



*"Here, I don't have to put up with violence, I can live independently. The staff here are really helpful. I have been able to take a step back and have the time to think about me and make decisions about my own life. There's no stopping me anymore."*



# why women only?

The value and benefit of  
by women, for women  
services

*"It is empowering just to be in contact with other lesbians, you don't feel like an outsider. It's a normalising thing - you have that similarity as soon as you walk in the door. The group is so supportive and non-threatening, we always welcome new faces."*



*"Women need to be able to take control of their lives and it's easier to do that and in a more empowering way, in our experience, by providing safe, separate services for women and allowing women the space to develop for themselves."*

*"Many women who access our services have experienced physical and sexual abuse by men and can only discuss these deeply personal issues and receive empathy from another woman."*



*"I'm providing such a good role model for my daughter. I've got absolutely no doubt that I will get a really good job. I'm absolutely 100% certain that I'm not going to be on a low income in four or five years' time."*





# why women-only?

The value and benefits of by women, for women services

Published by the Women's Resource Centre 2007

Women's Resource Centre  
Ground Floor East  
33-41 Dallington Street  
London EC1V 0BB  
Tel: 020 7324 3030  
Email: [info@wrc.org.uk](mailto:info@wrc.org.uk)  
Web: [www.wrc.org.uk](http://www.wrc.org.uk)

This report launches the second phase of the **why women?** campaign –  
[www.whywomen.org.uk](http://www.whywomen.org.uk)

This report is available in other formats. Contact the Women's Resource Centre on 020 7324 3030 or email [info@wrc.org.uk](mailto:info@wrc.org.uk)

## Acknowledgements

The Women's Resource Centre Policy Team is extremely grateful to everyone who helped us with this research.

We would like to thank:

All of the women's organisations that completed the on-line survey, participated in the in-depth interviews and organised focus groups, the service users who shared their invaluable experiences with us in the focus groups and the women who took part in the poll.

The multi-talented women at WRC for conducting interviews and facilitating focus groups, transcribing and proof-reading.

Our dedicated and hardworking volunteers, without whom much of our work would not happen: Margherita Musella (literature review); Rachael Ferguson (interviews and data analysis); Kate Spiegelhalter (focus groups, image sourcing and transcription); Sara Martini (interviews); Nahida Nusrat (interviews); Kelly Russell (interviews); Maxi Kuehnle (interviews); Christel Persson (design); and Yaqi Yang (transcription).

'why women-only' has been researched and written by Darlene Corry, Kiran Dhami, Isabel Hudson, Karen Moore and Tania Pouwhare.

Front cover images, from top left:

- A team of daredevil women raised more than £40,000 for the British Red Cross by beating the UK record for formation skydiving by an all-women group. Skydiving: © Willy Boeykins, 2007.
- A group of women in pink hats watch the Manchester Pride Parade 2005. © Paul Herrmann/reportdigital.co.uk.
- A group of Bangladeshi women teach a community group about growing vegetables at a city farm, Bradford, Yorkshire UK. © Paula Solloway/photofusion.org
- A woman fights back at her 'attacker' in women-only self-defence training at the London Centre for Personal Safety, an organisation featured in the research. © LCSP
- Members of a girls' football team practising at a Sheffield sports club. © David Bocking/reportdigital.co.uk
- Tea dance at the Avenues Centre, Queens Park, Paddington, run by Open Age, a voluntary and community organisation for the over-50s. © Philip Wolmuth/reportdigital.co.uk
- Women networking at WRC's 2005 International Women's Day celebration. © Olivia McGilchrist/Women's Resource Centre

Back cover images, from top:

- WRC staff celebrating after completing the Hydroactive Women's Challenge 2007 and raising funds for Mama Cash. © Allison Livingstone-Whitton/Women's Resource Centre.
- The why women? campaign to support women's organisations. © Bahareh Hosseini/Women's Resource Centre.
- Female NHS staff at a training conference, Bradford, Yorkshire UK. © Paula Solloway/photofusion.org.
- Women taking part in a Nia Fitness class. © Michal McEwen/www.nianow.com
- Actors from Three Bird Theatre, an all-female theatre group featured in the research. © Suzi Dorey/www.suzidorey.com

# Contents

<b>Executive summary</b> .....	5	Safety.....	60
<b>1 Introduction</b> .....	13	Sanctuary.....	61
The <b>why women?</b> campaign.....	13	Supportive and comfortable.....	62
Funding to the women's sector.....	14	Empowerment.....	64
Why women-only?.....	15	Women have a greater sense of voice.....	66
Structure of the report.....	16	Shared experiences.....	67
		Solidarity.....	68
<b>2 Methodology</b> .....	17	<b>9 How do women-only services benefit society?</b> .....	70
Survey of women-only services.....	17	Supporting women supports families.....	70
Interviews.....	18	Giving something back.....	71
Focus groups with services users.....	18	Economic impact.....	71
Poll.....	19	Challenging under-representation of women.....	72
<b>3 Profile of research participants</b> .....	20	Raising awareness.....	73
Survey respondents.....	20	Social change.....	73
Profile of interview and focus group participants.....	22	Community cohesion and integration.....	75
<b>4 Historical development of women-only services</b> .....	26	<b>10 What are the challenges facing women-only services?</b> .....	77
Historical context of the women's sector.....	26	The misconception that women's equality has been achieved.....	77
Women-only services and spaces.....	26	Lack of understanding about women-only services.....	80
Diverse women, many voices.....	29	Negative perceptions of women-only services.....	82
<b>5 Women-only services: current evidence</b> .....	30	Assumption that women-only services are no longer needed.....	83
Cost effectiveness.....	30	Funding to 'by women, for women' organisations.....	84
Violence against women.....	31	<b>11 Conclusions and recommendations</b> .....	88
Mental health.....	33	<b>Appendix A: Research participants</b> .....	93
Substance misuse.....	37	<b>Appendix B: Poll questions</b> .....	94
Homeless women.....	40	<b>Appendix C: Survey questions and theme definitions</b> .....	97
Young women.....	41	<b>Appendix D: Interview script</b> .....	100
Education.....	42	<b>Appendix E: Focus group discussion questions</b> .....	103
Training.....	43	<b>References</b> .....	104
Women-only services in the private sector.....	45	<b>Notes</b> .....	109
<b>6 Policy context</b> .....	46	<b>Glossary</b> .....	110
Funding to the third sector.....	46		
Gender Equality Duty.....	47		
Devolution of power to local government and communities.....	48		
<b>7 Poll results</b> .....	49		
<b>8 How do women-only services benefit women?</b> .....	55		
Women want women-only space.....	56		
Meeting women's needs.....	57		
Led 'by and for' specific communities of women.....	58		

## WHIST

Where would I go if I did not have you?  
I'll tell you now I don't have a clue.

Here is a place that gives you a glow  
To go and relax, meet people you know.

I know everyone is the same as me  
We find the staff are as great as can be.

So you see I'm so glad I found this place  
It gives me peace and lots of space.

The thing to remember above all else  
Is this place is a haven for the self.

Poem written about Women's Health in South Tyneside (WHIST), a 'by women, for women' organisation, by Dorothy, a member of the WHIST Writers Group. Taken from: Women's Health in South Tyneside (WHIST) Writers Group (2007) Dancing with Words. WHIST: South Shields.

# Executive summary

## Introduction

This report launches the second phase of the Women's Resource Centre's **why women?** campaign by exploring a question which women's organisations are increasingly being asked by funders and decision makers – "why are you women-only?"

Women-only services are constantly being asked to justify their existence, despite the fact that these services are needed and wanted by women, and have significant, positive impacts on service users.

This report further investigates the issues raised in the 'why women?' research of 2006 by exploring: the benefits and value of 'by women for women' services in both the third and private sectors; and the current challenges facing women's organisations delivering women-only services and spaces.

## Research methods

To enable us to obtain the views of service users, service providers and women from the general public, a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods were used including:

- Surveying 101 organisations in the third, public and private sectors about their women-only services;
- Conducting 20 in-depth interviews (19 with staff of women-only third and private sector services and one interview with a female MP);
- Facilitating seven focus groups with service users of women's organisations;
- Commissioning a poll with a random sample of 1,000 women throughout the UK about women-only services.

The research is primarily focussed on the women's voluntary and community sector in England. However, some private and public sector organisations that deliver women-only services participated in the study, enabling us to examine the use of women-only services across different contexts and further explore consumer choice in relation to goods, services and support.

In addition, a literature review was carried out in order to examine the use of women-only services in a range of contexts including violence against women, substance misuse, mental health, education, training, young women and the private sector.

## What has this research found?

### **Women-only services have far-reaching benefits**

The women-only organisations that participated in the research worked in a wide range of fields, from an all-female theatre company and a professional women's network, to women's refuges and Rape Crisis Centres.

In the interviews and focus groups with staff running women-only organisations and service users, a number of benefits of the services were identified to women as individuals, their wider communities and society as a whole.

Safety, both physical and emotional, is a key benefit of women-only services. As a result, women feel supported and comfortable. They become empowered and develop confidence, greater independence and higher self-esteem. They are less marginalised and isolated and feel more able to express themselves. Women using these services feel that their voices are heard and listened to. Through sharing their experiences with other women to make sense of the world together, they develop a sense of solidarity. Finally, participants described women-only services as a sanctuary:

"Coming here is a respite, I am grateful that we have got this space to come to. It was a relief when I joined." (Leicester Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Centre, focus group)

Women-only services have positive impacts on society. For example, they enable women to better support their families. Many go on to work or volunteer for the voluntary and community sector as a result of feeling more empowered, having greater skills, improved confidence and being more politicised.

The economic benefits of women-only services are likely to be significant, saving the state millions of pounds per year, such as through improving women's job opportunities or through preventing re-victimisation (e.g. domestic violence) or health problems arising or worsening.

### **Women want to have the choice of women-only services**

The research found that women from all walks of life prefer to use women-only services within a range of different contexts. Some women in the research stated they would not go to mixed services. Their needs would not be met at all if women-only services did not exist.

Our random poll of 1,000 women from the public found that:

- 97% stated that a woman should have the choice of accessing a women-only support service if they had been the victim of a sexual assault.
- 56% of women would choose a women-only gym over a mixed gym, 28% of women would choose to go to a mixed gym (16% didn't know).
- Of the 560 women that would choose a women-only gym, they cited reasons such as feeling more comfortable, less self-conscious and less intimidated. Respondents stated that they didn't want men watching them, looking at their bodies or sexually harassing them.
- 90% of women polled believed it was important to have the right to report sexual or domestic violence to a woman (such as a woman Police officer); 87% thought it was



important to be able to see a female health professional about sexual or reproductive health matters; and 78% thought it was important to have the choice of a woman professional for counselling and personal support needs.

Women-only services are not exclusively delivered in the voluntary and community sector, although they certainly are more prominent in the sector because of women's organisations. In Italy a women-only beach has been established, as have women-only train carriages in Japan as a response to the sexual harassment of women. In the UK, some baths and leisure centres have instigated women-only sessions to encourage more women to exercise and use the facilities.

The rising number of for-profit women-only services in the private sector demonstrates that there is a demand for women-only services generally. In the free market, women are choosing to spend their money on women-only, rather than general goods and services. This includes women-only gyms, health and beauty spas, holidays, insurance and mini-cabs. Parents are still prepared to pay to send their girl children to single-sex private schools in the belief that it will better meet girls' needs, will improve their educational outcomes and increase their self-confidence.

**There is a particular need for minority women to run their own specific services**

Some groups of women experience greater marginalisation and isolation and have particular experiences as a result of being both female and dealing with the impacts of racism, xenophobia, homophobia, disabilism, class, poverty, health status etc. (often referred to as intersectional discrimination). Women-only services develop to meet need, so those services which are led by and for specific communities of women, such as Black and Minority Ethnic (BME), lesbian, bisexual, older and younger women, lone mothers, mental health survivors etc. are crucial.

These women-only services are often able to reach women who would not otherwise engage with services, either in public or third sectors (including general women's organisations). As with women-only services generally, women from minority groups expect that women from their own or similar backgrounds will have a better understanding of their experiences and issues and greater empathy than men or women who do not share their backgrounds.

Organisations led by and for minority women are necessary in addressing social exclusion and community cohesion. They enable integration through empowering and building the confidence of their service users, and by helping women who are often on the margins of communities to access opportunities that many other people take for granted.

"I've learnt more here in the last six months than I did in the last 18 years. If I was this clever then, imagine what I could have done! Now I can speak to anyone, I can take my baby girl out, travel and see London, speak to anyone... Nobody can touch me because I came here. I celebrated my daughter's birthday the other week, I couldn't have done that before." (Greenwich Asian Women's Project, focus group)

As well as providing physical, psychological and emotional safety and sanctuary, minority women-only services empower and politicise women. Women see and hear that their experiences of sexism and racism or homophobia etc. are not isolated. They find mutual support and self-determination.

Organisations which are led by and for minority women are essential in addressing prejudice and discrimination and furthering women's rights. Their existence strengthens the women's voluntary and community sector. For example, it is BME women's organisations that are primarily responsible for bringing the plight of women and girls who are subjected to forced marriage, female genital mutilation, inhumane immigration rules, 'honour' killings etc. to the attention of Government, the third sector and the public in general. As a result, many important legislative changes have been made. All women, therefore, benefit from these advances in rights and protection.

### **Women-only services are misunderstood and not valued**

As Patricia McFadden (2001), an African feminist scholar, has argued, women-only space is inherently political. Women-only services are a legacy of the Women's Movement and represent the need for women's rights to self-determination and 'voice'.

Our interviews with staff of women-only services and focus groups with service users found that the misconception that women's equality has been achieved is widespread. This mistaken belief is influencing Government policy, which participants commented is becoming increasingly gender neutral, and is affecting the sustainability of women's organisations.

There is a lack of understanding about women-only services, which coupled with the 'equality myth', is resulting in women-only services being increasingly pressured to justify why their services are women-only. As a result, some women's organisations reported that funders and decision makers are pressuring their organisations to deliver services to men and viewing women-only services as irrelevant and unnecessary.

### **A precious resource and source of expertise is at risk**

In 2002/03, only 1.2% of central Government funding to the voluntary and community sector in the UK went to women's organisations (Mocroft and Zimmeck, 2004), despite making up 7% of registered charities (Women's Resource Centre, 2006).

In 2006, WRC conducted a snapshot audit of 26 different central Government funding streams. The research found that, along with lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) organisations, the women's sector receives less funding than any other equalities groups in the funding stakes (Women's Resource Centre, 2007). The impact of the belief that women-only services are unnecessary and irrelevant is likely to be significantly influencing funding to the women's sector.

As to be expected, funding was the main challenge cited by interview participants:

"...we know of an organisation that provides women-only space to women with mental health and substance misuse issues and it lost its funds from the local authority. Now there is nothing available to them at all. At the end of the day, if women-only spaces were actually seen as important then the funding would be there!" (Women's Refuge Project, interview).

In our survey of 101 organisations, 70% of respondents felt that being a women-only organisation made it harder to access funding, while just 3% felt that it made it easier (27% reported no difference).

We were also concerned to find in the snapshot audit (Women's Resource Centre, 2006), that there was a significant difference in favour of generic organisations delivering projects to

women over women's organisations. This was the case in 15% (4) of the funds examined. Funding to women's organisations in the Victims Fund (Provision for Victims of Sexual Offending) decreased by 20% from 2004/05, yet funding to generic organisations to deliver sexual violence services to women increased by 6.6%. Women's organisations in this research expressed concern about the lack of understanding and expertise generic organisations have in delivering services for women.

### **Counting the cost**

For each of the different research methods used, there was confirmation that many women have a personal preference for women-only services and, given the choice, will choose single-sex services over those which are mixed.

There was evidence that many service users would not access support if it was not women-only. Therefore, many women in need of vital support services would not receive them. The possible consequences could include deterioration in health, missed employment and educational opportunities, ongoing violence etc.

There is certainly a bottom line to be considered. If women-only services continue to be undermined, and in worst case scenarios are forced to close, there will be significant costs to the state through increased use of public services as a result of worsening social, economic, welfare, health, employment, criminal justice and education problems that could be avoided through sustainably funding women's organisations and their women-only services.

## **Recommendations**

### **Women's organisations**

- Women's organisations must challenge any questioning of the need for, or relevance of, female-only services by using tools such as the Gender Equality Duty, which clearly states that the different needs of women and men must be considered by public bodies. There is also significant evidence that women-only services are the most appropriate delivery method in many circumstances and produce better outcomes for girls and women (see Chapter 5).
- Women's organisations should gather evidence from service users about the impact of the organisation's women-only services. Women's organisations may want to use the data to produce information about the economic benefits of women-only services.

### **Central, regional and local government**

- Explicitly recognise the women's sectors' historic and current roles in providing specialist support, advocacy, expertise and campaigning on gender equality.
- Recognise that gender neutral approaches are being implemented by public bodies, particularly at local level, and take proactive steps to address this, in order to meet their requirements under the Gender Duty.

### **Cross-central government departments**

- The Ministers for Women and the Women and Equality Unit, with the Minister and Office for the Third Sector to immediately lead on an interim national strategy for the funding of rape crisis organisations with the Ministry of Justice, Department of Health,

Department for Children, Schools and Families, Department for Communities and Local Government etc. to prevent further closures of rape crisis organisations.

### **Office of the Third Sector**

- The Minister for the Third Sector to publicly recognise the value of women-only services and act as a champion to ensure their survival.
- Ensure that third sector policies and funding across Government departments explicitly identify women's organisations as being a sector in need of targeted support and prioritisation (e.g. ChangeUp).
- Intervene and advocate on behalf of the women's sector in issues of funding which jeopardise the sustainability of the sector (e.g. Victims Fund, single group funding issue).
- Recognise that commissioning of services has posed particular challenges for women's organisations and implement strategies to prevent further undermining of the women's sector and closure of women's organisations.
- Use the Gender Equality Duty and other relevant third sector strategies to address the tendency of Government (particularly local government) to fund generic organisations over 'by women, for women' organisations to deliver services to women.
- Ensure that the Cabinet Office's Gender Equality Scheme is robust and explicitly identifies how the Cabinet Office will support the women's sector.
- Reject Annex D (proposals on single group funding) of the Commission on Cohesion and Integration's report 'Our Shared Future'.

### **Equality and Human Rights Commission**

- As it takes up the mantle of the Equal Opportunities Commission, the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) should act as a champion for women-only services by promoting their benefits as a way of tackling gender discrimination and promoting women's equality.
- Recognise that gender neutral approaches are being implemented by public bodies. In response to this, ensure a robust and accessible mechanism to deal with breaches of the Gender Equality Duty, particularly in regards to public bodies' decisions on funding women-only services.

### **Ministry of Justice**

- To recognise the gendered nature of violence and abuse and recommend the preservation of women-only services, as opposed to establishing mixed services.
- Lead on developing an integrated strategy on violence against women, including ensuring women-only provision for survivors of violence.

### **Department for Communities and Local Government**

- Reject Annex D (proposals on single group funding) of the Commission on Cohesion and Integration's report 'Our Shared Future'.

- Issue guidance to local authorities to promote funding for women-only services and funding for other marginalised, minority groups as an effective way of promoting integration and cohesion.
- Publicly recognise the value of women-only services, including those for BME and other minority women, and prevent local authorities from exerting pressure on women-only services to deliver services to men.
- Publicly recognise the value of women-only services, including those for BME and other minority women, and prevent local authorities from exerting pressure on women-only services to merge or be overtaken by generic service providers.
- Develop local targets on specialist, women-only sexual violence support services through Local Area Agreements.
- Commissioning criteria of domestic violence Supporting People providers to include 'added value' (e.g. campaigning) and women's sector sustainability.
- Issue guidance to local authorities on funding of Supporting People domestic violence services for BME women which must adequately reflect the often increased resources needed to support BME women experiencing violence.
- Implement a clear direction and mechanisms to ensure funding at local level for women-only refuge-based and community support delivered by specialist women's organisations.

### **Department of Health**

- Urgently review Section 64 Grants to women-only organisations and acknowledge that specialist women-only health organisations, including Rape Crisis Centres, are at the greatest risk of closure. Develop strategies to promote stable, sustainable funding for these services.
- Reintroduce the key recommendations of the 2002 'Women's Mental Health: Into the Mainstream' and 2003 'Mainstreaming Gender and Women's Mental Health: Implementation Guidance' as targets for local and regional public bodies.

### **Women and Equality Unit**

- The Ministers for Women to publicly recognise the value of women-only services and act as a champion to ensure their survival.
- The Ministers for Women should reject the current Discrimination Law Review Green Paper which threatens to undermine the Gender Equality Duty and develop, instead, proposals which will support and promote the Duty.
- Recognise that gender neutral approaches are being implemented by public bodies. Ministers for Women to establish mechanisms for women's organisations to report where this is happening and to personally follow up these incidents.
- Use the Gender Equality Duty and other relevant third sector strategies to address the tendency of Government (particularly local government) to fund generic organisations over specialist 'by women, for women' organisations to deliver services to women.

### **Home Office**

- Acknowledge the skills and expertise of women's specialist organisations when developing the National Domestic Violence Delivery Plan and further work to develop a national violence against women strategy. This must include specialist domestic violence women's organisations who should be engaged at the earliest stages.
- Implement the Corston Report as a matter of priority, particularly in regards to non-custodial sentences and the role of women's organisations.
- Monitor National Offender Management Service (NOMS) funding for women's services and to women's organisations.

### **Local and regional government**

- Provide the women's sector with the appropriate resources and support to develop its capacity to tender for commissioned services to mitigate the current 'uneven playing field' between specialist women's organisations and generic third sector organisations, which is undermining third sector diversity.
- Provide the specialist women's sexual violence sector with the appropriate resources and support to develop its capacity to tender for commissioned services to mitigate the current 'uneven playing field' between specialist women's organisations and generic third sector organisations, which is undermining third sector diversity.
- Recognise the extra costs of providing Supporting People domestic violence services for BME women and adequately reflect this in contract prices.
- Use the Gender Equality Duty and other relevant third sector strategies to address the tendency of local public bodies to fund generic organisations over specialist 'by women, for women' organisations to deliver services to women.
- Recognise that gender neutral approaches are being implemented by public bodies, particularly at local level, and take proactive steps to address this.
- Recognise that women-only services, particularly those services delivered by and for BME and other minority women, are an effective way of promoting integration and cohesion and illustrate this in funding to local organisations.
- Publicly recognise the value of women-only services, including those for BME and other minority women, and prevent public bodies from exerting pressure on women-only services to deliver services to men or to merge or be overtaken by generic service providers.
- Include 'added value' (e.g. campaigning) and women's sector sustainability in commissioning criteria for local and regional services.

# 1 Introduction

This 'why women-only?' report further investigates the issues raised in the 'why women?' report of 2006 and explores how women-only services 'fit' in the current voluntary and community sector landscape. We asked women's organisations and projects in the third, private and public sectors, their service users and women in the general public:

- Why do women-only services exist?
- Do today's women want and need women-only services?
- What are the benefits and value of 'by women, for women' services?
- Are women's organisations facing specific challenges because they are women-only?

## The **why women?** campaign

In March 2006, the Women's Resource Centre (WRC) launched a national campaign to raise awareness about the women's voluntary and community sector. Named **why women?**, to reflect the question that many women's organisations are being increasingly (and often repeatedly) asked, the campaign calls on Government to acknowledge the systematic disadvantage women face because of their gender and to publicly recognise the essential services and expertise the women's sector provides to address this inequality. To date, the campaign has 770 individual and 315 organisational supporters. One hundred MPs signed Emily Thornberry MP's 2006 Early Day Motion in support of the campaign and 64 letters from WRC and articles about the women's sector have appeared in third sector press and broadsheets.

The campaign was launched with the publication of a research report, based on interviews with 44 women's organisations, which described the numerous benefits of the vital, and often life saving, services provided by women's organisations and the challenges facing the sustainability of the women's third sector (Women's Resource Centre, 2006).

The research found that the primary reason women's organisations are successful (in changing women's lives, wider communities and society as a whole) is because their approaches are women-centred and based on values of empowerment, rights and self-determination. They tailor their services to the needs, aspirations and experiences of their service users and recognise that violence and discrimination against women exists within, and is enabled by, social, political and economic structures. As the direct legacy of second wave feminism and the Women's Movement of the 1970s and 1980s, the women's sector is able to draw upon a rich herstory of theoretical analysis, collective action and significant victories.

## Funding to the women's sector

There are over 30,000 women's organisations in the UK, providing a wide range of services that cater to women's (often complex and multiple) needs. Women's organisations work in many fields, including health, social care and criminal justice and provide support to some of the most marginalised and vulnerable women in the UK. They tackle difficult issues that many other third sector organisations are unable or unwilling to address such as rape convictions, childhood sexual abuse and incest, domestic violence, female genital mutilation (FGM) and so-called 'honour' killings.

Despite increasing evidence of the necessity for women's organisations, the women's sector is facing, en masse, a worsening funding crisis. In 2002/03, only 1.2% of central Government funding to the voluntary and community sector in the UK went to women's organisations (Mocroft and Zimmeck, 2004), despite making up 7% of registered charities (Women's Resource Centre, 2006a).

In 2006, WRC conducted a snapshot audit of central Government funding streams. The research found that, along with lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) organisations, the women's sector receives less funding than any other equalities groups (Women's Resource Centre, 2006b). Of the 26 funding streams examined:

- 34% (9) gave no grants to women organisations.
- There was a significant difference in favour of generic organisations delivering projects to women over women's organisations in 15% (4) of the funds examined. Funding to women's organisations in the Victims Fund (Provision for Victims of Sexual Offending) decreased by 20% from 2004/05, yet funding to generic organisations to deliver sexual violence services to women increased by 6.6%.
- Department of Health Section 64 grants appear to be failing women's health organisations despite the fact that at least 36% of all women's voluntary and community organisations are working on health related issues. There has been an overall decrease in funding for women's organisations, from 2.94% in 2003/04 to just 2.15% in 2006/07.
- Women's organisations fared best in the Victims Fund at 47% (although this has decreased by 20% since 2004/05) and the Ethnic Minorities Innovation Fund at 21%. However, the futures of these funds are unknown.
- Apart from the nine streams where no funding was given to the women's sector, women's organisations fared worst in large, well established funding streams:
  - Arts Council Regular Funding (0.78%)
  - Futurebuilders (1.2%)
  - Safeguarding Children Supporting Families Core Funding (2.1%)
  - Big Lottery Fund (2.2%)
  - Department of Health Section 64 Grants (2.2%)
  - Strengthening Families Grant (3.7%)



## Why women-only?

The WRC's 2006 'why women?' report identified that women-only services and spaces are a key feature of women's organisations and are distinct to the women's sector. This research seeks to further explore those issues

The 2006 report identified several benefits of women-only spaces, including:

- Women are more comfortable to express themselves and articulate their needs.
- Women are less constrained or intimidated when not exposed to the 'male gaze'.
- Women are able to 'take stock' before going out into mainstream, mixed spaces.
- Women-only leadership ensures women's needs are met.
- Women-only services deliver better outcomes than mixed spaces.

Despite the added value that a women-only ethos brings, and the introduction of the Gender Equality Duty in April 2007, women's organisations are increasingly expected to justify their gender specific services – services which have historically been recognised as both valid and necessary by Government and the public generally. In extreme cases, women's organisations are now reporting to WRC that they are being coerced or pressured into delivering services to men and their women-only status is impacting on their ability to access funds.

Added to this is a deep concern, shared by the women's sector across the country, that Government policy is becoming 'gender neutral' and, as a result, 'women' and women's organisations are rarely deemed a funding priority. Some organisations have reported that services for men are being driven up the political agenda at the expense of funding for women's services.

During May-September 2007, WRC used a number of methods to gather data on the women-only services delivered by women's organisations including a literature review, focus groups with service users, a survey of the women's sector, in-depth interviews with women's organisations and a UK-wide poll of 1,000 women.

This report launches the second phase of the **why women?** campaign, and, again, seeks to explore a question which women's organisations are being frequently asked by funders and decision makers – "why women-only?".

During the course of the research, WRC received many comments from service users about how important this study is and how the women-only services they attend have been a life-line. However, it is with great sadness that, at the time of publication of this report, WRC has received word from Threshold Women's Mental Health Initiative in Brighton that the organisation will close in November 2007 after 20 years of service. Threshold will close because they are unable to secure funds for vital their work with women, despite the plethora of evidence which supports the urgent need for women-only mental health services (see Chapter 5). The closure of Threshold, an organisation whose strapline proudly reads 'by women, for women', will have a significant impact on the women's sector and, of course, their service users.

## Structure of the report

Chapter 2 outlines the research methodology including the various research methods used, participant recruitment, data analysis and ethical considerations.

Chapter 3 profiles the women-only services that took part in this research.

Chapter 4 explores the historical development of women-only services.

Chapter 5 is an in-depth examination of the current evidence about women-only services across a range of different contexts.

Chapter 6 examines the current policy context which impacts on women-only services.

Chapter 7 outlines the findings from the UK-wide poll of 1,000 women on the need for, perceptions of, and access to, women-only services.

Chapter 8 describes the benefits for service users of women-only services, using data from the survey, interviews and the focus groups.

Chapter 9 outlines the impact women-only services have on wider society, using data from the interviews and the focus groups.

Chapter 10 illustrates the challenges facing women-only services, using data from the survey, the interviews and the focus groups.

Chapter 11 concludes this report with comments and recommendations.

These chapters are followed by a number of appendices, references, notes and a glossary.

# 2 Methodology

To enable us to obtain the views of service users, service providers and women from the general public, a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods were used including:

- Surveying 101 organisations in the third, public and private sectors about their women-only services.
- Conducting 20 in-depth interviews (19 with staff of women-only third and private sector services and one interview with a MP).
- Facilitating seven focus groups with service users of women's organisations.
- Commissioning a random poll with 1,000 women throughout the UK about women-only services.

The research is primarily focussed on the women's voluntary and community sector in England. However, some private and public sector organisations that deliver women-only services participated in the study, enabling us to examine the use of women-only services across different contexts and further explore consumer choice in relation to goods, services and support.

In addition a literature review was carried out in order to examine the use of women-only services in a range of contexts including violence against women, substance misuse, mental health, education, training, young women and the private sector.

## Survey of women-only services

A short survey of closed and open-ended questions about women-only services and spaces was publicised through WRC's extensive networks.

101 surveys were completed, including seven from private sector companies and four from public sector organisations. The majority of responses (88%) were received from the women's voluntary and community sector. Seventy per cent of surveys were completed on-line by organisations and 30% were completed by phone with WRC staff and volunteers.

The survey asked: why the organisation was women-only; how being 'by women, for women' affected the values and day-to-day work of the organisation; and the key challenges in delivering women-only services. Participants were also asked to share their impressions of both the Government's and general public's perceptions of women's organisations (see Appendix C).

Survey data was collated using web-based software (Survey Monkey). Content analysis was used to analyse the qualitative data (used in all methods) which is a process whereby items,

themes and discourses are systematically identified from the data and coded into categories or themes. This enabled comparisons to be made within and across the survey, interviews, focus groups and poll.

As an acknowledgement of time given by participants, organisations had the option of entering a prize draw.

Survey data is used anonymously in this report and responses are not attributed to individual organisations.

## Interviews

WRC selected interviewees to reflect the diversity of the women's third sector to ensure adequate representation of women's organisations led by different equalities groups, fields of work and geographical location. Interviewees worked in employment, sexual and domestic violence, leadership and professional development, the arts, welfare and rights advice, drug and alcohol misuse and a women-owned sex shop (see Appendix A for participating organisations). These organisations provided services to vulnerable women such as sex workers and African, Latin American women, learning disabled and young women. Half of all organisations interviewed were from outside London.

A total of 20 in-depth interviews were completed to explore the benefits and challenges of women-only services and support. Seventeen were with women's third sector organisations, two with women-owned private companies and one with Emily Thornberry MP (member of an informal network of Labour women's MPs). See Appendix D for the interview script.

With consent from the participant, interviews were digitally recorded. Interviewees were provided with verbal information about the research, including their right to withdraw information and/or request that comments were not included, and were able to request a copy of their interview transcript. The recordings were transcribed and content analysed by WRC.

Interviews are attributed to organisations unless otherwise stated.

## Focus groups with service users

Focus groups were publicised through WRC's extensive networks and organisations self-selected to organise and host focus groups with their service users (see Appendix E for focus group questions).

Organisations that arranged and hosted focus groups with their service users included a women's refuge for women from the Indian subcontinent, a further education college, a centre for lesbians, and gay and bisexual men and women, a self defence organisation, a project for women trafficked into prostitution, a centre offering support and services on a range of issues including leadership, empowerment and domestic violence and a women-owned sex shop. Two of the organisations were based outside of London.

Seven focus groups were conducted in total and ranged in size from seven to ten participants. The semi-structured focus groups were facilitated by a WRC staff member, and often co-facilitated with a staff member from the host organisation, and participants were asked about

their experiences of using women-only services (see Appendix E).

The host service that organised, and often co-facilitated, the focus group was provided with a £100 donation for their time. All focus group participants were given a £30 gift to acknowledge their time and expertise and reimburse any travel costs incurred.

With the written consent of participants, most of the focus groups were digitally recorded. Recordings were transcribed and content analysed by WRC.

Participants were given both verbal and written information about the research, including their rights to withdraw their contributions and/or request that comments are not recorded. Comments from focus groups have not been attributed to individuals but the name of the focus group host organisation is given.

### Poll

WRC commissioned ICD Research, a market research consultancy firm, to poll a random sample of 1,000 women in the UK. The aim of the poll was to gain a clearer picture of the current public perception of women-only services and spaces.

The poll explored what women in the general public think about women-only services, whether they believe women want and/or require a choice in services and access to and knowledge of women-only services.

The poll included both closed and open-ended questions (see Appendix B for poll questions). The closed questions were analysed by ICD Research. Responses to open-ended questions were content analysed by WRC.

# 3 Profile of research participants

Our research utilised a variety of methods to gather data from a wide-range of women-only organisations and projects across the UK. We collected information about organisations which helped us to better understand women-only services and the organisations which deliver them.

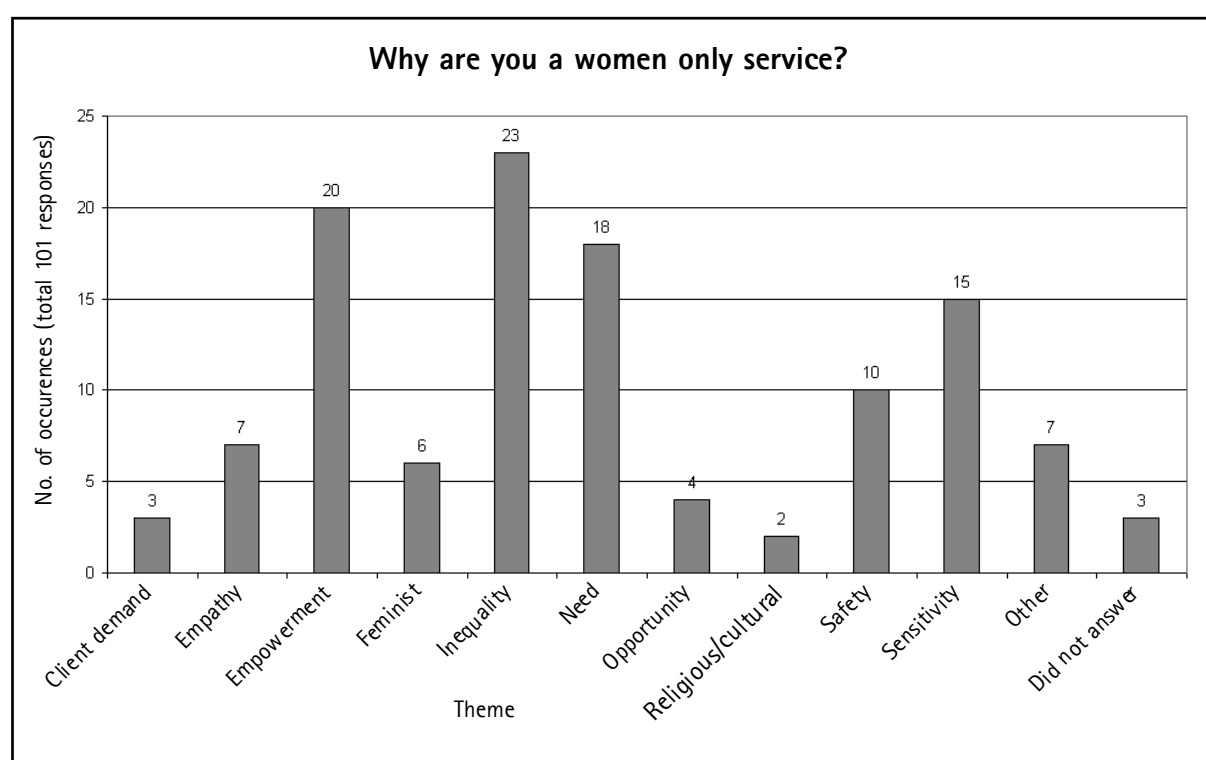
## Survey respondents

### Why are services women-only?

In the survey of 101 women-only organisations from the voluntary, public and private sectors, respondents were asked an open-ended question about why they are women-only. After responses were coded, the themes with the highest number of occurrences in relation to why services were women-only were:

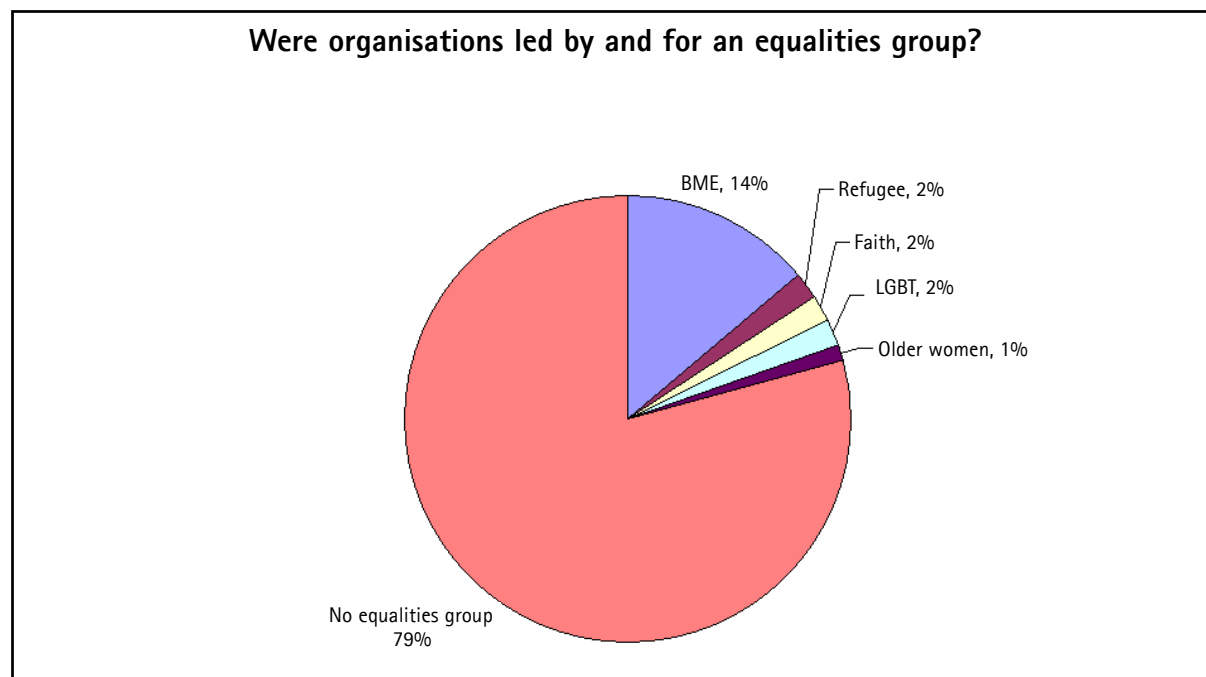
- Inequality (23 occurrences)
- Empowerment (20 occurrences)
- Need (18 occurrences)
- Sensitivity (15 occurrences)

(See Appendix C for more detailed explanation of themes)



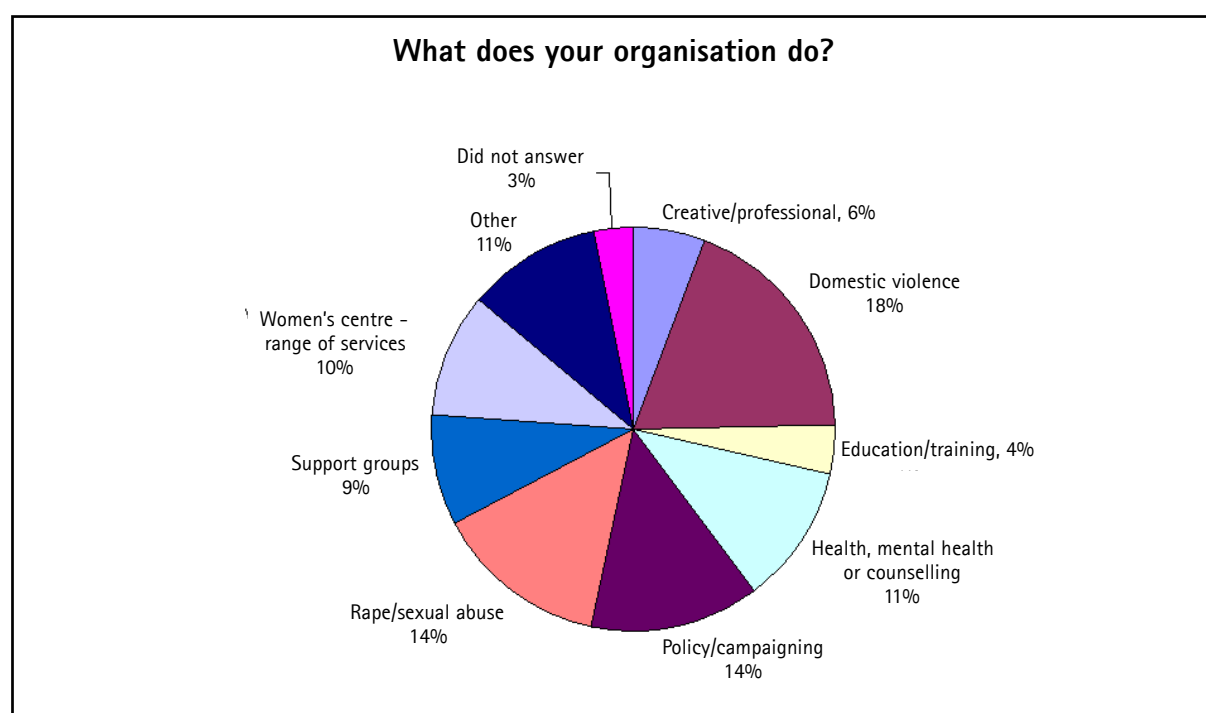
#### Who were the women-only services that responded to the survey?

Respondents worked with different equalities groups of women. Twenty-one per cent of survey respondents identified as an equalities group, which include services for disabled, lesbian and bisexual, refugee, older, younger and BME women and women from faith groups.



#### What do women-only services do?

Respondents engaged in a wide range of activities, such as counselling, support, advocacy, campaigning, refuge provision, court support, training, and much more. Some services were women's centres, providing support to women on a range of issues. Many provided specialist and tailored services on particular issues, such as rape and sexual violence, mental health, training, professional development etc.



## Profile of interview and focus group participants

### What size were the organisations that participated in the interviews?

Sixty-nine per cent of organisations that participated in our in-depth interviews had an annual income of £300,000 and less (12.5% of these were not funded at all). The majority had a small staff core and relied on volunteers to meet demand.

### What did the participating organisations look like?

The main themes that emerged from the research, which illustrate what women-only organisations look like today, were:

- Holistic and women-centred.
- Feminist.
- Involve women in the service.
- Informal, flexible and independent.
- Engaging with policy agendas.
- Challenge inequality and discrimination.
- Specialist services run by specific communities.

### Holistic and women-centred

One key feature that emerged from the research is that women's organisations provide holistic, women-centred services. A holistic approach entails assessing and providing for women's multiple needs. This has developed because of an understanding of the inter-related ways in which different aspects of a woman's situation can impact on her life.

For example, a woman experiencing domestic violence often needs more than a refuge. In order to leave an abusive relationship, she may need space for her children, specialist counselling, and advice about her financial, employment or housing situation. A woman who has been raped may need the Police, legal advice, housing, social services, mental health services, counselling and medical advice.

### Case study: Latin American Women's Rights Service (LAWRS)

Latin American Women's Rights Service (LAWRS), based in the London borough of Islington, supports 3,000 women annually, all of whom have a range of different needs depending on their individual circumstances. Consequently, they provide advice to women in a range of areas including housing, debt, welfare benefits, domestic violence advice and support and other areas, such as parenting, support for accessing mainstream services, English lessons, and, very importantly, counselling because many of their service users suffer from difficulties related to trauma (including domestic violence and abuse experienced in their countries of origin).



Many women's organisations operate as a 'one-stop shop' where a woman can access a range of services.

"I think the main way in which [women's organisations can differ from other groups] is that they offer holistic services. The services will be focused on the women's need and we would hope that we will make the services respond to her need rather than her having to fit into the services that we are providing. It is truly the notion of a one-stop-shop, because the support services, training and work are being brought into and built into this building." (women@thewell, interview)

Women-only services often empower women, which then enables them to take up opportunities, often within the same organisation:

"As a domestic violence victim I have moved on. I have used other services so I am not going to be stuck in that category anymore." (Women Acting In Today's Society, focus group)

Childcare is particularly important when thinking about the barriers to women accessing services and is built into many women-only and women-centred projects.

"The other thing that makes us particularly useful to many of our users is that we have a number of key services all in one place and that includes, for example, a crèche attached to all our advice services. So women can come to us, bring their young children and leave them in the crèche where they know they are going to be well looked after and safe while they talk to us. So if they need to express their feelings of fear, anxiety, sadness, despair, trauma, they can do so safely with the knowledge that the children are not overhearing and that the children are safe and well looked after. Many of our users tell us over and over again the importance of this, that our service has been thought through so that women who don't have a support network or cannot pay for a minder, can still access information, support, free counselling and therapy in their own language." (Latin American Women's Rights Service, interview)

#### **Feminist**

Most of the organisations that participated in our research identified as being feminist and many were set up decades ago as part of the Women's Movement. Being a feminist organisation meant (for them) that they were focused on the needs of women, and operated from a framework of empowerment. This included having an acute awareness of women's discrimination, and acknowledged the continuing power disparity between women and men.

Some of the services were concerned about publicly stating that they were feminist because of the negative connotations that the word now had within broader society, so they were afraid that either women might be put off by coming, or that their organisation would be attacked or criticised for identifying as feminist. Others discussed that there was confusion within the mainstream about what feminism means today, and many said that a mainstream perception that equality had been won impacts upon both the perception of both feminism and women-only services as outdated (see Chapter 10).

#### **Involve women in the service**

The research found that the input of services users is crucial to how and what services are developed and is linked to being an inclusive and empowering organisation. The findings showed that this often makes women-only organisations effective because they tailor their

services to the individual needs of women. It also provides a space in which women can feel actively involved in the running of the organisation:

"It provides a real model... for the young women coming to our service to be actively involved in the management and development of the organisation, to be part of decision making." (YWCA, interview)

#### **Informal, flexible and independent**

Many women-only services are small, grassroots organisations which often means they can respond quickly and effectively to the demands of their service-users. Being able to offer flexibility and informal advice and support means they are able to reach out to the most marginalised and disadvantaged women.

Organisations emphasised their independence as essential in meeting the concerns of women. This is especially important for women-only organisations because of the difficulties and worries women can have in relation to state involvement, such as the fears some women have about state intervention and any possible impacts this may have on her children's care.

#### **Engaging with policy agendas**

Despite capacity issues, many of the participants were engaged with policy agendas:

"There was a perception that women's organisations were a bit introvert, didn't engage properly, didn't build partnerships... that they just had no real sort of purpose, were not engaged with regional and national strategic agendas, and that they didn't make referrals to child protection was another criticism. In Brighton and Hove, all the women's organisations... have definitely shifted into being a lot more mainstream in that they have a very clear sense of what government funding priorities are and are delivering against that and being much more professional. It's been much easier to entrench and mainstream ourselves because we are delivering against national agendas." (Brighton Oasis Project, interview)

We found that women-only services are involved in a large range of predominantly local partnerships with other voluntary and community organisations, local government, Primary Care Trusts, Local Strategic Partnerships, as well as regional or national forums:

"I'm part of the local health forum and children and young people forum. I was a voluntary sector representative on 'Making Things Better', the strategic planning partnership for new health services in Leeds, and also the Leeds domestic violence strategic partnership, and the maternity services liaison committee." (Women's Health Matters, interview)

Such policy and partnership work was a crucial way for women-only services to engage local decision makers and input their expertise, even though, in their experience, they are not always listened to or taken seriously.

#### **Challenging inequality and discrimination**

The statistics to illustrate women's inequality are numerous (Women's Resource Centre, 2007b) and include the gender pay gap, the low rates of conviction in rape trials, the high incidence of rape and violence against women, occupational segregation, racism, homophobia, the effect of motherhood and caring responsibilities on women's careers and so on.

Women-only services are at the forefront of challenging the causes and consequences of women's inequality:

"[Latin American Women's Rights Service] was set up to address the lack of equal opportunities that Latin American women face in the UK, on many different levels – race, gender, class, immigration status, language and also lack of familiarity with the system here. All these are barriers [which put Latin American women] on an unequal footing in many different ways." (Latin American Women's Rights Service, interview)

"[We are women-led] because it's about addressing all those power relations – whether it's organisational or within individual relationships. It's about addressing male power and inequality – or abuse of male power – that's reflected across society, not just in terms of violent relationships but [also] politically and economically. We're challenging institutional discrimination." (Women's Aid Federation of England, interview)

#### **Specialist services run by specific communities of women**

There was a clear understanding by women-only service providers of the effectiveness of providing tailored services to specific communities of women across the equalities spectrum, including BME, disabled, lesbian, young and old women, women of minority faiths and poor women.

Women-only services are often led by and for specific communities of women. For example, Powerhouse is a women's organisation specifically for learning disabled women where 90% of the Management Committee are learning disabled women. As a result, the organisation is acutely aware of their service users' needs and provide a strong foundation for empowering service users through role modelling and mutual support.

Other research illustrates that women's BME organisations are vital, reaching women who are often less likely to access statutory services (Home Office, 2005). These organisations provide a safe and supportive space for women who may be uncomfortable accessing a mixed service, whose first language may not be English or have had negative experiences engaging with statutory agencies. Many women using specific women-only services feel that they don't have to explain or justify their experiences and feelings because the other women at the service and staff are from similar backgrounds:

"They don't need to explain, go into detail. They can just say 'it happened to me' and the women around them all understand without any explanation as they come from a similar background, even though they come from different parts of Africa. They have a shared culture and general history as well as shared experiences of arrival of this country – what they have been through to get here in the first place, the experiences they had at the point of immigration with the Home Office, with their husband and their children, working four or five jobs, all sorts of things. So really this is a sisterhood, this understanding. Sometimes this understanding does not even have to be spoken in detail." (Akina Mama Wa Afrika, interview)

# 4 Historical development of women-only services

The women's voluntary and community sector in the UK has its roots in second wave feminism and the subsequent Women's Movement of the 1970s and 1980s. Here, we provide an overview of that movement and its influence on the women-only services delivered today.

## Historical context of the women's sector

Women's mass organising, for political, economic and social purposes, spans three centuries. Women in the late 1800s onwards organised to demand a better and fairer deal and to assert that women must also have fundamental and inalienable rights. This was encapsulated in the suffragette movement, often referred to as 'first wave feminism', and women's struggles to win the right to vote. In 1918, women over the age of thirty were given the right to vote but it was ten years before this was extended to equal voting rights for women and men in Britain.

Modern feminism, or 'second wave' feminism, emerged in the politically and socially conscious sixties. Women were not only concerned about having the same rights as men, but were also questioning the fundamental structures of society which resulted in the systematic and systemic oppression of women. It was during the 1960s that abortion was finally legalised and contraception became available through Family Planning Clinics, significantly helped by the lobbying of women's organisations, and these victories heralded the beginning of a number of important advances for women.

The grassroots activism and consciousness raising activities of informal women's groups culminated in 1970 when the first National Women's Liberation Conference was held. This conference marked the beginning of an organised Women's Movement which was hugely influential in the 1970s.

The Women's Movement and women's organised action (such as strikes) would go on to influence policy and legislation on equal pay, domestic violence, rape, sex discrimination, contraception and much more. However, it is the women's voluntary and community sector which is the physical legacy of the Women's Movement.

## Women-only services and spaces

Feminist thought has had a significant influence on the development of the women's sector and women-only spaces. Whilst there are many different interpretations of feminism, and not all women's organisations would describe themselves as 'feminist', organisations across the women's sector are likely to agree there is still an ongoing need to address the unequal distribution of power between women and men. This provides women's organisations with opportunities to expose how women's access to political, social and economic power continues to be restricted. Furthermore, it emphasises how social practices and structures continue to reproduce and uphold power inequalities (Connell, 1987).

Patricia McFadden, an African feminist, articulated this in a paper on women-only space in which she argued that the concept of space is both a 'highly gendered and politicised social resource'. It is divided up by those in power who grant access to some and deny it to others (McFadden, 2001). By this she is referring to 'key institutions' (i.e. political, cultural and religious institutions), from which women today are still largely excluded.

Women-only space, she argues, is therefore vital in terms of women coming together to "formulate and express their own ideas as individual women". In women-only space, women are able to share their experiences, overcome feelings of isolation and develop a sense of solidarity. In this sense, women-only spaces are revolutionary.

One of the mechanisms of patriarchy is to deny women's experience, which was what made the consciousness raising activities of feminists so powerful. In these spaces women realised that their experiences were not unique to them, but rather were an intrinsic part of how women's subordination was maintained, for example through violence.

This is possibly why women-only space has been contested by certain groups of society who argue that it is separatist and discriminatory. However, women have pointed out that it is patriarchy which is divisive and discriminatory. By restricting women's opportunities to come together, patriarchy has prevented them from sharing experiences.

During the 1970s, but in the 1980s in particular, women's organisations were increasingly being set-up. It was also during this period that women's voices started to be incorporated into mainstream Government, such as through the establishment of the Greater London Council (GLC) Women's Committee and Women's Committees in some London boroughs, which went on to look at how housing, transport and social services policies were failing to address the needs of women in London. The GLC Women's Committee, created in 1982, was also an important ally, resource and advocate for the burgeoning women's sector and was responsible for funding a significant number of women's organisations. Between 1985/6, over 500 women's projects were funded with a budget of £11 million (Greater London Council Women's Committee, 1986).

The women-only spaces which were funded included full-time childcare provision, women's centres and leisure facilities. In WRC's 2006 'why women?' report, one woman recalled the GLC Women's Committee's commitment to women-only space:

"Back in the '70s and '80s there was the [GLC] Women's Committee and a major push for women-only spaces in every part of the country, in every borough, in every county – that is how a lot of women-only centres came into being at that time. They were supported, valued and understood as to why we existed." (Hillingdon's Women's Centre, cited in Women's Resource Centre, 2006a)

Across the country, women were establishing women-only spaces, based on the understanding that this was necessary for a number of reasons including political self-determination.

**Case study: Greenham Common peace camp**

The Women's Greenham Common peace camp (established in 1981) brought together over 30,000 women. The camp was originally set up to protest against the Government's decision to allow American cruise missiles to be based there.

In 1982, it became consciously and deliberately women-only with strong links to other women-only groups such as prostitutes' collectives and miners' wives groups. The rationale for the camp becoming a women-only space ranged from tactical arguments that excluding men would sharpen the contrast between women's non-violent direct action and male authorities, to ideological perspectives which tied patriarchy and male violence to nuclear weapons.

**Case study: The 'Battered Women's' Movement**

The creation of domestic violence refuges and rape crisis centres in the mid-1970s stemmed from both the lack of services available to women and their children and the absence of political will to fundamentally address the issue. During this period, domestic violence, where acknowledged to exist at all, was considered to be a private matter and not an issue for the public, let alone the political, domain.

Nevertheless, feminist activists were well aware that it was a significant problem (Southall Black Sisters, 2003) and in the absence of a state response took matters into their own hands. In 1971, the first widely publicised refuge was established in London. By 1980, there were approximately 150 refuges in England, under the banner of the National Women's Aid Federation, which served mainly poor and working-class women and their children.

During this period Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) women's groups established refuges within their own communities in response to the inadequacies of refuges in meeting the needs of Black women and children. The racism which BME women experienced in society was often replicated in these settings and created additional burdens for women trying to come to terms with the violence they had experienced (Southall Black Sisters, 2003; Davis and Cooke, 2002).

Empowerment, consciousness-raising and self-help were prominent feminist philosophies in the movement. Del Martin, in her acclaimed publication called 'Battered Wives' (1976) argued that the immediate predicament of women who had suffered domestic violence must be understood in broad political terms, namely through the institution of marriage, historical attitudes towards women and the inadequacies in legal and social service.

In this sense, women-only refuges were more than just spaces of physical safety, they were 'political'. Their very existence firmly located domestic violence as a gender based phenomenon – the systematic violation of women's rights by men, enabled and supported by patriarchy.

If 'white' women's organisations were political, BME women's organisations were even more so. In addition to providing a means of (physical) escape for BME women experiencing domestic violence, they also directly challenged the state by exposing how the rhetoric of 'multiculturalism' at times colluded with the oppression of BME women (Southall Black Sisters, 2003).

By the 1990s the campaigning and lobbying of women's organisations had transformed domestic and sexual violence from a subject of private shame to a matter of public concern.

## Diverse women, many voices

It was not just within the Women's Movement and the women's voluntary and community sector that the right to self-determination was seen as necessary. Many other 'movements' were active during this time, organising around race, sexuality, disability, trade union and class issues and many women were engaged with various political movements. Despite co-operation between movements, at different points, the ability of groups to encourage or include diversity and difference was not always successfully managed. Many women, such as BME women and lesbians, were compelled to form separate spaces or spaces within, or external to, these movements – either as a desire to focus on specific issues, such as gender, race, sexuality or disability, or because their specific issues, or differences, were marginalised or excluded within the larger movement.

The Women's Movement and feminism has been criticised for its lack of ability to include all women's experiences in its ideology or activism.

For example, lesbian activists have always been active in advancing women's rights but found themselves excluded and discriminated against by the feminist groups. Determined to be publicly acknowledged however, lesbians invaded a platform at the 1971 Women's Liberation Conference in Skegness, demanding recognition.[1] In 1974, the Women's Movement demanded an end to discrimination against lesbians and sexuality was firmly on its agenda.[2]

The 1980s and 1990s saw the development of a lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) voluntary and community sector in the UK. In 1984, the Lesbian and Gay Centre (which included a women-only space) was the first lesbian and gay community centre to be established in London. Today, perhaps more than any other part of the voluntary and community sector, LGBT organisations are struggling to be recognised and survive. This is in part due to stereotypical assumptions about the needs of LGBT people, which has meant that funding is largely targeted towards sexual health issues (such as HIV work with gay men), rather than wider or other needs. The needs of lesbians have been particularly marginalised within the wider LGBT sector (Kairos in Soho, 2006).

Although they are afforded greater protection than historically under the Sex Discrimination and Gender Recognition Acts, transgender women are a minority group of women who still experience high levels of exclusion from women's spaces/services. The Nottingham Women's Centre is a women-only service that has worked with Press for Change, a trans people's lobby group, to develop a transgender policy which is explicitly inclusive, and challenging of discrimination against transgender women, and other women-only services are re-evaluating their policies (Press for Change, 1998). The issue of trans women and women-only services is controversial within much of the women's sector and still requires further debate and discussion. Other women's organisations, such as BME and disabled women's groups, have also struggled to have their voices heard and issues acknowledged, both within the BME or disability movements and the Women's Movement.

As more women-only services were established, particularly by organisations led by and for minority groups of women, the principles of safety, empowerment and self-determination became more critical. With the diversity of the women's sector becoming stronger, women's organisations have become more aware of the need for an inclusive approach which enables the diverse voices of different women to be heard and of the need for organisations which are led by and for specific communities of women.

# 5 Women-only services: current evidence

Some evidence already exists about women-only services, which is brought together in this chapter. Here we look specifically at why women-only services could be saving the state millions of pounds per year, the range of contexts where a women-only approach is used, the benefits to services users and the effectiveness of women-only services.

## Cost effectiveness

WRC research has found that not only are women-only services wanted by women, but they also save the Government money. The WRC economic impact pilot study on the women's sector provides an effective methodology for calculating the economic gains brought about by the investment in women's organisations, and found that women's organisations provide value for money, representing an impressive return on funding/investment (up to 385% in the case studies). They are saving the state potentially millions of pounds through their intervention and prevention work. Without women's organisations, more women would be turning to public services with problems that could have been prevented. (Matrix Consultancy/Women's Resource Centre, 2006).

### **Case study: Creative and Supportive Trust (CAST)**

CAST works with women leaving prison as well as women involved in drug/alcohol rehabilitation or the mental health system. It offers a range of courses, accredited and non-accredited, including English, Computing and Art as well as welfare advice, education and employment advice, counselling and support groups. These services allow their clients to develop the skills and confidence needed to take control of their lives and to make the changes needed to move on successfully to further education or employment. Their output in 2004/05 saw 80% of their students go on to further studies, when many of these women would otherwise re-offend and return to prison. CAST and other women's organisations help women rebuild their lives and become economically independent.

CAST found that 80% of their service users interviewed expressed that it was very important that CAST was a women-only space and 44% of the students said they would not attend if CAST had not been a women-only space. (Matrix Consultancy / Women's Resource Centre, 2006). The survey also found that 64% of users would prefer women-only services in areas such as group counselling, hospital wards, mental health services, housing associations, health clinics, parenting classes and counselling.



## Violence against women

One of the areas in which the provision of women-only space is most visible is in tackling violence against women. Violence against women includes rape and sexual abuse of girls; female genital mutilation, forced and early marriage, stalking, crimes in the name of 'honour', trafficking and sexual exploitation, sexual harassment and domestic violence. ([www.endviolenceagainstwomen.org.uk](http://www.endviolenceagainstwomen.org.uk))

The British Crime Survey has highlighted the extent to which forms of gendered violence are experienced by women in the UK. It found that 45% of women have experienced some form of domestic violence, sexual assault or stalking (Walby and Allen, 2004). In addition:

- Domestic violence is overwhelmingly perpetrated by men against their women partners. Women subjected to domestic violence are more likely to be injured, frightened, repeatedly abused and murdered than their male victim counterparts (Greater London Authority, 2005).
- It is conservatively estimated that 80,000 women suffer rape and attempted rape every year (Walby and Allen, 2004). With regards to sexual violence, statistics show that rape allegations resulting in convictions are at an all-time low, having dropped from 24% in 1985, to just 5.6% in 2002, (Kelly et al, 2005).

### **Services for Black and Minority Ethnic women experiencing domestic violence**

Research has shown that Black and minority ethnic (BME) women are less likely to access statutory services for victims of domestic violence (Home Office, 2005). Therefore, independent services provided by BME women's organisations are crucial, including the planning, commissioning, organising and delivery of services. A seminar organised by the Asian Women's Resource Centre in London identified a number of barriers for BME women attempting to access support including:

- Services which are unable to accommodate the linguistic diversity of BME communities.
- Insufficient knowledge about different nationalities.
- Cultural barriers such as concepts of 'izzat' (honour) and 'sharam' (shame) which inhibit and prevent women from escaping violent and abusive situations.

The lack of support available for women with insecure immigration status is also a significant barrier. The 'no recourse to public funds' requirement means women with insecure immigration status, including those subject to the two year rule, cannot access public funds if they need to leave a violent relationship. Women with insecure immigration face a stark choice – homelessness and destitution or the prospect of ongoing, perhaps fatal, violence. The result is sheer desperation on the part of the individual and their advisors. Refuges are often forced to turn women away, or fund her stay out of their own reserves.

Research carried out by the WRC illustrates the value of women-only spaces in addressing violence against women. One of the benefits of women-only spaces for service users, across several organisations interviewed, was the opportunity to be with other women who had also experienced domestic or sexual violence:

"It was only after I came to the group that I realised how many women are in my position, sometimes in worse situations than me. I feel that if they can get out of their predicament, so can I." (Asian Women's Resource Centre cited in Women's Resource Centre, 2006a)

### **Women's domestic violence organisations**

Recent research on refuge provision in London found a definite shift towards refuge services either merging or being taken over by larger housing associations (Women's Resource Centre, 2007a). This has worrying implications for the future provision of refuge services. There are concerns that the specialist expertise and experience of women's organisations will be lost resulting in service providers that are inadequately trained or have insufficient understanding of the needs of women who have experienced domestic violence. Furthermore, this transformation of the refuge sector also risks the loss of its founding feminist principles of empowerment, contextualising violence within gender relations and meeting women's needs.

Imkaan, a national second-tier charity dedicated to the development of the specialist Asian women's refuge sector, recently conducted research into Supporting People funding, the primary source of income for refuges, and highlighted a number of additional concerns about this trend. They found that services were under pressure to merge and diversify services or risk being decommissioned, in spite of the fact that this would result in the loss of specialist services and expertise. Imkaan argue that this approach fails to take account of the needs of BME women and may result in fewer specialist services for this client group (Imkaan, 2006).

#### **Case study: Stella Project**

The need for women-only and women-led services for victims of violence who are also substance abusers has been identified by the Stella Project, which is part of the Greater London Domestic Violence Project.

One of the aims of the Stella Project is to address the gaps in service provision for survivors of domestic violence that also have problems with substance misuse. Research has found that women in these circumstances often use substances as a coping mechanism to deal with their experiences of violence and abuse.

Women are often excluded from services if they present with substance misuse problems. Refuges, for example, are limited in their capacity to support women with additional needs. As the Stella Project highlights, this leaves women with fewer options and increases their vulnerability.

In response to this issue, the Stella Project developed a toolkit aimed at domestic violence and substance misuse sectors. One of their recommendations was to ensure that services were able to address women's need for safety and support through the provision of women-only and women-led services.

The Stella Project advocates that providing women-only space is vital so that a woman feels safe. Mixed-sex services are perceived to be more threatening, particularly where women are in a minority. In addition, they have found that the majority of women prefer to talk about issues of abuse and trauma with another woman.

### **Women's sexual violence organisations**

Historically, there has been a policy and funding division made between domestic and sexual violence. Though not without problems, domestic violence has become more mainstreamed whilst sexual violence has historically been sidelined, and remains so. The failure of Government to prioritise sexual violence has resulted in a dire situation for women who have experienced childhood sexual abuse, rape and other forms of sexual violence.

In 1985, there were 84 Rape Crisis centres in the UK. Now, approximately 32 Rape Crisis Centres remain and are currently facing a severe funding crisis and the threat of closure. None of the remaining Rape Crisis centres have stable, statutory funding.[3] Contributing factors have included the lack of central government targets on sexual violence which means that it is not addressed at a local level.

The Government has provided funding for 30 (statutory) Sexual Assault and Referral Centres (SARCs). However, SARCs are primarily focused on gathering forensic evidence to secure a conviction. Rape Crisis Centres, on the other hand, offer long term, specialist services e.g. counselling, advocacy and support for women with complex needs (such as mental health or drug and alcohol misuse needs) to support women who are dealing with experiences of sexual violence. They support women who have experienced abuse either recently or historically.

There has been a collective failure of statutory organisations, centrally and locally, to provide funding to specialist, women-only services which provide crucial support to women who have been raped, sexually assaulted or experienced childhood sexual abuse. Rape Crisis Centres are currently struggling to survive despite the need for these services.

The Victims Fund has recently come under fire for breaching the Compact over the unacceptably late notice to Rape Crisis Centres as to whether they had received funding. The response from the Ministry of Justice (which took over responsibility for the fund from the Home Office) was that the Victims Fund was never designated as a stable source of funding; and that it is the responsibility of local authorities to ensure that service provision was available to meet the needs of their local communities. Unfortunately, this creates a vicious circle, as central government targets for local authorities do not include sexual violence.

The End Violence Against Women Coalition continues to lobby Government to comprehensively address violence against women and whilst there have been encouraging signs, such as the publication of the Cross Government Action Plan on Sexual Violence and Abuse (Home Office, 2007) a cross-government strategy (and commitment) to eliminate violence against women has yet to be prioritised.

## **Mental health**

In the last ten years, UK mental health policy has been concerned with providing user-centred services which are accessible and flexible. Alongside this has been an acknowledgment that existing mental health services need to be able to meet the needs of specific groups such as women and BME communities.

The problems experienced by BME communities, however, have mainly focused on men (Keating et al, 2002). As Black feminists have noted, space for Black women to voice their experiences is often limited, as 'Black' is generally taken to denote 'men' whilst 'women' is usually seen as referring to 'white women' (hooks, 1981; Southall Black Sisters, 2003).

A considerable body of evidence about (usually white) women's experiences of mental health and mental health services has been generated over the last twenty years or more. Feminist theorists have been particularly influential in this area, describing women's mental distress in a socio-political context (e.g. Williams et al, 2001). Their analyses have provided a counter-argument to the (patriarchal) medical model of mental health which in the view of feminist and mental health activists pathologises the often traumatic experiences of individuals, such as the abuse suffered in violent relationships. For example, it is estimated that approximately 50% of women who use mental health services have experienced childhood sexual abuse or domestic violence (Department of Health, 2002) and yet the majority are never asked about these experiences.

Academics, activists and charities have repeatedly campaigned for a social inequalities perspective in mental health services which takes into account the social context of women's lives; the multiple social roles they perform; and the fact that violence and abuse, poverty, caring responsibilities, experiences of racism, homophobia and other forms of discrimination often underlie mental health problems (Copperman and Knowles, 2006).

In response to the overwhelming evidence that mental health services were unable to meet women's needs, the Government undertook research and consultation in this area and finally produced policy guidance which set out a framework for providing 'gender sensitive' mental health services.

The initial research (Barnes et al, 2002) identified that the availability of women-only or gender sensitive services within the statutory sector was extremely limited. Their existence often depended on an individual working hard to champion the need for such services, as opposed to services being developed in response to women's identified needs.

The research consulted service providers in health, social services and the voluntary sector. The research identified a number of key characteristics of women-sensitive services in mental health provision:

- Provided only by women in a women-only space.
- Accessible.
- Confidential.
- Safe and secure.
- Comfortable.
- Appropriately resourced in terms of funding and workers' time.
- Flexible in the type of services available – group work, drop-in, counselling, structured activities.
- Culturally sensitive and responsive to the needs of different age groups, women's sexuality, ethnicity, disability and parenting.
- Understand women's difficulties in relation to issues such as child care.

**Case study: Drayton Park**

Drayton Park was the first women-only residential mental health crisis facility in the UK. It provides valuable insight into the effectiveness of women-only space within mental health service provision.

The facility was established in December 1995 and is provided by Camden and Islington Mental Health and Social Care Trust. It provides places for 12 women and is also able to accommodate up to four children over six months in age, with a maximum of two children per woman. The facility has an all-female staff team which includes a project manager, 17 project workers, an administrative assistant and a cook.

Drayton Park adopts a systemic model of working with clients, which emphasises examining women's existing situation and trying to resolve triggers and perpetuating factors for it. The interventions used vary from individual and group work to medication and therapies such as acupuncture. There is a particular emphasis on developing women's own coping strategies and self-medication. The target is that all women should be discharged within 28 days.

Since 2000, studies have examined the effectiveness of the facility in providing a woman-sensitive alternative to hospital admission. A randomly selected sample of women admitted since the facility's opening was examined. Findings showed that Drayton Park was able to provide a safe environment for women presenting in acute crisis, as well as being able to manage women in crisis within a relatively short stay. Furthermore, the involvement of service users in the facility's management and advisory group was found to provide an innovative approach to crisis resolution which has aroused both national and international interest.

The Department of Health's guidance (Department of Health, 2003) on improving mental health services for women established a framework for providing mental health services which are women-sensitive and women-centred. The recommendations were wide ranging and covered all aspects of care, taking into account how services are commissioned, planned and delivered. A key recommendation was that services should develop local gender awareness training initiatives on a partnership basis, so that staff working in specialist mental health and primary care services can participate.

It was recommended that the staff training should cover:

- The social and economic context of women's and men's lives.
- Life experiences that may impact on their mental health e.g. violence and abuse.
- The interplay between gender and other dimensions of inequality such as ethnicity, age and sexual orientation.
- Differences in the risk and protective factors for mental health in women and men.
- Differences between women and men in presentation and their pathways into services.
- Differences in the treatment needs and responses of women and men.
- The relationship between gender and power inequalities and how this may affect mental health.

- The links between violence and abuse and women's mental ill health.

In addition, the guidance recommends that the following should be established:

- Self-contained women-only wards/units should be available in every acute inpatient service "to address the wish of many women service users to be cared for in a women-only inpatient environment" (p34).
- Women-only crisis houses should be established as an alternative to acute inpatient admission and respite houses which would help to prevent women's mental ill health deteriorating.
- Community based residential acute care settings that can accommodate women's children where appropriate.
- Women-only crisis and respite housing for all women including those with learning and associated disabilities.

Unfortunately what was promising and progressive guidance from Government has largely been ignored by service providers. Lack of resources, targets and political will have prevented the recommendations being adopted wholesale and women still rely on the pockets of good practice and committed staff working in mental health services to have their needs met. This is highly disturbing given the amount of evidence which shows that mental health services do not only fail to provide appropriate services to women but also that these services are often unsafe.

Research has found that women are fearful of being on mixed-sex wards and that rapes and sexual assaults or threats are not uncommon (Cleary & Warren, 1998; Warner & Ford, 1998). Findings from an unannounced inspection of almost half of the acute mental health units in England in 1996 showed that problems of sexual harassment were reported in 56% of mixed-sex wards and only 35% women had access to women-only sleeping areas.

In 2006 the mental health charity Mind, which has long campaigned for single-sex wards for women, leaked a report by the National Patient Safety Agency (National Patient Safety Agency, 2006) which found that women were the victims of over 120 incidents of rape, sexual assault and sexual harassment (including 19 rapes) in NHS mental health units over a two year period. Other mental health charities voiced concerns that this could be the tip of the iceberg.[4] They argued that fear of reprisals and of not being believed mean that these figures are likely to be an underestimate. Furthermore, as 11 of the 19 rapes were allegedly perpetrated by male staff, there are implications for how mental health inpatients units are both structured and staffed.

However, the response from the mental health 'czar' Louis Appleby was that he was:

"...particularly concerned by some of the issues raised by the recent National Patient Safety Agency report, especially the 19 allegations of rape... in my opinion there is significant doubt in the majority as to whether any incident occurred...several allegations were made when the patient's mental state was severely disturbed, and the details of the allegations reflected this. This significant doubt applies to 13 of the 19 - there are too few details in the rest to make any comment. It is important to remember that press reporting in July assumed that 19 rapes had occurred: the reputation of mental health services may well have been unfairly damaged by this."[5]

This viewpoint is not uncommon. Research has found that mental health services have been reluctant to address the issue of violence and abuse on mental health wards and women who report assault are routinely disbelieved (Copperman & Knowles, 2006).

In their research on women-only and women sensitive services, Barnes et al (2002) found that mental health services "tend to reflect and repeat patterns of discrimination or repression that occur in the dominant culture". They argue that this creates a situation in which women and children are effectively silenced and unable to talk about their experiences of abuse. This phenomenon is not unique to mental health services but is a reflection of wider societal attitudes towards violence against women in which a 'real rape' only occurs when the victim is considered to be credible (Kennedy, 2005).

Another more insidious reason for the reluctance of mental health services to provide single-sex wards for women and/or women-only spaces is the pervasive attitude that women have a 'calming influence' on men, thus making inpatient wards 'easier to manage' (Copperman & Knowles, 2006).

Whilst women's organisations do not always explicitly describe themselves as mental health services, they often support women experiencing emotional distress and mental health issues. Organisations such as Rape Crisis Centres, who deal with the aftermath of rape and sexual assault, are examples of such organisations. Given the high numbers of women who are estimated to have experienced violence and abuse in mental health wards, they could arguably benefit from access to such services. However, these organisations, as well as those providing mental health services to women, are currently facing funding crises and threat of closure.

## Substance misuse

Since the late 1980s, an increased awareness of women's issues has shed light on the inadequacies of traditional treatment for women with alcohol and drug-related problems. With regards to alcohol misuse, the following factors have been identified as experiences which are specific to women and require special attention in service provision [6]:

- Women's experiences of sexual and physical abuse.
- Their experiences of various psychiatric disorders.
- Their dependency and low self-esteem.
- Their responsibility for childrearing.
- Their roles as mothers and carers and their feeling of isolation when their children leave home.
- Heavy drinking by partners and the loss of partners.
- Women working in male-dominated occupations where there are prominent drinking cultures.
- Depression.

- Domestic abuse.
- Childhood sexual abuse.
- Eating disorders.

Women are also thought to face greater barriers than men when getting help, largely due to the greater stigma that is attached to women with alcohol abuse problems (Grella, 1998; Niv & Hser, 2006). Other factors include the fear that they will lose custody of children (Grella, 1998).

In the US, increased funding was made available for alcohol and drug services for women after lobbying from policy makers and women's health organisations. However, the need for women-only substance misuse services was also politically motivated. During the 1980s there was growing public concern about children exposed to drug-using parents. US Government policy in this area continued to be shaped by these concerns into the 1990s and drug treatment programs often focused on pregnant women or women with children (Grella, 1998; Niv et al, 2006). Nevertheless, these women-only services adopted a less confrontational approach to treatment and focused on empowering women through providing training, in a range of social and educational skills, and providing role models in terms of female staff, in whom they were able to confide. The benefit of this women-only approach was that women felt more able to talk about issues such as abuse, which they felt they could not discuss in a mixed gender setting. Furthermore, research has found that women in mixed gender groups are more likely to withdraw from discussions, increasing their feelings of guilt and failure (Niv & Hser, 2006).

A paper examining the place of women-only services in substance misuse treatment programs found that whilst the outcomes of women-only and mixed gender programmes are similar (although the women's service was more cost effective), the important issue to be considered is that women who would not attend mixed-gender programs are more likely to access women-only services (Weisner, 2005).



**Case Study: Women's Alcohol Centre**

Research conducted by the Women's Alcohol Centre identified the sense of shame felt by women drinkers and the greater stigmatisation they experience, as the principle barriers to them seeking treatment:

1. Women are doubly stigmatised for having a drink problem and being a woman with a drink problem.
2. There is a treble stigma if the woman has children.
3. Add to this if the woman is from an ethnic minority or a lesbian.
4. Women problem drinkers tend to have a greater sense of shame.
5. Women often find it easier to talk in a women-only environment, particularly about such issues as childhood sexual abuse, rape, domestic violence, eating problems, Pre-Menstrual Syndrome (PMS), depression, low self esteem, self-harm.
6. Women suffering abuse from a man usually feel safer in a women-only environment.
7. Heterosexual women who often end up in abusive relationships may find it helps their progress to avoid male-dominated environments and to avoid relationships with men for a long period of time.
8. Women problem drinkers do not respond well to confrontation and directive interventions, as they suffer from low self esteem and need to find a way to control their lives.
9. Men tend to dominate in mixed groups.
10. Women tend to fall into traditional caring roles in mixed groups rather than focusing on their own needs, which can interfere with their own progress.
11. Women tend to present with complex needs e.g. self harm, eating distress, co-dependence, poor mental health, domestic violence, child care problems as well as alcohol-related problems and it can be difficult to decide which is the primary problem.
12. Lesbian women tend to feel more comfortable in a women-only environment.
13. Mothers need special help with parenting skills and overcoming shame and guilt to become a better parent, and they often benefit from the experience of other women and specialist knowledge.
14. Referring agencies are sometimes concerned either that their women clients are getting too involved either in caretaking of men, at the expense of focusing on their own problems or are vulnerable to being taken advantage of by men during the process of recovering from a drink problem.

## Homeless women

A clear example of women's exclusion from policy and service development can be found in a research study by Crisis, the homeless charity (Crisis, 2006). Their research was based on a survey and in-depth interviews with single homeless women (144 and 44 women respectively). The research found that women's experiences of violence and abuse were primary factors in their becoming homeless.

The report stated that the lack of women-only accommodation is an ongoing issue which urgently needs to be addressed. It found that 62% of the homeless women surveyed had slept rough at some point. In spite of the risks this involved, sleeping rough was, in many cases, considered the only option if the alternatives were staying with violent ex-partners or relatives or in mixed night shelters where women had previously been assaulted. Several respondents reported having been sexually assaulted by male residents while staying in night shelters:

"Such were some women's fears of mixed accommodation, sleeping rough (in less visible locations) was sometimes deemed a safer option." (Crisis, 2006, p.59)

Of deep concern are the study's findings that homeless women will put themselves at considerable risk in order to access accommodation by engaging in unwanted sexual activity. The in-depth interviews revealed that a number of women were or had been involved in some form of sex work which included 'picking up men' so they could spend the night with them.

In addition to the problems of mixed night shelters, day centres were also found to be inappropriate to women's needs. The report stated that day centres can be 'hostile, challenging environments which women wish to avoid'. For women who had experienced violence and abuse, the male-dominated nature of day centres makes them frightening, threatening and generally places they do not want to be in.

This report starkly highlights the consequences of not taking gender into account in the development and delivery of services. The prospect, for many homeless women, of engaging in existing services such as day centres and mixed hostels is so frightening that many would rather risk sleeping rough.

When asked about the type of services women would want to engage with the response was very familiar. Women wanted services which were:

- Women-only or offering women-only spaces/sessions.
- Informal and accessible.
- Safe.
- Able to meet multiple needs.
- Run by understanding staff.

Needless to say safety was of paramount importance, particularly for women who had experienced violence and abuse.

## Young women

Two recent studies have shown that accessing single-sex space is important for girls and young women. A review by Domoney, Jones and Garcia (YWCA, 2005) and Girlguiding UK (2007) found that girls and young women were enthusiastic about having time away from boys and benefited from having women leaders as role models. They also found that single-sex spaces encouraged girls to take more risks, express themselves and develop their self confidence.

The YWCA undertook research on the issue of girl- and young women-only spaces in response to growing pressure to justify women-only services. They carried out a systematic review of the evidence into the advantages and disadvantages of providing informal education to young women in single-sex environments.

Evidence from different types of single-sex group work showed that single-sex workshops and activities promoted a sense of solidarity and increased self-confidence, willingness to try new things and to speak openly. It found that boys tended to dominate the space in mixed gender settings which reduced girls' confidence. Mixed-sex provision reduced the likelihood of girls attending.

The review highlighted that mixed gender youth groups tend to be geared around the needs of boys with less consideration given to how to engage girls in activities. Studies reviewed in the YWCA report found an unarticulated assumption that girls were not interested in 'doing' but were happy to watch the boys. In single-sex groups however, the evidence showed girls and young women were keen to get involved.

Single-sex settings were shown to not only increase young women's attendance in youth work but also that they were more than willing to have a go at a range of activities, from outdoor pursuits, such as rock climbing and sailing, to learning circus skills and making videos. The fact that these activities were single-sex was a significant factor, as the young women reported that they didn't have to worry about boys making comments about them or deal with sexual harassment.

The YWCA review also supports other evidence that safety is a key reason why single-sex space is valued by young women. This refers to physical safety and also the safety of feeling able to express themselves openly and try new things in a supportive environment. Furthermore, it found that a single-sex environment helps girls and young women to think about and challenge gender stereotypes.

YWCA staff discussing the review findings felt that challenging gender role stereotypes was an important aspect of single-sex youth work. Whilst traditional feminised roles tend to be enacted by girls in mixed groups (reinforced by boys' dominance), single-sex groups provide an opportunity for girls to discuss gender stereotypes. The women who run the groups provide positive role models for girls which also helps in breaking down these stereotypes.

The review found that single-sex environments helped young women to develop good relationships with each other and with group leaders, particularly at ages when girls are "socialised... to regard their peers as competitors for boys' attention" (YWCA, 2005, p. 39).

Girlguiding UK, recently published a survey of girls and young women about what they feel about being a young woman today, the opportunities and challenges they face and how they

interact with the world around them. Access to single-sex space was considered crucial to the majority of those who were surveyed. Of the 3,200 girls and young women who participated "73% of seven to ten year olds, 81% of ten to fifteen year olds and 96% of 16 to 25 year olds like to spend time together without any boys being there". (Girlguiding UK, 2007)

## Education

In the struggle to achieve equality for women, education was seen by feminists as a way to fundamentally address and challenge structural discrimination (Weaver-Hightower, 2003). Indeed, researchers have pointed out that much of the discourse on education and gender in the 1980s and 1990s was focused on girls and the disadvantage they faced in the classroom (Weaver-Hightower, 2003; Evidence for Policy and Practice, 2002; Arnot, 1999 ). In recent years, however, the debate has shifted, reflecting increasing concern and even 'moral panic' that boys are now underperforming at school and being 'outstripped' in the academic stakes by girls (Francis, 2006; Weaver-Hightower, 2003).

This can be viewed in the context of a general backlash against feminism, which began in the mid-1990s. Concerns about boys' achievement at school focused on the supposed feminisation of education and the lack of male role models for boys whilst conveniently ignoring the fact that educational success for girls fails to translate into equal pay or better jobs (Equal Opportunities Commission, 2007; Breitenbach & Wasoff, 2007). An article from the Daily Mail encapsulates these fears:

"Girls out-performed boys in almost every subject. The reason is nothing other than the wholesale feminisation of the education system...The 'masculine content and orientation' of textbooks, topics and tests was obliterated in favour of female references; teachers were forbidden to use 'sexist' language; and male teachers' bonding with boys through jokes or shared allusions to football had to be reprogrammed out of the system." [7]

The Equal Opportunities Commission (responsible for the implementation of the Gender Equality Duty before the Equality and Human Rights Commission was established) produced guidance on the Duty for a range of public bodies, including schools (Equal Opportunities Commission, 2007). They echoed concerns about boys' poor educational attainment; however, they advised caution about making generalisations. The document acknowledges that factors such as race and class are also significant determinants of academic success and that white working class, African Caribbean girls and Roma/Gypsy girls do not achieve the same levels of success as other girls or indeed boys.

In 2006 the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) ran a series of seminars focusing on Girls and Education.[8] This also highlighted that many of the problems that girls face at school have been sidelined as result of the perceived failure of the education system to address the needs of boys. They also state that, in spite of the rhetoric: not all girls are academically successful; girls experience exclusion from school as well as boys; careers aspirations (and guidance) are still drawn on gender lines; the rates of smoking and drinking among some girls is worryingly high. Both the Equal Opportunities Commission and ESRC drew attention to the fact that girls may self-exclude, through truancy or even pregnancy.

Interestingly, anecdotal evidence suggests that, in common with the argument favouring mixed-sex mental health wards, girls are thought to have a 'calming influence on boys'. This reinforces the unequal power relations between women and men as it assumes that girls and

women should take responsibility for male behaviour.

The debate about single-sex versus mixed schools is ongoing whilst evidence about whether one is superior to the other has been largely inconclusive (Haag, 1998). Evidence has been produced to support both sides of the argument (Smithers & Robinson, 2006; Van de Gaer et al, 2004; Jackson, 2002), although recent research has found that girls perform better in single-sex schools due to the socio-economic status of its pupils rather than the nature of the environment (Smithers & Robinson, 2006). The same research however, did point out that girl-only schools performed no worse than mixed-sex schools.

Other research has found that single-sex settings were effective in terms of increasing girls' self-confidence and encouraging them to try activities traditionally associated with boys (Evidence for Policy and Practice Review, 2002). In addition, the Girls' School Association, perhaps unsurprisingly, states that mixed-sex schools may decrease girls' self confidence and aspirations.[9]

In their view, mixed sex schools 'short-change' girls in terms of education because boys tend to dominate teacher time; girls are more passive when boys are present and are therefore less likely to take risks; subject choices are more polarised; there are fewer positive role models and opportunities for leadership for girls; and that girls mature more quickly than boys and their needs are harder to meet in a mixed-sex environment.

## Training

Women-only training courses are delivered for a number of reasons, including: as a response to a skills shortage; to address women's low participation in certain occupations; or to encourage women in to work following a period of absence (often due to caring responsibilities).

Women and men's training needs can be quite different. Often, women require training which is flexible and can take account of their additional responsibilities such as caring. Some women need basic skills training before they can access other more mainstream courses such as ICT. And whilst it seems like common sense to address these issues in order to improve access to education and training opportunities, providers of women-only training feel that there has been a lack of recognition of women's needs by funders and decision makers.

The women's sector has extensive experience and expertise delivering user-centred, holistic services as well as having relevant and sound knowledge of the community they serve. Based in local communities, they are able to meet the needs of more marginalised and vulnerable groups of women who may experience barriers to accessing 'mainstream' training courses.

Women's training organisations are focused on providing women with the skills they need in an appropriate learning environment by:

- providing child care;
- offering flexibility in terms of the type of skills a woman needs to learn;
- providing women trainers who are role models for trainees and who have empathy with the various challenges women face (Faulkner & Kleif, 2003).

**Case study: Elevate**

In 2005/6 WRC provided high-level management and leadership training and support to 180 women from micro and small businesses, including the voluntary and community sector and social enterprises, through the Elevate training programme for women. The programme resulted in 74% of women on these courses reporting that it improved their confidence, 28 were promoted and four went on to start their own businesses (Zennor Consulting, 2006). The women-only approach made it attractive to trainees who valued being in a space in which they "felt safe and supported and more able to learn", and the evaluation reports showed that 89% of respondents felt more supported in a women-only environment and 87% felt they could be more open.

"The fact that the groups are made up of women and trained by women in a less informal (sic) structured way has enabled women to feel more comfortable to experiment and explore in an uninhibited way, feeling much safer to discuss, speak out and ask for help and has made for a supportive, dynamic learning environment."

Some comments from the participants were:

"I feel it is really important to have women-only safe spaces to learn and bring skills, and to solely be in the company of women."

"Having a course dedicated for women is extremely important to help increase your confidence in a supportive environment."

As shown in the case studies below, women sometimes/often need to build up their confidence and self esteem before they can participate in learning and training opportunities. Having these initial steps in place however, can have dramatic and positive results.

**Case study: The Bridge Project**

The Bridge Project was set up in 1985 by a small group of local women in Washington, Tyne and Wear. They put in a bid to the European Social Fund (ESF) to set up a project in the area that could provide education and training for local women, which incorporated quality childcare to enable them to gain qualifications. Since then the project has grown into a dynamic voluntary organisation, run by women for women. The Bridge project uses outreach methods to target areas and groups which are socially excluded. One of the aims of the project is to increase women's confidence, self esteem and to support them to be independent and have control over their lives and learning activities.

In 2007 Bridge has launched a new programme in partnership with City of Sunderland College to give women the opportunity to develop skills in male-dominated occupations. The programme, called 'Women's Power Tools', allowed 40 women to learn joinery, bricklaying, horticulture, painting and decorating. Included in the course were childcare expenses and travel costs.

"I think it is really important that young people are exposed to a wide range of positive role models. There are still a lot of people who pigeon-hole women into the stereotypical jobs that they think they 'should' do. I see this course, not only as a means of educating myself, but a way of giving me practical skills that I can pass on to others around me."

**Case study: Oxford Women's Training Scheme**

In 1988 Oxford City Council founded the Oxford Women's Training Scheme. It was originally set up to deliver IT training in a women-only environment. In 2005 the scheme merged with Oxford & Cherwell Valley College and it is now called Oxford Women's Training.

Gerry Moraveg from the scheme stated that "our women-only format for courses was originally developed to offset the prejudice against women in IT and construction education. It has also allowed us to develop training methods that suit the learning styles of most women, focusing on putting tasks into context and encouraging women to explore areas that had been previously been seen as 'men-only' ". [10]

## Women-only services in the private sector

As more women have entered the workforce and increased their economic power, there has been a corresponding realisation of the value of marketing to women. A range of facilities from women-only floors in hotels and women-only train carriages to women-only beaches, gyms, spas and holidays are now at women's disposal.

For example, a website for women called Ladiesaway provides networking opportunities for businesswomen.[11] The aim is to connect women who may be travelling nationally or internationally for business and to share information ranging from hotel and restaurant recommendations to developing business contacts or finding someone to socialise with. Partly, this is intended to overcome the isolation that some women business travellers may feel if they are in 'strange country'. Pink Ladies, a Warrington based women-led taxi firm, was established in 2005 as a response to the concerns women felt using minicabs.[12] With a fleet of unashamedly pink taxis and a women-only philosophy, they have established a service which is primarily concerned with ensuring women's safety. Drivers use satellite tracking and are trained in self defence. The website also provides advice for women on how they can keep safe. Other companies have realised the value of providing specific services for women. The health club chain Fitness First have established eleven women-only gyms in the UK which are 'run by women for women!'. [13] The emphasis is on providing women with a space in which they can exercise without feeling self conscious.

Some commentators have been sceptical about the segregation of the sexes, suggesting that it is a distraction from the need to fundamentally overhaul the relationships between women and men. Rather than address men's violence against women, for example, the solution is a quick fix of providing separate women-only spaces.

"But while the idea of a safe space is compelling, this international trend – which often comes couched in paternalistic rhetoric about 'protecting' women – raises questions of just how equal the sexes are if women's safety relies on us being separated. After all, shouldn't we be targeting the gropers and harassers? The onus should be on men to stop harassing women, not on women to escape them." [14]

What is important, as the article also observes, is the context in which women-only spaces are developed. It uses examples such as girls' schools and women-only networking websites to illustrate where women-only space can be valuable, self-determining and positive.

# 6 Policy context

Many women's organisations have expressed concerns about the gender neutrality of Government policy, even in relation to issues which disproportionately impact on women and where women's gender is widely and historically considered to be an influencing factor, for example domestic violence. This issue is described in-depth in Chapter 10.

There are a number of policy issues which are impacting on the women's sector. However, in this chapter, we provide a brief overview of changes to how the third sector is funded, the Gender Equality Duty (one of the key instruments by which women's organisations can make the case for women-only services), and the increased decision making powers, including vital decisions on funding women's organisations and women-only services, being devolved from Westminster to local government.

## Funding to the third sector

The funding environment in which the women's sector operates has, in the last five years, undergone significant changes such as, controversially, the increased procurement of the third sector to deliver public services (i.e. on behalf of the state), such as health and prison services.

However, one of the most significant changes affecting women's organisations has been the shift from grant giving to commissioning.

Formerly, the majority of third sector funding would have come from grant aid. The flexibility of grant aid enabled organisations to apply for funding based on the needs of service users but this is increasingly being phased out in favour of commissioning services which is typically characterised as being where the funder (such as a local authority) specifies the need to be met. Now, more than any time in the past, it is crucial that women's organisations are closely linked in, and more importantly, are *influencing*, local government decision making mechanisms such as Local Strategic Partnerships. It is likely that funding for women-only services will depend on the influence women's organisations can exert in these types of decision making forums. However, the lack of capacity to engage in policy may inhibit or prevent many women's organisations.

Across the sector, earned income (from contracts for commissioned services) has now eclipsed voluntary income (grants). In 2004/05, almost 40% of sector income was generated from contracts as opposed to 14% from grants (National Council of Voluntary Organisations, 2007).

Some women's organisations have been particularly affected by this shift. Recent WRC research into the funding of London women's refuges, who, on average, receive over half their annual income from being commissioned by local authorities to deliver refuge accommodation under Supporting People programmes, found that:



"Earned income from Supporting People contracts accounted for 54% of refuge providers' annual income in 2006/07. While providers were able to name several benefits of the Supporting People programme, such as greater financial security, the shift from local authority grants to Supporting People contracts has restricted and redefined the services refuges are able to deliver. Refuge providers depend on contracts with the state, more so than the VCS on average. This is likely to have significant impacts on the relationships between councils and providers. Providers who are unhappy with their contract terms, such as price, are unlikely to withdraw their services as there are no (realistic) alternatives to Supporting People funding. Some refuge providers commented that this has led to an unequal relationship between commissioners (councils) and providers." (Women's Resource Centre, 2007a, p.12)

The research found that the commissioning approach is likely to be encouraging 'super providers' – organisations with contracts in multiple boroughs. Over the past three years, at least seven women's refuges in London had been taken over by larger organisations. (Women's Resource Centre, 2007a).

## Gender Equality Duty

The Gender Equality Duty was introduced in April 2007, as part of the Equality Act 2006, and places a requirement on public authorities to have 'due regard' to the need to promote equality of opportunity between women and men and to eliminate unlawful harassment and discrimination.

The Duty requires public bodies to take action on their most important gender equality issues across their functions, which include policy, decision making and service delivery. The aim of the Gender Equality Duty is not to treat women and men the same but to acknowledge that they have different needs and that outcomes should be focused on addressing these needs. Authorities will also have an obligation to eliminate harassment and discrimination towards transgender staff and service users.

This provides a significant opportunity for women's organisations and groups to have their views and concerns heard and reflected in policy and practice. This is particularly important in view of the local government agenda. However, women's organisations have voiced concerns that, with no previous expertise on gender equality, some public bodies may misinterpret the aims of the Duty to mean that women and men should be treated the same, resulting in almost the opposite effect of its intention. Nevertheless, the Gender Equality Duty does enable women to ensure that gender sensitive service provision which reflects the needs of women and men gets on the agenda of public bodies.

In 2007 the Government launched a consultation on its manifesto commitment to introduce a Single Equality Act into Great Britain. The consultation document set out proposals for a fundamental review of discrimination law, which could result in a weakening of the Gender Equality Duty.

The proposals have been heavily criticised, with many organisations calling for a strengthening of the equalities duties on race, gender and disability as well as an extension so they also cover religion or belief, sexual orientation and age. Whilst there will be no imminent change, it does highlight the need to take advantage of the Gender Equality Duty now and demonstrate that it has the ability to be effective.

## Devolving power to local government and communities

The White Paper, 'Strong and Prosperous Communities' (Department Communities and Local Government, 2006) sets out the Government's agenda to devolve power to local government and communities. The document aims to provide a framework "to give local people and local communities more influence and power to improve their lives".

The White Paper, now the 'Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Bill', aims to place the voluntary and community sector on a level playing field with other service providers and to involve communities in shaping local services through petitions, community call for action and local charters. It also emphasises the role of the third sector in "shaping localities", and calls for more sustainable and long-term funding for local voluntary and community organisations.

Partnership working is central to this agenda and the Government proposes to develop standards and requirements for consulting and engaging with the voluntary sector and local communities. Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs) are the primary mechanism by which local decisions are made, including local priorities and funding for local services. These will be crystallised in Local Area Agreements which included targets and funding negotiated by a local authority and central government.

The Government introduced LSPs in England in 2000. LSPs are a way of bringing together local people, including public sector organisations, voluntary and community organisations, and business to work to improve the local quality of life. LSPs aim to improve the way that local services are planned and delivered. They help local agencies and others to focus on improving the quality of life and leadership in a locality by getting communities involved in their design and delivery of public services. This includes major public services like education, health, housing, police and social services.

In the context of the Government's agenda to devolve power to local communities', LSPs are of increasing significance. However, new research has found that representation of women and women's organisations on LSPs is woefully low. Only 1.8% of third sector representatives on LSP boards are women's organisations (Gudnadottir et al, 2007). Without better representation of women's organisations, key issues for women are likely to be marginalised. Women's organisations are increasingly looking at using legislative and policy instruments to improve 'gender' within LSPs such as the Gender Equality Duty because LSPs are a public function and therefore should meet the requirements of the Duty.

# 7 Poll results

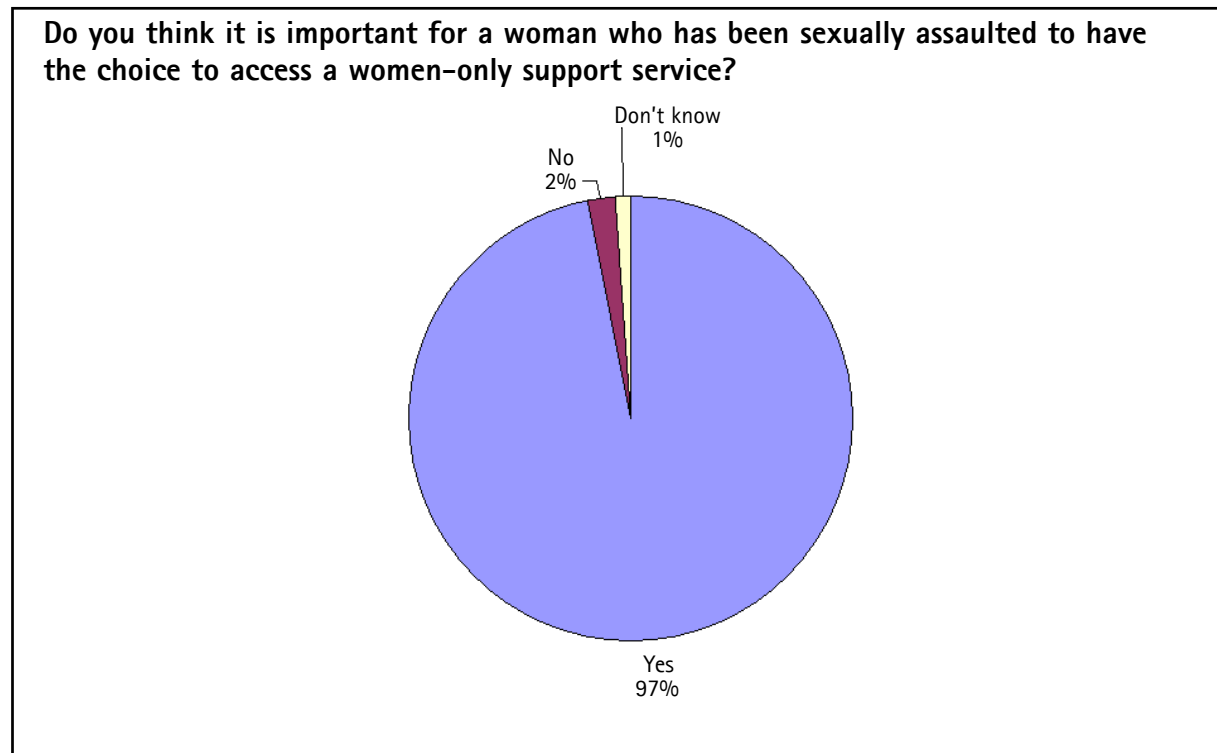
In August 2007, WRC commissioned a poll which asked a random sample of 1,000 women in the UK about their views and experiences of women-only services (see Appendix B). The aim of the poll was to gain a clearer picture of the current public perception of the need for women-only services and spaces.

The poll found significant enthusiasm for women-only services in a range of fields including services working in the fields of violence against women, health and training.

## Results

### **Should women who are victims of sexual assault have the choice of a women-only support service?**

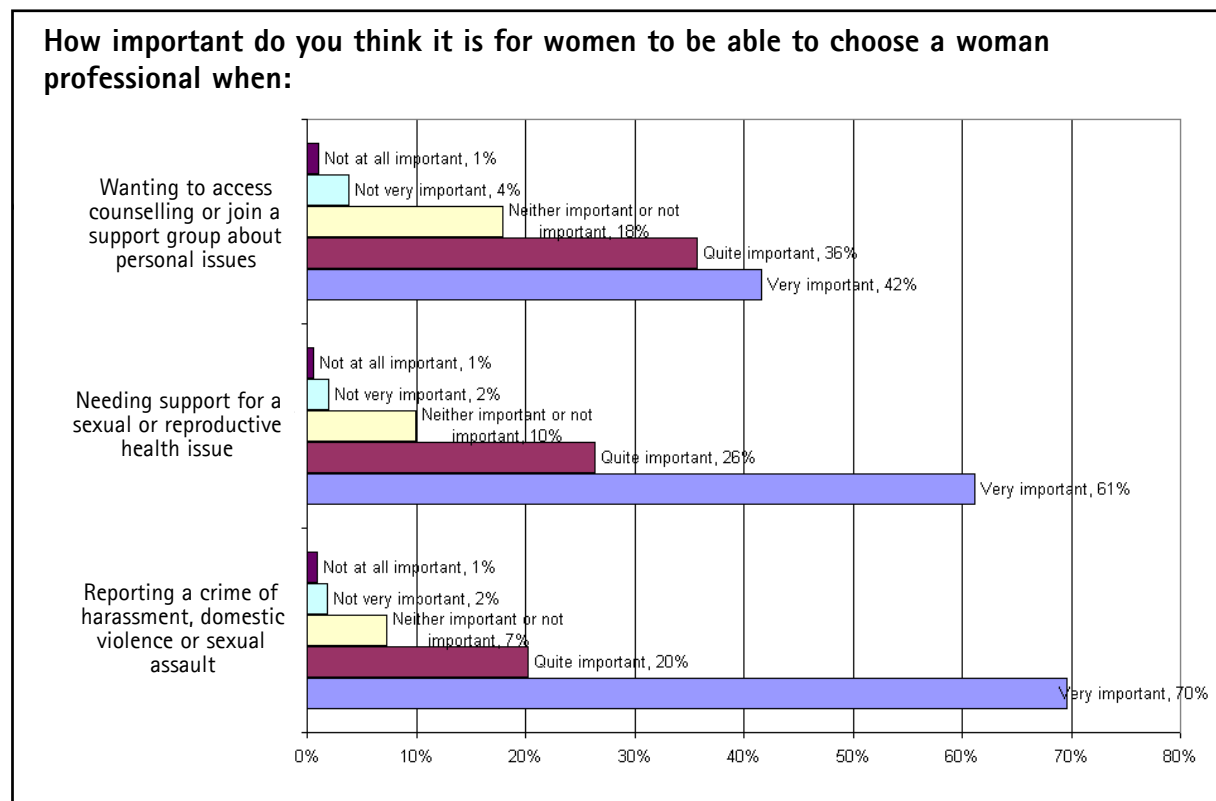
An overwhelming majority of respondents (97%) stated that a woman should have the choice of accessing a women-only support service if they had been the victim of a sexual assault.



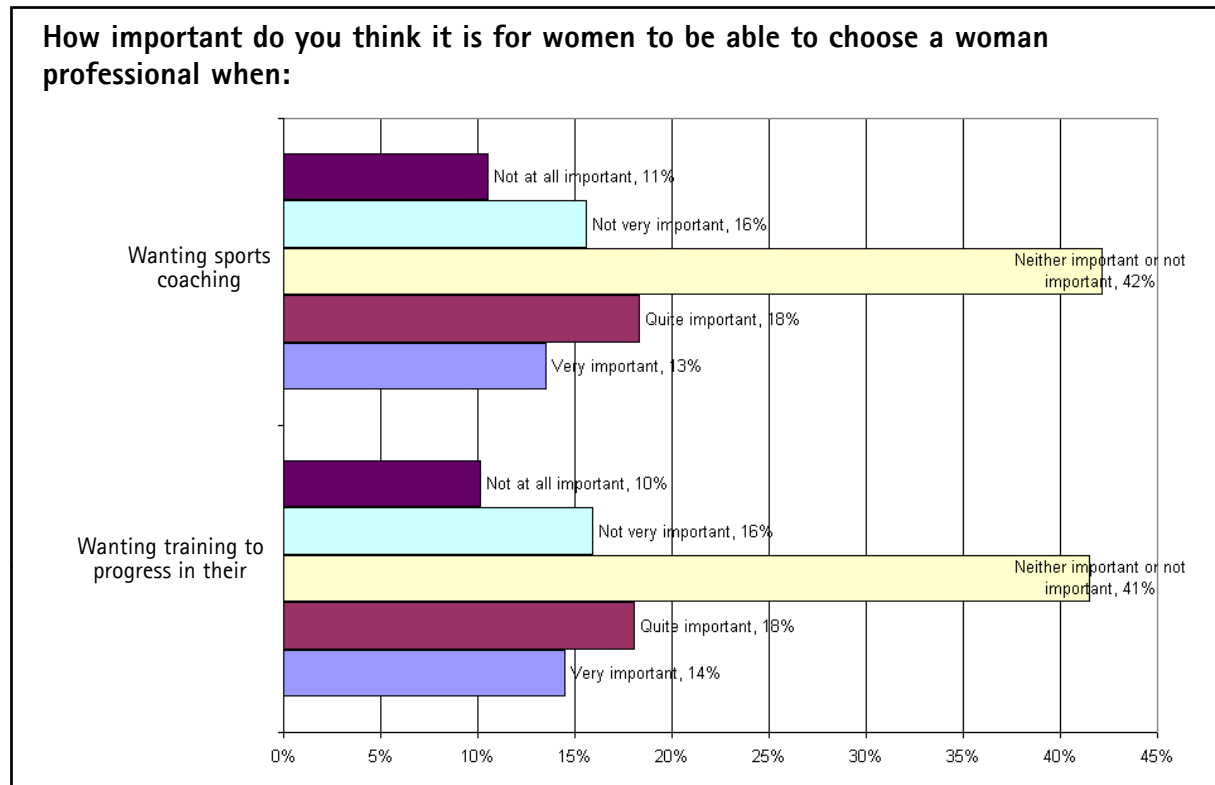
### Is it important for women to have a choice?

Ninety per cent of women polled believed it was important that women should have the choice to report sexual or domestic violence to a professional who is a woman.

Eighty-seven per cent also thought it was important to be able to access a woman for their sexual or reproductive health needs and 78% of women thought it was important to have the choice of seeing a woman for counselling and personal support needs.

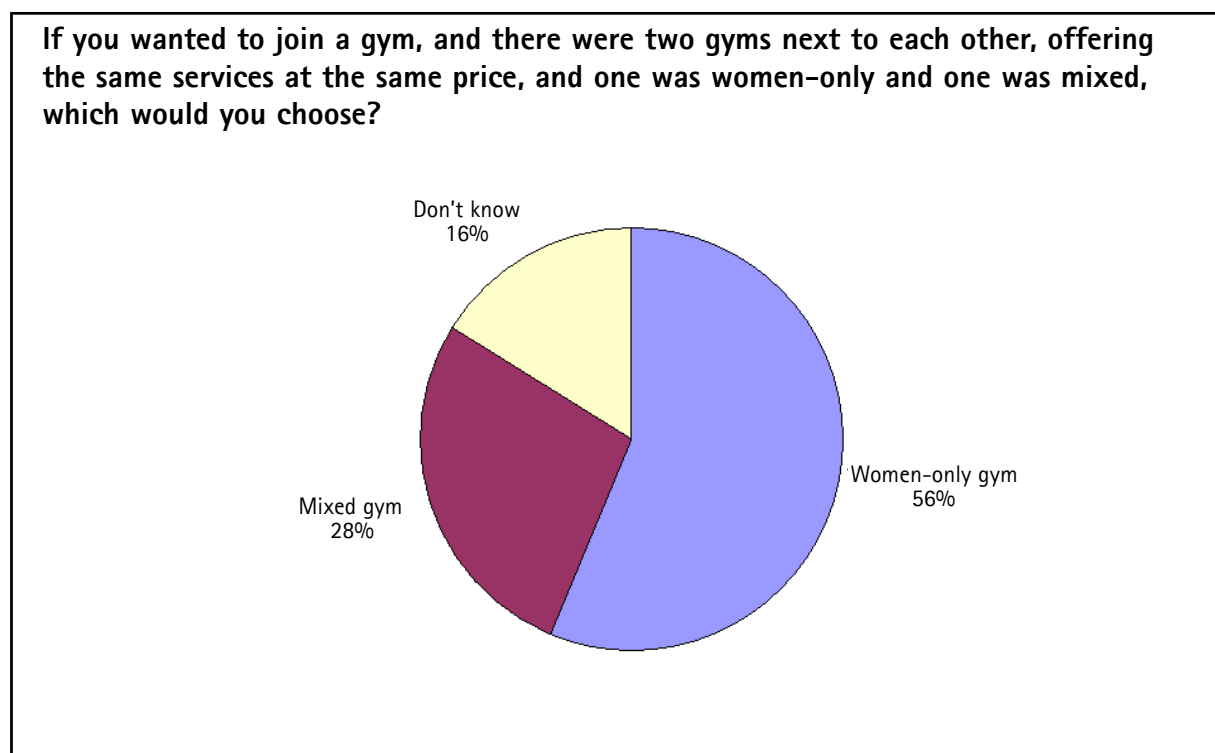


Almost a third of women (32%) thought it was important to have the option of women-only training to progress in their career and almost one in three (31%) women thought it was important to have the choice of women-only sports coaching.



**If you had the choice, would you choose a mixed or a women-only gym?**

Over half (56%) of women polled would choose a women-only gym over a mixed gym. Only 28% of women would choose a mixed gym and 16% didn't know

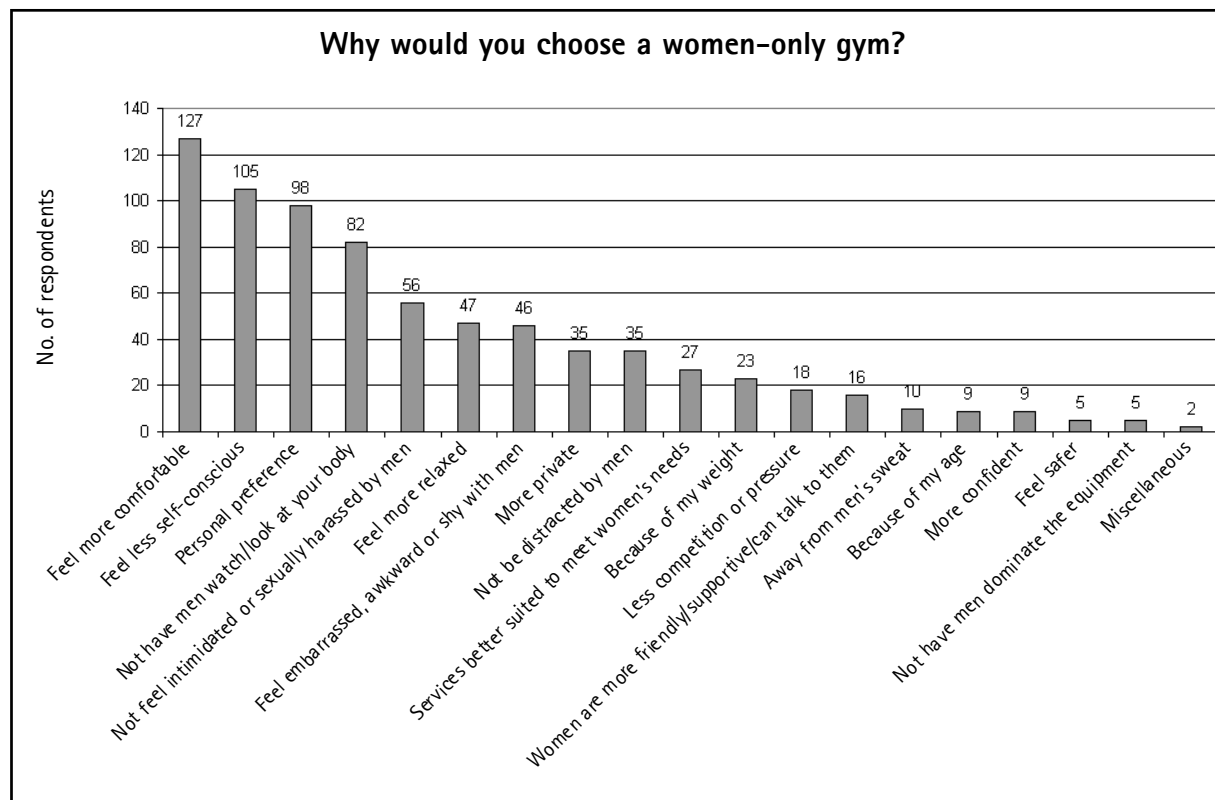


### Why would you choose a women-only gym?

This open-ended question asked respondents who stated they would choose a women-only gym over a mixed gym, why they would do so. Respondents were able to give multiple reasons.

The most frequently cited reasons for choosing a women-only gym were:

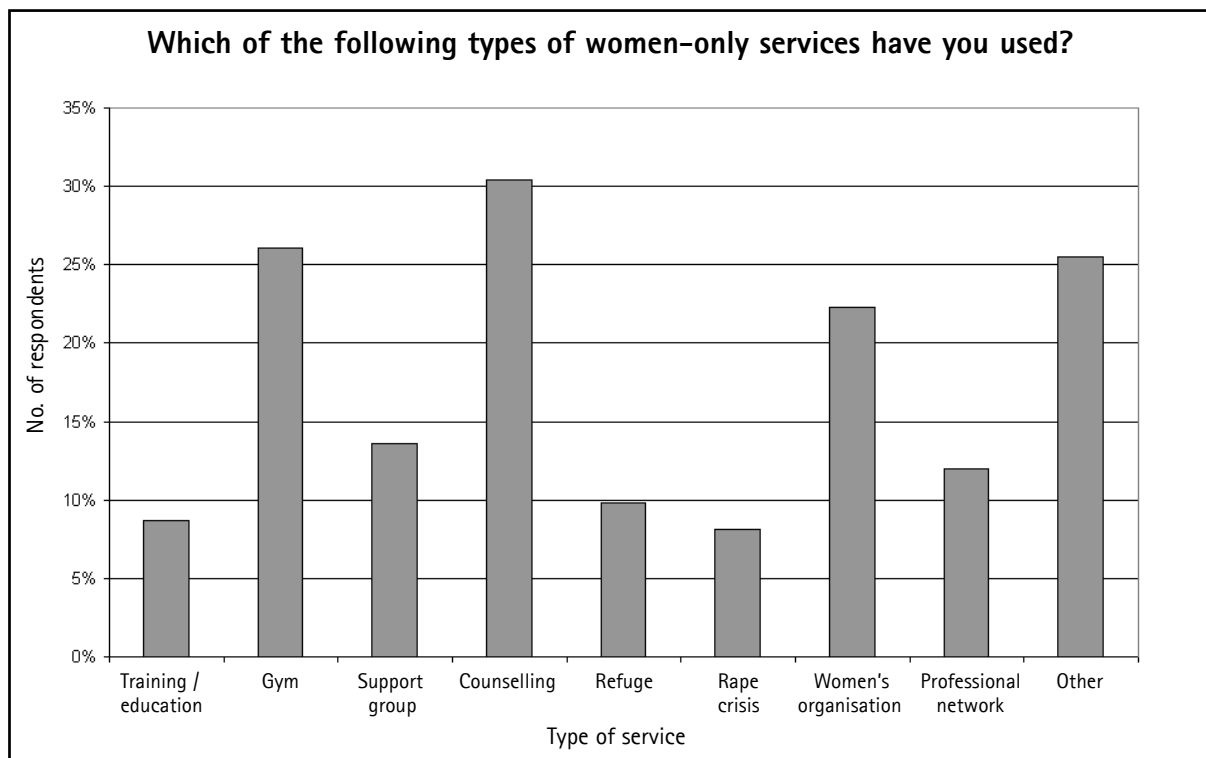
- Feel more comfortable (127 responses/cited by 23% of respondents)
- Feel less self-conscious (105/19%)
- Personal preference (98/17%)
- Not have men watch you, or look at your body (82/15%)
- Not feel intimidated or sexually harassed by men (56/10%)



### What women-only services have you used before?

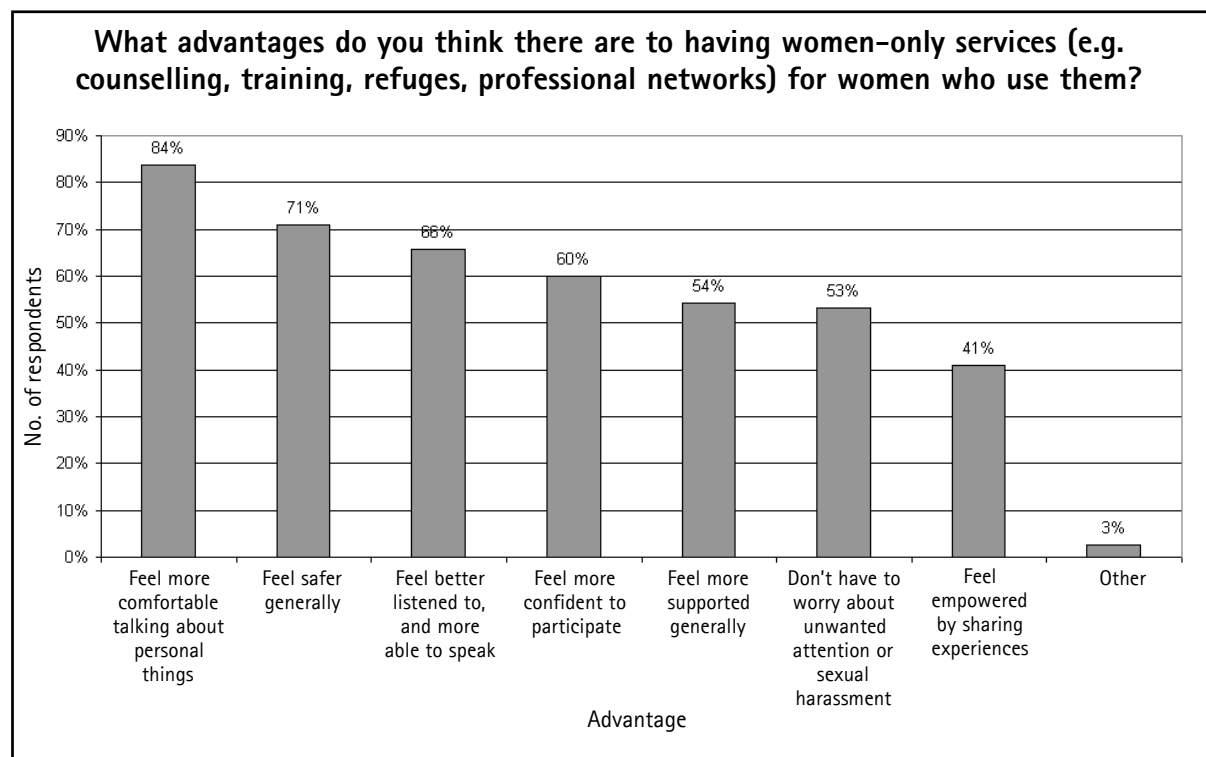
One hundred and eighty women have used a women-only service before, and of these respondents, 56 (30%) had visited a women-only counselling service. 48 (26%) had used a women-only gym and 41 (22%) had used a women's organisation.

However, a wide range of services were accessed spanning professional services, gyms, support groups, refuges, Rape Crisis Centres etc. This reflects a wide range of women-only services that are being used by women.



### What are the advantages of women-only services?

Eight hundred and forty women said an advantage of women-only services was their ability to talk more openly about their lives and experiences. Other themes that emerged here were that women had a feeling of safety, of being listened to, being more confident to participate in discussions and empowered – all without the unwanted attention of men. These themes are explored in more detail in the main body of the report.



### Poll respondents

Poll respondents were chosen at random by ICD research.

Of the 1,000 women polled, 12% identified as disabled, 86% were not disabled and 2% preferred not to say.

Ninety-four per cent identified themselves as heterosexual, 1% as lesbian, 2% as bisexual and 3% preferred not to say.

The ethnicity of respondents was broken down as: 'White UK' (90%), 'White European' (3%) and 1% each of 'Asian UK', 'Black UK', 'Chinese', 'Indian', 'Mixed Race', 'White & Black Caribbean' and 'White Other'. One per cent preferred no to say.

Respondents were evenly distributed across regions of the UK.



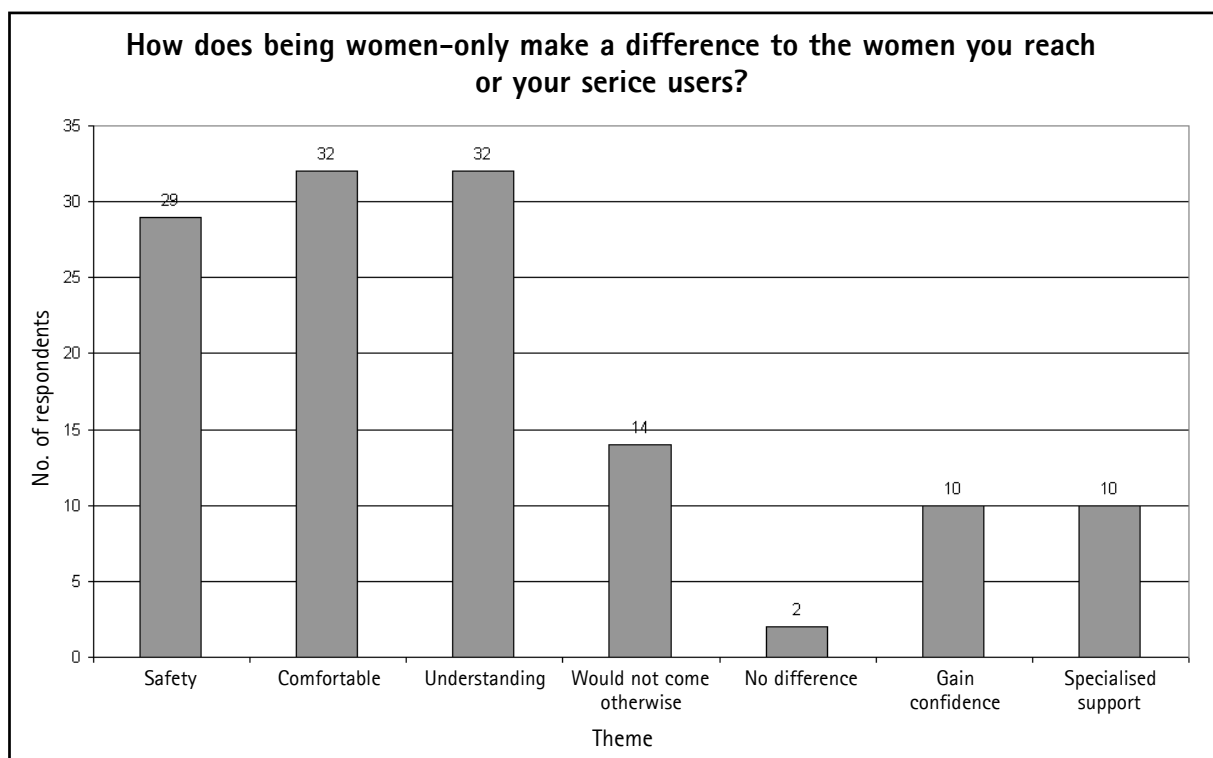
# 8 How do women-only services benefit women?

This chapter explores why women choose women-only services and the benefits they receive.

In the survey, we asked women's organisations to describe how their women-only service made a difference to their service users. Interestingly, because they were not directly asked, 14% of respondents said that their clients would not come to the service unless it was women-only.

The most common themes (see Appendix C for definitions) were:

- Comfort (32 occurrences).
- Understanding (32 occurrences).
- Safety (29 occurrences).
- Wouldn't come otherwise (14 occurrences).



## 8 How do women-only services benefit women?

The interviews and focus groups provided us with an opportunity to further explore the issues that emerged from the survey. The key themes about the benefits of women-only services, from the interviews and focus groups, were:

- Women want women-only spaces
- Meeting women's needs
- Led by and for specific communities of women
- Physical and emotional safety
- Sanctuary – sense of space just for women
- Supportive and comfortable
- Empowering
- Women have a greater sense of voice
- Shared experiences
- Solidarity

A recurring theme throughout the research was the importance of not only having a space or service just for women, but also that staff were women too. This was seen as intrinsic to what a women-only service is.

### Women want women-only space

In every context examined, service providers acknowledged that some women have a personal preference to access a women-only space.

The findings highlight that women who prefer to use women-only services come from all walks of life, and want women-only services across a large range of different kinds of service provision:

"We've got quite a few Muslim women members because they can come in and not wear their headscarves... Being women-only makes a huge difference. It's the reason women come here. If we were mixed, many women would be put off either for religious reasons or because they don't like mixed gyms, it's their personal preference... Some of the people who come here to work out wouldn't go elsewhere so they probably wouldn't work out at all." (YWCA Central Club, interview)

Many service providers had gathered data from service users explicitly stating they would not have come to that particular service if it was a mixed service for men and women:

"We use questionnaires where we ask all service users if they value having a women-only service and in 25 years we've never had a service user say that it doesn't matter to them... They actually actively choose women-only services and that's what they prefer if

they're talking about the details of sexual violence." (South Essex Rape and Incest Crisis Centre, interview)

"[Being women-only makes] a great difference. We have certainly had comments in the past from women saying that they would never have gone to a mixed class but coming here has given them the opportunity to try [new things]. A lot of women have gone on to do other courses." (South Yorkshire Women's Development Trust, interview)

This issue of personal preference also came up in each of the focus groups. Service users stated very clearly that they used the services *because* they were women-only:

"We want to be with like-minded people and would be far less likely to come if it was a mixed service. It would be completely different." (Leicester Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Centre, focus group)

"I most certainly would not have gone if there were male participants there, because it's actually really vulnerable. It's a vulnerable position to be in, particularly if you've had an experience of being attacked or assaulted, to put yourself in that. With women it's just far more comfortable." (London Centre for Personal Safety, focus group)

Even staff talked about how they prefer working in women-only environments, because of the focus it places on meeting women's needs.

"After working here, I would never go back into working in a mixed environment. I find them quite competitive and posey and people are lost in the background. I'll stay here working in the women-only service where you can focus on the women you're here to help." (YWCA Central Club, interview)

## Meeting women's needs

Women-only services are designed around the needs of the women that they work with. This framework, which places 'women' at the centre of their business, is frequently referred to by research participants as being 'women-centred' and was talked about in the majority of interviews and focus groups:

"We respond to them as individuals and in some women's cases they have not had that experience before. They have been put through a system that they feel treats them like a number." (South Essex Rape and Incest Crisis Centre, interview)

"The main thing is that we believe that the woman is central to the service and it's the whole of her needs that are being met. An example would be one young woman I know who has left working on the streets now, and has managed to do a degree and get work. I recently met her with her mother and we talked about the difference [our service being women-centred] made for her. She felt that what happened was that *she* mattered." (women@thewell, interview, *italics out emphasis*)

Organisations reported that some mainstream services were not able to meet women's needs for a variety of reasons. Generic services, even in a specific field of work, often failed to identify and meet the specific needs of women. Without a 'gendered lens', the specific issues impacting on women can be left unaddressed:

## 8 How do women-only services benefit women?

"There was no women-only space for women to support each other over health issues... A whole range [of issues] were not being addressed from women's perspective, even things that impact disproportionately on women like domestic violence, access to abortion, issues around support for lesbians in community care or lesbian health needs." (Women's Health Matters, interview)

"Our ethos and our reason for being is to create a safe space for women to express and explore their sexuality... A lot of people would try and sell you anything and the whole industry is based on false promises. We try and match the advice to the individual woman." (Sh! Women's Erotic Emporium, interview)

"I don't think men would have the same concerns about violence and I think their violence concerns are going to be muggings and fights... I'm not sure that they need that confidence in their boundaries in the same way that I think women do." (London Centre for Personal Safety, focus group)

Being women-centred allowed the service to focus specifically on a woman's needs, which are most often very different to men's needs. Service providers pointed out that this was not about excluding men, acknowledging that men may also need specific services, but quite simply, it was not appropriate for their organisations to deliver services to men. Women-only services had built up specialist expertise in their field of work, which was all about identifying and meeting women's needs:

"We grew out of the Women's Movement so we've always provided women-centred services, which are a space for women to support other women and for women to support themselves... We've worked as a service for over 25 years and have practical experience of how this approach does work and the feedback we've had from women and girls is justification on why it's important we're women-led." (South Essex Rape and Incest Crisis Centre, interview)

Research participants were very articulate about the continuing discrimination women face *because* of their gender and the impact this has on their lives:

"It's precisely because we don't live in an equal society that it's absolutely essential that there are specific services there for women. It's a human rights issue." (London Centre for Personal Safety, focus group)

"I believe women-only services would be needed whether or not we had total equality, because actually it's good for women to have space together and to have their needs met... But actually we need them at the minute because of oppression. In the future perhaps we can have them just for fun." (women@thewell, interview)

## Led 'by and for' specific communities of women

Some groups of women experience greater marginalisation and isolation and have particular experiences as a result of being both female and dealing with the impacts of racism, xenophobia, homophobia, disability, class, poverty, health status etc. (often referred to as intersectional discrimination). Women-only services develop to meet need, so those services which are led by and for specific communities of women, such as Black and Minority Ethnic, lesbian, bisexual, older and younger women, lone mothers, mental health survivors etc. are crucial – they empower women to develop a sense of autonomy and self-determination.

## 8 How do women-only services benefit women?

BME women often want to access women-only space for cultural reasons, and this was raised by many women. For example, in the focus group with service users of the Greenwich Asian Women's Project, women talked extensively about how having a service led by and for Asian women meant that women could safely explore experiences of trauma with women who shared similar cultural backgrounds and understandings, and where they could speak in their own language and be understood:

"If the staff weren't Asian we wouldn't be able to open up properly and talk about our feelings. There would be that extra language barrier as well. Even if we had an interpreter something would always be lost in translation." (Greenwich Asian Women's Project, focus group)

There is, of course, a need for appropriate services for other equalities groups of women, such as disabled women, young women or lesbian women. The benefits of providing a space for specific communities of women, many of whom have experienced particular forms of marginalisation and exclusion, include mutual understanding and support, staff who have expertise in issues, and generally empowering women through role modelling and solidarity. Being able to share experiences with other women that they know "will get it" because of similar histories, identity or culture was seen as crucial to engaging women in a service:

"What we have learned in the past is that if we don't create the environment they may not come at all. Even if they do come they will not speak. That's one of the reasons why it was created – not only a women-only space but also African women's space." (Akina Mama Wa Afrika, interview)

"It is women-only because in mixed gender groups, for people with learning disabilities, men tend to take a domineering and dominant role. This is partly a result of the difficulties with social skills that come with learning disability but it is also like going back forty years. What really hit me when I met a mixed group was that the men were displaying signs of sexist behaviour that I thought had disappeared twenty years ago – actually coming out with the statement 'well you are a woman, you can't do that!' The interesting thing was that many women with learning disabilities then did not have the confidence to challenge that behaviour. This is why a women-only service for women with learning disabilities is so important, especially as many women who come to us have suffered abuse in the past." (Powerhouse, interview)

**Case study: Leicester Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Centre (Women's Wednesday Group)**

The Leicester Lesbian Gay and Bisexual Centre is a voluntary organisation established to support lesbian, gay and bisexual people in Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland.

The lesbian group, Women's Wednesday Group, meets at the centre once a week, and has been running for over a decade. Even when the centre could not find funding for the project for a time, women continued to run the group themselves, because they found it so empowering to be with other lesbians. If the group didn't exist these women said they would feel isolated and alone.

"Everyone has a right to know who they are and to feel safe, it's a basic human need, and this group allows that."

The lesbian women who came to this group described it as an incredibly supportive space where women can come and feel free to just be themselves. Despite the focus on the social aspect of the group, women found coming to the group was a break from the constant homophobia they experience, in almost every other part of their lives.

"Why would we want to mix with a normal women's group? We do that all the time anyway. We know that in this space we all understand each other, we don't have to be guarded or feel like you are alone, or are the only person who has experienced doubts and worries."

The women from the group felt that its importance was that the issue of identifying as 'lesbian', the sense of always having to constantly 'come-out' at work, with friends and family, every single day, could be set aside. In this space sexuality is almost irrelevant but also highly relevant at the same time, because it can be set aside in the knowledge that every woman there has a common bond and has had a struggle to reach this point.

"We are all at different stages on a journey but it is the same journey, that's what links us."

## Safety

Safety emerged as a crucial element and benefit of women-only services. Both staff and service users emphasised that women-only spaces are safe spaces to be, and that this was absolutely vital for women who accessed them.

The concept of 'safety' encompasses both safety from physical attack, intimidation, sexual harassment or unwanted attention by men and emotional safety.

Women-only services are perhaps best understood by the general public, in terms of providing physical safety for women:

"Safety is very important... obviously our refugees need to be safe and some perpetrators will go to all lengths to track down their partners or ex-partners." (Women's Aid Federation of England, interview).

## 8 How do women-only services benefit women?

"We have quite a lot of feedback from our service users and one of the key words that came across was 'safety', [women say] 'I can shut the door to the building and I know I am safe.'" (Women's Refuge Project, interview)

In the Greenwich Asian Women's Project focus group, women were adamant about the importance of the refuge being a safe space. One woman stated that had she not escaped, she believes she would have been murdered, as she used to fall asleep each night in fear that she may be killed by her alcoholic husband.

However, women also talked extensively about 'safety' in a much broader context. This included knowing that a service viewed its women-only status seriously:

"If there was an unexpected man looming when I came in I'd feel a shock, even though I'm quite happy to mix with men usually, but if I go in this context, when I've come for a women-only service, it's a fact that I know that it's protected and policed really well, it's very special." (Sh! Women's Erotic Emporium, focus group)

"They said they feel safe in the YWCA environment, because they can talk about anything much freer in our programmes than perhaps if they were in a mixed gender environment. They said they find our organisation offers them a sort of relaxed atmosphere. They actually enjoy the company of other young women. We also have young women saying that young men take the mickey out of them, as [mixed] programmes are geared towards what the young men want to do, and not necessarily what they want to do." (YWCA, interview)

Repeated references were made in the interviews and focus groups to the different dynamics of mixed gender groups and the impact this has on women's feelings of safety. Women explained that they can feel intimidated by men, which resulted in them feeling less comfortable and less able to speak openly, and feeling that men dominate discussion, activities and or space.:

"I find that in meetings, not all of them, but they [men] can be quite domineering, and make you feel quite little sometimes." (Women Acting In Today's Society, focus group)

## Sanctuary

Many women described women-only services as a sanctuary, a space just for them where they are able to take a break from the challenges and strains of everyday life. It was interesting that this description of women-only services, as a "sanctuary" or "haven", was used by women across the range of different services offered.

"Sanctuary for men is often the home whereas the home for most women is where the second job starts. That was the whole principle behind this organisation, going to work, having to run an organisation and going home and running another organisation, the family, and it was like, where is the sanctuary, where is the escape place where you go for a breather, a quiet think-time? That's where we're going and ultimately it is the idea of this private club." (Shakti Ghar Regeneration, interview)

"There are not many women-only spaces in society and we argue that they could be a very positive thing for women and children, particularly to those who have experienced

## 8 How do women-only services benefit women?

trauma and abuse from men. It is about giving them a safe space. It doesn't mean that here life is all rosy but there are different dynamics. It's a big advantage for women to have a women-only space. There is a level of shared empathy and it provides a safe space that is not a feature of our world otherwise." (Women's Refuge Project, interview)

The sanctuary of women-only spaces was highlighted as something precious, something they didn't get in the outside world.

"We all need time to ourselves, time away from men. If you have nearly drowned, it's going to take you a while to get back in the water." (Greenwich Asian Women's Project, focus group)

"Having the children looked after... I haven't got to do any shopping or washing up or anything... It's all a new experience for me and I'm somewhere different, I'm still thinking about me and the future." (Hillcroft College, focus group)

"Coming here is a respite, I am grateful that we have got this space to come to, it was a relief when I joined." (Leicester Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Centre, focus group)

## Supportive and comfortable

Both interviewees and focus group participants talked extensively about how women-only services are supportive and comfortable. The concept of 'support' was broad and was one of the most common terms used to describe women-only services. Women used the term 'support' to mean a safe and non-judgemental environment, where they could 'be themselves', be understood and listened to, where they could express themselves and could get support and encouragement from other women.

"We are a community development organisation and our work is about recognising the potential of women to support each other. A little bit of support to help people to get together is going to have a massive impact on women, their families and communities. It's about facilitating self-help and mutual support in that way." (Women's Health Matters, interview).

Support was seen as something that was invaluable for all women. A common theme that emerged was the idea that women did not have to identify, or be seen as, victims in order to seek and benefit from support.

There was recognition that women have different kinds of experiences and challenges and women-only support was hugely beneficial for helping women face those challenges.

"As an intake [of female Labour MPs], we stuck together just that much more. We did a lot more work together before the elections, we were much more mutually supportive." (Emily Thornberry MP, interview)

"My main mission has been to provide safe women-only spaces where young women can express themselves, work through some of their questioning, find friends and actually support each other." (YWCA, interview)



## 8 How do women-only services benefit women?

The idea that women support each other differently in a women-only space than in a mixed gender space emerged quite strongly:

"I thought that the fact that we were all women, and we were all supporting each other, was really, really nice... I think in a mixed group, the boys would be competing with each other as well. There was no sense that we were trying to out-do each other when we were fighting back, everyone was supporting everyone else. I don't think that would happen in a mixed group." (London Centre for Personal Safety, focus group)

Many women also talked how comfortable they were in women-only spaces. While the concept of comfort included practical, welcoming things, such as providing a nice environment, it also seemed to encompass a way of working that ensured that women felt able to be themselves, be less embarrassed or self conscious, more relaxed, and more able to open up.

"Women feel more comfortable and safe speaking to a woman, particularly in the early days when they contact us for the very first time when they are very, very vulnerable." (Women's Refuge Project, interview)

"We water our plants, we have a lot of art work on the walls, it's very homely. We make lunches for the women, we build food into the program. We build a lot of complementary therapies into the program, a lot of activities. It could be because we've got children around as well – it gives it a more kind of comfortable atmosphere. That makes women feel more comfortable when they come here. They feel better able to speak freely. Some women don't enjoy a women-only environment and that's fine – they can go to a mixed gender service. But by and large, most women appreciate the space to just relax and be themselves, which takes so much longer to do in a mixed gender environment normally." (Brighton Oasis Project, interview)

**Case Study: Greenwich Asian Women's Project**

The Greenwich Asian Women's Project is run by and for Asian women, and provides a refuge for Asian women and their children experiencing domestic violence. The centre has spaces for both women and their children to stay, with a dedicated childcare worker and experienced support staff. Women from the centre talked at length about how supported they felt by staff and other women in the refuge.

That it is a tailored service led by and for Asian women meant that the women could safely explore experiences of trauma and male violence with others who shared similar cultural backgrounds and understandings. They could speak in their own languages. The participants emphasised that they felt supported and empowered by being with other Asian women who 'got' their experiences.

"We have got the freedom to share, we can speak to each other on any topic. Asian women in this country can be trapped, restricted, and tortured by Asian men... Here, we can learn from each other. Everyone has got different problems in life, but we can walk away from these problems and take control of our lives."

Having a safe women-only space for Asian women meant they could support and empower each other.

"I've learnt more here in the last six months than I did in the last 18 years. If I was this clever then, imagine what I could have done! Now I can speak to anyone, I can take my baby girl out, travel and see London, speak to anyone... Nobody can touch me because I came here. I celebrated my daughter's birthday the other week, I couldn't have done that before."

"Walking in here was like the beginning of a fresh and independent life for me. I'm running myself and the kids now, I can stand up for myself. The past is the past, it's gone... Now I can focus on the future."

Women at the group felt strongly that there are not adequate services available, particularly for Asian women.

,

## Empowerment

Women-only services are viewed as effective in increasing women's confidence, independence and self-esteem. In addition, women reported feeling a greater sense of control over their lives and that they had more options to make positive changes. The research also found that women-only services were able to address the marginalisation, isolation and exclusion many women experience.

"One of the benefits [for] women who have come to the training is personal empowerment. Sometimes women come to our leadership training and they were experiencing quite difficult situations at home and with their husbands in particular... It's a gradual process of self reflection enabling women to achieve personal empowerment and then take the action that is required. We have opened up the stage for them to reflect on themselves that they are important as women, not just wives and mothers." (Akina Mama Wa Afrika, interview)

## 8 How do women-only services benefit women?

As previously discussed, many women-only services described the concept of empowerment as being central to the way they work, and that the primary purpose of their service is about empowering women to find the resources and make decisions for and about their own lives:

"Here, I don't have to put up with violence, I can live independently. The staff here are really helpful and can give you options and choices about how to move on with your life. I have been able to take a step back and have the time to think about me and make decisions about my own life. There's no stopping me anymore." (Greenwich Asian Women's Project, focus group)

"It is empowering just to be in contact with other lesbians, you don't feel like an outsider... For me it is a normalising thing, you immediately have that similarity as soon as you walk in the door. The group is so supportive and non-threatening..." (Leicester Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Centre, focus group)

Providing services and spaces which build women's confidence was a key aspect of empowerment. Being women-only gave women a sense of additional support and safety, enabling them to develop and change in often radical and transformative ways.

"Most women who come here, their self esteem is rock-bottom. They think they are the bottom of the heap and deserve all they get and can't kick the habit. It's about helping them realise they can take control... I can't think of another thing in the world that would compare in terms of the strength of character it would take for changing your lifestyle from being a full on, long-tem, injecting heroin addict, or other problematic drug user." (Brighton Oasis Project, interview)

"I can show you [a letter saying] 'Dear Sh! After 15 years of marriage and three children I finally had an orgasm!'" (Sh! Women's Erotic Emporium, interview)

Women-only spaces also challenge exclusion and isolation. Challenging the idea of women as 'victims' is a key aspect of empowerment, as women are encouraged to focus on their capacities and resources to take back control over their lives:

"If [Women Acting In Today's Society] didn't exist, I'd still be stuck in the same situation. I was in the house with the doors locked and not even going out. I was being absolutely excluded from the whole world. It was just me and my kids. Isolated." (Women Acting In Today's Society, focus group)

Role modelling is another aspect of empowerment. Women can see other women challenging traditional notions of what women can do, and see that other women who have faced similar challenges are now thriving:

"If men were to teach women these [self defence] strategies, most women would not be convinced they could make it work, they would be more likely to think 'of course you can do this: you are a man!' In our case, it is very important to provide role models that challenge stereotypes of women as clueless, weak and powerless." (London Centre for Personal Safety, interview)

"Because construction has become a non-traditional trade for women, a lot of women feel they can't do it, without even giving it a try. By providing a women-only environment we give them the safe space to try and do things and gain confidence and

learn skills, without feeling that they have got to prove something to men." (South Yorkshire Women's Development Trust, interview)

## Women have a greater sense of voice

The benefits of feeling safe, supported and empowered by women-only services allows service users to have a greater sense of voice. Women feel more able to express themselves, participate and talk about personal experiences:

"There's no competition. There's openness. There's no right or wrong, so we can just express ourselves freely." (Hillcroft College, focus group)

"Something very special happens when you bring a group of women into a room – very quickly the masks are dropped. I am talking here about quite senior women from male-dominated companies. In that environment, most women inevitably developed a kind of mask, a persona, a way of getting through the day in this male-dominated world. So when these women are amongst themselves and also when they are well facilitated, they quickly drop that mask and start to be fully authentic. They start to speak from their hearts about their experiences, difficulties and successes. There is a lot of laughter, there is a lot of tears and a transformation happens in that environment." (Aspire Coaching and Development, interview)

Service providers and women service users talked at length about creating spaces where women could find their voice and express themselves honestly and fully, and where they feel they are not watched or judged by men.

"Sometimes I feel that if there are male participants, you've got to sort of watch or be careful about how you word something, or how it comes across. It's not only about offending them, but you don't want to make yourself look or sound weak, you don't want to show your vulnerability. Whereas because it's a group of women, you can say it as it is and be as real as you want to, and you know it is taken on the basis that it is said, it's been listened to." (Women Acting In Today's Society, focus group)

"I noticed in our session lots of women talked about homophobia. I'm not sure that lesbian women would be able to talk about homophobia if there were also straight men." (London Centre for Personal Safety, focus group)

One of the key benefits of women being able to express themselves was that they were more able to talk about personal things, especially, but not limited to, sexual or domestic violence, in ways that would not be possible if men were present.

"When women come into services it's a last resort thing and they're in a pretty bad way. At that point they need it to feel as safe and welcoming and affirmative as possible. I think when you throw in the whole gender politics stuff – especially when people have been abused, especially when there are domestic violence issues, issues around how tied up in somebody's drug use is their relationship with their partner – I think it just makes it that much more difficult if you're going to have to do it with a bunch of men in the room. In fairness, I think it might be equally difficult if you had to do it with a whole bunch of people who didn't speak your language, even if they were women... Men engage in group work in a very different way than women do... You need women-only services so you can cut to the quick." (Brighton Oasis Project, interview)

"I know 40-something, 50-something year-old women, they don't say anything and then they call you and say 'I've never masturbated before.'" (Sh! Women's Erotic Emporium, focus group)

## Shared experiences

Women emphasised the value of being able to break down isolation, share their experiences together and explore how gender impacts upon their lives as women.

"It's interesting because we have women come to our groups who probably wouldn't have thought there was a need for women-only services until they came and then realised that 'actually this is why it's working for me. I've got this safe space and can share with other women who have experienced violence, or being a teenage mum', or whatever it might be." (Women's Health Matters, interview)

Participants talked about how important women-only space was because service users felt that other women could understand and empathise much more effectively than men.

"I don't know if I would get that [understanding] from a male trainer. What the hell would he know about the threat of rape?" (London Centre for Personal Safety, focus group)

"They feel understood by other women and they respond to our understanding of gendered violence." (South Essex Rape and Incest Crisis Centre, interview)

"When you look at some of the challenges that African women are facing, they have an impact on their physical and emotional well-being. When they need support, they need to be able to go somewhere where they can feel comfortable and able to voice what they are experiencing, with other people who can understand, who have empathy." (Akina Mama Wa Afrika, interview)

Women-only services are able to contextualise women's experiences and as a result women are better placed to challenge discrimination in their own lives. For example, rather than simply supporting women to deal with the impact of sexual or domestic violence, most women-only services place this violence in a societal and cultural context, which names the violence as a form of gender discrimination, and challenges the myths which place responsibility onto the woman for the assault.

"We've always worked from the premise that violence against women is a cause and consequence of women's inequality." (South Essex Rape and Incest Crisis Centre, interview)

"Women that are in a refuge come together and they realise that actually it's not their fault. The violence isn't their fault. But very often the male violence that occurs against women, the women blame themselves for it, when in fact it is totally the responsibility of the man. But when you're in a collective experience then you can share your experiences together and you can work the self-help approach." (Women's Aid Federation of England, interview)

The ways in which women-only spaces operate allows for women to share experiences in a way in which they can learn from each other, and can name and challenge inequality and discrimination. This was highly valued by many women service users as they identified that they were unlikely to gain access to these kinds of collective understandings elsewhere.

"Until you hear somebody else say the same thing you individualise it, you think there's something wrong with you, 'why aren't I getting past this place?'. As soon as you get into a collective, and you realise these are collective issues, it gives you the strength to carry on and the strength to put it outside 'you' into something that's not about blame, but about action. It's not about bringing it inwards, it's about taking it outwards." (Shakti Ghar Regeneration, interview)

## Solidarity

Developing a sense of solidarity with other women also came out of the research as a key benefit for women and followed on strongly from the benefit of shared experiences. This meant that women felt they not only gained individual benefits from accessing women-only services but that they gained collectively as well, such as a sense of strength and unity through shared experiences and mutual support. It also had a political aspect in that women felt they could take action to make wider changes to the society they lived in and felt supported by the group of women they were working with to do so:

"The commitment of other women MPs to encourage female candidates and to give them support is very important. I've always had a huge amount of support from other women when going for selections and so on, and I wouldn't have been able to do it without them. So I will always be available to give that same help to other women if I can, and that's really important. There is a network of good solid women within the Labour party, good solid feminists." (Emily Thornberry MP, interview)

"They get a sense of solidarity, that we care about what they're experiencing." (South Essex Rape and Incest Crisis Centre, interview)

Women also talked at length about how important it was for them to develop this sense of solidarity with other women as well, exploring and sharing the commonalities of being a woman across different experiences, backgrounds and identity.

"I *choose* women's organisations and it's not because I'm a Muslim, it's because I'm a woman. It's not a Muslim or Asian thing, or about being Pakistani or Bangladeshi, it's about being a woman. A lot of people assume if you've got a headscarf you can only be just with women. It's annoying sometimes because it is part of me, I am a Muslim, but I'm a woman as well." (Women Acting In Today's Society, focus group, *italics our emphasis*)

"It's about inviting women into a wider community of women to gain support for them. They might not have that support in their geographical community, but we are offering another kind of community for them to get support from. It's being going for so many years – the Women's Movement and that kind of women's support." (Women's Health Matters, interview)

# 9 How do women-only services benefit society?

The interviews and focus groups mainly concentrated on the direct benefits to service users as individuals, but they also explored the wider benefits of women-only services and spaces to communities and society as a whole.

The themes that arose were:

- Supporting women supports families
- Giving something back
- Economic impact
- Challenging the under-representation of women
- Raising awareness
- Social change
- Community cohesion and integration

## Supporting women supports families

Supporting women makes them feel they are better mothers and helps strengthen their families. Apart from the obvious outcome of making children safer and no longer subject to, or witnesses of, sexual, physical and emotional abuse, involvement in women-only spaces makes women better able to parent their children:

"Well, the main benefit is that [women] learn to live drug-free lives and they are better able to parent their children. We had an email from a social worker the other day about a client, who said thanks to your programme she has got her kids back and it's that kind of helping families stay together or reforming families that have split apart." (Brighton Oasis Project, interview)

"We have one woman who was held prisoner by her mother in-law and husband... She finally got away, she escaped. We helped her get to a Women's Aid. While we were going through the process she found out about courses we are doing and she started doing self-confidence building and we gave her information, advice and guidance to get her going in the right direction. We managed to get her son into our crèche so he could be looked after while she was taking courses. She is now standing on her own two feet and working as an administrator in an office and doing rather well with her child." (Nottingham Women's Centre, interview)



## Giving something back

There were several examples of women whose lives had been turned around by their involvement in women-only projects, and who had reached a point at which they were ready to 'give something back' and make a contribution to improving society, for example through charity work. In one of the focus groups, a service user described how being involved in a women-only space enabled her to make a greater contribution to society:

"I do a lot for charity, voluntary work and stuff now. So, I feel I'm giving my bit back to the community now and I'm being a good mum." (Hillcroft College, focus group)

One worker from a women's organisation gave an example of a former service user who was now a paid employee at the organisation:

"We've got some real success stories. We've got a woman who came on a drug rehabilitation requirement so was coerced into coming by the court. She stayed with us and ended up being a trustee of the project and is now a member of staff. So there are people who are real success stories who you wouldn't have thought when they first came in." (Brighton Oasis Project, interview)

## Economic impact

This research has found that women-only services help women to access employment, tackle poverty and make a positive contribution to the economy. Conversely, if women-only services did not exist then there would be a greater cost to the economy in terms of the drain on public services due to increased mental health problems, revictimisation and so on. The economic impact of women-only services was referred to in both these ways.

As a result of accessing women-only services, women are able to lift their families out of poverty, as described by two service users:

"I know, I've got absolutely no doubt that I will get a really good job that's convenient for me. That might mean I set up my own business; that might mean I've gone back to uni' and got a degree... I'm absolutely 100% certain that I'm not going to be on a low income in four or five years' time." (Hillcroft College, focus group)

"When I leave here, I don't want to live with men, I don't want to be one of those mothers who sits at home on benefits. I want to do a course, get qualified, and get my own house and car... My driving test is coming up soon." (Greenwich Asian Women's Project, focus group)

Another service user spoke about the potential economic cost of women being unable to access women-only services.

"Well if you don't give a woman choice, and perhaps they don't end up accessing really crucial services, they're [the Government] gonna pay for it, probably ten times, 100 times more than what it would have cost to give a bit of money to a women's group." (London Centre for Personal Safety, focus group)

## Challenging under-representation of women

Many of the interviewees and focus group participants mentioned, in different ways, the under-representation of women, which covers areas as varied as political representation in parliament to the under-representation of Black women in national publications to the glass ceiling.

One of the focus groups was at Women Acting In Today's Society, an organisation which aims to increase women's involvement in public life through community development work and domestic violence support. As one participant described, "this isn't anti-men, it's about empowering women to work with men, to fit into society". Another participant highlighted the increased representation of women in external meetings, although she recalled being the only woman at a voluntary and community sector meeting and that this was extremely uncomfortable for her.

For women from minority groups, representation is doubly important, as one focus group participant described:

"I think Black women seem to be quite under-represented in national publications. It's quite different in the West Midlands especially in Birmingham. We're multi-cultural and it's in your face all the time, but there are still areas I travel to where they've obviously never seen a Black woman. You can tell by the way they look at you. You're just waiting for them to go 'can I touch you?' " (Women Acting In Today's Society, focus group)

Another example of the ways in which women-only services make visible and challenge the under-representation of women is through naming and challenging the glass ceiling that so many women, especially BME women, continue to face.

"[The company] was originally set up to address the imbalance, at the top level of companies, between men and women and to see what could be done to redress that problem, but also to help companies to bring women to leadership." (Aspire Coaching and Development, interview)

"Many of us feel very very frustrated that we feel we've climbed as far as we can go, not because of our aspirations or our abilities but because of what's permitted. If this was an individual feeling then it might be individualised but it's not, it's about a group of women who are not 'typical victims', who are all recognising that we are hitting a ceiling, and not one that we've created for ourselves. The organisation is there to give us the strength to carry on fighting, not to actually do the fighting for us." (Shakti Ghar Regeneration, interview)

Powerhouse, which sits on the local learning disability partnership board, particularly emphasised the need to tackle under-representation of the voices of women with learning disabilities in public services:

"The gender gap still exists. If you look at our area we want people with learning disabilities to be involved in the political process, especially in local service delivery. Statutory organisations have a duty to involve service users – the majority of those service users are men and there is still a huge way to go before they realise that service users come both in male and female form and their needs might be different." (Powerhouse, interview)

## Raising awareness

A key aspect of women-only services is that they raise awareness of women's discrimination and unmet needs that would not be addressed otherwise. For example, even with domestic violence, where a good deal of progress has been made in bringing the issue out into the open since the 1970s, raising awareness is still a core part of many refuges' work:

"In 2004, when our Safe as Houses project was first set up, there was a sort of disquiet in the community that having another domestic violence service would label the area as somewhere where all women are victims of domestic violence. But things have changed in the last three years: we have done a lot of work especially with the Police and Social Services to try and change their attitudes. So I have seen a shift, though there is a lot of work to do. We are very well established and are accepted as part of the community now." (Women's Refuge Project, interview)

Women-only organisations also change perceptions of women, by presenting strong inspiring images of women in contrast to images or stereotypes in the mainstream:

"Lots of the images of African women at the time in the UK, I am talking about the late 90s when we started our leadership training, lots of women were seen as a victim, and now we are trying to change that, turn it on its head. We started saying 'look, African women are not victims, we no longer want to see that anymore, we want you to see African women who can overcome struggles and who can speak for themselves, who don't need to be spoken for!'" (Akina Mama Wa Afrika, interview)

## Social change

The interviews often elicited comments about how changing society was at the heart of what women-only organisations do. This was linked to feminist, 'women-centred' and community development approaches. For one organisation, this was what distinguished them from statutory services:

"Because of our roots we are a campaigning and lobbying organisation for change, so we work to effect change, whereas many statutory agencies or other agencies don't do that, they are focusing on providing a service not about change as well." (South Essex Rape and Incest Crisis Centre)

One of the interviewees, from a women's health organisation, described how the organisation had been set up out of a recognition of "women's pivotal role in communities". For her, the essence of the feminist framework within the organisation was to contribute to making communities better:

"Taking power collectively makes things better in our own lives and own communities, so the approaches we take were born from feminist perspectives and community development approaches -the idea of getting women together to make things different, to make things happen." (Women's Health Matters, interview)

Often the way women-only services make those changes happen is by making the perspectives of women heard by statutory services:

"We come from a women-centred perspective and we work to promote the empowerment of women and children and young people to have their voices heard. We do recognise that their voices are not heard at all and we want to turn up the volume, if you like. We want to go to statutory, local and central bodies and say: 'hey, women want to say something about the circumstances in which they are living in, there need to be some changes.'" (Women's Refuge Project, interview)

#### **Case study: Women Acting In Today's Society (WAITS)**

WAITS was set up in 1992 to enable women to overcome barriers so that they can take action individually and collectively to make changes in their lives and their communities. As well as directly supporting women who are facing or recovering from domestic violence, WAITS' community development service involves work with women from diverse backgrounds to build supportive networks and groups, address personal and social issues, receive training and take action together to bring about change.

The organisations' domestic violence support gives it an understanding of how violence impacts on women, and its community empowerment work directly encourages women to actively take on roles in their community. One of the focus group participants described how her involvement in WAITS has evolved over the years and how being in a women-only environment helped her through a difficult period, enabling her to get and hold down a job in a mixed organisation.

"I first came as a student. I was at uni doing my dissertation on Black women and domestic violence...My son was about two at the time and he's nearly 12 now so he's grown up coming to events as well because there was a crèche available. The most important thing for me was, I had a year out of my paid job for personal circumstances and I was really nervous about going back to work. So I came back to do my volunteering and it was nice to just get used to being in the work environment again. Because everyone at WAITS knew why I was off I was still made to feel really comfortable and just get on with my job and not made to feel awkward. That was a really big thing. I've only been back to my paid job now since May and I was really nervous until I started coming here in January again. My paid work is in a mixed environment, men and women, so this [WAITS] sort of helped me. It was really nice – it is always a nice atmosphere."

Many of the women at WAITS described how it had empowered them, increased their confidence and raised their aspirations for what they could achieve. In many cases the organisation enables women to lift themselves out of low-paid, dead-end jobs or unemployment.

"WAITS has just totally and utterly made me ask 'why?'. Why should I work every single second of every single day for peanuts? Why not have the confidence to take things into my own hands and try something new? And so because of WAITS I've decided now that I'm going to train and do drama therapy, and that was basically through WAITS empowering me to not settle for second class, second best. So it is confidence, empowerment and a vision really..."

WAITS exemplifies the way many women-only organisations empower women one-by-one and in doing so strengthen their families and communities.

## Community cohesion and integration

Women-only services enable women who are marginalised or excluded to integrate better into society or with people from different backgrounds. While some organisations help integrate women by making diverse women welcome ("We are open to all women – trans, lesbian, bisexual and heterosexual" – Nottingham Women's Centre, interview) there was also a sense that the sanctuary of a specific space for marginalised women helped them integrate better in wider society.

For example, one interviewee described her organisation's area of work as "integration, because it's helping Latin American women to integrate better into British society and to access equality." She explained:

"[Clients'] feedback is that they have been able to understand how things work in this country better, and therefore function better in this country and they become more integrated. Sometimes they have been able to overcome situations of violence and to access safety for themselves and for their children. Sometimes they have been able to sort out practical difficulties which created a lot of distress and anguish in their lives." (Latin American Women's Rights Service, interview)

The theme also arose in the focus group with users of a women's group at a LGBT centre, where one woman felt that attending the lesbian-only space helped her to go out into the (predominantly) heterosexual "world out there":

"I go away with a feeling of collective girl power, that I can live life in a certain way and I'm going to be proud of it. We know that it's not a lesbian world out there, this is a little corner to ourselves. It's so nice not to have to play the 'pronoun game' where you are always watching what you say. Society is still heterosexual... I haven't got the energy to keep explaining it to people. In the group, you walk in the door and fit in straight away." (Leicester Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Centre, focus group)

The interviews and focus groups indicate that cohesion and integration are developed by having centres that are open to women from diverse backgrounds and enable them to mix, as well as providing separate spaces for specific minority groups of women so that they can better participate in wider society.

## Summary

The findings indicate that women-only organisations offer benefits far beyond the individual lives of the women who attend the services. By supporting women they support their families and their communities. Often these women became more able to create opportunities and lift their families out of poverty. The economic impact of women-only services was described in both this positive way, in terms of a reduction of poverty, and in the negative terms of the cost to society if women were unable to access the services they need.

In some cases women become more active citizens and work or volunteer for a charity, sometimes for the organisation that they have been helped by, which they often described as 'giving something back'. Changing society was seen as being integral to the ethos of the organisations, and some participants connected it to a feminist or women-centred approach. Sometimes this societal change took the form of addressing under-representation of women or

## 9 How do women-only services benefit society?

changing perceptions of them, particularly for minority groups of women such as BME and disabled women. Spaces for minority groups of women were seen as an important contribution to increasing integration and community cohesion, and some other women-only spaces enabled women from different backgrounds to meet each other.

So, women-only services make society a better place in many different ways, and as one interviewee expressed it, because of continuing discrimination and abuse of women and children, it is vital that we make sure women-only services continue to be available:

"Ultimately, I believe that we live in a highly unequal society and we as a women's organisation have a duty to promote women, children and young people. It's not about individual men and women. It is about how society is right now. We, as a society, have the duty to promote a safe and non-violent environment for women, children and young people and I think that we can most effectively do this right now by preserving and promoting our women-only spaces." (Women's Refuge Project, interview)

# 10 What are the challenges facing women-only services?

The interviews with women's organisations and focus groups with service users identified a number of challenges facing women-only services, many of which arose in the earlier 'why women?' report.

The key issues that were identified in this research were:

- The misconception that women's equality has been achieved
- Lack of understanding about women-only services.
- Pressure to deliver services to men.
- Negative perceptions of women-only services.
- Women-only services are seen as discriminatory.
- Equalities specific women-only services are seen as exclusionary.
- Stereotypes of women-only services.
- Assumption that women-only services are no longer needed.
- Funding to 'by women, for women' organisations.
- Generic services are being funded over specialist 'by women, for women' services.

## The misconception that women's equality has been achieved

The 2006 'why women?' report (Women's Resource Centre, 2006a) explored, in-depth, the wide-spread misconception that discrimination against women has been eliminated and women now enjoy full equality with men. The report argued that while important advances in gender equality have indeed been made (of which women's organisations were crucial), it is misleading to suggest that women no longer experience poverty, violence and discrimination *because* of their gender. The plethora of evidence is indisputable. The report went on to make the case that this mistaken belief was influencing Government policy and, subsequently, affecting the sustainability of women's organisations.

This issue was (again) repeatedly identified by women's organisations in this research:

"There is definitely still a marginalisation of women's rights and people don't think it's a problem anymore." (Three Bird Theatre, interview)

## 10 What are the challenges facing women-only services?

"There are now more women in positions of responsibility, more women in positions of leadership, but this leads to the misperception that inequality has been overcome. But of course when you look at it you realise that is not the case for the vast majority of women." (Latin American Women's Rights Service, interview)

"Certain issues are seen as redundant and that 'women have got everything they want'. People think that equality has been achieved [and] that [services for women] are not an issue". (Women's Refuge Project, interview)

Interestingly, many women's organisations stated that it is not just men that believe women have achieved equality and, therefore, women-only services are now irrelevant. Disappointingly, interviewees stated that women in positions in power may often share this view:

"A lot of women, especially those who are successful, believe that the gender gap is closed... More and more we are dealing with senior people [who are] women in [central Government] departments. These are influential and ambitious women who got to where they are through sheer hard work and determination and sometimes don't really understand that there are women who are less able and who have fewer opportunities – who can't break through the system the way that they have done. So it might sound odd but sometimes the hardest people to convince are the women. You would think that they would be the easiest to convince." (Powerhouse, interview)

In April 2007, the Government introduced the Gender Equality Duty – a positive duty designed to eliminate a gender-blind approach and promote equality of opportunity between women and men through policy and service development which explicitly recognises and addresses the different needs of both genders. Many women's organisations viewed the Duty as one of the key methods of increasing understanding of the need for women-only services:

"I think it's only really recently, particularly with the Gender Duty, that the culture will shift. But it hasn't [shifted] yet, in understanding that there are differences and people needed to be treated differently, that men and women are different. That's not to say 'one need is greater than the other', but they are different and interventions need to be different." (South Essex Rape and Incest Crisis Centre, interview)

In contradiction to the Duty, even though it is relatively new, it was clear from the research that women's organisations are deeply concerned about the gender neutral approach increasingly being taken by Government. The failure of Government to recognise that women experiences and needs are largely influenced by their gender is counterproductive and risks perpetuating women's inequality:

"In terms of addressing inequalities, a lot of people in positions of power don't have a gender-based, power-and-control analysis of domestic violence and so they talk about why they need services for men. Unfortunately, we're in a political climate which they call 'gender neutral'. In effect, gender neutrality is discriminatory towards women. Gender neutrality is maintaining the status quo which is a power inequality against women... In some areas I'd say [local authorities] are definitely very keen to be gender neutral which in effect is majorly discriminatory, because [domestic violence against] men is certainly far less prevalent....[and] they don't have those same power inequalities in their lives as women." (Women's Aid Federation of England, interview)



## 10 What are the challenges facing women-only services?

"They don't want to see domestic violence as being about 'women', but as about 'people'. It's a money saving exercise as well because if you amalgamate services instead of creating new ones that's how you save money!" (Women's Refuge Project, interview)

Given the current gender neutral climate and the hostility that some women's organisations have experienced, many women's organisations expressed apprehensions about the potential for the Gender Equality Duty to be misinterpreted and used against women-only services:

"I was hopeful about [the Gender Duty] at first and was talking about it before it came in and was saying to statutory agencies 'look, you have to meet this equality duty and we can help you do that' and people have been quite interested in Gender Impact Assessments. My concern now is that I was talking to somebody about it – about funding through statutory agencies – and they said to me that with the Gender Duty we need to look at gender specific services and that includes men's services. I got the impression that this meant there might not be as much money for women's services, so that is a concern. We are lucky because we have a lot of friends and supporters within the statutory sector but I am concerned that the Gender Duty could be used against us as much as for us. I mean society is already set up for men." (Women's Health Matters, interview)

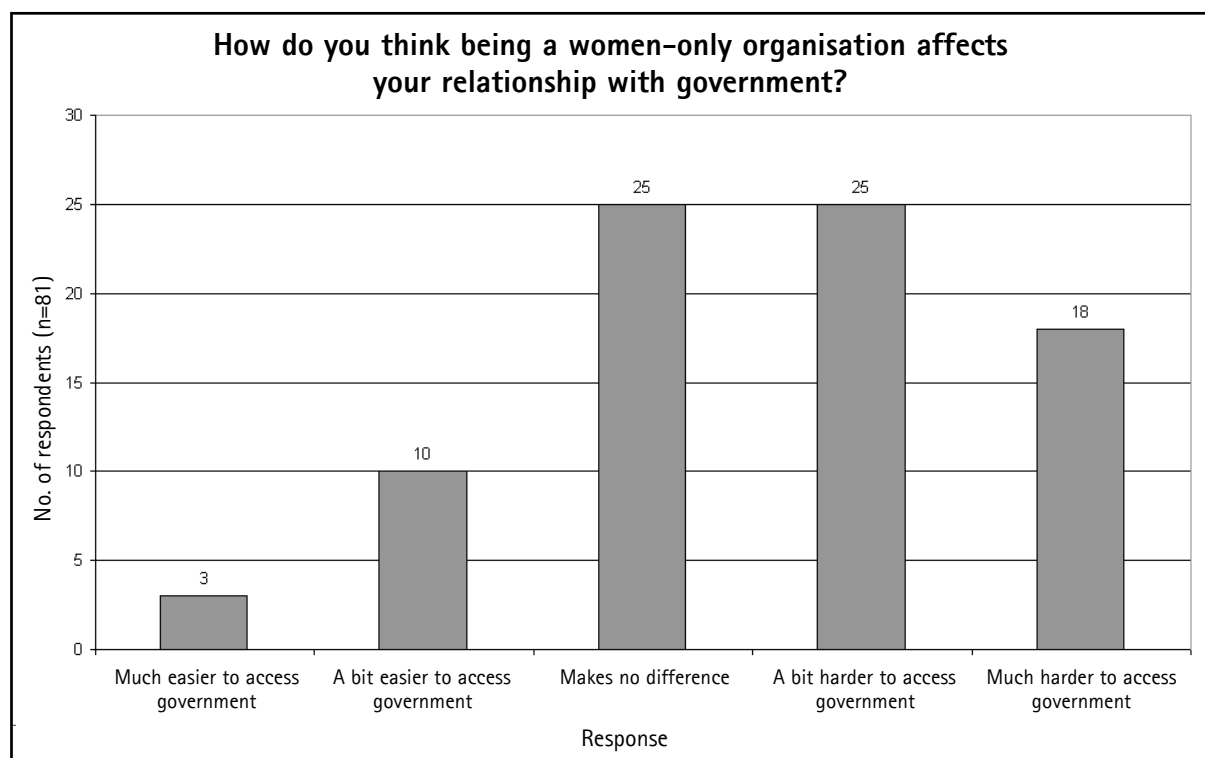
"What's happening recently, which may affect us in the future, is the Gender Duty and why we don't provide men's or mixed training. I believe it's going to become more and more difficult proving that we *are* trying to provide an equal environment for people to train... In the future we may have a problem if we have to justify why we only run women-only courses and not men-only courses." (South Yorkshire Women's Development Trust, interview, italics our emphasis)

"I'm terrified because of having seen what happened in Northern Ireland, particularly in terms of funding and also in terms of how people view the possibility of women-only services. I'm concerned that [the Gender Duty] will be used against services that are women-only. In Northern Ireland there were services that had been funded previously as women-only services, particularly with respect to violence against women. Suddenly, once the Gender Duty came in, services found that local authorities were cutting their funding and questions were being asked because 'equivalent services were not being provided for men'." (women@thewell, interview)

Women's organisations are an important source of 'intelligence' for public bodies and Government has much to gain by engaging women-only services in the development of social policy. However, given the lack of understanding about women-only services and the gender neutral policy climate, women's organisations are finding it increasingly difficult to influence decision makers.

## 10 What are the challenges facing women-only services?

In our survey of women-only services, 43% thought their women-only status made it more difficult to access government decision makers and only 13% felt being women-only made it easier (25% said it made no difference).



Organisations working with, and voicing the needs of, women who experience intersectional (sometimes referred to as 'multiple') discrimination are at risk of being further marginalised in a gender neutral climate:

"The other thing is the whole process with the EOC [Equal Opportunities Commission] going into the Human Rights Commission. I think there is a real danger that gender equality will be lost from the political agenda, especially in disability organisations. My colleagues working in BME organisations say there is a real concern that the multiple needs of women who are disabled and who come from ethnic minority background are going to be forgotten." (Powerhouse, interview)

"How we can go about ensuring that people know of our organisation, and that we have an impact? If we are not able to ensure that their voices are heard through us, then it limits the impact we can have on society." (Akina Mama Wa Afrika, interview)

## Lack of understanding about women-only services

The impacts of the 'equality myth' on women-only services are far reaching. Interviews with women's organisations and focus groups with service users revealed that, as a result of the lack of understanding about the ongoing and systemic nature of women's inequality, women's organisations are experiencing increased pressure to repeatedly justify, to funders, policy makers and other voluntary and community organisations, why their services are women-only.

Women's organisations expressed frustration at the lack of understanding about women-only services and why they are needed:

## 10 What are the challenges facing women-only services?

"I think there might not be an understanding of the need for women-only services but there certainly is respect for our particular organisation and what we do. But we're still having to make the case all the time – it's not like I don't have to explain 'why women' anymore, I have to say it all the time. I think sometimes we forget, as women's organisations, that we need to precede everything with 'why women' – every funding bid, every meeting and every proposal. You have to talk about your organisation and do the why women bit." (Women's Health Matters, interview)

"I am sure there are many men and women out there who don't quite understand [why 'by women, for women' organisations are important] because they haven't gone through some of the trauma that the women who come here have gone through." (Nottingham Women's Centre, interview)

Several interviewees stated that the highly visible women's rights movement of the 1980s, and before, had facilitated a strong understanding of the need for women-only services and political spaces:

"In the 1980s there was a period of growth, when we were talking loud about gender. But since then there has been a backlash and the 'false equality' trap is part of it. Now, when we talk about provision for women we are asked 'what about provision for men?' and 'women have come a long way, we don't need women-only services anymore'. Single-sex work was more accepted, but the prevalent ideology is that, with few exceptions, there is no longer any need for women-only spaces." (London Centre for Personal Safety, interview)

In the absence of a strong political and public awareness of gender inequality, the invisibility of, and lack of understanding of why there is a need for, women-only services is exacerbated:

"The thing about women-only services is that they're not visible. How do women know that they should have a choice? So, particularly young women, 'feminism' is not visible, and then they go, 'femi-what?'. The reason they don't know is because there's nothing there to tell them that there are issues." (London Centre for Personal Safety, focus group)

### **Pressure to deliver services to men**

Some women's organisations reported that funders and decision makers are increasingly pressuring women-only services to deliver services to men, who appear to be unable to understand why this would be inappropriate and ineffective, or that it would significantly reduce the resources available for work with women. It was widely acknowledged that there are many instances where services specifically for men are needed but that this work should be provided by organisations with expertise in working with men:

"We have recently put in a bid for funding with the local Skills Council. The tender asked for work with young parents, our bid was work for young mothers. Although we were successful in getting funding, we were asked to consider more work to involve young men and young fathers. Even though we have put 'we were working in partnership with another agency who would work with young fathers', it seems to be a misunderstanding of what we do." (YWCA, interview)

"We are constantly being challenged with the question 'why don't you work with men?', 'why don't you have male workers?' etc... I think that the Government is making a move towards seeing domestic violence as non-gendered. I think they would like to see

domestic violence taken into integrated services, men and women working together to promote non-violent relationships for men and women. Our argument would be that there must be separate organisations to deal with men. Men who have experienced violence must have services but we are not the organisation that is supposed to work with them! Supporting People keeps on insisting that we work with men and again it is an attempt to de-gender what we do." (Women's Refuge Project, interview)

## Negative perceptions of women-only services

The belief that women now have equality coupled with the lack of understanding about women-only services and spaces presents many challenges to women's organisations. And, in the absence of understanding about what women-only services actually do and why they exist, the knowledge vacuum is filled by indifference, negative perceptions and stereotypes.

"There is ignorance, mistrust and downright enmity about the need for women-only services." (London Centre for Personal Safety, interview)

Some interviewees stated that their organisations were often accused of discrimination and separatism as a result of their women-only services.

### **Women-only services are seen as discriminatory**

Women's organisations provide women-only services and spaces because it meets the specific needs of women. The research revealed that women's organisations are spending time and energy having to explain that it is not a case of discriminating against men but that their organisations were established to meet the very specific needs of women which other statutory agencies and voluntary and community organisations are unable and/or unwilling to address.

"I often get pulled up by people saying that you are discriminating if you don't have young men in your project. If we are, I think it is positive discrimination, we are offering specific services for young women, because the need's there. We never deny the fact that young men need support programmes and projects too, but we are there because young women want what we are offering" (YWCA, interview)

"Instead of listening to the issue and the need, people usually react with 'well, what about men?' and we get into a whole debate about the differences between men and women instead of looking at what we're there to do, which is to look at need and plan policy and provision around *need*." (South Essex Rape and Incest Crisis Centre, interview, italics our emphasis)

"We get so many comments from men – you know partners of women – who say 'why aren't you doing all this for men?' The amount of times! You just feel like shaking them!" (Women Acting In Today's Society, focus group)

### **Equalities specific women-only services are seen as exclusionary**

Women-only organisations working with particular equalities groups of women, such as disabled, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, older, younger women and women of particular ethnicity and faiths, often have to further justify their organisations:

## 10 What are the challenges facing women-only services?

"Some people don't understand the need for African women-only services... Some people might think that we want to exclude the rest of the BME women. But it's not about that at all because there are many similarities between BME women, but sometimes things are very specific to African women and we can't just brush it aside, say that we are all 'Black women'. Sometimes we have to catch up very specifically. Even though there are similarities, also there are very key differences and those key differences make a lot of difference when you are providing services to women. We always try to collaborate and engage in partnerships with a range of women organisations, both BME and more mainstream women organisations." (Akina Mama Wa Afrika, interview)

### **Stereotypes of women-only services**

As with 'feminism', perceptions of women-only services are often based on negative stereotypes:

"If you go to women-only spaces, you must be a hairy-legged, man-hating lesbian. A) there's nothing wrong with that, and B) it's not like that. That is not what it's about, but you're constantly fighting against this myth and that's exactly why that myth exists, to put women off joining together with other women and sharing their problems, rather than individualising them." (London Centre for Personal Safety, focus group)

"There's a stigma around women-only space in general because it is seen as a political act in itself... People get defensive about it." (London Centre for Personal Safety, focus group)

"I think there is some resistance to women-only services as it can bring up, for some people, issues such as 'feminism', 'divisiveness', 'men-hating', 'a coven of witches'... We recently had a new client asking for women-only workshops and they were really anxious about any possible publicity... So there is a stigma about 'women-only' and our challenge would be to tell people that this is not the case." (Aspire Coaching and Development, interview)

"Some women might not want to come to a women-only group because 'isn't that where lesbians go and I don't want to be seen as a lesbian, or a feminist!'" (Sh! Women's Erotic Emporium, focus group)

## Assumption that women-only services are no longer needed

Without understanding that discrimination and inequality against women continues and the lack of understanding about women-only services, including some negative perceptions, women-only services are often regarded by funders and decision makers as irrelevant and unnecessary:

"I don't think most people understand [why women-only services are needed] because they think equality has been reached... People ask 'why do we need women-only services, because equality has been met?' Well, you try being an asylum seeking woman in Britain escaping violence and having a baby, because you will find that being a woman has a disproportionate effect on your situation then." (Women's Health Matters, interview)

"It has been suggested over the years that because women have come so far that maybe there is no longer a need, and these messages stick. I think we constantly have to

campaign to remind people that although we have come a long way we also have a long way to go. Women-only organisations are still needed to drive those messages and to drive that continued need for advocacy and to progress." (Latin American Women's Rights Service, interview)

## Funding to 'by women, for women' organisations

In 2002/03, only 1.2% of central Government funding to the voluntary and community sector in the UK went to women's organisations (Mocroft and Zimmeck, 2004), despite making up 7% of registered charities (Women's Resource Centre, 2006a). In 2006, WRC conducted a snapshot audit of 26 different central Government funding streams. The research found that, along with lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) organisations, the women's sector receives less funding than any other equalities groups in the funding stakes (Women's Resource Centre, 2006b). The impact of the belief that women-only services are unnecessary and irrelevant is likely to be significantly influencing funding to the women's sector.

As to be expected, funding was the most pressing issue identified by the women's organisations interviewed in this research. However, evidence from the research indicates that this is likely to be compounded by the fact that they are women-only:

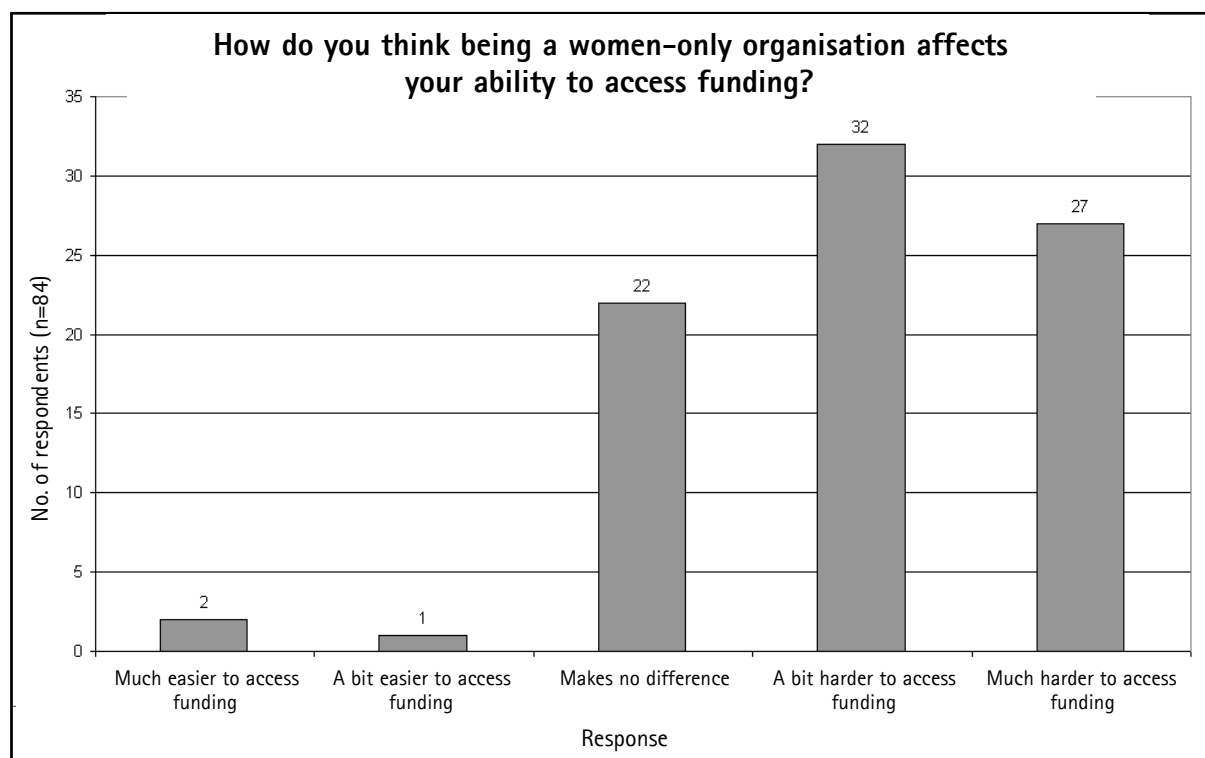
"Looking back to when the organisation was first set up, it is much, much harder today to get funding from social services, from statutory sources and also from charitable trusts that in the past had supported women's issues. Now they seem to think that there is no such thing as a gender gap and that the struggle for equality has been won. It is very difficult to explain that it is very far from being won. Often the people who control the funds are men of a certain age, from a certain establishment background... You have to explain yourself. If you were working for a mixed gender group you would not have to. You have to justify the reason *why* you are a women's organisation first before you can then justify the need that you are servicing. That seems to be an additional hurdle. You've got to convince people that a women's organisation is worthy of support before you even get to the general bargaining issue." (Powerhouse, interview, italics our emphasis)

"We went for one funding stream that was targeting women and didn't get it. So we've never tried to access funding on that basis which is reflective of the fact that centrally and at the charitable trust level, there is not much push for saying there is a need for women-only services... There doesn't seem to be a drive in the UK to resource and fund women-only work. We've only ever got our funding on delivering on mainstream agendas... I've never tried again to apply for funding based on being women-only." (Brighton Oasis Project, interview)

"Everyone is competing for the small pot of funding. As an African women's organisation we are marginalised and so it's hard for us to push through and get access to funding because we have problems related to lack of visibility." (Akina Mama Wa Afrika, interview)

## 10 What are the challenges facing women-only services?

Of those organisations that answered the following survey question, 59% felt that being a women's organisation made it harder to access funding, while just 3% felt that it made it easier (22% said it made no difference).



Some women's organisations that took part in the interviews believed that funding of women-only services is inextricably linked to the lack of political will to address women's persistent inequality:

"Funding for women's organisations has hit the bottom because there is no political will to support women's organisations." (London Centre for Personal Safety, interview)

"We are the only women's organisation in Brighton and Hove who has not had its funding lost or cut, in fact we have expanded over the last years. But, for instance, we know of an organisation that provides women-only space to women with mental health and substance misuse issues and it lost its funds from the local authority. Now there is nothing available to them at all. At the end of the day, if women-only spaces were actually seen as important then the funding would be there!" (Women's Refuge Project, interview)

One interviewee commented on the recent proposals by the Government's Commission on Integration and Cohesion (2007) that funding to 'single identity groups' should become the 'exception rather than the rule'.

"In this recent report, suggesting that special group organisations maybe shouldn't be funded, these kinds of recommendations can have a profound, detrimental impact because people take a very reduced message from recommendations of this nature. They don't necessarily look at all the qualifications or the subtleties of a study of that nature and therefore people are left with one blanket impression, you know, 'single issue organisations = bad'. People draw rather blanket conclusions and that can be dangerous." (Latin American Women's Rights Service, interview)

## 10 What are the challenges facing women-only services?

"Since September 11th the climate has changed. Now we're all supposedly fighting terrorism and so the focus is not on human rights... As an organisation working with women, and trying to put African women's rights forward, it's difficult in terms of funding because it's not a priority area anymore." (Akina Mama Wa Afrika, interview)

One focus group participant expressed frustration at the disbelief of the need for lesbian-only space:

"I get really angry when people say there is no need for these groups. Lesbian women are a minority group and therefore will suffer in the society we live in. There needs to be more of them, especially outside London." (Leicester Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Centre, focus group)

### **Generic services are being funded over specialist 'by women, for women' services**

In 2006, WRC conducted a 'snap shot' audit of central Government funding to the voluntary and community sector. We were concerned to find that there was a significant difference in favour of generic organisations delivering projects to women over women's organisations in 15% (4) of the funds examined. Funding to women's organisations in the Victims Fund (Provision for Victims of Sexual Offending) decreased by 20% from 2004/05, yet funding to generic organisations to deliver sexual violence services to women increased by 6.6%.

Women's organisations in this research expressed concern about the lack of understanding and expertise generic organisations have in delivering services for women:

"I do actually work with a number of voluntary groups that are providing women's services but they're led by men and I just think it's a contradiction in terms and it's very patronising, 'let's put something on for the ladies.'" (Shakti Ghar Regeneration, interview)

Concern was also expressed about the commissioning and procurement approach to funding the voluntary and community sector, which is increasingly replacing needs-led grants programmes. Organisations across the third sector have expressed concern at this approach, with many believing that larger, generic organisations will be preferred over small, specialist organisations:

"I think the bigger danger for women-only services is they tend to be smaller, specialist and niche, even though they might be part of a bigger network, such as Women's Aid. The challenges of funding often bring competition in, even within women-only services. I think in a world that's moving far more towards commissioned services and procurement, that this actually benefits larger organisations, where you have economies of scale. You've got centralised core services which make you, on paper, seem more efficient. Those services are then able to come up and they tender for women-only services but they're providing them through a non-women-led organisation, with all of the problems that come with that. I think we may well be in a situation where local authorities procure women-only services and may well fit them within the Gender Duty, but actually they'll provide them in a non-women-centred way, and I have huge concerns about that." (women@thewell, interview)



## Summary

There is a lack of understanding about women-only services which coupled with the 'equality myth' is resulting in women-only services being increasingly pressured to justify why their services are women-only.

Despite the added value that a women-only ethos brings, and the introduction of the Gender Equality Duty in April 2007, women's organisations are increasingly having to justify their gender specific services – services which have historically been recognised as both valid and necessary by Government and the public generally.

In the absence of understanding what women-only services actually do and why they exist, women-only services are seen as discriminatory, and minority women-only services are often viewed as exclusionary.

Added to this is a deep concern, shared by the women's sector across the country, that Government policy is becoming 'gender neutral' and, subsequently, 'women' and women's organisations are rarely deemed a funding priority.

As a result, some women's organisations reported that funders and decision makers are pressuring their organisations to deliver services to men. Some organisations have reported that services for men are being driven up the political agenda at the expense of funding for women's services. Finally, the research found that over half (59%) of survey participants believed that it is harder for their organisations to get funding because they are women-only.

# 11 Conclusion and recommendations

## Conclusion

This research has demonstrated a clear need for the preservation and active support of women-only services, across fields as diverse as violence, the arts, health and professional development.

Women-only services are needed and wanted by women and have significant, positive impacts on their service users. The value and benefits of women-only services are many – women feel safe, supported and comfortable using women-only services. They become empowered, increase their confidence and self esteem, feel less marginalised and more able to express themselves. Women using these services feel that their voices are heard and listened to.

Through sharing their experiences with other women, they can make sense of the world and their experiences together and develop a sense of solidarity. They often go on to take action to make their world a better place: feeling supported to become better mothers; feeling empowered to get better jobs; healing from the devastating impacts of violence; taking back control over their lives; challenging the discrimination they see around them; and 'giving back' to the communities they live and work in. Women-only services are a sanctuary for many women.

Women want to have the choice to access women-only services. The study found that many women would not access mixed services, even if there were no appropriate women-only services available.

Women-only services address social exclusion and community cohesion, particularly through the provision of specialist women-only services run by and for minority groups of women. These services reach and support women who are on the margins of communities, enabling them to access opportunities and empower themselves. They also address prejudice and discrimination and further women's rights.

Despite the evidence of the significant value and benefits of women-only services, they are misunderstood and disregarded. The misconception that equality for women has been won is impacting upon Government policy and funding for women's organisations. Many women's organisations reported that they find it harder to access funding *because* they are women-only, and they are being pressured to deliver services to men. Without a clear acknowledgement of the value and benefits of women-only services, women's organisations will have to continue spending time and resources justifying their existence.

The Government must consider the cost of not supporting and valuing women-only services. If women-only services continue to be undervalued, women will pay the price. The third and public sectors will lose women's organisations with decades of specialist expertise in meeting the needs of women and will be the poorer for it. If women-only services continue to be undermined, and in worst case scenarios are forced to close, there will be significant costs to

society through increased use of public services as a result of worsening social, economic, welfare, health, employment, criminal justice and education problems that could be avoided through sustainably funding women's organisations and their women-only services.

## Recommendations

### **Women's organisations**

- Women's organisations must challenge any questioning of the need for, or relevance of, female-only services by using tools such as the Gender Equality Duty, which clearly states that the different needs of women and men must be considered by public bodies. There is also significant evidence that women-only services are the most appropriate delivery method in many circumstances and produce better outcomes for girls and women (see Chapters 4 and 8).
- Women's organisations should gather evidence from service users about the impact of the organisation's women-only services. Women's organisations may want to use the data to produce information about the economic benefits of women-only services.

### **Central, regional and local government**

- Explicitly recognise the women's sectors' historic and current roles in providing specialist support, advocacy, expertise and campaigning on gender equality.
- Recognise that gender neutral approaches are being implemented by public bodies, particularly at local level, and take proactive steps to address this, in order to meet their requirements under the Gender Equality Duty.

### **Cross-central government departments**

- The Ministers for Women and the Women and Equality Unit, with the Minister and Office for the Third Sector to immediately lead on an interim national strategy for the funding of rape crisis organisations with the Ministry of Justice, Department of Health, Department for Children, Schools and Families, Department for Communities and Local Government etc. to prevent further closures of rape crisis organisations.

### **Office of the Third Sector**

- The Minister for the Third Sector to publicly recognise the value of women-only services and act as a champion to ensure their survival.
- Ensure that third sector policies and funding across Government departments explicitly identify women's organisations as being a sector in need of targeted support and prioritisation (e.g. ChangeUp).
- Intervene and advocate on behalf of the women's sector in issues of funding which jeopardise the sustainability of the sector (e.g. Victims Fund, single group funding issue).
- Recognise that commissioning of services has posed particular challenges for women's organisations and implement strategies to prevent further undermining of the women's sector and closure of women's organisations.
- Use the Gender Equality Duty and other relevant third sector strategies to address the tendency of Government (particularly local government) to fund generic organisations

over 'by women, for women' organisations to deliver services to women.

- Ensure that the Cabinet Office's Gender Equality Scheme is robust and explicitly identifies how the Cabinet Office will support the women's sector.
- Reject Annex D (proposals on single group funding) of the Commission on Cohesion and Integration's report 'Our Shared Future'.

### **Equality and Human Rights Commission**

- As it takes up the mantle of the Equal Opportunities Commission, the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) should act as a champion for women-only services by promoting their benefits as a way of tackling gender discrimination and promoting women's equality.
- Recognise that gender neutral approaches are being implemented by public bodies. In response to this, ensure a robust and accessible mechanism to deal with breaches of the Gender Equality Duty, particularly in regards to public bodies' decisions on funding women-only services.

### **Ministry of Justice**

- To recognise the gendered nature of violence and abuse and recommend the preservation of women-only services, as opposed to establishing mixed services.
- Lead on developing an integrated strategy on violence against women, including ensuring and supporting women-only provision for survivors of violence.

### **Department for Communities and Local Government**

- Reject Annex D (proposals on single group funding) of the Commission on Cohesion and Integration's report 'Our Shared Future'.
- Issue guidance to local authorities to promote funding for women-only services and funding for other marginalised, minority groups as an effective way of promoting integration and cohesion.
- Publicly recognise the value of women-only services, including those for BME and other minority women, and prevent local authorities from exerting pressure on women-only services to deliver services to men or to merge or be overtaken by generic service providers.
- Commissioning criteria of domestic violence Supporting People providers to include 'added value' (e.g. campaigning) and women's sector sustainability.
- Issue guidance to local authorities on funding of Supporting People domestic violence services for BME women which must adequately reflect the often increased resources needed to support BME women experiencing violence.
- Implement a clear direction and mechanisms to ensure funding at local level for women-only refuge-based and community support delivered by specialist women's organisations.

### **Department of Health**

- Urgently review Section 64 Grants to women-only organisations and acknowledge that

specialist women-only health organisations, including Rape Crisis Centres, are at the greatest risk of closure. Develop strategies to promote stable, sustainable funding for these services.

- Reintroduce the key recommendations of the 2002 'Women's Mental Health: Into the Mainstream' and 2003 'Mainstreaming Gender and Women's Mental Health: Implementation Guidance' as targets for local and regional public bodies.

### **Women and Equality Unit**

- The Ministers for Women to publicly recognise the value of women-only services and act as a champion to ensure their survival.
- The Ministers for Women should reject the current Discrimination Law Review Green Paper which threatens to undermine the Gender Equality Duty and develop, instead, proposals which will support and promote the Duty.
- Recognise that gender neutral approaches are being implemented by public bodies. In response to this, the Ministers for Women to establish mechanisms for women's organisations to report where this is happening and for these incidents to be personally taken up by the Ministers for Women.
- Use the Gender Equality Duty and other relevant third sector strategies to address the tendency of Government (particularly local government) to fund generic organisations over specialist 'by women, for women' organisations to deliver services to women.

### **Home Office**

- Acknowledge the skills and expertise of women's specialist organisations when developing the National Domestic Violence Delivery Plan and further work to develop a national violence against women strategy. This must include specialist domestic violence women's organisations who should be engaged at the earliest stages.
- Implement the Corston Report as a matter of priority, particularly in regards to non-custodial sentences and the role of women's organisations.
- Monitor the National Offender Management Service (NOMS), which if delivered without the ongoing and meaningful engagement of women's organisations will significantly fail women offenders.
- Audit NOMS to determine the level of funding for women's services and to women's organisations.

### **Local and regional government**

- Establish mechanisms by which statutory agencies, in partnership with the specialist sexual violence sector, can develop gender specific policies, plans and interventions that are compliant with the Gender Equality Duty and the Sexual Violence and Abuse Action Plan.
- Provide the women's sector with the appropriate resources and support to develop its capacity to tender for commissioned services to mitigate the current 'uneven playing field' between specialist women's organisations and generic third sector organisations, which is undermining third sector diversity.

- Provide the specialist women's sexual violence sector with the appropriate resources and support to develop its capacity to tender for commissioned services to mitigate the current 'uneven playing field' between specialist women's organisations and generic third sector organisations, which is undermining third sector diversity.
- Recognise the extra costs of providing Supporting People domestic violence services for BME women and adequately reflect this in contract prices.
- Use the Gender Equality Duty and other relevant third sector strategies to address the tendency of local public bodies to fund generic organisations over specialist 'by women, for women' organisations to deliver services to women.
- Recognise that gender neutral approaches are being implemented by public bodies, particularly at local level, and take proactive steps to address this.
- Recognise that women-only services, particularly those services delivered by and for BME and other minority women, are an effective way of promoting integration and cohesion and illustrate this in funding to local organisations.
- Publicly recognise the value of women-only services, including those for BME and other minority women, and prevent public bodies from exerting pressure on women-only services to deliver services to men or to merge or be overtaken by generic service providers.
- Include 'added value' (e.g. campaigning) and women's sector sustainability in commissioning criteria for local and regional services.

# Appendix A: Research participants

## **Interview participants**

Anonymous

Akina Mama Wa Afrika – London

Aspire – Coaching & Development for Women Leaders – London

Brighton Oasis Project – Brighton

Emily Thornberry MP – London

London Centre for Personal Safety – London

Latin America Women's Rights Service – London

Nottingham Women's Centre – Nottingham

Powerhouse – London

Safe as Houses/Women's Refuge Project – Brighton

South Essex Rape and Incest Crisis Centre – Thurrock

South Yorkshire Women's Development Trust – Sheffield

Sh! Women's Erotic Emporium – London

Shakti Ghar Regeneration – Birmingham

Three Birds Theatre – London

Women's Aid Federation of England – London

Women's Health Matters – Leeds

women@thewell – London

YWCA – Oxford

YWCA Central Club – London

## **Organisations that hosted focus groups with their service users:**

Greenwich Asian Women's Project – London

Hillcroft College – London

Leicester Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Centre – Leicester

London Centre for Personal Safety – London

Poppy Project/Eaves Housing – London

Sh! Women's Erotic Emporium – London

Women Acting In Today's Society – Birmingham

In addition there were 101 women-only organisations that filled in the survey, and 1000 members of the public who took part in the poll.

# Appendix B: Poll questions

The following questions deal with women-only services (a women-only service is a service that has women staff, and is for women clients).

We appreciate your thoughts and opinions, and remind you that all information is entirely confidential.

The questions should only take five minutes to complete.

1. If you wanted to join a gym, and there were two gyms next to each other, offering the same services at the same price, and one was women-only and one was mixed, which would you choose?

- Women-only gym
- Mixed gym

2. Why would you choose [INSERT Q1 ANSWER]? [Open ended]

3. How important do you think it is for women to be able to choose to see a woman professional when...

	Very important	Quite important	Neither important or not important	Not very important	Not at all important
Reporting a crime of harassment, domestic violence or sexual violence					
Support for a sexual or reproductive health issue					
Access counselling or join support group about personal issues					
Wanting training to progress in their job/career					
Wanting sports coaching					



4. Do you think it is important for a woman who has been sexually assaulted to have the choice to access a women-only support service?

- Yes
- No

5. What advantages do you think there are to having women-only services (e.g. counselling, training, refuges, professional networks) for women who use them? Please choose as many answers as you like.

- Feel safer generally
- Feel better listened to, and more able to speak
- Feel more confident to participate
- Feel more comfortable talking about personal things
- Feel more empowered by sharing experiences
- Feel more supported generally
- Don't have to worry about unwanted attention or sexual harassment
- Other (Please specify)

6. Have you ever used a women-only service? [IF YES, proceed to Q7. If NO, proceed to Q9]

- Yes
- No
- Don't Know

7. [IF YES TO Q6] What type of service? (You can choose as many as answers as appropriate)

- Training/education
- Gym
- Support group
- Counselling
- Refuge
- Rape crisis
- Women's organisation
- Professional Network
- Other (Please specify)

8. How easy (or not) was it to find out about this service?

- Very easy
- Somewhat easy
- Neither easy nor difficult
- Somewhat difficult
- Very difficult
- Any comments?

9. Do you consider yourself disabled?

- Yes
- No
- Prefer not to say

10 Do you consider yourself:

- Lesbian
- Gay
- Bisexual
- Heterosexual
- Prefer not to say

11. In which UK region do you currently reside? [Open-ended]

12. Which one of the following best describes your ethnic origin?

- White UK
- White other (Please specify)
- White European
- Irish
- Asian UK
- Indian
- Bangladeshi
- Pakistani
- African
- Asian other (Please specify)
- Black UK
- Caribbean
- Black African
- Black other (Please specify)
- Chinese
- Middle Eastern
- Latin American
- White & Black Caribbean
- White & Black African
- White & Asian
- Mixed race other (Please specify)
- Other (Please specify)
- Prefer not to say

Thank you very much for your time. The results of this poll will contribute to research being done by the Women's Resource Centre. For more information on the research, go to [www.wrc.org.uk](http://www.wrc.org.uk).

# Appendix C: Survey questions and theme definitions

## Survey questions

The Women's Resource Centre is currently conducting research into women-only and women-led services in the UK (or 'by women, for women' services). If your organisation or project is women-only, we would really value your input into this quick survey.

The results of the survey will be used in our report on women-only services which will be used to launch the second phase of the 'why women' campaign on 17 October 2007. More details about the launch of report will be available on our website ([www.wrc.org.uk](http://www.wrc.org.uk)) in the near future.

We will not attribute any quotes to your organisation and all information will be anonymous.

As an added incentive, we have £100 to give away to one lucky respondent! If you would like to enter the prize draw, please ensure to provide us with your name and contact details at the end of the survey.

If you have any queries about this survey, or the 'why women' campaign, please contact:

The Policy Team  
Women's Resource Centre  
Tel: 020 7324 3030  
Email: [policy@wrc.org.uk](mailto:policy@wrc.org.uk)

This survey closes on 27 August 2007.

1. Is your organisation/project women-only?

- Yes
- No

[If NO, message to read: "Unfortunately, this survey is about women-only services. Thank you for your time."]

2. What does your organisation do? [Open-ended]

3. Are you part of the:

- Voluntary / community sector (not-for-profit)
- Private sector
- Public sector

4. Why are you a women-only service? [Open-ended]

5. How does being women-only makes a difference to the women your reach or your service users? [Open-ended]

6. Is your organisation/project women-led?

- Yes
- No

[If NO: participant taken to question 8]

7. Does being women-led affect your values, how your organisation works, or your ways of working with women? [Open-ended]

8. What are the challenges and obstacles of providing a women-only service? [Open-ended]

9. Do you think being a women-only organisation affects your ability to access funding?

- Much easier to get funding
- A bit easier to get funding
- Makes no difference
- A bit harder to get funding
- Much harder to get funding

10. How do you think being a women-only organisation affects your relationship with Government?

- Much easier to access Government
- A bit easier to be access Government
- Makes no difference
- A bit harder to access Government
- Much harder to access Government

11. What do you think the general public thinks about women-only services? [Open-ended]

12. Would you be interested in participating in an interview, or conducting focus groups with your service users?

- Yes
- No

13. WRC would like to contact you in the future regarding our campaigns and work. This may include information on joining WRC. Would you like to receive this information? We will never give your details to outside organisations.

- Yes
- No

Thank you very much for your time. Please help us spread the word and ask other women's services to fill in this survey!

If you would like to enter the prize draw for £100, please fill in your contact details below.

Name of organisation:

Your name:

Email:

Phone number:

## Definitions of themes

The themes identified in the analysis of responses to the open-ended survey question, 'why are you a women-only service?' are defined below:

- Client demand: Organisation received feedback from service users indicating demand for women-only service
- Empathy: Women-only space means service users are surrounded by people more able to understand or share experience and empathise
- Empowerment: Referring to the benefits of women-only space, an environment that promotes empowerment, freedom of expression, development of confidence
- Feminist: Organisation is rooted historically in women's movement and maintains the principle of women-only organisation, or the organisation's feminist ethos means women-only space is valued
- Inequality: Women-only service in order to address wider gender power imbalance, inequality means need for women-only space outside male-dominated mainstream
- Need: Women-only service meets a need that is not being met by mainstream services, recognises the specific needs of women as opposed to men.
- Opportunity: Addressing women's disadvantage in certain fields, therefore aimed at creating opportunities specifically for women
- Religious/cultural: Cultural or religious background of service users makes women-only space more appropriate
- Safety: Needs to be women-only to protect the safety of women service users (usually domestic violence organisations)
- Sensitivity: The nature of the organisation's work means that women-only services are deemed more appropriate for service users, sensitive issues such as violence, sexual abuse, health and other issues are not suitable to be dealt in mixed gender environment

The themes identified in analysis of responses to the open-ended survey question, 'what difference does being women-only make to your service users?' are defined below:

- Safety: Users can access safe environment, feel safe, don't feel threatened, have an increased trust in service
- Comfortable: women able to express openly, non-judgmental environment, be themselves
- Understanding: Level of empathy/sharing of experiences with other women as they feel listened to and understood
- Wouldn't come otherwise: organisations report that women would not come if it were a mixed space
- No difference: Women-only makes no difference to service-users or respondent doesn't know if it does
- Gain confidence: Benefits of women-only space lead women to gain confidence, empowerment, gain more control over their lives
- Specialised support: Service users have confidence that organisation is providing specialised/focused support, geared to meet their specific needs

# Appendix D: Interview script

## **About your organisation:**

1. Name of interviewee:
2. Name of organisation/project:
3. What is your position within the organisation/project?
4. Is your organisation/project women-only? [NB: stop interview if not]
5. Is your organisation/project women-led?
6. Is your organisation part of the voluntary and community sector, the private sector or the public sector?
7. How many staff do you have?
8. How many volunteers do you have?
9. What is your organisation's annual income?
10. What are the main activities of your organisation or project?
11. How many women use your services annually?

## **The history of your organisation**

12. When was your organisation set up?
13. Can you tell me how and why your organisation was originally set up?
14. Was your organisation set up as a feminist organisation, and is your organisation feminist today?
15. How did feminist principles affect, if at all, how and what services were developed? How do they affect the services today?

## **Your organisation today**

16. Compared with when the organisation was first set up, how do you think it has changed or how do you think it is different today?

17. Compared with when the organisation was first set up, what external factors have changed that impact upon your organisation?

18. What field or area of work do you work in?

19. Can you describe how your organisation is different to other mixed organisations players who work in your field?

### **Outcomes and benefits of women-only services**

20. Why is your service women-only?

21. What difference do you think it makes to your service users that you are women-only?

22. What benefits, short or long-term, do women get out of coming to women-only service? Can you give us any examples of how women have benefited from coming to your service?

23. Is your organisation women-led? (We define 'women-led' as being when staff and volunteers, including the management committee, are women, so that services are developed and run 'by women, for women')

If YES, go to Question 24 and 25

If NO, go to Question 26

If YES to 23:

24. Why are you 'women-led'?

25. How do you think being a women-led organisation makes a difference to how you provide services to women, if at all?

NOW go to 27

If NO to 23:

26. How do you think being a women-led organisation would make a difference to how you provide services to women, if at all?

27. Do you think women-only services are needed? If yes, why?

28. Do you think most people understand why women-only services are needed?

### **Challenges and opportunities facing women-only services**

29. Have you heard of the Gender Equality Duty?

30. If yes, has the Gender Duty affected your service at all?

31. Do you sit on any local forums or partnerships? If yes, which ones, and can you say briefly what your experience of this has been?

32. In your experience, is there a general understanding by local government and local partnerships of the need for women-only services?

33. In your experience, is there a general understanding by central government, including government departments, of the need for women-only services?

34. As a women-only service, what would you say are the biggest challenges facing your service?

35. What has been your experience of funding, as a women-only service?

36. As a women-only service, what would you say are the biggest opportunities for your service?

### **Final questions**

37. Do you have any evaluation reports you could share with us?

If YES, please ask them to send them in.

38. Can you suggest any other women's services or spaces that you think may be interested in participating in this research?

39. Finally, is there anything else you would like to add?

Thank you very much for your time and your help with this research.



# Appendix E: Focus group discussion questions

## **1. Your experience of coming to this service**

- Why do you come here?
- How does it feel when you walk through the door?
- Is it important to you that this is a women-only service?
- How would it be different if there were men here?
- How have you changed since you have been coming here?
- How would you feel if this service didn't exist? What would you do?
- Have you used other women-only services? Why?

## **2. Your thoughts on women-only services**

- Can you think of any experiences of going to a mixed service, good or bad?
- What are your experiences of women-only services generally?
- What do you like the most about women-only services?
- What, if anything, would you change?
- How do you think women-only services are run differently from mixed services?
- All other things being equal, would you prefer to access a women-only service or a mixed service?
- For what kinds of services would it be more important for you to access a women-only service?

## **3. Your thoughts on women-led services**

- Do you think it would make a difference to you if this group was for women, but had some men on the staff?
- What about if you knew that men owned or managed the service? Or if there were male trustees? (These are volunteers who sit on a management committee, to oversee the running of the organisation)
- Do you think it makes a difference if a service is led by women, compared to a mixed service? (Women-led is when staff and volunteers, including the management committee, are women, so that services are developed and run by women, for women.)

## **4. Your thoughts on challenges facing women-only services**

- How easy was it for you to find this service?
- How easy is it for you to find women-only services, in general?
- What do you think the challenges are, facing women-only services?
- Do you think women-only services are well funded? well supported by Government? If not, why not?
- What do you think the general public thinks of women-only services? Do you think people understand why they exist?
- Why do you think women-only services exist?
- Is there anything you would like to say to Government or funders, about women-only services?

# References

Arnot, M., David, M. E. and Weiner, G. (1999) Closing the gender gap: Post war education and social change. Polity Press: Cambridge.

Amnesty International UK (2005) Sexual Assault Research Summary Report. AIUK: London.

Barnes M. et al (2002) Women-only and women-sensitive mental health services. Department of Health: London.

Breitenbach, Esther and Fran Wasoff (2007) A Gender Audit of Statistics: Comparing the Position of Women and Men in Scotland. Research findings 31/2007. University of Edinburgh/Scottish Executive: Edinburgh.

Cleary, M. & Warren, R. (1998) An exploratory investigation into women's experiences in a mixed sex psychiatric admission unit, Australian and New Zealand. Journal of Mental Health Nursing, 7, pp33-40.

Commission on Integration and Cohesion (2007) Our Shared Future. Commission on Integration and Cohesion: London.

Connell, R.W. (1987). Gender & Power: Society, the person and sexual politics. Polity Press: Cambridge.

Copperman J. and Knowles K. (2006) Developing women-only and gender sensitive practices in psychiatric in patient wards – current issues and challenges. The Journal of Adult Protection, Vol. 8, no. 2, pp15-30.

Crisis (2006) Homeless Women: still being failed yet striving to survive. Crisis: London.

Davis, S. & Cooke, V. (2002) Why do Black Women Organise? Joseph Rowntree Foundation & Policy Studies Institute: London.

De Beauvoir, S. (1949) The Second Sex. Random House: London.

Department for Communities and Local Government (2006) Strong and prosperous communities – the local government white paper. DCLG: London

Department of Health (2002) Women's Mental Health: Into the Mainstream. DoH: London.

Department of Health (2003) Mainstreaming Gender and Women's Mental Health: Implementation Guidance. DoH: London.

Department of Health (2005) Delivering Race Equality in Mental Health Care: An Action Plan for Reform Inside and Outside Services and the Government's Response to the Independent

## References

Inquiry of the Death of David Bennett. DoH: London.

Department of Health (2006) Supporting Women into the Mainstream: Commissioning women-only Community Day Services. DH: London.  
[http://www.socialinclusion.org.uk/publications/Womens\\_Day\\_Services\\_Doc.pdf](http://www.socialinclusion.org.uk/publications/Womens_Day_Services_Doc.pdf)

Equal Opportunities Commission (2007) Gender Equality Duty Code of Practice England and Wales. EOC: London.

Equal Opportunities Commission (2007) The Gender Equality Duty and Schools. EOC: London.

Evidence for Policy and Practice (2002) A systematic review of classroom strategies for reducing stereotypical gender constructions among girls and boys in mixed-sex UK primary schools. University of London: London.

Francis, B. (2006) Heroes or zeros? The discursive positioning of 'underachieving boys' in English neo-liberal education policy. *Journal of Education Policy*, Vol. 21, No. 2, pp187-200.

Faulkner, W. and Kleif, T. (2003) Edinburgh Women's Training Course: An Old Idea Still Working: IGIS: Edinburgh.

Girlguiding UK (2007) Girls shout out! Girlguiding UK: London.

Greater London Authority (2005) The Second London Domestic Violence Strategy. GLA: London.

Greater London Council Women's Committee (1986) The London Women's Handbook. London: GLC Women's Committee: London.

Grella, C. E., Polinsky, M. L., Hser, Y. & Perry, S. M. (1999) Characteristics of women-only and mixed-gender drug abuse treatment programs. *Journal of Substance Abuse Treatment*, 17(1-2), pp37-44.

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

Haag, Pamela. (1998) Single-sex education in grades K-12: What does the research tell us? <http://www.ericdigests.org/2001-2/sex.html>

Home Office (2005) Tackling Domestic Violence: providing advocacy and support to survivors from Black and other minority ethnic communities, Development and Practice Report No. 35. Home Office: London.

Home Office (2007) Cross government action plan violence and abuse. Home Office. London.

hooks, b. (1981) *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*. South End Press: Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Horvath, M. & Kelly, L. (2007) From the outset: Why violence should be a priority for the Commission for Equality and Human Rights. End Violence Against Women Coalition/London Metropolitan University: London.

## References

Imkaan (2006) Annual Report 2006. Imkaan: London

Jackson, C. (2002) Can single-sex classes in co-educational schools enhance the learning experiences of girls and/or boys? An exploration of pupils' perceptions. *British Educational Research Journal*, 28, pp37-48.

Johnson, S. (2002) Evaluation of Drayton Park Women's Crisis Service, a community-based residential alternative to the acute psychiatric ward. The Research Findings Register. <http://www.ReFeR.nhs.uk/ViewRecord.asp?ID=851>

Kairos in Soho (2006) Phase One LGBT Infrastructure Project: Final Draft for Consultation. Kairos in Soho: London.

Keating, F. et al. (2002) *Breaking the Circles of Fear*. Sainsbury Centre for Mental Health: London.

Kelly, L., Lovett, J. and Regan, L. (2005) A gap or a chasm? Attrition in reported rape cases, Home Office Research Study 293, Home Office Research, Development and Statistics Directorate: London.

Kennedy, H (2005) *Eve was Framed*. Random House: London.

Martin, D. (1976) *Battered Wives*. Glide: San Francisco, California.

Matrix Consultancy (2006) The economic and social impact of the women's voluntary and community sector – a pilot study. Women's Resource Centre: London.

McFadden, P. (2001) 'Why Women's Spaces are Critical to Feminist Autonomy' <http://www.isiswomen.org/pub/wia/wia101/spaces.html>

Mental Health Foundation (2006) *National Inquiry in to self harm*. MHF: London.

Mocroft, I. and Zimmeck, M. (2004) Central Government Funding of Voluntary and Community Organisations 1982/83 to 2002/02. Home Office Research, Development and Statistics Directorate: London.

National Council of Voluntary Organisations (2007) *Voluntary Sector Almanac*. NCVO: London.

National Patient Safety Agency (2006) *With safety in mind: mental health services and patient safety: Patient safety observation report 2/July 2006*. National Health Service: London.

Niv, N. and Hser, Y. (2006) Pregnant Women in Women-Only and Mixed-Gender Substance Abuse Treatment Programs: A Comparison of client Characteristics and Program Services. *Journal of Behavioural Health Services & Research*.

Paechter, C.F. (1998) *Educating the other: Gender, power and schooling*. The Falmer Press: London.

Press for Change (1998) Nottingham Women's Centre admits transwomen. <http://www.pfc.org.uk/node/273>

## References

- Smithers, A. & Robinson, P. (2006) *The Paradox of Single-Sex and Co-educational Schooling*. Carmichael: Buckingham  
<http://www.buckingham.ac.uk/education/research/ceer/pdfs/hmcscsd.pdf>
- Southall Black Sisters (2003) *From homebreakers to jailbreakers*. Zed Books Ltd: London.
- Stella Project (2004) *Toolkit: Domestic violence, Drugs and Alcohol: Good Practice Guidelines*. Greater London Domestic Violence Project/Greater London Alcohol and Drug Alliance: London.
- Sudbury, J. (1998) *'Other Kinds of Dreams': Black women's organisations and the politics of transformation*. Routledge: London.
- Threshold Women's Mental Health Initiative <http://www.thresholdwomen.org.uk/>
- Van de Gaer, E., Pustjens, H., Van Damme, J. & De Munter, A. (2004) Effects of single-sex versus co-educational classes and schools on gender differences in progress in language and mathematics achievement. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 25, pp307-322.
- Walby and Allen (2004) *Domestic Violence, Sexual Assault and Stalking: Findings from the British Crime Survey*. Home Office: London.
- Warner, L. & Ford, R. (1998) One day survey by the Mental Health Act Commission of acute adult psychiatric inpatient wards in England and Wales; *BMJ* 317, pp1279-1283.
- Weaver-Hightower (2003) The 'Boy Turn' in Research on Gender and Education. *Review of Educational Research*. Vol. 73, No. 4, pp 471-498.
- Weisner, C. (2005) Substance misuse: what place for women-only treatment programs? *Addiction*. 100(1):7-8, January 2005.
- Williams, J., Scott, S., & Waterhouse, S. (2001) Mental health services for 'difficult' women: reflections on some recent developments. *Feminist Review*, 68 (Summer), 89-104.
- Williams, J., Watson, G. et al (1993) *Purchasing Effective Mental Health Services for Women: A Framework for Action*. MIND: London.
- Women Against Fundamentalisms <http://waf.gn.apc.org/>
- Women's Aid Federation of England (2007) *The Survivors Handbook*. 2005, revised 2007. WAFE: Bristol.
- Women's Health in South Tyneside (WHIST) Writers Group (2007) *Dancing with words*, 2007. WHIST: South Shields.
- Women's Resource Centre (2006a) *why women? The women's voluntary and community sector, changing lives, changing community, changing society*. WRC: London.
- Women's Resource Centre (2006b) *Women's Resource Centre Response to HM Treasury's Third Sector Review*. WRC: London.

## References

Women's Resource Centre (2007a) Funding to London Women's Refuges: Report to London Councils (executive summary). WRC: London.

Women's Resource Centre (2007b) Uncovering Women's Inequality in the UK: Statistics. WRC: London.

YWCA (2005) Single-Sex Youth Work: a systematic review of research into the advantages and disadvantages of providing informal education to women in single-sex environments. Unpublished.

Zennor Consulting (2006) Women's Resource Centre Elevate: Women into Leadership: Phase 3 Evaluation – Final Report. Unpublished.

# Notes

- [1] [http://www.stonewall.org.uk/information\\_bank/history\\_\\_lesbian\\_\\_gay/89.asp](http://www.stonewall.org.uk/information_bank/history__lesbian__gay/89.asp)
- [2] <http://www.brightonourstory.co.uk/newsletters/winter06/theory.htm>
- [3] <http://www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/press/releases/?id=5592>
- [4] See SPN <http://www.spn.org.uk/index.php?id=1016>
- [5] <http://www.nhsinnovationsnorth.org.uk/newsdetails.asp?ID=65>
- [6] <http://www.librascotland.org.uk/>
- [7] <http://pws.prserv.net/mpjr/mp/dm190802.htm>
- [8] <http://www.lancs.ac.uk/fass/events/girlsandeducation/background.htm>
- [9] <http://www.gsa.uk.com/default.aspx?id=535&tab=218>
- [10] Email on 01/08/07.
- [11] [www.ladiesaway.com](http://www.ladiesaway.com)
- [12] <http://www.pinkladiesmembers.co.uk/index.php>
- [13] <http://www.fitnessfirst.co.uk/Fitness-First-For-Women-Gym/Gym-For-Women-Fitness-For-Women.aspx>
- [14] Guardian <http://www.guardian.co.uk/gender/story/0,,2140912,00.html>

# Glossary

## BME

Black and Minority Ethnic

## Compact

The Compact is the agreement between Government and the voluntary and community sector to improve their relationship for mutual advantage and community gain.

## Disability Equality Duty

A legal duty introduced in 2006. All public authorities in England, Wales and Scotland have to promote equality of opportunity between disabled and non-disabled people; eliminate unlawful discrimination against disabled people; eliminate harassment of disabled people that is related to their disabilities; promote positive attitudes towards disabled people; encourage participation by disabled people in public life; and take steps to take account of disabled peoples' disabilities, even where that involves treating them more favourably than others.

## Discrimination Law Review

A Government review of discrimination law and part of the current Government's manifesto commitment to introduce a single equality law.

## Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC)

The former Government body set up in 1975 responsible for implementing the Sex Discrimination Act and other gender equality laws, which has now been replaced by the Equality and Human Rights Commission.

## Equalities and Human Rights Commission

Formerly known as the Commission for Equality and Human Rights (CEHR), this new government body replaced the Equal Opportunities Commission, Commission for Racial Equality and the Disability Rights Commission in October 2007. The new commission brings together the work of the three previous equality commissions and also takes on responsibility for the other aspects of equality: age, sexual orientation and religion or belief, as well as human rights.

## Feminisms

A number of social, cultural and political movements, practices, theories and moral philosophies concerned with gender inequality and the empowerment of women.

## FGM

Female Genital Mutilation



## Gender Equality Duty

A legal duty which came into force in April 2007. All public authorities in England, Wales and Scotland must demonstrate that they are promoting equality of opportunity between for women and men and eliminating sexual discrimination and harassment. Similar to the race and disability duties.

## Herstory

A play on the word 'history'. Often refers to history written from a feminist perspective, emphasising the role of women, or told from a woman's point of view.

## Intersectionality

Intersectionality holds that the classical models of oppression within a society, such as those based on race/ethnicity; gender, religion, sexuality, class, disability and other markers of difference do not act independently of one another. This means that, for example, a Black woman experiences racism and sexism together and therefore they cannot be seen as separate, independent forms of discrimination.

## LGBT

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender

## LSP – Local Strategic Partnership

Introduced by the Government in England in 2000, LSPs are a way of bringing together local people, including public sector organisations, voluntary and community organisations and business to work to improve the local quality of life.

## Patriarchy

Patriarchal social structures are male dominated, male-centred and male identified.

## PCT – Primary Care Trust

Primary Care Trusts are responsible for the planning and commissioning health services for their local population. For example, PCTs must make sure there are enough GPs to serve the community and that they are accessible to patients.

## Race Equality Duty

A legal duty introduced in 2001 following the inquiry into the racist murder of Stephen Lawrence found that there was institutional racism in the police. All public authorities in England, Wales and Scotland must demonstrate that they 'eliminate unlawful racial discrimination, promote equality of opportunity, and promote good relations between persons of different racial groups'.

## Rape Crisis Centres

Independent voluntary sector organisations providing free, confidential, non-judgemental support for women and girls who have experienced any form of sexual violence at any time in their lives. Services include counselling, help lines and impartial information, advocacy and support about the criminal justice process.

## Refuge

Shared accommodation for women and their children who have experienced violence, threats or abuse from someone who lives with them or used to live with them. Many are affiliated to Women's Aid.

## SARCs

Sexual Assault Referral Centres are partnerships between the police and health services to provide one one-stop locations where victims of recent sexual assault can receive medical care and counselling, and have the opportunity to assist police investigations into alleged offences.

## Single group funding

A term coined in the Cattle Report into community cohesion and used by the Government to describe funding to community groups led by and for specific minority groups, particularly minority ethnic or faith groups. The Government's Commission on Integration and Cohesion recommended cutting 'single group funding' in its report, 'Our Shared Future' in June 2007, a proposal which has caused great concern in the voluntary sector.

## Third sector

A relatively new term for the non-governmental voluntary and community sector that encompasses charities, community groups, social enterprises, cooperatives and mutuals.

## Transgender

Transgender (or trans) is an inclusive term that includes: transsexual people who live permanently in the opposite gender role to the one in which they were registered at birth, transvestites who wear clothing of the opposite gender for any reason, and other people who do not see themselves as fitting into traditional male/female roles.

## Victims Fund

A Government fund derived from the recovered proceeds of crime, which is used to help provide community based services to support the victims of sex crimes.

## VCS

Voluntary and community sector

## Women-only

A space or service accommodated around the needs and experiences of women and which allows only the attendance of self-identified women.

## WRC

Women's Resource Centre





[www.whywomen.org.uk](http://www.whywomen.org.uk)



Women's Resource Centre  
Ground Floor East  
33-41 Dallington Street  
London EC1V 0BB  
[info@wrc.org.uk](mailto:info@wrc.org.uk)  
020 7324 3030  
[www.wrc.org.uk](http://www.wrc.org.uk)  
October 2007

