Women Take Part Briefing Paper

Women Take Part is a piece of work funded by the Government Equalities Office, looking at the participation of women, in particular under-represented women, in governance and decision making, in both community and public life

Women Take Part has been collecting information about two sides of the story:

- **'what works'** in terms of approaches, initiatives and learning models that encourage different groups of women to become more involved, **and**
- **'what needs to happen'** so that structures, policies and organisations work in ways that encourage the recruitment and support of more women,

This paper is one of a set, the others include: **Context and Rationale[1]; Methodology; Women's Journeys; Organisations and Structures; Closing the Gap: a framework for action; Organisation Case Studies**

This 'broad brush' research attempts to map, categorise and analyse 'what works' in a fragmented field covering the voluntary and community sectors, higher education and the public sector. A snowball sampling[2] approach was used to send out invitations to participate in the research and 27 organisations and networks were identified which offer learning, support and development to women around becoming more active critical citizens. 18 actually took part in the research and these are mostly located within the community, voluntary and third sectors.

The research identified **four general approaches** to working with women to develop skills, knowledge and confidence around becoming, and remaining, active critical citizens[3] in the public domain. The focus was on direct learning and support and so most of the qualitative research is about the first two of these categories.

Courses
Structured learning programmes linked to mentoring and support during and afterwards.

Holistic approaches
Women's organisations offer individual and group support and mentoring around specific issues. They support women in taking control of their lives and in starting to see a role for themselves in the public domain.

Networks
Local and national networks with a focus on women's support and development. A source of research, information, support and shared strategies.

Partnership approaches
Alliances of organisations working towards agreed aims led by either the voluntary and community sectors, or the statutory sectors, around 'engagement'

Seven organisations that deliver such publicly advertised women's courses were identified and six were interviewed. Four Holistic approaches were identified and all were interviewed. They often support women in crisis, such as Domestic Abuse.

The notions of *created space* and *invited space[4]* are used to draw attention to the origin and motivation of the initiatives.

- **'Created spaces'** refers to action and thinking within civil society; women's groups, voluntary and community organisations that are often motivated by a passion for women's equality and social justice.
- **'Invited spaces'** refers to action and thinking within government departments and structures; local government, Partnerships, national departments and Quangos, that are motivated by policies designed to increase democratic activity and citizen engagement. In this research, invited space initiatives were motivated by women in key positions who are also passionate about women's equality and social justice.

Learning, Support & Development

The majority of provision is located in created spaces which emphasises the importance of the women's Voluntary and Community Sectors as a mainspring for women's civic and civil engagement and involvement. If we accept the premise that we need to increase the **pool of women** available for civic and civil engagement and involvement; then due thought and consideration has to be given to how this is done and who does it. Recent research by the Women's Resource Centre[5] highlights the ongoing need for women only services and spaces, particularly in the light of increasing pressure on 'women-only' services to justify their existence through Single Group Funding and the questionable impact of the Gender Equality Duty.

Key characteristics of learning, support and development initiatives

- Women only courses are viewed as different from mixed gender courses: the group dynamics are different with many women saying that it is important to encourage safe spaces for experiential and personal learning. Women speak of bonding, disclosing personal histories and sharing and finding commonalities.
- End goals of initiatives are not rigidly specified as women have to be able to choose their own levels and fields of involvement. Outcomes are geared towards more women feeling confident about being in positions where they can make a difference. There is little enthusiasm about numbers for numbers sake
- Funding for initiatives is often precarious, short term and fragmented and is the result of particular women's organisations chasing specific funding, or women in key positions in other organisations making it a priority
- Initiatives try to work from 'where women are at' in terms of interests, ability, confidence, family situation, aspirations, work situation and culture

- Initiatives recognise that women have to move out of their 'comfort zone' in order to learn new skills and develop confidence
- Equalities planning takes a central role in practicalities and delivery: making sure that women can physically access the activities, (whether they be 'real' or virtual), as well as being able to take part once they are there.
- Appropriate accreditation is often an issue; time taken to navigate bureaucracy and the time taken to do administration, finding relevant units, the time for women to do assignments, literacy levels, and funding have all been stated as difficulties
- Encouragement and support is crucial and is built into the provision, both during and after the immediate activity, in the form of networking, mentoring or one to one support
- Opportunities to meet and have shared dialogue with decision and policy makers where women feel able to speak on their own terms and articulate their points

Does difference make a difference?

What are the benefits to *organising on the basis of difference*, and what are benefits to *organising on the basis of similarity*? It seems that both have particular benefits, depending on the needs of women at the time and the desired outcomes.

When women's courses are mixed they create opportunities for women to create connections to women who are different to themselves and to understand the common issues and experiences we have as women and share strategies for change. There is the opportunity to share and understand more about how power operates in terms of gender, race, class, sexuality and other aspects of people's identity and experience.

"As a group of women we were able to share the richness of our lives irrespective of socio-economic status, faith, sexual orientation, age, ethnicity, disability, colour, creed, profession etc."

Differences between women are crucial when stereotypes and prejudice lead to discrimination and careful skilled facilitation is needed to create safe spaces for difficult conversations and discussions.

When courses are for **similar** women they create opportunities for women to share specific common experiences and gain support for themselves and lobby together for change.

…for Asian women there is very little support for them to be able to engage – they don't come forward so…..the essential ingredients are – language, understanding where they are coming from and the impact of this – recognising different levels of learning – making connections and validating women's experiences – who they are….trying to understand each other…..and where we are at…… enabling Asian women to gain the skills, experiences and confidence to create an 'Asian women's voice' within the local area whenever they can'

Specific groups of women experience discrimination and subsequently demand and carve out safe spaces for support and sharing strategies for survival and development. These are important sources of support, learning and development.

"We discovered that all the women on the course had suffered the same sort of inequalities and barriers"

"……some Asian women are surprised when they realise that 'liberated' white women go through the same experiences of domestic violence"

The Learning, Support and Development Research Report[6] contains brief details of and contact information for initiatives that are included in the research.

Journeys and learning; the links

Women are generally active in the public domain when they are active in their own lives. Women are active in different spheres at different times:

Exploring the tensions and contradictions involved in 'citizenship and gender' lead us to recognise inequalities in the structures, processes and cultures of governance. If we want to change these then we have to challenge ourselves and others to become active critical citizens.
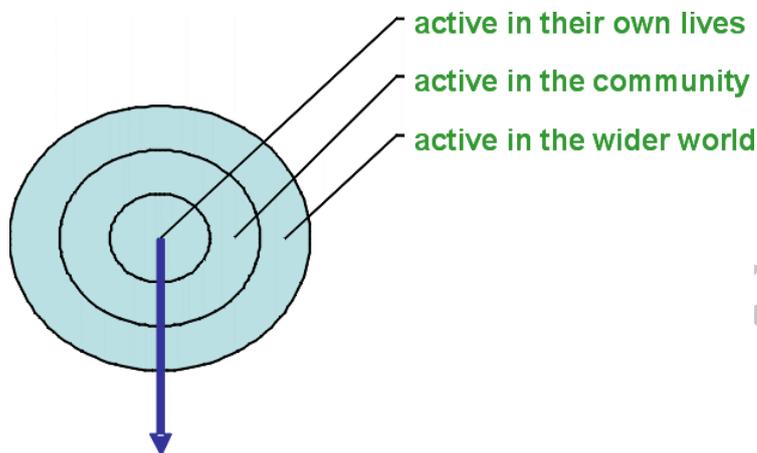
"To solve social problems and improve society, citizens must question, debate and change established systems and structures that reproduce patterns of injustice over time"[7]

active in their own lives

active in the community

active in the wider world

To provide the relevant learning experiences to achieve such active critical women citizens, delivery methods should be rooted in learner centred, participative and informal educational approaches within an explicit vision in relation to gender, race, equality and social justice.
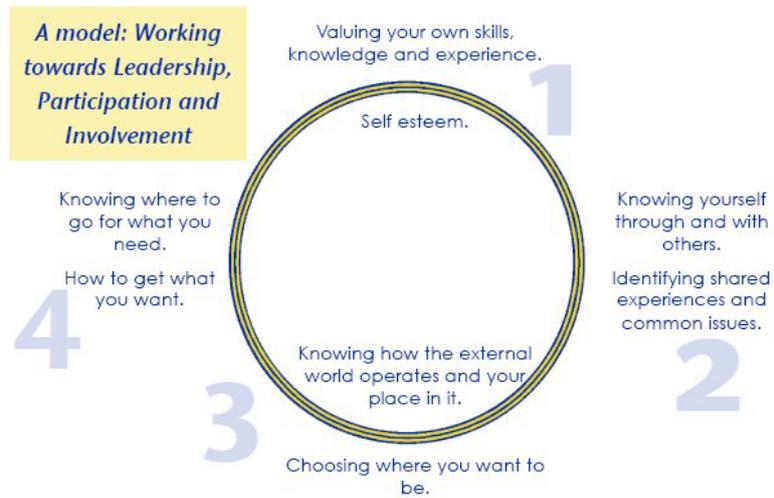
The course has enabled me to develop my own voice, challenge gender stereotypes, to focus on my strengths rather than my weaknesses, whilst accessing opportunities to assist me to mature and grow.

The continued support of the course facilitators and other women has enabled me to begin working on other initiatives that I hope will inspire, encourage, and move women to be more active in their own lives, and within their communities.

Learning, Support & Development

The **'Four Essential Ingredients'**[8] model used in the Take Part Learning Framework[9] was tested to see how useful it is in different contexts with different women. It seems to have relevance for learning, development and support around 'under-represented' women being active in both community and public life. In order to provide opportunities for women to start to recognise their potential for leadership and participation, *the Four Essential Ingredients suggest specific learning outcomes, which combine to create the conditions for women to be confident and active in the public domain.*

1. *Value your own skills*

- The focus is on work with individuals, whether in terms of confidence building, validating life experiences or practical skills development
- Presentation skills, public speaking, chairing meetings, budgeting, planning, dealing with difficult situations, being more assertive
- These can be the building blocks towards increased self esteem and an acceptance of one's own value and experiences

A model: Working towards Leadership, Participation and Involvement

Valuing your own skills, knowledge and experience. Self esteem.

Knowing yourself through and with others. Identifying shared experiences and common issues.

Knowing how the external world operates and your place in it.

Choosing where you want to be.

Knowing where to go for what you need. How to get what you want.

2. *Know yourself through and with others*

Provides the opportunity to make sense of the factors that shape your life - for example, education, religion, family, motherhood, sexuality, class, race, economic dependence
- While we have many experiences in common we are all products of our particular and diverse cultures, backgrounds and traditions
- If we can learn how to value ourselves and communicate with others in a genuine way we are in a better position to develop a network of support, deal with inevitable conflicts and work together to make positive changes.

I believe that my life experiences have acted as the trigger for me to strive to create a greater awareness of issues that impact upon women's lives, in the knowledge that women can affect change if they can develop a deeper insight into their own experiences, and that of others ... only then can you begin the process of change on a personal level, before you can begin to work on the process of change on a much wider scale.

3. *Know how the external world operates and choosing where you want to be*

- To make changes and get our voices heard women need to know how the system operates: how decision-making structures are set up, how these structures work, who is involved, how accountable they are, who holds power in any given situation
- This means knowing about the local, national and international structures that impact upon our lives
- If we are clear about our place within the system, as a voter, a constituent, a consumer, a citizen, we start to have a clearer understanding about our rights, and our responsibilities
- Once we have this knowledge we can make choices about where we want to be and the roles we want to play - for example, an elected member, a school governor, an MP, a magistrate, on a Citizen's Panel.

4. *Know where to go to get what you want*

In order to make changes women have to make their voices heard, ask people for information and know how to get what they want from individuals and organisations

This can involve negotiating, campaigning, lobbying – or simply being more assertive!

Learning, Support & Development

The course sessions were delivered in a non threatening way, which made me feel safe and not judged as a group member, which was made up of a diverse group of women. This in itself broke down our feelings of isolation as we were mutually supportive of each other, our experiences were validated, and our overriding desire to take collective action inspired us to stride forth. I keep in contact with a number of the women from the course on a regular basis with whom I have developed friendships…

Approaches for delivering learning, support and development need to be geared to the aspirations and situations of the women in question. Although it would be wrong to prescribe particular approaches for specific stages, it would seem that the Holistic approach (women's organisations offer support and mentoring around specific issues for women to take control of their lives and start to see a role for themselves in the public domain) is very appropriate for women at levels 0 and 1.

Journey stages		Approaches for delivering learning, support and development
Level 3	Staying there	
Level 2	Being there	Networks Partnership approaches
		Courses
Level 1	Getting there	
Level 0	Not there	Holistic approaches

Notes

[1] Document in progress: will be available at www.changesuk.net

[2] A networking approach to identifying potential research participants

[3] For definition see Context and Rationale Briefing paper: will be available at www.changesuk.net

[4] A Cornwall (2002) Making spaces, changing places: situating participation in development. IDS working paper 170

[5] Why Women Only? The value and benefits of by women, for women services. Women's Resource Centre, October 2007

[6] Will be available at www.changesuk.net

[7] Westheimer, J. and Kahne, J. (2004) What kind of citizen? The politics of educating for democracy, *American Educational Research Journal*, Vol. 41, No. 2, pp. 237–269

[8] *See 'Women, Leadership, Participation and Involvement Report' at www.bctrust.org.uk*

[9] www.takepart.org