



SOUTH
WEST
FOUNDATION

WHERE ARE ALL THE WOMEN IN THE
VOLUNTARY AND COMMUNITY SECTOR?
JAN CRAWLEY : EDITOR



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This report is based on two focus groups which were held, one in Bath and North East Somerset and one in Cornwall, to look at the issue of women's involvement in small Voluntary and Community Groups. We also sent out questionnaires. We would like to thank all the women who took part in these focus groups and who responded to the questionnaires.

The focus groups were organised by the South West Foundation and sponsored by Changes UK and Women Take Part. We would also like to thank Red Kite and East Cornwall CVS for their support and facilitation of the groups. South West Foundation is an organisation supporting small Voluntary and Community Sector Organisations in the South West Region.

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

The project has been collecting information about two sides of the story: ' *what works*' in terms of approaches, initiatives and learning models that encourage different groups of women to become more involved **and** ' *what needs to happen*' so that structures, policies and organisations work in ways that encourage the recruitment and support of more women. For more information about the research please contact sue.gorbing@changesuk.net.

Full Report is available from Jan Crawley South West Foundation

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1 Introduction

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 allocated over £2,500,000 and supported almost 1,000 small VCS organisations through small grants. The Foundation funds its activity by undertaking research and grant management for other funders and agencies. It hopes to continue to support around 50 small community organisations each year with very small but essential grants, particularly aimed at those organisations that have difficulty in accessing funding.

The Foundation also undertakes research that supports the sector and recently published Funders' Footprints looking at the experiences of these small community organisations in accessing funding and funding advice.

2 The Gender Issue

Over the years the Foundation has noticed the way in which women are involved in the small community groups with which the Foundation works. The innovative and inventive ways which women tackle issues in their communities and their dedication and investment in issues that are important to them are all very obvious when working with community groups. Many of the women are undertaking this work in their communities for little or no financial reward and are heavily involved in the governance of the small groups. Without these women, many of the communities in which the Foundation works would be sadly lacking in essential services that enhance the well being of many people in need in these communities.

Women are involved in many activities that support the wider community, as well as issues that are of particular relevance to women in those communities. Their work encompasses caring activities, education through playgroups and toddler groups, toy libraries, information and advice groups, mental health groups, advocacy groups. Their activity often helps to break the isolation of 'marginalised' groups by offering befriending groups, community newsletters, activities for young people in need, and support in engaging people in community activity.

The Foundation, in the course of its own activities, has noticed the under representation of women at decision making and policy making meetings, both locally and regionally. It has also noticed how, when women are present at meetings, they often contribute less at these meetings or have considerably less of the 'floor time'.

As well as running the focus groups the Foundation also sent out questionnaires to a selection of the organisations that it works with. From the 125 responses the findings showed that over 80% of the individuals active in the small groups that the Foundation supports are women. (The vast majority of the organisations that responded have an annual expenditure of less than £15,000.)

The findings also showed that when organisations were very small, often with no paid staff, women were far more likely than men to be running these organisations and to be members of the management group. Once the organisation's expenditure increased the numbers of men on the management group also increased and the numbers of women in the governance and management role decreased.

3 Taking the issue forward

As a first step forward the Foundation decided it would be useful to hold two focus groups which could look at these issues in more details. There were 20 members of the focus groups. Each focus group contained women from a diverse range of organisations within the region. The majority of women attending were not representing single issue women's organisations, but were involved in the wider voluntary and community sector.

4 What are Women involved in within the Voluntary and Community Sector?

Actual job roles

There was a diverse range of job roles within the two focus groups. The women were supporting service users, co-ordinating volunteers, on committees that gave them a voice such as the older people's forums, supporting smaller voluntary and community sector organisations, undertaking community development work, providing funding advice, setting up community groups and luncheon clubs, supporting people with health issues such as cancer- a whole range of services were covered by the women.

5 Women's Roles-paid and Unpaid

Volunteers

Women who were undertaking unpaid work appeared to feel freer of constrictions within their roles but often felt they were 'too far down the pecking order' for their views to be listened to.

Volunteers are not paid because they have 'no value'

We are too low down in the food chain to be asked about important/serious decisions; there is a lack of credibility.

Paid Employment

Many of the women in paid employment expressed a certain frustration with their situation. The women in paid employment felt that they had to be multi-talented, unlike male counterparts who might be managers and chief executives with a single management role. Many of the women indicated that they were undertaking paid roles in the community as their 'day jobs' but were further contributing to their communities through unpaid roles outside of their employment.

The Deskilling of Women in Paid Employment

There was some evidence from the women that in their current and past paid employment certain restrictions and requirements were placed on them to which led to loss of confidence and led to the deskilling of the women. The women objected in particular to male managers demanding that they dress in a certain 'official manner' even when the women were working in communities. This was totally against the way women felt it was appropriate for them to dress.

Many of the male managers had not undertaken direct work in communities and were not experienced in this field. Rather than giving value to the women's skills and knowledge, they tended to impose their own uninformed views on the women. *Often women felt that they were more skilled and knowledgeable than their male counterparts who were often their managers.*

Women felt that their views at work were not given the same weight as their male counterparts.

6 Women and Motivation

It was felt that men and women within the Voluntary and Community Sector are often motivated by 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. **Women were not so motivated by monetary gain or by self-promotion.**

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

7 Ways of Influencing

Influencing sideways

Women have different ways of influencing. Often the straight forward ways are not open to them so they will **seek to influence 'sideways'**.

The women felt that one way forward is to find men who can be allies in meetings and back up what they are saying. This does mean however, that the **women do not get recognised as having made the contribution** and it is often seen as the 'man's idea'.

Collective Action

All agreed 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.

Democratic Working

Women have a good democratic way of working together, making decisions together, tackling issues together.

It is important that this way of working filters up the ladder but for some reason it often fails to do so.

The value of hands on working

Women working in small organisations become very knowledgeable about the issues in a real, practical, 'hands on' way so they felt that women

" really should have all the power because we have the knowledge but for some reason we are not heard or valued".

8 The Barriers

Women were taken aback that when they stopped and consider how things were, even in the VCS and the **barriers** that were there.

"how has it happened that we do all this work, have all the skills and knowledge and yet fail to get heard?"

They also felt that the world in which the women operate is often constructed by men which bring its own difficulties and barriers.

Language is a real barrier at meetings. The jargon, the acronyms all make it difficult for us to understand and comment.

Most of the words are men's words. For men the sector has become 'robust' 'vibrant' 'strategic' but they are only words.

Men in meetings with gadgets can be distracting and make it impossible to concentrate.

Bureaucracy is a huge barrier. There are too many structures and we just can't get through them.

Bullying of women at work by men

In addition to women being told how to dress at work, a number of women working in the Voluntary and Community Sector admitted to be **'bullied' by male bosses**. It was not just the usual type of bullying but the less visible insipid bullying. The men being over critical, never telling the women that anything that they do, is done well-even when others give you this feedback. The women felt that the 'bosses' never gave credibility to the women's views and inputs.

Disruption to careers

Reluctantly some women admitted that child care could be barrier. **It meant a disruption in their career**; maybe part time working for at least some of their lives; it mean restriction on the amount of time they had available and how flexible they could be ; *having children it takes a toll on your career.*

Violence Against Women

In the Cornwall group there was a longer session on the subject violence against women led by the Cornwall Women's Rape and Sexual Abuse Centre .Statistics from the Women's Resource Centre were used as an information point. It was felt important to consider the issue of violence against women:

Violence against women is part of women's oppression.

The Women's Rape and Sexual Abuse Centre in Cornwall often is in the position of making sure that these issues are taken into account when strategies are drafted by the policy makers. They find that it

is really important to have organisations like them on strategic bodies.

9 Why Women Get Involved

With all this going on, why do women get involved?

Belief and passion got me into this work and these are important

I got involved because of personal interest and how the issue had affected me personally some years ago.

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 it I felt a real debt of gratitude and wanted to give something back. Because I have now had the opportunity of a higher education I am useful as a translator for working class poor people who cannot get their voice heard and who feel intimidated by middle class, educated language

I have a belief in the value of working in the community to make it a better place. As a volunteer we have experience, skills that we can invest and we can also represent others and give people a voice.

10 How did we get here?

Most of the women's involvement 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.....

I sat in a village hall...the rest followed

I sat around a kitchen table with a group of women

I got here from a sense of injustice.

11 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

My passion is to make sure voices of people are heard ...

To make sure our voice is valued. To make sure the dots are joined and that multi-agency working works.

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

The love of working with groups of women and seeing women taking back control of their lives.

12 The Future

The women gave their views of what they think should happen in the region

- Please keep this initiative going and develop the links
- expand focus groups deep into Cornwall
- have another meeting that will building on the discussions that have taken place today
- at the next meeting we could show the DVD 'Why women'
- continue to raise awareness of what women are doing in the community and voluntary sector
- put information on the South West Foundation website
- send the notes of this meeting out by email
- could also use CVS newsletters such as Signpost in East Cornwall
- share the contacts

- Consider more women's networks?
- In meetings we need to be strong and honest and inclusive.
- We need to be braver and to raise the profile of women.
- Three women's networks could not come = Dorset, Cornwall, Devon - we need to include these

APPENDIX 1

Organisations taking part in the focus groups



- Mendip Care and Repair
- West Wilts Community Club
- BANES
- Community First
- Positive Action on Cancer
- Voluntary Action North Somerset
- South West Foundation x2
- Red Kite x2
- Somerset Race Equality Council
- Ethnic Women's Older Peoples' Forum
- South East Cornwall healthy Living
- St Cleer Parish Project
- Penzance Central Initiative
- Cornwall National Osteoporosis Society
- Cornwall Community Volunteers Service
- Smart Women Project x2
- Women's Rape and Sexual Abuse Centre Cornwall
- Lapidus Cornwall