- Recognise that women have different routes to empowerment and community engagement than men and that women-only space is vital to women's empowerment and is a vital component of building an inclusive, vibrant and effective 'Big Society'.

Improve the culture of decision making

- Put measures in place to involve women and women's VCOs in local decision making at every level.
- Provide opportunities for women's VCOs to participate on their own terms in area and theme based participatory mechanisms, including providing women-only space to enable women to share their own experiences and clarify their perspective on a particular issue.
- Ensure the environment for joint working is safe, respectful and supportive. You will be more likely to hear the authentic voice of the women's VCS.
- Build in women-friendly ways of working including small group work and more interactive processes.
- Make sure women's VCOs are appropriately prepared for participation in engagement activities by ensuring participants have access to necessary support to enable them to participate (e.g. child or elder care, transport, etc.).
- Put measures in place to remove gender inequalities in local engagement and participation such as training in implementing gender analysis, monitoring of the effectiveness of women's participation in meetings and training of Chairs to ensure inclusive processes enable all to be heard.
- Make sure evaluation of participation in engagement processes and outcomes is carried out with and across a range of diverse women's groups.

Improve data and information sources

- Gender disaggregate all relevant sources of data, including who is responding to consultations, attending events etc.
- Recognise that women are not one homogenous group, but include a wide range of characteristics including ethnicity, disability, faith, sexuality, etc.
- Address intersectionality to ensure equalities strands are not looked at in isolation from each other.

- Carry out gender-profiling across areas and in relation to 'needs' audits. Develop action plans to follow up identified gaps and issues and consider commissioning the women's VCS to address these.
- Monitor the impact of decisions, policy and services on different and diverse groups of women.
- Ensure an equalities impact assessment is carried out at an appropriate level which focuses on imagery and language in public documents, websites, and other promotional material to make sure it reflects and is relevant to women's lives.
- Carry out an equalities impact assessment on engagement strategies and frameworks to see how effectively your public body is reaching the women's VCS and women and girls in general and develop an action plan to improve this if necessary.
- Train staff and members to be gender aware, or better still commission the women's VCS to deliver this training.

Build joint working relationships with the women's VCS

- Provide opportunities for the women's VCS to interact with members of the governing body and senior officers, including giving presentations and following-up in small groups.
- Hold public events which celebrate the women's VCS, for example by giving public awards and recognition.
- Develop and promote the use of mechanisms to disseminate information from the women's VCS across the public body and between partners.
- Work with the women's VCS on joint events and ensure attendance at events. Follow-up with appropriate internal feedback and action.
- Work with and support women's VCOs to make effective local change
- Work jointly with the women's VCS to carry out joint training for sector staff and public body staff, elected members, members of governing bodies and the public in general.
- Support the women's VCS to build its own capacity.
- Support women's VCOs to be effective in partnership working by using measures such as funding for back-filling to cover time taken in partnership working or by recognising the contribution when developing Service Level Agreements.
- Within the financial constraints facing public bodies, ensure the women's VCS is effectively resourced and value the independent voice which women's VCOs have and which can sometimes be a 'critical friend'.
- Where appropriate support women's VCOs to form and maintain a network which can act as a strategic channel of communication between the women's VCS and public bodies.²⁵

²⁵ See:

http://www.wrc.org.uk/includes/documents/cm_docs/2010/w/1_wrc_how_to_develop_a_womens_network_or_forum_aug_10.pdf

Outcomes of good engagement with women's organisations

Improved planning and decision making

- A gender-specific perspective to ensure scarce resources are targeted effectively and appropriately.
- Improved quality of decision making, including pathways to marginalised and vulnerable women and families.
- Improved decision making, thereby creating better quality, more appropriate and cost-effective services which are informed and influenced by women's needs.

Better quality services and value for money

- Better awareness of services and support that are available for women.
- Improved knowledge of gaps in public services.
- Increased satisfaction from women with public services and better understanding of issues affecting women.

More effective policies

- Improved partnership working, including opportunities for joint projects – giving rise to joint planning, development and delivery of policy and services where appropriate.
- Policies which reflect the diverse needs of communities and individuals.
- Improved access to local intelligence as a result of harnessing the knowledge and expertise of the women's VCS in relation to delivering better outcomes for women and families and about the needs of local communities more broadly.
- Policies which take account of social, environmental, economic and equalities outcomes.

A more inclusive 'Big Society'

- A 'Big Society' that understands women's different routes to engagement from men's.
- Ensures women's participation and recognises that the 'personal' issues affecting the lives of women and their families are often central to women's political concerns.
- A 'Big Society' that is inclusive of the diversity of the women's VCS and includes elements of service delivery, volunteering, social enterprise, social action and campaigning.

Enhanced local democracy

- A greater sense of democracy, involvement and social responsibility by making it simpler for women's VCOs to participate in decision making.
- Access to a wider audience of women.

- Increased civic participation and interest in local decision making.

Greater sustainability and resilience of communities

- More sustainable women's VCOs and networks, thereby enhanced women's resilience and well-being, and strengthened families and communities.

Where can I find out more?

Research into women's engagement

Bedford, J., S. Goring and S. Robson (2008) *Closing the Gap, Final Report: Women Take Part*. Government Equalities Office: London.

http://www.equalities.gov.uk/pdf/7841-TSO-Women_TakePart_WEB.pdf

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<http://www.oxfam.org.uk/resources/ukpoverty/downloads/notseennoheard.pdf>

Women's Resource Centre (2010) *Power and Prejudice: Combating gender inequality through women's organisations*. Women's Resource Centre: London.

http://www.wrc.org.uk/includes/documents/cm_docs/2010/w/1_wrc_power_and_prejudice_final.pdf

Gudnadottir, E., D. Corry, S. Robson and S. Smith (2007) *Where are the women in LSPs? Women's representation in Local Strategic Partnerships*. Urban Forum: London.

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Smith, S., B. Bance and S. Fooks (2009) *Getting Women into Local Strategic Partnerships: Knowing your community, improving public services*. Oxfam GB: Oxford.

<http://www.idea.gov.uk/idk/aio/16101495>

South Essex Rape Crisis and Incest Centre (2008) *Women's Participation in Local Strategic Partnerships and Gender Equality in Local Area Agreements*. Shaping Thurrock, Oxfam GB and SERICC: Thurrock.

http://www.wrc.org.uk/includes/documents/cm_docs/2010/t/thurrock_women_and_lsps.pdf

Research about the women's voluntary and community sector

Women's Resource Centre (2010) *In All Our Colours. Lesbian, bisexual and trans women's services in the UK*. WRC: London.

http://www.wrc.org.uk/resources/wrcs_research_and_reports/lesbian_bisexula_and_trans_womens_services_in_the_uk.aspx

Women's Resource Centre (2010) *Assessing the financial vulnerability of charities serving women*. WRC: London.

http://www.wrc.org.uk/includes/documents/cm_docs/2011/a/assessing_the_financial_vulnerability_of_charities_serving_women.pdf

Women's Resource Centre (2009) *Not just bread, but roses, too: Funding to the women's voluntary and community sector in England 2004-2007*. WRC: London.

http://www.wrc.org.uk/resources/wrcs_research_and_reports/not_just_bread_but_roses_too.aspx

Women's Resource Centre (2008) *The impact of commissioning and procurement on the women's voluntary and community sector*. WRC: London.

http://www.wrc.org.uk/includes/documents/cm_docs/2010/i/impact_of_commissioning_on_wvcs_briefing.pdf

Women's Resource Centre (2008) *The Crisis in Rape Crisis*. WRC: London.

http://www.wrc.org.uk/resources/wrcs_research_and_reports/the_crisis_in_rape_crisis.aspx

Women's Resource Centre (2007) *Why women-only? The value and benefits of 'by women, for women' services*. WRC: London.

http://www.wrc.org.uk/resources/wrcs_research_and_reports/why_women_only.aspx

Women's Resource Centre (2007) *Funding to London women's refuges*. WRC: London.

http://www.wrc.org.uk/resources/wrcs_research_and_reports/funding_to_london_womens_refuges.aspx

Women's Resource Centre (2006) *Why women? The women's voluntary and community sector: changing lives, changing communities changing society*. WRC: London.

http://www.wrc.org.uk/resources/wrcs_research_and_reports/why_women.aspx

*A social return on investment analysis of five different women's organisations will be published by autumn 2011 and will be available on WRC's website:

www.wrc.org.uk

Glossary of relevant terms

Disaggregated data: Data that is broken down by different categories, such as equalities groups or "*protected characteristics*". For example, once broken down by gender, data is further broken down by other equalities strands such as race, age, sexuality, disability etc. in order to gain a fuller understanding of an issue and who is most affected.

Gender: The term 'sex' is used to describe biological differences between women and men. The term 'gender' refers to the wider social roles and relationships which structure men's and women's lives. Gender inequality exists in all aspects of society and refers to lasting and embedded patterns of advantage and disadvantage.

Gender analysis: The systematic effort to document and understand the different needs of women and men and how gender impacts upon their life experience within a given context.

Intersectionality: Is about personal identity, social group membership and how people experience or react to the 'isms' such as racism, sexism, heterosexism, disablism, ageism etc. based upon their personal identities and social group membership. At the broader level, intersectionality speaks to the way in which the 'isms' interconnect or interlock to act as systems of oppression that support the domination of one group over another. Understanding and applying intersectionality is a crucial step in the pursuit of social justice, equality and fairness in the formation of any analysis or strategies. Intersectionality helps us to understand how different sets of personal and group identities impact on women and men's access to rights and opportunities.

Substantive model of equality: As defined by the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women.²⁶ This model is based upon the principle that discrimination is socially constructed and is not a natural principle of human interaction. It recognises the need for concerted action against inequality and the institutional mechanisms that perpetuate it. Substantive equality includes:

- equality of opportunity through law, policy programme and institutional arrangements
- equality of access by eliminating all obstacles that prevent access to opportunities and taking positive steps to ensure the goal of equality is achieved
- equality of results/outcomes.

Violence against women and girls (VAWG): VAWG is both a cause and a consequence of gender inequality, and remains a fundamental barrier to achieving equality between women and men. It includes domestic violence, rape and sexual assault, childhood sexual abuse, female genital mutilation, child marriage, so-called 'honour' killings, forced marriage etc. Acts and threats of violence and coercion can occur in private or public life and can be physical, psychological,

²⁶ See: <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/cedaw/index.htm>

emotional and economic. Importantly, these acts of violence disproportionately affect women and girls, and are directed at women because of their gender.

Women-only services: Services for women, delivered by women only. Research by WRC found that women from all walks of life prefer to use women-only services within a range of different contexts.²⁷ It is lawful to provide women or girls-only services; both the Equality Act (2010) and Sex Discrimination Act (1975) make provisions for single-sex services.

Women's participation: The means for women to directly participate in political, economic, cultural or social decisions. Whereas representation implies having the authority to be a delegate on behalf of a particular agency or community group, participation infers a level of proportionate decision making power (i.e. a woman having a say in decisions directly proportional to the degree that a particular decision affects her).

Women's voluntary and community sector (VCS) and women's voluntary and community organisations (VCOs): Includes registered charities, self-help groups, community groups, networks and campaigning organisations and can be formal and informal. Women's VCOs are not-for-profit and non-governmental and usually have an aim to promote women's/girls'/gender equality. The women's VCS is the legacy of the Women's Liberation Movement and has been responsible for bringing about significant gender equality changes in legislation, policy and public perceptions. Advocating and campaigning on behalf of the women they work with remains an important role of women's VCOs.

'VCO' and 'VCS' are often used interchangeably with the terms: non-governmental organisation (NGO); 'third sector' and 'third sector organisations' (in reference to the public and private sectors and which includes social enterprises and co-operatives as well as VCOs); and 'civil society' and 'civil society organisations' (in reference to wider society playing a role in bringing about change).

²⁷ Women's Resource Centre (2007) *why women-only? The value and benefits of 'by women, for women' services*. WRC: London.

http://www.wrc.org.uk/resources/wrcs_research_and_reports/why_women_only.aspx