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Putting equality at the heart of government

Closing the Gap
Executive summary:
Women Take Part



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Closing the Gap

Executive summary:

The Women Take Part (WTP) research was funded by the Government Equalities Office and Department for Communities and Local Government (2007 – 2008) to examine the participation of women, in particular under-represented women, in governance and decision making, in both community and public life. **Women Take Part** collected 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. The research included a literature review, focus groups with women, and interviews with civic, civil and voluntary sector organisations.

The forthcoming Sex and Power publication¹ produced by the Equality and Human Rights Commission suggests that it will take up to 200 years to ensure the equal representation of women in the British parliament, 27 years to achieve equality in civil service top management, and 55 years to achieve an equal number of senior women in the judiciary. Whilst these are shocking statistics, it is clear that there just aren't enough women in most areas of public life and for certain groups of women, including Black, Asian and minority ethnic women, this situation is even worse. There is clearly a power gap in our institutions and workplaces. Currently less than 20% of MPs are female. There are only two ethnic minority women MPs and there has never been an Asian woman MP. Ethnic minority women make up less than one percent of the House of Lords. Only 29.3% of Local Authority Councillors in England are women and less than 1% of all councillors are Black, Asian and minority ethnic women.²

The report highlights the ‘zapper’ effect where women felt excluded, and frustrated by the way business is conducted. So, as well as encouraging more and different women to become more constructive, critical, cooperative, confident and challenging in the public domain, there have to be changes in how organisations and structures work. If this doesn't happen, even though the pool of women might increase and expand, women will still experience the ‘zapper effect’.

Women Take Part builds upon successful work done by some of the Take Part Network, (as part of the Home Office funded ‘Active Learning for Active Citizenship’ programme³), engaging with and supporting women from all walks of life to ‘get more involved’.

1 Sex and Power 2008, Equality and Human Rights Commission

2 Census of Local Authority Councillors 2006

3 ALAC Evaluation report. Mayo and Rooke 2006. Home Office available at www.takepart.org

The report provides a summary of the research findings and guidance on models and approaches which can be used to encourage, equip and support women. It is a resource for Government and other agencies, from which they can extract information and ideas to inform delivery of relevant performance targets. The report⁴ draws upon contemporary research and knowledge⁵ which discuss and explore the inequalities surrounding women's active participation in public life. It emphasises the need to develop and grow the 'pool' of women available for civil participation and civic engagement.

The power gap needs to be closed, with true representation for all groups of women, including ethnic minority women, disabled women, working class women, lesbians, and women of all ages and faiths. Engaging more women into public life can enrich decision making, ensure that decision making boards reflect the communities they serve, and tap into the talents of women. A more representative local democracy can also make civic roles more attractive to those currently under-represented.

Recommendations

Recommendation one: build on this research

- Develop and pilot the WTP framework as a resource/toolkit for change for women and organisations
- Use the WTP framework to develop good practice case studies
- Promote and support the WTP Framework as a tool for change
- Investigate the relevance of the WTP framework for other under-represented groups

Recommendation two: bring together initiatives that offer relevant learning, support and development to agree a useful way forward

Recommendation three: address the issue of resources for learning, support and development for women's journeys

Recommendation four: broker networking between women's organisations and democratic structures and processes

Recommendation five: clarify and disseminate the legal position for organisations on promoting gender equality within civil and civic governance roles

Recommendation six: broker dialogue with public agencies and VCS organisations around gender, fairness and positive action

4 Closing the Gap Final Report: Women Take Part available from www.equalities.gov.uk and www.changesuk.net/Closing_the_gap.pdf


Other associated reports including: Women Take Part; research on organisations and structures report 30 Women Take Part; Learning Women Take Part: Learning, Support and Development Research report, Women Take Part: 'Action and Changes', Women Take Part: Research Event, Focus Group reports from the South West Foundation and Manchester Metropolitan University Gender and Participation Unit and the IMPACT! Evaluation Report, are all available from www.changesuk.net

5 Includes Councillors' Commission Report, Joseph Rowntree Foundation Report on Citizen Governance, Leadership Centre for Local Government, Where are the Women in LSPs, Urban Forum/Oxfam/Women's Resource Centre, Routes to Power: research on ethnic minority women and decision-making, Fawcett/Government Equalities Office

Women's journeys

The research findings are used to develop a **four step model of women's journeys to being active and critical citizens**. While we appreciate that women are all unique individuals, treading their own paths and taking different routes, there is some value in drawing out the common experiences that women face. By understanding these, we can see what needs to change for women to make progress, in terms of personal development and in terms of structures and processes that support or impede progress

The journey stages

Journey stages		
Step 3		Staying there
Step 2		Being there
Step 1		Getting there
Step 0		Not there

The stages are presented as steps in a progressive sequence. However, real life is generally more complex than this, with stops, starts, and movement backwards and forwards. Women will take different routes through the steps and we hope the model will be useful to them in making sense of their own journeys and in seeing the path they took or are taking. We are interested in what is required in order for women to move from step to step and stay 'at the table' and be 'critically engaged' – in whatever context they find themselves.

Women's experiences of both private and public domains provide the basis for the model. People start their journeys in different places, for different reasons, and with differences such as ethnicity, religion, disability, class, culture, income, and sexuality. These will have positive or negative impacts on progress. The Steps seek to encapsulate the experiences of 'EveryWoman/AnyWoman' and so we anticipate that individual women will recognise significant aspects of their own journeys within it. Stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination such as racism, homophobia and discrimination based upon disability, class, background, and culture will all affect women's journeys. ***The initial findings would seem to indicate that the steps are relevant for a wide variety of women***

Learning, support and development

The research identified **four general approaches** to working with women to develop skills, knowledge and confidence around becoming, and remaining, active critical citizens³ in the public domain.

Courses

Structured learning programme 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'.



The majority of provision is located in 'created spaces' which emphasise 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 Centre⁶ 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. This raises crucial issues about prioritising and funding the 'women's sector'.

Key characteristics of learning, support and development initiatives

- Women's organisations interviewed in the research viewed women only courses 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.
- The annuality of funding bids can often make good initiatives short term
- Organisations reported the pressure they feel to fit new priorities for funding purposes; the pressure to always have a new approach gets in the way of rolling out successful schemes and initiatives to new groups of women; the pressure to be innovative.

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

- 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

Delivery issues

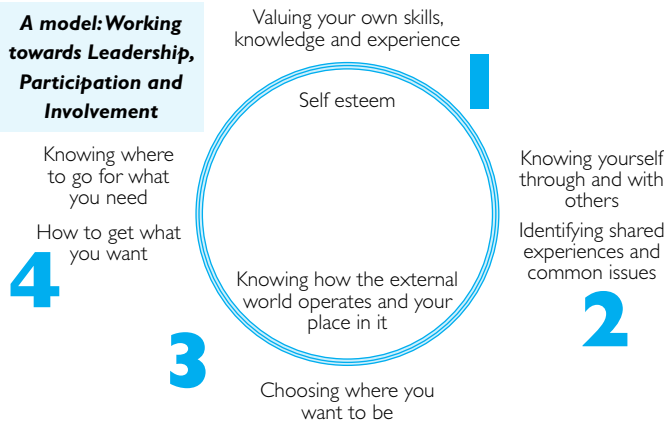
- The need for skilled facilitators that are able to manage complex group dynamics and who have conflict resolution skills
- The need for a cross section of trainers who relate to the experiences of the women they are working with
- The need for ‘training trainers’, both in terms of increasing the potential pool of trainers / facilitators, and providing more ‘representative’ trainers
- When the opportunity to learn and become familiar with IT skills are offered alongside these courses, women have found them very beneficial to source, understand and interpret information
- A critical aspect is the opportunity to consider and explore the issues around gender, power and personal and institutional barriers to women in the community and public domain; a safe space to explore gendered roles, cultural norms and family expectations

Does difference make a difference?

What are the benefits to **organising/learning on the basis of difference**, and what are benefits to **organising/learning 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 from themselves, understand more about those different experiences and how they impact on women’s lives, recognise and appreciate common issues and similarities and share strategies for change. There is the opportunity to share and understand about how power operates in terms of gender, race, class, sexuality and other aspects of people’s identity and experience. Careful, skilled facilitation is needed to create safe spaces for potentially difficult conversations and discussions.

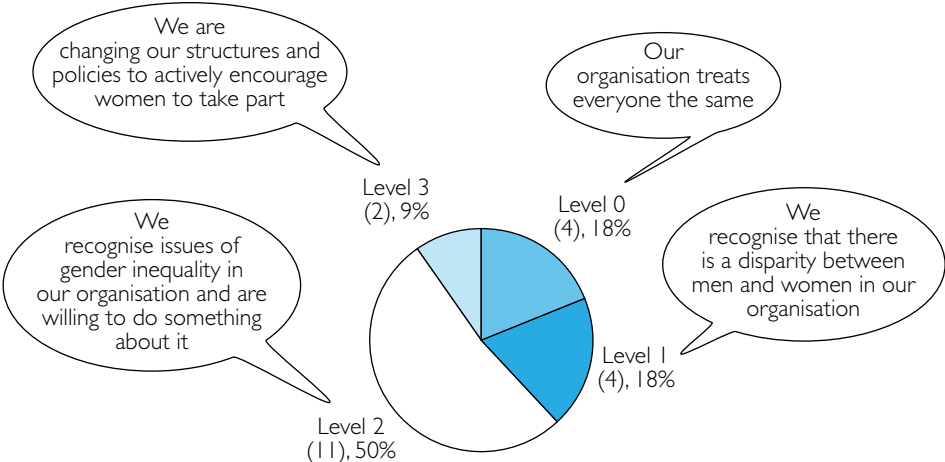
When courses are for **similar** women they create opportunities for women to share, understand and affirm their specific common experiences, develop more knowledge and confidence, gain support for themselves and lobby together for change. These are important sources of support, learning and development.



The **‘Four Essential Ingredients’** used in the Take Part Learning Framework was tested and seems to have relevance. The Four Essential Ingredients suggest specific learning outcomes for the content and approach of any learning, support and development programme, which combine to create the conditions for women to be confident and active in the public domain.

Organisation’s journeys

The research findings, contemporary research plus other commentary are used to develop and explain a typology which illustrates four positions on the journey towards a genuine willingness to change, take risks and do things differently to increase gender parity and equality.



A survey was sent to a cross section of 30 civic/civil/government and non-government/ local, regional and national organisations, eliciting 22 responses. Survey respondents were asked which of four statements best describe their organisation’s approach to gender equalities and women’s participation in their organisations.

The typology appears to have merit in relation to understanding and making sense of the varied approaches different organisations take to gender equality.

A significant finding refers to levels of knowledge around positive action in volunteering and Board member recruitment. A common theme from interviews is that organisations are unable to target specific groups of people as this is perceived to be counter to equalities legislation. This often leads to the situation where organisations treat everybody the same in a 'gender neutral' way. This could be seen as an 'even handed' approach which on the surface seems fair and responsible. However, such an approach often leads to reinforcement of current levels and patterns of involvement and engagement. Recent evidence highlights the need for organisations and structures to change how they do things if they want different types of people to become involved.

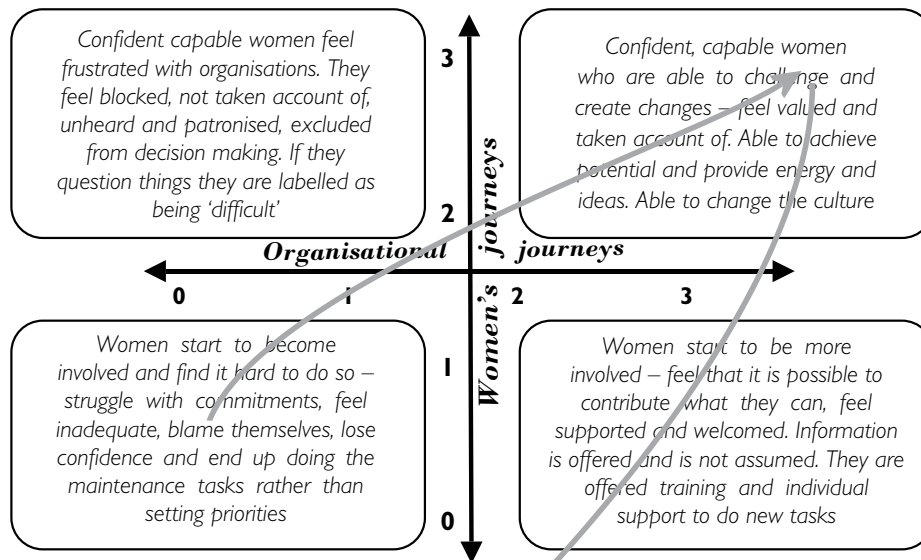
Taking part in the research has led to some of the respondents starting to re-think their approach to gender equalities; this is most prevalent in those organisations that positioned themselves at level 0 or level 1. ***Interestingly, there has been no mention of the Gender Equality Duty in any of the organisational interviews.*** Clearly there needs to be more research into the impact of this policy on public agencies.

Women Take Part Framework: making sense of women's experiences of the public domain

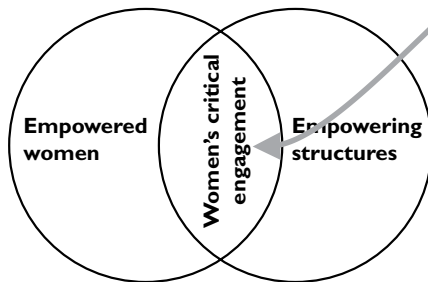
The two journeys can be brought together to form a framework which illustrates the relationship between women's development and organisational change. It provides a simple visible way to understand and articulate women's experiences of the public domain and makes it very clear that BOTH sides of the story are crucial if there is to be genuine change. Each level has a series of characteristics which emerged through the course of the research.

- The vertical axis represents women's journeys from step 0 to step 3
- The horizontal axis represents organisational journeys from step 0 to step 3
- Each quadrant shows the relationship between these and illustrates how women's experiences of engagement in the public domain are directly linked to the culture and practices of structures and organisations
- The quadrants help to understand why women decide that participation is a waste of time, when it's all too time consuming for too little benefit

The research seems to indicate that ***women's experience of public life is generally contained within the top and bottom left hand quadrants – that is, within structures and organisations that do not actively encourage or support women's involvement***



To summarise, increasing the number of 'empowered' women and 'empowering' organisations and structures is more likely lead to an increase in women's critical engagement in the public domain.



It is not enough to 'capacity build' women or to see women as deficient in some wayif only they were more confident, knowledgeable, skilled.... Ely and Myerson state that we need to go further than the traditional approaches of 'fix the women; create equal opportunity; and celebrate the feminine', acknowledge that 'gender' is a central organising feature of social life and that we can 'take risks, learn new ways, experiment and....invent a different kind of organisation'.

Diagram reproduced with the permission of 'changes'

Moving on up: the Women Take Part Framework as a tool for change

If the aim is to increase and sustain the numbers of under-represented women in public life, then the direction of movement within the Framework has to be towards to the top right quadrant of the framework. In order for this to occur action needs to be taken to encourage both 'under-represented' women and structures/organisations to develop further.

Using the Frameworkfor women

- As a prompt for discussion and debate; for women to share experiences of the public domain
- To share strategies for personal change **and** organisational change
- To monitor and evaluate their own journeys
- To monitor and evaluate the contexts/organisations within which they operate
- To identify external factors which affect their own journeys
- To develop mentoring strategies
- To identify what is needed in order continue on their journeys

- To help keep direction and focus; a checklist of progress
- To plan work with women around journeys

Using the Frameworkfor agencies and organisations

- As a prompt for discussion and debate within the organisation
- To monitor and evaluate the readiness of the organisation
- To identify good and poor equalities practice in the organisation
- To identify what the organisation needs in order continue its journey
- To consult on and plan future priorities and actions
- To help keep direction and focus; a checklist of progress

Alternative formats:

We will consider any requests for alternative formats that may be required.

Please send your request to:

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Email: enquiries@geo.gsi.gov.uk

The document can be accessed online at www.equalities.gov.uk