

An investigation into the contribution that women are making to communities through their involvement in small Voluntary and Community Sector Organisations (VCSOs) operating in the South West Region

JANICE ELIZABETH CRAWLEY

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School of Society, Enterprise and Environment, Bath Spa University

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## **Abstract**

This research investigated the contribution that women are making to communities through their involvement in small Voluntary and community sector organisations (VCSOs) operating in the South West Region of England. The research explored the roles the women play and what type of involvement they have in the development and delivery of services through small VCSOs. It also considered what motivates the women to become involved and to stay involved in these small groups and how visible and valued that involvement is.

The research utilised a feminist approach with mixed methods to provide a space for the voices of the women involved to be heard and over 200 women from small 'Below the Radar' (BTR) VCSOs took part including over 180 by completing scoping questionnaires, thirty-two in two focus groups and twelve who took part in semi-structured interviews.

The study found the context and circumstances in which small VCSOs operate contained factors, which have either encouraged or discouraged the involvement of women in their communities, including issues related to women's current position in society. The commitment, passion and desire to carry out work, which would benefit the whole community, were among the key reasons the women undertook the work, rather than financial reward or status. The work of the women involved in the research was also found to contribute to stocks of social capital in those communities.

The research analysed the degree to which recent governments have sought to utilise the VCS to assist with the delivery of their own agendas. The research suggests that women's involvement within the smaller BTR VCSOs could be conceptualised in a framework called the 'Women Alchemists' and that the use of the term 'Women Led Organisations' could more fully build on the contribution of women and to nurture it in a way which enables it to grow and be sustained without altering its nature.

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## List of acronyms, abbreviations

Acronym / abbreviation	Description
ACW	Association of Community Workers
BME	Black and Minority Ethnic
BSA	British Sociological Association
BTR	Below the Radar
CAB	Citizen's Advice Bureau
CD	Community Development
CDF	Community Development Foundation
CND	Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament
DCLG	Department of Communities and Local Government
ECT	Electro Convulsive Therapy
IACD	International Association for Community Development
NAVCA	National Association of Voluntary and Community Associations
NCIA	National Coalition for Independent Action
NCVO	National Council for Voluntary Organisations
NEP	National Empowerment Partnership
NUPE	National Union of Public Employees
TSRC	Third Sector Research Centre
VCS	Voluntary and Community Sector
WBG	Women's Budget Group
WRC	Women's Resource Centre

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# **Chapter 1**

## **Introduction to the thesis**

This chapter is in two parts. Part 1 is an introduction to the thesis considering my own professional role and relationship to the study. It outlines the context of the voluntary and community sector (VCS) since the 1970s. It provides a historical and political analysis of the development of ways in which successive governments since the 1970s have sought to utilise the voluntary sector to assist with the delivery of government agendas. A number of government-led approaches to the VCS are outlined and discussed. This includes the coming of the most recent policy initiative for the VCS, the 'Big Society' and its associated aims.

Part Two Introduces and discusses the small 'Below the Radar' (BTR) groups and organisations that provide the platform for community involvement in South West England, but which do so in a way, which is rarely visible outside of their location. The chapter concludes with a consideration of the position of women in society, focussing on their involvement in small Voluntary and community sector organisations (VCSOs) and the effects of economic austerity on women and the sector. Many of the topics are again included in Chapter 2, the literature review.

## **Part One: My professional role and relationship to this study**

### **Development of my own role in community work**

My own involvement in community work began at university. Having spent time when I was very young being cared for by my grandmother who had serious mental health issues, an interest in mental health started and continued at university long after her death. At university, I found myself organising a group, which visited people in the local psychiatric unit on the long-stay wards. I found the conversations intriguing and wondered how people managed to survive in such surroundings.

My interest in mental health issues continued and my first post on leaving university was as a nursing assistant on an acute admission unit. After six months, due to my campaigning against Electric Convulsive Therapy (ECT), I was moved from the admission ward to a long-stay female ward of 40 patients where ECT was an unknown concept. The women on this ward could not remember how they came to be in the hospital and never had visitors. I was often the only nurse on duty and at

quiet times, took the opportunity to study the women's case files and their reasons for being in the hospital.

Most of the women had been detained for more than ten years. In their case files, I discovered a world of injustices, abuse and disempowerment. It was difficult to see a recognisable mental health diagnosis for many of the women, until they had been in the hospital for some time. My belief that they must have been suffering from serious ill health before their admission was misplaced. The evidence from their case files revealed that they had been incarcerated for most of their lives because they had 'shamed' their families by having illegitimate children or been victims of what we would now view as abuse. Some had minor learning disabilities or had nowhere else that could accommodate them.

Some of these injustices to women have been recorded over the years: for example, Geller and Harris published research in 1999, which considered women who had been placed in asylums from 1840-1945. They collected 26 first-person accounts of women who were placed in mental institutions against their will, often by male family members, for holding views or behaving in ways that deviated from the norms of their day. The women had adjusted to this life, made their own world within the hospital in order to survive. For an outsider to see how the women lived was difficult, knowing the injustices they had suffered, I was left with the question of what was it that made it acceptable for women to be treated in this way?

Incensed, not only at the way those women were treated in the mental health system, but how archaic much of the treatment was, I moved on to the more modern approach of the 'halfway house'. Patients were being discharged from the longer stay hospitals following on from the Community Care Act, as part of Care in the Community agenda. After having no say in their incarceration, patients now found themselves in the 80s having no say in their discharge from those hospitals, many decades later. My anger at the way the women had been placed in the hospital moved to my anger at their discharge with such inadequate care.

The 'halfway house' was for 15 people with mental health problems, 10 of them women. Somehow, with very little qualifications in the field I became the person in

charge. I again found myself with no belief in the system that was discharging these vulnerable women out into bed and breakfast accommodation and seeing this move as 'success.'

I left the hostel and upskilled myself by returning to university, undertaking a Social Work Diploma and becoming a field mental health social worker. I again struggled to comply with agency requirements, which were increasingly seeking to reassess people's needs and restrict services. Outside of work, I found myself with others, setting up small local community groups, to fill some of the gaps that the system was leaving. Among these groups were social groups, advice and information groups, carers groups, volunteer groups. I had no idea that these small groups were part of a wider movement. My only knowledge was of the community around me.

Mayo and Jones outlined a range of community work activities that took place across the country in the 60s and 70s in their collection of writings, 'Community Work One'. Jones and Mayo (1974) describe community work in Britain as a

new and rapidly growing job market.... new ideas and approaches are being generated - old ones rediscovered - very fast, much faster than the rate at which they are being written (Jones and Mayo, 1974: xiv).

There was an element of conflict and challenge in community work at this time, particularly the area of community work that rested with smaller groups and within community action. Dominelli describes this as follows:

Community action presupposes a conflict model of social organising...the model can be militant, bringing people lacking power together to reduce their powerlessness (Dominelli, 2006: 17).

I was not aware at that time of any of this. All I knew was that I was paid as a social worker and I did my best, but outside of this, there were gaps in provision for people in difficulties, which could be easily identified. The only way to resolve this issue was outside of the system. A group of us felt we could resolve this by working together to establish new services to fill the gaps. We enlisted other people such as the local

pharmacist, the local college tutors, and the local youth club. Funding was not an issue. We did not receive payment for our actions. We set up a social group for people with mental health problems, a carers' group, a toy library and community advice centre. The choices about who established any gaps in community services, particularly in areas such as health and welfare tended to be made by local authorities in the 1970s and 1980s. Voluntary efforts in the form of community organisations, as Jones and Mayo (1974) indicate were expected to fill the gaps, which had been established by local communities. People outside the state were not expected to have control over what gaps should be filled. I introduce this issue here, because the desire of the state to control the VCS to deliver to the state agenda is one of the themes that recurs throughout this thesis. From my perspective in the 70s and 80s, as local people, we were just doing whatever we had identified as being needed. We required no-one's permission. We could not do this within our paid employment, so we did it outside of this.

As the demand on the small groups that we had set up grew, so they began to need resourcing. Attempts to dissuade us from setting up new community groups because they were not in the local plan only made us more determined to continue. We saw ourselves as the experts. This was our world, our groups and our lives. I had moved to run the local community advice centre by then, finding the compromises of social work too great, and seeing the freedom of the advice centre to be a more inventive approach. It is still operating now 30 years later.

The advice centre now needed funding, and ironically, it came from the local authority whose representatives came out and invited us to apply. On reflection, I can see that this was because we were delivering what they required, but at the time, it seemed like an amazing opportunity for us to do more and the robust requirements of government funding were not yet in place.

There is analysis later in this thesis which argues that accepting funding from the state could and did compromise the VCS. However, in the 1970s and 80s, the reins on funding were not as tightly controlled as, they have since become.

Bryant and Bryant (2011: 144) comment that

If the sponsors of community work had only wanted to encourage a 'bread and circuses' variety of community work, it is puzzling why so many of the early projects were given at least initially so much autonomy in their day-to-day running and management.

With the New Labour Government in 1997, funding to the advice centre increased, but we were constantly being asked to deliver more services that complemented those of the local authority. We had accessed £6 million in five years in unclaimed benefits and battled with bailiffs during the challenges of the Poll Tax. The organisation had grown to one that now needed a strong administrative core, to manage the funds and report on expenditure, outcomes and outputs. It was no longer the small organisation that I had set up eight years previously and I decided to move on.

### **The growing need to be a researcher**

I moved into the field of funding with a post in a community foundation. The focus was small community groups, primarily in rural areas. We worked with donors who required evidence which demonstrated the need for funding. It was a model based on negative assessments. The more evidence we could provide of people that were in need, the greater the evidence of lack of resources for communities, the more funds we could access for those communities, but we also had to evidence the need and the value of the groups.

I accessed the evidence by undertaking a research-based Masters' Degree about how small grants allocated to community groups were helping to tackle poverty and social exclusion in a rural area. Tackling poverty and social exclusion had become central to the New Labour Government's agenda.

Poverty and Social Exclusion have become prominent features of the national agenda with the current Government placing the Poverty and Social Exclusion (National Strategy) Bill before the Commons on February 10<sup>th</sup> 1999.

(Crawley, 2000:8)

The evidence from the research was used to support my own community foundation's request for funding for small groups. It was also later used for the National Community Foundation Network to gain support.

When I moved to a new regional foundation, my first action was to undertake research into the funding needs of the South West (Crawley, 2002). Based on this research, the board of the foundation established the focus of its current funding programmes.

The findings showed a need for support for small voluntary and community sector organisations (VCSOs). The small groups were the groups who were being ignored in funding programmes.

To date South West Foundation, my current organisation, has utilised evidence to raise over £5 million and funded more than 1,600 VCSOs, most of them 'small' groups. The Foundation has just two members of staff and a board of seven people, all of whom have been or are currently involved in their communities. Research became an essential tool and helped to develop a sense that actions should be based on evidence.

### **The rationale for this research**

My passion for the value of small community groups has never wavered. I have an admiration for some of the medium-sized groups. However, there has been such a change in culture and direction of the VCS over the years, it is becoming increasingly difficult to place the small independent community groups, who rely on very small amounts of funding, in the same 'box' as those larger VCSOs, who mainly deliver services for statutory agencies and whose voices have been stifled.

Research into and evaluation of the small VCSOs has been a regular activity throughout the period of my post in the foundation, to demonstrate its need, or to analyse its reach and worth. The fact that women were the main leaders and deliverers of services, of the part of the sector that included the small groups, was observed but rarely commented on. It was the part of the sector that received very

little attention or recognition. As chair of the Regional Funders Forum, I could also see increasingly, that small groups were falling off the agenda of the independent funders, as well as government programmes. Funding small was 'too difficult' was the view of the funders, although this view was not based on any evidence. Large charitable funders have the desire to be 'high profile' and 'ground-breaking', and they were not viewing the funding of smaller groups as a way of hitting this agenda.

The driving force behind this current research was, therefore, twofold. To raise the profile and knowledge of the small VCSOs, but above all to explore the vital role that women were playing in these groups. It had seemed so obvious to me that women were the community leaders through the small groups that I never sought to comment on this.

In 2004 I was co-opted onto the Board of the Federation for Community Development Learning (FCDL), which was the leading national organisation concerned with the development and delivery of learning opportunities in community development. I met the prominent researcher in Community Development Margaret Ledwith, for the first time and heard her speak. I began to have a wider perspective and realised the wider challenges within the sector, particularly for women. While never being part of the feminist movement, I have retained my strong sense of what Popple refers to as 'a healthy sense of outrage' (Popple, 2015: 119). This is outrage at the injustices suffered by women in the psychiatric hospitals, but also those suffered by the many hundreds of women I have met through small VCSOs who have had trouble in their lives, simply because of their gender. Popple refers to the fact that sociologists such as Trevithick (2012) argue that to be an effective practitioner you need to stay focused on the present, being aware of your feelings and thoughts while attempting to understand the position of others.

It is about allowing ourselves to be affected by the experiences and hardships that people face in ways that move us. In the case of injustice, it can encourage an appropriate healthy sense of outrage, which can propel us in our efforts to help bring about change.

(Trevithick, 2012 cited in Popple 2015: 120)

I was working with several a groups of women at that time, some whom were survivors of domestic abuse, others facing complex issues. They were all seeking to set up small community groups to benefit others, but never saw their involvement being highlighted or celebrated at any level, other than in their local communities.

I witnessed first-hand how dedicated, passionate about their communities the women were, and how dedicated to making a difference the women in the small groups were, but their voices were never heard or celebrated at a higher level. I searched for research on the topic, to use as evidence of their worth, but could find very little. I therefore set out on the journey in this research.

### **Research title and aims**

This research is an investigation into the contribution that women are making to communities through their involvement in small Voluntary and community sector organisations (VCSOs) operating in the South West Region.

The **aims** of this research are to:

- investigate how governments' relationships with the voluntary and community sector has evolved (and its effect on small VCSOs)
- explore women's involvement in small Voluntary and community sector organisations operating mainly, but not exclusively in rural areas, market and coastal towns of the South West Region of England
- examine why women become involved in the small community groups in the voluntary and community sector and what keeps them involved
- analyse the nature of women's involvement and how visible that involvement is
- analyse the ways in which their small groups are organised, their social relations and their relationship with policy makers.

The research addresses the following **questions**:

- Have government agendas marginalised small VCSOs and the women involved in them?

- What type of involvement do women have in the VCS, both in the development and delivery of services through small VCS organisations and groups?
- What motivates the women to become involved and to stay involved in these small groups?
- How visible and recognised is that involvement and what future direction should those small organisations take

This study addresses a number of issues related to its aims. It considers the context in which small VCISOs operate. It looks at the nature of women's involvement in these small community groups. The factors that have either encouraged or discouraged the involvement of women in their communities, including issues related to women's current position in society are examined. Little research exists about the nature of women's involvement within the smaller less well-defined voluntary and community organisations and the way in which the women within those organisations are able to influence the direction of the organisations through their work. The study asks whether it is possible to build on the contribution of women and to nurture it in a way that enables it to grow and be sustained but does not alter its nature.

## **The Context**

### **The term 'Voluntary and Community Sector'**

Throughout this thesis, I use the term 'voluntary and community sector' (VCS) to describe the part of the sector in which the small community groups, which feature in this research, operate. I do this because this is the terminology that was being utilised when most of the women, who are the focus of this research, started their work in the community. The terminology of 'third sector' is often now used, but not chosen by the sector, and is broader than the range and type of organisations featured in this research. The National Audit Office currently defines the third sector as:

a wide range of organisations that are neither public sector, nor private sector. It includes voluntary and community organisations (registered charities and associations, self-help and community groups) social enterprises, mutual and co-operatives (National Audit Office, 2015).

The term voluntary and community sector is a long standing and recognised term for the sector (Alcock, 2010; Craig and Taylor, 2002; HM Treasury, 2002; IDA, 2009; Mayo, 1997). Adirondack and Taylor (2009: 7) suggest that the VCS contains groups, which are:

- voluntary in the sense of being set up and continuing to operate because the people involved want to, rather than being set up by statute
- have a governing body (committee or board) whose members are likely to be volunteers
- set up for the benefit of the public or a community, which may be local, national or international, or a community of interest such as people with a particular illness, political or social concern or hobby
- set up on a not for profit basis, which means not primarily for financial gain
- mainly but not always charitable. Smaller community groups operate in this sector.

### **Defining Community Development**

One of the issues that had challenged me personally throughout this period was what community development (CD) actually was. Looking at the environment in which the women were working in CD is an important process. Community development is analysed in more detail in the literature review (Chapter 2), but it is interesting to note that finding an absolute definition of CD challenged all three of the key national community development agencies throughout their lifespan. It is an issue that was not resolved, even when some of the agencies were faced with the possibility of closure or severe reduction in their capacity. Where was the formal definition of CD? Craig et al. (2011) noted that 'Community development, in reality...has always had an ambiguous nature' (4) and as Shaw (2008) states

those writing about and practising community development have struggled over the past 50 years even to define what community means in practice' (Shaw, 2008: 60).

As a practitioner in the field, I struggled with a definition. Community development was a key component of the Empowerment Agenda. I had been part of the team that was involved in drafting the Community Development Challenge (2007), I was a community development officer, but I had also witnessed the apparent inability of the national community development organisations to agree on a definition of what community development was. The definition agreed at an international conference in 2004, known as ‘the Budapest Declaration’, was significant because it had been agreed by representatives of more than 30 countries. However, this did lead to the definition being perhaps over long and wide ranging, with many words that required further interpretation as can be seen below.

Community development is a way of strengthening civil society by prioritising the actions of communities, and their perspectives in the development of social, economic and environmental policy. It seeks the empowerment of local communities, taken to mean both geographical communities, communities of interest or identity and communities organising around specific themes or policy initiatives. It strengthens the capacity of people as active citizens through their community groups, organisations and networks; and the capacity of institutions and agencies (public, private and non-governmental) to work in dialogue with citizens to shape and determine change in their communities. It plays a crucial role in supporting active democratic life by promoting the autonomous voice of disadvantaged and vulnerable communities. It has a set of core values/social principles covering human rights, social inclusion, equality and respect for diversity; and a specific skills and knowledge base (IACD, 2004).

The declaration asserts that community development strengthens civil society, empowering local communities. It defines ‘community’ as being of geography, ‘communities of interest’ and ‘arising from specific themes and policies’. It talks of community development promoting an autonomous voice of ‘disadvantaged and vulnerable communities’. These are common themes from previous definitions of community development, but much of the terminology remains open to interpretation and further definition (IACD, 2004).

From experience, I had developed the principle that community development was the main ingredient and process that enabled people to undertake successful development within their communities, but this was alongside their own passion and a desire to bring about change in communities for the better. This desire came with the need for the right tools and information to enable that process to take place. For me this was where community development sat. It was like the potting shed that kept all the tools needed for those individuals who wanted to bring about change. Not all of the tools would be needed on every occasion, but a wide selection was often useful. For some the power to unlock the shed of tools lay with community development workers and for many that was not acceptable when communities were themselves to hold the power. According to Henderson and Thomas (1975: 22) skills are tools that can be used in neighbourhood work to 'involve people at grass-roots level in decisions and policies which affect them and their neighbourhoods'. There was also a sense of tackling an injustice, righting a wrong, making communities an equal place for all to live in. However,

there were also concerns that community work in its delivery can reflect class, gender and the racially structured nature of society which distributes power and resources (Pople, 1995: 91).

Pople proposes that the skills that community work employs have to be 'adapted and recreated to address these' (Ibid: 91).

Struggling with the debates that had been held at a national level between the leading agencies it was preferable to keep to my own simpler definition: that of community development as a process that enabled people to access the tools, information, support and skills that they needed to bring about change for the better in their communities. In the communities that I worked in, people were often involved in this process without pay but with a passion that led to a conviction that there could be change and with that an equal society.

For the purpose of this research, I have therefore constructed the following definition:

**Community development is a process that enables people to access the tools, information, support and skills that they need to bring about change for the better in their communities.**

### **Community development workers**

When I first started the work that included this research in 2002, the then Labour Government had invested substantial sums of money in a number of national organisations whose remit was community development (CD). This included the Community Development Foundation (CDF) which at that time was a quango representing the alignment of government to the notion of community development as a powerful force for change in communities. The Community Development Exchange, formerly the Standing Conference on Community Development, acted as a body to support and network the large numbers of around 20,000 community development workers that existed at that time. In 2004 Glen et al., on behalf of the Standing Conference for Community Development (SCCD) and the Community Development Foundation (CDF) produced a report, which focused on community development workers. It was the largest piece of research undertaken into this topic. The findings included a sense of instability with 39% of posts being short-term contracts. Female practitioners were more likely to be on short-term contracts and twice as likely to be in part-time posts. Women were also more likely than men to be on lower pay scales. Overall community development was not viewed as a well-paid job. (Glen et al., 2004) Popple commented that

Overall, these findings are worrying as they show that community work, and in the case here specifically community development, although regarded as a valued activity, is prone to changes in wider government policy. Therefore, while community work provides a much-needed voice for those in communities, it is often a victim of financial cuts by governments that are suspicious and critical of an activity that can oppose their policies (Popple, 2015: 127)

A later survey was undertaken by (Sender et al., 2010) which indicated that Community development workers existed in a wide and diverse range of settings.

This research indicated that CD is a key part of many roles in society. Community engagement officers, neighbourhood managers and community safety officers undertake CD work, but so do unpaid individuals, activists and social entrepreneurs who apply a CD approach to work in their neighbourhoods. CDF's survey found CD work taking place in more than 29 different fields, from empowerment to housing to health (Sender et al., 2010: 9).

### **The role of the state in funding community development workers**

The Sender et al. (2010) survey considered the broad range of CD work being delivered in England, and the diversity of people identifying themselves as undertaking CD. In the survey CDF aimed to give readers a better understanding of who CD workers were, 'how they got into the field, the support they receive, the benefits of their work, and the challenges and barriers they face' (Sender et al., 2010: 9).

The 900 responses, which was significantly less than a similar survey carried out in 2004 which was based on 2,886 completed questionnaires, confirmed that the most common employer for paid CD workers was the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) (42%) followed by the public sector (36%), (predominantly the local authority). In addition to this, although there were a variety of CD employers, the majority of organisations with CD staff were actually funded by the public sector, with 58% specifically funded by the local authority. For example, 55% of all non-public sector organisations employing community development workers had that work funded through a local authority. In total 78% of survey respondents worked for organisations reliant to some extent on local authority or public sector funding (Sender et al., 2010: 9). The community workers in the CDF survey saw themselves as 'enabling' communities to have a 'voice'. To be funded by statutory sources and to be enabling communities to have a voice, does in itself have some contradictions. It raises the question as to what those voices could be free to say, particularly if they were to take a critical stance. This dilemma intrinsic in the issue of the state funding community work is considered in more detail later in this chapter.

The CDF 2010 report indicated that community development workers were:

an approachable focal point for both the community and service providers. Their face-to-face contact with the community gave them both knowledge of the area, but also meant they were able to build trust with community members by providing help and advice. CD practitioners felt they were able to raise issues with relevant bodies and influence policy on behalf of the community, in particular for those who are marginalised (Sender et al., 2010: 15)

VCSOs, especially smaller organisations and individuals in communities seeking to develop small community groups, were very reliant on the assistance of community development workers to guide them and help them through that process. Through the CDF survey, CD work was found to be taking place in more than 29 different fields, from empowerment to housing to health. The amount of community development that was funded at that time indicates how dependent on government CD was during this period and how vulnerable it left it when reductions in funding were needed.

### **Community Involvement**

Community development has at its core community involvement, which is why its presence was often seen as essential to the development of small community organisations such as those that the women in this research were involved in. The importance that successive governments have attached to community development through policies, guidance documents and funding streams has been marked. In the 1960s in a search to find a way to tackle poverty and deprivation, the Home Office had established a series of Community Development Projects (CDPs). The CDPs were conceived:

as action research initiatives whose central purpose was to collect information on the impact of Social Policies in the selected neighbourhoods to assist people to use services more constructively and to encourage and support community initiatives.

(Lees and Smith, 1975: 47)

The establishment of the CDPs was in response to a number of pressing political problems, including what is known as the 'rediscovery of poverty' in a country that, according to the Conservative Party, 'had never had it so good' (Beck and Purcell, 2010: 5). The motivation behind the Community Development Projects, which were fully funded by the Labour Government at that time, and which continued for some time into the seventies under a Conservative Government, was a belief that the problem of poverty and associated issues could be 'dealt with easily enough, once the right method or combination of methods have been found' (Miller and Rein, 2011: 93).

The CDP consisted of twelve local action research projects which were set up at a local level to seek solutions to what at that time was seen as the 'culture of poverty' and the 'cycle of deprivation' (Miller and Rein, 2011: 92). One of the major findings of the work undertaken by the Community Projects 'pointed to industrial disinvestment and random public services as the major reason behind poverty and deprivation in those areas, rather than, as government would have had people believe, the 'fecklessness of inner city residents' (Ledwith, 2011: 16). From the research undertaken by many of the Community Development Projects, a critique developed of government development programmes which 'were not about solving the problem of poverty but about maintaining the status quo and managing the poor' (Beck and Purcell, 2010: 6).

Government funding for the Community Development Projects eventually ceased. Governments did not 'take kindly to the project teams analysis and by 1976 the state had withdrawn its funding' (Pople, 1995:19). The state was not the only critic of the CDPs, which were the most controversial of all government funded community work programmes. Their doctrinaire style and continuous devaluation of neighbourhood work could alienate CD practitioners and inhibit open discussion. Pople viewed them as the 'clearest example of the radical socialist approach to community work theory and practice' (Pople, 2015: 63) but also indicates that they have been criticised by feminists for being gender- blind, and by ethnic minority and anti- racist writers and activists as being 'colour'- blind (Ibid:64). Whatever view writers have of the CDPs, they were a landmark in community work, raising its profile and encouraging discussion. There was a sense, however, that governments would

never again fund activity that would take such a loud and critical stance on capitalism, identifying the structures within capitalism as being the root cause of poverty (Loney, 1983).

### **Tacking poverty and social exclusion**

Poverty and what was called 'social exclusion' by the Labour Government continued to be a growing challenge for governments. During the 1990s, the Labour Government sought to 'stimulate community engagement in public affairs' as part of their attempt to bring about a fairer society. Just days after the general election in 1997, Tony Blair made a public speech on the Aylesbury Estate in London promising that there will be no forgotten people in Britain (McNeil, 2012). There were going to be more initiatives around framing the political discourse around poverty and social exclusion (ibid: 3). 'Deprived' neighbourhoods were treated as a high profile issue following Labour's election. Early in his time in office, Prime Minister Tony Blair declared the ambitious goal that within 10-20 years no one 'should be seriously disadvantaged by where they lived (McNeil, 2012:18). Policy Action Teams (PATs) were established to 'provide essential building blocks for the National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal' (Social Exclusion Unit, 2001). Because of the investment in the PATs by the Labour Government and the findings of the Action Teams, a significant sum of government funding was invested into the Neighbourhood Strategy. For example, the PAT report into the 'Importance of Community Self Help' resulted in £35 million being invested in a Community Empowerment Fund, and £50 million for Community Chests, 'to enable people at a local level to become involved in setting up community services' (Policy Action Team Audit, 1999). Community development was seen as the tool and process that was at the heart of the policy of giving local people and communities the skills that they needed to be more in control and to have a greater voice and influence over services.

### **The value of community development to government**

In 2005 as the community development officer of the regional body, the South West Foundation, I was invited to contribute to a national report funded by the Department for Communities and local government entitled 'The Community Development Challenge'. Its aim was to promote the role and value of Community Development to

communities (DCLG, 2006). Community development was still seen by government as a way of giving 'citizens and communities a much bigger say in the services they received and in the quality of the communities in which they live' (ibid: 1).

The Government also published a White Paper, *Strong and Prosperous Communities* (DCLG, 2006) which set out a range of proposals designed to strengthen local communities. The White Paper had 'a focus on strengthening participation and enabling communities to help shape policies, services and places' (Blackmore, 2006: 2).

The Labour Government described their vision as of 'prosperous and cohesive communities, offering a safe, healthy and sustainable environment for all' (DCLG, 2006: 4). The Government's 'Together We Can Programme', which was launched in 2005 sought, among other aims, to bring a shared understanding by the three major agencies involved in community development (the Community Development Foundation – CDF; CDX and the Federation for Community Development Learning – FCDL). The 'Together We Can' programme envisioned CD as a key influence in 'encouraging and empowering people to gain control over the conditions in which they live' and as 'a very powerful way of turning alienation into engagement' (DCLG, 2006: 1). An essential component and delivery agent of this strategy was the VCS alongside the enablement tools of community development. The chapter now moves to a period when 'empowerment' and 'community engagement' became a major part of the VCS agenda.

## **Empowerment**

The 'National Empowerment Partnership (NEP) managed by the Community Development Foundation, made significant use of the work of the Policy Action Teams and was launched by the Government in 2007. It ran until 31 March 2011. The £6.7 million programme was delivered at a regional level through nine Regional Empowerment Partnerships. A national programme of activity, with programme management support, ran alongside the regional work commissioned, coordinated and conducted by Regional Empowerment Partnerships. The funding enabled a large number of community empowerment activities to be developed and delivered.

The objectives of the NEP had been expressed earlier through a series of policy documents, including the Local Government White Paper (DCLG, 2006), Planning for a Sustainable Future White Paper (DCLG, 2007), Governance of Britain (DCLG, 2007a) and by the Action Plan for Community Empowerment (DCLG 2007b). They continued to influence the Government agenda throughout its term in office. Overall, the type of empowerment that the NEP was engaged in promoting was 'community empowerment'. DCLG defined community empowerment as 'the giving of confidence, skills and power to communities to shape and influence what public bodies do for or with them' (Chanan, 2009: 17).

### **Community engagement**

Entangled with the empowerment agenda, and intrinsic to it, was community engagement. Community engagement was defined as 'the process whereby public bodies reach out to communities to create empowerment opportunities' (DCLG, 2007b: 8). Community engagement was also an intrinsic aspect of community development as noted previously. CD, at least in part, was viewed by the Labour Government as a tool to be used in the process of changing people's feelings of disempowerment and disengagement or changing 'alienation' into 'engagement' (DCLG, 2007b: 14). In doing so, the hope was that being more involved would enable people to feel better about the neighbourhoods and communities in which they were living.

The evidence suggests that the Labour Government wished to encourage the involvement of local communities in local democracy and decision making through community empowerment, but that they still wished to lead the agenda defining the process by which this engagement would happen. Mayo (1977) discusses why government becomes interested in community development and local community involvement in the decision-making processes. She argues this was an antidote to the increase in, and unpopularity of, state intervention.

In the face of this evidently far from popular growth in official bureaucracy, western social democracies have been concerned to offer official anecdotes

in the form of public participation, community action, and community development-to name only the most popular at present (ibid: x).

This comment, although from the 70s, still applies to recent policy in this field. The NEP was arguably used by the Government to support activities that would help deliver its own agenda of encouraging the expansion of local democracy and devolved decision-making. While the 2010 Coalition Government, in their 'Localism Bill' talked of 'passing power to the hands of local communities' (HMSO, 2011:1), it is clear that it is the government that is still in control of the process of how this will happen.

In May 2010, at the start of the NEP's fourth and final year, a Conservative-Liberal Democratic Coalition came into government. There were a number of positive findings of the legacy of the NEP that were to resonate with the 2010 Coalition Government's agenda, such as improving working relationships between local authority staff and communities, better knowledge exchange between sectors which enabled better understanding and co-operation, increased social capital, greater feelings of influence and improved physical environments. Evidence gathered by the Regional Empowerment Partnerships indicated that public agencies involved in community empowerment benefitted in a number of ways. These included agencies becoming more aware of the needs and aspirations of the citizens they serve; improved service delivery; improved partnership working with community organisations and greater legitimacy (Sender et al., 2011). With the change of government in 2010, however, came a change of focus, a change of agenda and more importantly a change of funding. The funding for empowerment was not renewed.

### **The coming of localism and the Big Society**

The focus of the new Coalition Government was a 'Localism Agenda' and the high profile personal agenda of David Cameron as expressed through the Big Society. The common aims of the localism agenda included decentralisation of power and responsibility to LAs and local people across public services. The newly appointed Minister for Decentralisation and Planning, the Right Honourable Greg Clark MP,

travelled the country seeking the views of people from grassroots community organisations on the Big Society. The new government's aim was to 'put more power and opportunity into people's hands'.

Our Conservative - Liberal Democrat Government has come together with a driving ambition: to put more power and opportunity into people's hands. We want to give citizens, communities and local government the power and information they need to come together, solve the problems they face and build the Britain they want. We want society – the families, networks, neighbourhoods and communities that form the fabric of so much of our everyday lives – to be bigger and stronger than ever before. Only when people and communities are given more power and take more responsibility can we achieve fairness and opportunity for all (Cabinet Office, 2010:1).

There were strong echoes of the previous government's stated desire to legitimise change by putting the decision of what those changes were to be in the hands of local communities, also in enabling local communities to take part in helping those changes to happen. It has been argued that 'big society' thinking can be traced back to the 1990s, and to early attempts to develop a non-Thatcherite, or post-Thatcherite, brand of UK Conservatism. Heywood (2011) puts forward the view that rolling society out can roll government back; people in communities come forward to take a more active role in their communities:

Society therefore gets 'bigger', in the sense that citizens get more involved in their communities, by, for instance, volunteers taking over the running of post offices and libraries, parents setting up 'free schools' and charities taking over public services (Heywood, 2011: 2).

Many of the proposals around this agenda for 'rolling back the state' were contained in the Localism Bill (HMSO, 2011), which aimed to reduce bureaucracy, empower communities and increase communities' control over public finances. It also looked to strengthen accountability to local people. When examining the core of localism and the Big Society, it would be hard not to hear echoes of the previous government's community empowerment agenda. Giving local authorities and

neighbourhoods more power to take decisions and shape their area, opening up public services, enabling charities, social enterprises, private companies and employee-owned co-operatives to compete to offer people high-quality services and social action: encouraging and enabling people to play a more active part in society.

What is perhaps most striking is the apparent willingness of the Coalition to do what is normally regarded as politically unmentionable, give up power.... of course the proof of the pudding is in the eating. But already we can say this: The Big Society 's political programme is being vigorously implemented. It is likely to amount to the most thorough attempt for a century to redefine the relationship between individuals, the state and public and private institutions (Norman, 2010: 199).

The key element of this statement is the way the government decides how much power it will give up and to what end. The new initiative, was immediately tainted by austerity and the suspicion that the new measures and the Big Society were simply a way to save government money (Chanan and Miller, 2011; Cox and Schmuecker, 2013; Evans, 2011).

There were also new community rights written into law. These included; the right for the community to be given the option to buy local assets such as old town halls, village shops or pubs; the right of Voluntary and Community Organisations, parish councils and local authority staff to challenge to take over the running of local public services; the right to have a local referendum and to veto excessive council tax rises.

Many of the Coalition Government's 'new' agendas had strong elements of the focus and aims of both community development and empowerment as discussed already in this chapter. The Community Development Challenge had spoken of the government in the UK as increasingly seeking to 'stimulate community engagement in public affairs and local development through a wide variety of policies in the 1990s (DCLG, 2006). The new Coalition Government when it came to power in 2010, sought to stimulate such action through its 'localism agenda.' The localism agenda was more politicised in some ways than the empowerment agenda and was backed specifically by the Localism Act of 2011. Its main publicised aim was to enable

decision-making on important matters that affect local areas to be taken at a local level. Perhaps the most important aspect of the act in relation to this study is Part 5, which relates to community empowerment. Among the powers within this element of the act is the right of local people to be consulted on, and to challenge decisions around council tax increases, accounting practices, the redistribution of community assets and in local planning decisions.

The previous government's empowerment agenda was more about providing communities with the tools and support through community development, to take an active part in this process. The difference with the Big Society was the impact of the global financial crisis. The financial crisis, which hit the world's economy in 2007/8, was considered by many as the worst financial crisis since the Great Depression of the nineteen thirties. *The Economist* in an article in 2013, five years after the crash, commented that,

The collapse of Lehman Brothers, a sprawling global bank, in September 2008 almost brought down the world's financial system. It took huge taxpayer-financed bailouts to shore up the industry. Even so, the ensuing credit crunch turned what was already a nasty downturn into the worst recession in 80 years. The effects very quickly hit the average person causing the need for government to start to shore up the banks and consider drastic economic measures. Public faith in the Labour Government gave way, but not to a sufficient degree that there was an outright winner of the general election of 2010 (*The Economist*, 2013).

The voluntary and community sector, which had received a fairly high level of support under Labour, started to go through one of the most significant and often contradictory stages of its history (Crawley and Watkin, 2011). It was with against this background that David Cameron announced his plans for the Big Society.

You can call it liberalism. You can call it empowerment. You can call it responsibility. I call it the Big Society...The biggest, most dramatic

redistribution of power from Whitehall to the man and woman in the street (Cameron, 2010: 1).

Faith in politics had also been hit by a series of scandals with proven fraud, connected to MPs expenses and certain MPs facing high profile court cases and possible custodial sentences. The settlement, which was announced for the Department for Civil Society of £470 million, was described as 'significant'. However, a high proportion of the £470 million was to go to the government's new programme to get young people into volunteering through the National Citizens' Service.

Other funding was to go to training 5,000 'Community Organisers' and setting up their academy. Some funding was to support employee-led mutuals. This left much of the sector wondering what proportion of the £470 million was to fund essential Voluntary and Community Sector services that had been working well for years, supporting statutory services and building the social capital of civil society. Overall, the Big Society agenda appeared initially to contain a great deal of opportunity for the Voluntary and Community Sector to do more in communities and to have a greater say and influence. However, the Big Society Agenda (NCVO, 2011) appeared to rely on 'the man in the street sharing the vision' while at the same time apparently withdrawing the funds and support from the sector that was assumed to be at the centre enabling the Big Society to succeed.

The website 'Voluntary Sector cuts for 2011-12' recorded 496 funding cuts to the 'Voluntary Sector' worth £75,420,854. NCVO also utilised the evidence from this source and further estimated the voluntary sector income would continue to fall drastically

Assuming that the voluntary sector experiences proportionate cuts, its income from government will be £1.7 billion lower by 2017/18 than it was in 2010/11 (using 2010/11 prices). Local government spending is estimated to fall by over 14% between 2010/11 and 2017/18. The equivalent figures for central government suggest a fall of around £580 million (NCVO, 2012: 6).

These figures indicate that the VCS would be forced to shrink or seriously alter its funding sources.

### **The role of the voluntary and community sector (VCS)**

Under the Labour Government, government offices had been making increasing use of mutually agreed voluntary sector compacts, which were meant to govern relationships between the 'Civil Society' agencies and government. There was a flurry of 'compacts'. There was the national compact, the regional compact and local compacts drawn up with local authorities. All of these sought to govern the ways in which the VCS should be treated in the new contract culture. The most recently drafted national Compact (2010) was seen as a crucial part in improving the partnership between the government and 'civil society' organisations, for the benefit of citizens and communities. Nick Clegg in his introduction to the Compact indicated that:

A flourishing civil society is fundamental to achieving the Power Shift. The Coalition Government is committed to, transferring power away from central government to local communities. This compact is a vital part of achieving that goal, laying the foundation for productive working partnerships between the government and civil society organisations (Compact Voice, 2010)

However, the reality was that the renewed compact was being put in place, in readiness for the next new government initiative, the Big Society.

Building the Big Society and getting citizens more engaged, involved and responsible for the communities around them will only be possible in partnership with the sector; improving and delivering better, more responsive public services can only be done with the help of the sector. (Cameron, 2010)

One of the most essential elements of VCS has been its ability to retain its independence from the state, at times to be a critical voice and advocate for the sector and those that it seeks to serve. This is recognised by the words of the Compact, which denotes to a 'strong, diverse and independent civil society'

(Compact Voice, 2010). The very first guidance point in the 2010 Compact relates to the VCS retaining its independence states that it should:

Respect and uphold the independence of VCISOs to deliver their mission, including their right to campaign, regardless of any relationship, financial or otherwise, which may exist (ibid: 8).

Although the Compact is full of well-intended promises of undertakings by government in relation to its treatment of the 'Civil Society' organisations, neither the Labour nor the Coalition Government has ever made the Compact enforceable. It has always remained a well-intentioned document without any teeth.

Later experience of the Big society is well summarised by Popple (2015):

The government's enthusiasm for the 'Big Society' has to be placed against the substantial cuts they have made to the funding of the voluntary and community sector, which in turn has decreased the services they can deliver. So while the voluntary and community sector can make a considerable contribution to neighbourhood life, as well as making contact with 'hard- to-reach' groups, their finances are shrinking at the very time they are expected by central government to fill the gap left by central government funding cuts (Ibid: 53).

Just at a time when the VCS could have utilised an effective compact it slipped out of their grasp, because it was not enforceable and perhaps not viewed as necessary by a government that was relying heavily on 'Civil Society' organisations to deliver its agenda. It is noted here that the terminology of 'Third Sector' used under Labour to describe the sector in which the VCS is found, had become Civil Society within the Compact. NCVO (2014: 1) define Civil Society as 'the associational life that brings people together and allows civic values and skills to develop' and that this would include 'the body of organisations that exist between government, individuals, and businesses.' This would include 'all of the organisations that are variously labelled as the third sector, the voluntary sector, the non-profit sector, the community sector, and so on' (ibid:1). This is a considerably broader range of activity than what has

already been described as the VCS, and was linked more clearly to the terminology of the Big Society.

### **The voluntary and community sectors' perception of the Big Society**

There is very little record of the views on the Big Society from members of small VCISOs when it was first proposed. It is therefore useful to consider this material from research carried out by the South West Foundation, as it provides some insights into why the Big Society appears destined not to succeed. Government made it clear that the notion of Big Society and Community Organisers was not up for discussion, they were here to stay. On 28 September 2010, South West Foundation held a community development conference in Somerset, called the 'Big Community Development Picnic' and a further smaller seminar in Redruth in Cornwall. These seminars were undertaken mainly to inform people involved in local community groups, of the new agenda around the Big Society and the associated initiative of community organisers. These events reflected the growing unease at the new Government's agendas. 120 people attended. They were individuals from statutory organisations, VCS organisations and housing associations. They came to listen to two representatives of the Cabinet Office talking about the Big Society and Community Organising. The Foundation was specifically instructed by the Cabinet Office not to call the events 'consultation' events, as these were not topics open to discussion.

From the Foundation's events, it seemed clear that the sector felt it had been delivering many of the elements of the Big Society for years. Many of the 120 people who attended the events were already very active in their communities. They also had a great deal of knowledge of the great contribution that the VCS was already making to communities. Those attending discussed the implications of the Big Society, but also considered the question, *'Does the Government know and understand what the sector already contributes?'* The responses from the audience were revealing. A selection of participant comments from the events is in table 1:

Selected responses to the question <i>Does the Government know and understand what the sector already contributes?</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We need to keep our existing skills going – how can we protect what is being done?</li> <li>• A lot is already happening BUT under threat because there are no future funding promises.</li> <li>• DON'T sweep away all the good stuff that is already happening.</li> <li>• Lots of good organisations are being shut down already.</li> <li>• Does the Government understand what we are currently doing? They talk as if they know very little...</li> <li>• We're already doing this work at grassroots – we need local government to recognise it is already being done.</li> <li>• How can existing structures and people's skills, knowledge and experience be utilised?</li> <li>• We already have good community networks.</li> <li>• We already have good grassroots activities - we need to keep these going.</li> <li>• There are 133,000 volunteers and 8,000 VCSOs in Cornwall alone.</li> </ul>

Table 1 – selected responses – 'Big Community Development Picnic'

These extracted quotes reflect the general perception from people present at the event that the Government was seeing the Big Society as a 'new invention' that belonged to David Cameron. There were significant questions around whether the Coalition Government was giving recognition to the groups and activities that were already operating in communities, in particular the smaller grassroots organisations that are the focus of this research. Those present felt that recognition was essential. Everything was being badged as the 'Big Society' as if this was all 'new' and the result of the Coalition Government's intervention. There was also little understanding from the community members present at the event of what the Big Society meant in practical terms, other than getting local people in communities to undertake tasks and activities that were previously within the remit of the local authority, statutory organisations or government. The Big Society was essentially viewed by members at these events as a way of saving government and local authority expenditure.

The data generated by the event demonstrated that the concept of Big Society was linked to cuts in the minds of those present at the Foundation's event. The fear was that although the Big Society rhetoric clearly valued the type of activities that people were already undertaking in communities, it gave very little open acknowledgement to, or practical support to, the activities of the thousands of the small community

groups who were already delivering activities and service in neighbourhoods and communities. They were concerned about cuts to their own funding and how they would be able to continue to have the capacity to deliver existing community services with comments such as:

*What is already being delivered by the sector is now under threat.*

And

*Will there be funding to achieve anything?*

*There is an issue about the cost of delivery without the same amount of money...we can barely deliver what we already delivering*

(Big Community Development Picnic participants, 2010)

Further comments from the event about the Big Society from the event are in table 2 below

<b>Selected participant comments on the coming of the Big Society</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Will funding to established voluntary organisations be reduced?</li> <li>• We are already facing cuts – so how can we deliver all of this.....?</li> <li>• How are they going to deliver the idea of the Big Society - will we have the capacity left to deliver this?</li> <li>• There is an issue about the cost of delivery without the same amount of money... we can barely deliver what we are already delivering.</li> <li>• Local authorities facing 25% cuts but they are already looking at 40% cuts to the voluntary sector - how does this support The Big Society Agenda</li> <li>• What is already being delivered by the sector is now under threat.</li> <li>• There is already a lack of funds to deliver. How can we deliver more?</li> <li>• Will there be funding to achieve <b>anything?</b></li> <li>• Big Society means services on the cheap. Many good organisations will be shut down.</li> <li>• Not enough funding for the Big Society ideas.</li> <li>• How will those communities left behind be funded or supported?</li> </ul>

Table 2 - selected responses – ‘Big Community Development Picnic’

These responses represent how the Big Society policy was problematic for small VCISOs from the start, particularly as the sector was very aware that in a time of austerity, financial cuts were bound to occur. Would the Big Society have fared any better had it not been linked to severe cuts in funding to the sector? People had to 'guess' at what the coming of the Big Society might mean, because of the lack of specific information about what in practice it was about. Lack of new funding and withdrawal of existing funding was a major issue as can be seen from the comments in tables 1 and 2.

One of the Third Sector Research Centre reports identifies the Big Society as being central to the Conservative agenda but

the Big Society has been a rather elusive concept. Academics and commentators seek to understand what it means, what it signals, and what it might imply. It is viewed by critics as providing political cover for the Coalition's deficit reduction programme and as a Trojan horse for privatisation (MacMillan, 2013: 185)

The Big Society's aim was to see a shift of power 'from state to people' with the promise of giving charities a 'starring role in public service provision'. However, it failed to recognise and understand that those agencies were already delivering services and support to communities.

To add to the negative perceptions of the Big Society, the Big Society Network aimed at promoting the initiative was hit in 2014 by a series of 'scandals' around funding issues and was forced to close (Third Sector, 2015).

### **The case of the disappearance of community development**

The 2010 Coalition Government moved the term 'community development' and some key aspects of its purpose to the back of their agenda almost overnight. They were able to do this with some ease due to a number of existing factors. Those national organisations and professionals who had been previously involved in the community development agenda were not united in their cause. The lack of clarity of

definition of community development in England, lack of available convincing evidence about its value, and the inability of those involved in community development at a national level to work together as a collective and coherent whole, only added to the ease with which the Coalition Government was able to diminish the importance of community development.

Local authorities in a time of austerity were also able to make severe cuts in their community development teams without too much consternation or opposition from the public. This was particularly the case in England. The CD Challenge had highlighted earlier that '20,000 professional practitioners around the UK work in CD and yet the general public have little understanding of CD' (DCLG, 2006: 9). Some of the main agencies involved in promoting community development such as the Community Development Foundation and the Community Development Exchange, if not wholly funded by government, had government as the major contributors to their central funding, which it could be argued made it almost impossible for them to freely speak out.

The Coalition Government, however, had an expectation that community groups and individuals in communities could take part in their new agenda and sign up to the Big Society, minus the resources to enable them to have the tools to do this. The Big Society agenda was tainted from the start, by its close association with the financial cuts and cuts to services and being viewed as a way of the new government encouraging people in communities to take responsibility for the delivery of services, that government and the local authorities could no longer afford.

There were further reasons behind the ease with which community development slipped off the agenda. Community development was the invisible tool that enabled communities to move forward, to develop new services and activities. Community members were engaged and were very involved in developing these new services but it was community development that was invisible in the background enabling all this to happen.

Highlighting the achievements of community members can mask the specific contribution of the community development worker and to the casual observer it can seem as though community achievements, which have been skilfully

nurtured over a long period, have popped up spontaneously. The many successes of community development in almost invisibly boosting community activity and overcoming disadvantage may have misled policy makers into an over-optimistic impression of what communities can do spontaneously, even in harsh conditions (DCLG, 2006: 9).

The Coalition Government also failed to recognise or take account of the reasons why people in communities get involved and the support that was needed to enable that involvement to happen. As can be seen from the earlier responses from small VCISOs (Table 2), small organisations in particular were not well networked, and those involved were not used to thinking of themselves as part of a sector. The lack of knowledge of how these organisations are perceived is one of the key rationales for this research.

Henderson and Thomas (2012) warned of dangers of ignoring these aspects of community involvement.

There is a hunger for participatory forms of politics. If, however, these are going to work they need to connect with the ways in which people are willing to become involved. This is where community development becomes of critical importance. It is an essential cog in the wheel of authentic democratic processes. Without it, the voices of communities will be severely weakened.  
(12)

A number of issues presented by the Big Society idea were highlighted by Chanan and Miller in an open letter to David Cameron in 2011 (Chanan and Miller, 2011). In this letter Chanan and Miller, who have a long history of involvement in community development, urged David Cameron to have a rethink on the Big Society. They argued that the Big Society would not succeed ‘unless it focuses on real community development and volunteering, instead of being muddled with the shift to take public services into the independent sector’ (Chanan and Miller, 2011: 3). They called for David Cameron to save the Big Society by detaching it from strong association with ‘local authority cuts’; to support directly community groups and local anchor

organisations and to 'acknowledge that the huge role that was played already by voluntary and community groups is the bedrock for greater advance'. They referred to the Big Society as a 'phantom element' (ibid: 3).

The Big Society brought confusion between the values of the sector, its passion, its desire to serve communities and the government's own need for an army of community volunteers to deliver services and activities that were previously the responsibility of the state. By the time the Conservative Government was elected in 2015, the phantom had almost disappeared.

The Big Society, more than most agendas, appeared to have citizen involvement at its heart, and yet the very ingredient that assists people to become involved and engaged, that is community development, was missing from its strategy. The terminology of community development does however appear to be reappearing recently. The Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) model promoted by Cormac Russell has been adopted in a number of local areas such as Torbay, Gloucestershire and North Somerset, largely supported by housing associations and local authorities. There is hope yet that CD might rise again.

## **Part Two - 'Below the Radar' (BTR) groups; women in society, their involvement in small VCSOs and the impact of economic austerity**

### **Recession and the VCS**

Fears about the future of the VCS had started before the Coalition Government had come into power in 2010. In November 2008, a survey of 392 charities carried out by PricewaterhouseCoopers LLP, the Charity Finance Directors Group (CFDG) and the Institute of Fundraising predicted that there would be a shortfall of around £2.3 billion across the voluntary and community sector for the next financial year. This and the following reports (2009, 10 and 11) continued to consider the effects on the sector of the recession. NCVO were estimating cuts far above these figures and in a joint report published by the Charities Aid Foundation in 2012, warning was given from the results of a survey into 292 charities that one in six would be faced with closure in the next year.

## **Small community groups – ‘Below the Radar’ BTR**

Where in all this extensive period of change and austerity were the small VCSOs? Small community groups had been operating in communities long before the ‘Big Society’ was conceived, but evidence about their value, or definitions of their nature and their numbers are not readily available. The chapter has already discussed how community development can be a difficult concept to define. This difficulty of definition is accompanied by an absence of good quality data about much of the VCSO.

A significant proportion of the VCS is made up of small groups. Some of the reasons for this absence of data are very specific. The policy makers, researchers and funders have had very little direct access to this important part of the sector as so many of these groups are not on any registers. Gathering data on their activity has therefore been difficult. Mainly from the work of the Third Sector Research Centre, they have come to be known as organisations that operate ‘Below the Radar’. The term below the radar (BTR) has become a short-hand term to describe small voluntary and community organisations, community groups and more informal or semi-formal activities in the VCS (McCabe, 2010). These small BTR community groups are often not registered with the Charity Commission or any other overarching body. This has meant that ‘little is known about the exact extent of small VCSOs or below the radar activity’ (Toepler, 2003: 236). Cox and Schmuecker (2013) argue that much of the research that has been undertaken into the sector has excluded the small, unregistered organisations due to lack of a means of finding out exactly who these small organisations are, and how to contact them.

In 2008 a National Survey of ‘Third Sector Organisations’ (Ipsos MORI, 2008) was sent to over 100,000 organisations by the government. However, this significant part of the sector, the BTR groups, was omitted from this survey because the data collection relied on the Charity Commission register and Guidestar which was a website maintaining a database of ‘information about charities registered in England and Wales’ (Guidestar, 2015) as their main source for contacts. Both of which only have details of organisations that are in some way registered. In another, survey that is more recent carried out by a VCSO (Cox and Schmuecker, 2013), an annual

income of above; £60,000 was used as the cut-off point for 'small' community groups that were the focus of their research. However, it was acknowledged that the researchers could only access data from the organisations that were registered in some way. Smaller unregistered organisations had to be omitted.

Although this part of the sector has not easily been captured in previous research, it is possibly one of the most significant parts in terms of its size and reach. While no exact figure can be given on the numbers of these BTR groups, McGillivray et al. (2001) estimated there to be more than 900,000 what they called 'micro organisations' in the UK and NCVO estimated that there are around 870,000 small BTR groups operating in the UK (NCVO, 2009). If these figures are correct there are between three and five times a greater number of these small BTR organisations within the sector than mainstream organisations. By being excluded from research, a very significant part of the VCS is also excluded from being considered sufficiently within the sector's future, in policies and in funding programmes. Toepler (2003) asks a reasonable question:

Perhaps one of the few remaining big mysteries in the non-profit sector research is the question of what we are missing by excluding those organisations from empirical investigation that are not easily captured in standard data sources (236).

Despite being the hidden part of the VCS, small VCS groups are often the centre of community life particularly in rural areas such as the South West, but do not have the voice and visibility that the larger charities occupy. Village halls, community lunch clubs, community transport schemes and befriending schemes may occupy centre stage in a small village but beyond their localities, their value often goes unrecognised. South West Foundation undertook a snapshot survey in 2014 of the 51 organisations that the Foundation was supporting with small grants from the Esme Fairbairn small grant programme. The survey revealed that only three of the 51 organisations funded, were in any way registered. (Crawley, 2015) Many operated with only volunteers or part-time workers. A number of these unregistered organisations share the characteristics of relying either entirely on volunteers or on a

handful of part time employees but are effectively excluded from research and consultations.

The Third Sector Research Centre (Soteri-Proctor, 2011) has also identified this BTR sector as under researched. With their own research, they do have the same issue of direct access to the groups. Direct research with these small groups is still rare, but their views, issues and challenges can successfully be represented by those having some form of 'insider' understanding of this part of the sector.

TSRC believes that 'below the radar' is becoming a commonly used term to describe these small mainly unregistered community organisations. Most of the research undertaken into the 'Third Sector' has not included these community groups; it is difficult for researchers to gather the information and intelligence needed to include them in research and reports, without undertaking some very thorough preparation. This has led to a much research into the sector not featuring evidence from this very important and vital contributor to community life, as Phillimore et al. confirm.

Much of the existing research into Third Sector has focussed on larger formal organisations leaving gaps in knowledge base around the nature and function of small groups and activities that are more informal that happen at a community level (Phillimore et al., 2010: 1).

The Big Society agenda appeared to bring a focus on small community groups. The vision of the Big Society encouraged local people to take over services for their local communities and deliver these as volunteers. Small community groups, who had been offering services in communities for years, were however not running public services but delivering a range of independent support services and activities, often for people most in need in communities that they had themselves identified and designed. They were rarely running public services. This was a significant difference between small VCSOs and the Big Society Agenda.

Research undertaken by South West Foundation has indicated that these small groups have indeed been operating BTR (Crawley and Watkin, 2011; Crawley, 2003; 2006: 2008: 2015). The research found a number of key issues associated with

small BTR VCSOs including that being BTR was not helpful from the perspective of the organisations being well researched; did not provide them with a high profile and tended to mean they were not understood. However, the reports did find that many of the community groups were set up and led by people who enjoyed a passion for the cause or services. Individual activists involved in setting up small community groups did so because there was a cause that they had identified that they wished to progress. It could be social support for older people, working with young people and children in need or other causes. They were involved because they felt that they could make a real difference to communities. By being BTR, they had a certain freedom to decide the direction of travel of their small groups, but they were of course less likely to receive funding and other forms of support.

The Government was now looking for local community members and community groups to 'step up' and take the delivery of services that statutory organisations could no longer afford to finance. The Big Society agenda had not lived up to the initial hopes that it would engage with the small community groups, who were already delivering a wide range of activities in communities. Instead, these small groups began to suffer in their own way from the government's austerity measures.

One of the main pieces of direct research referred to within the TSRC's Research 'Below the Radar' working paper (McCabe et al., 2012) was the research actually published by my own organisation, South West Foundation. The authors concluded that 'small community groups are being affected in many ways by the current economic climate but much of this is invisible and unrecorded' (Crawley and Watkin, 2011: 4).

Community groups are recognised as essential to communities but also find, as indicated in the previous section, that their contributions are unrecorded and unnoticed outside of their main community area in which they operate. Shedding more light on this situation is a central aim for this research.

The focus of research for this thesis is on women who are involved in organisations, mainly with an annual income far below the NCVO definition of £100,000 and more likely to have an income nearer to the Foundation definition of 'small' which is below

£20,000. Smaller charitable organisations with an element of community campaigning and with a significant number of women involved are central to this research. Some organisations studied may have an income above £20,000 but still, because of their shared characteristics, come within the remit of this study. The irony is that legally if these organisations are charitable and have an income of above £5,000 they do have the choice to seek charitable registration; they would then not be ignored by researchers and government policy makers who have difficulty in accessing information on organisations that are not in any way registered. Significant numbers of small community groups fail to register and so far, government has not pursued these omissions.

The invisibility of these BTR VCISOs also leads to a lack of recognition of their community involvement. The South West Foundation does collect evidence on this to report to funders. A major benefit of the VCS is its ability and capacity to engage community members to participate in community activity (Crawley, 2003, 2006). An evaluation of the Small Grant programme of the South West Foundation in 2003 found that the 73 groups funded through this programme were between them supporting several thousand individuals in need and involving nearly a thousand individuals as volunteers in the process. The small organisations have their core activities but beyond these, there are ripples of much wider engagement and benefit.

Many organisations referred to the fact that they were run and managed by volunteers and that in some way volunteers were both the beneficiaries and mainstays of the organisations .... few organisations had paid staff...in a number of groups; the volunteers were closely connected to the client group they were supporting. For example, the parents ran pre-school activities; older people as volunteers led the older people's groups. ... Half the organisations felt that volunteers had also benefited e.g. by being involved in the community or by increasing self-confidence and self-esteem (Crawley, 2003: 23).

In 2000 when working for a Community Foundation, I had analysed how grant funding had helped to tackle poverty and social exclusion in rural areas (Crawley, 2000). This research was mainly on smaller groups within the VCS that met the

NCVO definition of having incomes below £100,000. While undoubtedly government policies have a great effect on the economy and the nature of poverty for many rural communities, the problems of poverty and social exclusion were often being tackled at a local level through the efforts and skills of the VCSOs (ibid). Church et al. (2000) make a similar point:

Community based projects and groups are a valuable resource for those struggling honourably to help a very needy group of young people. In terms of sustainability the community sector is always there even in the most excluded locations (Church et al., 2000: 26).

As Henderson and Thomas (2000) stated, across the country there are thousands of community groups and voluntary sector organisations operating down to a parish or neighbourhood level providing advice and information. Henderson and Thomas (2000) argue that it is this bringing people together and building networks, that has a wider importance to the community.

The lack of access to very small unregistered community organisations as outlined in this chapter has, however, led to a major gap in research on this part of the Voluntary and Community Sector.

The fact that groups have 'chosen' not to register and do operate with a low profile to service providers and statutory bodies, does suggest that there may be other elements to operating BTR, which I explore further in the literature review. It is important to note here that, while being invisible is in many ways detrimental, there is certain element of freedom and lack of regulation in inhabiting that section of the VCS that is still able to operate below the radar. Gordon Brown in 2004 as Chancellor of the Exchequer argued that, for the VCS, 'independence...is the essence of your existence, the reason you can serve, the explanation of why you can be so innovative... (and why) you can make the difference that others cannot' (Brown, 2004).

It has to be further noted, that little if any attention has been paid to the one part of the sector that is less reliant on government funding and therefore less under

government control. The thousands of BTR groups may be the only part of the VCS that holds the key to retaining its independence and honest voice

The fact that these organisations are BTR and therefore not visible to researchers and government, has led to the lack of data, or contradictory data on their numbers. It is also possible that specifics about who the main contributors are to these small organisations and their nature, has also been missed. One of the unique elements of this current research is that it has been undertaken by someone who has direct contact with, and up-to-date experience of, those small community organisations that have proved elusive for many other researchers. The next section of this chapter concentrates on the women who are the focus of this research.

### **Women's involvement in the voluntary and community sector**

The small, often BTR organisations are the groups that the women, who are the focus of this research, are most often involved in. These small VCSOs have escaped the attention of reports and research to date, because of their lack of visibility beyond their locality, and absence from any official dataset.

### **The Women's Sector**

What has been recognised to some extent is that the Women's Sector is an essential part of the VCS in the UK but its aims are focussed clearly on gender equality:

The advances for women over the last century have been secured and underpinned by a vibrant and committed community of women's organisations – what we today call the Women's Sector. These organisations have considerable experience and expertise in working with women, giving them the skills, confidence and support they need to achieve long-term change in their lives. And they have an impressive record of accomplishment as advocates and campaigners, identifying and addressing the underlying structural factors that stand in the way of women's equality (Pratten, 2014: 4).

The Women's Sector has a specific focus on issues that affect women and gender equality. Organisations within the Women's Sector who focus on women's issues, such as domestic abuse, women's rights and more recently female genital mutilation can become defined by that work. In the UK, the Women's Sector has been championed by the London-based Women's Resource Centre (2007a) which has issued one of the most comprehensive and accessible publications on statistics around women and inequality in the UK. SW Foundation has used the publication repeatedly at events and in reports over the last seven years. In 2007, WRC published their 'Why Women only?' report, which formed the basis of their women only campaign. The report considered the values and benefits of providing services for women, which are delivered, entirely by women for women. The Women's Sector, seemed to be particularly vulnerable in the deteriorating funding climate. It was already recognised in the mid-80s that women's organisations needed 'to diversify their funding sources' (Grant, 1988: 62) and take the necessary steps to 'strengthen [their] financial independence and increase their mutual support of each other' (Bowman and Norton, 1986: 23). However, these reports put the solutions to the issue in the hands of the women involved, almost suggesting that some failing on the part of the women was the cause of the lack of investment. Proving their worth, making their contribution to communities more visible to policy-makers are issues that have always been a cause for challenge for small community groups. They operate on small amounts of funding, they deliver a great deal and their capacity to tackle issues beyond the immediate is very limited. These women's organisations have similar challenges but also have the additional challenge of being led by women and focusing on women's issues.

In addition, the difficulty in accessing funding was highlighted by a study of women's organisations in the UK carried out between 1995 and 1999 by the Centre for Institutional Studies at the University of East London (Riordan, 1999). The study found that women's concerns were not adequately represented in public agendas. They were therefore not adequately serviced by mainstream organisations. Lack of funding continued to be a major issue. This study also considered the financial resources of women's organisations drawing upon data on 301 women's organisations collected from the National Lottery Charities Board and the National

Council for Voluntary Organisations. They found that the organisations were 'overwhelmingly, small'. Seventy-two per cent had annual incomes under £100,000 (62% of which had incomes under £50,000). While the definition here of 'small' is different to the one that is being used in this study, it can still be seen that a significant part of the women's sector is made up of organisations with 'modest incomes'. This survey showed that very few trusts gave priority to 'women-specific work'. They found that, out of 4,297 UK-based trusts listed, they were only able to identify 80 at that time that broadly mentioned women, gender, family, young people and/or children in their guidelines (Riordan 2009). Women's issues, from the evidence presented by Riordan, appeared not to be a priority for the majority of charitable trusts in the UK. The research found that 'for a number of respondents, women had difficulty in getting their voices heard', which possibly contributed to women's organisations remaining invisible to funders.

In 2011, the Women's Resource Centre (WRC) added to the debate, when they reported that women's organisations' faced greater barriers to obtaining funds/sustaining themselves' than VCSOs as a whole. Fifty-two per cent of women's organisations had been forced to reduce their service provision. Furthermore, the report found that '95% of respondents faced funding cuts or a funding crisis in the next year and 25% said that further cuts would result in closure' (WRC, 2012: 6).

Based in the same building as the WRC and established in 2008 is the Rosa Foundation for women and girls which 'supports and empowers women and girls by raising funds and allocating grants'. Their income for a national foundation is by any measure 'modest', averaging between £200,000 and £100,000 per annum. Their recently published report (Pratten, 2014) is relevant here. The report is based on responses from 70 women's organisations. The report also focuses on the context of the current environment and how women are still suffering inequality. Women's position in society has improved over the 20<sup>th</sup> century but 'the battle for women's equality is far from won' (Pratten, 2014: 4). The research cites how 60% of young women still feel that they are judged on their appearance rather than their ability; how 44% of women in the UK have suffered physical and /or sexual violence since the age of 15 and how still only one in five MPs are women. Despite hopes to the

contrary from the report findings, their conclusions are that 'today, women's position appears to be getting worse, not better' (ibid: 4).

Women's involvement in small VCSOs is at the heart of my research. Organisations which could be defined as operating within the Women's Sector are included, but the research themes are wider than the scope of the Women's Sector. It is based on women's involvement in a diverse range of small community groups in the South West Region delivering services and activities that are helpful to both women and communities as a whole.

The continuing inequality of women in society continues to play out with women's involvement in small community groups in the UK. Lees and Mayo (1984) collected a number of case studies in their report on Community Action for Change and, while they did not focus on women's organisations or issues affecting women specifically, they did focus on the strong involvement of women in community action. They noted that 'chapter by chapter' in their book women emerge throughout their study as consumers of the welfare state, through women's concerns around health care, fighting for tenants' rights in Manchester, South Wales and Tyne and Wear. They cite Elizabeth Wilson who argued that community work and the women's movement grew from the same upsurge of political consciousness and operated in the same terrain as feminism (Lees and Mayo, 1984: 6).

It is not surprising that women's organisations and wider BTR community groups share challenges and issues around funding, sustainability, having a voice and their visibility. It is however, the wider issue of women's involvement in community groups that this research concentrates on, which also encompasses some of the work that is traditionally seen as being within the Women's Sector but goes beyond this, to organisations that operate for more general community benefit.

### **Underrepresentation of women in positions of voice and influence**

Dominelli (2002) reflects on views expressed at the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century that we have now entered a 'post feminism era':

Feminism seems an old-fashioned word in today's allegedly postmodern world. The media in Western countries has coincidentally asserted that feminism is passé by claiming that we have entered the post-feminist era. To women like me, this is a strange paradox. For as women experience the feminisation of poverty, increasing levels of sexual violence, the loss of welfare state benefits which women have accessed in the recent past, the threatened loss of livelihood and statehood, I marvel at the idea that feminist claims have been realised and need consume the energies of women and girls no longer (Dominelli and Campling, 2002: 1).

When this research began in 2008 despite the significant contribution that women were making to communities through their involvement in small community groups, they were still underrepresented on bodies that had voice and influence. For example, the findings of a research report from the Urban Forum in 2007 entitled 'Where are all the women on the Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs)?' The LSPs in 2007 were the latest government invention through which local power was to be channelled. LSPs existed in nearly all local authority areas in England. They brought together representatives from the local statutory, voluntary, community and private sectors to address local problems, allocate funding, and discuss strategies and initiatives. They were set to be powerful bodies.

Gudnadottir et al. (2007) considered women's representation on Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs) which were becoming increasingly powerful at local levels in England at the time. The main aim of the report was to promote gender equality in these partnerships. Their task was hampered by the difficulty in obtaining information about gender representation on the partnership as many were failing in their Gender Equality Duty to record gender representation, let alone ensure the representation was equal and fair. Through the research into LSPs 70% of LSP respondents said they were aware of the Gender Equality Duty ... but 'over 80% of LSPs did not monitor women's representation' (Gudnadottir et al., 2007: 5) The report found women were seriously underrepresented on the Local Strategic Partnerships and that their representation was at a level far lower than that of their male counterparts. Only 28% of chairs of central LSPs boards were women, roughly equivalent to the

percentage of women local councillors at the time. Local Strategic Partnerships during this period were looking to be powerful local decision-making bodies.

The Conservative Government in 2016 has a new raft of important decision-making bodies operating throughout the country. These are the Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs). Thirty-nine LEPs now exist throughout the country. LEPs are partnerships between local authorities and businesses. They decide what the priorities should be for investment in roads, buildings and facilities in the area. The facilities include opportunities for training and job creation at a local level. LEPs are in charge of distributing significant amounts of funding and will be major powerful players within the local economy. A special fund with an initial £175 Million 'Building Better Opportunities Fund', established by the LEPs, with Lottery and European Social Fund monies, is due to be delivered by the LEPs in 2016. An informal snapshot survey undertaken in 2014 by my own organisation, South West Foundation, looking at gender representation revealed 76% of the members of the Board of the LEPs in the South West are men.

<b>Name of Local Enterprise Partnership</b>	<b>No of women on Board</b>	<b>No of men on Board</b>	<b>Percentage of women</b>
West of England	2	10	16%
Heart of England	2	16	11%
Swindon and Wiltshire	4	9	30%
Gloucestershire	2	9	18%
Dorset	7	11	38%
Total	17	55	24%

Table 3 – Gender make up of Local Enterprise Partnership (LEPs) boards

While it is interesting to have the evidence, there is no real surprise in these findings. It is important within my research to look at the context in which women have been situated for many years. There is a sense not only as Dominelli and Campling (2002) suggest that it is absurd to think that the need for feminism is past. In periods of economic difficulty, equality issues are often vulnerable. When the issues with LEPs were raised with the Women's Resource Centre by the Foundation, they responded that they no longer had the capacity to take on such an issue.

The past battles and campaigns that women have been involved in, to try to gain political and economic equality, are in some ways better understood and documented historically than is the current situation. It is important to situate the focus of this research in wider struggles for women's equality. The range of experience of the subjects of this research covers some fifty years.

Research by the WRC from 2007 showed that the situation of women in the Voluntary and Community Sector is a reflection of women's situation in society. Nearly half (44%) of the women employed within the VCS were employed part-time, compared to less than a quarter (23%) of men. Men working within the voluntary sector, however, were more likely to be employed part-time than men working in the private and public sectors (13% and 11% respectively). The proportion of women working part-time was similar in the private sector (45%) and a little lower in the public sector (40%) (WRC, 2007a).

These problems are far from new. Whilst progress towards achieving economic equality for women has been made in recent years, successive governments have failed to adequately tackle the root causes of the problem and design policies in a way that reflect the realities of women's lives in the modern world. In other words, when key tax and spending policies are being designed, not enough attention is given to how they are likely to affect women's equality and if they will make this better or worse. With the Equalities Act government departments are now supposed to ensure new policies do not impact on any specific group or on equality, and carry out equality impact assessments. Equality organisations, which used to monitor equality and gender, have closed. For example, in the South West region of the UK, Equality South West, an organisation that operated for over five years, has disappeared due to lack of funding. The Urban Forum who published the report on the under-representation of women on the Local Strategic Partnerships closed in 2014. Making budgetary decisions in a "gender blind" way runs the danger of policies being created that not only do not reflect women's existing economic inequality but actually shore it up or make it worse.

What progress there has been in previous years for women is now under renewed threat, according to the Fawcett Society (2012) and the Rosa Foundation (2014).

Their research asserts that the current austerity agenda and programme of deep spending cuts has left women facing a ‘triple jeopardy’ of cuts to jobs, benefits and vital services. This means that ‘women are being hit in three key ways a result of the deficit-reduction measures’ (Fawcett Society, 2012: 3). The first issue is employment. Women make up around two-thirds of the public sector workforce, so cuts to this sector are hitting them harder. What is more, there is evidence that women are not sufficiently benefitting from government action to create jobs in the private sector. The second is welfare benefits.

Women have historically been over-represented within the welfare sector due to their caring roles and family roles for some time (Fawcett Society 2012, 2013a). Cuts to benefits and tax credits such as housing benefit and carers allowance hitting women disproportionately hard – around three-quarters of the money being cut is coming from women’s pockets. Thirdly, rolling back public services also affects women disproportionately, as they tend to use public services such as childcare and social care services more frequently and more intensively than men and so are disproportionately affected by the cuts in these service (Fawcett Society: 2013a). The research concludes that:

taken individually, the elements that make up the current austerity package will make life more difficult for many women across the UK; added together they spell a tipping point for women’s equality (Fawcett Society, 2012: 3).

Responding to the first budget from a new Conservative Government through a press release, the Women’s Budget Group stated:

The changes in welfare benefits and personal income tax redistribute money from the purse to the wallet. The majority of people losing from cuts to tax credits (£5.8bn a year by 2020) will be women and the majority of people gaining from rising tax thresholds (£1.5bn a year by 2020) will be men. A benefit system is a necessary part of providing economic security, especially for people with caring responsibilities

” (Women’s Budget Group, July 8, 2015)

This chapter has explored the context within which small community groups have been operating in since the 1970s. It has also analysed the degree to which successive governments since the '70s have sought to utilise the voluntary sector to assist with the delivery of their own agendas. This has emerged as a key link across the period despite any apparent ideological differences, interpretations and implementations of those policies. This includes the most recent development of the Big Society and its associated aims, and the current hiatus reached by the Big Society idea. The chapter has discussed and analysed the invisibility of small 'Below the Radar' (BTR) groups and organisations that provide the platform for community involvement in South West England. The chapter has concluded with a consideration of the position of women in society and how this is reflected in the VCS. Despite women's key and leading involvement in small voluntary and community sector organisations (VCSOs), they remain often invisible beyond those groups and their local communities, and absent from research and datasets, as with BTR groups. Women's position in society, despite a number of successes through the feminist and women's movement, is still far from equal.

## **Key themes from Chapter 1**

This chapter has introduced a number of key themes, which feature throughout this thesis, and these are:

- Women are the main contributors/participants in small community groups.
- The involvement of women in community groups is unrecognised.
- The independence of VCSOs has been compromised by governments exerting influence through funding and contracts with the sector. Only the smaller groups appear to retain their independence.
- Small VCSOs are under-researched.

This research will contribute to redressing the lack of research, which has largely ignored small VCSOs and the women who are involved in them. Through this research, the aim is to contribute to making the work of women in their communities more visible, by seeking out a model that can both identify the women and raise their status in decision-making and for policy-makers. Highlighting the diverse range of work of the many BTR community groups that women are involved in are undertaking, is also a key aim.

**Chapter 2** reviews the literature in the field and identifies three key themes, each of which has further subthemes. These are community work; the voluntary and community sector and women and communities.

**Chapter 3** Outlines the research methodology as a mixed methods feminist research study; the qualitative and quantitative methods used; the sampling strategy, ethical considerations and the approach to data analysis.

**Chapter 4** presents the findings of the research through the women's voices.

**Chapter 5** is a discussion and analysis of the findings and how they relate to the key themes from the literature review.

**Chapter 6** considers if the research has achieved what it set out do, reviews the contribution of the research to new knowledge, draws conclusions from the research, evaluates the research methodology, suggests a new framework and outlines possible for change and considers future action because of the research.

## Chapter 2 - Literature review

### Introduction

In conceptualising the research question, it was important for me to identify literature that would provide a framework for the prime focus of this research, which is to examine women's involvement in small Voluntary and community sector organisations (VCSOs) that operate primarily in the rural areas of the South West Region. These small VCSOs are mainly those organisations that the Third Sector Research Centre refers to as operating 'Below the Radar (BTR)'. McCabe et al. (2010) acknowledged the challenges they faced when constructing their own literature review relating to small VCSOs. They indicated it was not possible to undertake a 'systematic review' of the literature because 'much of the literature on these small groups cannot be easily or openly accessed and it exists mainly in internal evaluations' (Ibid: 3).

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They also argue that academic literature on the subject is 'extremely fragmented' (Ibid: 3), and that

one of the big mysteries in non-profit sector research is the question of what we are missing by excluding these organisations from empirical investigation that are not easily captured in standard data resources (McCabe et al., 2010: 236)

There have been similar challenges in this literature review. The focus of this research on women's involvement in the VCS was itself almost invisible or hidden from view, in research terms. It was therefore necessary to include topics related to the primary research focus, as there is a lack of literature on the exact topic. The focus of the literature review is therefore to explore related areas of research and concepts that can help develop a useful framework for understanding this topic.

Ackerly and True (2010) argue that a literature review aims to contribute to an understanding which is broader than the focus of the research itself, and which can be interesting to others from other fields. In order for us to have 'informed reflexion on what kind of puzzle or problem our question poses' (Ackerly and True, 2010: 77),

literature was searched for key topics of relevance to the research, such as why do women become involved in the small groups, and what keeps them involved? Literature has also been included on other relevant topics such as the nature of community and community work, and women's position in communities. Wider topics such as the relationship of small VCSOs and the overall VCS with the state are also included.

### **Literature review themes**

Three main themes emerged from the literature review.

The first theme is an examination and analysis of the notions of community, community work and community development. Chapter 1 has already analysed the political and societal background and context of community work and community development and the background in which the women, who are the subjects of this research, operate.

The second theme within this chapter considers the available literature that surrounds small VCSOs. The focus is particularly on small community groups, which operate Below the Radar (BTR). The literature on the background of smaller VCSOs and their relationship social capital is considered including the gender element of social capital. The notion of conflict in and between small VCSOs groups is examined. The section further analyses the threats to the independence of the larger VCSOs and some smaller VCSOs through their relationship with the state.

The third theme is that associated with women and their work in the community. It looks at the wider issue of women's position in society; their lack of power and influence; and how the invisibility of women's work has transferred into their work in communities. It also considers evidence from research of why women become involved, why they stay involved, what challenges they face, and what motivates them and keeps them involved.

I have searched databases for relevant journal articles, books, reports, dissertations and other publications including published, unpublished and 'grey' literature from

professional networks, from project and research work, from colleagues and from organised events and activities. The search for relevant keywords highlighted what Bond et al. (2008: 48) describe as 'a surprising absence of literature on how and why women become involved in their communities as activists and leaders in the first place'.

## **Theme 1 – community work**

### **What is community?**

Occasionally a word appears in the English language that becomes 'ideologically' acceptable. Gilchrist suggests that 'most people regard community as 'a good thing', and we often hear 'a nostalgic lament that community is disappearing from modern lives and needs to be reinvigorated, and possibly even reinvented' (Gilchrist, 2004: 2).

Varnier proposed a very positive view of communities in the 1980s:

Men lived in homogenous groups; people spoke the same language, lived by the same rules and codes of behavior. There was a sense of solidarity and unity, which came from a need to co-operate to meet material needs and to defend the group (Varnier, 1982: 1).

Before this, in the 1960s and the 1970s, 'community' as a word in the UK was often seen as 'something intrinsically good and right' (Jarvis 2004: 56). Chanan (2002) somewhat nostalgically argues that 'community':

echoes something positive about a time gone by when people related to one another, when neighbours looked after the less fortunate, when people did not suffer from isolation and all worked toward the good of the whole. ...the nature of this community involvement is forever changing (Chanan 2002: 15).

Dominelli (2006) cites Toennies (1957) in writing about rural communities as articulating 'a homogeneous view of community'. He calls it *Gemeinschaft* and argues that it is a self-contained entity united by kinship and a sense of belonging,

which stands counter-distinctive to *Gesellschaft*, which involves a loose association of individuals. (Dominelli, 2006: 2). This idealised, nostalgic view of community is identified by Gilchrist (200), Chanan (2002) and Dominelli (2006). Dominelli argues that finding any absolute definition of the notion of 'community' is like looking in a 'portmanteau - stuffed with diverse meanings that lack clarity' (ibid: 2).

Galpin (1915) delineated rural communities in terms of the trade and service areas surrounding a central village. Craig identifies 'community' as a word that is found everywhere in the language of policy and politics 'particularly where politicians wish to engender a sense of well-being and consensus' (Craig, 2011: 274). Community is a word often used but the definition of which is 'loaded with contradictions and ambiguities' (Craig 2011). Hillery (1964) examined the literature fifty years ago and identified several hundred meanings with the only 'distinctive common characteristic being that of social interaction' (as cited by Craig, 2011: 274). Dominelli (2006) refers to Bell and Newby as unearthing '98 definitions for community (1).

There have been many attempts to define the notion of 'community'; perhaps the most used of these was the notion of geography (Craig 2011) or 'location' as Dominelli refers to it. Gilchrist refers to the geographical dimension of community as follows:

The geographical dimension of community was paramount to defining the set of people studied, such as the residents of a particular neighborhood, small town or island' (Frankenberg, 1966 cited in Gilchrist 2009: 43).

Dominelli refers to communities as being 'constantly changing entities':

Politicians, policy makers and practitioners like the term 'community' because they envisage this as a unitary fixed site where things happen and [people] enjoy the warm feelings of solidarity and belonging....this is a very partial view of community (Dominelli, 2006: xi).

As the latter part of this quote indicates, for Dominelli communities are complex and transient.

Varnier, back in 1982, suggested that the definition of communities, through their location or geography might not hold. He argued that 'times have changed' (1). People who live in the same neighbourhood may not always be part of a homogenous group with the same beliefs, the same ideals and the same codes of behaviour. The notion of geographical boundaries defining a community, as Chanan suggests, may be one of convenience:

The most practical way of specifying a population to investigate is to use a territorial framework (a locality of some size, such as a local authority area, a ward, neighbourhood or parish) (Chanan, 2002: 17).

Even when utilising the geographical notion other elements must be taken into account. Chanan outlines some of these when stating:

However, the types of activity to be captured are not only those that relate specifically to the chosen locality but also to activities taking place in that locality that relate either to some smaller part of it, or to communities of interest and identity that run across it, or to issues far afield (Chanan 2002: 18)

Whatever definition of community is used it starts with people at its heart. The term 'community' is complex in its nature and can have many definitions and uses but that does not render it without meaning.

It is a number of people who have repeated dealings with each other. We use the term sometimes to mean all the people in a certain local area, sometimes to mean particular groupings amongst them, sometimes to mean networks not tied to the locality. The word may be much stretched or even abused but it is not meaningless (Chanan, 2002: 16).

While accepting that community is complex, Craig (2011) identifies three definitions of community. One relates again to a *geographical community* where people living within a well-defined physical space such as a housing development, a neighbourhood or a rural village or refugee camp may be viewed as living in a

geographical community. Gilchrist (2004: 2) states that 'the geographical dimension of community was paramount in how people were studied'. Craig's second definition focuses on what he calls *community of identity*. Community of identity refers to the fact that within and between geographical communities there might be a wide range of communities of identity with different needs and identities. These identities can be cultural, political, gender-based, occupational, recreational, ideological, or many others. Sivanandan (1990) when writing about communities of resistance and the struggles of Black and Minority Ethnic communities in Britain reinforces this. The third definition of community for Craig is linked to what he calls 'issue based communities' where people come together with a focus on a specific issue such as 'improving housing conditions, improving road safety at school crossings, protecting aspects of the environment' (5). Activity within such a community may involve campaigning around issues. Craig argues that such communities may not be permanent, but may come together for a certain action or campaign, and then be 'quite ephemeral and fade away again after a campaign has been successful' (ibid: 5).

Issue based communities are not exclusive and people may be members of more than one community at any given time. Dominelli (2006) refers to this when discussing differing notions of communities. She argues that location and geography plays a part in communities, but that other 'influences are present which result in a concept of community as 'multidimensional, interactive and fluid' (Dominelli, 2006:8). Individuals and groups may belong to more than one community at any given time although they may identify foremost with one particular community.

Finding a definition for community has occupied so many because of its importance. Negative aspects of communities have also been identified where some members of communities are, for whatever reason, excluded from taking part. Gilchrist (2004: 9) argues that 'communities are sometimes elitist, tribalist and oppressive'. Gilchrist refers to the fact that 'dominant norms' in strong communities might damage the confidence and identity of anyone who deviates from that perceived norm, and that 'Social Networks are used to exert these pressures causing misery as well as bodily harm' (ibid: 9).

Communities therefore can be exclusive as well as inclusive. The difficulties surrounding social exclusion are largely accepted as a position that many people can find themselves in through no fault of their own. People who have health issues that preclude them from taking part in their communities, people for whom age has made connections difficult with friends and contacts dying as the ageing process bites. For others social isolation may be forced upon them by their community itself, not accepting their faith or religion or their 'othering' caused by poverty (Lister, 2014: 3). People need friends, contacts social interaction if they are to survive. A range of studies, including Berkman and Syme (1978) and House et al. (1988) have identified social isolation as causing both psychological and emotional distress even early death.

Agencies go to great lengths to help tackle isolation among older people, for example. Age UK, in its 'Evidence Review of Loneliness and Isolation' (2015) lists a wide range of health benefits, both physical and psychological, for older people who are able in some way to remain 'connected' and socially active. Studies, which seek to identify a baseline for health status, consistently show increased risk of death among people with a low quantity and often low quality of social relationships (Berkman and Sime, 1978). Small community groups are one of the essential ingredients in communities that provide a wide range of activities and opportunities which help to address these issues of isolation (Crawley, 2015).

Varnier (1979) argued that the communes and alternative communities in the 60s and 70s contained people wishing to come together in a community to bring about change. People may wish to work for peace and justice or the improvement of the quality of life of themselves and or others. Some may have left their own neighbourhood and environment to join a community in another geographical location that shares their beliefs and vision (Varnier, 1979). This element of community was also highlighted by Chanan when arguing that for some, community could become 'a powerful organising ideal (such as those concerned with advancing the communitarian agenda' (Chanan, 2002: 14).

Clark (2007) argues that the definition of community referring to a fixed geographical location is challenged by:

processes such as transnational mobility and the development of diasporas, and technological development such as global communications and the internet. This 'cosmopolisation' of community has encouraged reflection of issues such as proximity and distance and co-presence and absence that are central to more static concepts of community, for as social contacts become stretched over great distances, so social relations are being re-shaped beyond the traditional categories of place (Clark, 2007:3).

Popple (2015) also refers to the influence of global communication as becoming a tool of activism when stating:

digital networks offer the opportunities for communities everywhere to enjoy largely unfettered discussion and co-ordination in their campaigns (Popple, 2015: 55).

In this sense community partly becomes as a form of 'political mobilization' inspired by 'radical democracy' that prompts 'communities of action' to oppose social injustice' (Clark, 2007: 3).

The search for a definition or definitions of community is important, not least because the word 'community' is utilised as a prefix to so many other concepts for which definitions are sought, such as community work, community development, community engagement, community involvement to name just a few.

Overall, as the literature suggests, multiple understandings of community are present and multiple definitions suggested, without a general agreement on any particular one. This has often been a significant disadvantage for the VCS.

## **Community work and community development**

In Chapter 1 the social and political context of small community groups was considered. The women who are the focus of this research undertake their community activity through small community groups. Chapter 1 considered the roles

that community workers and community development workers were playing in communities; the influence of government agendas on community work and community development; the voluntary and community sector's situation and the challenges faced by the sector. The following section considers these subthemes as they emerge from the literature. The section begins with a brief history of community work.

## **Defining terms**

Henderson and Thomas (2000) argue that the term 'community work' featured regularly in the 1970s, although the notion of 'community development' was also present. A number of authors (Poppo, 1995; Dominelli, 1990 and Twelvetrees, 2001) agree that community work, as with community development, suffered from the lack of a clear definition. Community work is also a contested concept where there is no universally agreed meaning (Poppo, 1995). Twelvetrees (2001) indicates that when he started as a community worker in the 1960s, neighbourhood work was the only recognised community work that there was. In the 2008 edition Twelvetrees acknowledges that the notion of community work had broadened to such an extent that he would struggle to cover all the aspects and models in the book.

When I started out as a community worker in the early 1970s, the only kind of recognised community work in Britain was neighbourhood work. There were no institutional structures within which to deliver community work, 'partnership working' had not been 'invented'. (Twelvetrees, 2008: xiii)

Poppo (1995) argues that certain writers placed community work within a struggle for 'macro change', Jacobs (1984), Dominelli (1990) and Lees and Mayo (1984) all recognise 'a disparate experience within communities and the need to tackle structured inequalities at the neighbourhood level' (Poppo 1995: 5). Poppo argues that community work is not a profession like any other:

It is a profession dedicated to increasing the expertise of non- professionals; to increasing the capacity of people in difficult and disadvantaged situations, getting more control over their collective circumstances (Popple, 1995: 5)

However, some of the elements of this definition are also present in community development. Twelvetrees in the 2000 edition of his book acknowledges that different writers use community and community development in different ways and that the same writer may interchange the definitions. Twelvetrees' definition of community development workers argues they operate as facilitators with people, in relation to what those people decide to become involved with, and that they help them to realise their collective goals. Helping communities or groups to do things for themselves is a helpful interpretation and one that Popple (1995) has also adopted.

It can be difficult to distinguish absolute differences between models of community work, in particular the difference between community development and community work. Twelvetrees considers it helpful:

to think of community work as a bit like an onion, of which neighbourhood community development work is the centre; but there are several other 'layers' building up the whole onion.' (Twelvetrees, 2001: xii)

Twelvetrees agrees however that even this analogy could be open to discussion:

it is a matter of opinion as to whether the outer layers are community work or not. What I would call community work, another commentator might not. Looked at in different ways, these outer layers can be social work, youth work, service delivery or planning, to name but a few (Twelvetrees, 2001: xiii).

The suggestion by Twelvetrees that community work may be used, as the 'umbrella' or overarching phrase to cover 'both paid and unpaid work, doing things for the benefit of neighbourhood and community' can be helpful when seeking to differentiate between community development and community work. Community development then becomes one of the models of community work.

In 1995 in the first version of Analysing Community Work, Popple produced a useful table of community work models. Twenty years later in 2015, he has produced a revised model. It is both interesting and comforting in this changing and difficult environment for the VCS, to find that Popple’s new table of community work practice retains many of the features of the 1995 table. Sections of the 2015 table, which are new, have been highlighted in yellow in Table 4, and the text emboldened to show where the additions have occurred.

While much of the table has remained, there are some changes since 1995 in addition to key selected texts. An addition to the 2015 table of Popple’s models of community work is ‘environmentalism and the green movement critique.’ It is not surprising that this area has grown during a period of increasing concern about major environmental issues that are threatening local communities and future generations. The other and perhaps more controversial inclusion is the new ‘not-for profit’ businesses and co-operatives. Within this arena is the very rapid growth of the new structures of Community Interest Companies (CICs). Over the last 10 years, it is the one area that has had the greatest effect in the ‘not for profit sector’. It is possible to establish a CIC within two weeks without the ‘hindrance’ or ‘scrutiny’ of the Charity Commission. CICs have grown by over 11,000 since their introduction in 2005 (ORCIC, 2015: 15). Many charitable funders including Lloyds Bank Foundation, one of the largest of the charitable funders, will not consider applications from CICs because of their lack charitable aims and status.

See the table below for Popple’s Models of community work 2015

<b>Community work model</b>	<b>Strategy</b>	<b>Main role/title of worker</b>	<b>Examples of work/agencies</b>
Community Care	Cultivating social networks and voluntary services Developing Self-help concepts	Organiser Volunteer	Work with older people, person with disabilities, children under 5 years
Community Organisation	Improving co-ordination between different agencies	Organiser Catalyst, Manager	Councils for Voluntary Service <b>Racial Equality Councils</b> Settlement
Community Development	Assisting groups to acquire the skills and	Enabler Neighbour-	Community Groups Tenants Groups

	confidence to improve quality of life	hood worker Facilitator	Settlements
Community Education	Attempts to bring education and community into a closer and more equal relationship	Educator Facilitator	Community Schools /colleges 'Compensatory education' Working Class /feminist adult education
Community action	Usually class based, conflict focussed direct action at a local level	Activist	Squatting movement, welfare rights movement Resistance against planning and redevelopment Tenant's action
<b>Community Economic Development</b>	<b>Establishing local-based, 'not for profit' businesses and co-operatives</b>	<b>Facilitators Development Workers</b>	<b>Credit Unions</b>
Feminist Community Work	Improvement of Women's welfare working collectively to challenge and eradicate inequalities suffered by women	Activist enabler Facilitator	Women's refuges Women's health groups Women's therapy centres
Ethnic Minority and anti-racists community work	Setting up and running a groups that support the needs of ethnic minority groups and communities Challenging racism	Activists volunteer	<b>Autonomous ethnic minority community based groups</b>
<b>Environmentalism and the green movement critique</b>	<b>Working with and setting up groups and networks that focus on empowering communities to address climate change and sustainable justice</b>	<b>Activist Volunteer</b>	<b>Community Co-ops</b>

Table 4: Models of Community Work Adapted from Popple (1995 and 2015)  
Terminology around 'Black' groups has altered to 'Minority Ethnic' groups to reflect current practice. The absence of Race Equality Councils and the Race Equality Commission as the 'actors' in this field reflects the casualties of austerity measures.

Their absence also marks the reduction of a number of agencies around equality issues such as Equality South West and the Black South West Network.

Community work in 2015 still has a solid core of community care, community organisation, community development, community education, community action, anti-racist community work and feminist community work. This is encouraging given the current economic climate. What the table does not tell us however, is how prominent these models now are, in comparison with their functioning in 1995. For example, to me, as someone operating in the field, the reduction of community development workers in local authorities and the voluntary and community sector in the last five years is all too clear. The period when there were 20,000 community development workers has long since ended. With the closure of CDX, the considerably diminished Federation for Community Development Learning and closure of the Community Development Foundation (2106), there has been no new report on CD workers since 2007.

Popple proposes three main models of community work which are directly relevant to this research. They are community development, community action and feminist community work. These three models align well with the experiences, both in historical time and actual experience, of the women who are the focus of this research.

### **Community development**

Community development has already featured in Chapter 1. After discussion of a number of definitions by Craig et al. (2011); Henderson and Thomas (1987); IACD (2004); Popple (1995) and Shaw (2008), I coined my own definition.

**Community development is a process that enables people to access the tools, information, support and skills that they need to bring about change for the better in their communities.**

Historically, the origins of community development evolved from experiences within the colonies. Popple (2011) outlines how Batten (1957: 67) introduced the notion 'community development' to the UK 'deriving from his experiences of working in the

British colonies' (213). Gilchrist (2004), Ledwith (2005), Popple (2011) and Twelvetrees (2001) also make this historical link. Ledwith (2005) explains how community development began its theoretical life in Nigeria between 1927 and 1949 and cites its primary uses being that of assisting colonial domination. Popple (2011) cites the use of community development as a tool used by the British administration overseas to manipulate local communities in a 'colonial manner'. There was a strong element of community development being an instrument of control, which often gets lost in current thinking. This element of control and manipulation in community development is an interesting beginning for a model of community work that has, more recently, been argued to be a process which assists community groups 'to acquire skills and confidence to improve the quality of the lives of its members' (Popple, 2011: 214).

More recent theorising of community development shifts the emphasis from its more negative history as a tool of control, and argues for it as a benevolent and useful tool of enablement. It has also been associated with 'projects that have their origins in grassroots activity aimed at benefitting local people' (Blackshaw, 2010: 164). The current conceptions of community development more closely relate to work undertaken in the 1960s and 1970s, much of which came from the Association of Community Workers. By 1971, the Association's membership had grown to more than two hundred and thirty. The Association of Community Workers identified community work at that time as a 'deliberate and systematic activity' and was a new phenomenon (Jones and Mayo, 1974: xv). At that time Jones and Mayo's work defined community work as a 'wide and encompassing activity', which 'cut across the disciplines being developed in a variety of settings and organisations' (ibid: xvi).

Within the notion of community work as the overarching genre of community activity, there was also a strong element of community development, which, as Twelvetrees has identified, sat at the core of community work. This chapter will later consider the notion of independence of both community development and community work but it is important to note that both community work and community development in the 1970s and 1980s were part of the desire to bring about change. One of the key aspects of approaches seeking to bring about change was 'community action'.

## **Community action**

Popple (1995) and Dominelli (1990) have identified different approaches to community action. Popple views community action as emerging from:

two contradictory and distinct forces: benevolent paternalism as reflected in the work of the colonial office and the settlement movement; and collective community action such as the Glasgow rent strikes, the unemployed workers union, the suffragettes and the colonial struggles for independence (Popple, 1995: 7).

Dominelli identifies community action as 'presupposing a conflict model of social organising that is often identity based' (1990: 15). Community action according to this model can be:

militant, bringing together people lacking power in order to reduce their powerlessness and increase effectiveness in furthering their interests through direct collective action. Confrontation and negotiation are the key means for releasing their objectives (Dominelli, 1990: 6).

This model of community action is particularly relevant to the Below the Radar small groups, which many of the women that were involved in this research, are active in. The Association of Community Workers in 1982 published one of the most comprehensive collections of examples of community action with 17 live case studies from around the country, all delivered by women mainly involved in small groups. Lees and Mayo (1984) noted a growth of community action since the 1960s to the time they were writing:

This has included the welfare rights movement, resistance against planning and redevelopment, the squatting movement, strategies to form alliances with trade unions, the local organisation of ethnic minorities, the development of feminist groups, and demands for the devolution of decision making in industry, politics and government (Lees and Mayo, 1984: 11).

Lees and Mayo (1984) further argued that the unfair distribution of power and resources was unjust and exploitative and that this could motivate people's involvement in community action to bring about change.

One of the first community groups that I was involved in establishing in the early 1980s as mentioned in Chapter 1 was a small local advice centre in an old mining area of Somerset. The Claimants Union were the first to come out from Bristol to help with its development. The motivation for the establishment of the group was the realisation that people most in need in the local area were missing their rights. Poverty of both their income and environment was leading to people lacking a voice and the confidence to access their rights. In five years in excess of £6 million in unclaimed benefits and charitable funding to assist people in need were accessed; bailiffs challenged and prevented from entering people's property in the Poll Tax era; a national landmark legal victory was won around industrial injuries benefitting thousands of miners.

This experience endorses at least to some degree Dominelli's (1990) 'conflict model of social organising' (15), and the drawing together of people around a common cause. As a welfare rights group in Somerset we initially challenged decisions on benefits through persuasion. Those who had benefitted from our services and 'won' their cases joined us as volunteers to help others. Lees and Mayo (1984) describe this type of activity as community activists using their skills and legal knowledge to help people to access their rights. Community action 'involved not only obtaining change in the present but taking direct collective action to obtain an improved situation' (Lees and Mayo, 1984: 76). The term 'transformative community development' now appears to have come to the fore, rather than 'community action' with authors relying on conflict models of society from thinkers such as Alinsky and Gramsci, who are referred to in more detail later in this Chapter.

The dynamic nature of definitions of 'community', 'community work', 'community development' and 'community action' reflect both the changing nature of policy outlined in chapter 1 and changing analytical frameworks

Literature on all four topics including Dominelli (1990), Ledwith (2005), Jones and Mayo (1974) and Pople (1995) often begin their definitions of these topics by arguing that the topic is difficult to define and that there is no one agreed definition. In addition, there is a tendency for writers to interchange certain of the terminologies with each other, to the extent that even if a semi-precise definition is agreed, the intermixing of terminology confuses the reader once again. While some flexibility in definition can be helpful, when that field is under attack, it can leave it vulnerable, difficult to defend and challenging to prove its worth.

## **Theme two: small voluntary and community sector organisations**

There was a growth of community groups from the 1960s onwards. Community groups are placed within what is often referred to as the 'voluntary and community sector' or VCS. As discussed in Chapter 1, the sector has adopted a range of different terminologies since the 1960s such as 'Third Sector organisations', 'social purpose groups' and 'the charitable sector'. The terminology of the 'voluntary and community sector' however has been present since the 1960s, and is possibly the most recognisable and most widely used.

It was not until the 1960s and early 1970s that people began to form themselves into community groups intent on tackling some local issue including the provision of a service or activity for often for those 'less fortunate' individuals. Community Work One (Jones and Mayo, 1974) published a collection of articles by practitioners in the community work field. Women were a key to much of the community action. In 1997 Mayo, who was a researcher for the Joint Docklands Action Group at that time, produced a 'lively collection of papers' by women involved in community work and community action. The collection considered links between the women's movements and community action. In 1990, Lena Dominelli published her landmark book about women's involvement in community action that focused 'primarily on community action as a model of community work' (Dominelli, 2006: xiii). Collective action was the process viewed as bringing people together for community action. Feminist community workers emphasise collective action for changing women's lives. In the 60s and 70s, women were taking collective action to change the lives of the wider

community. As outlined by Dominelli, women were changing the world not just for women but for men and children as well:

Feminist campaigners and networks began as a social action to tackle women's inequality in all areas of life (Dominelli, 2006: 102).

Feminists wished to eliminate all forms of oppression of 'a majority (not minority)'. It became increasingly clear, as argued by Dominelli, that egalitarian social relations would not be realised unless the roles and status of men and women were changed.

The interdependence of men, women and children required change in all their lives to ensure social justice (ibid: 102).

Pople's table of community work models demonstrates the challenges associated with the formulation of tables and models. Some forms of community work could fit into more than one category in the table, while other forms of community work would struggle to fit into any of the categories. The women who are the focus of this research do not readily fit into any of the categories listed by Pople. The one category that they may have fitted into would be Feminist Community Work but this model only includes work with women. The participants in this research undertake activities that benefit both women and men, in their search for social justice and equality. Dominelli and Campling (2002: 6) highlight a possibly appropriate model when they state:

A further group of feminists have argued that for women to be truly free, men have to liberate themselves from the shackles imposed upon them by their adherence to patriarchal social relations (Dominelli and McLeod, 1989; Collins, 1991). And, they have sought to include children and men as beneficiaries of their social action (Dominelli, 1999).

Dominelli (2006) argued that, although feminist campaigns and networks at the beginning tackled women's inequality 'the change effort today encompasses the entire world, even if it begins with women' (Ibid: 102).

With that in mind, it is possible to adapt the 'Feminist Community Work' model featured in the Popple (2015) table as shown in table 5.

<b>Model</b>	<b>Strategy</b>	<b>Main role / Title of worker</b>	<b>Example of work / agencies</b>
Feminist Community Work	To reduce inequality in communities for all and to bring about improvement in welfare often with specific focus on women.	Community leader Facilitator Enabler	Small Community groups Women's refuges Women's health groups Women's therapy centres

Table 5 - adapted model of Feminist Community Work

Historically Craig (2011) argues that community groups have their antecedents in two distinct areas, one domestic and the other overseas. In the domestic context Craig explains how in the Victorian era a number of 'charitable paternalistic organisations such as the Charity Organisation Society and university settlements' were in existence. Evidence from Craig (1989, 2011) demonstrates that the poor benefitted materially from work done with them through these organisations. It is also argued that the concern of many of the upper class was prompted, as much by growing unease at the possibilities of social unrest, as by a (generally charitable) desire to improve the lot of the poor (even the "undeserving" poor) (Craig, 1989, 2011). More recently, the National Coalition for Independent Action (2015) has introduced the following definition of voluntary organisations.

Voluntary groups (including those that provide services, whether under contract or otherwise) do not have to exist. They are an expression of citizen action, usually driven by compassion, concern and determination to make the world a better place (NCIA, 2015: 1).

This literature review however, has found that very few publications, other than those mentioned here, have identified a gender issue in the expression of community action and the desire to make the world a better place.

### **Relationship with the state**

Over the last 30 years, as can be seen in Chapter 1, governments have been increasingly seeing the VCS as the best placed to deliver services that will bring about change and improve the quality of life for people in communities. The VCS has become a delivery agent for reaching those marginalised individuals most in need of assistance. Much current government investment in the sector seeks to ensure that the sector is fit for purpose, that purpose being the delivery of services for government. For some time now, the role of the VCS in tackling poverty and social disadvantage has been recognised as a powerful force. As Church et al. (2000) suggest:

Community based projects and groups are a valuable resource for those struggling honourably to help a very needy group of young people. In terms of sustainability, the community sector is always there even in the most excluded locations (Church et al., 2000: 12)

Most people who get involved in their communities and remain involved do it through some sort of group. At a local level, organisations are likely to be small and less formal. Literature often refers to the smaller less formal organisations as the 'community sector', for example:

The community sector is not a unified organisation or association but a stratum of autonomous and often small initiatives and organisations. In some localities, many organisations will not even know of each other's existence; in others, they may be well networked. (Chanan, 2009: 15)

Some see the community sector as part of the broad spectrum of the VCS. Chapter 1 outlined the history of successive governments of all political persuasions and their desire to utilise the VCS to be an agency to deliver statutory service. Because of this, the sector over time is becoming divided. The 'voluntary sector' is often thought of as the larger more formal end of the sector with professionally led organisations. Those smaller organisations, which are the focus of this research and nearer to the community, tend to be largely volunteer-led while those within the professional voluntary sector tend to be led by paid staff (Marshall, 1997).

In Chapter 1 the issues surrounding the importance of community groups and community development to government agendas of community engagement, were outlined. At their best, the local authorities supported groups who were seeking to provide a service to the communities for which there was a proven need. In the 1960s and 1970s, these voluntary groups were rewarded by financial support to continue their activities. Dominelli, (1990), Mayo, (1977) and Popple, (1995), commented on the strange irony in this situation. Having grown from a radical and challenging stance to change and alter the provision of public services, these groups then became persuaded to improve the lives of individuals within the communities by providing a service, but a service funded by government or local authorities. Groups which originally sought to challenge established authorities and policies frequently ended up providing services which were 'welcomed by authorities because they eased the pressure on them' (Dearlove, 1974: 37). This also meant that the community work activity, which had been challenging the established authorities, also started to be funded by local authorities. In some ways, this made it more difficult, as the years passed by, for the community sector, in which community work was embedded, to remain critical and challenging (Popple, 1995).

The National Coalition for Independent Action undertook research in 2013 and 2014, which considered the future of the VCS. Their research raised serious concerns about the sector becoming a servant of the state and compromising their ability to have an independent stance and to provide a critique of public services.

Voluntary services exist to do the things that government cannot, will not, or should not do; to complement, not substitute for public services and entitlements: to innovate, reach excluded groups, aid access to mainstream services, offer services which have to be independent (such as advice and advocacy) and act as commentator and critic of public services and State action. Once a voluntary group becomes a servant of the State this unique role is compromised. (NCIA, 2015: 3)

The Voluntary Sector is going through challenges at the time of writing, with the loss of grant aid and the movement toward the 'contract culture'. As outlined by the

Minister for Civil Society (another more recent term) in 2104, government is keen to invest in the sector but only for its own purposes.

We need to find a much more active and responsive system.... we have to help build much more capacity in the (voluntary) sector to be able to deliver what Government is going to need in the future. (Wilson, 2015)

The 1960s and 1970s has been referred to as the 'Golden Age of Community Work' (Popple, 1995: 30). Voluntary groups could access financial support to continue their activities. Having grown from a radical and challenging stance to change and alter the provision of public services, these groups then became persuaded to improve the lives of individuals within the communities by providing a service, but a service funded by government or local authorities. As funding programmes became more focussed and outcomes driven, this compromised the independence of the very organisations that the government sought to support. The dilemma of the state funding the VCS and the effect this had on its ability to be critical and the degree to which it damaged its independence, runs throughout this section, and is returned to later in this chapter.

### **Voluntary and community sector organisations (VCSOs) and social capital**

Behind the diversity of conceptualisation outlined above there is an underlying concern with the possibility of marginal populations engaging with problems and being more resilient. Social relationships were viewed as being key. A prominent concept emerging from work in this area is that of social capital. Social capital allows for a number of different approaches when seeking definition, but there is some consensus within the social sciences towards a definition that emphasises the role of networks and civic norms (Healy and Cote, 2001). Robert Putnam, generally recognised as one of the main authors in the field, argued social capital is both a private and public good because, it can benefit those actively involved, and those who are recipients of help (Putnam, 2000). Governments continue to show an interest in the value of VCSOs to help them to deliver their agendas. The contract culture grows and those medium to large organisations are seen as potential

partners with government to enter into contracts for the delivery of services. This is one of the main concerns of the research into the future of the sector by NCIA (2015). The sector is spending its time getting 'contract ready' and turning into a network of agencies to deliver contracted services.

The voluntary and community sector in particular has been influential in pioneering welfare service tailored to the needs of specific sections of the population that have been overlooked by mainstream agencies. (Gilchrist 2004: 10)

The American sociologist Robert Putnam (1995) suggested that there is a much wider community value connected to community groups, which can be associated with the notion of 'social capital'. 'Social capital' is a phrase which describes 'networks, norms and trusting relationships necessary to act together more effectively to pursue shared objects' (Putnam 1995: 18). Putnam sees these as being maintained through voluntary associations, civic life and community activity (Gilchrist, 2004). Putnam undertook 20 years of research in Italy in the 1970s into regional governments and discovered that some governments proved to be dismal failures while others thrived by creating 'innovative day care programmes, economic developments and managing public businesses efficiently' (Putnam, 2000: 24). He found, to his own surprise, that the best predictor of which of the governments would succeed and which would fail was 'civic engagement'. In other words, in regions where the members of the community were more engaged in grassroots community groups, societies and public issues, a more successful government appeared to operate. Putnam argued that civic engagement increased a community's 'social capital', and this to his mind was what made one community more successful than its neighbour where that neighbour's engagement in social and cultural associations was 'meagre'.

Putnam (1995) argued that social capital, embedded in the norms and networks of civic engagement, could be a precondition for economic development as well as for effective government. His research continued to relate these findings to aspects of the situation in the USA (Putnam, 2007) and found the decline in civic engagement was contributing the 'disintegration' of society. He argued that the decline of people's

involvement in clubs, societies, the church and all those organisations that give their communities a '*connectedness*' (Putnam, 1996; 2000) could be disastrous.

Putnam (2000: 23) argues that social capital has 'forceful, even quantifiable effects on many different aspects of our lives'. Putnam and Halpern and others outlined positive effects of increased social capital as including lower crime rates (Halpern 1999, Putnam 2000), better health (Wilkinson, 1996), improved longevity (Putnam, 2000) better educational achievement (Coleman, 1988), less corrupt and more effective government (Putnam, 1995)

Putnam identified two main types of social capital; bridging social capital and bonding social capital. Bonding social capital is good for 'getting by' and bridging is crucial for 'getting ahead'. (Putnam 2000:19). Bonding social capital refers to relations amongst relatively homogenous groups such as family members and close friends and is similar to the notion of strong ties. Examples of bonding social capital include ethnic fraternal organisations and church based women's reading groups. Bridging (inclusive) social capital refers to relations with distant friends, associates and colleagues. Putnam (2000) lists examples of these as being civil rights movements and ecumenical religious organisations. These ties tend to be weaker and more diverse but more important in "getting ahead".

Szreter and Woodcock (2004) provide further definitions:

- Bonding social capital refers to trusting and co-operative relations between members of a network who see themselves as being similar in terms of their shared social identity.
- Bridging social capital by contrast comprises relations of respect and mutuality between people who know they are not alike in some social demographic (or social identity) sense (differing by age, ethnic groups for example (2004: 654-55).

Research undertaken by the UK Government's Policy Action Teams (PAT, 1999), as identified in Chapter 1, reinforced the value of encouraging people to become more actively involved in their communities and neighbourhoods, increasing the viability of

small community groups and encouraging the growth of informal mutual support (Chanan, 2002). The importance of smaller, local grassroots community and neighbourhood groups and their connection to social capital rapidly came to be recognised and supported at the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century by the then Labour Government because of a growing awareness of the work of Putnam. For many of the groups 'bonding social capital' is more likely to be linked to small VCSOs made up of people who share a mission and interest. For 'bridging social capital' to occur, different elements need to be available that will facilitate the bringing together of people from very different spheres. In places where people from different backgrounds and interests can meet, this can help to develop 'motivations of dual benefit,' and 'a common grievance or issues' which can be tackled by groups coming together from different backgrounds.

Kirkby-Geddes et al. (2012) examined whether and how the dimensions of 'bonding' and 'bridging' social capital could re-cast the complexities of the ways in which community participation is experienced in everyday life and produce a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. They used the notion of bridging and bonding social capital to measure the nature of social networks through the work of a Healthy Living Centre. They found that the social capital dimensions of bonding and bridging offered a useful focus for this study to bring a clearer understanding of the complexity of these networks. Although they did find limitations in this application of social capital, it did help them to 'make sense of the complexities and contradictions in participants' experiences of community group participation' (Kirkby-Geddes et al., 2012: 271).

Geys and Murdoch, (2008) tested the approaches of bridging and bonding capital on data relating to 'voluntary association membership' (435) in Flanders. They analysed data on over 7000 individuals from Flemish government surveys and did find associations between bridging and bonding social capital and themes such as 'pro social attitudes' (445), but did also find methodological and conceptual problems with the dual concept of social capital represented by 'bridging and bonding'.

### **Critiques of social capital**

The concept of social capital proposed by Putnam has been criticised for not taking into account 'everyday realities of social interactions and the complexity of social networks' (Kirkby-Geddes et al., 2012: 272). It has also been described as requiring researchers to ask 'serious methodological as well as conceptual, theoretical questions' (Geys and Murdoch, 2008: 445) and to produce a clearer definition of the concepts involved in order to avoid variable interpretation and application of the ideas.

Campbell and Gillies (2001) study of people's experiences of community life in a small southeastern town in the UK is critical of Putnam's inability to take into account the fluidity of community life. They argue that changes and developments in communities can take place quickly, and that there are phases where steps forward are made and others where the reverse happens. Their research suggests the notions associated with social capital may not consider this fluidity sufficiently.

Criticism of social capital also suggested that it could perpetuate inequality. Portes and Landolt (1996) suggested that, like many new sociological concepts, the concept of social capital was stretched to become 'all things to all men', often in ways which differed substantially from the concept from which it emerged. Portes and Landolt (1996) summarise the concerns of others who are critical of social capital in describing how the building of networks and norms can reinforce inequalities and prejudices in a community, in the same way that it can improve the well-being of that community. Norms and networks that sustain some groups may preclude others. Building social capital could in some incidences emphasise and consolidate the current inequalities, rewarding those who are already well placed to successfully adapt the existing social relationships and structures for their own gain. (Portes and Sensenbrenner, 1993).

Putnam addresses some of these issues of the exclusivity of networks in a 2006 conference address (2007). He expanded on this notion of bridging and bonding social capital indicating that where bonding social capital was high, it was not necessary for this to have a detrimental effect on bridging social capital. This was

partly in response to claims that bonding social capital could lead to strong groups excluding others that did not share its characteristics:

Advocates of the conflict and contact theories clearly disagree about the balance of the empirical evidence, but in their shared focus on ethnocentric attitudes, they share one fundamental assumption – namely that in-group trust and out-group trust are negatively correlated. I believe this assumption is unwarranted and may have obscured some of the most interesting and unexpected consequences of diversity for social capital.

(Putnam, 2007: 143)

It has also been argued that social capital literature is too gender neutral (Lowndes, 2004; Inglehart and Norris, 2003 and Shapiro, 1997). They suggest that social capital 'seemingly ignored the differences in the day to day experiences of men and women' (Shapiro, 2003) and reinforced the idea that social inequalities may be embedded in social capital. Dominelli (1990) argues that Putnam ignores issues of gender and excludes the identification of important contribution that women make:

The personalisation of social capital has significant repercussions for women who not only have less access to formal social resources than men, but also have their stock of social capital appropriated by men. (1990: 41)

Growing social capital relies on informal networks that are built on trusting relationships, and as Dominelli argues, 'in this sense, women's skills and social relationships form the social capital that lies at the centre of civic engagement' (Dominelli, 1990: 41). Social capital theories have been argued by some to raise issues, 'that feminism has long worked to put on the social agenda' (Franklin and Thomson, 2005: 427). Overall, while some feminists engage with social capital 'others see it as detrimental to feminism and that to add women in, is to give it unwarranted credence' (Hodgkin, 2009). Putnam's omission of gender, while symptomatic of the way women's contributions are disregarded in the literature of this time and beyond, reinforces the invisibility of women's contribution to the structured well-being of communities. Coleman (1988) set out to investigate perceived loss of stocks of social capital. Coleman focusses on the family, and

argues that the more women worked in paid employment, the more they lost crucial associations for their families and ultimately with their immediate communities.

A further discussion around women's contribution to social capital focusses on their causal effects on stocks of social capital, through their central role in communities. While recognising the contribution that women were making to social capital, the other side of this, was felt to be implicit that women also had a role in diminishing stocks of social capital, through their increasing participation in the workforce. Lowndes (2004) notes that the focus has been on considering whether women are either the saviours or wreckers of social capital. They can be seen as saviours through the establishment of networks and trusting relationships, while involved in childcare but wreckers when no longer selfless and putting their own needs above those of their children, through women's increase participation in the workforce.

Beyond the perpetuation of inequality and the omission of the gender aspect of social capital, there are also concerns about the 'dark side' of social capital. While social capital is generally seen as a process for the good of civic engagement shoring up trust, norms and value (Halpern 2005) it has been recognised that there are potential dark sides to civic engagement (Bourdieu, 1985 and Coleman, 1991). Putnam did accept that certain types of social capital could result in damaging effects to the community and could perpetuate inequality: 'like human capital and physical capital, social capital can be put to bad purposes' (Putnam, 1995: 12).

Putnam has no absolute answer to the criticisms of social capital. Some networks are more useful and beneficial to the community as a whole than others. He feels this needs further investigation but that the usefulness of the social capital approach far outweighs the potential ills (Putnam, 1995).

### **Conflict and small VCSOs**

Social capital is based on the notion of building mutual trust. Research about small VCSOs, identifies them as core to the process of building social capital (Kirkby-Geddes et al., 2012). This does not however ignore the potential for conflict,

particularly if the critiques of social capital from Dominelli (1990); Geys and Murdoch (2008); Kirkby-Geddes et al., (2012); Lowndes (2004); Inglehart and Norris (2003) and Shapiro (1997) are correct in their concerns about equality issues and the possible exclusivity of strong networks and action groups. Reference has been made in the previous section to the potential of social capital to perpetuate inequality and assist the 'dark side'. There is some concern about the capacity for social capital, under certain circumstances, to contribute toward inequality and the generation of conflict between groups and between communities. There is also the potential within groups for conflict between group members (intra-group intra-personal conflict).

In order to seek out literature relating to conflict and small VCSOs, and relevant other fields, searching of the EBSCO database, Google Scholar and books used for other aspects of the literature review was undertaken. Searching for the keyword "conflict" and including other terms such as "voluntary sector" and "community group" all yielded little on the subject within the sphere of small community groups. Publications by the Third Sector Research Centre (TSRC), as already indicated in this chapter, focus a good deal on smaller VCSOs, but this search also yielded little information. None of the 139 working papers published by the TSRC published in the last 4 years, focus on the topic of conflict among the smaller VCSOs. A random sample of 50 of the TSRC's working papers was searched for the text 'conflict' and the result was that it was not mentioned at all in most of the papers. Three working papers mentioned conflict but less than three times in their text and only one paper mentioned the term conflict more than three times. The paper concerned passing references to Saul Alinsky's conflict model of community organising, which is based on engineering and encouraging conflict mainly between voluntary groups and the state or public and private agencies (Rees et al., 2013). Other brief mentions of conflict within the TSRC papers referred to conflict between the sector and the state (Arvidson, 2014). In certain geographical communities such as those in Northern Ireland, which had been experiencing ongoing conflict, the VCSO played an important role in the peace process.

To consider those papers in more detail:

**Paper 122** (Rees et al., 2014) considers public sector commissioning from the third sector and identifies a potential conflict. This is particularly in local government, and especially now that deep budget reductions are being made. Commissioning

involves securing cost savings and driving outsourcing, but commissioning can also be seen as something more collaborative, trust-based, and networked and about participative planning for social outcomes. The paper argues that it may therefore be useful to view commissioning as operating on a continuum – between ‘intelligent / collaborative’ commissioning on one side and ‘commissioning on price / procurement’ on the other. The collaborative and trust-based approaches of many small VCSOs could potentially conflict with the efficiency and cost saving approaches involved in commissioning services.

**Paper 117** (Arvidson, 2014) reviews government documents relating to open public services including evidence based policy-making, and the challenges faced by the VCS in relating to that government approach. The paper asserts that recent policy-making history tells us that on the one hand some government programmes, like ‘Sure Start’, which provided support for families with young children, were closely linked to research evidence (Nutley, et al., 2007). On the other hand, in the context of illegal drugs, the notion of ‘evidence’ has proven to be highly contested and policy-making ideologically charged. This has led to conflicts between politicians and the research community as to how to value and interpret research results and expert advice (Monaghan, 2008). Areas such as working with young children and drug users, and working to alleviate policy are all important to the voluntary sector, so can be affected by policy-making related to evidence when the evidence is used in ways which the VCSO may not agree with. Policy making of this type, and open public services therefore could be an area where government and the VCS may find conflict.

**Paper 115** (Rees at al., 2013) provides an overview of community organising in England as seen in 2013, and this paper contains ten mentions of the word ‘conflict’. A short overview of the history of both community development and organising and the current state of play in organising in rural communities is the main content of the paper. The final discussion explores the challenges confronting those engaged in rural community practice, and the extent to which community development and organising are in conflict – or opposition – as models of working.

Saul Alinsky ‘pioneered the first broad-based community alliance in the Back of the Yards neighbourhood of Chicago in 1939’ (Wills, 2012: 115). He subsequently helped to develop ‘larger-scale urban alliances and related networks across the

USA'. Fisher et al., (2012) argued that this model and others of the era involved militant tactics and strategies aimed at mobilising local people 'in support of democratic and just solutions.' Central to this approach was self-interest and conflict, or, as Alinsky (1971: 116) put it, community mobilisation resulted from rubbing "raw the resentments of the people in the local community".

The paper found that the UK version of community organising 'ranges across cooperation and conflict; which may also reflect differing institutional and individual views of its purpose and meanings' (Derounian, 2009: 19). Given the small number of activists in rural areas, and the 'often consensual models of community development' which have been identified by research in the UK, this paper suggested conflict based models 'rather than the conflictual approach of Alinsky' (ibid: 20) were more likely to be present. None of these references cited however, relate directly to conflict between or within small voluntary organisations.

This search reinforced the notion that research to date has not identified the presence of conflict to a significant degree within the context of small VCSOs. To further validate the results of this search, I made a direct enquiry to the Third Sector Research Centre, and they confirmed that they were aware that there was little if any empirical data about conflict within or between small VCSOs. They agreed this could be considered as surprising, but confirmed that this was a reflection of the research evidence to date. (2016)

Recently published research by Lloyds Bank Foundation into grantees (Lloyds Bank Foundation, 2015) also has only two mentions of conflict. One mention concerns the fact that different organisations may have different ethos that conflict which can make forming coalitions difficult (Ibid: 12). The other mention refers to the conflict between what funders require of organisations seeking funding, not conflict between the groups. Lloyds Foundation only funds registered charities and while the grantee's have 'small' incomes they would not be in the BTR category. It might have been expected that for those groups conflict would have been more of an issue when competing for funding.

## **The Big Society - co-operation, competition or conflict?**

As discussed in this chapter, the idea of the Big Society has sparked a lively debate. However, to date it has not been framed in terms of theories of the third sector's existence, role in society and its relationship to the state. This opens the question of whether, fundamentally, a view is taken of the third sector as potentially in conflict or competition with the state, or whether a more co-operative and complementary relationship is thought to apply

This section of the literature review does not ignore the presence of conflict in small VCISOs, but has found very little evidence from research, which supports the assertion that conflict is regularly present. The involvement of small VCISOs in the building of social capital suggests that conflict would be unlikely to be a prime issue in this part of the voluntary sector. Small groups with incomes below £20,000 need very little in the way of resources. Many of them operate on less than £20,000. The groups have their own mission that they wish to achieve. These smaller groups have not engaged with the business model that government is pointing the VCS toward. They do not compete for contracts, and equally are often not competing with their neighbours for small grants, which are often delivered on an ongoing basis, not through competitive grant rounds. The lack of research on every aspect of these groups provides the rationale for my own research. So little is known about who they are, how they organise, how they relate to the community or how they relate to the state, local government and funding organisations. When analysing the data from this research, aspects of conflict, which have been raised in this section of the literature review, will be considered as part of the analysis and discussion.

## **Independence of the VCS**

The independence of the VCS has been of concern for a number of years. As identified in Chapter 1 Mayo had noted as early as 1974 the issues involved in the state taking such a close interest in the sector, providing funding for the sector and funding the significant numbers of community workers (1974) and the threat that this posed to the VCS. In 2013, the Baring Foundation published 'Independence under threat'. This report was produced by a panel of interested agencies that Baring Foundation had established looking into the independence of the sector. The panel

was established because of Baring's view that VCISOs are so popular because of their distinctive nature in the way that they intervene:

This is not just through the personalised help they give, or the way in which they find new approaches and solutions to longstanding problems. It is also because they can speak forcefully and without fear on behalf of unpopular causes and people. (Baring, 2013: 3)

The Baring Foundation had identified and valued the independence of the sector, but found evidence to show that the government was not doing enough to recognise or safeguard the sector's independence. The chair of the Baring Panel on Independence, Roger Singleton (2013), reflected this concern when he highlighted the government's attacks on freedom of expression of the voluntary bodies working with the state:

It is particularly surprising to see direct attacks by government and others on the freedom of expression of voluntary bodies working with the state. Self-censorship by voluntary bodies is also a problem because some fear losing vital and increasingly scarce state funding if they challenge the status quo. (Baring, 2013: 3)

The report from the Independence Panel (2013) recognises the extreme challenges that are facing the sector with regard to funding, and how vulnerable any criticism of the state would make them (Baring, 2013: 6). The report does mention the fact that small organisations are less likely to rely on state support. It also argues that those that do, often lack financial and brand power to influence their environment.

The fact that the Independence Panel consulted with both Community Matters and the National Association of Voluntary and Community Associations (NAVCA) as examples of how small organisations are faring does, as discussed in Chapter 1, and at the start of this review, mean that they will only have been able to access information and evidence about mainly registered organisations. The views of BTR organisations would be likely to be under-represented. Their finding that small groups 'struggle with the bureaucracy and cost of commissioning, with tightly drawn

contracts restricting their ability to meet the needs they were established to serve' (ibid: 7) are correct. They are not however related to small 'below-the-radar' groups who are not involved in commissioning or contracts, and are largely able to retain their independence because of this.

The evidence from this chapter and Chapter 1 makes it clear that small, 'below the radar' VCSOs rarely feature in research on the VCS. Baring, 2013; Dominelli, 2006; Jones and Mayo, 1974 and Popple, 1995 all argue that the VCS should remain independent of the state but do not necessarily identify that the only organisations able to do this are those operating BTR. The essence of this argument is that when a significant number of organisations lose their independence, trust in and public support for the whole sector erodes, and even organisations with strong independence may be affected. The result could be that diverse and potentially opposing voices become increasingly silent, narrowing political debate, and VCSOs look to their contract terms, rather than their mission, when vulnerable people arrive on their doorstep for support.

### **Being below the radar and independence**

Chapter 1 noted that small community groups are operating in an invisible space. Because many of them are not registered, they are able to operate outside of the reach of government. As the Third Sector Research Centre and NCVO argue, they are operating below the radar (McCabe, 2010; McCabe et al., 2010 and Thompson, 2008). Their research identifies advantages and disadvantages of being BTR. One advantage of this comparative invisibility is that their value and ability to engage significant numbers of community members in a wide range of activities is not brought into the contract culture. They also experience a freedom to develop, manage and deliver their services in a way where government influence is weaker and, therefore, are able to be more representative of the transformational work of the 1960s and 70s. It is here where women's involvement in the community sector sits.

## **Theme 3 - Women and communities**

### **Women in society - the challenges**

Women constitute roughly half of the population of the world and thus potentially half of its workforce. As a group, they do as much work as men, if not more. However, the types of work they do – as well as the conditions under which they work and their access to opportunities for advancement – differ from men's. Women are often disadvantaged compared to men in access to employment opportunities and conditions of work; furthermore, many women forego or curtail employment because of family responsibilities. (United Nations, 2010: 75)

Chapter 1 outlined the situation of women's organisations within the VCS. Their lack of profile and investment leaves them vulnerable in a challenging funding climate. This research goes beyond women's involvement in the women's sector. It looks at women's much wider engagement in a diverse range of community activities through the small community groups. The lack of profile, lack of recognition and lack of respect of the value of women's contribution runs throughout all aspects of this thesis, along with issues gender and equality issues.

We acknowledge the contribution of women in the past, but there is still a long way to go to get ourselves out of a world designed by men and fashioned for profit rather than for people. (Curno et al., 1982: 6)

The issue of women struggling to gain some kind of parity in a world run and designed by men is a common theme occurring in the literature.

### **Women and Power**

The 2014 report 'Sex and Power: who runs Britain?' by the Fawcett Society provides an interesting insight in statistical terms about the lack of equal representation of women in positions of influence within the UK. To highlight just a few of the statistics produced, only 23% of Members of Parliament are women and only 24% of members of the House of Lords: 19% of elected mayors are women and 24% of chief executives of local authorities are women (Fawcett Society, 2014).

This lack of equal representation of women in positions of power in the UK is either not changing at all for the most part, or where there is some change it is marginal. The Centre for Women and Democracy noted that women's representation in the UK Parliament, in comparison with women's representation in other countries, had fallen from 59<sup>th</sup> prior to the general election in 2010 to 65<sup>th</sup> in the world ranking of Parliaments in 2013. The progress or lack of it is so slow that their report comments for the second year running that 'at the current rate of progress, a child born today will be drawing her pension before she has any chance of being equally represented in the UK Parliament' (6). Although a major issue, women and democracy is not the focus of this research, but it helps to build the bigger picture of an environment where women who are active in their communities are absent from or under representation on decision-making bodies.

The dominance of men in positions of power is not just in national politics but also in positions of power in regional and local communities. Connell (1987), Halford et al. (1997), Ledwith (2009); Morgan (1992) and Wilz and Savage (1992) have all analysed the issue of gender and power and highlighted a number of issues. Embodiment, gender regimes within the family and the historical positing of women can all explain women's current situation. The examples in Chapter 1 from Local Enterprise Panels (LEPs) and Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs) demonstrated the degree to which women are still under-represented on strategic organisations.

### **Women and poverty**

As part of the background to women's position in their communities, it is important to look at the historical context of women and poverty. The Women's Budget Group (WBG) previously cited, is an independent organisation comprising individuals from academia, non-governmental organisations and trade unions, which promotes gender equality through appropriate economic policy. In 2006, the group set up an action research project in an attempt to enable a group of women, who were living in poverty, to engage with, and have a direct influence on policy makers. The WBG were working from Department of Work and Pensions statistics, which indicated that about one in every five women in the United Kingdom, live in poverty (DWP, 2007). This was felt to be a conservative figure. Historically there is significant evidence that

women have been overrepresented among the poorest in society even in recent times (Glendinning and Millar, 1998; United Nations, 2010).

This is evident particularly in older women who have taken part in the labour market and therefore being less likely to be entitled to the more generous non-contributory benefits (Glendinning and Millar, 1998). This is currently changing with the introduction of new pension rules with the aim of men and women being entitled to the same level of state pension, but the effects of this are not yet clear. Crawley's study of the work of community groups (2000) highlighted a gender issue in respect to poverty and social exclusion. Women were far more likely to be in the client groups receiving a service from the organisations funded through the Community Foundation than men. Women were most often the carers; not only of young children but also of elderly and or sick relatives: Older women who had survived their partners were often isolated, living on their own and struggling to cope with some of the household tasks previously undertaken by their male partners. In the national literature in the late 1990s, both Glendinning and Millar (1998) and Dex et al. (1994) had clearly identified economic and social difficulties that had led to women having a special place on the poverty agenda. The causes and remedy of the economic deprivation of women are very much seen to be in the wider political agenda (Glendinning and Millar, 1998).

The gap between the number of men and the number women living in poverty looks to be lessening in the last ten years. However, the Women's Budget Group argue that the statistics do not tell the whole story. Women still make up a higher proportion of those in poverty. Before housing costs, 37 % of those in relative poverty were men, and 39% were women (the rest being children); after housing costs, this was 35 versus 37 per cent (WBG 2015), but the effects of financial dependence within the household can leave women vulnerable to future poverty should relationships within the household break down. Financial dependence is an additional, gendered, risk of poverty. This lack of control over an adequate independent income represents financial precariousness for individuals. The argument is that financial dependence can indicate a risk of future poverty.

The Poverty Site is a well-respected online source of data on Poverty. It reports that over the last decade 'women are a bit - but only a bit - more likely to live in low-income households than men' (2015), 21% compared with 19%. While Government statistics on gender show a reduction in the numbers of women living in poverty, the long history of women being overrepresented in poverty statistics leads agencies such as Oxfam to continue to report that women are far more likely than men to be living in poverty (Oxfam, 2015). The Joseph Rowntree Foundation has been actively working with the Women's Budget Group to 'enable women experiencing poverty to engage and influence policy-makers'. They asked the women participants in a recent combined piece of research to define poverty. Their responses reveal a 'complex and dynamic understanding that went beyond finances':

The participants framed poverty as a human rights issue and defined poverty as an experience of social isolation. The impact of their poverty on their children was a central theme and the participants talked about sacrificing their own food, clothing, heat and other basic needs in order to put their families first. Poverty was experienced as a constant sense of financial insecurity and instability and the lack of any real opportunity to improve their situation. (JRF, 2008: xi)

Women have been far more prominent in poverty statistics than men for so many years. It is not yet known if the current apparent improvement will continue and what the effects of that might be, when gender inequality is increasing. The Fawcett Society's 'Triple Jeopardy' (2012), as featured in Chapter1, addresses some of the themes relating to women's poverty and argues how the triple combined effects of austerity will negatively affect women more than men. This suggests any recent improvements may well be lost.

### **Gender inequality**

The most recent data available suggests that 'Britain is slipping behind the rest of the world for gender equality, despite protestations to the contrary. The latest World Economic Forum rankings of gender equal societies (2014) put the UK in 26th place, down from 18th a year ago. This puts the UK behind 14 European countries, as well

as the United States, Rwanda and Nicaragua. There are also continuing concerns from a number of sources about the gender pay gap with reports of women's pay being between 10% and 30% less than that of their male counterparts depending on age. Chartered Management Institute research in 2014 found that female managers aged over 40 earn 35% less than men of equivalent rank do. The data from the World Economic Forum indicates that part-time work, to which mothers often return after their children are born, tends to offer reduced access to training and career opportunities. Changes to the labour market since the financial crisis have meant that many women have moved to private sector jobs, where the pay gap is even greater – 19.2% compared with 11% in the public sector. According to the most recently available statistics from the Office of National Statistics (2013), many of the new jobs created are zero hour contracts, part-time or temporary.

Research from the Fawcett Society (2013) indicates that, since the start of the financial crisis in 2008, 826,000 women have moved into low-paid and insecure work. The issue of gender and poverty has become even more complex than just the effects of poverty associated with finances. It becomes a pervasive experience, which damages life chances and opportunities.

### **Perceptions of a woman's place in society**

When examining why women suffer from lack of visibility, lack of recognition of their contribution and lack of representation in places of power, it is helpful to consider the work by sociologists such as Roberts, Rowbotham and Oakley. In the 1970s, Oakley (1974) and Rowbotham (1972) highlighted the contribution that women were making to society through their work in the home and how that contribution was largely invisible.

Anne Oakley produced important publication about the sociology of housework (1974). In 1974, Oakley described 'the Invisible Woman'. The books explored how the social image of a woman, the roles of wife and mother, were not seen as distinct from the role of housewife. 'Housewife' became a term that referred to the role exclusively associated with women, with economic dependence and a status of non-work because the role was perceived as having little economic value and was

undertaken as unpaid work. 'However, honourable the housewife's role, hers is, must be, a situation of economic dependence' (Oakley, 1974: 11). Oakley also identified a significant difference between labour undertaken outside of the home mainly by men which was viewed and classed as 'publicly productive' and the domestic tasks which were performed in the home and were largely invisible and viewed as having no or little economic value.

Elizabeth Roberts in 1984 produced an oral history of working class women tracing the role of women from 1890 to 1940, from school to adulthood, where women became the housewife and mother and what she called the 'household manager'. Oakley was one of the few sociologists in the 1970s who was drawing attention to the situation of women which Oakley felt had been ignored by much of the field of sociology. Women were often inadequately represented or not represented at all in academic writings in the field of sociology. She argued that women in the field 'take the insubstantial form of ghosts, shadows or stereotyped characters' (Oakley, 1974: 15). The position of women was further influenced by what Oakley describes as 'the myth of the division of labour' where women were seen as 'naturally housewives'. There was a sense that for women to be housewives was essential for women to survive in a capitalist society. It is accepted that women should fulfil this role, because this is the agreed perception of what women should be. Oakley viewed this as closely connected to 'the social construct theory', where individuals and groups participate in the creation of their perceived reality (Berger and Luckman, 1966). It appears natural, obvious, 'common place' that women should undertake certain roles in society and have a lesser status and visibility than men, but 'this has its basis in an agreed truth, an invention of society and those who inhabit it' (Oakley 1974: 14).

### **Perceptions of women's work**

Women's work in communities is not immune to challenge. Dominelli (2006) indicated that women have always been neglected in community work discussion and literature until Marjorie Mayo (1977) 'Highlighted the relevance of gender'. In addition, Wilson (1977a) argues that:

Women have always participated in community activities, but their significance has been relegated in favour of men's actions...yet community is the site where women live and work and ensure the survival of the species. (As cited by Dominelli 2006: 2)

Women's work in communities is open to being taken advantage of particularly in relation to their caring duties. Mingol (2013) indicated that this could explain the predominance of women in social and volunteer movements.

For example, in Spain, women account for more than 75 percent of volunteers, and worldwide, they comprise the majority in environmental and pacifist movements. Despite the difficulties women face in participating in formal politics, their involvement in informal politics and civil society is undeniable. (2013:406)

Mingol (2013) refers to Gilligan's (1982) work, which found that 'socialization and the praxis of care' develop a specific moral voice in women. This concept has come to be known as the "ethics of care" (Mingol, 2013: 407). Mingol further analyses the importance of motherhood as a key element in the participation of women as active in civil society and agents for peace, stating:

Sara Ruddick is one of these authors. Her concept of "maternal thinking" alludes to the commitment of women to the values necessary to sustain and care for children and how maternal thinking can nourish and contribute to building a politics of peace. (2013:407)

Mingol herself does not however agree with this view, arguing that it is not:

motherhood that is the epicentre of the political and social involvement of women, but rather a wider concept of care and an "ethics of care." It is this "ethics of care" that leads many women (not necessarily mothers) to participate in environmental, pacifist, and democratization movements across the world. (ibid:408)

Dominelli's concern is that for some, community can be a site of exploitation,' especially of their caring capacities.

This issue is of particular concern in countries where public provisions have been reduced in favour of 'community care' without the necessary resources accompanying such moves and those where family values are anticipated as ensuring that welfare needs are met. (2006: 3)

This can be a difficult line for women to tread, to ensure that in the sphere of community care, their input is in the role of community leader, not in the role of victim with their caring desire being taken advantage of and misused.

Gilchrist (2004) considers that networking, which is the focus of her publication the Well-connected Community, demands a complex range of capabilities, including social skills to maintain and repair relationships during periods of conflict or adversity. Gilchrist suggests that in most networks there is one person who makes all the contacts and the arrangements. In a family situation, this is often the woman. In the context of community work, Gilchrist argues that networking is often seen as a 'womanly way' of working and she cites Dominelli (1990) and Bryant and Bryant (1997) as supporting this view. Studies, according to Gilchrist:

have frequently commented on the role played by women in neighbouring and informal networks (Young et al., 1957; Bourke and Prof, 1993) running voluntary and community activities (McCulloch, 1997; Doucet, 2000; Krishnamurthy et al., 2011). (2004: 27)

Dominelli's argument relating to women and networking is similar to Gilchrist's, but Dominelli (2006) also identifies the invisibility of women's activities and the degree to which they often appear to operate behind the scenes. Dominelli urges community workers to assist women to network, despite any challenges they might encounter.

## **Women working in the community**

It might have been expected, that within the VCS, that there would have been greater recognition of the importance of the role of women's work. However, the literature (or lack of it) suggests that women's contributions and roles in community work appear to have suffered from a similar acceptance of the 'way the world should be'. Dominelli argues that the work of women within communities, 'the work that women take on, on behalf of others within those communities, is also often just accepted and left 'invisible' (Dominelli, 2006: 62).

In 2004 the Global Fund for women found that for the previous two decades, non-profit, community-based organisations had proved themselves to be the strongest and most effective force for enabling grassroots to participate in the resolution of community problems and the promotion of human rights and women were at the centre of this:

Indeed, these citizen groups, of which women are often the backbone, have filled critical gaps in areas such as social services, human rights, and environmental protection. These are issues that neither governments nor the private sector seem willing or able to address. (Global Fund for Women, 2004: 1)

Recent statistics show that women are the main contributors to the VCS (NCVO, 2013). The NCVO headline figures show that in 2013, the UK VCS employed 800,000 people, about 2.7% of the UK's workforce. Two thirds of the employed workforce were women (524,000) with just 275,000 men employed in the sector, meaning that just under two-thirds (66%) of the voluntary sector workforce were women. A similar ratio was found in the public sector (66%). Both proportions are in stark contrast to the proportion of women employed in the private sector (39%) (NCVO, 2013).

The evidence above is consistent with NCVO's annual voluntary sector data over a number of years, which indicate that women have been the prime contributors to the community agenda through their involvement in small VCOs. NCVO (2014) have themselves recognised that this involvement has however attracted little attention,

recognition or support. Women are the prime deliverers of community engagement and yet their involvement has not been identified or supported by government.

### **The invisibility of women's work in the VCS**

The importance of women's contributions to communities was highlighted as far back as 1977 by Marjorie Mayo in her collection of authored case studies. In this book Elizabeth Wilson highlights how work is the core of their lives...while for women it is the home (Mayo, 1997: 3). Women's work outside of the home had to be organised so that it did not 'disturb the family routine' which meant that women had to accept low part-time and low paid employment. However, because of their position in the family it was largely the women who became the mainstay of 'local groups'. Campaigns around safety crossings on dangerous roads for instance are usually the work of mothers whose children are at risk. Women have organised nursery provision; argued for family allowances and organised the National Abortion Campaign.

Roberts (1981) is critical of previous feminist attempts by Della Costa and James (1971) who were suggesting a campaign for a wage around housework (wages for housework) which she felt this would 'lock the housewife' yet more securely into isolation and the toil of housework (Roberts, 1981: 5).

Although women's involvement in 'uplifting communities' at an international level was acknowledged by Haidari and Wright (2001), Dominelli argued that the work that women undertake in communities on behalf of other community members in the UK, is often invisible, stating 'and so women are excluded from its remit while being included within in it' (Dominelli, 1990: xii). Given the significant representation of women, both in the VCSOs and as community development workers (as outlined in Chapter1), the lack of focus on the issue of gender within community work literature is a major omission, adding to the invisibility of women's contributions.

Dominelli commented in 1990 on the fact that two of the main exponents of community work literature, David Thomas and Alan Twelvetrees, had virtually ignored the implications of gender (cited in Popple, 2009: 69). The reality of the type

and amount of recognition that women receive for their contribution to communities in the UK does also have a more worrying aspect than that highlighted by Dominelli and Popple. They were initially raising these issues in 1994/5. In the last ten years, it could have been expected that literature on the topic of women's contribution to community development would be recognised as an important issue as two well-respected contributors to the field had now raised it. However, the lack of recognition of the contribution that women make to communities, through their involvement in the voluntary sector and in community development UK continues without challenge or comment. Chanan and Miller's recent book on community development (2014) makes no direct mention of women's contribution to the field and alerts the reader to the fact that one of its limitations is in its 'gender outlook' (Chanan and Miller, 2014: 3). Given the significance of gender in community development, such a minor acknowledgement in a major piece of writing about community development that the gender outlook is missing from that literature does not make it an acceptable omission.

Earlier Twelvetrees, in one of his few mentions of women in his publication (2002), provides examples of feminists in the 1960s and 1970s, some of whom he describes as 'zealots' who seemed to place ideology above constraints of practice (ibid: 13). There are few authors to be found that address this imbalance in the literature on the sector. Popple, on the other hand, is one of the few examples of a male author who does provide a profile for women's involvement in community development. In his *Analysing Community Work* (1995), he makes almost 20 references to women's roles in community work, feminism and feminist community work. Popple examines how the women's movement was able to influence and 'challenge the activity of the state and civil society in many areas' (ibid: 25). Within his description of feminist community work he outlines over 20 wide ranging and diverse women's campaigns led by feminists, including 'women's health groups. He discusses work by Roberts (1981), Ruzek (1986) and Webb (1986) in relation to women's involvement in the miners' strike of 1984-5. Bloomfield (1986) and Dolby (1987), and the women's peace movement in particular, that focuses on Greenham Common (Cook and Kirk, 1983).

Popple indicates that whatever role women have been playing 'it is clear that women have played a highly considerable role in the practice' (Popple 2009: 69). Popple further argues that the 'paucity of literature in this field indicates the need for further research' which links well into the purpose of this research. Even some of the best-known female writers in the community development field, alongside their male counterparts, fail to mention gender or the strong representation of women in the field, despite the fact that there are now valid statistics to support this. Gilchrist and Taylor in their short guide to Community Development (2011) make no mention at all of gender or women in the field of CD. It is Mayo, Dominelli and Ledwith who have led the way.

The research in this thesis focuses not on women's contribution to the women's sector but on women's wider contributions to communities, through their involvement in a diverse range of community organisations. That includes the areas traditionally associated with the women's sector such as domestic abuse, childcare and women's rights. However, it also includes a wide range of other services and activities that are aimed at and significant numbers of individuals in communities, particularly those who are oppressed, discriminated against and excluded through disability, ethnicity, poverty and need. The information about the Women's Sector helps highlights how the vital and integral work of women in communities in the UK attracts so little attention and is given so little value and prominence.

It would be expected that women would fare better within the VCS with its emphasis of equality and social justice, but recent research indicates that is not necessarily the case. Lewis (2012) published through NCVO, a report 'Close to Parity' which challenged the voluntary sector to smash the glass ceiling and inspire action, celebrate women leaders' achievements in the sector to aim for parity between men and women in the sector. She found some 'uncomfortable truths' along the way. Lewis states that "The voluntary sector is the women's sector: 68% of our workforce is female" (ibid: 7). The research analyses how in this sector, which statistically is dominated by women, only 43% of charities are led by female chief executives and chairs. In charities with a turnover of £10m plus the research found that women lead just 27% of major charities. Even in the mainstream voluntary sector where women dominate statistically, they still do not dominate in terms of paid leadership. It is

important to note that Lewis only selects data from mainstream organisations that are registered charities. As has been stated previously, for most researchers this is the only data that is easily accessible to them. She was not looking at the situation with regard to the many small-scale and unregistered charities that operate 'below the radar', where another significant amount of women's involvement is found and which is the focus of the research in this thesis.

### **Why do women get involved?**

Given that there is little reward for women in the VCS in terms of financial gain or accessible movement toward leadership and status, the question arises as to why so many women get involved in this sector. Bond et al. (2008) carried out a study of 'women's constructions of how and why they became and have remained engaged in grassroots community activity and leadership' (ibid: 48). Bond et al. undertook a study of 17 women who they had identified as being leaders in their communities. They were seeking to examine how women become leaders and why. They highlighted one of the challenges in this field as 'a surprising absence of literature on how and why women become involved in their communities as activists and leaders in the first place—the origins of their involvement (Ibid: 48). Bond et al. (2008) examined the contributing factors to women's involvement in their research and found women's involvement was linked to their desire to promote future generations (described as 'generative activity'). Makeover (2005) defines 'generativity' as 'the adult's concern for and commitment to the next generation, as expressed through parenting, teaching, mentoring and leadership' (ibid: 4). Makeover identifies how women's generative activities have been relegated to a 'limited number of acceptable activities such as catering or caring for children'. Makeover views the women's acts of generativity through their civil engagement in leadership, as taking on community leadership that 'contributes to the future for both themselves and others in ways that extend beyond the familial home' (Ibid: 52). Bond et al. also considered family motivation, a background of involvement when they were younger and /or a high level of caring from family or community. The results of the study featured interpersonal rewards; the joy of meeting people and being able to contribute constructively to communities as being important motivators.

Nancy Naples in her research published in 1998, *Grassroots Warriors*, undertook interviews with over 60 women who were involved in communities in New York and Philadelphia during the War on Poverty in the US 1964-74. She was examining what motivated them to undertake community activity. She uses the term 'activist mothering'. Most of the women did not see themselves as being 'politically engaged' rather they saw themselves 'as undertaking community work'. They also saw themselves as ensuring the right environment for their children to grow up. They saw their community work as a 'logical extension of their desire to improve their neighbourhoods for their families and neighbours.' What Kaplan (1997) originally referred to as the female consciousness. Many of the women featured in the research were profoundly changed by their interventions, seeing themselves as community workers and as empowered citizens with the right and obligation to act on behalf of their communities against the state. One of the common motivational strands identified in the literature for women to be active as community leaders and activists is the desire to bring about some form of change.

### **Women, change and transformation**

The evidence from the literature suggests that the motivation for women involves their desire to bring about change in their communities. This is a change for better and often a change that is for a single local issue or campaign. Much wider than this is the call in literature for transformative action. Popple (1995: 67) argues that there is a consensus that the central aim of feminist community work practice is the improvement of women's welfare, by collectively challenging the social determinants of women's inequality. For Mayo (1977) and Dominelli (1990) collective action seemed the way forward as a strategy for change that was to be 'transformative':

Transformative community development is rooted in a vision of participatory democracy, equality and social justice. In practice, women are the prime collective force in communities, in moving towards this vision. (Dominelli, 1990: 44)

Transformative community development at this time was a call for women to come together in collective action and to organise to bring about wider social change.

Margaret Ledwith more recently identified the wider notion of transformative community development using the writings of Gramsci and his focus on hegemony. Gramsci was born in Sardinia in 1891 and was imprisoned 1926 by Mussolini for his role as leader of the communist party. Gramsci then spent most of the remainder of his life in prison where he wrote his prison transcripts 'rewriting aspects of Marxism' (Beck and Purcell, 2012). Gramsci's argument was that the working class had been conditioned to 'accept a false consciousness about the nature of society'. The way the world was and the acceptance of who held the power was 'simply seen as common sense'. Gramsci identified this process of cultural domination as hegemony. It also links to the theory of social conditioning identified by Oakley (1974). Ledwith (2009) argues that, although Gramsci did not focus on gender equality in any way, it is possible to use his work to question women's position in society, and consider what strategies could change this acceptance of male domination or male hegemony. Gramsci was 'a Marxist revolutionary' and nothing less than the overthrow of capitalism was acceptable as a process to bring about change and transformation. Ledwith (2009: 39) maintains however, that thanks are due to Gramsci for opening the way for feminists and others in the women's movement not to accept the status quo but to challenge it. Ledwith admits that Gramsci was not identifying the oppression or lack of power of women in any of his writings but his ideas did provide tools for conceptualising how the mechanisms of dominance could be understood and challenged.

Ledwith questioned the reality of the world around her when working as a classroom teacher and identified that what she witnessed was a dissonance in her practice; *an* 'inner discomfort that the reality I witnessed around me was not founded on justice and democracy' (ibid: 40). Ledwith argues that feminism owed a 'debt to Gramsci'. He made an immense contribution to feminism without 'getting it'. Gramsci's analysis of the concept of hegemony is profound. Hegemony as identified by Gramsci is the means by which one class assumes dominance over the masses in society. In Gramsci's definition, dominant attitudes are internalised and accepted as common sense and thereby legitimised in the minds of people. Gramsci's insightful analysis of hegemony, and the 'subtle nature of consent, offered feminists a conceptual lead on the personal as political' (Ledwith, 2009: 686). Ledwith was not alone. Arnott (1982) had argued that male hegemony consists of a multiplicity of moments, which have

persuaded women to accept a male dominated culture and their subordination within it. The result is a constructed reality, which is qualitatively different from that of men, in which women are diminished and exploited within a common sense patriarchal view of the world.

In summary, the difficulty of definition of the notion of community has emerged clearly from the literature. Some of the most prominent definitions around the community of geography, of identify and of shared concerns or issues (Craig, 2011) have been analysed. There is a shared focus in all definitions on people at the centre of the community. While the sense of community has attractive and desirable features, there are also more difficult and challenging aspects of community, where people can find themselves excluded and isolated.

Difficulties of identifying an agreed definition of community flow over into the attempts to construct definitions of community work and community development. Different authors use the terms in different ways, and regularly use the terms interchangeably. For the purposes of this research, the definition of community development adopted in chapter 1 has been reiterated.

Community work is a 'contested' concept. Popple argues that community work is an umbrella term within which community development operates and this provides a useful construct. Although this is not an agreed concept, the tables of models provided by Popple (1995, 2015) provide a helpful guide to the activities which often feature in community work, and a comparison of their features yields some helpful analysis. The comparison of the content of the two tables also helps identify an adapted model of feminist community work, which reflects the work associated with this research.

Community development emerges from the evidence as useful tool, previously used as a means of control in the colonies, and it now appears to focus on enabling activity and part of community engagement to help grassroots groups with their development. It also is not without contention as noted in chapter 1.

Community work and community development, while having an element of independence and challenging the state, are in danger of having that role compromised by state intervention particularly in the form of financial support, which challenges independence of the VCS. While some flexibility in definition can be helpful, when the field is under attack, it can leave it vulnerable, difficult to defend and to prove its worth. Community action is the more radical and often challenging model of community work. It can be militant but even without the militancy it has an element of challenging the way things are and seeking transformation. The women who are the focus of this research are mainly active through small community groups in this world of community action.

Small community groups contribute to stocks of social capital, but there is both little research into conflict in small VCSOs and little evidence of its presence in the literature. The small community groups seek transformation through community engagement and change. They do not require state intervention. The larger VCSOs are vulnerable to the issues around state control that haunts community development and threatens their independence. When funding from the state is accepted to assist survival this can compromise the ability of VCSOs to operate with independence. Smaller VCSOs occupy a position that is barely visible due to lack of official registration. Characterised by operating below the radar, requiring small amounts of resources, being run mainly by volunteers, many of whom are women, they are able to retain an independence that is becoming increasingly difficult for the larger VCSOs.

Women, who are the backbone of these small community groups, as a gender lack power, are absent from positions of power, are overrepresented historically as living in poverty and often occupy subordinate positions in society. Their involvement in communities is under-recorded, their roles, responsibilities and characteristics are rarely the subject of research.

It would be helpful to develop a model, which both characterises the way women work in small VCSOs and that would provide them with an identity and profile with the aim of making the women more visible and acknowledged.

## Chapter 3 - Research Methodology

### Introduction

This research is an investigation into the contribution that women are making to communities through their involvement in small voluntary and community sector organisations (VCSOs) operating in the South West Region

The aims of this research are to:

- consider how government's relationship with the voluntary and community sector has evolved (and its effect on small VCSOs)
- explore women's involvement in small voluntary and community sector organisations operating mainly, but not exclusively in rural areas, market and coastal towns of the South West Region of England
- examine why women become involved in the small community groups in the voluntary and community sector and what keeps them involved;
- analyse the nature of women's involvement and how visible that involvement is.

This study covers a number of issues related to its title. It considers the context in which small VCSOs operate. It considers the nature of women's involvement in these small community groups, the factors that have encouraged the involvement of women in their communities and how visible and acknowledged their contributions are. These women are the focus of this research. It was therefore important to utilise a research methodology that suited the subject matter, was flexible and not rigid in its approach. It was particularly important to find a research processes that gave the women the space to express their views, enabled them to have the confidence to take part and avoid over interpretation of the resulting data. Feminist research presented me with many of the aspects that I was seeking in a research methodology.

The first section of this chapter examines the background, development and particular characteristics of feminist research as the methodology used for this thesis. The chapter continues to consider my personal ontology, and my situation as an insider researcher and the ethical considerations for carrying out the research. The chapter concludes by describing the four phases of the research, which were:

- 1) Questionnaires

- 2) Focus groups
- 3) Semi-structured interviews with individual women
- 4) Analysis of the results.

## **Defining feminist research**

### **Lack of definition**

One of the issues that may have hindered feminist research as a methodology from being accepted as mainstream is its lack of exact definition. For example, Hammersley suggests that:

The arguments in support of a feminist methodology do not establish it as a coherent and cogent alternative to non-feminist research. Many of the ideas on which feminist's methodologists draw are also to be found in the non-feminist literature. (1992: 202)

When considering approaches to social research explained by writers such as Bryman (2012), Denscombe (2010) and May (1997), I find I have some sympathy with Ackerly and True's (2010) assertion that it can be difficult find exact guidance and agreement on what makes feminist research different to other research methods. As Ackerly and True suggest, 'certainly, there are essays and books on methodology, but trailblazing critical feminist scholars have not always left a trail of methodological guidelines' (2010: 8).

Brayton (1997) accepts that defining feminist research is problematic but argues that it is identifiable by the elements within the research process that all link together. For many the openness and lack of rigidity of feminist research is a positive but it does open the way for criticism of the approach. Crotty (1998) for example talks about feminist research 'making sense of the world in a myriad of ways' and bringing 'differing, even conflicting, assumptions to their research; he suggests that there is 'a place for some 'sorting out' (ibid: 161).

It is not however, the individual components of research, which define feminist, research overall, but its own particular combination of epistemology, ontology,

methodology and methods. These are identified in specialist books on feminist research such as Bowes (1996), Harding (1987), Hesse- Biber (2014), Naples and Gurr (2014), and Roberts (1981) where a range of characteristics and components are identified as being within the remit of feminist research methodology.

Hussani and Assad (2012) also consider the dilemma of lack of absolute definition but highlight what they argue to be three distinct features of feminist research, and they are:

- 1) feminist research explores and challenges the power imbalance between the researcher and the researched.
- 2) feminist research is politically driven and has a sense of purpose and has an important role in removing social inequalities.
- 3) it asks for the experiences of women to guide the whole research process.

From the research literature reviewed for this thesis, I have constructed a range of characteristics which can be argued to demonstrate an identifiable core of feminist research, and which underpin its valid position as a research methodology.

### **Core characteristics of feminist research**

Brayton (1997) agrees that there is no absolute definition of feminist research but argues that it is identifiable by the elements within the research process that all link together:

What makes feminist research uniquely feminist are the motives, concerns and knowledge brought to the research process. (Brayton 1997:1)

I will now outline these motives, concerns and the knowledge in a series of key characteristics of feminist research.

### **1. Positioning of gender as central to the research methodology**

Feminist research until recently has had a relatively low profile in the social science research field. Writings about research methods as late as the 1970s rarely featured

feminist research as mainstream. Roberts (1981) refers to this in some detail. In 1978 Roberts was teaching a postgraduate course in research and methodology at Bradford University and was using a collection of essays edited by Colin Bell and Howard Newby (Bell and Newby, 1977). It was a collection where writers outlined their experiences of undertaking social research. Roberts wrote to the collection's editors to raise the issue that there was no mention of feminism within this collection, nor were there any contributions by women. The following is an extract from their response:

At the time 'Doing Sociological Research' was planned, we were mainly looking for major research projects from which seminal accounts had been published in book form ... I do not think that the necessity or otherwise of a feminist methodological contribution ever really occurred to us ..... All that being said, with the omission (if not the admission of it) made, then we are left with a rather small and specifically feminist market for that kind of book in mind. (Bell and Newby cited in Roberts 1981: xiv)

This response from Bell as cited in Roberts (1981) reflects the lack of the importance given in many of the sociological research textbooks some 30-40 years ago to the field of feminist research. Letherby, writing in 2003 about feminist research, traced the lack of attention given to gender issues in sociological research back the fact that 'Sociology, my own academic discipline, clearly demonstrates male bias.' Letherby outlines a wide range of reasons why women have traditionally been considered inferior to men both physically and mentally:

The general idea here is that western societies have been dominated by patriarchy and men have used their positions of power to define issues, structure, language and develop theory. Men have been able to promote their own interests and as a result dominate all forms of discourse. (Letherby, 2003: 20)

This patriarchy has continued over into the academic world as Oakley (1974) argues the theories and methods of sociology have been built upon from man's relationship to his social world, as cited by Letherby, 2003: 21.

Researchers, however, have become more sensitised to the issues of gender in research over recent years. It is no longer 'of marginal concern' as Bell and Newby had argued. Robson argued that there was a 'convincing case, for the existence of sexist bias in research' (Robson 1998: 63). He referred to a range of literature that had identified gender bias in research, including Eichler (1980); Harding (1987); Holloway and Highes (1989); Roberts (1981); Smith (1987) and Stanley and Wise (1983).

Hesse-Biber (2014) outlined how researchers over the last 30 years had not only identified the male bias in research but had begun to react against it:

Over the course of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s feminist researchers reacted against the persuasive and "androcentric, or male bias" that was characteristic of published research findings. Feminist empiricists sought to "correct such biases". (2014: 4)

Hesse-Biber (2014) continues to outline how in the 1970s and 1980s many ground breaking anthologies of feminist research by such authors as Gloria Bowles, Renate Duelli-Klein, Marcia Millman and Helen Roberts were not just critical of the male bias but were also critical of the traditional knowledge frame. They began to ask the question 'What is social reality?' Roberts for example asked the question of how rational it was 'in a sociology in which social class plays such a central part, to rely on a classification scheme in which married women are classified according to a husband on which they may or may not depend' (Roberts, 1981: xiv).

Better (2006) commented on the absence of research on women but 'beyond this, the 'use of the male experience as the basis for knowledge' which had led to an accepted framework of the world based on the male view of that world. The identification of this bias came at a time when women's equality and women's rights were both an issue and 'led to the creation of feminist research methodology in sociology'. Feminist methodology grew out of the changes in society and in academia which led to a re-examination about ways of knowing' (Better, 2006: 4) In 1989 the British Sociological Association (BSA) identified a range of sexist language in the research field and offered alternatives. This demonstrates a degree of

sensitisation of the research field to the presence of, and need to remove, a gender bias within the research field. Language such as 'mankind', 'man-made', 'manpower', 'master copy' were all gendered terms in everyday use BSA (1989). Robson (1993) further accepts that 'problems arising from sexism affect all stages of research (ibid: 650). However, while some research readers include feminist research as sitting clearly within the realms of social research, to others it remained on the periphery.

Denscombe for example (2010) makes only a fleeting reference to feminist research (pages 12 and 68). May (1997) makes several references to feminist research (pages 121, 17, 18, 21, 22, 127) but still leaves the reader without an overall and collective view that feminist research as a method is part of the accepted mainstream of research methodology. The positioning of gender as the centre of the enquiry is therefore an essential ingredient of feminist research and helps to distinguish it from other more generalist research. Hesse-Biber (2014) explains.

By using a variety of research methods-quantitative, qualitative, mixed-feminist researchers use gender as a lens through which to focus on social issues. Research is considered feminist when it is grounded in the set of theoretical traditions that privilege women's issues, voices and lived experiences. (2014: 3)

## **2. Challenging the research status quo**

There had been attempts in the past to rectify the gender bias in research through the inclusion of women as subjects of research but this was insufficient to effectively address this imbalance (Roberts 1981). Over the course of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, feminist researchers reacted against the pervasive 'androcentric, or male bias', that was characteristic of published research findings. Feminist empiricists sought to 'correct' such biases. They diversified research samples by including women and began to ask new questions that would enable women's voices to be heard. The approach identified that what was previously being defined as human knowledge was, in fact, specifically male knowledge and the focus of feminist epistemology had been on the location of men as the source of knowledge (Harding, 1987 and Roberts, 1981).

Feminist methodology grows out of an important qualitative leap in the feminist critique of the social sciences: the leap from a critique of the invisibility of women, both as objects of study and as social scientists, to the critique of the method and purpose of social science itself. This is the leap from sociology about women to sociology for women (Gorelick, 1991). Feminist empiricists wanted to eradicate sexist research by introducing women's perspectives into research projects across many academic disciplines: psychology, philosophy, history, sociology, education, anthropology, language and communication, and the fields of law and medicine (Hesse-Biber, 2014: 4).

Commentators on feminist research do not define their comments on the elements of feminist research to just the range of methods used. Ackerly and True argue that:

a feminist methodology is not a series of particular methods or guidelines for research, like a protocol, but a commitment to using a whole constellation of methods reflectively and critically, with the end aim being the production of data that serve feminist aims of social justice. (2010: 6).

One of the primary concerns of feminist research is therefore to contribute to the feminist objective of achieving 'gender equality and justice' and the methodology utilises 'a wide range of methods that best suits both the subject' (ibid, 2010: 7 ) to achieve that objective. Within this thesis, gender plays an important and central role in the discussion, which positions it within feminist research, utilising a reflective yet varied range of methods that best assist with the gathering and analysis of the data.

### **3. Understanding women's problems and lives**

Hammon and Wellington (2012: 77) argue that feminist research is 'an approach which offers a means of understanding women's problems and their lives' and this is supported by a number of other feminist researchers (Ackerly and True, 2010; Hesse-Biber, 2014 and Naples, 2014). Because feminist research gives voice to those who have challenged constraints and oppression this provides feminist researchers with a particular concern for ethics. This includes a commitment to addressing inequality in the design, how it is carried and the use made of it... 'is often

manifested in a concern for the relationship when researchers and researched are committed to change' (Hammon and Wellington, 2012: 77).

#### **4. Selecting a mixture of methods to suit the research focus and situation**

The preference within feminist research has been for the use of qualitative methods such as the use of face-to-face interviewing, oral histories, observation and many of the methods that are deemed less 'scientific' in their approach. Feminist Research challenges the 'scientific' assumptions and in the 1980s and 1990s the feminist researchers such as Robson (1998), Stacey (1991) and Stanley and Wise (1983) argued that it is not just by ensuring that women are included in research studies, but by paying attention to the specificity of women's individual experience, that research can become more equal. Traditionally there has been a general rejection by feminist researchers of quantitative methods in research (Miner and Jayaratne, 2014: 301). Quantitative research has been viewed as being rooted in 'positivism' and Hesse-Biber states that:

Quantitative research methods, which rely much more on measurement and numerical data, have been viewed by feminist researchers, as residing very clearly within the masculine research domain, which has dominated certain research. (2014: 11)

She continues to argue that:

Quantitative research is clearly situated in the 'positivist paradigm'. Feminist researchers consider objectivity and neutrality as a masculine perspective in order to exercise power and control. Objectivity for feminists is viewed as an excuse, which is being used for power relationships, which treat women as mere objects and keep them in subordinate position by men. (ibid: 12)

The feminist argument is based on the premise that the qualitative approach gives more space to women to express their experience than a quantitative approach. It is argued that more scientific quantitative methods lack the 'personal and social character of the research process' and often 'impose the rules of the uninvolved researcher' (Reinharz, 1992).

By utilising both qualitative and quantitative methods, I have been able to gather statistical evidence about the number of women based in the small groups in the VCS, the type of activities that those small organisations are involved in and the position of women in those organisations. This range of data has helped validate the findings.

The view of those defending the validity of feminist research is that existing research methods were based within a male environment and with a male construct. Authors such as Ackerly and True (2010), Hesse-Biber (2014) and Roberts (1981) challenged the traditional research standpoint of positivism where methods were based on scientific objectivity, where the research approach would be value-free, stressing the detachment of the researcher from the researched. However, Hesse-Biber (2014: 5) also accepts that the challenge by feminists of the previous androcentric approaches to research does not 'need to mean, that quantitative methods are antithetical to feminist research'. This is a view also supported by Oakley (1981).

Feminist researchers have been critical about quantitative data, which just 'reduces people to numbers' (Miner and Jayaratne, 2014: 302) and ignores the context or environment or other factors that may have an influence on the responses.' Mann and Kelley (1997: 392) spoke of feminists as being stern critics of 'hygienic research', which censored out 'mess, confusion and complexity'. Oakley (1999) however suggests how a positivist approach can also assist the feminist researcher when stating 'women and other minority groups, above all need quantitative research, because without that it is difficult to distinguish between personal experience and collective oppression.' (Oakley, 1999: 251)

For this research, it was essential to be able to find a mix of methods and approaches that would enable the gathering of the views of wide range of women involved in the sector and to ensure validity of the research.

## **5. Need to be transformative**

Another of the core characteristics of feminist research highlighted by a number of researchers including Ackerly and True (2010); Hesse-Biber (2014), Ledwith (2009) and Roberts (1981) is that it needs to be transformative.

Feminist research projects should support social justice and social transformation; these projects seek to study and to redress the many inequities and social injustices that continue to undermine and even destroy the lives of women and their families (Hesse-Biber, 2014: 3).

Feminist research works through the lens of injustice and inequality that women have suffered from over the years and seeks to address this. As Ackerly and True argue, 'enquiry and reflection on social injustice by way of gender analysis can help to transform and not simply explain social order' (Ackerly and True 2010: 2).

## **6. By women for women**

Another characteristic common to feminist research, which sets it aside from other research methods, is that it is primarily conducted by women for women. Authors such as Stanley and Wise (1983) and Stanley's later *Feminist Praxis* (1990) take a close look at what the social challenges are which face feminist social scientists as they carry out research projects. The focus of the argument is that feminist research is defined:

as a focus on women, in research carried out by women who were feminist, for other women. Second there was perceived distinction between 'male' quantitative methods and feminist qualitative ones. And third feminist research was overtly political in its purpose and committed to changing women's lives. (Stanley, 1990: 21)

Part of the rationale for women playing central role in feminist research is the element of a shared understanding between women. Feminist research is conducted by women who have a shared understanding with those they are researching. For many of the earlier feminist researchers, women's shared experience was central (Stacey, 1996).

Not everyone writing on feminist research however would agree that it must always be carried out by women to be feminist. Better for example has some doubts on this topic:

Looking at research projects conducted by men, I seek to challenge the assumption that feminist research can only take place “on, by and for women.” Using data involving gay fathers and practice nurses I will grapple with issues of broadening the spectrum of who can be given voice through feminist methodology (Better 2006: 3).

Despite Better’s challenge to the assertion that feminist research can only be carried out by women for women, the majority of feminist researchers are clear that the shared understanding between women justifies the position of women as the main researchers within feminist research (Hesse-Biber, 2014; Roberts 1981; Stanley 1996). Feminist researchers are clear that while women share oppression, there are many shades of this oppression. The oppression suffered by women from BME communities for example, may be experienced in a completely different way to women from white backgrounds. Disabled women may suffer by being women and being disabled. It does not mean that the oppression experienced is the same. Feminist research allows for the fact that many groups of women may suffer oppression in different ways with different impact and effect. Feminist researchers’ concern with difference provoked them to disagree with the idea that there is one essential “women’s experience”. In place of one experience, they recognised the plurality. With multiple standpoints that accounted for interlocking relationships between racism, sexism, heterosexist and class oppression, additional starting points from which to understand social reality emerged (Hesse-Biber, 2014: 7)

### **My engagement with feminist research**

In this enquiry, I am examining women’s involvement in communities through their activity in small community organisations. Like many of the students that Hesse-Biber referred to at the start of her feminist research primer (2014) I had not identified myself as a feminist at the beginning of my research journey. This did not necessarily mean that my research was not coming from a feminist perspective, just

that I had not identified it as such. However, as the research progressed I soon came to reflect on my situation and motivation and realised how essential and central the feminist approach was to my research.

Gender had emerged clearly as an issue when I was considering my research question. I also identified a strong desire to bring about change through the research. Early on in the research it became clear that the nature of the research lent itself to a feminist research approach, methodology and methods. The, interviews and focus groups would enable me to collect the data in ways that were appropriate to the topic and those who would be taking part as subjects of the research. The quantitative method of questionnaires would help me to map the significance of the issue so it could be better researched, understood and appreciated and to consider topics and issues to analyse further in the focus groups and interviews. My main evidence would be from interviews and focus groups that collected directly the experiences and perceptions of the women from their own worlds. I have collected the views of women who were they actively involved in their communities, or who had a long history of such involvement and were of prime importance in this research. Cohen and Manion (1994: 37) state:

What of the interpretivist researchers? They begin with individuals and set out to understand their interpretations of the world around them.... Investigators work directly with experience and understanding to build their theory on them. The data thus yielded will be glossed with the meanings and purposes of those people who are their source.

## **Validity and Bias**

Miner and Jayaratne (2014) have outlined a number of reasons why quantitative research is an important tool within feminist research. One of these reasons is to provide the research with a more 'valid base'. Supporters of quantitative research view it as being less open to bias and more 'scientific'. Feminist research has social change at its core. In order to achieve this, the research has to be visible, understandable and deemed to be valid. 'The public might be uncomfortable with research methods that they tend to perceive as less objective' (ibid: 304). It has

therefore become acceptable within feminist research that the use of quantitative research methods in a mixed method approach can provide research with a validity to reinforce the use of qualitative research methods.

While I make primary use of qualitative research methods within this thesis, I also utilise quantitative research methods including questionnaires to provide accessible and valid data. This allowed for an initial movement towards more factual information using a questionnaire and the later approach of focus groups and interviews to capture the rich, in-depth accounts of women active within the smaller voluntary groups.

Another issue that has been raised by feminist researchers is whether any method of research is free from bias and influence. Quantitative research has a basis of numbers, statistical evidence and responses that can be counted and analysed so it claims to be scientific and without bias (Hesse-Biber, 2014). Feminists, however, have argued that it is not possible for any standpoint in research to be unbiased. When we choose the questions that we ask, when we limit the scope and topic of the research, we are making judgements that are influenced by our 'personal beliefs and experiences'. Miner and Jayaratne (2014: 303) argue that 'this decision is not arbitrary, but is based on many practical factors, such as the respondents' education or the need to limit the time it takes to collect responses'

Stanley and Wise (1983) also maintain that objectivity in principle is impossible to achieve and that all research is effectively, 'fiction'. Hesse-Biber, Leavy and Yaiser (2004) summarise feminist objectivity as knowledge and truth that is:

partial, situated, subjective, power imbued, and relational. (It) combines the goal of conventional objectivity-to conduct research completely free of social influence or personal beliefs with the reality that no-one can achieve this goal...and recognizes that objectivity can only operate within the limitations of the scientist's personal belief and experiences (ibid: 13).

## **Epistemology and ontology**

The research was empirical in nature as it dealt with the gathering of information through direct personal and professional experience. As the aim of this research was to consider women's contribution to communities through their roles in small VCS organisations, the women who had experiences within those small organisations were of prime importance in this research. The research therefore sat clearly within the interpretivist paradigm. It fulfilled Cohen and Manion's view as research, which aimed to:

begin with individuals and set out to understand their interpretations of the world around them.... Investigators work directly with experience and understanding to build their theory on them. The data thus yielded will be glossed with the meanings and purposes of those people who are their source. (Cohen and Manion 1994: 37).

Some of what I was undertaking within this thesis depended upon my own definition of the subject matter. This has influenced what I count as knowledge and what I want that knowledge to be about. I recognise within this, my own perception that small groups are highly valued within communities, that it is mainly but not exclusively women who contribute to the small community groups. I had to be aware that data collected through qualitative methods was open to both interpretation and criticism, since qualitative methods rely, to some extent, on the researcher's own experience and knowledge for the analysis of the data. However, to gather information on this subject I have to be aware that while some empirical data does exist, it is not an exact science and that more of the relevant data, of necessity, will not be based on purely scientific data. It is based on the perceptions of others and my interpretation of that data.

As Jones (1993: 114) has written, 'In any kind of knowledge production by human beings much depends on your ontology - your definition of your subject matter, or what you take reality to be like. Your epistemology – what you count as knowledge – depends on what you want knowledge about'. I wanted to add to the knowledge about women's contribution to communities, through their involvement in small

community groups. With mixed methods of data collection, including both quantitative and qualitative methods (questionnaires, focus groups and semi-structured interviews) I aimed to produce 'validity to my analysis and findings' (Belbase, 2007).

### **Feminist Standpoint Epistemology**

As stated the focus of this research is women and their contribution to communities through their involvement in small community groups. It was important to be aware of the power dimension between the researcher and the researched without damaging the validity of the research. It was important that the women I was interviewing felt comfortable and were not in an environment in which they felt constrained and unable to speak freely. It was also essential that the women did not feel subordinate and unable to speak as equals. The feminist standpoint provided the opportunity for me to be aware of the power dimensions between the researcher and the research participants. Harding (1991) argues that an approach to research knowledge production 'that does not acknowledge the role of power and social location play in the knowledge production process must be understood as offering only a weak form of objectivity' (ibid: 19). Good research methods are supposed to be culture free and value free. Yet Harding argued that it had become clear to feminist scholars that this standpoint had not and could not be met in practice.

Harding (1987) was one of the first to name feminist standpoint theory as a general approach within feminism and this came about as result of the growing knowledge that value free research is an unachievable ideal (Naples and Gurr, 2014: 20).

The familiar paradoxes of feminist theory re-appear in concerns about research methods. Feminist researchers have the aim of reducing power imbalances between the researcher and the researched, but in so doing they leave themselves open to criticism of lack of objectivity. Standpoint methodologies have been perceived as one way that research projects can turn disadvantaged social positions into powerful intellectual and political resources. Standpoint theory emerged in the 1970s and 1980s as a feminist theory about relationships between the production of knowledge and practices of power. Standpoint theory, according to Naples and Gurr (2014), is

presented as a way of empowering oppressed groups, of valuing their experiences and of pointing a way to develop oppositional consciousness. They also argue that it is a way of using research methodology, in the service of democratic social transformation is for researchers, where they use the power that they have in ways that directly advance social justice. Women, like members of other oppressed groups, had long been the object of inquiries of their actual would-be rulers –‘but there was no way for those women to become the authors of the research’ (ibid: 22). Swigonski (1994: 12) asserted that ‘feminist standpoint theory places the life experiences of marginalised groups at the centre of the project and then directs the view of the researcher toward the social structures that shape the lives of the group members’. This was a helpful guiding feminist principle when carrying out the research for this thesis. The core feminist characteristic that questions the gender bias, both in research and the wider world, and that seeks to bring about change is at the core of the subject matter of this thesis.

### **Personal Ontology**

Considering and reflecting on my own personal ontology and perspective. I have more than 30 years’ experience of community involvement both as a participant in community action, as a delivery agent and as a funder. I recognise that this has influenced what I count as knowledge and what I want that knowledge to be about. I recognise that I am sensitised to issues surrounding women and social injustice. I am also sensitised to the involvement of women in communities. I am also fully aware of social inequalities having spent most of my working life to date working either in the 10% most deprived areas in the South West, in rural areas with lack of opportunities or with communities, both of interest and geography, who face multiple challenges and injustice. My own conviction is that poverty, social injustice is a negative experience, and that it can be alleviated, to a certain extent, if appropriate services are funded. However, to gather information on this subject I have to be aware that while some empirical data does exist, it is not an exact science, and that more of the relevant data by necessity will not be based on purely scientific data. It will be based on the perceptions of others and my interpretation of that data.

While feminism itself is not one unified project, most feminists can be defined by their concern with an understanding of why inequality between men and women exists. Letherby (2003) argues that this is related to a concern with the reasons behind the subordination of women, the causes of male domination and how to bring this domination to an end. Ackerly and True do however caution that:

any account of research is at risk of relying on, and producing, its own essentialisms and the researcher needs to be aware of this and continually reflect on the course they are undertaking to ensure that we are discerning 'fact from opinion' and making sure that we as researchers do not allow our own assumptions to take over. (2010: 24)

So we need to be aware of our situations, our own experiences our own 'privileges' as Ackerly and True put it, but as long as we are aware of these and sensitised to their effects 'an epistemology should not prevent us from doing research; it should enable us to do it better' (Ackerly and True 2010: 25). For me personally I needed to be aware that my position as chief executive of an organisation that, among other activities, provided financial support in the way of grants to the sector had put me in a position of privilege. Ackerly and True (2010) continue to support the view that feminist research must retain diversity when stating that 'Feminist goals are plural and contested and, as such, feminist research cannot be reduced to a particular normative orientation of politics or ideology (ibid: 25). It was essential that my politics or ideology were not to the fore in this research.

### **Insider researcher**

I also recognised when undertaking the research that I had 'insider' knowledge. Having insider knowledge is not unusual. It is increasingly common for researchers to carry out a study directly concerned with the setting in which they work (Robson, 1998: 297). This is the position in which I found myself when starting out on this research.

The small community groups, which are the subject of this research, are something, which I encounter on a daily basis through my work within South West Foundation. I

have therefore been investigating this area as someone who is actively working in the field. Robson (1998) refers to this position as an 'insider researcher'. Robson outlines a number of advantages to this situation which include such issues as not having to travel far, having intimate knowledge of the context of the study, knowing about the 'politics of the institution'. Not all of these considerations were relevant to my situation working for an organisation that had reported contact with over 4,000 organisations and has funded over 1,000 of them. It was not necessarily the case that I was 'close' to any of these organisations. I was not undertaking a study within my own organisation, so I was not an insider researcher from that particular perspective. However, looking at issues that I came across within my position as chief executive on a daily basis, it was inevitable that I was undertaking the research from the perspective of someone who has insider knowledge of the topic and would be perceived as such.

Robson also discusses the researcher having 'street credibility' as someone who understands 'what the job entails'. I did 'understand 'the arena in which the participants were operating' when I started this research and that has remained the situation throughout. I also felt that the participants had some trust in my judgement and motivation, knowing of me, if not always knowing me personally. This was an aspect that I needed to reflect on throughout the research.

South West Foundation is a very small organisation in terms of staff and funding, although it covers the whole of the South West Region. It has been in action since 2002. I have been the main worker for the Foundation and, since 2007 I have been the chief executive directly delivering most of the programmes. The work of the Foundation in some ways has become synonymous with my own actions and motivation. The Foundation has the reputation for supporting and caring for small voluntary and community sector organisations (VCSOs) and those people who work with and for these organisations. This 'street credibility' certainly would be an element that would give any potential participant a 'trust' in my motivation for wanting to undertake this study, knowing that I supported and understood the field that I was researching. It also did provide me with a great deal of information about the background to the sector, if not necessarily the exact topic on which I was focussing.

This meant however that throughout the entire process of the research, it was important for me to be aware of and account for my personal biases:

Reflexivity is a way for researchers to account for their personal biases and examine the researcher effects that these biases may have on the data produces. (Hesse-Biber, 2014: 3)

I constantly needed to reflect on the fact that my position as chief executive of a funding organisation possesses a number of potential challenges for me as a researcher. How can I be impartial when I have 'insider knowledge' of these organisations of which the women, who were the main subjects of the in-depth interviews, are a part? How can I set aside my previous opinions of these women and the organisations with which they were associated? Ackerly and True suggest that the feminist research ethic is helpful here in that it:

guides our research decisions and helps us to reflect on and attend to dynamics of power, knowledge, relationships, and context throughout the research process. (2010: 2)

They indicate that it is essential for feminist research ethics, that the researcher uses 'critical reflection as a work ethic' (ibid: 2). It was therefore important for me to reflect throughout the research about my employment position and how that might impact on the research I was undertaking and the decisions that I might make within that research. Who, I chose to include as participants, what questions I chose to ask in questionnaires, focus groups and interviews and how I analysed the data. Each stage required that I reflect upon my position and my judgements.

## **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical issues run throughout feminist research practices and are difficult to separate out from other issues within the research process. As Bell states 'ethical issues are embedded within feminist research; they cannot be easily separated from issues of research methodology or epistemology' (Bell, 2014: 99).

Throughout this research, I adhered to the research code as contained within the Bath Spa University Research Ethics and Integrity Policy in the Research Degrees Handbook 2013-4. This states that:

All research at BSU should be carried out:

- with full respect of other researchers' rights and achievements
- with full respect to the rights of participants in research projects
- in an ethically appropriate manner

(Bath Spa University, 2013: 8)

Consideration of ethical issues began at an early stage with potential participants. I explained the focus of the research and that I was undertaking this piece of research outside of my role of that of my post as chief executive of South West Foundation. I therefore followed the principle of 'informed consent' as outlined by Cohen and Manion as 'acceptance by those whose permission one needs before embarking on the task' (Cohen and Manion, 1994: 345). Informed consent implies that the individuals will be fully informed of all aspects of the research and its implications (Cohen and Manion, 1994). It was recognised, prior to arranging the interviews that the individuals that I interviewed might not wish to be identified with certain information that they may wish to impart. While it was entirely possible to guarantee the anonymity of any organisation that completed the questionnaires, it was not possible to guarantee the total anonymity of individuals. Those involved in the in-depth interviews were advised of the intention to retain their anonymity. Many however, indicated that they were not too concerned with this element or trusted my judgement. Those who agreed to be filmed in the later interviews fully understood that there could be no anonymity. The public films of the interviews were edited and viewed by the participants before they were made public. The interviewees were very happy with this arrangement. They also further understood that the whole of the taped interviews were transcribed and data from these interviews would be utilised in the research. The aim was to anonymise this element of the content as far as possible. Cohen and Manion accept that it may not be reasonable to expect complete anonymity when undertaking in-depth interviews, when they state 'a subject agreeing to face – to face interview...can in no way expect anonymity. At most the interviewer can promise confidentiality' (ibid: 366).

Pseudonyms were used for individuals involved, but it was still very important that if individuals were to give their 'informed consent' to taking part in the interviews, then the possibility that anonymity could not be guaranteed was put before them. While individuals will never be named within the research it may not be possible to guarantee that people would not be able to identify individuals from the data provided. It was therefore important to ensure that information disclosed was not damaging to their relationships.

### **Researcher effect**

In terms of sociological research, the 'researcher effect' is important.

Research does not take place in a vacuum, it always has a context. Social and educational research is conducted by thinking feeling human beings and in qualitative approaches the researcher takes on a highly interactive profile. (Hitchcock and Hughes, 1995: 39)

Many of the questions of 'researcher effect' stem from my own position as chief executive of a regional grant giving foundation and gave call to me continually reflecting on how this position may affect, not just the participants in the study, but also my own stance and positioning:

Feminists again and again repeatedly on the ways in which we approach our work, and on the changing nature of what we study. We focus on the ways in which power affects our assumptions and on the continually revealed exclusions and inclusions of research. (Ackerly and True, 2010: 3)

Writers on feminist research (Hesse-Biber, 2014; Oakley, 1981 and Roberts, 1981) caution the researcher to be aware of the power of the researcher and the ethical research dilemmas involved in using feminist techniques when interviewing. The relationship between interviewer and interviewee is under scrutiny because feminist research gives voice to those who have challenged constraints and oppression, this provides feminist researchers with a particular concern for ethics and a commitment to addressing inequality in the design of the research, how it is carried out and the

use made of it. Ackerly and True alert the researcher to the issue of the power relationship between researcher and the researched:

Of course being attentive to relationships of power in research requires us to recognise those between the researcher and the research participants. This is the most common focus of attention to power dynamics and the vulnerability of feminists, other researchers and ethical review boards. (2010: 32)

Just as feminism is alert to asymmetrical power relationships between men and women, feminist methodology has a special interest in the relationship between the researcher and the researched (Harding, 1987). The accepted standpoint for a researcher is to be 'distant' and 'non-committal', 'and objective' when undertaking research interviews. However, it is this standpoint, which puts distance between the interviewer and the subject. Feminist research aims to diminish the hierarchy between researcher and participants as far as is possible. Feminist research questions the accepted traditional male paradigm

As the chief executive with the Foundation one of my tasks is to 'assess' applications and monitor the grants that have been allocated to organisations. I therefore had to be aware that, if those interviewed still had connections with regard to potential future funding, they were aware that nothing that was said during the interview would affect any future relationships with the Foundation. It was made clear at the beginning of the interviews that the individuals should feel free to express their views unfettered. This point was also made to those organisations who received the questionnaires, within any part of this research, through a covering letter. However, it was not just the power of my employed situation that I needed to be aware of when starting on this journey, it was also my power as the person undertaking the research.

When undertaking the face-to-face interviews, I was very aware that those who took part did so on the understanding that they were contributing to a collection of data that would highlight many of the issues that they themselves had experienced. They also believed that his research might contribute to highlighting issues and bringing about change. Those I interviewed had a far greater knowledge than me, of the

issues in question. The relationship was very much that of the interviewees imparting their knowledge as a 'gift' as Limerick et al. (1996) have suggested:

...in fact it is wiser to regard the interview as a gift, as interviewers have the power to withhold information, to choose the location of the interview, to choose how seriously to attend to the interview, how long it will last, when it will take place, what will be discussed-and in what and whose terms-what knowledge is important, even how the data will be analysed ... power is fluid and is discursively constructed through the interview rather than being the province of either party (Limerick et al., 1996: 452)

It was certainly the case with the interviews that I conducted. The women who I interviewed led very active lives and I was very reliant on them identifying a time and venue where the interviews could take place. Also, the length of time that the interviews lasted was not in my power but in the power of the interviewee. I was concerned that the relationship between me and those I was interviewing was experienced as a more equal relationship. I did try to engender the feeling that we were all working on this together:

Feminist researchers want to do things differently and they frequently enlist those who are being researched as participants or collaborators in the research (Morrow, 2006: 275)

Feminist researchers have been criticised as being biased because they can get closer to the women they are researching than other traditional researchers from a male paradigm. Other perspectives can see the benefits of this approach in relation to the type of research that feminist researcher might be undertaking. It is not just an ethical position but also an epistemological one, and standpoint feminist methodology argues that research that starts from examining women's lives will 'present a less distorted view of the social world' (Harding, 2004: 57). From my perspective in the face-to-face interview, it was important to start from where the women felt comfortable in the interviews and to retain flexibility.

## **Stages of my research**

In the next section, I look at the different stages of my research.

- **Stage one** aimed to explore women's position and representation in small community groups, and to test assumptions about their situation, including my own. It involved gathering data via questionnaires and provided the background to inform the interviews and focus group.
- **Stage two** was the focus groups. The intention of the focus groups was to gather data that would help me to formulate the semi-structured questions for my face-to-face interviews. They also assisted in the review of my research question
- **Stage three** was interviews with a selection of women who were involved or who had been involved in community action. I undertook six individual interviews at the start of my research and six more towards the end of the research.
- **Stage four** was where I undertook the analysis of the data.

### **Stage One: the questionnaires**

Stage one of my research was planned to gather data, which would inform the focus groups and questions for the later face-to-face interviews. One of the aims was to test out a number of my assumptions that I had gathered from the experiences of working in the field of funding small community groups for some ten years. Reflecting on my experience had led to the following questions:

- Were women involved in community groups that delivered services to communities beyond those traditionally attributed to women's issues?
- Were women more involved in the management and delivery of small community groups than men?
- If women were involved, at what level within the groups were they involved? Did this change in any way, as the groups grew larger?

These questions formed the basis of a short scoping questionnaire that was sent out to 130 of the small community groups that my organisation had funded over a two-year period (see appendix 5). These questionnaires informed construction of the questions of the later semi-structured interviews. As Robson (1993) has stated

When carrying out an enquiry involving humans, why not take advantage of the fact that they can tell you things about themselves? One important

category of enquiry method is based on asking people questions, or otherwise getting them to respond, and then getting them to record their responses.  
(Robson: 1993: 227)

I share the concerns of other feminist researchers such as Landrine et al., (1992) that more quantitative methods such as questionnaires, which rely on my interpretation of written data received from people I have probably never met, can have limited value if not supported with other more in-depth data. However, the questionnaires assisted me in scoping some of the key research themes, and considering the questions, that I would need to formulate for the in-depth interviews. This field is, as pointed out in the last chapter, under-researched so it was important therefore to try to map its magnitude. Though the sampling frame was not exhaustive, the network of relations established by the Foundation in the area did enable a reasonably good number of organisations to be contacted and engaged in the research. The use of more than one method of collecting data also assisted with the validation of the findings of the research through triangulation. According to Hitchcock and Hughes (1995: 106), 'the most common way in which validity can be strengthened is by some form of triangulation or diversity of method.'

For me this stage was the start of my research journey and was helpful in gathering the background that I required to test out my assumptions that women were the main contributors, both at a management level, and at a delivery level, within these small community groups. I had personally observed that women appeared to be the main contributors to the small community groups that I worked with, but I wanted to test this assumption out. As Robson (1993) states, 'questionnaires ... are very efficient in terms of researcher time and effort' (ibid: 243). The results of the questionnaire are outlined in more detail in the findings sections of this research. The results of the questionnaires provided more supporting evidence than I might have been expecting and gave me a very strong basis from which to move forward with the research.

## **Stage two: Focus Groups**

### **Rationale for the Focus Groups**

Having tested my assumptions and gathered some very useful data using questionnaires, the second stage of my research was to gather the views of a range of women involved in small community groups, to provide a background to my research. Feminist methodology informed the focus group from the start. I felt able to use a diverse range of research activities within the focus groups to suit my research subject and did not feel constrained to any one approach. I held two focus groups, one in the north of the region and one in the south that involved women from rural areas, market and coastal towns and some from the urban areas.

Focus groups came into use in the 1940s and were generally a method used by market researchers. Since the 1990s, focus groups have been rediscovered by social scientists, who now use them as a primary research method and accept findings produced using this method as valuable and useful. One of the principle strengths of focus groups is recognised as enabling the researcher to allow respondents to talk in a more natural language, in their own words, and about their own concerns (Kitzinger, 1994). Writing in 1999, Wilkinson noted focus groups as relatively neglected in feminist research, and that feminist methods textbooks rarely included a chapter on focus groups. Hesse-Biber (2014: 183) maps this progression by stating that 'by 2001, ... focus groups were gaining in popularity among feminist researchers— even arguing that they could be seen as 'one of the most appropriate methods for use in feminist research.' Writers such as Madriz (2000), Montell (1999) and Wilkinson (1999) argued that focus groups are particularly helpful in feminist research. Munday (2014) argues that focus groups can be utilized at different points during the research process - as a pilot to help inform the formulation of future research questions, as the main method to address the research question, or as a follow up to further explore points of interest raised at earlier times during the research (Munday, 2014: 235). I selected focus groups as a method to:

- assist with the formulation and validation of the final research title
- test out that I was not just relying on my own assumptions, based on my involvement in the field

- to see if there were any specific aspects of the issue I wished to research that I should focus down to
- to widen the number of women who were taking part and assist with the triangulation of my data

Using focus groups as a method proved very useful in highlighting and considering issues that were facing women in the voluntary sector, and provided a rich range of data beyond my expectations.

## **Sampling**

My sampling strategy for the questionnaire was to contact organisations that had been funded in the previous two years through the Foundation's grant programmes. I was aware that the small grant programme focussed on the smaller community groups mainly with an annual income of less than £20,000 while our larger Community Grant Programme would include a number of organisations that had an annual income way beyond this level. The reason for including some of the larger organisations was that I wanted to explore if the position of women in these groups altered at all when the organisations' income increased. The other aspect of the funding programme from which the groups were selected, was that it focussed on supporting people most in need in communities.

My sampling strategy in this second stage of the research was to seek out women who were involved in contributing to their communities through small community groups. The main questions that I wanted to investigate were:

- What were the activities that women were involved in, in their communities?
- Why did they get involved in community action?
- What motivated them and kept them involved?

I already knew from the questionnaires that more women than men were involved in small community groups particularly in unpaid role. While reflecting on my own work, I had noticed an apparent over representation of women as deliverers of services through small community groups. Before settling on my final research question, I initially wanted to test out two aspects of my theory. One area that I wished to test was that women were over represented as delivery agents in small community groups and second that those women had elements of shared experiences. I was

fortunate that I was in touch at any one time with over 200 small community groups, most of which were run and /or managed by women. The most appropriate method for selecting participants was purposive sampling. Bryman (2012: 418) argues that 'the goal of purposive sampling is to sample cases / participants in a strategic way so that those sampled are relevant to the research questions that are being posed'. Robson (1993) agrees that the principle of selection in purposive sampling is the researcher's judgement.

I knew little about the women who were participating other than what their roles were and that they were involved in small community groups. In addition to this, as the area was potentially sensitive, I had to ensure that women were willing and able to participate in the research process.

### **Running the Focus Groups**

It has been suggested that the ideal number for focus groups is between eight and twelve (Barbour and Kitsinger, 1999). The researcher can access a wide variety of attitudes and opinions with this number of participants however there is also the possibility that such a large group may become unwieldy to facilitate and to analyse (Hesse-Biber, 2014). My main issue with the size of the group was that often people would arrive unexpectedly having heard that such a group was taking place. There appeared to be a great appetite for the women to come forward and give their views. Managing the group size without disappointing people therefore became a challenge. I ended up with 16 women in each focus group, which was a slightly larger number than I would have liked. A group that size raised issues around ensuring that the participants felt able and comfortable to put forward their views. Considering this, I sought accessible accommodation in places where the women would feel at ease and safe to give me their views.

The focus groups were conducted in a non-hierarchical way with small sub groups providing the opportunity for participants to take an active part and put their views forward. A variety of feedback methods within the focus groups resulted in the women being able to take part in discussions put their views on post it notes, flip charts or draw pictures to demonstrate their own situation within the sector. I took

notes of the main points raised in the focus groups, transcribed the flip charts and post it notes and also took photos with permission. The reasoning behind this was to eliminate any element of hierarchy within the groups. Issues and themes, which were identified in-group discussions, were later tested out through small group work and gathering further data onto flip charts and on post it notes (see appendix 7). These informal methods of capturing data, ensured that all the women present felt able to contribute, even if they were less confident in giving their views verbally. Although there have been concerns expressed about the danger of hierarchy in focus groups with moderating, Munday (2014) expresses the view that focus group can be 'a method that has the potential to be used in a non-hierarchical manner that empowers and gives participants some degree of control over the research process' (253). Simel argued that the focus group is the most egalitarian research method available and therefore is particularly appropriate as a tool for feminist research (Simel 1997 cited in Hesse-Biber, 2014: 253.)

One unexpected issue did arise during the focus group; when the women present expressed a joint anger about the way in which they were disempowered by men, to a far greater degree than the women who undertook the individual in-depth interviews. I feel that this was because within the focus group the women were able to reflect on their own experience in the presence of others and were able to come to a collective agreement on that experience. As Munday (2014: 243) puts it, 'for many feminist researchers, the importance of the collective nature of focus groups is that they bring women together through discussion and can reach a point where they realise that their experiences are not just individual but collective.'

### **Developing my research title**

Formulating the title for me would be an ongoing activity but the core of the original research title seemed likely to remain. My initial title was based on my knowledge, understanding and observations of the issues through my work. The aims and questions of the research had grown out of my knowledge and involvement with small community groups alongside my own experience of working for many years within the voluntary sector in a small local community group. I had identified the fact that women, both in their governance and their delivery, led most of the small

community groups that I was working with. The women were often working in unpaid or low paid positions within those groups. They were passionate about what they were doing and every evaluation of that I had undertaken of the value of the small community groups to inform our grant programmes, showed the depth of their worth. (Crawley, 2003; Crawley, 2006; Crawley, 2008).

### **Ethical issues relating to the focus groups**

In the focus groups, I tried to ensure that any dominant speakers would not prevent others from having the opportunity to speak and from being able to put forward their views. I gave people the opportunity also of putting their views on post its and placing them on a chart on the wall, to enable those who did not feel strong enough to speak up to also have a voice and a say. All of these contributions were analysed as part of the final data.

There was a feeling from the participants in the focus group that having identified the issues I was going to do something about them. That information gathered and data accessed through the focus groups would later be used to highlight the issues faced by the women and bring about some sort change or transformation. This is itself has been seen by many, as part of the feminist research process, that the aim of the research would contain an element of transformation, and help to bring about some sort of change or recognition of both the challenges face by the women and the value of their interventions.

### **Finalising my research title**

Having undertaken the initial questionnaire and focus groups I then set about revisiting and finalising further my research title, aims and methods. They are stated at the beginning of this chapter, and the title is:

An investigation into the contribution that women are making to communities through their involvement in small voluntary and community sector organisations operating in the South West Region

I analysed the data from the questionnaires and focus groups (see chapter 4). This analysis assisted me to further focus my research title and questions and informed the design of the interviews.

### **Stage Three: the interviews**

For stage three of the research, I conducted semi-structured interviews with six women. As stated previously, these individuals were selected purposively because of their known involvement in community groups and their willingness to contribute to the research. Other criteria include the fact that they had been involved in activity in the voluntary and community sector for more than five years and if not currently involved still had a connection with the sector. The interview questions were less formal than those asked through the focus group and I left myself free to modify the interview structure as the interviews progressed.

The interviewer is free to modify the sequence of questions, change the wording, explain them or add to them. The research interview has been described as a 'two-person conversation initiated by the interviewer for the specific purpose of obtaining research-relevant information and focused by him on content specified by research objectives of systematic description, prediction or explanation' (Cohen and Manion 1994: 271).

The questions concentrated on the background of the women that had led to them becoming involved in the community groups. Their motivation for that involvement, the types of activities they were involved in and what kept them involved. The semi-structured nature of the interviews meant that there was scope for the women to bring in issues that were relevant to the research as they viewed it rather than being restricted in their responses. It also enabled some of the women to bring in their own aspirations for the future. Their interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed and analysed.

I later interviewed six more women to see if the time lapse in the research would make any difference to the responses that I might gather. These additional six women were selected using similar purposive sampling technique and using the

same rationale. All but one were women that I not been in contact with in 2007, when I selected the initial six women for interviews. My reason for selecting an additional six women for interview was that I could compare the data gathered to see if any different themes were being presented. I also had the opportunity to film these interviews and present edited film versions of the interviews. This was the beginnings of the transformative process of the research and the interviews themselves by being made public in this way started the process of making women's contribution to communities more visible.

## **Stage four - Analysing the data**

### **One-to-one interviews**

As the interviews took place, I could feel certain patterns and similarities starting to form. The first interviews were audio recorded and the second later tranche of six interviews were recorded and filmed. All interviews took place face-to-face apart from one in the initial tranche of interviews, which took place of the phone using a hands-free facility. I transcribed all of the recordings. While being extremely time consuming, this gave a good register and recall of what was being said. Looking for individual similarities and patterns in the interviews was a very useful tool in this context. Where each individual's experiences and perceptions had certain shared similarities they began to build up the common themes. I used colours to identify themes in each of the transcribed interviews, which also helped in building a library of common experience.

### **Data analysis from the questionnaires**

May (1997) argues that 'the aim of the questionnaire analysis is to examine patterns among replies'. It was not anticipated that the quantitative data provided by the initial questionnaires would generate such large amounts of statistical information.

However, 130 of the organisations who were sent questionnaires did return them completed. This led to an increase in the amount of collation that was required from the data from the questionnaires. I analysed the data using a spreadsheet. I had deliberately not asked any qualitative questions as I was looking for simple numerical data to confirm levels of involvement of women in the delivery and management of small community groups and if so at what level that involvement was. This was a

very narrow and specific piece of research. It was the numbers that were important to this piece of research and it was a tool that could deal with number analysis that I was using.

I had not envisaged how useful or important the findings from the questionnaires would be until I came to do the analysis. Even from simple statistical analysis I was able to draw up a data table listing the main findings from the questionnaire. As the patterns began to form, I realised how useful the data was, not only informing the semi-structured interviews, but also by providing interesting and possibly unique insight into women's position in the small community groups that I had not previously been able to evidence. I included bar charts to give me a visual display of the information (Robson 1994: 320) where this was felt to be helpful.

Within both the data collected during desk research and the questionnaires I looked for clusters of data around which to build the questions for the one-to-one semi-structured interviews. Had a dedicated computer package been available to me both during the design stage of the questionnaire and during the data analysis this would have made the work less time consuming and perhaps allowed me to cross-reference some of the data within the questionnaires, which may have proved useful. However, as I was only using the data as background information this was not so vital.

There is no one set method of analysing interview data. Robson (1994) sets out some of the methods and the reasoning behind these. He refers to the quasi-judicial approach, which is a very flexible approach to for analysis. 'Analysis is not left to the end of the process but is a continuing concern' (Robson 1994: 375). Although this method is helpful and clearly laid out it leaves the reader guessing as to what should be done with the data once it is collected. Both the focus groups and the in-depth interviews yielded a significant amount of qualitative data that needed careful and thorough analysing. One of the main challenges with qualitative research is that very rapidly generates a large cumbersome database because of its reliance on prose in the form of such media and field note, interview transcripts, or documents (Bryman, 2012: 565).

Woods (1986) suggests six steps, which can be used when analysing qualitative data. Although I did not precisely move through six steps as Woods (1986) describes, it was certainly the case that the earlier analysis involved 'tentative reflection' (Woods 1986: 121) revealing a number of insights. These reflections helped me make 'initial judgements about the data' (Woods, 1986: 123). I then moved on, after further consideration, to the stage where the data needed 'to be ordered in some kind of systematic way' (Woods, 1986:126) and this 'classifying and categorising' (Woods 1986, step 2) helped begin to identify the key themes and issues. This process then continued through the stages that Woods (1986) suggests where the themes and issues became more completely developed.

Hesse-Biber (2014) suggests that there 'is no specific path to interpreting your data. In fact, the researcher often goes back and forth from data analysis to data interpretation that leads to the collection, where appropriate of more data (ibid: 409). I would agree with Hesse Biber and certainly while following the steps that Woods outlines, I did return often to the data and repeat a number of these steps.

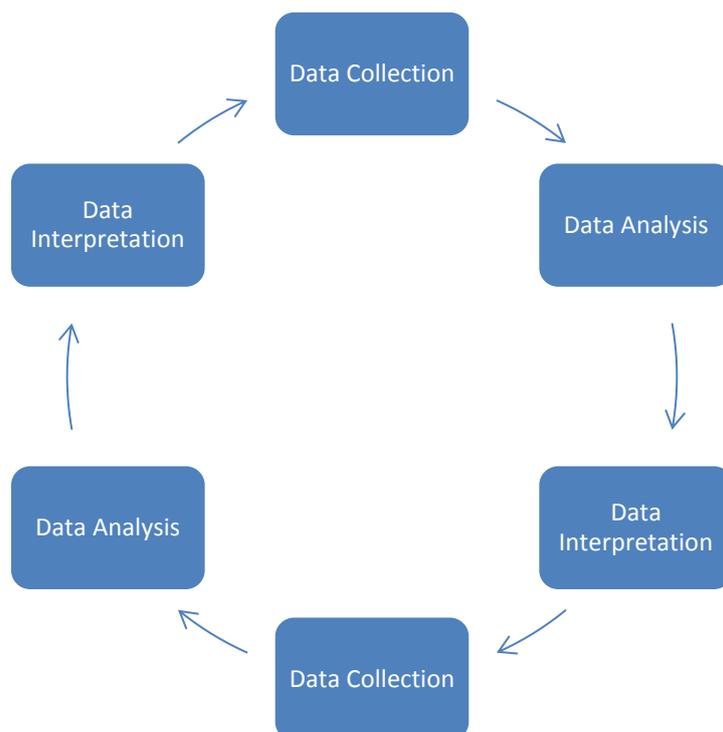


Figure 1 - Process of the analysis and interpretation of data

With reference to the diagram above provided by Hesse-Biber (2014: 408) I followed an iterative process in the analysis and interpretation of data asking the questions as

Hesse-Biber suggests of what did I find; what does it mean? Who else would I interview? It was this last question that led me to interview a further six women, five years later.

## **Summary**

The feminist methodology that I have utilised, as outlined in this chapter, is based on the core characteristics of feminist research, including the use of mixed methods, using both qualitative and quantitative data. I sought out a methodology that would enable me to be aware of and minimise the power dimension between myself as a researcher, and the women as the research subjects. It was important that the women felt that they had the space to express themselves freely, in order that they would be able to contribute to the discussions of the topic in full and be unfettered by a rigid approach. By using initially questionnaires, then focus groups and one-to-one in-depth semi-structured interviews, I also ensured that the approach and data produced was valid and did not involve over interpretation. The use a variety of methods enabled a rich collection of data for the later analysis.

## Chapter 4 – Research findings

### Introduction

This chapter starts with the first stage of the research and then continues with stages two and three. The fourth stage is in chapter 5 where I analyse the data and discuss the findings. I have separated the findings from the discussion in order to ensure that the women's voices are heard in their original words before I start on the discussion of those findings.

- **Stage one** presents the findings and analysis of the initial questionnaires that provide the statistical background to women's involvement in the VCS. The information includes details of the size of the community groups that the women were involved in and the main purpose of those organisations.
- **Stage two** presents the findings and analysis of the two focus groups in which 32 women took part and considers what the women were involved in both in their paid and unpaid roles.
- **Stage three** of the research findings is the presentation of the data contained in the 12 interviews with women working in the VCS. There are six initial interviews with women who were currently involved in small community groups and a second group of interviews of six women that took place four years later. All the interviews are with women who were currently involved in the delivery of services to their communities through their involvement in small community groups at the time of interview.

### Research stage one

When I began this research, I had already undertaken approximately 12 small-scale research reports over the previous 10 years for the organisations that I had worked for. These were published through my organisation and on occasions by national organisations such as the Federation for Community Development Learning and the Community Development Foundation. These reports mainly focussed on the activities of small community groups and were published in the years from 1998 to the present. The reports outlined the activities and achievements of small community groups, but there was little other than a passing comment in my research about the fact that women were the main deliverers of activities through these groups. It had

become too obvious and clear to me that this was the case, and that it was 'normal' and unremarkable. My assumption was that this was a well-recorded characteristic of the community groups, and was almost part of their definition. Other regular factors in my work with groups were that the groups had small incomes, were not registered as charities, largely volunteer led, had wide reach into communities, were integral to community engagement and most importantly, as far as this research is concerned, were and are led and developed in the main by women.

As I began to attend more meetings at strategy, regional and national levels, I began to doubt some of these assumptions. I came firstly to recognise that women were seriously unrepresented at these policy level meetings. When women were present, they were able to make very little by way of verbal contributions. Women's contribution to communities through small community groups was also rarely, if ever, mentioned. If it was recognised that women were so important to the community sector, the main contributors, the question arises as to why there was no recognition of this and why their voices were so difficult to hear? Once sensitised to the issue, I decided to test out if my assumptions from experience, that women were heavily involved in contributing to their local communities as the main delivery agents within small community groups, was correct. This was carried out through a questionnaire to 180 grant recipients of the South West Foundation's Small Grant programme. It formed the first stage of my research.

### **Questionnaire Results**

As outlined in Chapter 3, I used a mixed methods approach to undertaking the research. At the start I utilised quantitative methodology through questionnaires to test out my assumption that the majority of individuals who were involved in delivery of the activities through small VCSOs, were women. Having been personally involved in the sector, the use of quantitative methodology at the start of this research enabled me to ensure my own personal standpoint did not affect the results, and provided accessible quantitative data to add further validity to the research, as suggested by Oakley (1999). The quantitative methodology involved sending out questionnaires to 180 VCS groups that were recipients of the Foundation's small grant programme over the previous two years (2007-9). The purpose of the original

questionnaire was to test out the assumption that women were the main contributors to very small community groups, and that the services that they were involved in benefitted the wider community and were not just those traditionally associated with women. One hundred and twenty-one (67%) returned the questionnaires. I utilised quantitative analysis to identify the size of the organisation, how many of the individuals involved in the groups were women, and to pinpoint other key facts. The use of the quantitative methodology through questionnaires yielded far more informative statistical data than I envisaged. Sixty-eight (56%) of those organisations that returned the questionnaire identified that they had an annual income of less than £15,000. Within this 68, 38 (31%) self-identified as having an income of less than £1,000; sixteen (13%) had an income of between £1,000 and £15,000. A further sixteen (13%) had an income above £15,000 but below £50,000. Ten (8%) had an annual income of above £50,000 but below £100,000. This meant that all of the organisations that took part in this stage of the research, except one, met the NCVO (2011, 2012) definition of ‘small’ voluntary organisations (annual income of less than £100,000). However, the size of the majority of these organisations, 110 (90%), is much closer to the NCVO definition of a ‘Micro organisation’ which NCVO-defined as organisations with an annual income of less than £10,000 (NCVO, 2012). The ‘larger’ of these organisations had been funded because they were running smaller projects, and these ‘projects’ felt unable to have their own governance structure. This was mainly because of the health or vulnerability of the people wishing to run the organisation, and so their groups came under the auspices of the larger organisations

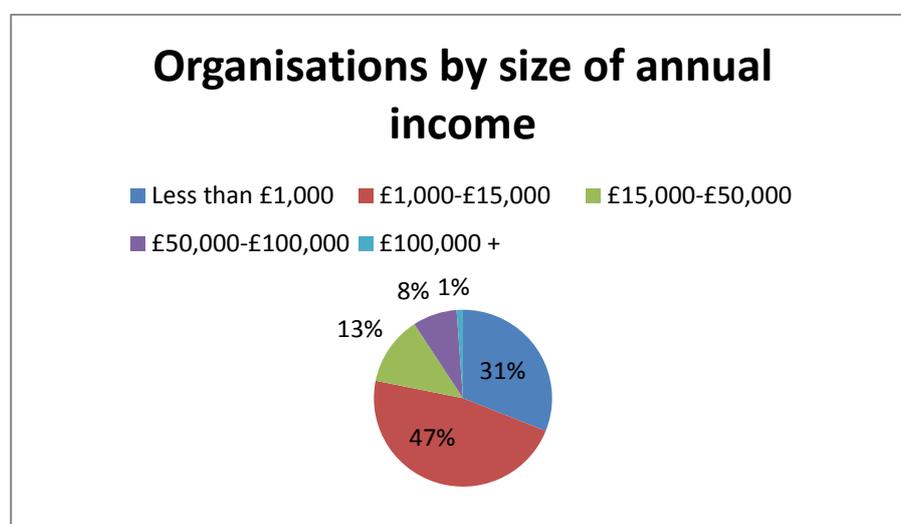


Figure 2 – Organisations by size of annual income

### Unpaid staff by gender

Organisations were further asked to identify whether they had more women than men involved as volunteers (unpaid staff) within their organisations. These volunteers also included unpaid board members. Of the 121 organisations 86 (71%) identified that the majority of their volunteers were women.

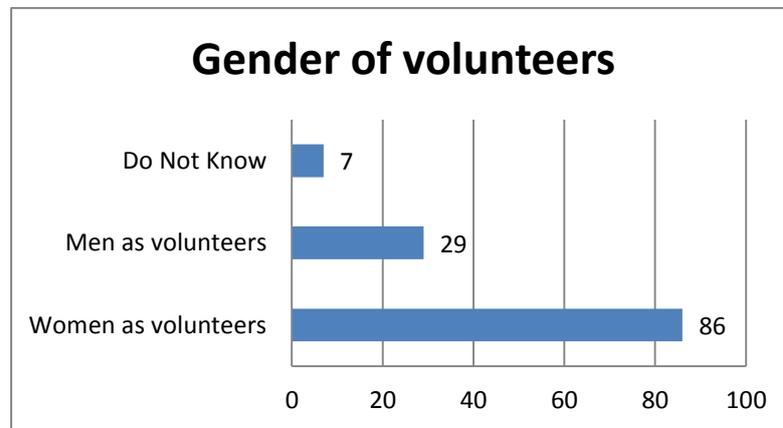


Figure 3 – Gender of volunteers

These results indicated that more of the organisations had women as the majority of their volunteers than men.

### Range of activities undertaken by the organisations

This question asked groups to identify the prime activity of the organisations in order to record the range of activities that the women were involved in. For example, if organisations identified themselves as a youth group, then it was accepted that working with young people would be their prime activity.

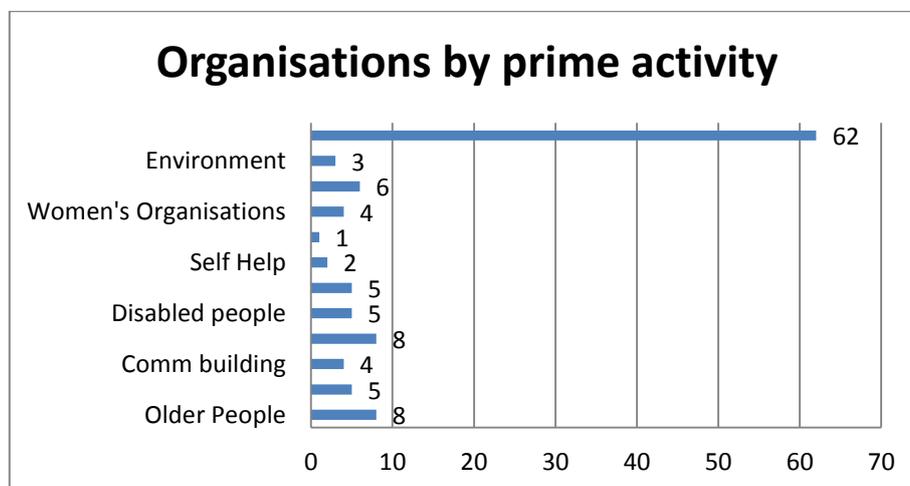


Figure 4 – organisations by prime activity

A substantial number of the organisations, 62 (52%) identified that a prime activity was delivering a service to the 'wider community'. Within this category came such activities as the production of a community newsletter, which reached a wide selection of community members or by running a community association that was undertaking a wide range of activities and support for their local community. These organisations were designated as having a wide community benefit and they had not identified one specific group of people as their focus. Most organisations identified that they fitted into the category of benefitting a range of people in communities and were not just focussed on benefitting one particular service user group. However, among those that did identify a single focus group or activity there was also a wide range of community services, such as services for disabled people, services for older people, young people and children.

Four organisations (3%) identified themselves as specifically offering women only services. This is within the area of such activities as women's rights, childcare and domestic abuse which is the area where women's involvement and contribution has received some recognition as being within the 'women's sector'. It is within the arena of the 'women's sector' that assumptions tend to be made that majority of women have their involvement. However, the involvement of women as shown in these results, is widespread throughout the voluntary sector and as can be seen, women have a broad involvement in community action through these small community groups. In Chapter 5 further consideration is given to how the findings question to some degree the expectation that women's involvement in communities is largely within women's organisations. These findings show a wide range of activities which women are involved in through small VCS groups and how they are involved in delivering services that benefit the wider community, not just women.

### **Involvement in the leadership of small community organisations by gender**

A second smaller questionnaire was sent out a year later. This was also to the organisations that had benefitted from the South West Foundation's small grant programme, but this time it was just those who had been grant beneficiaries over the previous 12 months (2009-10). The purpose of this questionnaire was to build on the evidence from the initial questionnaire and to further examine the roles that women had within the small organisations. Eighty questionnaires were distributed and 60

(75%) responses were received. Across the two uses of questionnaires, 243 were sent out, and 181 returned. This is an overall return rate of 75%.

The respondents to the second questionnaire indicated how many women were their prime contributors through their involvement in the groups. They were also asked how many volunteers they had and how many of these were women. This questionnaire focussed on the roles that women played in small organisations.

Of the sixty-two organisations that responded, forty-three (69%) involved women as the prime contributors through their role as paid staff (mainly part-time), as unpaid staff and as members of management committees. This is just a slightly lower percentage than the first questionnaire (2% lower), but given the difference in size of the sample this is a small difference which did not warrant further investigation. It was necessary to ensure that the questionnaire was not too complex for the small organisations to complete. The purpose was to identify at what level within the organisation women's prime involvement was, and not to consider whether male or female delivery roles differed within the various activities.

1,761 volunteers were involved in these 62 organisations. 1,104 (63%) of the volunteers were women and 657 (37%) were men. Only 162 (14%) of the women involved in the groups received any form of payment for their contribution either on a part time or full time basis. 942 (86%) women who contributed to the sector through the 62 organisations surveyed received no payment at all for their contribution. (284 were involved as unpaid members of management committees). Of the 43 groups that involved women as their main contributors 39 (91%) were managed by women, either in an unpaid or paid capacity. In terms of the size of the organisations, of the 35 small organisations (incomes under £15,000) 32 were managed by women, two had an even gender split on the management committees and only one did not have women as the majority on the management committee. The types of services that these organisations offered were again diverse: playgroup, toddler and after-school clubs (7); older people's groups supporting both men and women (4); village halls (4); disabled access groups (2); community gardens (2) and one each of transport and befriending, ethnic minority support group, tenants support, newsletter, training provider, youth group, carers.

Of the seven 'larger' organisations (that is the organisations with an annual expenditure over £15,000), only one was led and managed by women, despite them being the main contributors and service providers through their volunteering. While this is a relatively small sample, the diminishing numbers of women leading small organisations as their size increases could be a subject for further investigation.

### **Summary of findings in stage one from the questionnaires**

The use of quantitative methodology at this early stage in the research provided the following evidence to inform the future direction of the research.

- Women are major contributors to VCSOs and through these organisations to the local communities in which they are involved.
- The small VCSOs that are led and managed by women are involved in some traditionally gender related activities such as play and family support. They do however, include a range of activities that are not gender focussed and both areas, whether they are traditionally viewed as being of benefit to women, do benefit both men and women within those communities.
- Smaller VCSOs are likely to be run and managed by women often without any financial reward.
- When VCSOs grow and begin to take on more financial responsibility, women are more likely to be underrepresented on the management committee, with the gender balance on the management committees swinging over to male dominance. This does need further investigation.

These findings are further discussed in Chapter 5 but a picture emerges from both surveys that women are involved in a wide range of community activities and services that benefit a significant range of community members. This includes old and young, women and men, disabled and unwell, people who needed help, support and advice. The women surveyed were there to take on that broad role.

### **Research Stage Two: Focus Groups**

Having confirmed my initial assumption that there are significant numbers of women involved in small community groups; that the activities that they undertake are wide and varied, and that the range of people who were the end beneficiaries, was

diverse, I identified focus groups as the next stage in the research. The focus groups were intended to gather more qualitative data about women's' experiences in the sector and to establish some of the themes for the interviews. As Ackerly and True (2010) suggest, focus groups can build trust, be utilised as a method for data collection and take to social research 'the idea that" two heads are better than one" (ibid: 147). The data collected in the focus groups assisted with scoping areas for more detailed investigation at a later stage of the research. A discussion at the focus groups about the roles of women in the sector would be the key focus.

The activities / questions used in the focus groups are shown in table 6 below

Activities / questions asked in focus groups
1. Participants were asked to identify the type of community work they were involved in: small group exercise: feedback to whole group
2. Participants were asked how valued they felt in their various roles: small group exercise: feedback to whole group
3. Smaller groups - women were asked what motivated them to be involved in their community: feedback to whole group
4. Smaller groups - women were asked if they felt women worked in any particular way; record on flipchart
5. Smaller groups - women were asked how they first became involved in their communities: post-it notes/flip chart reporting
6. Final exercise with post-it notes and the 'Influence Mountain' (pictorial outline of simple mountain) women were asked as a group to place post-it notes on the side of the mountain to show how high up the mountain they felt they were able to influence

Table 6 - activities / questions asked in focus groups

The focus groups ran under the title 'Gender on the Agenda' specifically to allow the women to focus and reflect on their roles as women in the sector. Invitations were sent to individuals in 30 small organisations that the Foundation had funded over the previous 12 months. It was likely that some of the women who were invited may have been involved in the completion of one of the questionnaires, but as responses were anonymised this was not identified. The women were invited because of their involvement in small community groups. What was not identified before the women attended was their involvement in any form of paid employment outside of their

involvement in small community groups. From those invited, most participants were from groups with an income of less than £15,000. I had wanted to keep the size of each group to between 12 and 14, but 16 women booked in for each group and I chose not to exclude anyone. One group met in the north of the SW region and another in the south. I also wanted, as I said, to ensure that any data gathered was not limited to one particular geographical area.

The first question asked was about the type of work that the participants were involved in. This question turned out to be a good starting point as it put the women at ease and each attendee had something to talk about from the beginning. At both focus groups, the women firstly divided themselves into small self-selecting groups, discussed their roles then fed back to the whole group and me. They were asked identify the type of work they were involved in, in the community. I took notes on their feedback. I also gathered in their own notes that a nominated member at their table had made about their roles.

### **Diversity of roles**

The women in the focus groups were playing a diverse range of roles in their communities. The majority of women who attended were undertaking unpaid roles in small community groups which was their reason for selection, but a number of the women, more than 50% (22) held dual roles in their communities both paid and unpaid. Ten of the women also held more than one unpaid role and one unpaid worker had more than four unpaid roles. Within the northern group, the women were of diverse origins and their experience of other countries and frameworks added to the discussion. There was an unusually high percentage of women. Some women had worked extensively in other countries such as Russia, Pakistan and Africa or who were of other ethnic origin including African Caribbean, Sri Lankan and Lebanese.

The participants were undertaking a wide range of roles (some of them undertook paid and unpaid roles), most of which were not within 'women's organisations' but of benefit and interest to the wider community. They included:

- supporting service users (14)

- co-ordinating volunteers (4)
- on committees that gave them a voice such as the older people's forums (4)
- supporting smaller voluntary and community sector organisations (5)
- undertaking community development work in small rural communities (3)
- providing advice and information, running community groups and luncheon clubs, supporting people with health issues such as cancer (20)

### **Paid and unpaid roles**

A number of the women identified that although they were involved in small community groups on an unpaid basis they also worked part-time in paid community roles for other agencies. This was an unknown aspect of the focus group participants who had been invited purely because of their involvement in small community groups, mostly unpaid. This brought an unexpected dimension to the discussion. This was one of the unexpected outcomes of focus groups. This had taken me in an unexpected direction, but this enriched the discussion and brought a new perspective and new data. I altered the format of the focus groups at this point to allow for a discussion about both paid and unpaid community work. Because of this change in direction I omitted to collect exact data from the individual women on both their paid and unpaid roles. The table below is therefore a snapshot and examples from the women that I did collect data from. On a future occasion, this is something that I would amend.

<b>Table of sample participants who had both aid and unpaid roles</b>		
<b>Focus group participant</b>	<b>Unpaid role/s</b>	<b>Paid/roles</b>
1	Running small support group of mental health survivors	Co-ordinator of health project
2	Working with Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) Mental health survivors	NONE
3	Running neighbourhood transport project	Co-ordinator of volunteers in large home improvement agency
4	Founding member of trust providing small grants to groups working with people in need from Eastern Europe	Paid consultant working for British Council
5	Helping to run a small independent welfare rights agency	Local authority employee supporting small groups
6	Running an African Caribbean luncheon club Prison visitor Victim support advisor Running black history group	Income maximiser for local authority
7	Chair of older person's forum Support Trainer small groups	Employed by rural community council to support carers
8	Volunteer chair of small organisation supporting small groups	Employed as a development worker
9	Older people's champion Chair of older people's forum Local councillor	None

Table 7 - examples of paid and unpaid roles

## Comments from participants in paid and unpaid work roles

The women were asked how valued they felt they were in their current roles, firstly in their paid employment and then in their unpaid roles. The table below provides a snapshot of examples of the contrasting comments that women made about the differences between their paid and unpaid roles.

Sample Comments on paid work	Sample Comments on unpaid work
<i>I am treated as if I am so stupid I cannot even choose what to wear to work</i>	<i>I have freedom in my unpaid role to use my own skills and knowledge</i>
<i>They (male boss) never telling you that anything that you have done, is done well, even when others give you this feedback'</i>	<i>I stay involved because it is being part of the community and this helps me to feel valued</i>
<i>"Bureaucracy is a huge barrier. There are too many structures and we just can't get through them."</i>	<i>Being part of your community is inspiring and gives confidence to speak out and help people to speak out using their own words</i>

Table 8 - examples of comments about paid and unpaid roles

The whole issue of the different experiences of women in the sector in their paid roles, mainly in larger organisations to those in their unpaid roles in the smaller community groups, is something I was not expecting, as my focus was on their unpaid roles within the small community groups. I would have been better prepared for this topic, if I had understood that the women had these dual roles. However, it was a topic that the women wanted to share. The contrast between the two roles did help to inform the nature of small groups in comparison with the women's experiences in their paid roles for larger organisations. It also helped to identify some of the less positive aspects of the women's experiences. It was only when I came to analyse the data from the focus groups that I realised the importance of these two perspectives.

All of the women in paid employment who voiced a view, felt in some way that they were deskilled and undervalued in their paid roles. The women felt they were often forced by the male managers to comply with, and to take certain approaches to their work, which they were not in agreement with. One example of this was male

managers enforcing or trying to enforce a style of dress on the women that he managed. This experience was shared by nine others in the group in various aspects of their roles. They felt they were dictated to by their male managers and felt they were forced to undertake their roles in a way that they were not comfortable with and that was against their own principles of approach and delivery. An example of this behaviour was that the women felt they knew what the appropriate way to dress was for the work that they were undertaking or what the appropriate approach was to their client groups. This greatly reduced the confidence and feelings of self-worth even for the most skilled of women.

It was not an issue for women in unpaid employment who felt that they had much more freedom to dress how they wanted and to approach their service users and clients in a way that they felt was appropriate, utilising their knowledge and skills to the full. Women in paid employment felt that there were all sorts of barriers for them, which prevented them from moving forward in this world.

*“Bureaucracy is a huge barrier. There are too many structures and we just can’t get through them.”* (employee: local authority)

For those who operated both as paid and unpaid workers, they felt that in their unpaid roles they had more freedom and more control over design and delivery of what they were able to offer. Their unpaid activity however gave them a freedom and had an element of tackling social injustice and inequality. For others they were operating community activities, which gave people more choice and option in their communities and opportunity to socialise and be active.

*I have a belief in the value of working in the community to make it a better place where people can join others.*

(Volunteer community worker)

*As a volunteer, we have experience, skills that we can invest and we can also represent others and give people a voice.*

(volunteer: advice agency)

*There is freedom in being a volunteer. It is here that I feel I can help to tackle injustice.*

(volunteer: multicultural project)

Some women felt that in their paid roles they had to be apolitical and unable to fight for the rights of others. They felt that type of activity would have to be undertaken outside of their paid work. In their paid work, they felt that:

*A box is created for women at work in which they are expected to fit and that box is non-aggressive, compliant. It is a role that is constructed for us and we slot into it whether it is what we want or not.*

(employee; health)

A barrier for the women to feel equal to men in their paid roles was the issue of language

*“Language is a real barrier at meetings. The jargon, the acronyms all make it difficult for us to understand and comment”* (employee local authority)

*“Most of the words are men’s words. For men the sector has become ‘robust’ ‘vibrant’ ‘strategic’ but they are only words.”* (employee housing)

The women also felt that in their paid roles that they were helpless to challenge what was expected of them:

*Women need to be brave to blow the whistle on the men who are misbehaving. (employee health)*

*There is evidence that whistle blowing policies don’t protect you – you still need a reference to move on – and it takes a toll. (employee health)*

The women who held both paid and unpaid roles felt that in their unpaid roles gave them more ‘freedom’. ‘Freedom’ and ‘independence’ were the words mentioned most often when the women spoke of their unpaid roles.

The women identified two main issues between the way women worked and the way men worked. These were motivation and reward.

### **Women and motivation**

The majority of the women both in paid and unpaid roles voiced the views that men and women within the VCS are motivated by very different 'rewards'. The women felt that often their initial motivation was passion, either the passion for a particular topic or the passion to make a difference and effect change:

*I want to spread the value and therapeutic nature of writing and inspiring people so that they can do it.*

(volunteer and activist author)

*My passion is to make sure the voices of people are heard about the services that are available... or not.*

(volunteer in advice agency)

*Being part of your community is inspiring and gives confidence to speak out and help people to speak out using their own words.*

(unpaid community activist)

The women also felt that they wanted to make a difference to others – not just for themselves. If they could bring about improvements either personal or environmental for others, then they had a sense of achievement and satisfaction.

### **Motivation for men**

The women in paid roles noted that men in their organisations had completely different motivations. Men, they felt, were motivated through self-promotion, congratulations from external forces, monetary reward and status.

*Men have different motivations- 'where-ever there is a pile they want to be on top of it, whatever the pile is'. (paid employee, housing)*

Another motivator for men was to make sure that their voices were heard. Meetings were seen to be arenas where women were not listened to and where men's voices took up most of the valuable time. Because of this, the women's ability to influence and have a voice was negligible. Being in a minority at meetings, not being willing to be aggressive in their approach to get space to air their views, were all elements mentioned by the women in who attended meetings outside of their organisations. Six of the women also admitted to feeling quite defeatist in meetings and having a feeling of '*what is the point they never listen anyway?*' This led to those women not speaking at meetings that were dominated by men. Another five women agreed this point.

### **Women's ways of working**

Both in their paid roles and unpaid roles the women commented that women have certain ways of working. All agreed that women are good at working together to solve a problem and that they are good at networking and making allies. This is one of the most important activities.

*We like to work together. We find others who have similar views and stick together (employee local authority)*

### **Men as allies**

The women tried to extend this democratic way of working to their male colleagues, as they did not wish to get into conflict at work. Although a number of the women felt very angry about the way they were treated by some of the men, this did not extend to all men and finding allies among the men was seen to be an essential way through some of the barriers and to get their voices heard.

*It is important to find men who can be allies in meetings to back up what you are saying. (employee, advice service)*

*Sometimes I look for a man I can trust outside of a meeting and see if he will back me up. (paid employee local authority)*

## **Why women get involved**

A number of women who were in paid roles saw their 'escape' in also being involved in unpaid roles. Given the fact that for women in unpaid roles there was often little monetary reward, their contribution is often invisible and undervalued and they have difficulty getting their voices heard, it was necessary to ask the question of the women, why they wanted to be involved in the small community groups in their communities and why they stay involved.

There was strong element of women having a passion for the issues that they were involved in and a strong sense of injustice for other people who they felt did not have equal life chances.

*Belief and passion got me into this work ...I got here from a sense of injustice.  
(volunteer domestic violence project)*

There was an element that some women had their own personal experience of the issues that they were involved in, and now they wished to help others, who had a similar experience.

*I got involved because of personal interest and how the issue had affected me personally some years ago. (unpaid volunteer domestic violence project)*

One woman had lived on one of the most deprived estates in the south of the region. She was a lone parent and her opportunities were limited. However, she was given the chance to access a degree course, which she took, and it opened her horizons. Now she wanted to work with others to help them with their education and aspirations.

*Living in a poor, deprived area, I felt voiceless and powerless. I was given the opportunity to study for a degree and when I completed, I felt a real debt of gratitude and wanted to give something back. (part time paid worker and a volunteer community activist)*

## **How women get involved**

Most of the women's involvement in their unpaid roles had started locally and in a 'small' way with one thing leading to another.

*When it comes to volunteering, you 'dip your toe in the water and the next minute you are up to your neck!' You say yes to one thing and then.....*

*(unpaid volunteer)*

and

*I sat around a kitchen table with a group of women and we thought what can we do... (unpaid volunteer talking about how she set a up a community group with other women)*

Fifteen of the women had got involved initially in a very small way. They identified a problem and they came up with a solution to tackle the problem mainly by setting up, small VCS groups, often with others. By working with other women and having a passion for what they were doing, things had grown, and they had stayed involved.

## **What keeps the women involved?**

For most of the women, their motivation had little to do with money or status but more about acting as 'change agents' and catalysts to enable something significant and powerful to develop from small grains of ideas. While the women felt that as a woman, they were struggling to make themselves heard and visible in their paid roles, outside of those roles they were eager to make sure that others were given opportunities.

There was also a strong element of doing something positive for their communities.

*I stay involved because it is being part of the community and this helps me to feel valued. (unpaid volunteer activist)*

*Being part of your community is inspiring and gives confidence to speak out and help people to speak out using their own words. (unpaid volunteer activist)*

The women themselves got a great deal from seeing the difference that they were making. They were not looking for praise from others, status or monetary reward. They got their reward from seeing the difference that their involvement had brought.

*The joy of seeing people develop and grow. Having a chance to make a difference and just occasionally there is a glint of light, of success, of change!  
(volunteer: women's project)*

*To change the world, to be a catalyst for change. There is more to life than money (volunteer activist)*

The women themselves were using the words of alchemy. The desire to bring about change and to make something that is good, far reaching and of great benefit was strong for the women within their unpaid roles. There was a real feeling that women were using their own skills, knowledge and time through the community to bring change and transformation for others.

At the end of both focus groups, the women were invited to contribute to the 'mountain of influence' and a place sticker representing themselves at the level at which they felt those in power, valued their interventions. When the women placed themselves on the mountain initially, they placed most of their interventions at the base of the mountain. They felt they were very knowledgeable in a hands-on practical way but this was not valued. Their interventions were often viewed by those 'higher up the mountain' as 'grassroots', starting not just at the bottom, but below the surface of the ground where the roots exist. Roots they felt were one of the most important and essential aspects of a plant, but not valued or visible. The more they discussed this with each other and reflected on their situation, the less acceptable they found this.

*we really should have all the power because we have the knowledge but for some reason we are not heard or valued. (volunteer activist)*

The women who were unpaid agreed with the paid women on this point that their ability to have a say and influence at a wider level was seriously limited.

*Because we are volunteers, we are not paid and they think we are not worth anything.*

*(volunteer; community group)*

As the discussions continued, in the northern focus group, the women decided to take control. They took the drawing of the mountain off the wall and turned it upside down, so that their interventions and activities appeared at the top of the mountain

*If you turn the 'mountain' of influence upside down so that all those skilled, knowledgeable women that are on the bottom are now on the top then this is how it should be" (volunteer; women's group)*

### **Social capital and conflict**

There are aspects of the focus group results, which are relevant to social capital, and the place of conflict in small women led VCSOs. Social capital will be further discussed in Chapter 5.

### **Summary of findings from focus groups**

- From the focus groups, I was able to derive more information about the very wide range of roles that women were involved in within their communities.
- I had not expected to have the views of both paid and unpaid workers but these views from the paid workers provided a valuable insight and contrast between the two roles. It also provided some wider indicators about the position of women in communities.
- The women within the focus groups who were paid workers did reveal a certain anger and frustration at the way they were treated and subordinate to men who they felt did not have the same level of skills or knowledge. This was not so apparent in the women who were in unpaid roles.
- There were topics that needed further consideration such as what other indicators might there be that led women to become involved in activities for which there was little if any financial reward, recognition of the value of the contribution or status?

- More in-depth data was necessary to look at where the initiation of the women's desire to be involved in their communities might have started from and what motivated them and kept them involved.
- The differences between the unpaid roles and women who are employees was apparent in the focus groups. The focus of this study is on women's involvement in small voluntary organisations. These are unpaid roles.

It was from these main issues within the focus groups that I formulated the questions for the 12 face-to-face interviews.

## **Stage Three - Interviews**

### **Description of interviewees**

In the third phase of my research, twelve women interviewees were selected who were experienced in community work. They were women known to me through my work with the Foundation. They were all involved at the time of interview in small community groups throughout the South West Region. Their narrative voices provided an exploration of their own perceptions of and reflections on the community work that they had been involved in. The interviews were semi-structured and focussed on a selection of the issues highlighted through the focus groups. The questions asked were;

- how did you first become involved in community activities?
- what motivated you to become involved?
- what community activities had you undertaken in the past?
- what activities were you currently involved in?
- what kept you involved?

Additional related questions were asked according to the women's responses. The second round of interviews took place with a further six women four years later to ensure that there was continuity and relevance to the original interviews that was not damaged by time.

<b>Interviewee</b>	<b>Paid Role/s</b>	<b>Unpaid Role/s</b>
<b>Alison</b>	Foster parent	Running a small community group to support people for people from Black and Ethnic Minority communities and their families. (F)  Producing a Community newsletter for the Black and Minority Ethnic Communities (F)
<b>Mary</b>	Community worker supporting small community groups in a rural community	Chair of a local community groups offering wide community services
<b>Betty</b>	Illustrator for a small environmental organisation (F)	Local councillor campaigning against genetically modified food
<b>Caroline</b>	Running a refuge and main service deliverer for women survivors of Domestic abuse (F)	Setting up summer camps for 'disadvantaged' families Campaigning against nuclear weapons
<b>Joan</b>	Previous in nursing but resigned due to ill health. No paid roles at time of interview.	Chair of and prime deliverer of community services within a small community group in small seaside town in a rural area (F)
<b>Barbara</b>	Director of small Cancer support charity (F) Author	Community writer Community Performer
<b>Kari</b>	Running Community Group to Support and training for ex-offenders (F)	Previous involvement in small community group supporting ex-offenders Involvement in supporting community members in an urban area
<b>Rosa</b>	Running a Community Group to support ex-offenders(F)	Previous involvement in small community group to support ex-offenders
<b>Miriam</b>	X	Leader of a Multi faith community forum (F)
<b>Lucy</b>	X	Chair of older people's Forum (F)
<b>Bella</b>	X	Chair of senior residents' association(F)
<b>Dot</b>	X	Chair of local community centre and main deliverer of service (F)

Table 9 - Community involvement of participants at time of interview of all interviewees

**(PLEASE NOTE: an (F) indicates the woman concerned was a 'Founder' or 'Co-Founder' of the group)**

The ages of the women ranged from 30 years to 88 years old. The interviewees themselves had been involved in a wide range of many aspects of community work for from 2 to 50 years. The activities that I was aware that women had been involved in before I interviewed them was their involvement in small community groups. I had no prior knowledge of their backgrounds. Their involvement ranged from supporting women survivors; forums for older people to have a voice; supporting for people suffering from cancer; environmental campaigning; supporting prisoners and ex-offenders; support for homeless people and people suffering from mental health issues; community development; support for people from BME communities and more as indicated in the table above.

The women interviewed were often undertaking paid employment in some community work related post alongside their involvement in small community groups that was often not paid. All of the women, except one, were involved in community groups where they had been the founding member.

### **Difference between Community Action and Volunteering**

Many issues raised in these findings will be further analysed and discussed in Chapter 5. By way of introduction, it is however important to identify where the women who were part of this research and participants in this literature are placed. In some ways, the focus groups helped to clarify this. Women are involved in their work in communities through a wide range of activities. It is important at this stage to differentiate this aspect of women's involvement from the traditional action of volunteering. It is true that the women were often giving their time to their community work without payment, which could be classed as volunteering. However, it became clear that they were not involved in simply donating their time and involvement free of cost to a larger agency such as Citizens Advice Bureau, the Women's Institute or some local arm of a larger charity. Their involvement was completely different to that expected of communities through the 'Big Society' (Cameron, 2010, Norman, 2010). The Big Society is said to be about people making a contribution to their communities by filling gaps left by statutory provision. Individuals would still remain in a world that is moulded and designed by forces outside of their control, moulded by need as identified by others. The type of activities expected and demanded by the

Big Society are those identified to reinforce the world as prescribed by external agencies. This could be the government or the local authority.

The activities that the majority of participants were involved in, I realised on reflection, were not traditional volunteering. That is not to diminish the power and value of volunteering, but there is something very different about many of the small groups who operate below the radar and the women involved in them. They are not trying to maintain the *status quo*. They are trying to create something that is different, that is unrestricted and has a strong element that of bringing about change of some sort. Whether this is change for individuals, change for communities or change for the world as a whole, women describe it as something quite different to that area covered in mainstream volunteering. Their desire to make a difference and bring about change is considered in more detail later in this chapter

## **Background to community involvement**

### **Influence of family members**

I had wanted to discover what had brought the women to become involved in their communities. I did not ask specific questions about their families, but a number of the women focussed on the influence of parents without any prompting. For them certain family members had been quite a strong influence on their lives.

Alison's family had experienced difficult times. She was very aware that her parents were quite different to other children's parents. Her mother was German and had moved to Ireland after the war. Like many people after the war she had suffered from the lack of food and amenities in Germany. She was also quite alone, being in not only a foreign country, but one of the countries that Germany had been in fighting against during the war.

*My mother left Germany during the Second World War. She had lived there with my grandfather in the industrial part of Germany. He was a miner. She left Germany when she was 16 and I can remember her talking about the great hunger and lack of food that there was in Germany at this time. There were very few German people in this country after the war and the German*

*families tended to settle in Ireland. My mother met my father shortly after moving. He was a passé Indian in the RAF.*

Alison

Her parents were a very unusual union at that time and Alison found herself as the only mixed race pupil in her school.

Alison's mother was also very unusual. She had a very strong sense of social injustice and being in domestic service posts. She had informally supported a number of domestic workers who like her were in a country that was not their country of origin, and who were being forced to work in difficult and unacceptable conditions. Alison was witness to all this and clearly remembered it.

Alison's mother became particularly involved in a National Union of Public Employees (NUPE) 'She was one of the first one of the women to be actively involved in this way and helped to build up the local branch' (Alison). This was at a time when the 'unemployment rate was high' and Alison observed her mother's involvement in a number of demonstrations against the National Front and People's March for Jobs. Not only did Alison observe this but also her mother took her along to the demonstrations with her. Alison could remember hundreds of people coming into the city in which she lived and her mother providing support for them and refreshments so that they could continue with the marches. It was not just people from her own town but 'wings' from other towns and people were all coming together to demonstrate. Alison was able to witness first hand collective action.

*There were a number of demonstrations and my mum became involved in these demos taking me along with her. There was a certain amount of National Front activity around at that time and I can remember them getting involved at demos. I remember the anti-abortion demonstration and the People's March for Jobs.*

*(Alison)*

Joan who later went into the caring profession, before starting on her unpaid community work, had a father who was involved as local councillor and as a child, she was witness to the political discussions within her family.

Betty's father was also into politics.

*When I was a child I had a very political Dad. He's retired now. He used to talk politics. I started writing in the local paper when I was 11. It's been there since I was a child...my Dad always encouraged me to be critical, so I've always had that approach to things, always challenging what I hear. It's always been there... (Betty)*

Five of the women talked about how a member of their family brought some kind of political or community awareness into their lives.

The women, while living through different eras do have some shared experiences. Some of them have experience of community action and political activity early in their childhood through the influence of a family member or the community around them. Many of the women as identified are initially looking to 'change the world' but as their lives progress, changing the lives of individuals replaces their desire to change the world but the desire for change is one of their motivational forces throughout their lives.

### **What did the women mean when they mentioned the word 'community'?**

The women in their interviews mentioned the word 'community' 111 times. There was no attempt by the women to define what they meant by 'community'. It was accepted as a word that had a meaning that needed no further interpretation and that it would be understood by the interviewer, depending on the context in which the word is used. The context appears to define the meaning. This topic of community will be re visited in the analysis, but as it is in the community where the women's activities takes place it is important for us to identify initially what community is in terms of the women's understanding of the word. Many of the women used the word community as a prefix. Within the interviews, there was a long list of words that all had the word community at the beginning. The inference was that these were

activities that took place in the community so for example there was community education; community learning; community transport. The other way that the prefix was commonly used was to indicate that the activity was 'about the community' or to 'benefit the community'. So there is 'community development', 'community accountancy', 'community groups', 'community living', community policeman, community shop.

In some instances, the prefix 'community' is referring to geographical place, so, for example, the prisoners that Kari works with, once they have served their time they are returned to 'their community', but this could equally be to identify their fellow offenders or ex-offenders. The difference can only be identified through its context. For Bella and Lucy, the community that they refer to when they are younger has now been redefined because of their age.

*Life has got more difficult to help people to have a community, particularly when you are older. The older you are the more your community is a locality. You lose the ability to move further away you become more restricted in the path. It is important to have local people involved and make friends when you are older and friends that are supportive.*

Bella

Mary and Joan, who both live in rural areas, speak of 'rural communities' rather than a singular geographical community. They see rural communities missing resources and assistance going to the larger urban areas and that is an imbalance that they wish to address.

The word community used as very specific noun is that used by Alison and Caroline to refer to what is also known as 'commune' a place of collective living. Both Alison and Caroline refer several times to the communes that they reside in and have wanted to reside in as 'communities' or 'the community'. Here they are referring very specifically to communes.

In some instances, the community becomes an entity in its own right with a life of its own, so people talk about wanting to put something back into the community. There

is 'community spirit', a 'sense of community', 'community initiative' all of which could do with clearer definition, but which never the less, still do give people a sense of meaning, without exact definition.

Communities can also be owned by people; so Joan and Mary both refer to the fact that they wish to help communities but have to remember that the community belongs to others; it is not 'their community'.

*I think communities are always changing and it will always change and people will want different things so I mean its listening and continually listening and seeing just how you can involve them rather than doing to for them so that they can have their own input into it because it's their Community ... it isn't only ours.*

Joan

### **Communities of Interest**

There are also communities of interest. Only Barbara and Alison refer to these Barbara was writing a book about the 'mining community' where the miners' wives supported their community in South Wales following on from the miners' strikes. This has the sense of both a community of interest i.e. miners and a community of geography. Barbara was also using the terminology to refer to the geographical communities that contained the miners. Alison talks about how she was supported by the 'lesbian community' when she 'came out' as gay in her twenties.

*I went on to North East Poly to do cultural studies. Much of what I studied was about women's issues and feminism. Most of the people who taught me were white middle class women ...however I did meet a very good bunch of women and came out as lesbian...I could not have done this without that community's support*

### **Sense of Community**

Another element that the women mentioned from their childhoods was a strong caring element either from their families or from their local community. Barbara lived

in a town in South Wales. Her mother and aunts brought her up with her father being absent.

*I was brought up by women and they were all community spirited....there was strong sense of caring in our community.*

Barbara

Her own mother was always helping people, getting their medicine running errands for them. Mary had a strong but caring mother. 'She was a very strong woman and she raised us with a rod of iron but she cared about us...' Joan's mother died when she was four ....'she had a heart attack and that was unexpected...we were a close community and people were very good'.

### **The Face of adversity in childhood**

Several of the women mentioned an issue or issues in their earlier life, which had led to them feeling 'outside of the norm'. Only one parent had brought some up.

Barbara's father had left her mother. Her mother subsequently had some very hard times

*My mum worked in the paper bag factory. she absolutely loved it...she had done half her training to be a nurse but she could not afford the rest. I came from a single parent family so life was very much a struggle. I spent about a year in a children's home when I was young because my mum had a nervous breakdown, so I know what it was like to be on the end of being treated in a disrespectful way...so I always felt great sympathy for people who I would say are in a very vulnerable group.*

Barbara

As previously stated, Joan's mother died when she was four. Her father brought up her brother and Joan single-handed:

*I suppose I was disadvantaged.... I didn't actually feel different...this is how it is ... we had all the normal struggles.... well although I said it didn't make a difference it did ... because we did not have a mother we were pretty poor and*

*life was hard and Dad had to work all the time. Mothering Sunday and things like that don't even come into my vocabulary...*

More than 50% of the women at some stage in the interview complained about being frustrated by lack of educational achievement holding them back. The women do vary in age range from just over 30 to more than 80 years old. So it is important to remember the time in history that they are referring to and their educational experiences probably span at least 30 years.

The two women in their 80s, Bella and Lucy, were brought up in a time when women were not expected to have careers therefore their education was not important. They existed in a time 'when we were expected to be at home with the kids and have our husband's tea on the table' (Lucy).

*Well I was one of those women who did not go out to work. Firstly, having babies and so on. Don't forget we are historic if you are over 80 these days.  
(Bella)*

However, it was not just the women who were over 80 and historic who felt that this sort of life was mapped out for them. Mary, who is 30 years younger, had the opportunity to go back and get a degree in her 50s. Her husband was not keen at all in her going back to university. Alison had been a chef all her working life and had looked after her son before that. To go to university in her 50s she had to make her second husband a promise:

*I made him a promise that he would always have supper on the table. Women have historically been in the home....it is still very much the same culture here  
(Mary lived in a rural area)*

Barbara hated school and from an early age would always prefer to be out helping other people. This limited her career options and she found herself going from factory job to garage attendant to hairdresser.

*I think I became very angry. I was very angry. I felt cheated. I felt as though my education had not been a source of concern because it didn't matter if I did very well at school. It did not matter if I did not well in any career because eventually I would get married and I would have children it actually didn't matter. I got very angry that people were conditioned and were passing on this conditioning to their girl children and I felt as though women should know.*

*Barbara*

For Alison her lack of qualifications was a great hindrance to her being able to get the jobs that she wanted:

*I did a course in public administration but did not do too well. I felt really stupid as many of these people that I knew had degrees. My lack of a degree however was stopping from getting the jobs that I wanted most.*

*Alison*

Alison had had several attempts to get the qualifications that she needed, but because she felt that she had achieved very little at school a degree was elusive.

Joan felt that her schooling when she was younger had not been seen as important as that of her brother.

*I didn't do very well at school .....My brother went to grammar school and I only went to secondary modern.*

*Joan*

She also indicated that really for women, their life was mapped out for them

*Even at school it was boys are going into the dockyard or the services, whereas girls just had a basic education You went into a shop or went to Pitman's and did shorthand*

*Joan*

Two of the other women, Caroline and Alison, while not mentioning any adversity in their childhood, both appeared to have left home and started out on their lifetime journeys at a very early age. Both were seeking an alternative life.

*I liked alternative things not being in the mainstream it was good fun... I stayed in the commune a year*

Caroline

Caroline moved into a commune when she was 17, and vulnerability of her leaving home at this age does come through in her narrative. *'We had communal showers but it wasn't all orgies'*. Caroline was however shocked to see a young man coming out of the bedroom of an older woman half dressed:

*There were lot of screwed up professionals there who couldn't deal with life...there were also people from ETA (This is Euskadi Ta Askatasuna - a Basque Terrorist organisation) ...you had people on the fringe...people who could not deal with life...I was so idealistic and naïve...*

Caroline moved out of the commune and got married at 18. At the time of interview Caroline had six children. *We were poor. We did not have any money and my partner had a breakdown.* Caroline ended up looking after her husband and the children but she also lost one her children, one of her twins, to a tragic accident aged three. It was an accident that haunted Caroline whenever she smelt air freshener in the refuge *because they had air freshener at the funeral parlour where her daughter's body lay.*

Barbara's husband also had difficulties with drink early in their partnership, but as a couple, they moved into a new life with their children in a market town. Barbara had identified her husband as the man she would stay with all her life as soon as she saw him, and they had been together for 33 years at the time of the interview. Both Barbara and Caroline were complimentary about their husbands and how they had supported them through their community involvement. Barbara's further challenge was that she developed breast cancer at a young age (40s) and had a double mastectomy.

*My partner supported me all the way through this and through my work with the charity*

Kari's husband stayed home to look after their three children while she worked and was supportive during this early family period but they later divorced and she found herself struggling as a single parent.

Joan worked for years as a nurse but eventually had what she saw as burn out:

*The sad bit is that you don't notice you're burning out. I just walked out one day and I never came back - Joan*

It is important to remember that none of these women, except Bella and Lucy, the two older women, knew each other. None of the women knew each other's history. As the researcher who had identified these women as research participants because of their involvement in small community groups. I did not know their history. They had been selected because of the involvement in small community groups where they were taking leading roles in both delivery and for some, management. There are however similarities in their backgrounds and similarities in their life experiences that were only revealed through interview and analysis. Similarities in their backgrounds included:

- A number have a family member who had an influence in their childhood through their own interest in politics and their own desires for social justice.
- Nine of the women (75%) had major challenges in their childhoods including loss of a parent and/or financial deprivation.
- These challenges continue in later life and five (42%) do express the views that their own personal experiences have enabled them to have greater understanding of the difficulties that others might be feeling.

These life experiences appear to build their skills and their knowledge for the paths that they have set themselves, which is to bring about what they see as change for the better.

### **Changing the world / direct action**

Five of the original interviewees and three of the later interviewees (66%) mentioned wanting to 'change the world' from a very early age as one of the motivations for their activities in their community and beyond. For most, wanting to change the world started at a very early age and was based on their perceptions of an aspect of inequality or social justice that they had observed. Alison, having been involved with direct action through her mother's involvement, started a group to help with raising funds for various charities.

*There was a strong feeling amongst us that we wanted to do something to change the world and this was our way of starting on that.*

Alison

Caroline also had a strong urge to 'change the world-to make it a better place'.

*Yes, I thought I could make things different. When you're sixteen you know what it's like, you're radical.*

Betty had a politically involved father who used to have discussions with her about the world when she was younger. At college, she instigated a sit-in against conditions at the college and the way the students were being treated.

*I thought it would make a difference I was only 15 or 16 it was my first taste of collective action how people could change things by just saying 'No Listen to us' We should have a voice and things did change we got a new principal with a much better approach.*

Betty

There is a difference between the activities of the younger women and the two women in their 90s. Both had lived through the war and Bella had experienced being

pulled out of a traditional home life where women did not go out to work, to doing service in the Fleet Air Arm. After training in technology, she was given a post of repairing and fitting radio sets and radar on the planes. Having witnessed the war Bella was highly critical of the war, which she saw as 'being run by testosterone charged men'.

*I was technically outraged at the deaths and the end results....we were bombing Dresden- on all sides it was not just our losses it was 9 million people across the world.. What a way to run the world I thought as an arrogant 21 years old...what a way to run the world.... There must be a better way- we have to find a better way*

*Bella*

Bella continued with her search to find 'a better way to way to run the world', taking part in a fact-finding mission to Russia and the US. Most of her paid working life was as a social / community worker in various roles but outside these roles, she continued with her campaigning, mainly with CND to ensure that there was future for her children.

*I joined peace movement .... I joined CND and joined the rally in 1958-I am still a member and campaign against the arms trade these wider political interest have been with me right through my life.*

*Bella*

The women such as Alison and Betty, who started community action early in their lives, had a sense of rejecting some aspect of the world that they were being asked to live in and wanting to seek out a better way - a different way to lead their lives.

### **Greenham Common**

Given that none of these women knew each other and that their ages varied from women in their 30s to women in their 80s, it is significant that Greenham Common featured in the histories of five of the women (42%). The Women's Peace Movement in the 1980s was seeking non-violent solutions to social conflict. Bella, after setting

up a mother and toddler group became increasingly concerned about global issues at the time with a concern for future generations.

*worrying about atom bomb testing and our children's bones, we set up a local group to voice protest. I had been on a march from Aldermaston against the Atom Bomb when I saw Greenham Common women...*

*Well I saw that it was a protest against war by women who valued life and not these testosterone games that men play. It was extremely dangerous you can't ignore that it was terrifying... Women had much more worry about future generations and life on the planet.*

Lucy

Caroline, Lucy, Bella and Betty were all concerned about the environment in which they were living and the danger of the existence of nuclear arms. They all became involved in some way with the women at Greenham Common to show solidarity for the cause. Caroline used to lie in front of the vehicles carrying the warheads. This involvement was not age dependent and range from interviewees such as Bella who had young children and became involved taking their babies along with them. For the younger women they were in their teens when they took part and would have witnessed the 'success' of direct and collective action.

The women between had extensive experience in their past of being involved in various forms of collective action which were of fairly high prominence at the time.

Table 10 shows the interviewees experienced involvement in past community action.

<b><u>Interviewee</u></b>	<b><u>Campaigning</u></b>	<b><u>Setting up alternative solutions</u></b>
<b>Alison</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Young Socialist Party</li> <li>• People's March for jobs (1981)</li> <li>• Pink Elephants: campaign for women to claim unemployment benefit 1980s</li> <li>• NALGO</li> <li>• Out Write:1982-1989 feminist newspaper</li> <li>• Lesbian BME group tackling Domestic Violence</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Out Write:1982-1989 feminist newspaper</li> <li>• Lesbian BME group tackling Domestic Violence</li> <li>• Community accountancy Project 1989</li> <li>• International lesbian and gay people of colour conference 1991</li> <li>• National women's solidarity movement: Testimony of women</li> <li>• Support group for BME families</li> <li>• Director of Race Equality Council</li> </ul>
<b>Betty</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sit-in in local college</li> <li>• Art College involved in Politics in Cork in Ireland</li> <li>• Campaigning against genetically modified foods</li> <li>• Various Communes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teaching in alternative environments</li> <li>• Books Upstairs: Alternative community book shop_ anti-war books</li> <li>• Training people with learning disabilities in Drama</li> <li>• Small group delivering alternative therapies</li> <li>• Education otherwise for children who needed alternative education</li> </ul>
<b>Caroline</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• CND</li> <li>• Cruise Watch</li> <li>• Embrace the base (Greenham)</li> <li>• Poll Tax campaign</li> <li>• Campaign to stop the closure of local maternity hospital</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Church summer camp annually for over 150 women and children</li> <li>• Support for women survivor</li> <li>• Refuge for women survivors</li> </ul>
<b>Lucy</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• CND</li> <li>• Women's Voices</li> <li>• Greenham Common</li> <li>• Forum on Ageing</li> <li>• Campaign to save community centre for older people</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Setting up mother and toddler groups</li> <li>• Setting up play groups</li> <li>• Helped to establish University of the Third Age</li> <li>• Chair of older people's forum to give older people a voice</li> </ul>
<b>Bella</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• CND</li> <li>• Greenham Common</li> <li>• Women for Peace</li> <li>• Forum for Ageing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mother and toddler group</li> <li>• Action groups against war and nuclear armaments</li> <li>• Residents group in a car village</li> </ul>

Table 10 – Involvement in community action

### **Looking for an alternative world**

Several of the women as well as being involved in political campaigning, collective action and direct action also sought other ways to create a different world to the world that was all around them. Two of the women, Caroline and Betty sought alternative ways of living by joining communes. For both this started at a very early age 17 for Ann W and 16 for Caroline.

*When I was 17, I moved into a commune for a year. It was fun but I was naïve, and 17, and a lot of it used to go over my head. I liked alternative things not being in the mainstream*

*Caroline*

Alison also tried commune living at an early age briefly and then returned to the commune movement after a break of being a teacher and set up alternative education structures in a rural commune.

*I've always been interested in communes and the potential of communities - living that idealistic utopian life alternative communities ...*

Barbara was not able to find paid employment that she could remain with, and created her own alternative community when she moved to another area. Her aunts made it possible for her to move to a rundown cottage in Somerset that they had inherited. Barbara was married by then and had a small child. Once in the house, being bored by domestic chores and childcare, she set up a small residents' association. This involved a group of women coming together, sharing childcare, sharing cooking and domestic duties and being creative.

*I started to get involved, I helped to start a residents' association, which was unheard of years ago, and there was also a group of women in my street who got very friendly. We were all fairly young women there were four of us and we started to do community cooking it was absolutely fantastic.... We'd hand our dishes in to whoever was cooking that day and we'd have our food delivered to us. Just one of us would cook for all four families that were involved .... I'm just so pleased that my children were brought up in the way.*

Although Barbara's residents' association was the first one in the town to have this sharing ethos, the market town in which that Barbara started her community work, 30 years later, has now gone back to the ethos of 'community life'. It has designated itself as a 'sharing town' with people bringing possessions and equipment to the 'sharing shop' and there are 'sharing cars' that people can book to prevent them

having to have their own cars. The people who are setting up the sharing scheme are of an age where they could be the children of Barbara and the other mothers who were involved in her first attempts at a 'sharing world.'

Caroline, having had a difficult time herself focussed on other women who were in difficulties. She set up a refuge and within that refuge worked with the women to establish their own rules, ways of behaving, and ways of running the refuge. It was through the smaller women's resident group within that refuge that I had got to know Caroline. In many ways, she broke all the rules that were imposed upon the refuge by outside agencies. Caroline herself offered all sorts of support and help to the women that were way beyond her job role.

*We really we created our own community in the refuge and ran it the way we liked.*

Caroline

There were rules that they were supposed to adhere in the refuge, but when asked about those, once she understood what was being asked, she said all those rules were in the 'bollocks policy folder' that never came off the shelf. There is evidence that the women's involvement in community groups outside of their paid employment gave them the opportunity to create a world in which they felt more comfortable, in which they could use their skills and knowledge and offer services and help in ways that they felt were appropriate. This involvement enabled them to feel that, even though they might not be changing the world they were making a real difference to the lives of people in their communities.

Alison for example refers to her and her friends at school collecting money for a charity because they *wanted to change the world*. Later when organising a women's event, she says:

*I just felt that if you touched one person if you changed something for one person that is making a difference you have made a difference.*

Alison

And again:

*I will carry on wanting to make a difference that won't change my definition of difference might...I'm now looking for the ripple effect.*

Alison

Eight of the women (66%), as they describe it, were involved either in direct campaigning and / or collective action in their younger years and then followed a pathway through their own passion and belief to starting up community groups which they believed could bring about change for individuals in communities. Barbara for example was hoping that her book, which focussed on a woman's difficulties facing domestic chores at her home, would have some influence

*I'm conscious of that I may have influenced women when I wrote 'happy as a dead cat' I thought if this just changes one women's life I will be absolutely delighted*

Then when she set up the cancer support group

*I just thought if this saved one woman's sanity I will be thrilled*

Kari and Rosa Talk about how they wanted to change the lives of offenders

*there comes a time when people really do want to change and its very much about having a relationship with someone they can trust as opposed to a statutory organisation which they have to trust themselves to but don't give themselves completely. Then they find they can expect change and that's where the reward comes for us*

This desire to bring about change either to the world or to individuals in communities runs throughout the interviews and is one of the driving forces behind the motivation of the women.

## **How women work**

One aspect that has come over quite clearly in virtually all of the interviews is the way that women become stronger by working together. This was also mentioned in the focus groups. Initially when the women are looking to change the world they turn to other women for support, encouragement and practical assistance. They look to help each other or look for other women who will join in with their activities, whether it is in collective action, or simply working with each other in the small community groups.

Lucy felt that women work together when they have an interest in 'their locality'. Bella indicated that in her younger days as a woman looking after babies she sought out other women in the same situation. As a woman she would *see the need in the community and do something about it*. Caroline indicated that in the refuge women would support each other. One example of this is a woman who needed health tests in order to persuade her to go and be tested others went along to have to the same test with her.

*There's something about people getting together and sharing*  
Caroline

When Barbara was writing her community play about breast cancer she looked to enlist other women's support.

*I said well I'm going to do a monologue about breast cancer and she said well if you make it a dialogue we'll do it together...then we got someone that I knew (a woman) who was a director who I worked with in prison and got her involved and we devised and wrote ..... that was really exciting*

Talking about one of women's groups that she was involved in Alison said:

*.. it does feel possible to make a difference. it does feel positive to bring people(women) together to change things to build on that support it's interesting .... we were trying to get various Community initiatives together particularly around self-help for survivors of sexual abuse and survivors of the mental health system. It was fairly self-help stuff rather than anything else.*

Alison

Small community groups, through their independence and the lack of requirements placed on them, are of great benefit to the women who are free to develop and deliver services in the way they see as the best way to do this. The women in effect through the community groups create their own world of support and help for others in communities. They have a passion for what they are doing. For some, such as Barbara and Joan, this may come from their own personal experience. Having children might interrupt and hinder a career in paid employment, but for a number of the women, the space and connections have given them an opportunity. An opportunity to meet other women and work with them. Opportunity without the pressure of paid work to do the things that they feel are right and to deliver services and opportunities to others in communities in a way that they see as the way that best suits peoples' need. As can be seen from the focus groups in paid employment the women are fulfilling a role that is designed by others. It is often not the women who are in charge of the paid employment or who have designed the systems, the measurements and the accountability. It is not the women who have developed the policies or the funding streams.

Another aspect, which was also present in the interviews, was that the type of activities the women were involved in should not be confused with traditional volunteering. Their involvement was very different to traditional volunteering.

### **Women and Community Groups**

At the time that I interviewed the women, they had all had quite a lengthy history of community involvement and wanting to change the world through direct action, collective action and campaigning, as can be identified through their histories. Five of the women, Mary, Caroline and later Barbara, Kari and Rosa, when her posts moved into a paid post from the groups that they had established, they were trying bring about change through their paid employment. For the remainder of the women, their community action outside of their paid employment enabled them to feel that they were making a difference. It was not the lofty aspiration of changing the world, but definitely changing the world for the better for the individuals in their local communities. Providing an example of a particular or complex situation or process through the use of a case study or a pen portrait can help us to reflect more fully on the people or situation involved, informing a model which they can be seen to

represent and providing a richness which can lead to a better understanding (May, 1997). The following pen portrait shows the journey of one of the women, which led to her setting up a community group to support people with cancer. This was selected to provide an overview of how the women's journey to community action occurred and it exemplifies the type of journeys that the women in the study experienced.

### **Pen portrait - Barbara**

The pen portrait highlights the pathway setting up a community group through Barbara's experience.

#### **Pen portrait – Barbara**

As mentioned previously Barbara came from a single parent family of 'working class background. She had not been an 'achiever' in school and felt that her education, because she was a girl, was not given any great attention by those who looked after her. When younger it was her own desire to help people in the local community, which came before any thoughts of her future career. This carried on throughout her life.

Barbara's initial experience of setting up a community group came from her experience as a mother. At home and feeling the 'drudgery' of looking after husband, small children and babies she eased the 'pain' of this by establishing a community cooking and sharing group, which had the effect of giving women more free time to develop their own ideas and activities. Certain household tasks such as cooking and childcare were shared throughout the group that she established meaning that the women had to cook for the whole group and their family one night per week. They also shared other household tasks to free up their time. During this time Barbara found an old typewriter and started to write a book about her experiences as a mother. She hid the typewriter under a tea towel until one of the other women spotted it and asked her what she was doing. She had hidden it because she felt the idea of her writing a book would be ridiculed, as her spelling and writing were so bad. The other women however were full of praise for her courage and added support and encouragement, which helped her to continue and which, enabled Barbara to write the manuscript for her book in just three days.

However, it took her several weeks to type it up on her old typewriter. She described trying to find a publishing house '*Like pinning a tale on a donkey*'. Eventually she came across the Women's Press who advertised that they published work by 'working class women'. With the encouragement from the other women, Barbara sent off her transcripts and wrote the following letter in support of her manuscript.

*Dear Women's Press*

*Rumour has it that you support working class women writers. Well here is the chance to put your money where your mouth is.*

*Barbara*

Much to her amazement they wrote back saying they would be delighted. They wrote back saying 'come hell and bankruptcy court we are determined to publish this novel'.

Despite the success of the book, which went to top of the alternative book bestsellers list for four weeks and stayed in print for 16 years, Barbara's feeling of 'challenge' because her lack of education stayed with her.

*I was so excited I was also very scared. I was scared because I was still very under confident I still couldn't feel that I was articulate. I was also not academic.*

However, the book did change Barbara's life and she was able to do a number of different jobs that would not have been open to her before such as resident writer in a women's prison.

She began to see her lack of education in more positive light as it could give others hope through her example.

*I don't have any qualifications but it gave me the confidence to realise that I'm OK without qualification there are other women around who have*

*amazing skills but because they don't have qualifications to back up those skills they don't get the opportunities or jobs and careers that they could do very easily standing on their heads.*

Barbara liked being able to help the women in the prison who she felt really, like herself, had had difficult lives in the outside world but again the paid role took its toll on Barbara:

*Prison is not a nice place to be in it really is a hellhole. A lot of them were without their children ...you do get worn down by the prison service. It is a very difficult environment to work in you would not believe the amount of rigmarole to get through to do anything in a prison. If you imagine how difficult it is to run a writing group, you imagine doing that inside a prison it's about a 100 times harder*

The transformation of Barbara through her success at writing is mentioned here because a few years after starting her work in the challenging environment of the prison, a new challenge faced Barbara when she discovered she had advanced breast cancer and had to have a double mastectomy. Even in hospital, Barbara was trying to work out how she could prevent people from going through the same experiences as her, on their own.

*Being told that you have cancer is really, really scary I have never come across anything so scary in my life.*

Barbara was in hospital with another woman and the two of them, without any experience, started to ask other women how they could set up a group to support people when they first had their diagnosis of cancer.

*I didn't know how to set it up. I phoned a friend of mine who knew a little bit about how rape crisis was set up in Bristol and all she kept saying to me was you have to start it small.*

So that was how Barbara started her support group for people who had just been diagnosed as suffering from cancer. She started small by having a helpline in the sitting room of her own house. She got a 'huge shock' when the phone eventually started to ring with people needing her help. She could not cope with all the calls and needed more help.

*One of the things that was difficult was that I knew nothing about the voluntary sector - absolutely nothing, so I had to scratch around and find people who did know things and set up meetings. The other thing I found difficult was talking to health professionals ...I'm an ordinary person.*

For four years she operated a telephone help line from her own house with the help of other women. The small community group became a great success. Using her writing skills Barbara wrote a play about her experiences with cancer and performed it in village halls

*I wrote the play and that was brilliant it brought writing back into my life and the opportunity to perform, which I just love.*

Barbara was then contacted by the local hospital and asked to support a woman who was going through the same scary experience as Barbara around the discovery of cancer. The two realised that they had met 18 years previously

*I was her main support through her breast cancer experience and I used to go over when she was having chemotherapy and sit in the garden with her. That was the summer of 98. Sit in her garden and put the world to rights. I would tell her about my experience .... I said well I'm going to do a monologue about breast cancer and she said well if you make it a dialogue we'll do it together.*

The two set up a small community performance group and performed the play about breast cancer all over the country and then in Australia. Barbara felt that she could have just sat there with her cancer and done nothing. The following sums up

for Barbara how, her lifetime experiences assisted:

*I just really, really appreciate every bit of my life. I appreciate the struggle the lack of money, lack of education and I really feel as though all those things happened. I had quite a hard life. I really feel that I've been charmed because it's made me into the person that I am now...Life.... it's about give and take. It's about having something and being able to give something back... It isn't about getting a better house every ten years.... getting a bigger bank balance and having these holidays. I've never thought life was about that. Life is about living with other people and kind of sharing experiences and giving as much as you get.*

Barbara admits that she gets surprised when she sees her book in shops, when she hears that it influences people and when she sees posters for her cancer support work.

*I think of my god. I get quite tickled...*

The payback and motivation for Barbara were not in any way connected to status, monetary reward or fame.

*It feels like a privilege you can talk about any amount of people who have a yacht or a house in another country. You can say they are privileged, but I don't see it like this. I feel totally privileged that I've been able to do all that I have.*

Table 11 – Pen Portrait - Barbara

### **Social capital and conflict**

There are aspects of the interview results, which are relevant to the discussion of social capital, and the place of conflict in small women led VCSOs. These will be further discussed in Chapter 5.

### **Summary of findings from interviews**

- The majority of the women who were interviewed had an urge within their younger lives to somehow make a difference to the world around them. For many this difference would change some aspect the world as a whole.
- Their desire to change the world was, like Barbara's, sometimes related to an aspect of the world that they had been personally affected by; for others there was an element of social justice and equality.
- For all but one of the women, they have taken a path in their lives that has set them apart from the mainstream voluntary activity and the larger VCOs. This has led to them setting up alternative activities through their involvement in small community groups.
- While often having little academic qualifications, they do have an enduring belief in their own power to make a difference. Their life experience for some replaces those qualifications and becomes the source of their creativity.
- While not having a belief in their own technical qualifications they do have a belief that the world as it is 'faulty' in some way. They are critical thinkers and have confidence in their worldview. They perceive faults in the way the world is run, the way people are left without support, the way services are delivered, the requirements of the world around them and the way people are treated, excluded, are prevented from taking part. They wish to work to improve these faults.
- Wherever there is a fault that they think they can fix, they set about trying to fix this, through their development of small community groups.
- Money, status and enhancing their position in the community is not their motivation. They get their satisfaction and sense of worth from making a difference to individual people in their community.

## **Chapter 5 - Discussion and analysis of findings**

This chapter consider the findings from the data and analyses them with reference to relevant literature in the field. It considers the analysis within the following themes:

### **Theme One: Community**

Discusses the definition and usage of the word community in the data and other related terms and how this links in to the literature. What do the women understand by the word community?

### **Theme Two: Women and community action**

This theme analyses how the women involved in the research relate to their communities, how they undertake their community action and the nature of that community action; how their notion of changing the world transforms into wanting to change for the better some aspect of community life for those around them. What motivates the women into community action and how they maintain that motivation and engagement is also considered. The role of small VCSOs and the women involved in those groups and how they contribute to stocks of social capital is analysed. The notion of conflict within the groups and between groups is also explored.

### **Theme Three: Small community groups and independence**

Considers the position of the small BTR VCSOs that the women are involved in, their ability to operate independently while they are less visible and what implications this holds for the women. Can the women remain invisible and still be transformative through their actions?

### **Theme One: Community**

#### **What is community?**

Although the women have not defined the word community, their responses demonstrated that for them it has a wide range of meanings, all with people at the centre. The diversity of uses the term has, indicates how central it is to key aspects of social relationships: not just delimiting boundaries around place and people but communicating strength of identification, the quality of relationships and positively valued forms of action. The meaning of the word is understood by the women in the context in which they use it. The evidence from research does indicate that 'community' can be a difficult word to define Twelvetrees (2001) argues that 'the

more you try to examine 'community', the more 'slippery' it becomes. Other authors such as Chanan (2002), Gilchrist (2009), Henderson and Salmon (1998), Mayo (1994) and Popple (1995 and 2015) all argue that there are many uses of the word community, but no overall agreement about what it means. The women's confidence in using the word 'community' so frequently (111 times) in their responses, without attempts at definition, suggests how comfortable they are with this word and the confidence they have that it will be understood. A number of different ways in which the participants use the term 'community' were present in their responses and the next section considers those.

### **Community of place**

Community is an important issue for the women in its use in terms of a definition of place. Firstly, community is the geographical area they lived in when they were younger, and the base for their families. It is also the area in which their efforts to 'change the world, and to 'make a difference' happen. For example, Betty talks about 'her community' in which she is active at the time of interview. For Betty community is the geographical area or place that she lives in and represents as a councillor.

*We're all up for re-election in May and I have to talk to people about what it's like for me to be working in my community as a non-executive councillor. I spend a lot of my time in my community*  
*Betty*

When considering the historical journeys of the women to the time of interview, their geographical base and their geographical communities, or their 'community of place' alter and change as they move around and become involved in different challenges. One example of this is where Bella identified that becoming older meant that the geography of her community had to alter, to take into account the limitations in her own mobility caused by age.

Similarly, in the focus groups, the women spoke of being involved in their 'communities' and being a part of that particular group of people in that place making them 'feel valued'. Being part of their community was also 'inspiring' (*focus group participant unpaid*) for the women.

Many of the women had also experienced a caring element in the geographical communities in which they had lived when they were younger, and had strong community associations with that place. The women reflected on fond memories of these communities and often portrayed them in warm and caring terms. This demonstrated the presence of the notion of community as place.

For example, Barbara, in her 'community' in Wales witnessed the caring way that people looked out for each other, offering to get each other's shopping and run errands. It reflects on the nature of this community and it is something she sees as wishing to engender in her later activities, which may take place in other locations.

*The community is lost really but in those days there was a real sense of community in that part where we lived and I think I really valued being part of that I knew what the community was very early on.*

*Barbara*

This view of community links in with Chanan's (2002) view as something, which takes on a warm and fuzzy glow. Chanan (2002) identifies this notion of community stating 'when people look back to the times when neighbours looked after each other it echoes something positive of times gone by' (ibid: 4).

Another element of community, which is evident in the interviews, is that the women are mainly, but not exclusively living and operating in the rural areas, market and coastal towns of the South West. This is as expected as the grouping from which the women were selected, the Foundation's small grants programme, focuses on the rural areas, market towns and coastal areas. Davidoff and Hall (2007) and Oakley and Mitchell (1997) argue that rural areas are likely to have a particular claim on the notion of 'community'. They suggest that there is a link between the notion of the rural idyllic community and the notion of home and domesticity, which has been present since the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

It is important to stress that most rural groups would be 'Below The Radar' They are small and operate at a very local/parish level. It is estimated that there are between 8-9,000 village hall associations in England and below this,

there are maybe 10-15 groups using village halls. These will be almost invisible (McCabe et al., 2010: 3)

The evidence from this research also suggests that there are many significant groups and agencies operating in both rural areas and in urban areas. They include organisations such as Mind affiliates (i.e. local affiliated groups of national organisations) and Wildlife Trusts. The evidence from this research and the literature does reinforce the notion that there are many small groups operating in rural areas, offering a diverse range of services and engaging significant numbers of people from the locality (Crawley, 2012: 2-3)

The places in which communities exist can be exclusive as well as inclusive, and are not always 'warm and fuzzy'. Alison had experienced both the caring side of her community, and the negative side of being excluded and taunted because of the 'otherness' of her mixed race origin. She rarely saw anyone else in her community who was of mixed race when young. She says she was 'taunted mercilessly' because of this. At the time of the interview, she found herself again active in a rural area and describes how this brought back memories about how she was treated as an 'outsider' by her community.

*I grew up as a young mixed race woman in an area where nobody looked like me, that was the way I codified the world. There was those who looked like me and there were those who didn't. Most people didn't. It's interesting that here I am in an area that's predominantly rural and it goes back to those experiences that I had at that time.....nothing would entice me back to those times.*

*Alison*

Research reinforces this view that community as a rural idyll does not hold true for all and oppression and exclusion of certain individuals also exists (Banks et al., 2007), Cohen (1982) and Henderson and Thomas (2012). Their writings argued that the discriminations they identified within communities were essential to the definition and meaning of community, and that:

One of the classic ironies of the term of course, is that the assumed unity it implies cannot help but draw attention to such boundaries, and the discriminations they signify such as who is in and who is out.

Cohen (1982) cited in Craig et al., (2011: 304)

As a microcosm of this the communities/communes as described by Caroline and Alison that they wished to enter when they were younger and looking for an alternative lifestyle, were difficult to access and be accepted into. Many of them were very exclusive

*It's very difficult to get accepted by communities, it's horrendous it took us a year. We visited for a weekend and then a week and then a month then you have to go through a joining meeting where they discuss you in great detail and see how we would all fit in.*

Alison

The community of place experienced by the participants in the research is not always positive.

### **Government and community of place**

Being in communities and being accepted as part of those communities gives these women a great advantage in the way they are able to deliver their services. They are also well placed to access and reach community members. The way that that governments and statutory authorities listen and attempt to support communities is often criticised in the literature. The political use of community, often on containing messages on the surface about empowerment, was also about constraining the way people acted in line with political visions, as can be seen from the following example.

Building the capacity of both individuals and groups within communities is central to the process of civil renewal, enabling local people to develop their own solutions to the issues, which most affect them. Community groups have a crucial role to play in this re-invigoration of public life. They grow out of the determination of committed people to solve problems, press for change and ensure that all sectors of the community have a voice. (Blunkett: 2002)

Community is viewed as the place where activities take place to engage local people in democracy. Successive governments have been criticised for their inability to enable people's voices to be heard. Evidence from the literature including Chanan and Miller (2011); Cox and Schmuecker (2013); Dominelli (1990); Evans (2011); Mayo (1997) and Popple (1995 and 2015) produce an analysis that government is often concerned with a community which represents a place approved by them

Living in the community and knowing her community enabled Joan to get close to her community. She found inventive ways of making sure that community members' voices were heard and their views gathered. She knew that if she followed the usual model of inviting people to an AGM virtually no one would attend. Instead, she organised the AGM in the local pub at Christmas with food and activities. Once she had people captive she then asked people's views in an entertaining way, making it interesting and fun. That way she was able to gather the community's views on what the organisation should be doing as priority in the future.

*We don't have an AGM because as soon as you mention AGM nobody comes. So we have a Christmas lunch and then people vote .. they are a captive audience ...we have a little skit and some music and gather their views. We get over 80 people coming. We all enjoy it*

*Joan*

Politician's views of engagement in community tend to focus on particular forms of action, but many more exist in practice. The uses of community as a prefix indicate a much wider and more dynamic conception of being active in the community than the political visions described above.

### **Community as prefix**

The women in the interviews and in the focus groups used the word 'community' many times and in many different ways as a prefix. Table 12 contains a list of the different ways in which the women use 'community' as a prefix, with the number of times used in brackets.

Community Development	(x3)
Community Groups	(x5)
Community Initiatives	
Community Accountancy	
Community Accountant	
Community Work	(x4)
Community Worker	(x2)
Community Fund	(x3)
Community Sprit (ed)	(x3)
Community Organisations	
Community Leadership	(x2)
Community Living	(x2)
Community Politics	
Community Members	
Community Stuff	
Community Minded	
Community Outreach	
Community Wise	
Community Negativity	
Community Shop	
Community Policeman	
Community Nursing	
Community Meeting	
Community Activities	
Community Education	
Community Area	
Community Engagement	
Community Projects:	

Table 12 – the use of the word community as a prefix.

Some of the uses of 'community' as prefix were mentioned more than once. Whenever the women use the word, its meaning is understood by the context in which it stands. The varied and frequent use of the word could be viewed as an indication as to how comfortable the women felt with this word, and the fact that its meaning would be understood without any further attempt to define it. In fact, community as a prefix is often defined by the word that follows, so for example a community police officer, is a police officer that is to be found in the community. There are other uses of 'community' as prefix which are harder to define as considered previously such as 'community work' and 'community development'. Twelvetrees explains this use of community as prefixes in the example of 'community work' where he argues that the word 'community' is an adjective describing the activity.

The word 'community' in 'community work' largely needs to be seen as an adjective, describing a certain approach to social intervention ... rather than having the aim of 'creating community' (Twelvetrees, 2001: 1).

In the case of Twelvetrees, the approach concerned is 'a process of assisting people to improve their own communities by undertaking autonomous collective action' (ibid: 4).

The participants in the research used 'community' as a prefix in various ways. Mary was recently qualified and came to community work late in life, in her fifties. Mary identifies herself as a 'community worker' and interchanges the terminology of community work and community development. When Mary was 44, she left her job as a chef to try a new life and went to the college to fill in a form for an access course.

*I filled in various things and one of them was community work, I didn't know what the hell a community worker was, but I liked people. So I ended up doing a community worker's course. ...I ended up working as a community development worker.... community development is about identifying the gaps*  
Mary

To Mary community work and community development are interchangeable. Mary's main role in her paid work was to help small community groups. It was in her unpaid role that she linked directly into a small community group as trustee of local community group. Rather than being the instigator of a small group, Mary became an active and useful supporter and helper to the small groups in her area. Mary was the only one of the women who took on this more formal development role. Mary is also the only one of the women to make use of the prefix 'community' and to use the terminology of community development in ways, which would identify with writers such as Twelvetrees. For most of the other women who mentioned the way in which they had established their groups, they had achieved this through informal and networking route and contacts. Barbara, for example, knew someone who had been involved in setting up Rape Crises centres and so she asked her what she should do to set up a small community group. She felt 'frustrated' that she needed this type of help but without it 'she did not know where to begin.'

Lucy and Bella had had many years of activism and involvement both paid and unpaid. They used their own skills and knowledge to establish their groups, although some of the smaller groups were linked to initiatives run by Help the Aged who had three development workers based in the region to assist and support people. Joan used her own knowledge and skills she had acquired through her health roles and the networks. She had used these skills to build up and to recruit a group of 'willing helpers'. She had seen what was possible.

The evidence from these women suggests that they rarely experienced the use of formal approaches and techniques such as 'community development' as described by Craig et al. (2011) and Twelvetrees (2001). Their focus was more informal as developed through their own accumulated experiences and direct engagement with their communities. Alternatively, they might know someone who had the right tools and knowledge to help them. Their answers resonate more closely with my own definition of community development, which has already been mentioned in Chapters 1 and 2, which is:

Community development is a process that enables people to access the tools, information, support and skills that they need to bring about change for the better in their communities.

The women needed these tools if they were to set up and deliver services to achieve change in their communities.

### **Communities of interest**

Craig et al. (2011) and Twelvetrees (2001) discuss the geographical aspect of community or 'community of place' and 'communities of interest', 'where links between people are something other than geography' (Twelvetrees, 2001:1). Some other form of shared interest or bond for example may link people. Alison for example was supported by the 'lesbian community' when she moved to London and was able to 'come out as gay'. Being a woman of mixed race, she was also linked into Southall Sisters and the Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) community. She found support and shared interest in those communities when she was living in London. She has a number of communities she was linked into including a community of feminists supporting the view that people can be part of many communities simultaneously. This links into Dominelli's (2006) model of community where people may be part of more than one community although they may identify more strongly with one of the communities.

Popple (1995) also argues that one definition of community is 'communality of interest or interest group .... a group of people sharing a common condition or problem such as alcohol dependency or cancer' (Popple, 1995:4).

This separates Twelvetree's (2001) community of interest into two, those who share a common complaint and those who share a common interest. However, Popple reminds us that absolute definitions are difficult and that 'community must remain an essentially contested concept' (Popple, 1995: 1). The data gathered in this research reinforced that statement. The lack of absolute definition of 'community' did not appear to trouble the women involved. In fact, they demonstrated a confidence in the notion of community and a certainty that when they used the word there would be a shared understanding of its meaning.

## **Theme Two: Women and community action**

### **Women's place in the community**

The use of quantitative data collection and quantitative analysis made a significant contribution overall to the richness of the data and the process of triangulation, which would not otherwise have been the case. The questionnaires provided good quality background evidence for the research and indicated a significant percentage of the research participants involved in small VCSOs were women. It also identified the diverse range of activities and services that they were involved in, through those groups. For the women in this thesis, community is the place where they undertake their activities. The women are also very respectful of their communities and of whom they view as 'owning' the community. Although they are often living in the communities in which they undertake their community activity, they do not assume that their own voice is the voice of that community. Joan for example is very keen to gather the views of her community.

*I think communities are always changing and it will always change and people will want different things. So I mean it's listening and continually listening and seeing just how people can be involved rather than doing it for them so that they can have their own input in it because it's their community...it isn't just ours....*

Joan

There has been uncertainty about identifying women's place to be 'in the community' given their history of being confined to the home and the kitchen sink (Oakley, 1974). Roberts' (1995) research studied the lives of working-class women between 1890 and 1940.

They were ordinary women in the sense that very few of them achieved even a small degree of public prominence but they were truly remarkable in the extent of their real achievements.

(Roberts, 1995:1)

This statement highlights to some extent the danger of women being positioned 'in the community', in that they achieve great things but there is very little recognition of their contribution or value. There were also concerns highlighted in the literature about women's work in communities 'being relegated in favour of men's actions' (Dominelli 2006) or being taken advantage of through their association with the caring role Mingol (2013).

The evidence from my research does not suggest that the women involved are in some way confined in their communities or that they do not have some control over their situation and destiny. There are no victims. The community is the place where their activities take place through choice. It is also, where their significant achievements, as described through their narratives, lie. It is the fact that they go unrecorded, unrecognised and undervalued as identified by (Bond et al. 2008; McCabe et al., 2010 and Popple, 1995) that emerges as a major concern from the evidence of this research.

Evidence from the literature (Connell, 1996; Curno et al., 1982; Fawcett Society, 2012, 2013, 2014; Halford et al., 1997; Ledwith 2009 and Mayo et al., 2009) confirms that gender inequality still exists in society. This is despite the efforts of the suffragettes, the Feminist Movement and agencies such as the Women's Resource Centre who have undertaken major work in researching and identifying and highlighting gender inequalities and trying to bring about change. Gender inequality and the under representation of women in places of influence and power continues to be a significant challenge.

There were, however, only four mentions of the word 'feminist' or 'feminism' within the transcripts of the women's interviews in this research. Three were by the same woman and this woman only mentioned feminism at the start of her journey into community action. Barbara mentions feminism when she started to attend a conscious raising group:

*We sort of got together quite a lot we went to a consciousness raising group together and that's how it started really then we discovered feminism and all of us went down like skittles..*

Barbara was the only one of the women who had this formal link to any feminist group. The evidence from the participants generally does not indicate they were consciously linked into formal feminism or the feminist movement.

On the other hand, there were 465 mentions of the word 'women'. Women were an important aspect of their lives. Women as friends, women as allies, women as comrades. These women activists were constantly linked in to other women as well as being linked into to the notion of community. Their networks and connexions (Gilchrist, 2004 and Dominelli, 2006) however are horizontal and they connect to the women they work with, the women they are assisting through their activities and the women who become engaged in the organisations that they have established. Kari and Rosa for example, as indicated in chapter 4, linked with each other to set up their group to support ex-offenders. Barbara linked in with another cancer sufferer to write her community play, she had also linked in to her local residents group (women) to set up the community cooking, Joan linked in with women to help her to deliver projects within her community hub. The women linked with other women to achieve their aims but not necessarily to link up with the wider feminist movement.

Nancy Naples (1998) identifies similarities with women activists in her work in America. Naples and her fellow students had wanted graduate training so that they could acquire the tools needed to research women activists who were 'fighting on behalf of their communities'. Naples wanted to support these women but she also identified her underlying aim was to link the activists to the Women's Movement.

We came to our studies as committed feminists who were concerned that many of the women who fought alongside us did not define themselves as such. In fact, we identified closely with many other women who felt distanced from the Women's Movement (Naples, 1998: ix).

Naples identified the wide range of campaigns and community activity that the women activists who she was studying had been involved in, such as 'campaigns for social justice and economic security and campaigns against abuse, in diverse settings and often under adverse conditions.

'Many have been engaged in struggles for most of their lives and continue despite the decline in the wider society's support for a progressive social agenda' (ibid: x)

It was Naples who had identified the need for these women to be linked to wider feminist movements, if they were to have more influence. This was not a concern that had ever been identified by the women in her research who had viewed feminists as from a different class. The women in Naples' research were very much caught up in their day-to-day struggles at a local level. There is a similar dilemma in this research. There is good evidence that the women participants have been achieving positive things in their communities. These include enabling others to participate and engage in their community, tackling issues from abuse to support for cancer sufferers, supporting involvement in a wide range of community groups which help those most in need in communities. They are seeking to give people equal chances, to improve their lives and their opportunities and yet they seek little recognition, other than from the communities they are assisting.

The participants in this research work often with little monetary reward if any, little recognition of their value to communities and virtually no status. They are not linked in to wider movements and therefore, it would appear on the surface that they have little influence beyond their direct community, whether that is a community of interest or place.

### **Women and social capital**

Social capital has become an important element when considering the health of communities. This is alongside growing recognition that women play an important, if often ignored role in the building of social capital through their ability to network, to come together and to establish relationship on the ground (Putnam 1995 and 2000). Considering the overall definition of social capital as building networks, norms and trusting relationships in order to work together to pursue shared objects (Putnam 1995), it is not surprising that the small community groups in which the women are involved show evidence of activities likely to promote social capital. There is evidence both in the focus groups and in the one-to-one interviews that the work that

the women undertake in their communities and the way that they work together assists in the building of social capital in communities.

Putnam not only identified social capital as assisting the health of communities but he further argued that social capital operates through two distinct models, 'bonding social capital' and 'bridging social capital'. Bonding social capital is where people come together with other like-minded individuals, with whom they may already have some close connection. Putnam viewed bonding social capital as good for 'getting by'. Bridging social capital is where individuals come together from a more diverse set of starting points, where initial ties are weaker. Putnam argues that bridging social capital is more important when trying to 'getting ahead' (Putnam 2000: 219)

The focus group and interview responses show indicators of bonding social capital rather than bridging social capital, as they align with the close knit relationships associated with bonding social capital (Kirkby-Geddes et al., 2012; Putnam, 2000; Szreter and Woodcock, 2004). Some of the women interviewees in their earlier lives indicate that by being at home with their families they came together as women to establish play groups, (Bella and Lucy), family holiday activity schemes (Caroline) and to bring people together to help other 'less fortunate' neighbours in their communities (Barbara). Barbara also discloses historically that her mother was also involved in this type of activities.

There is clear evidence from the women's early lives that their position in communities has assisted with building social capital through the process of bringing women together to work on community issues. Research in the field however also outlines concerns about how the women's efforts to build networks and increase stocks of social capital are taken advantage of and how men are at the centre of significant social organisations and networks. There is little recognition of their contribution, or how they build social capital, while men were the centre of attention. (Portes and Landolt, 1996; Portes and Sensenbrenner, 1993).

*The whole thing was that when men were born they were encouraged to be the whole centre of their own universe where women were encouraged to be a centre of a man's universe.*

Barbara

Lucy and Bella also indicate their contribution to local communities early on in their lives, which focussed on their role as mothers trying to make the world a better place for their children through the establishment of playgroups and mother and toddler groups. The women in this research are often involved in bonding social capital, bringing together other women in their communities to solve an issue or provide a service.

The way women come together and relate to each other is mentioned by eight of the women as a positive way that women can come together and work together.

*When you get pregnant you might meet people that you would not talk to in a month of Sundays you just do get on.*

*Caroline*

Caroline talks very specifically about how women are able to network and how women are able to support each other. The women themselves view their way of working as very positive. Caroline and Barbara are dismissive and almost pitying of the men who they view as not having the same opportunities and themselves.

*I don't think men would do the same thing. We are just different Single parent males are very insular and that's not a good thing.*

*Caroline*

*The men might be part of a group or part of the army but other than that I'm not sure what their contacts are.*

*Barbara*

*Lots of positive things about being a woman I would not have changed any of that. The women I've met ...the sense of solidarity that I've gotten from working with women ... there's a feeling of solidarity and power in its positive kind of sense that I don't think men often get in groups to that extent.*

*Alison*

Getting together in groups and forming networks, is viewed by the women as being a positive aspect of their gender that is not shared by men. Much feminist literature engages with the stereotyping of women as nurturing and caring as taking advantage of women, the women participants in this research view this as an important aspect of their lives, which makes them stronger, and something that is lacking in men.

While much of the evidence suggests that the women in this research, through their work in small groups, are building bonding social capital, there is also some evidence suggesting that some of the women are contributing to stocks of bridging social capital, as described by Campbell and Gillies (2001); Kirkby-Geddes et al., (2012); Putnam, (2000) and Szreter and Woodcock, (2004). Caroline for instance, did not just concentrate on building a small organisation based on her own personal interest, she opened the organisation up, listened to needs identified by a wide range of people in the local community and encouraged over 70 people from all walks of life to engage in a range of projects. Miriam from the friendship group brought together women from over 30 different ethnic backgrounds, of all ages and from all religions.

The evidence from the research indicates that the women working in small VCSOs who participated were contributing to stocks of bonding social capital and to bridging social capital to a lesser degree. Their own comments and responses did not however include any direct mention of social capital, suggesting the concept was not in their daily terms of reference.

### **Women and conflict in small VCSOs**

As argued in Chapter 2 from research by Dominelli (1990); Kirkby-Geddes et al., (2012); Lowndes (2004); Norris and Inglehart (2003) and Shapiro (1997) work in VCSOs where there are strong convictions and strong networks can contribute towards the generation of conflict between groups and communities, and to conflict within groups and between members. Dominelli (1990 and 2006) argued that community action presupposes a conflict model of social organising but this was focussed on the powerless in communities coming together to reduce their

powerlessness. Mayo (1977) had also referred to the conflict model used by community activists to bring about change. However, conflict and challenge in the 70s and 80s often involved activists coming together to challenge the state and state run services (Lees and Mayo, 1984)

As the sector became increasingly funded by the state, the potential of a conflict model to enact change, started to diminish. There was a strange irony developing which was commented on by Dominelli (1990), Mayo (1977) and Popple (1995). Community Action was losing its radical and challenging origins aimed at altering the provision of public services, to becoming a friend of the state delivering its services (Dearlove, 1974). Mayo (1974) also charted the intervention of the state and the way in which community development in particular was used as an antidote against the unpopularity of the state.

While it is perhaps surprising that the women involved in small VCSOs, who were participants in this research, did not mention conflict as an issue within their organisations, or even between their organisations and others, there were indications of at least some negativity and some potential for conflict within the comments made by attendees at the focus groups. This however was very specific to those women who had undertaken paid roles in larger organisations. Their evidence provides indications as to why the women in small community groups may not have chosen to utilise a conflict model in their groups.

The focus group participants often held both paid and unpaid roles. Within their unpaid roles they experienced little if any conflict. Within their paid roles, however they were unable to deliver services in the way that they felt was appropriate. There were strong feelings that their male managers forced their own way of working upon women, even down to the way they dressed at work. They felt totally powerless to raise these issues and unable to resolve the conflict.

For example:

*I am treated as if I am so stupid I cannot even choose what to wear to work  
(focus group participant paid worker)*

They did not feel protected by whistle blowing policies and rather than raising the issues, they remained silent. The effect of this was to make the women feel deskilled and to suffer a loss of confidence. This was reinforced because they were working in a world that was not designed by them, but by men. They struggled with the language used by their male counterparts. The women indicated that they felt 'helpless' and unable to challenge their situation in paid employment.

*They (male boss) never telling you that anything that you have done, is done well, even when others give you this feedback.'*

*(Focus group participant paid worker)*

Their way forward was not to cause conflict or to take a conflict based-approach to their role in a VCSO, but to engage 'sympathetic' men as allies. There was a sense from the focus groups that despite the injustices the women felt they suffered, their preferred option was to seek a democratic and non-conflict based approach by finding men who were sympathetic to their cause who would support them in meetings. It was that or remain powerless.

*It is important to find men who can be allies in meetings to back up what you are saying.*

*(Focus group participant paid employee)*

Throughout this research, the women in the focus groups and in the individual interviews shunned conflict and aggression. A word search of the interviews of individual women for the word 'conflict' resulted in only six occurrences none of which related to conflict. Associated words such as 'aggression / ive'; 'disagree'; and 'argument' were also searched for and occurred in very small numbers with no ongoing connections between them. One of the attractions of being part of a very small organisation is the lack of conflict – there is a good chance that like-minded individuals are going to be involved. Alison mentions conflict but this is very specific to the larger commune that she was a member of earlier in her life. The conflict made her uncomfortable and Alison did not always find the commune an easy place to live in and eventually left, partly to escape conflict. Conflict was mentioned in

terms of taking action to avoid conflict within the refuge. These two were the only relevant mentions within the interviews. The approach from the interviewees was more that conflict was something to be avoided and not to engage with or instigate. This matches the other findings in this research about the way women in small VCSOs work.

The women interviewees reject the approach of men. They talk disparagingly about the way that testosterone-charged men have caused conflict and war and destroyed the peace of the world by playing 'testosterone fuelled games'. As with the women at Greenham Common Peace Camp rejected 'patriarchal' forms of organising they held the male approach as responsible. (Dominelli 2006: 196).

As Bond et al. (2008), Dominelli (2006), Kaplan (1997) and Popple (1995); have argued, women work in different ways to men, and have different motivations. To some extent, the participants in this research seek their solace in their unpaid roles and roles that they have taken on, because of their passion and their desire to bring about change for the better, often for people who are themselves powerless or who experience challenges that make their lives difficult. They are not there for status of monetary reward. While we might expect conflict because of their passion and single focus, this is not an element that is mentioned outside of paid roles. As indicated in Chapter 2, the Third Sector Research Centre confirmed that conflict in small VCSOs is not a topic that has attracted research when I approached them directly in 2016. The findings of this research therefore make a helpful contribution to changing that situation.

It is also helpful when considering why there appeared such little evidence of conflict within the groups to consider the nature of the groups that the women were aiming to establish. These were small community groups that required little in the way of funding. Mostly the women were not employees of these groups but neither were they volunteers in the traditional sense of volunteers. They had identified a community issue that they wished to address, a social injustice or inequality that they wished to amend. Their main motivation for involvement was not status or monetary gain. Conflict would have been detrimental to their cause.

## **Why women became involved in their communities / pathways to involvement**

The analysis to date suggests that the 'community' in this research is the place where the women's community action happens, whether this is in a community of place or within a community of interest, or a community with shared concerns. Through their responses in the face-to-face interviews, it is possible to track their pathways to their current involvement in small community groups (see pen portraits Chapter 4 and 6).

There were some differences between the community experiences of the women in the focus groups, and the women's experience in the face-to-face interviews. Most (90%) of the women in the focus groups who were involved in unpaid activities in community groups, had joined existing organisations. They were not seeking to establish their own groups. In the focus groups, the women were speaking of a model of community activity and contribution that was much closer to the traditional model of volunteering. They were undertaking these roles alongside their paid activity. In addition to this, some of the women were holding a number of unpaid roles in their community simultaneously. Their way into unpaid community activity was more around being invited in to a current activity or linking in with an existing organisation.

*When it comes to volunteering you 'dip your toe in the water' and the next minute you are up to your neck!*

*You say yes to one thing and then.....*

*I sat in a village hall...the rest followed*

*(Quotes from unpaid workers in the focus groups about their volunteering)*

While the women in the focus groups identified that they were much freer within their unpaid roles to dress how they wanted and to be guided by their own instincts, concerns were raised about increased controls on volunteers as the size of the agencies increased.

Roberts and Devine (2004) examined how volunteering can be at risk of being utilised by government. They found that respondents were involved in numerous forms of voluntary activity that included occupationally based activity, educational activity, community-orientated activity, recreational activity, and political activity. With many who were active in the more traditional forms of volunteering, they found that the main reason for volunteering, was the 'pleasure and enjoyment' that individuals got from being volunteers. They cited the Labour Government at that time as recognizing volunteering as a contributor to social capital. The authors were sceptical of the way the Labour Government was drawing voluntary activity into the 'notion of social capital to bring informal volunteering within formal infrastructure compatible with its 'own policy agenda' (ibid, 2004: 284). This issue around the size of organisations and vulnerability to external control and influences that this can bring, is returned to later in this chapter.

### **Women as community leaders**

The women who were the participants in the face-to-face interviews had 'dipped their toes in the water' of more formal volunteering 'earlier in their life, but at the time of interview, their involvement had altered. All but one of the women interviewees, were involved in organisations that they were the lead members of and/or had founded. In this sense, their role could be seen as being much closer to the model of community activists and community leaders.

In 2008 Bond et al. identified the issue of women's involvement as leaders in community activities and the lack of information and research that surrounds this topic in their research in America.

Although women have largely been absent from many formal, public, and civic arenas, they have been more visibly in informal local leadership roles, as evidenced in grassroots neighbourhood and community movements (Bond et al., 2008: 48).

Bond et al. also cite Omolade (1994), and subsequently Belenky et al. (1997), as having described in earlier research how women's informal community leadership has been critically important in supporting the development of others, but that this support and the resulting activity is rarely recognised. The informal nature of this leadership is reflected in Omolade's (1994) reference to it as a 'tradition that has no name' (4). They also emphasized the vital role of these "community other mothers" in uplifting the most vulnerable members of the community (Bond et al., 2008: 49)

Bond et al. however, while identifying this wide involvement of women in community activities, particularly those that benefit the most vulnerable, also note the almost complete lack of research on how women become involved in this community activity in the first place.

In light of the overall benefits of women's community leadership to themselves and to others, there is a surprising absence of literature on how and why women become involved in their communities as activists and leaders in the first place — the origins of their involvement (ibid: 49)

Bond et al. researched this topic through their interviews with 17 women 'community leaders' in a neighbourhood in America. The research considered the circumstances under which the women's community involvement first takes shape and identified that over 50% of the women interviewed had some form of informal family involvement in their community prior to them becoming leaders. The findings in this research also identified family influences and caring communities at the beginning of their journeys as an important issue. In Chapter 4 examples were given of the influence of close family members such a mother or father on the women's early awakening to community activity. Eight (66%) of the women in the interviews indicated how the initial experience of their early lives was influenced by family community involvement and their own involvement. This was both formal and informal. Two of the women had fathers who were politically involved through being local councillors and so were able to have discourse in the family environment about aspects of politics. Alison had more formal involvement in through her mother's collective action and union activities.

## Generativity

Another aspect of Bond et al's (2008) findings, which resonates with this research, is the notion of generativity, Erikson (1950, 1969) described generativity as the realisation of ways to nurture, advising and promoting future generations as the epicentre of adult development. Although caring for children has been the prototypical example of generativity, Erikson, along with several contemporary scholars, describe parenting as one of many possible generative outlets. As McAdams et al., (1998) suggest, generativity 'is even about assuming such a role writ large, about being a responsible citizen'. The essence of generativity in this sense is having a concern about future generations. To Bond et al. (2008) this concern for the future, aligned itself well with the feminist aim of not just reporting on situations but doing something about it:

a feminist method should produce a study not just of women, but also for women, helping to change the world as well as to describe it (ibid: 50)

While not wishing to stereotype women's involvement as linked to their role as mothers, four of the women in this study did indicate that they were looking out for the future of the world, in their own campaigning role. They were aiming to protect the future in some way for their children. This element was much stronger when the women talked about their earlier campaigning. Both Lucy and Bella who are in their 80s spoke about how their desire to 'change the world', to make sure the world was 'safe from ecological disaster' and warfare was motivated by their desire to keep the world safe for their children. When Lucy's children were young, her community activity was based around the children setting up mother and toddler groups, playgroups and art activities for children.

*after that there were a lot more things which involved the community... but more global at the time... of worrying about the Atom bomb testing and our children's bones. We set up a local group to protest, to put pressure on'*

*Lucy*

Generativity as motivational factor for some of their earlier campaigning and action features regularly in the responses of the women.

### **Establishing 'alternative worlds'**

Linked to the desire to ensure the future of generations to come, was the desire to find a 'better way' and to 'change the world' which the women expressed at the beginning of their journeys.

Lucy's involvement with the Voice of Women led to her joining Greenham Common Women and the Peace Movement. Her Greenham Common involvement was short lived because of her family responsibilities.

*I belonged to CND. I ended up on Greenham Common for a weekend or two.... not seriously abandoning husband and his Sunday dinner ...but for a week or two*

*Lucy*

Bella also describes herself as being 'out with her buggy' in 1958 protesting at the 'Aldermaston March'. Having experienced her own family members being killed in the war, being sent out to foster home herself, and losing friends and neighbours, she did not want this type of a world for future generations. This led to her stated belief that 'there must be a better way'. This spurred on her desire to seek alternative and better ways' to run the world'

Four of the women interviewees, while not knowing each other at the time, shared the experience of having been involved with the Peace Movement at Greenham Common. Greenham Common was a significant part of the women's movement at that time. On the 5th September 1981, the Welsh group "Women for Life on Earth" had arrived on Greenham Common, Berkshire, England. They marched from Cardiff with the intention of challenging, by debate, the decision to site 96 Cruise nuclear missiles there. On arrival, they delivered a letter to the Base Commander, which among other things stated 'We fear for the future of all our children and for the future of the living world which is the basis of all life' (<http://www.greenhamwpc.org.uk/>). This movement shows the fear at that time that existed in the minds of the women protestors about the future. Dominelli's views echo those of Bella:

Greenham women eschewed patriarchal forms of organising ... They held machismo responsible for pushing the world to the brink of nuclear war and rejected all it stood for (Dominelli 2006: 196)

Dominelli raised the issue of women rejecting the world of men and, excluding men from the Greenham Common camp. Bella also rejected the 'testosterone filled men' who she saw as causing the war.

The women in the focus groups were clearly angered by how men treated them in their paid jobs, but the women in the interviews did not have this anger against men. They did however, feel it was necessary to establish new community groups that they were in charge of, where they could decide on the rules. In effect they created their own worlds outside of the existing 'world' and yet operating inside it. They established what Dominelli refers to in connection with Greenham as 'their own spaces and statements' and 'increased their sense of participation and confidence' (ibid: 197). The women in this research did this through the establishment of small community groups, through which they could deliver their community action. Dominelli discussed how the women in Greenham had acted in accordance with the principles of women 'personally determining their contribution to the struggle. This meant that for the women they had created their own definition of the situation rather than one that had been determined by others and imposed on them' (ibid: 198).

This description of the women at Greenham, mirrors to some extent one of the prime motivations of the women in this research, who needed to create worlds that they were comfortable in, in order to deliver their community action. This was preferred to taking part in a world with which they disagreed, where they were not free to act in the way they felt was right and not to have to comply with rules imposed on them by others.

This desire to create a world controlled by the women themselves and not by an outside influence, or not imposed on them, links well into the motivation behind the women participants in this research and is built on later in this chapter.

In her earlier life, Bella campaigned and fought against what she felt was wrong in the world. Now that she is older, she wants the world to be a better place for other

older people to experience in the future. She was finding however that her attempts to bring to the fore the issues experienced by older people were finding the same resistance that she found when younger, when heading off to Russia to find out if there was an alternative way to run the world.

*When I was younger I was told you can't do that because you are a woman...now I am told you cannot do that because you are old.*

*Bella*

Two of the women spoke about seeking alternative worlds through their involvement in communes and while this was just a small number of the interviewees, it does cover a historical element of activism at that time when people were seeking alternative ways of life that did not damage the world or use up its resources. Again based on a concern for future generations, Ann describes her commune experience as 'all rice and sandals' but while in the commune, she also helped to set up alternative education methods. In one of the better-known communes, she established alternative innovative training through arts and drama for people with learning disabilities.

Caroline's involvement in holiday camps for 'deprived' children was about the women trying to create a 'better world', an alternative world from the very difficult world that those 150 children were experiencing. This reflects a desire to have a place that they can call their own. To 'build their own community' as Caroline puts it, is a prime motivation to their establishment of the small community groups.

### **Process of 'Othering'**

Eight of the women who took part in the interviews identified that they had suffered hardship in their childhood, often due to a life tragedy, a parent dying or becoming seriously ill and unable to look after them. Their own childhoods were lived in poverty. Barbara for example was put into care for a year when her mother had a breakdown. Bella and Lucy also describe the hardship of living in an era of war, or great financial hardship in their childhoods, along with having lost loved ones or having to leave their homes.

Later in their lives, a number of the women (6, or 50%) also went through partnership breakdowns and their own illnesses. They also suffered their own personal tragedies, as they grew older, such as Caroline tragically losing her daughter to a domestic accident and her husband experiencing a breakdown. The women have long periods of suffering not just 'poverty' in the financial sense, but the experience of poverty. Lister (2015) discusses experiences such as poverty in the context of a similarly named concept of 'othering'. Lister argues that government measures poverty through statistics but what is not taken into account, according to Lister, are the wider effects of poverty such as 'shame'. Lister argues that people who live in poverty suffer from a process of 'othering' that is imposed upon by those 'better off' members of the community.' 'Othering' describes how the 'non-poor' treat 'the poor' as different.

It's a dualistic process of differentiation and demarcation that draws a line between 'us' and 'them', which establishes, maintains and justifies social distance....to experience shame is to feel inadequate, lacking in worth, and perhaps lacking in dignity and integrity', with damaging implications for self-respect, is confirmed by people living in poverty themselves. As one woman put it, 'You're like an onion, gradually every skin is peeled off you, and there's nothing left. All your self-esteem and how you feel about yourself is gone. (Lister, 2015: 4)

The women in the interviews, having revealed their own life challenges, having survived poverty and tragedy themselves, appear to have an affinity with those people in their communities and have experienced a process of 'othering'. They are readily able to link into the communities because, in some ways, this is one of the communities to which they belong. Not just in the geographical sense but also in the shared interest sense.

Barbara, for example, suffering from cancer and surviving, immediately wanted to link into the community of people who were cancer sufferers, to try to alleviate their suffering, through her own intervention and support based on her own personal experience. There is evidence within the interviews of the women feeling part of communities because they have a shared interest and that shared interest in their

own experiences of poverty and hardship and feelings associated with experiences of 'othering'.

*I've always felt very compassionate for the underdog because I always was an underdog, so I know how hard it was being on the end of oppression. I came from a single parent family so life was very much a struggle. I spent a year in a children's home because my mum had a nervous breakdown, so I know what it was like to be on the end of being treated in a disrespectful way, so I always had a great infinity for people who I would say are a very vulnerable group*

*Barbara*

Being unlike others appears to link the women in the interviews and the communities' / community members, that they wish to assist through their experience of poverty and hardship, and how they feel about this due to 'othering'.

### **Motivation**

One of the motivational factors for the women coming forward as community leaders as identified by Bond et al. (2008) was the identification of a 'community need' and the desire on behalf of the women to do something about this need. This motivation factor also features in research undertaken more recently by the Third Sector Research Centre. They found that 'all organisations start with a passion' (McCabe et al., 2010: 8). The women in the focus groups talk about having a passion for the unpaid work that they are involved in.

*Belief and passion got me into this work and these are important*  
(volunteer children's project)

*I got involved because of personal interest and how the issue had affected me personally some years ago*  
(volunteer: domestic violence)

*I got here from a sense of injustice.*  
(volunteer community activist)

## **Benefits for the women themselves**

Another motivational factor for the women's involvement in their communities were the benefits that they themselves experienced through that involvement. All of the women interviewed and the unpaid workers in the focus groups in this respect do link into the definition of volunteers.

Volunteering means any activity, in which time is given freely to benefit another person, groups or organisation (Wilson 2000: 215)

They also share some similarities in the personal benefit as expressed by the women in the focus groups. All the quotes below are examples from unpaid volunteers in the focus groups.

*Being part of your community is inspiring and gives confidence to speak out and help people to speak out using their own words.*

*I stay involved because it is being part of the community and this helps me to feel valued. The joy of seeing people develop and grow. Having a chance to make a difference and just occasionally there is a glint of light, of success, of change!*

*To change the world, to be a catalyst for change.  
At the end of the day knowing that you have done your best.*

*More to life than money.*

*Wanting to challenge injustice*

There is also an element of the enjoyment working with other women:

*I love working with groups of women and seeing women taking back control of their lives.*

There was strong agreement in the focus groups that women are good at working together to solve a problem. They are good at networking, and making allies. *'This is one of the most important activities. There is strength in collective action'* (focus group participant). The women also considered that the way that they worked with other women was very democratic.

*Women have a good democratic way of working together, making decisions together, tackling issues together.* (focus group unpaid activist).

The women felt that this was *'important that this way of working filters up the ladder but for some reason it often fails to do so'* (focus group participant).

Other personal benefits from both the focus group participants and the women interviewees, included becoming more knowledgeable about the issues they were involved in, having the confidence to have a stronger voice and feeling valued by their communities.

The women who were interviewed individually about their experience of community involvement were undertaking activities that differed from traditional volunteering, as identified earlier, in that they were mainly the founders and leaders of the groups they were involved in. Coakes and Bishop's 1998 research involved interviews with women in six states across Western Australia about their involvement in their communities. This example is selected because of its specific focus on women. Their initial interest was sparked by noting how women were underrepresented on boards of the community sector and other community agencies. They also were alerted to the topic, by a number of researchers who had noted the improvements that had occurred in communities where there had been participation in VCOs, including Florin & Wandersman (1984) and Zimmerman & Rappaport (1988). Coakes and Bishop also noted that women had been identified as playing a major role in community life through what we would consider to be more formal community involvement in such organisations as playgroups, the Country Women's Associations; women's auxiliary clubs and services. The studies focussed on by Coakes and Bishop indicated that 'purposive or social benefits, which involve improving or bettering the community, are the most common motivators of participation' (1998: 252).

While there were some similarities between the experience of women in the interviews and those 'rewards' associated with traditional volunteering, the experience of the women and their reasons for being involved in the small community groups, were much wider and had a different basis. As has already been discussed in Chapter 4, and is present in a number of the examples cited there, one of the key motivations for the women's involvement in small community groups, in which they were themselves the leaders, was a desire to bring about change for the better in the communities in which they were involved. That change is designed and led by themselves, not just as a contributor in the wider field of volunteering

### **Theme Three: small community groups and independence**

#### **Small groups 'below the radar'**

The vehicle for the women achieving their aims of bring about change for the better to their communities and the places where they found space for themselves are within the small local community groups that they have themselves moulded and developed. The existence and the value of these small groups is, as stated by TSRC 'often acknowledged but only anecdotally'. Recently the Third Sector Research Centre has breathed new life into the topic with their 'Below The Radar' Project as mentioned in chapters one and two.

Much rhetoric and anecdote has been evident about the role, function and strengths of small voluntary and community based activity. Substantial claims have been made about the importance of community groups and action (for example CLG, 2009), but there was limited empirically based evidence about the impact of BTR actions upon society, how they evolve over time and who becomes active in them (McCabe et al., 2010)

#### **Participation and empowerment**

Participation and empowerment, as was discussed in chapter 1, became preferred terms for both the Coalition (2010-15) Government and the previous Labour Government when seeking to engage and involve communities. Successive governments had identified community development and to some extent small groups as 'empowering local communities'. They saw participation and engagement

as a route to 'flourishing' communities (Chanan, 2012). Community empowerment for the Labour Government was the route by which the National Empowerment Programme would provide resources for a wide range of activities. Many of these initiatives had community development and the VCOSOs as the delivery vehicles that would be used to engage and increase the numbers of people in communities who felt able to influence decisions in their local communities.

Although the way in which the women participants in this research were involved could be viewed as fitting the definition of 'empowerment', the way in which they worked, and their motivation and drive had little that linked them directly to the government's notion of community empowerment. Craig and Mayo (1995) review popular and conflicting usages of the terminology of community, participation and empowerment throughout the world. They examine the motivation of governments seeing community participation as a way of ensuring that 'development projects reach the poorest in the most efficient and cost effective way' (ibid: 2). They also note that the strategies to promote participation and empowerment from governments and international agencies 'have largely turned to the NGOs to deliver these programmes'. They argue that 'empowering the poor' has become an almost universal slogan with reducing public spending as another recurring theme. They consider potential tensions between the needs of the community, the NGOs, private corporations and government. The same has been the case in the UK, with the state looking to the 'Third Sector' to become the government's delivery agency. As long ago as 1995, Mayo and Craig discussed the 'madness of governments funding this work, mainly because of the contradictions between 'empowering people' while at the same time controlling the nature of that empowerment' (ibid: 8). The alleged desire of the government to 'give' power to communities while at the same retaining control through funding and funding requirements, has been a consistent feature in my research.

It was clear from the interviews with the women, that most of the participants were operating outside of government agendas and were able to do this because they did not require government funding or government recognition in order to survive. They started their journeys when they were younger, very much 'against the state' and the status quo, wanting to 'change the world' to bring about a 'better way of doing

things'. Some experienced collective and direct action themselves when they were younger, such actions as Caroline lying in front of the cruise missiles.

*We did Cruise Watch they were transporting stuff through the streets. We used to just lie in front of the lorries, paint ourselves white, and just lay there. It was quite dangerous when I think about it now.*

*Caroline*

Betty started a sit in to protest at the 'establishments' treatment of the lecturers at her local college and Alison joining her mother on marches and rallies. Some of the women had witnessed the 'success' of peaceful protest and collective action through Greenham Common and with the Women's Peace Movement in the 60s and 70s. Other women, if they did not witness the success of direct and collective action, they witnessed the process of people coming together, working together trying to bring about change at a national if not international level (Lucy, Bella, Caroline, Barbara.)

The women themselves, having taken part in action that had been instigated, organised and established by others in their early life, went on to become the catalysts that empowered other people to take part in their communities. Perhaps the most successful of the women in this respect in terms of numbers of people who were enabled to participate in their community, was Joan who had 'empowered' 59 local community members to become involved in their local community, by contributing to the various services that her community organisation had developed for those in need in the local community. The term 'empowered' is used loosely here and does not sign up to the government term, which clearly has a strong element of being controlled by governments.

The women in this research are creating a very different type of 'empowerment'. They are using their own skills, knowledge and passion to establish the vehicles by which local community members can become involved and participate in their communities. They have a focus on the disadvantages and social injustices that they are seeking to tackle, and they are not controlled by external agencies. The women could not however deliver their activities without enlisting others to participate. Wood et al. (2015) suggest that:

Participation is altering people's position from passive beneficiaries to actively shaping design, delivery and evaluation of services (Wood et al., 2015: 24)

In this sense the women who are the focus of this research, used their own skills, knowledge and experience, built up over many years, to act as the catalyst to engender participation and empowerment. In this sense, their activity is not restricted or controlled by what the state says that they should or can do. The means through which they enable this participation to happen are the small-unregistered community groups that are operating, as identified by TSRC as 'Below The Radar'.

McCabe et al. (2010) discuss how much rhetoric, anecdote has been evident about the role, function, and strengths of small voluntary and community based activity, without that rhetoric being based on actual knowledge of these groups. In a series of research projects, TSRC describes 'distinctiveness' of these groups as they discovered it from their research.

### **Distinctiveness of below the radar organisations**

The TSRC (McCabe, 2010; McCabe et al., 2010; and Soteri-Proctor, 2011) identified that distinctive features of these 'invisible' groups included:

- the personality of leaders,
- the fact that many women's groups were run by people who had experienced oppression for themselves and were keen to help make changes for others
- they are not tied to any specific ways of working by funding contracts and are free to lobby as they see fit;
- they may seem to have a single focus but fulfil multiple roles at a community level;
- they are embedded within their communities;
- they are more fluid, flexible and informal than the mainstream;
- they are uninhibited by bureaucracy

While these elements of distinctiveness are not the only ones identified by TSRC research, they are the ones that identify well, with the findings of this research. The

women experiencing life challenges themselves have an affinity with those they seek to help. They are offering a wide range of diverse services to their communities through their involvement in these small below the radar groups. The bureaucracy of others does not hinder them but instead the women are able to choose their own mode of delivery, to bring about social justice, and change in way that the larger groups are often no longer able to.

What the sector is about is social justice, that is what it is about, but actually, I think a lot of the sector has forgotten that in a meaningful way.

(McCabe et al: 2010:10)

Much of the distinctiveness identified by the TSRC echoes a number of the already discussed reasons why the women have taken this route to achieve their aims. The freedom of operation, the ability to create worlds that are suited to their aims, the lack of control by other agencies, their ability to stick to their mission of social justice and equality, and their concern for future generations.

### **Independence**

One of the guiding factors that enables the women to operate in this way as mentioned previously, is being in small community groups that are not reliant on government funding in the way that the larger organisations are. The National Coalition for Independent Action (NCIA) highlighted the dilemma of those activists, who are trying to bring about change in communities, accepting funding for outside sources that have their own agendas:

Money does not prompt activism, but is a major factor in silencing it. Active dissenters are not paid to be activists, nor are they motivated by money.

(NCIA 2015: 2)

The women in this research repeatedly emphasise the lack of monetary reward being their motivation, and NCIA endorse this with the statement.

Empowerment of the relatively powerless has inherently limited possibilities under capitalism (ibid: 3)

The findings of this research reveal a wide and diverse range of community organisations that the women have been involved in establishing. These range from support groups for BME families; training for ex-offenders; a community hub that has grown from its initial aims to support isolated older people to offer exercise classes, young peoples' activities, advice and a community shop. All of these groups, at least in their initial stages were unregistered and survived on small grants and volunteer input. The women interviewees often made significant personal sacrifice to establish these groups. For example, Kari who set up the organisation to support prisoners and ex-offenders from the community in which she was living, gave up full time work and the status of her previous job to enter into a world that was uncertain and to some extent unknown. She did this because she felt the current system was failing offenders and felt there had to be another and better way to offer services.

Miriam had a strong belief in people of all religions coming together, working together to offer services in their community and to better understand and accept each other. She restricted her paid employment in order that she would have the time to devote to the Multi-Cultural Forum. She admitted at one stage that she felt 'addicted' to the cause. Colin Rochester in his guide for small groups 'Juggling on a Unicycle' (1999) outlines the benefits of organisations remaining 'small' and retaining their independence.

In order to remain independent, it is not just about the individuals themselves not receiving money, but about the small groups in which they are involved retaining their independence by remaining small with regards to their need for monetary resource (2).

Joan's organisation, for instance, when at the height of its activity, was only requiring £8,000 per annum on which to operate and was accessing this through independent sources. Miriam's group needed £2,000. What the small VCOSOs featured in this research need to survive are people who will participate and give their time. They

also need venues to meet in and small amounts of funding, not large amounts of government funding. As the TSRC report, this is crucial as 'It is the lack of the need for significant resources that enables the small groups to stay 'below the radar with their activity' McCabe et al., (2010).

### **The dilemma of remaining Below the Radar**

The work of Barings Independence Panel (2013) was highlighted in the literature review as identifying how the voluntary and community sector has become compromised by its need for larger amounts of funding, much of which is coming from government and therefore linked to their agendas, whatever government that happens to be. However, the price of remaining independent would appear to be remaining small, undervalued and remaining invisible. This invisibility is especially true of the women who are not only invisible because of their involvement in the small below the radar groups but also because lack of research had led to a gap in knowledge about their involvement and contribution. This is the dilemma. The women have found the world that they want within the small below the radar groups that they develop themselves with others, mainly women. They are 'unfettered' by the requirements of government funding. But does this mean that the women have also sacrificed their desire to be transformative and to 'change the world'?

### **Transformative Action**

A series of questions arise from the analysis to this stage.

- Should we be concerned for these women and the lack of recognition of the value of their contributions?
- By accepting the situation, the women are in, are we perpetuating the male hegemony referred to by Ledwith (2009) and reducing the chances of arriving at 'a transformative reach, from personal empowerment to collective global action' (ibid: 694).
- Are we allowing the status quo to continue where women and their work in communities remain invisible or is there another way to view this and increase their influence?

As has been seen from literature throughout this thesis, it can be argued that the independence of the VCS is significantly under threat. The only remaining active

National Community Development Organisation, the Community Development Foundation (CDF), relied on £481,296 of its core funding being awarded by government and statutory sources, with only £33,875 coming from independent trusts has now closed (2016). How, free was this organisation to add a critical voice for the sector?

The women themselves, as can be seen from the findings, are motivated by different rewards to money and status, but the lack of recognition, which they encounter, is problematic. Nancy Naples (1998) sought to gain skills to work with women activists to link them into feminism, as a route to greater influence amongst other things, and yet it was not a movement that the women in her research had aligned themselves to. The same could be said about the women who were the subjects of this research, given the discussion of findings undertaken in this chapter. The words 'feminism' and 'feminist' are mentioned in the interviews only four times and three of these were by the same participant. It could be easy to conclude from this, that while the women value and promote equality and social justice for others; they are not linked into movements that would fight for social justice for themselves. But the notion of 'women' is high on their agenda with the word 'women' being mentioned more than 400 times in their interviews. They clearly care about women, about helping other women, working with other women, networking with women. Miriam who had set up a multicultural forum was reticent to be interviewed without the other women. The group as whole showed a great compassion for each other.

*We are women we are mothers we are not mothers we are children of mothers and mothers do not expect reward...we have each other we love each other, we respect each other and we care about each other. You cannot live alone it is caring and sharing again*

Miriam

The priorities of the women are not personal or monetary gain. These are not their ambitions but this does not mean that their contribution should go unrecognised. There is strong evidence from research, particularly from the TSRC (McCabe, 2010; McCabe et al., 2010 and Soteri-Proctor, 2011) and from the research I have carried out through South West Foundation (Crawley, 2008 and 2015), that operating below

the radar gives the women a freedom to achieve their aims, and to create alternative world which is free from the interference of men.

One reason for the lack of evidence about women's contributions to the sector could be, that they are working in a part of the sector that is difficult to access for academics and researchers. There is an argument therefore, as has been the case in this research, and as discussed in the methodology chapter, for the researcher to be an 'insider'.

It would appear, from the evidence in this research, that the women working in small groups are not aiming to bring about the global transformation, which Ledwith and others have argued, is a crucial goal. Ledwith (1997) used examples such as Saul Alinsky of the People's Organisation using 'power, action and justice to fight racism, poverty and Isolation' (Ledwith, 1997; 28). Alinsky's form of community organising differed from the terminology used in the UK in the 70s, which was far more aligned to Community Work. Alinsky was said to be using people power to tackle private and public organisations in Chicago initially to bring about change. His way of working was to educate poor people in America to bring about change using their collective power for tackling poverty. In his own words his tactic was

To rub the resentment of people of the community: fan the latent hostilities...to the point of overt expression. (Alinsky, 1972: 116-17) as cited by Ledwith (1997: 89).

This research has not considered the government supported 'community organising' in the UK. The women involved were active in their communities prior to government funded community organising being brought into the UK. It came into being with the Coalition Government in 2008 as part of the Big Society Agenda. Community organising was not particularly welcomed in the UK when the government introduced it. It was funded and controlled entirely by government and did not have the same momentum as the Alinsky model, or a leader with the alleged charismatic personality of Alinsky. The current government has now almost ceased funding community organising and existing models appear to resemble community development in the UK. Despite the reputation of community organising in the US as being radical and

bringing about change, it was also ironically funded by the state. Alinsky died in 1972 and the movement has kept going with less impetus. Now that government funding has ceased, the People's Organisation in the States has closed and the question has to be asked exactly how radical is the change that is achieved, if the movement that is funded by government can be closed through the withdrawal of that funding? As Ledwith (1997) identified

Alinsky's organisers were paid for their skills and experience to support the development of other community organisations. Would this model be a possibility in the UK where the perennial dilemma for community workers is their contradictory role 'in and against the state?' (ibid: 90)

There is however evidence from the data collected and referred to in this research, that the work in their communities, which the women have carried out, has involved elements of transformation. The women had tested the water of collective action and community action when they were younger. They settled for addressing local community issues through small community groups. They used their skills, expertise and knowledge as the magic ingredient to conjure up activities and service and harness community assets such as people to bring their skills to bear on the broader community. Through this, they were able to instigate a form of transformation in the neighbourhoods and communities in which they were operating. They were bringing about change for the better for communities. They have been offering services to some of the people most in need in communities helping them to transform their lives but also undertaking all this activity with an independence and in a way that is denied to larger organisations who are compromised by their funding source.

The women featured in this research have a unique way of working, of tackling problems, or using their 'sense of otherness'. There is a clear and important role for feminism, but this is not where these women sit. They are instead what, I argue in Chapter 6 to be 'women alchemists'. The development the concept of the women alchemist, the conclusions from the research, recommendations arising from the research, future action which is taking place related to the research, and evaluative reflections on the research overall, including the methodology will conclude the thesis in chapter 6.

## **Chapter 6 – Conclusions and recommendations**

This final chapter starts by presenting the research conclusions and contributions to new knowledge. The title, 'Women Led Organisations' (WLOs) is proposed as a means of naming the small organisations which have been the subject of this research, and it is argued this could be applied more widely in the VCS and beyond. The model of 'Women Alchemists' is also introduced as a new way of capturing the essence of the ways of working, motivations, characteristics and approaches of the women involved in the research. The recommendations include the proposal of the adoption of the 'Women Alchemist' model, and the title of 'Women Led Organisations' as they would provide a means for women to be visible and their work valued as this research has shown it can and should be. A key outcome of this research has been to make visible the nature and significance of the work carried out by women-led BTR groups, and the need to develop research and conceptual tools to refocus attention and develop understanding of this important area of social renewal in the contemporary world. The chapter moves on to evaluate the research methodology making use of Bryman's (2012) general framework for social research, and Hesse-Biber et al.'s (2014) perspectives on feminist research. The chapter concludes with recommendations including an outline of potential future actions arising from this research.

### **Contribution to new knowledge**

The chapter now presents the conclusions from the analysis and discussion of the research findings and explains how they add to our knowledge of women's contribution to communities through small VCSOs in the South West Region.

#### **A shared understanding of 'community'**

Through the literature 'community' has been identified as a 'slippery concept' that is difficult to define (Chanan, 2002; Craig et al., 2011; Dominelli, 1999 and 2006; Popple, 1995, 2015 and Twelvetrees, 2001 and 2008). Popple (2015: 12) sums this up well when stating:

Defining what the notion of community means, however, has never been straightforward. In fact, it could be described as one of the most challenging of sociological concepts to analyse successfully.

Popple (2015) also argues that the concept of community has been evicted from British Sociology because the word has been used so much with so many different meanings that 'the word itself has become almost devoid of precise meaning' (ibid: 12). The women interviewees in this research used the word 'community' 111 times without attempting a definition, demonstrating a core of an accepted meaning for the word 'community' that perhaps defies a fuller definition. They use the term in everyday life as a prefix with a collective meaning identified by its context, hence reducing the need for definition. Exploring the multiple meanings of community for these women uncovered key aspects of how they engaged with the challenging issues encountered in their localities.

### **The nature of small community groups**

The evidence in Chapter 2 indicated that the small community groups in which these women are involved are under-researched. This research has helped to fill the gap by focussing on small VCSOs and the results highlight their distinctiveness. The work of the Third Sector Research Centre has helped to draw some attention and a better understanding of the nature of small VCSOs while raising the profile of this part of the sector. The expression 'below the radar' (BTR) has become a short-hand used to describe small VCSOs and more informal or semi-formal activities in the 'Third Sector'. Literature reviews and definitions papers completed for TSRC's "the BTR work stream" (McCabe et al., 2010 and Phillimore et al., 2010,) revealed a wide range of gaps in knowledge about this part of the 'Third Sector'. The research also found a number of distinctive challenges that face small community groups operating 'below the radar' which have major implications for their future and for their ability to have a voice. These are:

- They may be operating below a number of different radars, including not being engaged in or linked to any development agency
- They lack of any kind of resource from statutory sources or network organisations
- The smaller groups are also not engaged in any kind of policy agenda and remain outside of the radar of influence. What is local stays local.
- Small BTR VCSOs often lack registration with any regulatory body such as the Charity Commission or with development networks.

- Small VCSOs survive on small amounts of financial resources and rely particularly heavily on the time, motivation and resources of unpaid staff.

A further significant distinctive element the TSRC has surprisingly not commented on is the fact that so many of these small groups are led and managed by women.

Further research has been published on BTR groups in 2015 and 2016 and includes a Big Lottery Publication (Austwick, 2016) a publication by the Young Foundation (Draghony and Boleman, 2015). Both consider smaller groups to some degree. Neither report makes any mention of the gender perspective or women's contribution to this part of the sector. Women's involvement in communities through small community groups, which are developed and led by women, remains unidentified and invisible. Among the main implications of this for funders and policy makers is that there is no impetus to invest in these women or to invest in women generally, to encourage their leadership and community engagement role. There is no financial investment and no commitment. In my research however, the significant involvement that women are undertaking in communities through their general involvement in small VCSOs and in particular as leaders of small VCSOs are prominent findings.

### **Distinctiveness of women led small VCSOs**

The findings and analysis of my research lead to the following conclusions about the distinctiveness of this part of the voluntary sector:

- Women are the main contributors to small VCSOs.
- That involvement has been historically ignored and continues to be ignored.
- The women involved in small VCSOs play an important role in the development of social capital but evidence shows that this is often not identified or valued.
- The social injustices and the inequalities that women are tackling through small VCOs are not only those associated traditionally with women, but with the wider community.
- The women themselves have not linked what they do to the feminist movement and yet there are many similar bonds. The women do not describe themselves or what they do with the terminology of feminism.

## **Without a voice**

The women in this research appear to have no public voice. Their involvement in small community groups, while providing a space for the women to develop their ideas, also links them to sector that is in itself, despite the recognition of its contribution to stocks of social capital, almost invisible from the political and public agenda. Chapter 1 outlined the context in which the women and small VCSOs were operating and analysed the desire of successive governments to utilise the VCS to deliver their agendas, viewing it as a vehicle to increased community engagement and community involvement. The literature shows how concern has grown around the issue of the sector accepting funding from government to deliver services and how this direct funding from government restricts and inhibits the sector's ability to be independent of state. The Baring Foundation (2014); Chanan and Miller (2011 and 2014; Mayo, 1974; McCabe et al., 2010; and Phillimore et al., 2010) all argue that state funding of the VCS can be a threat to its independence and that this is of great concern. It has also affected larger VCSOs' ability to be advocates for the sector and for the individuals in communities who the sector seeks to assist. It is difficult to bite the hand that feed you. As the National Coalition for Independent Action states 'money (from the state) does not prompt activism, but is a major factor in silencing it' (NCIA, 2014: 5).

## **Implications for small VCSOs**

Despite the challenges outlined, small VCSOs, as identified through this research, are a significant part of the VCS, which is currently able to retain its independence (McCabe et al., 2010 and Phillimore et al., 2010). While lack of recognition and being undervalued leaves the smaller groups invisible, it does provide a flexibility that enables them to be able to respond to the voice and needs of those that they seek to serve. Requiring small amounts of resources and being invisible can mean they are not open to state intervention, as is the case with larger organisations. Larger organisations are open to advances by governments who seek to fund them to deliver state agendas. The need for significant funding that the larger organisations has the potential damaging effect of leaving the sector open to being controlled by the source of that funding, which is often the state. Small groups need to be able to be responsive to their communities and to be flexible. It may be that it is the only

small groups who are not funded by the state who can be truly independent and offer the needed levels of responsiveness and flexibility. Being 'Below the Radar' can bring independence and freedom that is not enjoyed by many of the larger VCS agencies.

### **The dilemma above the radar**

There is however, a dilemma that means any raising of the profile of small community groups and women's involvement in these must be handled with the utmost respect and care. My research has highlighted a dilemma faced by the women who are the subjects of this research, and others like them. The evidence has been presented that women are heavily involved in delivering services to many of the most vulnerable people in communities in the UK. They do it with passion, skill and knowledge that is often based on personal experience rather than formal qualification and this involves almost a chemistry that cannot be defined. Tackling the injustice of this lack of recognition of the worth of these women is something, which should be undertaken, particular given the feminist paradigm in which this research is located. Is it however, what the women themselves would want and need?

Is there an element that by bringing them out of the safety of the shadows their 'magic' or artistry would be damaged or destroyed? BTR groups have been seen by published research including McCabe et al. (2010) and Soteri-Proctor (2011) and this research to benefit greatly from remaining under the radar. What would the consequences be of these groups becoming more visible to government and others? As one of the participants in Phillimore et al., (2010) states:

getting in touch with the radar '*can burn you*' (12)

### **Women in small VCSOs**

#### **Range of community activity engaged in by women**

Women's involvement in their communities through small VCSOs is not confined to traditional 'women's issues'. Women are involved in contributing to a wide range of community activity and action. These small VCSOs that are led by women offer

support and services are aimed at assisting the wider community including young people, old people, carers, disabled people, people with mental health issues, offender and ex-offenders. The services that they are involved in providing include the running of community centres, community hubs, training, support and activities, social groups, advice and information services. Women's contribution to the Women's Sector has been recognised by organisations such as the Women's Resource Centre (2007b). Women's contribution to the wider community through smaller VCSOs has to date however received little attention (Bond et al., 2008; McCabe et al., 2010; Phillimore et al., and Popple, 1995). This research makes a significant contribution to clarifying and understanding the roles that women play in communities through their involvement in small VCSOs. Research focussing of women's involvement in BTR groups has suffered from a lack of visibility alongside that of the small-unregistered VCSOs themselves, which is why this particular research is important to the field. This research has provided a range of new evidence of that broader involvement of women in the voluntary and community sector but what is it, which leads to that involvement?

### **Women's motivation to become involved in their communities**

Given that there is little if any monetary gain and little status and recognition from anyone other than those communities they assist, what is it that motivates the women in this research to become involved? What keeps them involved? This research asked those questions, and there is evidence of a variety of factors being involved. Strong evidence was found that making a difference is a prime motivational factor. Their narratives show women wanting to 'change the world' when younger or wanting to find a 'better way to run the world' through campaigning and direct action.

As the women's pathways progressed, this sense of wanting to 'change the world' altered to the women wanting to make a difference to individuals around them, who they feared may be suffering some form of injustice, social isolation or lack of opportunity. The women are also motivated by a sense of achievement when they see the change they have brought about. While their role as leaders of these small VCSOs is different from that of individuals involved in traditional volunteering within larger groups, there are some similarities between their 'job satisfaction' in their

unpaid roles in the small community groups and that experienced by volunteers in more traditional settings. The women show a great desire to bring about change, to tackle social inequality and injustice not just for women but for the wider community.

They make choices which are less likely to gain status and financial reward to enable them to give their skills knowledge and time to lead on this change. The women also need to engage the help of others to help them deliver their aspirations. The evidence from this research strongly suggests that the others are more likely to be other women, although there is some acknowledgement that men as allies can also be extremely useful. Recruiting other women and working with other women helps them to move forward and keep them going.

### **The Women's' earlier Life**

The women's earlier life may have had an influence on their growing desire to become involved in their communities. Analyses of the women's descriptions of their childhood backgrounds revealed common powerful themes. These included personal formal and informal involvement in community action when younger; formal and informal family formal involvement in community actions; a community ethos of care and / or an ethos of care expressed by a role model. These factors resonated with Bond et al.'s (2008) research.

The other aspect of the women's earlier life was the fact that they had suffered some form of hardship. For some this included the loss of a parent when they were younger for others it also included experiencing poverty at an early age. Lister (2015) develops the term 'othering' where, in her view, the experience of poverty is not just about government statistics but goes beyond this. This has been described as 'the poverty-shame nexus', shaped by 'dominant discourses'. 'Othering describes how the 'non-poor' treat 'the poor' as different' (Lister 2015: 4). It is this difference, which is the key in my research, not necessarily only in relation to poverty. There is evidence from the data that indicates that the sense of 'othering' that the women had experienced when younger, which set them apart for others in their communities, may have given them a connection or bond with those they were seeking to help through their involvement in small community groups

## **Women and social capital and conflict**

The literature indicated the contribution that small community groups make toward stocks of bonding and bridging social capital (Kirby-Geddes et al., 2012; Putnam, 2000; Szreter and Woodcock 2004). The ability of small community groups to bring people together, to assist in networking and building trust, is well documented in the literature alongside its perceived ability to add to the strength and health of communities. (Gilchrist, 2004; Putnam, 1995 and 2000, World Bank, 2102). Concern however was shown about the lack of recognition of the part that women play in building stocks of social capital and about how this social capital is misappropriated by men (Dominelli, 1990; Portes and Landolt, 1996; Portes and Sensenbrenner, 1993).

While viewed as beneficial, social capital is also viewed as having the potential to contribute to social inequality. While some people were in the networks, others could be excluded from these networks. Portes and Landolt (1996) summarise these concerns. Dominelli (1990) argues that Putnam ignores issues of gender within the notion of social capital and there is little recognition of the contribution made by women. There is some acceptance by the women interviewed to the fact that just by being women they are not viewed as important as the men. The women however, come together to work with each other in a positive way and gain strength from other women. They accept that they have different ways of working to the men. Rather than envy the men their position and status, they almost seem to pity the men for not having strong relationships and the bonding support of others that the women have. They are clear that they do feel marginalised but they also find ways to develop other more positive forms of organising that they value.

Conflict and aggression are activities that the women associate with men. There is virtually no mention by the individual women of conflict as an issue in the groups they are involved in or between groups. Mention in the literature of the conflict model of social action (Dominelli, 1990; Kirby-Geddes et al., 2012; Inglehart and Norris, 2003; Lowndes, 2004; and Shapiro, 1997) more often referred to activists challenging the state and state provided services than conflict between groups (Lees and Mayo 1984). Different motivation and ways of working between genders may go some way to explain the lack of focus on conflict, as do the different constructions of

society faced by women and men. (Bond et al., 2008; Dominelli, 2006; Kaplan, 1997 and Popple, 1995) have highlighted the different motivations women have from men, including less emphasis on financial gain. There was little mention in the literature about conflict in this particular part of the sector as confirmed by the Third Sector Research Centre 2016. More research is needed on the topic of conflict.

### **Is this feminism?**

According to their own accounts, the women who are the focus of this research did not set out to deliver a feminist agenda or to tackle gender inequalities. They were seeking a fair and more just society for all. As Dominelli (2006) expresses it, they had 'aspirations for a different social order'. It is also based on the notion that the 'well-being of people should be at the heart of the social agenda' Dominelli, (2006: 3). The women did not identify themselves as feminist but that does not mean that their achievements should not be recognised and celebrated by and for feminists. Dominelli captures this well when stating:

Women's heroic efforts to reshape the world in more humane direction by working through the local level, inspire both practitioners and educators, and challenge those who seek to write these stories to do so in ways that accurately portray women's voices, concerns and achievements.

(Dominelli, 2006: xii)

### **Women Led Organisations (WLOs)**

There is a need for a straightforward and understandable way of identifying the small community organisations that lie within the Voluntary and Community Sector that are led by women. When considering the findings and conclusions from this research, I would argue that a new term such as 'Women Led Organisations' (WLOs) would be a clear and appropriate way of naming small VCSOs, and many other organisations in the VCS and beyond which are indeed led by women.

VCSOs operating below the radar, led and often founded by women, should not be confused with the Women's Organisations within the Women's Sector, which have their own very clear identification and remit, working 'towards transformational and

substantive equality for women' (WRC). WRC (2007a and 2007b) argue for women only spaces and work that focusses on 'women's issues'. Organisations such as women's refuges; women's health organisations; organisations tackling abuse of women; organisations supporting and promoting women's rights, health and wellbeing are essential and have been recognised over the years for their valuable and contribution to women and to gender issues. These women's organisations are a vital part of the VCS.

Many of them, when compared to the small BTR VCSOs, have significant incomes. The WRC for example has an income of over £900,000. A voluntary organisation operating in the field of Domestic Abuse in Devon has an income of over half a million. This is not where the small women led VCSOs belong. There is however, an urgent need to identify the contribution that women are making to communities, through their involvement in small VCSOs that occupy the wider community agenda. The use of a title such as 'Women Led Organisations' (WLOs) would be a major step in establishing a clearer identity for these organisations and groups. The women who are involved invisibly in community action benefit in various ways from their invisibility. If they remain invisible and their work remains uncelebrated and undervalued, then this is in itself a social injustice, as the major contribution that women make to communities will continue to be unrecognised and their voices unheard. There is a need to find a way to identify and celebrate the achievements of women and the value of their small VCSOs without damaging their freedom and independence. The title of Women Led Organisations could help this to take place.

Based on the findings and their analysis, the women themselves are not aware of their own skills, nor do they fully appreciate the achievements and value of their efforts and of those with whom they work. The evidence from Dominelli (2006) and Gilchrist (2004) suggests this is achievable through networking where natural alliances can be nurtured and strengthened, and possibilities for joint action, development and discussion.

## **Lack of research**

This research has highlighted how little research has taken place into small UK based VCISOs. It is unacceptable that so little research exists into this part of the VCS. In what other field of any significance do researchers constantly omit such a significant proportion of the activity, which takes place in the field from their research? Data collection from the BTR VCS is difficult, and there are challenges in access, but these reasons do not constitute a reason for such a lack of research. These challenges could be overcome by enabling, supporting and encouraging the 'insider' researchers to undertake this access role, where they can then act as researchers themselves, as they have the background, knowledge and above all trust of the organisations.

## **Women Alchemists**

The metaphor of alchemy is used here because of the traditional association with alchemy as an ancient science, associated traditionally with men who used their skills and knowledge to attempt the transformation of an ingredient of low value (sand) into a metal of high value (gold). It is now acknowledged that behind a number of the male alchemists there was often a highly skilled woman who was not given credit for her contribution. When considering the lack of recognition of women in small VCISOs, their lack of visibility and recognised value, this echoes to some extent the situation of past alchemists who were women. In his recent book about women alchemists, Gordon (2013: 2) refers to how these women were 'hidden from history' and that their 'stories had been neglected'. Historically for some women such recognition of their skills would even have put them in danger of persecution. Many of the sciences locate in the male domain, so alchemy has often ignored women's contribution. The results of this research support the argument that it is however, a term and skill, which has real relevance to the way women in small VCISOs operate and work.

In recent years there has been a slow but growing use of the word 'alchemy' to denote the process of transformation, often a transformation that has some element that escapes definition. The unique qualities of the women who are the subject of this research and the lack of recognition and respect given to their involvement in

community has been clear from this research. This research indicates that the Women Alchemist analysis and understanding it provides of the engagement and activism of individuals in local VCSOs should not be ignored. It is also important to identify the women, not just to the outside world but to provide them with models of the social world in which their views, approaches and skills are visible and attributed the significance they deserve. Recognising and adopting more widely the views and experiences, as reflected in this research would give the women involved a greater belief in their roles and activities and a better understanding of their own worth. A new framework can establish a space where women working in small VCSOs can retain their freedom to utilise their skills and to perform their artistry in a way that values what they do. I shall now propose a framework, which I believe, has the potential to achieve this. The framework establishes the model of 'Women Alchemists'.

An interestingly relevant publication in 1999 was Charles Handy's book 'The New Alchemists'. Handy generally writes with authority and accessibility about organisational behaviour and management. He published 'Understanding Voluntary Organisations' in 1990 and has been cited in a wide range of scholarly writings in the field of VCSOs. Handy interviewed 29 individuals who had made a great success of their lives and had achieved remarkable things in 'The New Alchemists'. His goal was not to interview people who had made it to the 'top of their professions' or who were 'highly successful business people', although many of the people he interviewed could be described in this way. He chose the individuals that he selected because, in his view, 'they all turned something made out of the equivalent of base metal into gold' (Handy, 1999: 20). He gave this group of people a title of the 'New Alchemists'. While many of these New Alchemists, both men and women, became wealthy and people of status this was not their prime motivation when they started in their journeys. Handy interviewed his participants because he wished to discover their 'pathways to successes'. As the book progresses, he makes use of the term 'alchemist' to describe their unique role in making much from nothing, as if making' gold from grains of sand, a seemingly magical process of transformation' Handy (1999: 3). The 29 people interviewed by Handy were all well-known names. They included Bob Ailing, the British Airways boss; Charles Dunstone of Carphone Warehouse; Geoff Mulligan of Demos and perhaps the most famous of all Richard

Branson of Virgin. In his interviews, Handy considers whether there are any common threads between the successful individuals that he interviewed. Not all individuals shared the same common threads, but there were enough commonalities between people for Handy to come to some conclusions.

Handy was investigating what motivated people to create something from nothing. What got them started, what drove them on and what kept them going. None of those interviewed came from the VCS, although there were one or two of the individuals selected who were not strictly speaking in the business world, and whose creations fell into what could be described as the philanthropic field. There was however, unequal representation of men in his sample and some of the minority of women included came more from the philanthropic world than the business world. For example, Julia Middleton, who was one of the founders of Common Purpose, is not strictly from the business sector. Many of these 'alchemists' identified by Handy had become wealthy through their 'inventions' but this was not the purpose of their venture.

Handy was asking some of the same questions in his research into entrepreneurs that was asked of the women interviewees in this research. The women in this research had set up small community groups, and dedicated their lives to trying to bring about change in their communities, often using their own time, skills and passions to create something from very little. Like Handy's research, this research also asked where these individual women started; what motivated them and sustained them given that it was clear that was neither money nor status. Both sets of accounts are of ordinary people doing extraordinary things.

I read Handy's book long after I had started on this research. I had interviewed the women and had listened to their narratives. On reading Handy's report, it was difficult not to see common threads in answers and themes in their narratives to the narratives of Handy's New Alchemists. Like Handy, I found that not all common threads applied to all the women but to a significant majority. Handy's common features of the New Alchemists offered the opportunity within this research to compare the common threads with the women I had interviewed. The results would help to test out if the concept of 'Women Alchemists' could be a helpful contribution

to defining the characteristics of these women, why they are driven to bring about change in their communities and how they got there.

In order to develop the framework for the 'Women Alchemists' model, the next section firstly identifies the common features Handy (1999) identified across his group of 'New Alchemists'. Not all of these features were present for all of those he interviewed, but they did appear frequently enough to be included. Both types of Alchemists:

- Are very much their own person, with a commitment and drive
- Possess a dedication and a passion that drives them forwards
- Follow their heart not their desire for fame
- Do not have a driving passion for money.
- Have a passion that generates energy and the capacity for hard work.
- See discouragement as a challenge
- Do not readily fit into working for large organisations.
- Possess an urge to express themselves.
- Have a driving need to make a difference and bring about change
- Demonstrate leadership
- Have inherited traits from parents or grandparents
- Left formal schooling at an early age
- Had suffered the death of a parent at an early age (some)

While not definitive, these common traits provide components of a framework.

Guild et al., (2014) utilise the terminology of alchemy to describe a form of community transformation in their report on volunteering.

...volunteering at its core remains transformational. It transforms both the giver and the receiver...It transforms the organisation's ability to deliver to beneficiaries. The process of volunteering is a form of alchemy. Put simply it brings out the best in people.

(Guild et al., 2014: 2)

While the Women Alchemists in this study practiced, a form of volunteering that differed from traditional volunteering in that they had designed their own worlds in which to deliver the change that they were passionate about, they did give their time, skills and their energy to bring about change in communities.

Outside of the UK, a further example of the use of the concept of alchemy as having a transformational core is available. An organisation in Zambia, which seeks to improve organisational boards in the country by investing in women and promoting them into leadership, has utilised the terminology of alchemy. The Zambian organisation, Alchemy - Women in Leadership (AWIL) is a national initiative dedicated to supporting a higher representation of female leadership throughout the Zambian workforce and the broader community. It recognises that boards within both the business field and the community field work better when more women are involved. This approach characterises their training, which aims at promoting women into leadership.

Research has shown that companies perform better with women on boards. In Zambia, the Government of the Republic of Zambia has committed to 30% women in leadership positions through the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (AWIL, 2016). They promote a message to businesses, government and agencies in Zambia using the notion of alchemy, where women can transform communities for the better. If all involved invest in those women, all will benefit from a greater prospect of transformation. My research brings a similar message for the UK. This use of alchemy links in well with the way in which the women in this research utilise their time and skills and act as leaders to transform elements of the community into a diverse range of community services. They enthuse and enlist new members, new volunteers to share their passion and to bring about change, often for the most vulnerable in communities.

### **Change and transformation**

The women in this research have a history of seeking wider societal transformation. They wanted to 'change the world'. They engaged with this aim through collective and direct action. They witnessed some of the changes that these approaches could bring, such as through the efforts and sacrifices made by the women at Greenham Common to stop nuclear missiles being transported through communities and

threatening the survival of future generations. Some had even joined in this collective action. As the women's work in the small groups continued, they tended to turn their actions towards the community to which they were directly connected. They concentrated their efforts on making a difference to individuals and groups in those communities.

Ledwith (2009) and Chanan and Miller (2014) argue that community work and community development should contribute to a wider transformation of society. Chanan and Miller (2014) describe 'transformative neighbourhoods', which they define 'not as places which completely change their character, but neighbourhoods which make it easier for people to transform the conditions of their lives (170). The evidence from this research suggests this local type of action is also 'transformative'. If the significant numbers of small community groups which exist, according to McCabe et al., (2010) are correct, and there is no reason to doubt this, then the numbers of women engaged in trying to make communities and neighbourhood more equal places for everyone through this more localised community action are large.

Crawley (2015) for example, has recorded over 300 individuals engaged in the 42 groups funded over the last year with small grants. With 5,200 direct beneficiaries supported and 23,000 indirect beneficiaries recorded. The numbers are significant. The people benefitting directly are often the most vulnerable people in our communities whose lives the small groups have managed to change in some way. This represents a potential considerable community transformation, even if we ignore the figures for indirect beneficiaries. To help further establish the key characteristics of this model, a table providing details of the common features and counterpointing examples from Handy's 'New Alchemists' and the 'Women Alchemists' of this research follows.

New Alchemists	Women alchemists
<b>General features</b>	
<p>Very much their own person, with a commitment and drive.</p>	<p>Individuals who had set themselves on a certain road based around social justice. Although recruiting people to their cause their initial venture was individual.</p>
<p>Possessing a dedication and a passion.</p> <p>Terrance Conran was passionate about design.</p> <p>Trevor Bayliss could not stop coming up with ideas for inventions to improve the lives of less fortunate people.</p>	<p>Possessing a dedication and a passion.</p> <p>The dedication and passion of the women repeatedly features in both the focus groups and in the interviews. For example, Joan is passionate about setting up small groups as part of her community hub to support older people, mothers, children and young people. She is always looking for the next project.</p> <p>Barbara is passionate about helping and supporting people with cancer</p>
<p>Following their heart</p>	<p>Following their heart</p> <p>The women were following their own instincts and doing what they felt to be right; taking the right course of action to help people in their communities</p>
<p>The driving passion was never money.</p> <p>Money is described as the 'score' by Handy .. what they achieved, but not the reasoning behind what they set out to do. Even though many of the people</p>	<p>Money, power and status not motivating forces</p> <p>Repeatedly the women in the focus groups rejected money, power and status as motivational sources. They see those as rewards of the man's</p>

<p>that Handy interviewed had been highly successful in terms of money generation</p>	<p>world</p>
<p>Passion generates energy and the capacity for hard work.'</p> <p>Handy's New Alchemists have all laboured long hours to achieve their goals</p>	<p>Dedicating long hours and significant efforts to the cause.</p> <p>The women showed a loss of definition between their personal lives and their 'work' lives dedicating long hours to the cause.</p> <p>For example, the refuge for survivors of Domestic Abuse became part of Heather's life. Her own children joined her in the refuge and she spent long hours helping the women in all sorts of ways.</p>
<p>Including their families in all their endeavours (some of those interviewed, not all).</p> <p>A number dedicated so much of their time to their work that family breakdown occurred</p>	<p>Families a strong influence on their endeavours</p> <p>Caroline, Mary and Mari parted from their husbands but a number of the other women, kept together with their partners through a range of adversities.</p> <p>Their children were with them all the way and often their activities allowed space for their children. Such as Betty taking the children to the commune with her.</p>
<p>Seeing discouragement as a challenge</p>	<p>Keeping going at all costs</p>

	Bella kept going even though people told her you cannot because you are a woman and now tell her she cannot do things because she is old. She still keeps going.
Not able to fit into working for large organisations.  'They would be uncomfortable subordinates.'	Used small community groups as their vehicles of delivery and progression.  Did not seek to join large organisations apart from at the beginnings of their journeys.
An urge to express themselves.  There is a strong suggestion that the Alchemist urge to create new things is linked to a creative spirit	An urge to express themselves
A driving need to make a difference.  All the New Alchemists say that they wanted to make a difference. That was their driving force. 'To do that they have to do things differently.'	A desire to change the world  Virtually all of the Women alchemists expressed the view in their early life that they wanted to change the world. At time of interview they still wanted to make a difference but to individuals and the community around them. Bringing about change for the better was their main driving force.
<b>Seeds of Alchemy</b>	
Inherited traits from parents or grandparents.	Inherited traits from parents or grandparents.

<p>This was not true of all.</p>	<p>While Alison looked to her mother for inspiration, Betty had her political father, as did Joan. Barbara had the kindness of her mother toward others in the community and admitted to a creative gene inherited from her grandfather who helped design and sculpt Eros in London.</p>
<p>Left formal schooling at an early age.</p>	<p>Limited achievement from formal schooling at an early age.</p> <p>The women often mention their lack of formal qualifications and two of them started living in communes as a very young age</p>
<p>Suffered the death of a parent at an early age. (some)</p> <p>There is anecdotal evidence to show that a death of parent at a young age makes people mature quicker. Handy quotes the fact that 61% of all British Prime Ministers and most American presidents had lost one of their parents before they were 14.</p>	<p>Suffered the death of a parent at an early age. (some)</p> <p>Joan and Barbara both mentioned a parent dying then they were very young while others had a father who was 'no longer with them' either through death or just by having left the family. This is true of some of the Women alchemists but not all, although virtually all had some sort of disadvantage to endure while young.</p>

Table 11 - Common features of New Alchemists and Women Alchemists

### Common features of Women Alchemists

From the comparison undertaken to produce the table above, and the examples cited, I have constructed a set of features of Women Alchemists which is shown below.

## **General Features**

- Individuals who had set themselves on a certain road based around social justice
- Possessing a dedication and a passion
- Following their heart
- Money, power and status not motivating forces
- Dedicating long hours and significant efforts to the cause.
- Families a strong influence on their endeavours
- Keeping going at all costs
- Used small community groups as their vehicles of delivery and progression.
- An urge to express themselves
- A desire to change the world

## **Seeds of Alchemy**

- Inherited traits from parents or grandparents.
- Limited achievement from formal schooling at an early age.
- Suffered the death of a parent at an early age.

It was the belief of Handy that the New Alchemist he had interviewed, very much like the Women Alchemists interviewed for this research, were more 'interested in doing what they believed in and enjoyed' (1999: 56), than amassing fame and fortune. The Women Alchemists framework is in its early stages of development. The concept provides a means of capturing and expressing the wonder of what these women achieve without damaging its nature. The women seek social justice through their actions and seek to tackle inequalities, to use their skills and knowledge passion and inspiration to bring about wider involvement to bring about change for the better. They transform communities through their joint ventures utilising small resources to great effect. We can look for commonalties and themes to help us identify where the power of the Women Alchemists comes from but absolute analysis and definition escapes us.

## **The Women Alchemists – an illustrative pen portrait**

In order to extend the conceptualisation of Women Alchemists, a further illustrative pen portrait follows of one of the research participants. Data from Dot's transcribed interview has not been used in findings to date because at interview she did not

disclose anything about her past involvement in the community or her own background prior to her involvement with South West Foundation. Her connection with South West Foundation also appeared stronger than any of the other participants. As well as running a small organisation that had received a grant from South West Foundation, Dot was one of the first women to pilot South West Foundation's community researcher course. She then returned to repeat the course at another venue as she had enjoyed it so much. The community researcher course is open to all. It is however often only women who take part in these training programmes. The programme is based on a model of working with people in communities, to enable them to increase their confidence by undertaking research into their communities. A group of women residents working with the Foundation to seek a new way to engage communities developed the course. To date the Foundation has trained over 400 community members through this programme, including Dot. Listening to Dot's narrative, I realised that the Foundation's influence on her life had been greater than those of the other women I had interviewed. This did set her data slightly apart from the other women, who were simply grant recipients. A number of issues raised through Dot's narrative did also give certain indicators for the future, but there were no clues from the past.

#### **Dot – Pen Portrait**

Four years prior to the Foundation's involvement with Dot, she had moved some distance from an urban area to an estate in a seaside town. However, she had moved onto one of the estates that not only ranked among the top 5% most deprived communities in the country, but also had a certain 'reputation' with a high incidence of anti-social behaviour being recorded in police statistics. The buses had stopped running on the estate due a shooting incident. Even residents from other estates that the Foundation had worked previously, were not keen to venture with us onto this estate.

The estate on which Dot was living had a well-built community centre but it was barely used. Her reason for wanting to do the community researcher course was to 'make friends and to be able to help other people on the estate'. Her research topic initially was older people and she wanted to look at how to get the busses back onto the estate. By the time I interviewed Dot, which was three years after she had taken part in the community researcher, course, her enthusiasm for her new life was clear.

*I thoroughly enjoyed doing community researcher course...and then I did it a second time...the only person to do it twice... I did it at the church, we did*

*it (the research) on facilities for elderly people, and out of that, we have a luncheon club called Bridge Three Churches Together. We cook every week (for the older people) ... my turn this week ... It gave me a great deal of confidence. I made a lot of friends on the course. Lasting friendships and we now come together with the community centre and we work together and help each other. It is totally due to the community researchers...it made me do things I've never done before...when we did our research presentations I was bricking it, and it gave me the confidence to do presentations. I've done several presentations since.*

*Dot*

We do not know Dot's background. She had at least three children one of who was diagnosed with Asperger's. Whether Dot had a background in community work previously seems unlikely. When she joined the community researcher course, it all seemed new to her. She would arrive at the first course in her slippers, ready to turn round and go back home if all did not work out. Once she started her community activities there was no stopping her. She volunteered to help after the course and took over as chair of the community centre.

*There used to be apathy on the estate, nobody didn't want to do anything... they would all moan but not do anything, but slowly I've got them coming in and volunteering in the community and everyone is so friendly...it's brilliant it's really good. With training, they can learn new skills and put them into operation, which is great.*

Dot has never raised gender as an issue, but when I visit her, the centre is full of women helping to run the activities. In addition, Dot's family help her and husband, a retired army cook helps at events.

The Centre is now unrecognisable from the days when we first met Dot in her slippers and so is Dot. Dot listed all the activities that the centre now runs and is able to identify measurements, which show the value of her work.

*We have a lot going on here we have Roc cafe with 5-10 year olds. We are overrun with children on that tuck shop every night .... hopefully soon we'll have community shop The MS Society come in, then we have Roc café for 11-19s.... then totally teenagers...it's reduced ASBOs... reduced by more than 50% on the estate all due to youngsters having something to do. They have clubs to come to so they are not bored so much. ...youngsters wanted vegetable plots.... that's what they want to do.... clear it and plant vegetables.... that's what we're doing now.*

As I walked round the estate with Dot people were shouting out of their windows to

her calling her 'Nanna Dot' and asking her what was happening at the centre that day. She has clearly taken on the role of a community leader. She had turned the community centre, which until Dot's involvement had no life, into a thriving centre, an object now of great value to the community.

Dot was also able to enlist the help of other agencies who invested in her to enable the transformation to happen.

*Other agencies gave massive help and the church...have been brilliant.*

Asked why she does it Dot responded:

*It is hard work and absolutely love it ... and the community really does need it... the kids need to be involved and kept occupied...*

And will she continue

*I will always stay involved they will take me out of here in a wooden box.*  
*Dot*

This pen portrait is included as an illustration of how with investment women can gain skills and confidence to take their passions, ideas and actions forward. Dot only needed the right ingredients to work her transformation. Dot had within her a strong desire to make a difference to the community she now found herself in. She could see the problems. From her own experiences and her newly acquired skills and confidence, she had the ingredients to start her alchemy, transforming her own time into a useful process, transforming her community for the better. Living on the estate, being part of the estate and caring enough about the estate to invest her own time and efforts in bring about change and transformation of the local community. As with all the women in this research, she did not seek fortune or fame but used her involvement in the community, gave her personal commitment and enlisted other people on the estate. She provided the alchemy to develop a new vision of possibilities that dismissed the apathy and brought action.

Table 14 –Pen Portrait 2 - Dot

In relation to the features of Women Alchemists, Dot does demonstrate all of the 'general features' from her account of her experience but not the features of the 'seeds of alchemy'. This does not mean they were not part of her story, just that for some reason she chose not to speak of them.

When looking at the lack of recognition of women in the small VCOSOs, their lack of visibility and recognised value, this echoes to some extent those of the historical women alchemists. Gordon (2013) in his recent book about women alchemists refers to how these women were 'hidden from history' and 'whose stories had been neglected'. This research, through recording the voices of women involved in transforming communities, is hoping their stories will no longer be neglected. Many of Handy's 'New Alchemists' (2009) had gained fame and recognition through their success, even though this was not what they sought and this was not what motivated them. The model of Women Alchemists provides a helpful framework for the women in this research and others like them, and is something that warrants further development.

### **Did this research do what it set out to do?**

Bryman (2012) outlines a framework for assessing the quality of evaluation / research studies that 'derived from qualitative investigations' (Bryman, 2012: 237). I have adapted Bryman's suggested list of criteria, utilised it to appraise this research, and used it to inform the following evaluative questions. My research set out to undertake 'an investigation into the contribution that women are making to communities through their involvement in small Voluntary and community sector organisations throughout the South West Region'. The title made it clear that the research had a gender focus and that it would explore women's involvement in the small voluntary and community sector organisations operating in the South West Region. It considered why women become involved in small VCOSOs, what keeps them involved and explored the nature of women's involvement and how visible that involvement is.

### **How defensible is the research design? Methodology and methods**

Hesse-Biber begins her definition of feminist research by stating how it 'positions gender as a lens through which to focus on social issues' (2014: 3). While feminist research utilises a number of the tools of other research methodologies, a number of elements sets it apart from other 'more scientific research'. Three of the main aspects are its focus on gender, its focus on closing the gap between the researcher

and the researched and its desire to bring about change. Hesse-Biber (2014) highlights the need of feminist research:

to support social justice and social transformation: these projects seek to study and redress many of the inequalities and social injustices that continue to undermine and even destroy the lives of women and their families (ibid: 3).

One of the key conclusions from this research is that the women who are at its centre do appear to share that common purpose of redressing inequality and enhancing social justice. The lens of gender in the methodology has drawn this into focus. A feminist methodology provided the freedom to use a variety of methods both qualitative and quantitative with an overall emphasis on qualitative methodology, as outlined by Hesse-Biber (2014).

The initial use of questionnaires tested my own views based on my experience that women were the main contributors to the small VCS Organisations in the SW, and that their involvement and contribution was not restricted to women only activities but that its benefit was mainly to the wider community. My sample of groups consulted was limited to small groups who had received a grant from South West Foundation. This grant programme focussed on small groups working with people most in need in communities, and this was a part of the purposive sampling where subjects were selected on a strategic basis relating to the research title and aims (Bryman, 2012). The grant programme did not include groups engaged in the 'environmentalism and the green movement critique' model of community work referred to in the models of community work from Popple (2015). This part of the VCS has very specific aims relating to sustainability and green issues with a focus of 'saving the planet from those elements in the modern world if unchecked will threaten its existence' (Popple, 2015: 95). These groups merit further research but this research had a focus on those organisations that were operating in the world of social justice and welfare for people most in need in communities.

The variety of methods enabled me to collect data through questionnaires, focus groups and face-to-face interviews with women. The questionnaires provided good quality data confirming that women were the main unpaid contributors to small VCS

organisations and that their contribution to and benefit for the community was wider than that associated with traditional women's activities. They also provided data about women's involvement in those small community groups and the wide range of roles that women were undertaking in their communities. Further information on whether the women were the service delivery agents or members the boards of the small community groups was also gathered through the questionnaires.

The focus groups did, as Ackerly and True (2010) argue they should, enable me to build trust between the women and myself as a researcher. This stage of the research assisted the women involved to come to a shared understanding (ibid: 172) of the subject matter.

### **How well was the data and the collection carried out?**

Ackerly and True (2010), Denscombe (2010) and Hesse-Biber (2014) all argue that the selected research methods should provide credible data. The use of quantitative methodology through the questionnaires, and a quantitative analysis of that data, enabled a range of statistical evidence to be collated, which gave validity to the later use of qualitative methods such the focus groups and interviews. The use of mixed methods and analysis, both quantitative and qualitative provided helpful triangulation of data. Denscombe (2010: 174) argues that:

Researchers can improve their confidence in the accuracy of findings with different methods to investigate the same subject.

and that:

Where different methods produce data that are more or less the same, the researcher can feel more confident in assuming that the findings are accurate.

The combination of the sampling used; the mixture of methods; being reflective and aware of my position as researcher and informing the planned questions with Hesse-Biber's (2014) 'iterative' approach all contributed to ensuring that credibility. The findings from the different methods also produced robust results.

In order to ensure that women's voices were heard, I transcribed the interviews myself and during small group exercises in the focus groups, I utilised my own transcribed notes and notes from the group note takers in the small group exercise, to provide an accurate record. I also took photos of feedback sheets, post-its and pictorial representations.

### **What evidence is there of attention to ethical issues?**

As Bell states, 'ethical issues are embedded in Feminist research' (Bell, 2014: 99). The main challenge within this research was that I should be aware of the potential researcher effect of my own position as Chief Executive of the South West Foundation. I was aware of the effect of this throughout my data collections and addressed these issues through assurances to all who took part. Anonymity was assured throughout. Questionnaires were completed anonymously and groups assured that their responses would not affect any future relationships with the Foundation. Focus group participants were treated with respect and again assured that any of their responses were anonymous and would not affect any future relationships with the Foundation. Informed consent was obtained from the women in the focus groups and in the individual interviews. Participants were assured on confidentiality. All interviewee's names have been anonymised despite some of the women indicating that they were happy to be identified.

Power exercised by those who initiate a research project can be significant as they have designed the research and instigated it. While it is not possible to remove this power it can be minimized using participatory methods, as argued by Belenky et al. (1997), as cited in Dominelli (2006). The focus groups included a wide range of participative methods such as small group work, use of pictorial illustrations, discussions and face-to-face discussions. It was also important, as Ackerly and True (2010), Bryman (2012) and Hesse-Biber (2014) all argue, that I was aware of the power relationship between participants and myself as researcher particularly during the face-to-face interviews. Mitigating this was achieved by the relaxed manner in which the interviews were undertaken. The interviews enabled me to gather the views of the women direct from the women themselves.

## **Women's voices to the fore**

The feminist research methodology enabled me to design a process through which 'women's voices could be heard' (Hesse-Biber, 2014). The supportive atmosphere in focus groups and the interviews helped the women to speak freely and a rich breadth and depth of data was collected. The focus groups were held in accessible venues, they were women only and a variety of feedback methods were utilised, such as small group exercises; post it note exercises, and pictorial representations, alongside group discussions. However, the raising of the issue of women having unpaid roles in small community groups alongside paid roles was unexpected. Had I been aware of this fact, I would have been better prepared to gather the data on this topic. I was however, able to adapt the programme to allow for this factor resulting in further rich data being collected from the focus groups. The design of the research enabled me to use a variety of data collection methods, which suited the subject matter, enabled me to approach the data collection through the focus groups and interviews in environments that suited the women participants and enabled them to speak freely.

It was also my intention not to over interpret the data from the interviews but to present the words of the women. Hussani and Assad (2012) argue that feminist research 'asks for the experiences of women to guide the whole research process' (202). My research design, methodology and methods ensured that was the case. Feminist research is 'grounded in the set of theoretical traditions that privilege women's issues, voices and lived experiences' (Hesse-Biber 2014: 3). Throughout this research, what the women were telling me was carefully listened to and 'privileged' in this way. While focussing on the research question, I was also able to follow the narrative of the women with a range of sub questions that provided me much of the additional data. This data included such as information about their childhood and their family backgrounds, that I might otherwise not have been able to access if the women's voices had not led me in that direction.

## **Validity**

Denscombe (2010) refers to validity when undertaking qualitative research, and describes it as:

the absence of bias in the research. It denotes research that is impartial and neutral in terms of the researcher's influence on its outcome, and it denotes processes of data collection and analysis that are fair and even-handed (389).

Overall the use of a variety of research methods provided opportunities for richness of data and further evidence of the 'iterative' data analysis process' outlined by Hesse-Biber (2014: 409).

### **How well does the research address its original aims and purposes?**

The original purpose of this research was to investigate the contribution that women are making to communities through their involvement in small VCSOs. Had I not been in my current post through which I had 'insider' access I would have been unable to access this direct data, and the investigation would have been considerably more difficult. In terms of the research aims, the selected variety of research methods and the feminist research approach combined well to ensure I was able to gather a good range of first-hand data from the women. This included information about why they became involved in those small groups, what kept them involved and how visible and valued that involvement has been and continues to be. The results of this research will contribute to a better understanding of women's involvement in communities. It has also provided some detailed insights into understanding the nature of that involvement. The data and its analysis provided a better understanding of the issues and the implications of the women becoming more visible, as outlined in the findings. The research has also considered the relationship of government with the VCS and how this affects small VCSOs and identified elements, which can help small VCSOs to retain their independence and keep this influence to a minimum.

The research conclusions have made a significant contribution to our knowledge about women working in small VCSOs and have provided indications of the way forward and recommendations for further actions as outlined in the final section of this chapter. Overall, I would argue that there is good evidence that the aims and the

research purpose have been met. The next section provides recommendations from this research for the women alchemist of this research, other women working in small VCSOs, all others active in their communities, the voluntary and community sector and for government and other key stakeholders.

## **Recommendations**

1. There is a need for a term that identifies women led small VCSOs, which will help policy makers and funders easily identify these groups for investment purposes. Women Led Organisations (WLOs) is a clear and understandable term and it is proposed that this term is adopted.
2. The 'Women Alchemists' framework potentially provides a way of conceptualising how women in small VCSOs work and why, and it is proposed that this term is adopted to give the women a profile so that independent funders and government can identify these women and invest in them.
3. Further evaluative research into the value of women's contribution to communities, through their involvement in small community groups, would provide policy makers with the evidence to include these women in future programmes and strategies, and should be undertaken.
4. Further evidence needs to be gathered about the value and impact of small voluntary and community sector organisations in general, that would complement the research into women in the women involved in the Women Led Organisations. This would raise the profile of these small groups, enable future programmes to utilise this evidence and inform independent funders.
5. Training, support and resources for women who have a desire and a passion to bring about change for the better in their neighbourhoods and communities to be made a priority for policy makers and independent funders.
6. Further consideration to be given to whether small community groups and the women involved in them should operate below or above the radar. Can their involvement be made visible without damaging it?
7. There needs to be further consideration of the value of independent small VCSOs and how this independence can be sustained.

8. There is a need for a new structure, which links women involved in small community groups to each other. A structure, which will support them to identify, acknowledge and understand their value and the value of what they achieve.
9. The presence of other women is very important for women in their work in communities. Horizontal networks would provide them with a means of being aware of the value of work of other women and its value. The formation of women's networks at a horizontal level to be enabled by community investors. This should be progressed with and by the women in small WLOs.
10. If recognition of the involvement of women in small community groups is achieved and promoted, it needs to be in way that celebrates and maintains the independence of the women. It also needs to recognise the way in which they work; understand the value of these groups and enabling them to continue to act with freedom, with passion and with the knowledge and understanding of those they seek to help.
11. Gender inequality persists in the VCS, which makes progression for women problematic in a world they see as 'designed by men'. This research has further drawn attention to this situation, and ways should be sought to address this.
12. There is a lack of research into conflict, where it exists in this part of the VCS and/or if not why not. More research should be undertaken in this field.
13. Independent funders should prioritise providing the small amounts of money, which are needed to support the community groups that the women establish and lead, to enable them to continue to carry out their alchemy.

## **Working for change in the field, future actions, activity and research**

As mentioned previously an aspect of feminist research that drew me to the model was its focus on change. As Gorelick (1991) stated of feminist research:

The point is not merely to describe the world but also to change it (460).

I was aware that as I was collecting women's views through the focus groups and through the interviews that women's awareness of their own situation was being raised. As a result, they wished something to be done about the issues that were

being raised, not just to note the answers. The focus groups themselves brought women together to exchange views. They also had the effect of the women networking and making contacts. Following on from the focus groups for the last 4 years I have organised and run a women's event each year in the region (see appendix four for details), bringing together the women who are involved in small community groups. Numbers have been building over the years and this year over 70 women attended the gathering which took place this month (July 2015: The Visible women – see appendix 3). A film was also made of this event gathering personal evidence from the women of the services that they are offering in communities and published on line.

More women from BME groups and disabled women attended than any other previous event. Women also came from further afield, from Gloucestershire, Bristol, Weston Super Mare, Bath, Devon and the aim of the event was to bring women in the sector together, to give them a voice to showcase and celebrate what they do. Women are encouraged to speak about what they do in communities and these events. This year more than 16 women asked to be able to speak to the group the youngest being 21 and the oldest being 93. At each event, I have run workshops to informally feedback on the progress of this research. This year the women asked for more regular networking opportunities and the chance to partner each other in funding bids and for training in skills to help them to run their groups. For the first time they discussed the issue of their groups staying small and there was agreement from those who spoke that this is what they would do. Four of the groups who spoke, indicated that their existence had been threatened, not just state services identifying their value and 'trying to take them over', but other larger agencies within the voluntary sector wanting to 'use' them to further their own agendas.

The women at the event wanted to be stronger to resist such threats and were looking to the Foundation to organise more networking events and training. As chair of the regional funders group which includes such major funders and the Big Lottery, Children in Need and the Lloyds Bank Foundation I have regularly put a discussion around small groups on the agenda to raise issues with funders. The Lottery who attend these meetings, have just announced a newly funded pilot

scheme looking at making small groups sustainable and piloting it in Torbay where I have been running the women's Creating Changes Projects.

I have continued to undertake research outside of this current research, around the issues affecting small community groups. In 2012, I published a report with the Foundation's intern, Crisis and Contradiction (Crawley and Watkin, 2012) which provided evidence on how the government agenda of the Big Society was giving voice to support for community engagement, while at the same time withdrawing the support to the very groups that the Big Society was seeking to utilise. The report was sent to every MP and was presented on national radio.

With regard to political action, I organised events for women around how to influence Parliament in partnership with the Parliamentary Outreach Unit.

In 2011, I took 25 members of small community groups to Parliament for a discussion with MPs.

In 2014 I was asked to a round table discussion on small community groups with Nick Hurd, the then Minister for Civil Society. I was the only member of that discussion group who had direct contact with small BTR groups. I was also the only member of the group arguing for small groups to stay small and unregistered. Nothing came from either of these political attempts other than, like the women in this research, I feel that there must be another way.

The results of this research have provided a new insight into women's involvement in community groups. It shows the wide and varied contribution that women are making through small local community groups and the freedom that involvement brings them to use their creative skills and their knowledge of what works well. Their skills are often not built from formal education but through their own experience and artistry that they have built up over the years. Women need to operate in a world that is designed equally by women, not just men.

This research shows a new way forward, which is not based on trying to influence government. The dangers of that route have been acknowledged throughout this thesis, but things need to change. It is my belief that independent funders should and

could be influenced to take this women's existing involvement in communities forward to enable women to retain their independence. The women are based in a part of the sector that can retain its independence and its own way of taking action. There is an urgent need to stop the loss of the independence of the rest of the VCS. It is not just this research that has identified this but research including that from Chanan (2002); Chanan and Miller (2014); NCIA (2014), McCabe et al. (2010); Phillimore et al. (2010) and Popple (2015).

Government control and influence without effective safeguards is a real danger to the sector. There is an urgent need to stop the damage that is happening to the independence of the voluntary and community sector. The research has shown that the small BTR VCSOs featured in this research, as Women Led Organisations, working with their Women Alchemists as leaders, may be the best way to promote, enhance and maintain that independence.

Through the research, we have learnt a great deal about the background and pathways of the Women Alchemists. Can more Alchemists be grown? Handy thought that the evidence on this was weak, but my work through South West Foundation suggests this could be possible. Indications of what contributes to creating Women Alchemists would enable them to be identified, encouraged and supported to move forward with their skills and passion.

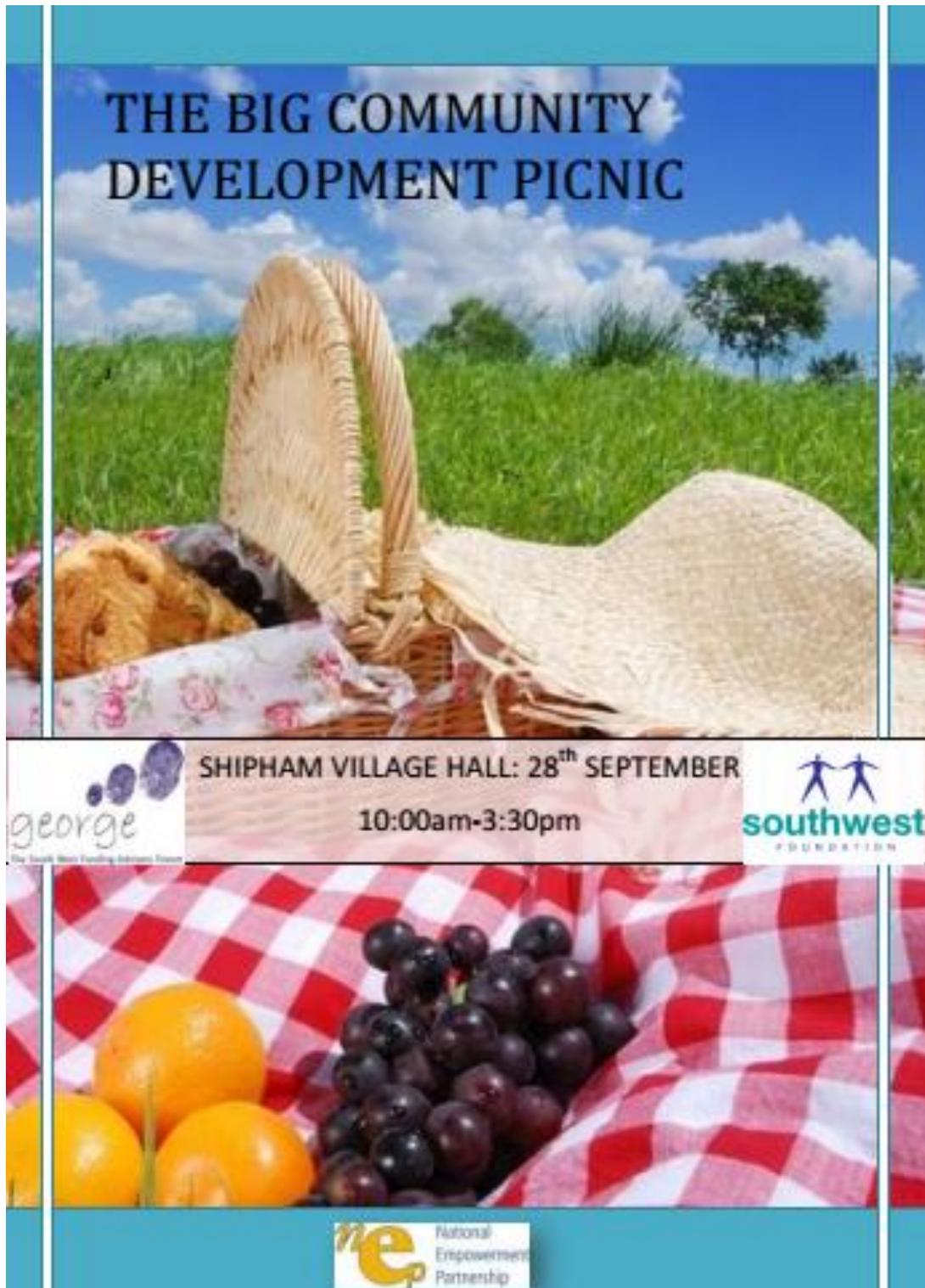
Given the numbers of women involved in small community groups, the question would appear to be how do we support the Women Alchemists that we have? How do we make them stronger to continue and develop as important community transformers?

As their lives progressed, these Women Alchemists never lost their desire and passion to bring about change and improvements, mainly to those most in need in communities. While no longer aiming to change the world, the Women Alchemists still wish to bring about change for those around them.

*There was a strong feeling amongst us (when young) that we wanted to do something to change the world and this was our way of starting on that. I can remember at that time the desire to stand up for things that I felt were not fair. I can remember feeling that I had the right to do this to stand up for things...I don't know now whether it is to change the world but it is make some kind of difference. ...I will carry on wanting to make a difference that won't change but my definition of difference might.*

*Alison*

**Appendix 1 - Flyer for the 'Big Community Development Picnic' event**



## **THE BIG COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT PICNIC**

This collective event from South West Foundation, George - the Regional Funding Advice Workers' Forum and the Empowering Communities Partnership takes place in the lovely setting of Shipham Village Hall on 28<sup>th</sup> September 2010. 10:00am-3:30pm (registration from 9:45am)  
Informal dress essential!

### **Programme**

The event will include:

- Consultation on Community Organisers: Led by Margaret Firth from Government Office South West
- Community development learning workshops: Led by the Federation for Community Development Learning
- The Charity Bank George Award for Funder of the Year
- Workshops for funding advice workers
- The Bigger Picture: a photographic exhibition by South West Foundation celebrating the Community Sector
- Community Researchers and Community Development workshop; NS Housing and South West Foundation
- A selection of funders including the Big Lottery, South West Foundation and Charity Bank
- A picnic lunch from Shipham Community Shop

### **WHERE IS SHIPHAM VILLAGE HALL?**

The Foundation has a policy of using community venues and we are very pleased that we have been able to book Shipham Village Hall for this event. The hall is just off the A38. If you have any difficulties in getting to the venue do let us know and we will do our best with shared transport but just a few examples of travel time from Shipham by car:

Bristol 30 mins; Taunton 41 mins, Gloucester 1 hour 10 mins; Exeter 1 hour 14 mins, Yeovil 1 hour 11 mins. There is ample parking and no traffic queues! Directions to be found on [www.shiphamhall.co.uk](http://www.shiphamhall.co.uk)

**To Book:** we are asking for a donation of £15:00 for this event

Please complete the attached form and send back to us or if you would just like to book by phone give us a ring and we can complete your form on the phone.

South West Foundation: Phone Number 01275 333666

Appendix 2 – Flyer for focus group 1

# Where Are All The Women?

A Focus Group Looking at  
Women's Participation in  
the Voluntary and  
Community Sector

MONDAY 31<sup>st</sup> MARCH 2008 at the  
AMMERDOWN CENTRE IN RADSTOCK

A partnership event

[South West Foundation](#)



**southwest**  
FOUNDATION

The aim of the South West Foundation is to support small Voluntary and community sector organisations working with those most in need in the South West Region. The focus of the support is on rural areas, market and coastal towns. Over the last 5 years, the Foundation has supported almost 1,000 small VCS organisations through small grants. Over the years, the Foundation has noticed the way in which women are involved in the small community groups. The innovative and inventive ways in which they tackle issues in their communities and their dedication and investment in issues that are important to them.

### [The Aim of the Focus Group](#)

The focus group will look at :

- the type of activities the women are involved in?
- what drives them to become involved?
- what keeps them involved?
- how involved are they in influencing decisions that affect their wider community?
- Are there barriers that prevent women from being able to influence? If so what are these barriers and how can they be overcome?

**The focus group will run from 10:30am- 3:00pm on Monday 31<sup>st</sup> March with lunch included. The event is free but please note that if you book a place and fail to turn up the organisers reserve the right to charge you £30:00 cancellation fee. If you would like to attend please complete the slip below and return to the Foundation or telephone to book your place. Tel:01275 333666. Places are limited.**

Appendix 3 – Flyer for focus group 2

# Where Are All The Women?

A Focus Group Looking at  
Women's Participation in  
the Voluntary and  
Community Sector

FRIDAY 4<sup>th</sup> APRIL 2008 at the St Mary's Parish  
Centre in BODMIN

A partnership event

[South West Foundation](#)



The aim of the South West Foundation is to support small Voluntary and community sector organisations working with those most in need in the South West Region. The main focus of the support is on rural areas, market and coastal towns. Over the last 5 years the Foundation has supported almost 1,000 small VCS organisations through small grants. Over the years the Foundation has noticed the way in which women are involved in the small community groups. The innovative and inventive ways in which they tackle issues in their communities and their dedication and investment in issues that are important to them.

### [The Aim of the Focus Group](#)

The focus group will look at :

- the type of activities the women are involved in?
- what drives them to become involved?
- what keeps them involved?
- how involved are they in influencing decisions that affect their wider community?
- Are there barriers that prevent women from being able to influence? If so what are these barriers and how can they be overcome?

**The focus group will run from 10:30am- 2:30pm on Friday 4<sup>th</sup> April with lunch included. The event is free. If you would like to attend please complete the slip below and return to the Foundation or telephone to book your place. Tel:01275 333666. Places are limited.**

Please return the response slip below

[jcrawley@southwestfoundation.org.uk](mailto:jcrawley@southwestfoundation.org.uk) or South West Foundation: the Granary;

Westway Farm, Bishop Sutton, BA39 5XP

Appendix 4 – Flyers for Women’s events

Tea with Mrs Pankhurst, 2009

# WOMEN AND INFLUENCE

## “TEA WITH MRS PANKHURST”



MONDAY 7th DECEMBER: 1:30pm-4:00pm AT

COMPTON DUNDON VILLAGE HALL

(Near Street, Somerset)

Free Event



National  
Empowerment  
Partnership

TEA WITH MRS PANKHURST

The EVENT

This event is aimed at women involved in the Voluntary and Community Sector who have an interest in looking at the following issues;

- How are women able to influence decisions?
- How do women have a voice?

The event will start with “Tea with Mrs Pankhurst” a play from the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, followed by an opportunity to reflect on what makes us feel better able to influence decisions in our communities.

There will also be the opportunity to hear more about the new Women’s Cafe Social Networking site, an exciting new project that enables women to talk and work together.

### **The PLAY**

*“...friendly audience participation and some lovely moments of wit, the play’s historical content unfolds in a series of short episodes, beautifully enacted by the cast”*  
The Stage & Television Today, review of Tea with Mrs Pankhurst.



Emmeline Pankhurst and Selina Cooper took tea together many times. Yet these two suffrage leaders had not only different

approaches to gaining the vote, but also different motives. Exploring the suffrage movement and the conflicts within it, this fast paced production gives great insight into the impact that war had upon the suffrage movement and asks the question ‘ who won the vote?’ With a cast of four professional actors playing a whole host of colourful characters, Tea With Mrs Pankhurst brings the suffrage campaign to life and shows how this historic movement is still relevant today.

# CELEBRATING WOMEN CHANGING THE WORLD

**MARCH 10TH 2011 AT THE ALBEMARLE CENTRE: TAUNTON**

**10:30AM-2:30PM**



COMMUNITY  
GROUPS

REFUGEE  
GROUPS

FAMILY  
GROUPS

SPAN AND SOUTH WEST FOUNDATION  
HAVE COME TOGETHER TO ORGANISE A  
CELEBRATORY ROUND THE TABLE  
EVENT IN INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S  
WEEK. WE WANT TO CELEBRATE THE  
ACHIEVEMENTS OF WOMEN WORKING



SHARE YOUR  
STORIES  
NETWORK WITH  
OTHERS AND  
LOOK TO SEE

## The Visible Women' event – July 2015



### THE VISIBLE WOMAN

#### CELEBRATING AND BUILDING THE RESILIENCE OF WOMEN IN THE VOLUNTARY AND COMMUNITY SECTOR

**Date: Friday 10<sup>th</sup> July; Creech St. Michael Village Hall, Taunton TA3 5QQ; Time: 10:00am-3:00pm**

This event at Creech St Michael Village Hall is the next in the Foundation's annual series of free information and networking events for women. We will be looking at what will makes our groups and organisations resilient in these tough times, and how we can look after ourselves as individuals. There will be speakers, workshops and plenty of opportunities to share experience and network

Email: [Info@southwestfoundation.org.uk](mailto:Info@southwestfoundation.org.uk)

Funded by



Friday 10<sup>th</sup> July,  
10am-3:00pm  
Creech St Michael  
Village Hall Nr  
Taunton TA3 5QQ

How are we  
surviving in the  
community Sector  
in the current  
climate?

Hear about what  
other women are  
doing in  
communities. Tell  
us what you are  
doing

This event is part of  
South West Foundation's  
Capacity Building  
Programme for  
Community Groups  
Tel 01761 471104

## Appendix 5 – Questionnaire 1

### Questionnaire One

We have not asked you to name your organisation as we aim to keep responses anonymised

#### 1 Size of your organisation

Please tick the box that best describes the income of your organisations

- A £1,000 or below
- B More Than £1,000 but less than £5,000
- C More than £5,000 but less than £15,000
- D More than £15,000 but less than £50,000
- E More than £50,000 but less than £100,000
- F More than £100,000

#### 2 Volunteers

G How many Volunteers does your organisation have including board members?

---

H Do you have more women volunteers than men?

Yes  No  Don't know

#### 3 Activities that your organisation offers

What is the main purpose of your organisation-please tick one?

- J To provide a community building
- K To provide a community newsletter
- L To support older people over the age of 55
- M To support people who have a physical disability
- N To support people who have mental health issues
- O To improve the environment
- P To provide advice and information
- Q To provide activities for children
- R Other activity please specify
- S Not Sure

## Appendix 6 - Questionnaire Two

### Size of organisation

#### 1 Size of your organisation

Please tick the box that best describes the income of your organisations

- A £1,000 or below
- B More Than £1,000 but less than £5,000
- C More than £5,000 but less than £15,000
- D More than £15,000 but less than £50,000
- E More than £50,000 but less than £100,000
- F More than £100,000

#### 3 Activities that your organisation offers

What is the main purpose of your organisation-please tick one?

- J To provide a community building
- K To provide a community newsletter
- L To support older people over the age of 55
- M To support people who have a physical disability
- N To support people who have mental health issues
- O To improve the environment
- P To provide advice and information
- Q To provide activities for children
- R Other activity please specify
- S Not Sure

#### 2 Volunteers and paid staff

How many people are involved in your organisation including your Board/Management Committee members? \_\_\_\_\_

How many of these are women? \_\_\_\_\_

How many volunteers does your organisation have? \_\_\_\_\_

How many of these are women? \_\_\_\_\_

How many women involved in your organisation receive payment for their contribution? \_\_\_\_\_

How many of your volunteers are Board/Management Committee Members? \_\_\_\_\_

How many of your Board/Management Committee Members are women? \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix 7 – Focus Group activities / questions

Activities / questions asked in focus groups
1. Participants were asked to identify the type of community work they were involved in: small group exercise: fed back to whole group
2. Participants were asked how valued they felt in their various roles: small group exercise: feedback to whole group
3. Smaller groups - women were asked what motivated them to be involved in their community: feedback to whole group
4. Smaller groups - women were asked if they felt women worked in any particular way
5. Smaller groups - women were asked how they first became involved in their communities: post-it notes/flip chart reporting

## **Appendix 8 – Interview questions-Semi Structured Interviews**

- how did you first become involved in community activities?
- what motivated you to become involved?
- what community activities had you undertaken in the past?
- what activities were you currently involved in?
- what kept you involved?

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