



# WOMEN'S RESOURCE CENTRE

## The Women's Voluntary and Community Sector in London

"IF WE ARE TO ATTAIN GENDER EQUALITY IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY, THE ORGANISATIONS WHICH CARRY FORWARD THIS AGENDA MUST BE STRENGTHENED"

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## WHAT IS THE WOMEN'S VOLUNTARY AND COMMUNITY SECTOR?

Women's voluntary and community organisations work daily with fundamental human rights issues – working to improve the status of women by providing support and advocacy and challenging ideology, attitudes, legislation, policies and practices which discriminate against women and affect their quality of life and opportunities.

For the purpose of this position paper, we define the 'women's voluntary and community sector' as being any "voluntary" organisation (i.e. not-for-profit, non public



or local authority, normally formalised and employing paid professional staff) or "community" organisation (a web of networks, groups, relationships centred around a community of interest such as physical neighbourhoods, common understandings, interests etc) which is:

- **Led primarily by women; or**
- **Provides services primarily to women; or**
- **Whose organisational objectives or projects are of special concern to or are aimed at women.**

The "women's voluntary and community sector" can also include women working for generic voluntary and community organisations who are involved in gender equality or women's projects either internally or outside of their own organisations. Like any population, the women's voluntary and community sector is not homogenous, yet the common goal shared by all is to improve the status of women.

While no conclusive database on women's voluntary and community organisations exists, 'guesstimates' place the number at over 10,000 groups throughout the United Kingdom. These groups provide a variety of services to a diverse range of women, which is often reflected in the staff makeup of the organisation (paid and unpaid), its values, the services it provides and the ways in which these services are delivered.

Frequently, women's groups are part of other sub-sectors of the wider voluntary and community sector such as the Black and Minority Ethnic, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender, disability, older, youth, Refugee and faith sectors.

## WHAT DOES THE WOMEN'S VOLUNTARY AND COMMUNITY SECTOR DO?

Women have successfully organised on numerous issues such as the vote, abortion, domestic violence, employment and rape, which has led to significant changes in public policy and legislation.

Women's groups simultaneously work across multiple fields, which include violence against women, health, education, employment, the arts, political representation, sport, planning, leisure, homelessness, discrimination, the environment, rights, development, globalisation, drugs and alcohol, media and justice. For example, a domestic violence provider may provide support, advice and information to women experiencing mental health issues and homelessness, as well as domestic violence. They provide a plethora of services such as advocacy, counselling, advice and information, support, shelter, treatment, referrals, advocacy, training and skill development, care and practical assistance.

Most women's groups are social service providers (i.e. 1st tier organisations) and/or 2nd tier agencies such as infrastructure bodies and lobbying and campaigning organisations. As well as delivering services to individual women and groups, women's organisations participate in Government and wider voluntary and community sector consultations and forums.

## WHY IS THE WOMEN'S VOLUNTARY AND COMMUNITY SECTOR IMPORTANT?

The impact of the women's voluntary and community sector is wide reaching. It generates social, political and economic

benefits for the general public, Government and business. The women's sector is also an integral part of the wider voluntary and community sector. However, its contribution to society is often overlooked and it remains undervalued.

The women's voluntary and community sector addresses long term problems, often working with individual service users over an extended period. They raise awareness, are part of community events, enable support networks, build safer communities and improve health and wellbeing.

### Service Delivery

Women's groups are often established because a need is identified but mainstream services to meet this need are either inappropriate or non-existent. They therefore add considerable value to the Government's equalities agenda by reaching those who have fallen through the 'safety net' or who are otherwise inaccessible to Government agencies.

Because the experiences of men and women differ, a 'one size fits all' model of service delivery is often inappropriate. Women's groups develop services which are informed by feminism, a commitment to gender equality and decades of experience. The approachability of women's organisations and the need for them is evident by the millions of women contacting women's groups and using their services. Despite this, vital 'women only' services delivered by the specialist women's sector are often seriously undervalued and under resourced.

### Social Change

Women's organisations have proved to be powerful drivers of social change because they are able to publicise the needs, aspirations and experiences of their service users and promote a gendered analysis of social issues. The expertise that the women sector brings to policy consultations adds considerable value and helps Government to formulate more effective public policy.

### Economic Value

The women's voluntary and community sector delivers services such as childcare, education and training, which enable women to enter paid employment as well as supporting the local economy and employing women from a diverse range groups which have traditionally faced discrimination in the labour market - notably Black and Minority Ethnic women. Some organisations also provide childcare to enable women to use services.

The women's sector also unlocks public donations of money and time - volunteering and charitable giving are integral to the survival of women's organisations. The women's voluntary and community sector brings extra funds into London's economy such as European Social Fund money and public donations to provide services. The number of women assisted and the impacts women's groups have on women's lives and the community has never been fully researched in order to provide a full picture of the extent to which the women's voluntary and community sector assists individuals, communities and Government in addressing violence, education, health, employment, representation/ participation in public life, gender stereotyping etc.

## WHAT ARE THE PROBLEMS AFFECTING THE WOMEN'S VOLUNTARY AND COMMUNITY SECTOR?

At several events over the past 18 months, women's groups have voiced concern that, despite women constituting over

# Profile

## OF THE WOMEN'S VOLUNTARY AND COMMUNITY SECTOR

- The majority of organisations in the women's voluntary and community sector are led by women and are providing services predominantly, if not exclusively, to women.
- Women's groups provide services to the most marginalised people in society, and particularly those on low incomes.
- The greatest numbers of organisations work in the general, health, mental health, violence against women, development and education fields.
- Advice, information and training are popular services and a significant number of organisations provide counselling, campaigning and advocacy. The vast majority span across at least two types of services.
- Many women's groups are providing services to women in their local or neighbouring boroughs.
- Similarly, a considerable percentage of workers, especially volunteers, live in the borough where the organisation is situated.
- While most London women's groups are borough or pan-London wide, many national women's groups are also based in London.
- Most women's groups are small, with an income of £100,000 per annum or less.
- A significant proportion of women's groups have no full-time paid or any paid staff. Volunteers are crucial to women's organisations who are heavily reliant on their unpaid labour. In the wider UK voluntary and community sector, 22 million adults are involved in formal volunteering and 90 million hours of formal voluntary work takes place each week. The economic value of formal volunteering is estimated to be £40 billion per annum.
- The majority of people employed by the wider voluntary and community sector are women. The voluntary and community sector provides 4% of London's jobs .
- Women's groups are heavily reliant on the State (at local, regional and national levels) and charitable Trusts for funding. Government funding accounts for 29% of income (grants and contracts) and there has been a definite shift towards earned income and away from donated income.
- A least ten percent of organisations have no premises. A significant number of premises do not have disability access.
- Most women's groups do not have a website.
- Women's groups are supported by individual and group membership.
- The majority of women's groups have limited capacity (i.e. time, funding and human resources) to consistently engage in consultations.
- Very few women's groups are actively engaged in formal structures, such as Local Strategic Partnerships, to influence and advise Government.

For statistics and fact sheets on the women's voluntary and community sector, visit [www.wrc.org.uk](http://www.wrc.org.uk)

half of London's population, 'gender has fallen off the Government's agenda'. It is given insufficient priority in both funding and policy.

Under-resourcing continues to be the primary issue facing the women's voluntary and community sector – particularly the lack of stable, long-term core cost, organisational development and project funding. Subsequently, long term project and strategic planning, developing the sector through partnership and engaging in consultation – all of which are necessary to building a sustainable women's voluntary and community sector – are not undertaken.

Heavy reliance on Government contracts and grants, the three year funding cycles and changes in funding priorities and funding policy has left women's groups in extremely vulnerable positions, especially since few other options for diversifying funding are available (and many organisations have closed in recent years). Developments in funding policy and priorities have included competitive bidding, the removal of ring-fenced/targeted funding for women's groups, and the emphasis on 'innovation'. Additionally, having to complete different monitoring and evaluation requirements for each funder diverts resources away from delivering on core aims.

Recruiting and retaining paid staff is also difficult, usually due to low salaries relative to the specialist skills required of the position. Training volunteers is resource intensive.

Most women's groups do not have a website which limits their ability to publicise their services to other voluntary and community organisations as well as potential service users, employees and funders. It affects their ability to participate in Government moves towards ICT delivery of services and information.

Office space in London consumes a major proportion of an organisation's funding. A significant number of premises do not comply with the Disability Discrimination Act due to lack of funding to finance building costs. Many are also cramped and/or in need of repair. An organisation's premises can impact on staff recruitment if it is inaccessible or provides a poor environment.

## WHAT DOES THE LONDON WOMEN'S VOLUNTARY AND COMMUNITY SECTOR NEED?

### Funding

Despite the enormous contribution that the women's voluntary and community sector has made to gender

equality, this has not been matched by Government commitment to secure a stable funding base for women's groups. Women's groups need long term and ring fenced/targeted funding for projects, core costs, premises, organisational development, recruitment, sector development, consultation and participation in local governance. Collaboration amongst funders to develop generic funding applications and monitoring and evaluation standards, and to ensure pots of funds are strategically aligned, would also benefit women's groups.

### Research

Substantial investment into research is urgently required (including a directory of women's organisations in London) to develop a comprehensive picture of the status, nature and scope of the women's voluntary and community sector, of which little is known. Research undertaken on the wider voluntary and community sector and data collected by funders must be disaggregated in order to identify trends as well as areas of need and good practice.

### Consultation and Formal Structures

Many women's organisations, especially smaller groups, simply do not have the time, resources or capacity to attend consultations and other forums and therefore chances to influence public policy or planning in both local boroughs and regionally, pass. Given the high volume of consultations and other meetings, attending these events places further stress on already pressurised resources. For Government and the wider voluntary and community sector, valuable opportunities are missed to gather information from organisations about how policies and strategies are affecting or will affect women. It is now widely acknowledged that attempts to regenerate and economically develop areas often fail because they do not involve and/or benefit local communities sufficiently. In order to engage meaningfully in consultation, women's groups must be funded to do so. Agencies undertaking consultation would also benefit from using models of good practice such as outreach. Reporting back on consultation responses is also well received by the women's voluntary and community sector.

### Infrastructure Support

Infrastructure support, coupled with funding, allows groups to develop the skills to sustain their organisations. Infrastructure bodies provide training and support in governance, management, fundraising, planning, ICT, employment, policy, research and service delivery. It is vital that infrastructure bodies are adequately resourced to provide this support effectively.

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The Women's Resource Centre is a membership based co-ordinating and support agency for voluntary and community organisations that work to improve the status of women.

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