

**Breakthrough: Researching Gendered Experiences of Education and Employment in Yorkshire and Humberside**

**Report 5: Transforming Women's Lives: Women's Voluntary and Community Services in the Yorkshire and Humber Region**

Other reports in the Breakthrough Series:

Report 1: *Gender, Confidence and Mental Well-Being*

Report 2: *Gender, Education, Training and Aspiration*

Report 3: *Motherhood: Choices and Constraints*

Report 4: *Women's Experiences of Work: Breaking Through the Barriers*

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The *Breakthrough* series of five reports brings together the findings of one of the most extensive studies of women's lives in the Yorkshire and Humber region. Based on empirical research conducted in 2006 and 2007, the study draws on the knowledge, experience and histories of women from across generational, social, cultural and geographic backgrounds. This series arises from and is led by those women's voices. It is a testament not only to the richness and diversity of women's lives, but also the commonalities of their experiences. More specifically, the study identifies the key problems that women face in breaking through the barriers of both gender-based and other forms of social exclusion, and uses critical social science perspectives to help facilitate a clearer understanding of these complex issues. It also evaluates the contribution of public and voluntary sector organisations, including the work of individual women within those organisations, in meeting women's everyday needs, raising aspirations and providing the necessary support to enable women to achieve those ambitions. As a whole, the series provides the empirical detail and grounded analysis from which to address broader policy questions at the local, regional and national levels.



**B R E A K T H R O U G H**

**Researching Gendered Experiences of Education and Employment in Yorkshire and Humberside**

**Transforming Women's Lives:  
Women's Voluntary and  
Community Services in the  
Yorkshire and Humber Region**

Hannah Miles, Suzanne Clisby,  
Julia Holdsworth and Anne Fairbank

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# **Breakthrough: Researching Gendered Experiences of Education and Employment in Yorkshire and Humberside**

## **Report 5**

### **Transforming Women's Lives: Women's Voluntary and Community Services in the Yorkshire and Humber Region**

**Hannah Miles, Suzanne Clisby,  
Julia Holdsworth and Anne Fairbank**

This report is based on research commissioned by the European Social Fund, Learning and Skills Council and Hull Women's Network. The facts reported and the views expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the commissioners.

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# 1.0 Introduction to the ‘Breakthrough’ Series

The aim of the ‘Breakthrough’ study was to explore women’s life histories and experiences specifically in relation to education and employment trajectories throughout the Yorkshire and Humber Region<sup>1</sup>. Through a combination of extensive interviews, focus group discussions and an extended questionnaire survey in 2006 and 2007, we have generated a rich and unique dataset that draws on the knowledge, experience and histories of over 500 women from across generational, social, cultural and geographic backgrounds. This is one of the largest studies of its kind in the region.

The original remit of the project was to address current strategic objectives laid down by Government Office for Yorkshire and Humberside and those set out by the Learning and Skills Council and Hull Women’s Network. Specifically, gathering information and evidence from women in Yorkshire and Humberside, we focused on capturing information about the gender related barriers women face in their attempts to access learning opportunities, employment, career development, and personal progression. This will inform

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<sup>1</sup> Hull Women’s Network established a working partnership with the Gender Studies Department at the University of Hull in order to collaborate on research into issues of gender discrimination for women in the job market. This collaboration resulted in the development of the Breakthrough Research Project proposal which was subsequently funded by the European Social Fund, the Learning and Skills Council and Hull Women’s Network.

planning for future delivery of accessible, gender-aware and socially inclusive learning opportunities.

Along the way, however, a wide range of themes and issues were raised through women describing their educational and employment experiences. Hence, rather than a single report, the findings of this study have been produced as a series of five research reports which develop the themes of:

1. Gender, confidence and mental well-being
2. Gender, education, training and aspiration
3. Motherhood: choices and constraints
4. Women's experiences of work: breaking through the barriers
5. Transforming women's lives: women's voluntary and community services in the Yorkshire and Humber Region

Each of the reports in the 'Breakthrough' series are led by women's voices and give testament, not only to the richness and diversity of women's lives, but also the commonalities of their experiences. Using a gender analysis and critical social science perspectives to facilitate a clearer understanding of these complex issues, the research identifies the key problems that women face in breaking through the barriers of both gender-based and other forms of social exclusion.

The study also evaluates the contribution of public and voluntary sector organisations, including the work of individual women within those organisations, in meeting women's everyday needs, raising aspirations and providing the necessary support to enable women to achieve their ambitions. Working closely with women's groups and

the voluntary and statutory sectors across the region, we have explored what women themselves think *would* help and what *has* helped them get to where they want to be.

## **1.1 Why a gender analysis of women's lives?**

A gender analysis is essential in order to understand the ways in which women's lives both in the Yorkshire and Humber Region and in the UK as a whole are conditioned by socio-cultural and patriarchal structural frameworks. As succinctly explained by Nayak and Kehily (fc.2008);

'By examining gender practices, and in particular how they are produced, regulated, consumed and performed, we can gain a fuller insight into broader gender patterns and arrangements. This enables us to interpret the relationship between gender and power and to see how gender is institutionally organized, discursively constituted, embodied and transfigured in social life. It can begin to explain how gender relations are embedded within the social fabric of human societies and serve to shape the choices and possibilities open to us as gendered subjects. This suggests that gender is not simply a matter of choice, but a negotiation that occurs within a matrix of social and historical forces enshrined in the ideological arenas of law, religion, family, schooling, media, work and so forth' (Nayak and Kehily, fc.2008:5).

A gender analysis of women's lives continues to be of critical importance in today's society despite equalities legislation which might suggest otherwise. Women have come a long way since our grandmothers and great grandmothers fought for the right to vote. We have made major advances in the kinds of work we are permitted to do, the institutions we are allowed to be members of, and the levels of political, educational and sporting attainment we have reached. From being excluded from education, over the course of the past hundred years women have entered educational institutions at every level to the extent that they are now out-performing boys and gaining better overall grades at primary, secondary and higher educational levels (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2006).

Women are now allowed to become doctors, lawyers, judges and 'captains' of industry. We see high profile women succeed in all walks of life and enter previously male-only domains. Indeed, the extent to which women have pushed at the glass ceilings, jumped off the sticky floors, and knocked down barriers to equality of opportunity can lead many younger women in Britain today to feel as if they have it all, to believe that they do not face discrimination on a daily basis. However, despite the real advances we have made as a result of women's continued and extensive struggles over the course of the 20th century, the goal of gender equality has not yet been reached. Gender discrimination and segregation across public and private spheres continues to be a stark reality of women's lives in 21<sup>st</sup> century Britain.

### ***Politics is still a man's world***

Formal politics is still largely a man's world, and this in itself inhibits women's entry and participation. Politics continues to be seen as a 'male space'. The House of Commons, for example, has been likened to a gentlemen's club, famous for having a shooting range but no crèche, a barbers but no hairdressers, and far too few women's toilets. Following 80 years of women's suffrage less than 20% of MPs in the UK Parliament are women (Women and Equality Unit, 2007), of these only two MPs are Black and there has never been an Asian women MP (Fawcett Society, 2007). At this rate it will be another 200 years before women achieve numerical equality of political representation, rising to 300 years for Black and Minority Ethnic women. These facts speak volumes about the status of women in positions of power and decision-making (EOC, 2007, Fawcett Society, 2007).

### ***Gender segregation in education continues***

Despite girls gaining higher grades than boys at every level of education, they continue to be faced with complex socio-cultural pressures that lead to extremes of segregation in education along traditional gender lines. At F.E. and H.E. levels, for example, the vast majority of students studying literature and languages are female, whilst the overwhelming majority of those studying sciences, engineering and computing are male (ONS, 2006). Vocational training is even more highly segregated: 97% of early years care and education and 90.1% of hairdressing apprentices are women, compared with men constituting 99.2% of apprentices in construction, 94.8% in engineering manufacture and 98.6% of apprentices in the motor industry (Fuller, Beck and Unwin, 2005).

***This in turn contributes to gender segregation in paid employment***

Women continue to be concentrated in low-paid, gender stereotyped (and often part-time) jobs, representing, for example, 79% of workers in the health and social care sector, 98% of childcare workers, 95% of receptionists, and 76% of cleaners. At the other end of the scale, only 10% of senior police officers and 9% of the judiciary are female, whilst 83% of directors and chief executives and over 70% of private sector managers are male (EOC 2006). Women still face a stark gender pay gap, earning an average of 17% per hour less than men in full-time work, rising to a gender pay gap of 38% for part-time employees (EOC, 2007). Within individual employment sectors the gender pay gap can increase, for example, women earn 22.5% less per hour than men in full-time work in the private sector as a whole, rising to 41% in the banking and insurance sector (EOC, 2006).

***Gender discrimination at home***

Women clearly continue to experience gender discrimination in the public sphere, and despite women's place supposedly being 'in the home' discrimination also permeates the private sphere. Women perform, and take responsibility for, most of the reproductive and community management work in the household: cleaning, cooking, shopping for household provisions, managing household finances and maintaining extended family networks. Women also take most responsibility for caring: for children, for disabled or sick relatives and for elderly family members.

The feminist movement has been calling for greater recognition of this work for decades, including demanding wages for housework on the basis of its direct value to the national economy. A recent UK

government report, through the Office of National Statistics, made an attempt to put a value on housework. They calculated that if the time spent on unpaid work was valued at the average rate for paid employment it would be worth over £700 billion a year - more than three quarters of the value of the paid economy (BBC, 2002). Data also shows that women spend an average of just over 3.5 hours per day on unpaid domestic and child care tasks in addition to their regular paid work. That's almost twice as much time as the average man spends on similar tasks (Gershuny, Lader and Short, 2005).

### ***The home as a site of domestic violence***

Despite, and because of, all their hard work within it, women can find their homes a source of comfort and security, but all too often the home is a site of fear, abuse and violence. In the UK, one incidence of domestic violence is reported to the police every minute and one in four women experience domestic violence during their lifetime. On average two women are killed every week by a male partner or former partner, constituting over a third of all female murder victims (Home Office, 2007).

It is clear then, that gender inequalities continue to exist at both national and regional levels. However, in order to understand the experience behind such statistical representations, we have to speak to women about their lives and experiences inside the household, in local communities, in the work-place and in educational establishments. Empirical research such as that undertaken in this study is crucial as women themselves are best-placed to understand and communicate their own life experiences. However, this research not only documents the continuing social barriers and inequalities that women face: it also provides evidence of the struggle of

women, both as groups and individuals, to challenge and break through those barriers and to ensure that other women find the help and support they need to do so.

## **2.0 Methodology**

This research employed both qualitative and quantitative methods, underpinned by a methodological approach grounded in feminist research and praxis as well as ethnographic understandings. The adoption of a mixed-methods approach, led by the collection of qualitative data, was chosen to best facilitate the capturing of broad gendered experiences of education and employment in this region. The employment of qualitative research strategies facilitated the collection and analysis of personal beliefs and experiences, commonalities and women's own understandings of their lives.

Initially in this section we present some of the epistemological and theoretical stances which underpinned the approach to data collection and analysis that was adopted. We then proceed to outline some of the main data collection methods employed.

### ***Feminist research methods***

This research was informed by a feminist standpoint and research methodology. Ethical considerations were paramount in all aspects of carrying out this research, and were informed by the ethical guidelines produced by the British Sociological Association, as well as academic debates about ethical procedures in research. Brayton (1997) suggests there are three methodological elements which make research feminist:

## **1. Addressing power imbalances between research/researchers and research subjects**

This research was conceived in collaboration with Hull Women's Network (HWN), a strategic partnership of women's service providers in Hull. The design of the research activities was done with the needs of participants in mind. We adopted a reflexive approach throughout the research process, for example, early findings were fed back to participants and they were encouraged to comment on the appropriateness of the emerging themes and the researcher's depictions of women's lives.

The findings presented in these reports are presented as subjective understandings created through dialogues between people, each of whom brings to the topic a set of pre-conceived perspectives and positions. Such an approach facilitates the recognition and integration of different standpoints and experiences through allowing women's voices to speak for themselves.

## **2. Politically motivated and with the aim of promoting social change**

This research aims, through presenting women's understandings and experiences of the opportunities and barriers they face in their day to day lives, to promote better appreciation of gendered opportunities and constraints. Further, this research has developed practical and strategic recommendations for the improvement of gendered experiences in the Yorkshire and Humber Region.

On a strategic level, this project has, where possible sought to contribute to individual participants' empowerment. Taking part in a research project such as this can enable women to reflect on their

lives and on the ways which individual, socio-cultural and structural factors impact on their situation and the choices available to them. This facilitates women's understandings of their lives as situated knowers.

Practically, the researchers have sought to facilitate and support the self-development of participants where possible. Being involved in research of this nature, and re-telling life histories can call up all manner of emotional experiences for women. For many this is, ultimately, a positive experience and most women in this research commented, after the interview, on the fact that having someone to just sit and listen to them was itself, a rewarding experience. Some women raised aspirations during interviews, such as wanting to get back into education, and, where appropriate, researchers sign-posted them to possible training or sources of information or, for other women, to other relevant support services.

Whilst such support is not the primary role of researchers, in a research project exploring gender inequalities, to ignore such possibilities of pointing women in the direction of potentially life-changing services would have been failing the participants and the wider goals of this research.

### **3. Begin with the experiences and standpoint of women**

This research has sought to understand and articulate women's perspectives and experiences as they are framed within the patriarchal context of today's UK society. The themes and issues which have become prominent during this research have been defined and refined by the participants themselves. Analysis was conducted in a grounded manner, developing the main themes and analytical

concepts from close scrutiny of the experiences of women in the Yorkshire and Humber Region.

### ***Research methodologies***

The methods employed in this research were all informed by the epistemological stance developed in the discussion above. A range of different techniques were employed, which are briefly outlined below.

### ***Interviews***

The main data collection strategy for this research was through in-depth, semi-structured interviews. A total of one hundred and ten separate interviews were conducted with women and key professionals across the Yorkshire and Humber Region. These were subdivided into two main types;

- **Life histories**

Life histories, lasting from around 1 to 4 hours in single or repeated sessions, were collected from women across the region. This strategy was adopted in order to capture the complex interrelations which exist between different parts of women's experience and to elucidate the ways in which gendered identity constructions impact on women's lives. Life histories were conducted using an interview guide, however, researchers were not constrained by the question areas in front of them and, instead, allowed women to focus on and develop particular issues as they arose.

- **Key Theme Interviews**

Interviews were conducted with key service providers in the arenas of education, vocational training, community and voluntary services,

employment, business, social and emotional support provision, local government and statutory services.

- **Focus Groups**

The team conducted a series of twelve discussion groups involving 69 people with a range of diverse groups:

- Women returners to education
- Women in 'traditional' gendered occupations
- Women making decisions around work/care after having a first child
- Young parents
- Women users of community and voluntary services
- Women service providers

Focus groups were employed for a number of reasons, particularly as they can encourage participation from people who may feel nervous about a one-to-one interview. Further, a major strength of focus groups is that they facilitate observation of group dynamics by promoting open discussion, questioning and interaction between group members. This means that the parameters are not set entirely by the researcher, but instead come to reflect what members of the group feel are important and relevant to the topic introduced.

Focus group discussions were designed, in each case, to cover topics relevant to the people comprising the group. Each of these discussion groups lasted between 1 and 2 hours, dependent upon the wishes of the group and were either recorded using a mixture of sound recording equipment and note-taking or solely through note-taking.

### ***Participant observation in a women's centre***

Part of the research team were based in a working Women's Centre in Hull for the duration of the project. This provided insight into the issues which women face on a daily basis as well as the major issues experienced by people working in the voluntary and community sector. Such close level involvement elicits insights and understandings which are difficult to gain from methods which do not take such a long-term approach.

### ***Questionnaire/Survey***

Following initial literature reviews and exploratory interviews with key informants a number of themes were identified as central to understanding gendered experiences of education and employment in the Yorkshire and Humber Region. A questionnaire was designed to cover these themes and was delivered through both electronic and paper media. This resulted in a total of 323 responses collected from across the Yorkshire and Humber Region. All questionnaires were anonymous and provided respondents with the opportunity to contact the project for more information.

Two main distribution methods were used for the questionnaire:

- The electronic version was designed and delivered using a web-based survey creation tool. Hyperlinks to this questionnaire were placed on the web-page of the Hull Women's Network (HWN) and on the project website as well as being distributed to relevant email lists and through personal networks. This way of distributing the questionnaire meant that respondents could click on the link and complete the questionnaire anonymously

- Paper copies of the questionnaire were targeted to parts of the population for whom computer skills or access to internet could be issues in preventing them completing the questionnaire

Finally in this brief section on methodology we return to the issue of ethics to address two areas directly.

### ***Confidentiality and informed consent***

All participants in this research project have confidentiality assured through being identified by pseudonyms, allocated in a random pattern using the letters of the alphabet in turn. In a small number of cases it has also been necessary to amend or omit certain other personal details to ensure anonymity. Participants' quotes are coded by pseudonym, age-range, occupational sector, if they are a parent, and geographical sub-region. For the purposes of confidentiality, 'North Lincolnshire' has been combined under 'Humberside'.

Participants were informed, as far as possible, of the uses to which the information they provided will be put. They were also given the opportunity to withdraw part or all of the information they provided in interviews. Where contactable, participants were invited to the research dissemination events<sup>2</sup> and provided with copies of the executive summaries of the reports.

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<sup>2</sup> The dissemination of the research is also an example of feminist praxis in as much as a wide a range as possible of people were invited to the events, including the research participants, policy makers, academics and members of the public. The events were held in accessible locations, were free of charge, and bursaries were made available to pay for travel and child-care costs. Copies of the executive summaries were made freely available to everybody in attendance and complimentary copies of the final reports provided.

## 3.0 Executive Summaries

### 3.1 Report 1: Gender, Confidence and Mental Well-Being

Whilst not initially setting out to focus on women's mental well-being, it soon became clear in the course of the research that mental well-being was a recurrent issue for women, cutting across indices of difference such as socio-economic background, age, ethnicity, educational attainment, occupation and location. In addition to clinically significant experiences of depression, self-harming and other mental health issues, women repeatedly raised - both explicitly and implicitly - a range of broader well-being issues such as low self-confidence and low self-esteem as obstacles to their personal and professional development.

#### ***Key findings:***

The impacts of reduced self-esteem and under-confidence can include:

- Impacts on employment, for example, loss of earnings for women and costs to employers through physical and mental ill-health
- Lower dynamism and initiative in the workplace. This can become reflected in economic disadvantage, for example, in terms of reduced earning potential
- Being less able to protect oneself from harm, for example, bullying or harassment at home, school and in the workplace

- Limiting educational and career aspirations, posing obstacles to reaching one's full potential. This can include women being self-limiting
- Negative affects on women's physical health, potentially contributing to chronic ill-health and the related impacts on those around them

We accept that there are aspects of self-esteem and mental well-being that can be especially gendered experiences for women *qua* women. We argue, however, that there must be a reconfiguration of the individuation of these connections and a recognition of the fundamental implication of socio-cultural structures in the creation of mental ill-health as a 'woman's problem'. In other words, whilst the ways in which women's gendered identity is constructed leave them more prone to mental ill-health, the flaw lies not with individual women but in the normative patriarchal constructions of their gendered beings: of femininity, women's roles, divisions of labour and their relative status in society.

Women are more likely than men to seek support, are more likely to be offered medical treatment, and to be 'labelled' as having mental health problems. It is crucial, however, to recognise that mental health issues impact on both women and men. Thus, whilst calling for greater resources and support for women and men with mental well-being issues, the cultural construction of mental health as a feminised arena *per se* should be resisted. Rather, we need greater understanding and acknowledgement of the ways in which mental ill-health is a condition of human society which is fundamentally

conditioned by the constructions of both men's and women's gendered identities into falsely immutable categories.

We focus in this report on three areas that are particularly gendered in terms of women's experiences and mental well-being: gender socialisation; motherhood; and domestic and sexual violence. Finally, we look briefly at the role of women's and women-oriented voluntary and community services, particularly in the context of women who have been supported through experiences of domestic and sexual violence. We argue that there is a need to employ a gender analysis to address both the causes and consequences of low self-esteem, lack of confidence and issues of mental well-being in the broadest sense.

***Recommendations:***

- Taking far more seriously the problematic gender stereotyping in social institutions such as the family, schooling and in the media and discourage negative gendered discourses
- Increase gender analysis training for educators, employers, civil servants, health specialists etc.
- There needs to be a renewed debate about the structural causes and consequences of domestic and sexual violence and a wider recognition of the long term impacts of such violence on millions of people's lives
- Undertake a comprehensive cost-benefit analysis of providing greater levels of service provision and increased resources to tackle both the causes and consequences of domestic and sexual violence

- Greater emphasis needs to be placed on social rather than individual models of mental well-being in approaches to mental health care provision
- Provision of more personal development training and the development and valorisation of ‘soft skills’
- Provide more individual, familial and institutionally-based support for mothers and women-returners to facilitate transitions from employment/education to motherhood, and for women returning to paid work or training after a break. This might include, for example, more systematic development and application of mentoring systems putting in place support strategies within work places or educational institutions.

### **3.2 Report 2: Gender, Education, Training and Aspiration**

This report explores the impact of gender on women’s aspirations and on their experiences of education and training. These research findings show that women’s experiences of education and training continue to be strongly influenced by gendered socio-cultural expectations which are also translated into structural gendered norms and practices. By placing women’s educational experiences within broad context this research also makes clear the ways in which gendered experiences of education have life-long implications in terms of the kinds of paid employment and other roles men and women do and the rewards they accrue for these.

During this research we talked to women about current experiences of, and future aspirations for, higher, further, and adult education and training. We also explored women's reflections on their schooling and other previous educational experiences. This report presents the various factors which constrain or enable women in imagining possible futures and attaining them for themselves.

***Key Findings:***

- Education continues to be experienced largely along gendered lines despite long-term efforts to equalise boys' and girls' education. When choice becomes available, girls and boys tend to choose different types of subjects due to a complex mix of factors including; peer pressure, ideas about 'suitable' subjects and imaginings of appropriate futures
- Subjects which are traditionally seen as 'boys' subjects continue to be valorised over those traditionally seen as 'girls' subjects
- Formal and hidden curricula structures 'stream' students into particular subject areas, often along gendered lines
- The careers advice which participants received was often directed along gendered lines, meaning that pupils may not be provided with the full range of career options, limiting possibilities for both boys and girls
- The impact of educational choices is often life-long. Although girls outperform boys at almost every level, this does not

translate into economic and social rewards due to the differential rewards which 'male' and 'female' occupations attract

- When women engage with education or training as adults they often feel that their multiple roles and responsibilities are not recognised or catered for. Women commonly experience problems such as finding childcare whilst in learning, or may struggle to juggle domestic responsibilities and learning commitments
- Gendered Issues are often particularly marked for women undertaking education/training in areas traditionally thought of as 'male' areas
- Community-based education often provides a vital resource for women. Such organisations aim to offer a range of educational provision and do so in supportive environments in which holistic approaches are taken to understanding the needs of women learners

***Recommendations:***

- Continue to promote equality of opportunity and expectation in schools and work to further address the impact of the formal and hidden curricula constraints
- Through the promotion of gender awareness training, work towards provision of more broad-ranging careers advice in schools which provides equality of opportunity for both girls and boys

- Work to challenge gendered stereotypes of subject and occupational value, and encourage awareness of the consequences of valorisation of particular subject areas for women's life chances
- Exert pressure on providers of further, higher and adult education to recognise and support the multiple roles parents and carers occupy
- Address issues of gender disadvantage in areas of education and training which are not traditionally taken up by women
- Consult with, and provide support to, community based education and training programmes which work with women and recognise the value of a holistic approach to women's adult learning

### **3.3 Report 3: Motherhood: Choices and constraints**

This report focuses on the impact of motherhood on women's choices, particularly as it relates to domestic roles, educational chances and employment. These research findings show that, although women's lives have changed significantly, and more women are combining work and motherhood, the ways in which they do this are heavily constrained by cultural and institutional gendered identity constructions and expectations. This means that mothers continue to carry a heavy burden of domestic labour and, where they

take on paid work outside the home, are concentrated in low-pay, low-status work with fewer chances for progression than either men or non-mothers. Utilising women's stories of motherhood and non-motherhood this report presents the various factors which constrain or enable women in developing successful roles for themselves.

***Key findings:***

- Women are increasingly seeking to combine motherhood and paid employment outside the home
- The impact of motherhood for women's choices and opportunities is much greater, and more detrimental, than that of fatherhood for men
- Experiences of direct discrimination amongst mothers and women who are pregnant are rare. Women can, however, feel that they are not fully supported when they make decisions about maternity leave or returning to work
- Socio-cultural expectations and stereotypes mean mothers often struggle to negotiate satisfying and successful roles both in and out the home. This is worsened by the conflation of childcare responsibilities with other domestic labour, meaning mothers often also take greater responsibility for, and spend more time on, tasks in the home
- Time spent at home can result in loss of self-confidence and well-being, in underestimation of women's transferable skills and in women feeling ill-prepared to re-enter education/employment

- Opting for part-time work in order to achieve a work/family balance has serious implications for women's career progression chances and mothers continue to be concentrated in low-pay, low status employment
- Women generally welcome recent UK government work/family policies however these are not always flexible enough to meet the diverse situations of mothers
- Childcare remains a significant barrier to mothers' participation in paid work and in education. Concerns about childcare are not simply about levels of provision and affordability, but also quality, location and flexibility
- Whilst motherhood is still the norm for women in the UK, and undoubtedly brings personal and emotional rewards, increasing numbers of women are delaying (or refusing) motherhood in order to concentrate on achievements in other areas of their lives

***Recommendations:***

- Take far more seriously the continuing gender stereotyping in social institutions such as the family which mean there is a perception that women are responsible for caring and domestic labour
- Work to promote the understanding that there is no necessary link between caring for children and other domestic labour and

encourage greater parity between men's and women's roles in the home

- Provide more individual and institutionally-based support for mothers and women-returners to assist in women's transitions both from employment/education to motherhood, and after a career break when women choose to return to paid work
- Promote recognition in institutional structures, families and policy that fathers also have responsibilities for childcare and work to increase parity of opportunity for mothers and fathers, for example through enhancing paternity leave provision
- Work to address the gender discrimination inherent in much UK work/family policy which continues to place women in the home to a greater extent than men
- Improve the flexibility and affordability of childcare for children of all ages, as well as increasing the numbers of places available overall

### **3.4 Report 4: Women's experiences of work: breaking through the barriers**

This report focuses on the importance of gender in women's participation and progression in the work place. Here, we make visible the profoundly gendered nature of our everyday worlds. Women's experiences and practices, both at home and at work, are

set within the social context in which they live and embedded in their individual biographies. The study shows that although the world of work is changing, for women there are many factors that continue to operate to their disadvantage. This report presents the issues that, in women's experience, have helped or hindered their participation and progression in the labour market.

***Key findings:***

The key factors that women felt limited their participation and progression in the work place are:

- Processes of gender socialisation can negatively impact on women's levels of self belief which, in turn, can cause them to be self-limiting in their expectations and aspirations
- Gendered expectations of families, friends and peers mean that women are encouraged/discouraged to enter particular kinds of employment
- Women's triple burden of paid, reproductive and community management labour, for example, women retain the majority of responsibility for caring roles, domestic work and community-based labour in addition to their paid labour
- Career breaks to raise children mean that women can experience occupational disadvantage upon returning to employment

- The difficulties of finding appropriate, flexible and affordable childcare continue to be a barrier to women's equal participation in the paid labour force
- Part-time work, frequently opted for by women, continues to be associated with the highest level pay differentials, is feminised, and attracts poorer working conditions and lower status
- Part-time workers can be perceived as lacking commitment to their paid work and so are less likely to be considered for promotion or more responsible tasks
- Gender segregation in education combined with poor career advice can serve to limit career options
- The lack of role models in non-traditional female occupations and in high-level positions limits women's aspirations
- Women continue to experience gender discrimination and sexual harassment at work

***Recommendations:***

- Work to challenge gendered stereotypes of occupational value and promote equal value for 'traditional' female occupations
- Encourage equality in family and home life through wider debates around power relations in the home with the aim of closing the unequal division of domestic labour

- Exert pressure on Government and Local Authorities to provide more flexible, affordable, accessible, quality childcare
- Through the promotion of gender awareness training, provide better quality careers advice in schools which provide equality of opportunity for both girls and boys
- Develop links between schools, industry and commerce in order to broaden the range of possibilities which school pupils imagine for their futures
- Positively promote female role models in non-traditional occupations to help dispel the myths that work to limit women's aspirations
- Continue and formalise funding for first-rung interventions in women-oriented voluntary and community sector services
- Promote and enable women's self-development through proactive support programmes which encourage women to apply for promotion and through the increased development of mentoring programmes designed to meet the needs of women
- Recognise issues of diversity and difference and seek to promote organisational structures which are not predicated on hegemonic masculinity, where women's needs are seen as 'other'
- Promote campaigns to end gender discrimination and sexual harassment in the work place

The stories provided by many women in this research clearly show that gendered expectations affect their experiences of education, careers advice, work and home thus impacting upon women's careers. Policies need to be further developed which aim to widen women and girls' horizons. However, it takes more than policies to change deeply engrained cultural norms and values. What is needed is a genuine will and concerted action at all levels to create 'joined up thinking' in all areas of life. Mainstreaming gender, that is, bringing gender into discussions in families, schools, popular culture and the wider community is an important first step. We need to push the boundaries and encourage girls to 'think outside the gender box'.

### **3.5 Report 5: Transforming Women's Lives: Women's Voluntary and Community Services in the Yorkshire and Humber Region**

This report focuses on the role of women's voluntary and community sector organisations in the Yorkshire and Humber Region. Within this we develop a particular focus on the work of women-only and women-oriented services. In particular, we examine the transformative power of engagement with women's voluntary and community services for both individual women and their local communities.

Despite there being thousands of such services in the UK and hundreds in the Yorkshire and Humber Region, there is little

empirical data examining the work of women's organisations and the economic impact of their interventions. This report contributes to the debate about the value of voluntary and community service provision through using the voices of service users and providers to explore women's differing experiences of, and motivations for, engaging with women's services.

***Key findings:***

Throughout this research the participant's voices make explicit just how vital women-only services are in transforming women's lives. However, the continued existence of women's centres and women-only safe spaces is constantly under threat. Both the lack of understanding and suspicion of the services themselves, and the myth that gender equality has been achieved, result in under-appreciation of the work that women's organisations do. This can contribute to the problem that women's services exist in a state of perpetual insecurity, surviving largely on short-term, and increasingly declining, funding sources.

Women's and women-oriented voluntary and community services:

- Fill gaps in levels and areas of statutory service provision
- Offer women-only 'safe spaces' which provide an environment where women can be supported and encouraged to reach their full potential
- Adopt a holistic approach to engaging with women and provide a range of services in one space

- Provide ‘first-rung’ training in a range of different skills, through both accredited and non-accredited courses. These can be an effective first step for women seeking to re-enter education and employment
- Provide encouraging and supportive environments through a range of different means, including, providing positive role models and working to raise women’s aspirations and self-confidence
- Seek to engage with women who are socially excluded through outreach work

***Recommendations:***

- A fuller study needs to be undertaken to assess the social, cultural and economic impact of women’s organisations for society as a whole. This could include a cost-benefit analysis
- Further assistance could be provided to support organisations with funding applications and the application processes themselves could be simplified and made less time-consuming
- There should be greater recognition of, and financial provision for, the work that women’s organisations do in ‘filling the gap’ and ‘picking up’ from statutory services
- Promotion of greater networking and knowledge-sharing between women’s organisations, be they based on locality, religious or ethnic affiliation, or around particular gender

issues such as domestic and sexual violence, education or employment. This would also encourage the recognition of diversity as a strength of the sector

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# Report 1: Transforming Women's Lives: Women's Voluntary and Community Services in the Yorkshire and Humber Region

'Women's Voluntary and Community Sector': any 'voluntary' organisation (i.e. not-for-profit, non public or local authority, normally formalised and employing paid professional staff) or 'community' organisation (a web of networks, groups, relationships centred around a community of interest such as physical neighbourhoods, common understandings, interests etc.) which is

- Led primarily by women or
- Provides services primarily to women or
- Whose organisational objectives or projects are of special concern to or are aimed at women'  
(Women's Resource Centre, n.d.:2)

## 1.0 Introduction

There are currently over 10,000 organisations and groups in the UK that work specifically with, or to raise the profile of, women<sup>3</sup>. Despite

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<sup>3</sup> Estimates of the true number of organisations are difficult to come by as not all organisations working with women are registered in the same way, or are properly formalised. The UK Women's Resource Centre estimates over 10,000 according to their definitions WRC (2004) whilst Guidestar UK, (2007) has over 11,000 registered charities and organisations working

these large numbers, there is little empirical research focusing on the work these organisations do, or the social and economic value of their contributions (WRC, 2006a). This report helps redress that imbalance. We draw on the voices of service users and providers to explore women's differing experiences of, and motivations for, engaging with women's voluntary and community organisations and the impact of those services on women and the wider communities in the Yorkshire and Humber Region.

A variety of both government funded and national charitable organisations such as Women's Aid, Well-Woman Centres<sup>4</sup>, The Women's Institute<sup>5</sup>, Home-start<sup>6</sup> and Sure-Start<sup>7</sup> work across the region. In addition to these national bodies, however, independent women's voluntary and community organisations exist in a variety of forms in each sub-region of Yorkshire and Humberside. In fact, there are over 640 registered charities in the Yorkshire and Humber Region that state they specifically work with or to raise the profile of women (Guidestar UK, 2007). Many more women's community and voluntary groups, however, exist as not-for-profit organisations, informal networks and local groups. That many such groups are relatively informal makes it extremely difficult to calculate exactly how many exist, but we would estimate that numbers again run into several

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with women. A WRC (2006a) report suggests there are an estimated 32,000 women's voluntary and community organisations in England and Wales.

<sup>4</sup> Well-Woman Centres provide sexual health and family planning advice to women, they have female physicians only.

<sup>5</sup> The National Federation of Women's Institutes is the largest voluntary organisation for women in the UK with a total membership of approximately 211,000 women. In the Yorkshire and Humber region there are over 430 individual Women's Institutes covering Humberside, North West, North East, South, West and East Yorkshire (<http://www.womens-institute.co.uk/>)

<sup>6</sup> Home-Start UK is a support organisation that carries out home visits to those families who are facing difficulties and may need additional assistance and support. They have over 300 offices across the UK and a sister organisation that works worldwide.

<sup>7</sup> Sure-Start is the government initiative that aims to give every child the best start in life. They have specific provision for women who are expecting or have children.

hundred. The latter includes organisations with specific aims or membership such as religious affiliations or refugee support networks in which women's services are a component of their work. It also includes women-only groups, women's refuges, women's centres and services that work with specific sectors of the community such as Black Minority Ethnic (BME) women.

The central focus of this report is on women-only services and this is for a number of reasons. First, the women who participated in our study frequently cited the importance of women-only services to them. Second, while women-only services are sometimes contentious, we wish to explore the wider benefits that women-only services have for both women and men. Third, as we demonstrate below, women-only services routinely operate without secure and stable financial support. That they are able to provide such crucial services not just for women but for the wider community without adequate funding is testament to the creativity, skill and hard work of both paid and unpaid service providers and volunteers. Just as importantly, the evidence presented here demonstrates the impact of women-only services and provides a basis from which to press local and national government to take their role more seriously and provide greater investment and support for those who are already doing that work.

Though the research data derives from interviews, discussions and participant observation with women from across the Yorkshire and Humber Region, this report draws in particular from the experiences of women who work for, and/or have benefited from, Hull Women's Network. Hull Women's Network is one of a small, but nonetheless significant, number of formal women's Trusts and Networks in the

Yorkshire and Humber region that also includes the South Yorkshire Women's Development Trust<sup>8</sup> in Sheffield, Rotherham Women's Network<sup>9</sup>, and the Yorkshire and Humber Women's Network<sup>10</sup>.

Since 2004, Hull has had an established strategic partnership of women-only services in the form of Hull Women's Network (HWN)<sup>11</sup>. It currently has 6 partners: Hull Women's Centre incorporating Women Arts and Media (WAM); 'Open Door', Bransholme Women's Centre; 'Willow', North Hull Women's Centre; 'Winner', Preston Road Women's Centre; West Hull Women's Centre; and SAFE Women's Training Company (Self-defence Action for Equality). In 2007, Hull Women's Aid<sup>12</sup> also became a part of the Network and HWN sits on the steering committee of Hull-Domestic Abuse Partnership (Hull-DAP)<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> South Yorkshire Women's Development Trust is an organisation run by women for women. It provides resources and funding for women's organisations across south Yorkshire. See <http://www.sywdt.org/>

<sup>9</sup> Rotherham Women's Network was launched in March 2007 and aims to bring women across the community and social sectors together see: <http://www.rotherhamcen.net> or for Rotherham voluntary and community action see: [www.varotherham.org.uk](http://www.varotherham.org.uk)

<sup>10</sup> This network has developed from an initial conference organised by Hull Women's Network and funded by Change-Up in 2005. It aims to maintain a database and contacts between women's organisations in the region. See [www.hullwomensnetwork.org.uk](http://www.hullwomensnetwork.org.uk) and follow the links.

<sup>11</sup> For further information about Hull Women's Network see [www.hullwomensnetwork.org.uk](http://www.hullwomensnetwork.org.uk)

<sup>12</sup> Women's Aid is a specialist service that works with, and on behalf of, women who have or who are experiencing domestic violence, they are a national charity with over 500 offices across the UK. <http://www.womensaid.org.uk/>

<sup>13</sup> 'Hull Domestic Abuse Partnership Project' (Hull DAP) was formed in 2005 as a multi-agency partnership to address domestic violence across the city. The Crime and Disorder Act (1998) places this obligation on a statutory footing, requiring some organisations to form partnerships to tackle crime and disorder, including domestic violence and abuse, and provides a legal power to share information. Hull Citysafe, the Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership (CDRP), teamed up with key agencies in Hull as a multi-agency response to tackling domestic violence and abuse. The aims of the partnership are to 'reduce repeat victimisation by improving the safety of survivors and children in Hull through a coordinated and effective inter-agency response; holding abusers accountable from initial point of contact with police and throughout the criminal justice system; and working towards zero tolerance of domestic violence and abuse' (Hull DAP, 2005:3)

The broad aims of Hull Women's Network are for the member organisations to support each other both as a collective and as individual organisations to improve the lives of women across the region. HWN has been successful in creating a range of projects for women in addition to the work already carried out within its partner organisations. Thus far these have included projects supporting women into training, volunteering and employment, projects focusing specifically on young women, and, most recently an ambitious and long-term project which involves the purchase of several properties across the city to provide women and their families with rental accommodation in a supported environment.

This report takes a closer look at some of the work of the various centres and projects that make up the Hull Women's Network, what those services mean for the lives of individual women, the role of individual women working in those centres and projects, the contribution these women see themselves making to the wider community and the everyday struggles they face in ensuring the services they provide continues. It is important to note here, moreover, that the research team were partly based in one of the women's centres in Hull for the duration of the project. That first hand experience of listening, observing and participating in the day-to-day life of the centre provided us with a deeper understanding and appreciation of the 'grassroots' level from which these services operate.

In focusing on Hull Women's Network, we are not claiming that what we found there is necessarily the same across the entire Yorkshire and Humber Region. This report recognises that 'women' cannot be

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treated as an undifferentiated, homogenous category. Women's experiences of the world are inevitably affected by intersections of complex and changing positionalities, including differences in terms of what point they are in their life-course, their socio-cultural background and ethnicity, whether they live in a rural or urban context, if they have children, and so on. Similarly, ethnic minority groups are not a homogenous mass, and, as Bhavnani (2006) has argued, making generalised statements and comparisons can be problematic, especially when the outcomes could influence legislative and policy changes.

In sum, the Yorkshire and Humber Region is clearly made up of a range of diverse communities, each revealing specific needs and challenges for the women in those communities. It is also the case, of course, that coverage across the region varies enormously, with some areas being better served than others. Here, however, we focus more on what women have in common than what separates them. Employing the voices of individual women promotes the recognition that women experience and articulate their lives in different ways while allowing us to draw on common themes and experiences.

## **2.0 Women-only services: meeting needs, raising aspirations.**

'The women's voluntary sector is extremely well-placed to provide public services, having built up a wealth of knowledge and expertise on a wide range of issues

pertaining to women and domestic violence, sexual violence, forced marriages, immigration, housing, health, cultural constraints, drug and alcohol abuse, child care and protection etc. Women's organisations have developed extremely effective ways of working with some of the most marginalised women and children' (Women's Resource Centre, 2006b:19).

In one of the few pieces of recent research on the women's sector, the Women's Resource Centre has identified five key features of women's organisations that define the services they offer, make them distinct and enable them to fill the gaps left by other mainstream publicly funded service providers. These are:

- Provision of women-only spaces
- Focus on empowerment and independence
- Service user involvement and high levels of peer support
- Integrated needs-based service
- Reaching the 'hard-to-reach' women (WRC, 2006a:4)

All of the women's centres we focused on in the course of this study share the features outlined above. In this section we address each of the five points raised by WRC to explore the value of women-only services, before proceeding to discuss the ways that women's organisations fill the gaps left by other service providers. We also examine the importance of such provision in women's lives, particularly in terms of raising aspirations.

## 2.1 Women-only safe spaces

Women working in women-only centres stressed that an underlying strength was that they are open to women in all situations and from all walks of life;

*‘Any person can come as long as they are female, it don’t matter their marital status, whether they’ve got any income, anything, it doesn’t matter’* (Deidre, early 40s, manager, community sector, volunteer, mother, Humberside).

*‘People have been brought up or lived different lives and for them to actually think about coming into a centre, on their own, is a big deal and people do literally pluck up courage’* (Pamela, early 40s, manager, community sector, volunteer, Humberside).

Such centres often exist in deprived areas, providing outreach work to women who may otherwise be forgotten or missed by more mainstream services. They also attract women who hear about the services through friends, family and neighbours and may not have the confidence to seek help from or engage with formal services. Fiona, the co-coordinator of a women’s centre, talks about the range of women the centre works with;

*‘I’d say it’s probably fair to say that the majority are from, you know, an area of...of recognised deprivation. A lot have left school with no formal qualifications... a lot have had their*

*children early. But having said that, we've got women who have got University degrees and for one reason or another, you know, their lives taken on a change'* (Fiona, late 40s, manager, community sector, volunteer, mother, Humberside).

Abigail also works within a women's organisation and describes women's centres as a 'stepping-stone'; enabling women to regain self-confidence and re-establish their own identity. She feels that the inclusive atmosphere promoted by women's centres is one of their most positive aspects;

*'We have all sorts of women [...] so we've had you know one woman who came in who had a law degree, however, she just really, really was lacking confidence because she'd been at home and had three children and really concentrated on putting her energies towards being mum and then when it comes to children going to school she felt like she'd lost who she was a little bit. So she came to us to, you know just needed a little bit of hand- holding and reassurance. [...] it's like they need the stepping stone of somebody saying 'what you're doing is amazing and creative and you can do this''* (Abigail, late 20s, manager, community sector, volunteer, Humberside).

### **2.1.1 Why women-only?**

Women's centres are run by women for women. They are inclusive of all women and exclusive to women, i.e. they often have strict policies on the admission of men and boys for any purpose. One of the

primary reasons for women-only spaces is to create a safe environment for women. As Pamela, the coordinator of a women's centre in Hull, commented;

*'We need a women's centre because it needs to be women-specific and it needs to be an environment where any woman can feel safe to come through the front door [...] not everybody has the confidence or the opportunity'* (Pamela, early 40s, manager, community sector, volunteer, Humberside).

And Abigail's comments reveal further benefits of being a women-only service, creating a space within which women can share their experiences;

*'Being part of a women-only project gives them the opportunity really I think to kind of talk other things like I mentioned, for example if they're having any difficulties at home in their personal life'* (Abigail, late 20s, manager, community sector, volunteer, Humberside).

Indeed, service providers are convinced of the need for provision of 'women-only' safe spaces despite sometimes being opposed by partner groups;

*'There was a lot of controversy really about what women-only space was for, why we needed it, a lot of the senior managers, well a significant number of the senior management team at the NDC didn't respect it'* (Wendy,

late 30s, manager, community sector, volunteer, Humberside).

Also, for some culturally or faith-based women's groups, there may be additional imperatives to access services in women-only spaces. Here Kavshi talks about running English classes for a group of Kurdish women at a centre for refugees which did not initially have an effective women-only space;

*'When I first started, there was a large group of Kurdish women that used to come [...] and they stopped coming after the first couple of times. I got to know most of them in rather a short period of time and they stopped coming on the basis that my manager was walking around. Now the afternoon was women only, umm, but he would stay in to, umm, just finish off some paperwork. Umm, but that wasn't acceptable, umm, and yes it was a case of being chaperoned to and from the building. Umm, on one occasion, we had to ask a man to leave umm because it wasn't appropriate for him to be there in front of the other women, but he wanted to stay because of his partner. Umm, we explained that we couldn't do that, but she was in a safe environment, that the door would be locked behind him and, you know, no men would be allowed in apart from the manager and he wouldn't allow that so she had to leave and then they stopped coming altogether. Umm, now it's a full day on a [day] and umm as I mentioned before, all the doors are locked bar one and the entrance door and there are no men, not even my manager's in there anymore [...] but when I approached the*

*Kurdish community, the women's... Kurdish women's group [...] they still weren't happy, umm, with coming along to the English classes because of the presence of men basically [...] they still feel that it's just not appropriate, it's been done before, so it may happen again'* (Kavshi, late 20s, part-time, community sector, student, Humberside).

### **2.1.2 A safe learning environment**

Creating a sense of safety is not only about literally providing a safe, women-only, haven for those women who may be experiencing abuse or violence from men, though the latter is clearly important. Rather, it is about the need to provide a broader sense of security as a basis from which to meet women's other needs. Women's centres make a significant contribution to improving women's education as many of the women who access these services lack the confidence to enter formal educational establishments and may previously have had negative experiences of formal education. There are several key elements which contribute to making women's centres safe learning environments;

- **Community-Based** Meaning women can fit learning into other activities in their lives, such as dropping children off at school. Women can also stay in a local environment which is comfortable to them
- **Personal Networks** Many women have initial contact with this learning environment through attending with a friend or

through a personal recommendation, meaning that there are friendly faces from the start

- **Appropriate learning environments** Women's centres aim to offer both accredited and non-accredited courses and to allow women to develop and progress at their own pace in an environment where they can feel safe to express themselves and explore their potential

Octavia was introduced to her local women's centre by a relative who attended a range of activities there. Prior to this Octavia had been out of education and employment for many years, initially to raise her children, and subsequently due to health problems. She had also been subjected to domestic violence over a long period of time through her relationship with her abusive and controlling husband. This significantly contributed to problems with her mental health at one stage in her life. These experiences left her lacking in self-belief and, consequently, although she was keen to take up new opportunities such as education, she did not have the confidence to go to college or other formal environments. As with many women in her area, she was not comfortable travelling to parts of the city with which she was not familiar.

*'I started off on the non-accredited courses and when I started going on computer courses and that, I still didn't have the confidence to go to proper college, what I call proper college, you know the college in town, and I still wanted to stay within the familiarity of the women's centre because I felt safe, I felt other people were in the same predicament as me, and I didn't feel confident to, you know, go further a-field'*

Octavia has been involved with the women's centre for several years, during which she has built her confidence and gained new qualifications. She now gives back to the centre by running some courses and has become a regular volunteer. She describes how her involvement has changed her life for the better;

*'For my health and my mental status it really did help me [...] I found that my getting out and I had something to focus on for myself and helping others then I wasn't taking as much medication and my whole health, I was physically better'* (Octavia, late 40s, volunteer, mother, Humberside).

## **2.2 Focus on empowerment and independence**

*'Women quite often feel that they have no control over anything and that they have no right to make decisions about anything and that they have no confidence to do anything or to make changes in their life or to get anywhere they want to and I think the gender role socialisation plays a massive part, as in, 'my job here on earth is to care for other people and I'm not allowed to think about myself, I'm not allowed to prioritise what I need' and that feeling selfish if they do not do that'* (Sally, late 30s, manager, health sector, volunteer, West Yorkshire).

Low levels of confidence were repeatedly raised by women as one of the major factors affecting their lives. The underlying causes of this are complicated but are rooted in social and cultural expectations and the consequences of these as suggested by Carla, the coordinator of a rural women's group;

*'I'm working with you know some people who have issues with husbands and things like that and boyfriends, like domestic abuse etc. So that knocks confidence anyway, so it could come from things like that but it could be just the simple fact that they've got no self-esteem, it comes back from childhood and you know they've never been told that they're good at anything, you know they even go to work but you've never been given any praise whatsoever'* (Carla, mid 40s, manager, community sector, mother, North Yorkshire).

Similarly, Nasreen, coordinator of an Asian women's group, found that confidence was particularly significant for women accessing the group;

*'I think the majority of them have no confidence...I'd say 90% of women [...] I'm sure everyone has their dreams and ambitions but they don't have the confidence and they don't know which way to go around it'* (Nasreen mid 20s, manager, community sector, mother, Humberside).

This common experience of low confidence for women was recognised as a fundamental aspect of service provision within each of the

women's organisations we spoke with. Explicit and implicit means were used to address low levels of self-confidence, ranging from confidence and assertiveness courses, social events and family fun days aimed at encouraging stronger social networks, to decorating women's centres so that they would appear friendly and welcoming.

### **2.2.1 Confidence building courses**

Confidence building courses are often a woman's first contact with a service provider. Specifically designed to be accessible and non-threatening, they are especially popular amongst women who have been out of employment and education for some time or at home for a period raising children. They are described in terms such as: *'a very short course with a minimal number of people so that they are not bombarded with too many new faces'*, *'there is no pressure'*, *'non-accredited so guided by the learners' pace'*, *'ice-breaking activities that are informal and fun'*, which demonstrate the importance of creating a non-threatening situation. It may have taken years for women to lose their self-confidence so one important recognition is that rebuilding this may not be an easy fix, it needs long-term and sustained effort.

Carla describes how she builds regular confidence courses into her activities;

*'Keep on doing confidence building courses because they're very important, don't just think you've done it once and that's done and their confident, because they're not...'*

(Carla, mid 40s, manager, community sector, North Yorkshire).

Many of the service providers started out as either service users or volunteers at the centre, which can lend itself to greater empathy for and understanding of issues of under-confidence and with low self-esteem. Octavia started out by attending a weekly confidence building course, progressing to running this herself in recent years. She emphasises the need for non-judgemental and long-term engagements with women;

*'I do stress that it had taken me three years to gain my confidence, so they know that [...] it's taken three years for myself, if it takes you three years, that's fine that's what I try to put over'* (Octavia, late 40s, volunteer, mother, Humberside).

### **2.2.2 Shared experiences**

Women's centres can be instrumental in allowing women to share their experiences and aspirations with people who have similar issues in their lives.

Bridget is the lone mum of three children after leaving her violent husband. She has been attending a women's centre for several years and completed a range of different courses, from confidence building to volunteer training and self-defence. Bridget has just fulfilled her long-term goal of going to university and has started studying for a degree, something she would have not believed possible before coming

to the women's centre. Here she describes the empowering impact of attending a women's centre;

*Oh it has totally built my confidence up, it still needs building more but it has really built my confidence up, it has totally made me a stronger person and to look up what I have actually been through to get this far [...] Within two weeks of being on the assertiveness course it was unbelievable, I got this bar job, a job behind the bar and it also gave me something to throw back at my ex as one thing he always said is there is no way you are working behind a bar [...] It makes you realise that there is that many women out there who don't know that they have got so much talent and so much strength inside them, they think they are weak but they're not because of all the experiences they have been through and they [the women's centre] make you realise that [...] It was really seeing who you was and the compliments you got and the support you got was so good and basically it was everyone talking about what they had been through and you knew you wasn't on your own [...] The biggest step was walking into university as I thought I would never be able to do that, walking in the first day I was absolutely petrified, totally petrified, I was totally petrified [...] but I stuck it out and kept saying to myself, 'you can do it, you can do it' (Bridgett, early 40s, student, mother, Humberside).*

For some groups expectations are changing, for example, the women we spoke to from ethnic minority backgrounds frequently noted that they aspire to quite different lives from their mothers or older female

relatives. Gita, for example, originally from Bangladesh, married at eighteen, has an undergraduate degree and is currently thinking of progressing to postgraduate study. Gita accesses a women's centre working specifically with BME women which she says she appreciates particularly for its informality, a factor which encourages local women to make use of it. Gita's long-term aspirations reveal how she sees her role being outside the home;

*'For myself, job-wise, I want a job and I want more to do with life really. I don't want to stay at home and just ... like life around my husband, I want to offer more to the community, provide my services'* (Gita mid 20s, self-employed, Humberside).

## 2.3 Service user involvement

The women's centres we spoke to all aspired to have high levels of user involvement and governance and to promote a safe learning environment for all women through a variety of means. As Wendy explains, they offer;

*'A safe space for women, services for women, opportunity for women to learn new skills and develop etc, etc, all those things, determined more specifically by what local women wanted, and the development phase of the project produced a development plan, detailing quite clearly what local women wanted'* (Wendy, late 30s, manager, community sector, volunteer, Humberside).

Many centres, for example, have users on the management committees so that local women are able to contribute to the running and direction of the centre. However, as we discuss below, service user involvement extends beyond simply consultation and to a more genuinely user led service through the active participation and transformation of women from being simply service users to service providers both as volunteers and as professional staff.

### **2.3.1 Volunteering**

In line with current government strategies (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2007), volunteer programmes were seen to be of vital importance when tackling social isolation and deprivation. Volunteering often provided a route back into training, employment and social inclusion and thus assisted in lifting women out of economic and social deprivation;

*‘We’ve got a very active volunteering programme, so women who are maybe bored at home with two kids under five can come in and do something and be with grown ups for a little while, which is a life-line really in a lot of ways and get some experience and skills, do a few courses, to rediscover their own identity, do whatever they want to do’* (Wendy, late 30s, manager, community sector, volunteer, Humberside).

At one of the focus group sessions we asked women to tell us about why they chose to volunteer and what it meant to them; these are some of the reasons they gave:

- Wanted to give something back to the community/women's centre
- Began as a service user and wanted to help other women in similar positions
- To get work experience
- Volunteering at the centre provides contact with other people

Rita has been attending a women's centre for several years, she volunteers on a regular basis and is now a member of the management committee. Rita told us how having a disability sometimes affected her confidence levels and what she felt she could and could not do, which meant she often spent a lot of time in her house. We asked Rita why she volunteered;

*'I think it's meeting people, I mean I live in a really quiet cul-de-sac, honestly if I didn't do any voluntary work I don't think I'd see anybody.... think I'd just go crazy if I didn't have anything to do'* (Rita, early 40s, volunteer, Humberside).

### **2.3.2 Inspirational role models**

The fact that women who work in women's organisations often began as service users themselves has several benefits:

- They offer strong, positive examples and role models for other service users

- They bring a deep and personal understanding of the kinds of complex issues that many women bring with them
- They are committed to the working methods of the women's centres and are 'living proof' of the value the services they provide

Quite often a key figure was mentioned as being a catalyst in women's lives, someone who guided and supported them. This can be clearly seen below in the way that Deidre talked about an inspirational teacher she had at the women's centre that really turned her life around;

*'She's fantastic ...absolutely inspirational, I did a women's study course with her and she just opened all the wounds in it because it was about looking at... you know, you as a person and how these barriers had stopped you and everything [...] I'd wrote this massive essay thing and she said 'Do you want to do it?' and I actually showed it to me husband because he said 'are you ready for this?' because I undid a lot of cupboards... and then... so then when I did this it was brilliant, you know, and we actually went and she read it and she said 'I'm so glad you've been able to trust me with that sort of information, you know'... and I said 'Yeah' I said, 'Because you've just changed me life' and she did. She absolutely changed my life' (Deidre, early 40s, manager, community sector, mother, Humberside).*

Many of the women we spoke to articulated in various ways how important a stable role model or mentor can be at difficult times, Carla illustrates here;

*'The person who ran the women's group was somebody that I sort of looked up to because she sort of helped me, pushed me in directions, a role model, yes definitely a role model, she pushed me into directions that I probably would never have got into not going to the women's group'* (Carla, mid 40s, manager, community sector, mother, North Yorkshire).

These sorts of positive and life changing experiences led to women feeling as if they wanted to give something back to women's organisations and their local communities. Below Wendy is talking about a difficult phase in her life and how the support of a woman at the centre helped her through it and gave her the inspiration to support other women in similar ways;

*'She was again absolutely the right person for me to be round at that time, because also of her experience of working with women [...] and her involvement with [organisation], so the whole [...] thing that was still going on while I was there, she was able to support me through that which was brilliant really [...] so that was quite a pivotal experience for me, and it led to me wanting to provide a similar kind of experience for women here at [women's centre] through this project'* (Wendy, late 30s, manager, community sector, volunteer, Humberside).

Daisy found her involvement in a women's centre and with the women working there inspirational and this was pivotal in her positive life transition. Here she talks about how she came about the women's centre and the kind of impact it has had on her life. Daisy now serves as a positive role model to other women because from starting out on smaller courses she is now the coordinator of well-established and thriving women's centre.

*'You know, we was between that bracket where I couldn't get anything coz we were not on benefits, but I can't do anything because I've got no valuable income of my own [...] I was very much isolated [...] a friend on the estate who I'd actually known for years gone by... she came round and she'd actually started at [women's centre] about three or four months previous, that's when she said, 'Oh why don't you come along?', 'Oh no', I said 'I don't fancy nowt like that' and then she said about the reflexology class, I was thinking ooahh! But, umm, yeah, so I came along to that and really that was it. It's always been a struggle, always, but I say, that's why I feel so much about coming here because it went from I'd say something daft like reflexology class, I then went on to start umm English... from that I started me GCSE English at [College] on a night... and I passed that. I mean I got a 'B' in me English, which you know, that just blew me away [...] Just think what I've wasted, what I could have done, you know, because I... I did cleaning, you did all the menial... you know, shop work, all what I'd class as menial jobs... where you're never going to get any better because you haven't got a chance to [...] That's why I love the job I'm in*

*because I can relate so much to different aspects of women that come through the door and that is... it's having that empathy' (Daisy, early 40s, manager, community sector, mother, Humberside).*

## **2.4 Integrated, needs-based services**

A fundamental feature of women's centres is their holistic nature. They attempt to see the whole woman and her needs as integrated and overlapping. Thus, they provide a range of facilities such as on-site child-care, social spaces, cafés, even gardens and allotments in addition to rooms specifically for training, counselling, or sexual health advice/clinics. Moreover, women can access services and support on a repeat and long-term basis. The long-term and holistic nature of women's centres enables women to access services more freely and flexibly;

*'The voluntary sector seems to be generally better at looking at women's lives in context... counselling and therapy can be a lot more holistic and long-term and much more suited to women's needs really' (Sally, late 30s, manager, health sector, volunteer, West Yorkshire).*

Thus, women's centres normally develop their service provision around the belief that they need to consider users as whole people, rather than simply dealing with one aspect of the women they see. The everyday demands placed on women means they are often 'time

poor' (Moser, 1993, Clisby, 2005). Fear of, and lack of knowledge about, formal institutions often makes it difficult for women to access the information and services they need. Having everything under one roof means that women can access information readily and easily and in an environment where they feel safe and supported.

The UK Women's Resource Centre notes that, typically, women's groups 'provide a plethora of services such as advocacy, counselling, advice and information, support, shelter, treatment, referrals, training and skills development, care and practical assistance' (WRC, n.d.:2). This was confirmed by our research. Although provision levels vary greatly, there are core areas which centres focus on which influence the services they provide. These include;

### ***Education***

- Accredited and non-accredited courses
- Self defence and assertiveness training
- Health, fitness and relaxation classes
- Nutritional advice for women and children
- Creative arts

### ***Empowerment***

- Holistic and emotional support
- Help with writing formal letters, job applications and CV's

### ***Advice***

- Signposting to other services e.g. Relate<sup>14</sup>, Victim Support<sup>15</sup>, Citizens Advice<sup>16</sup>
- Benefits advice and one-stop shops providing advice in a range of areas
- Sexual health and pregnancy services

### ***Social***

- Day trips and informal social activities
- User-run cafes
- Childcare and Crèche facilities

In what follows, we concentrate on two specific aspects of the above; the importance of ‘first-rung’ provision for women on the educational ladder and in providing a ‘one-stop shop’ for women.

## **2.4.1 First-rung provision**

Service providers we spoke to were explicit about the importance of providing first-rung provision to women who had previously not had positive educational outcomes. This approach is in line with government strategies to tackle social deprivation through neighbourhood based facilities (Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, 2003), as Fiona describes below;

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<sup>14</sup> Relate is the UK’s largest provider of relationship counselling and sex therapy. The service is provided nationwide and at a low cost. See <http://www.relate.org.uk/>

<sup>15</sup> Victim Support is a nationwide charity that provides a free and confidential service which helps people cope with the effects of crime. See <http://www.victimsupport.org.uk/>

<sup>16</sup> Citizens Advice offices are nationwide and provide free of charge legal advice on all matters. See <http://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/>

*'People for whatever reasons, maybe they had bad experiences, possibly they have no formal qualifications, so for them it is the first step into engaging with or back into learning'* (Fiona, late 40s, manager, community sector, volunteer, mother, Humberside).

First-rung provision is defined by its ability to respond to the needs of individuals and communities and can encompass a range of courses from self-confidence, self-esteem and assertiveness to information, advice and guidance and basic skills in maths, literacy, and computing. Being based in local communities, women's centres are ideally placed to provide non-threatening, on-hand learning environments for women seeking to re-engage with learning. Daisy makes this point clearly;

*'When you've been out of the education loop for so many years, whether that's bringing your family up or working or not, you know, it could be illness or anything, to actually walk back into an educational establishment is very, very difficult'* (Daisy, early 40s, manager, community sector, volunteer, mother, Humberside).

Although all the centres provided first-rung provision as a key part of their learning and development programmes, it is clear that some groups face additional educational needs. Women whose first language is not English feel that they stand little chance of obtaining employment. Many feel too embarrassed to look for employment for fear of rejection or being made to feel uncomfortable. Below an

outreach worker is talking about the importance of offering assistance with English language to help people look for work;

*‘One thing, one big thing is language barriers, if you can’t speak English that will just put them off completely’*  
(Ayisha, late teens, part-time, community sector, Humberside).

Not being able to speak English becomes a triple burden for Black Minority Ethnic women as it compounds their social isolation, marginalises them from the labour market and increases their economic dependency on male partners or family members. This can have disastrous effects on women’s lives as is articulated in the quote below from Pamela who previously worked as a service provider at a women’s centre in West Yorkshire which was accessed by a high number of BME women;

*‘The main barriers economically were because a lot of them had no English at all, and they had perhaps ended up here with husbands or boyfriends or partners and then had to leave because of violence. So economically, some people were sort of fresh from their own country, and were totally left without anything in a foreign city’*  
(Pamela, early 40s, manager, community sector, volunteer, Humberside).

## **2.4.2 Women’s centres as a ‘one-stop shop’**

First-rung provision, however, involves more than simply introducing women to the world of 'life-long' learning as the first step towards educational qualifications and employment. Rather first-rung provision is only possible within a framework of a holistic and integrated service which recognises that women's lives are often very complex and that there are many factors that impact on the possibilities of women achieving their full potential;

*'Its nice as well to be within an organisation that offers other support mechanisms, so you know a woman can come and be struggling with financial difficulties and then she can see one of the outreach workers and I think it's really important for us as a project to be part of a bigger thing because I think when a woman comes to start a new hobby or you know begin an education, there's a whole host of other things that can be happening in her life'* (Abigail, late 20s, manager, community sector, volunteer, Humberside).

Being able to signpost women to other areas of service provision was seen to be an integral part of provision in all the women's centres and they all built up formal and informal links with other agencies to ensure this was possible. In all cases staff at women's centres had assisted people to find other provision, to make appointments and even accompanied women to the appointments if necessary. This kind of care and attention was seen to be over and above other forms of service provision that women may receive for example, at a college or through the NHS. As Abigail suggests;

*'its not that we necessarily have anything in place to help ourselves but we can signpost on and we're aware of all what there is so we know where they can get free contraception, pregnancy testing, and that's really important because certainly at a college you wouldn't get that level of support'* (Abigail, late 20s, manager, community sector, volunteer, Humberside).

At the time of the research, Wendy was the coordinator of a large, well established and successful women's centre. Below she is talking about the types of provision the centre offers. Her narrative illustrates aptly the importance of holistically geared service provision;

*'We've got a number of support services, we've got the direct one-to-one support, a generic support service which is really fielding any issue that women bring with them as they walk through the door, either dealing with it, helping them to deal with it or making a referral to a more specialist service or agency, so it could be anything from debt, to housing, to problems with children, to anything that you can imagine, then we have a specialist domestic violence support service that comes from a person centred perspective in that the woman leads the service that she receives, so she may just want to come in and talk about what's happening to her, what her options are, she may come in wanting practical information, she may come seeking physical refuge, because if she's being chased down the street, it could be any one of the above really, so we provide a service that's tailored to her, it's*

*absolutely confidential because we're a big building we've got loads going on, its fairly anonymous, so she could be coming in for to drop her kids off at the nursery or to access a course, or she could be coming in for domestic violence support. We've got a sexual health service, information and referral for any kind of sexual health issue, we do free, confidential pregnancy testing, Chlamydia testing, gonorrhoea testing on the premises, we train staff or volunteers to deliver that service. We have an active training programme, accredited and non-accredited courses. It's pretty much a one stop shop in a lot of ways, there aren't many needs we can't cater for, we don't offer specific legal advice, we refer on for that, very complicated housing issues we refer to specialist agencies, but pretty much women can get whatever they need from us, on their doorstep, women-only space, between ten and four' (Wendy, late 30s, manager, community sector, volunteer, Humberside).*

## **2.5 Reaching 'hard to reach' women: the importance of long-term provision**

A report commissioned by the Women's Resource Centre (2006b) argues there is a crucial need for the continued existence of women-only organisations as they actually save women's lives. What the WRC reports is born out by the findings of this research. Women's lives are

saved not only because of the work of women-only organisations in helping to raise awareness about, and prevent violence against women, providing physical shelter and a safe haven from abusive partners, but also because women's centres provide hope and interpersonal contact that can help save women from the sometimes life-threatening effects of poverty, isolation and despair. Offering that hope requires a sustained and ongoing presence in the community.

Samantha is an intelligent woman with a lot to offer, but she can at times find it difficult to cope with everyday life. She used to deal with this by shutting herself away in her house, where she felt isolated and suffered from depression. Samantha started attending a women's centre several years ago, beginning with confidence building courses and has worked her way up from there. She has successfully completed several courses and volunteers on a regular basis for different organisations. Her long-term goal, with the support from the women's centre, is to return to university. She has this to say about the role of the women's centre in re-building her life;

*'It started me off getting back into a proper life again, I spent several years just hiding away, then coming here I mixed with people, I've had something to get up for, I found a bit of a sense of purpose, and most of the groups have been lovely, really warm, caring people, the [...] session that I'm doing at the moment is perfect for me, and it's not so much the content of the group as just being in the room with people... it's really important to me to be able to come here and feel a little bit of belonging because I feel quite isolated and I get very lonely... and*

*without coming here the days would run into the night and it'd just be unbearable for me [...] it being an all women centre is imperative to me coming here, so there's a safe environment to come to'* (Samantha, late 30s, volunteer, Humberside)

Samantha is not alone. Many women who were accessing the women's centres had, for one reason or another, difficult lives. Those women told us how important it was for them to know that the service was there when they needed it: just knowing the centre was there for them assisted in creating some much needed security and stability.

Bridget has been attending a women's centre for several years, initially she came to get support with domestic violence issues, she now attends courses and drops in when she feels she requires additional support;

*'I can leave [the women's centre] for like seven months even and when I come back it is like I never left, they make you feel so welcome every time you walk through the door'* (Bridget, early 40s, student, mother, Humberside).

Similarly, service providers told us how important it was that they were able to provide long-term and ongoing provision to support women throughout the life course. Being embedded in local communities means that the service providers are also able to develop relationships with service users and other members of the local community;

*'I could probably name 99% of the women that come through the door. They'll see you walking around the estate and they'll say, 'hello Daisy'. It's all that familiarity, it does break down that barrier [...] you're not just this face in an office, there is that relationship building and that enables, again women to open themselves up' (Daisy, early 40s, manager, community sector, volunteer, mother, Humberside).*

## **2.6 Filling Gaps, transforming lives: the wider impacts of women's centres**

Women begin attending centres for many different reasons. Often it is to effect change in their own lives, such as improving self-esteem or re-entering education. However, the impact of women's centres is clearly much broader than just on the individual lives of women service users. Firstly, as described above, women's centres compliment mainstream service provision by helping women find out about and access the range of services available to them *and* their families. Secondly, women's centres also fill the gaps in mainstream provision in health and in education and as such do not simply refer women on to other services, but often have women referred on to them from the statutory sector. Thirdly, working directly with women to improve their quality of life has a much wider impact on families and communities in terms of helping to raise aspirations and levels of educational attainment. One of the services which almost all women's centres provide is basic skills education. This was a draw

for women who had previously not had very positive experiences of education. Those women were keen to improve their skills not just for themselves, but more importantly in order to help their children.

### **2.6.1 Filling gaps in the statutory sector**

Women's organisations are often established where mainstream services are inappropriate or non-existent (WRC, n.d.:3) such as in rural areas, in areas of socio-economic deprivation or for excluded communities such as some ethnic minority groups;

*'I think in general there's not enough support for women and for parents really and I don't know if there's any kind of women's centre round here. I think there was but I don't know if it's still there. So I think where would you turn if you needed anything?'* (Priya, late 20s, full-time mother, Humberside).

As women's centres are based in local communities they often aim to respond to specific and changing local needs in ways that statutory sector organisations find difficult. They are often pro-active in promoting women's participation in their services, for example by holding 'Open Days' in the centre which offer women the chance to go and try taster sessions in different classes. Other activities include holding fun days, open to men, women and children in local venues so that people can go along and learn about what the centre offers in a non-threatening environment.

Some women attending women's centres are sign-posted there by statutory organisations as it is recognised that they are frequently

able to provide additional and/or long-term support. Molly's story of how she first began attending a women's centre illustrates a route that is common;

*'What it was, was that I was going through a bit of depression and that, and well I saw a counsellor at the doctors and she referred me to another counsellor but I didn't get no joy, but she recommended this place [women's Centre]' (Molly late 40s, full-time mother, volunteer , Humberside).*

Service providers were not only able to identify the 'gaps' they were filling in state funded provision but also the economic contribution they made by keeping women (and through them their families) out of mainstream service provision;

*'Picking up the pieces from the person who hasn't got the counselling and has decided that, that night they're going to self-harm or commit suicide. Add in those costs of the paramedics, ambulance, and casualty department. That's just an example of what the women's centre does. The benefits and advice, add that in, take that away from somebody then going to the benefits agency and taking four hours of one person's time, they would come here and get that' (Pamela, early 40s, manager, community sector, volunteer, Humberside).*

## 2.6.2 Engendering aspirations: women as role models for their children

The Yorkshire and Humber Region has marked areas of high unemployment and deprivation, which are often coupled with low aspirations. The region as a whole has a slightly higher than average percentage of people 'not in good health', 10.3% compared to 9.0% in the UK overall. In addition, one in three people aged 16-74 have no qualifications (ONS 2007). Women's centres are concerned with addressing each of these issues through positive action and, as Wendy illustrates, can be instrumental in radically changing women's lives;

*'A local woman, said to me was before she'd become involved with the women's centre she felt that she wanted to stay at home and look after her children until they were in their teens, and then after that she could see herself working on the till at [a frozen food store] and that now she knows that she can do whatever she wants to do, all the choices are open to her, and its up to her to make those choices and that's what she's going to do, and that just completely opened her world by being exposed to different opportunities [...] I think we have a very clear role to play in addressing disadvantage in that way, because we do open doors, we provide practical help and assistance, but we also give women aspiration and that's something that's hard to quantify but enormously valuable' (Wendy, late 30s, manager, community sector, volunteer, Humberside).*

Similarly, service providers acknowledged the importance of aspiration and noted that women often engaged in education as they wanted their daughters to have more options available to them than they had had in their own lives. Women stated that both being a good role model and being able to help their children with school work were important motivators. They felt this was best achieved through educating themselves first;

*'How I always looked at it myself is, educate the parent, you educate the child. You know if I used to be sat there doing my homework with my children and it's 'Oh Mum. Oh what're you doing?' You know, [...] they see you learning and they want to learn' (Daisy, early 40s, manager, community sector, volunteer, mother, Humberside).*

Issues of education were especially relevant to women whose first language wasn't English. These women felt that lacking English language skills limited both their own life chances and their ability to take a more active role in their children's education and achievement, as Ayisha, an outreach worker, explains;

*'Because they want to be involved with their children and it's a shame that they can't because of just one little thing, so if they can overcome it, they can be a part of their child's education in the future, which is really good, we all need a role model' (Ayisha, late teens, part-time, community sector, Humberside).*

In sum, one of the most significant findings of this research was just how important women's centres are not just to the women who access their services but also to their children, their families and the local communities who benefit from the services provided to women. The wider impact of those services can be seen not only in the way that women's centres and organisations compliment and fill the gaps in statutory service provision, but also in the way that the transformation of women's lives helps to engender in families and communities a sense of aspiration and achievement.

### **3.0 Barriers to service provision**

The preceding section provides evidence of the wide ranging contribution of women-only services to meeting women's needs and enhancing their life-choices, and the wider effects of that service provision. This section explores some of the barriers that women's centres face in the provision of those services. These barriers are both structural, such as accessing funding, and cultural, such as battling against a popular belief that, as there exists a perceived legal equality in the UK, gender inequalities are no longer an issue. Some people, especially some men, can also appear threatened by women-only spaces. The problems which women's services face are many and varied, and can be difficult to extricate into separate issues. Here, we focus on some of the main barriers that emerged through the data.

### 3.1 Public (mis)conceptions

Public understandings of the nature and role of women's services have a huge impact on both women's ability to access services and on provider's abilities to provide them. There are a number of stereotypes associated with women's centres which may be negative and problematic, and which are largely based on a lack of knowledge about such services. The key to dispelling negative stereotypes can be through greater understanding as Fiona notes;

*'People say is it the men, but no it's not, it's the women themselves [...] they put us into categories; we're all lesbians, we're all battered by men, we hate men, we're all vegetarians [...] Well come and have a look... it's just... you find that the only criteria is you have to be a woman... The head of this Residents Association [wrote a letter] saying, 'I never believed in women's centres before, now I think it's great'. And it was just that one letter. Now [he] did more for our project and women's centres than if I'd have spent 5 years going round the estate... because they knew him, they trusted him' (Fiona, late 40s, manager, community sector, volunteer, Humberside).*

Other common assumptions are that women's centres only cater for women with particular kinds of problems, which can cause potential users to be nervous about getting involved;

*'People have said "oh the women's centre, that's for battered women isn't it?" (Octavia, early 40s, volunteer, mother, Humberside).*

Service providers noted that women are far more likely to cease accessing a service if they come up against opposition from family, friends or the wider community. One Asian women's support service we spoke to overcame this issue by setting up a women's group at the local mosque. Removing this barrier enabled local women to freely access the service provided without causing difficulties at home.

*'I think what we need to show is, we need to show to the men that we're not putting their wives against them but we're showing that you can compromise and you can do it on an equal level, so we're not enemies' (Ayisha, late teens, part-time, community sector, Humberside).*

## **3.2 Lack of recognition**

The women's sector provides services which enable women to enter education and employment, providing long-term economic benefits to individuals and local communities. What this and other research has consistently shown, however, is that those working with women in the voluntary sector often feel that the work they do is under-valued. In addition, there is a perception that little recognition is given to the gaps they fill or economic burden they take away from the statutory services (WRC, 2004).

*'I do feel social services have abused the women's centres over all because they give referrals but they don't give us any contribution for the cost of doing, and basically we're doing their jobs for them [...] but we're also improving their statistics because they count for every lady that they put onto us they're still counting them in their budgets, but they keep the funding and we don't get it'* (Octavia, early 40s, volunteer, mother, Humberside).

Although such services fill the gaps left by mainstream and statutory provision, they are often left without the resources in place to cope;

*'The only thing that we find difficult sometimes is if a lot of the mental health service see a women's centre and they think, 'Ooh, we can send them along to the women's centres... and sometimes their needs... are much more you know, than anything that we can offer... And that's... that's... you know, that's not excluding them, that's just the... the reality of it'* (Fiona, late 40s, manager, community sector, volunteer, mother, Humberside).

In reference to the free counselling service that women's centres provide and all the attendant cost associated with that, Fiona further notes;

*'We've got a waiting list; she's currently doing two women as long as it takes. We've got a waiting list for that. We're providing that service free, we're providing the room, tea and coffee, the environment. [...] All that saves already a GP practice or the health service paying for that person to*

*have private counselling'* (Fiona, late 40s, manager, community sector, volunteer, mother, Humberside).

An independent study, based in London and commissioned by the WRC in 2006, found that all four of the women's organisations it looked at provided 'excellent' value for money;

'A recent pilot study on the economic impact of women's organisations found that women's organisations provide excellent value for money (the economic cost of delivery far exceeded the funding received). Furthermore the women's organisations in the study made savings for the statutory sector by preventing domestic violence, reducing burdens on the health system, reducing women's re-offending, improving mental health and enabling parents to take custody of children previously 'looked after' by social services' (Women's Resource Centre, 2006b:18).

Without full economic costing of the benefits which women's services provide it can be difficult to measure the impact which they have on both individuals and local communities. Further studies are needed to quantify both the direct savings made by statutory services in terms of referrals to women's organisations and other indirect economic benefits that accrue as a result of their work, for example, in assisting women into education and employment. However, it is also important to acknowledge that much of the work women's organisations do is essentially qualitative and therefore difficult to quantify.

Being involved with research can be challenging, specifically for those being interviewed about what are essentially both private and sensitive topics. The observation below is from a service provider. She is referring to a focus group and interview session held at a women's centre during the course of this research. The quote captures perfectly how sometimes progress cannot be measured solely through statistics and outputs. The very fact that women felt able to discuss their lives with us is evidence in itself that the work these women's centres do has positive impacts on the lives of the women who access the service;

*'There are two women in that particular group who months ago were at the stage where they weren't even coming through the front door of their own house, and with our help and support and sort of constant mentoring and chivvyng along [...] they're now the people who can sit in a room and be interviewed'* (Pamela, early 40s, manager, community sector, volunteer, Humberside).

### **3.3 Funding and resource issues**

Popular misconceptions about the work of women's organisations and the lack of recognition of the work and services they provide is directly linked to what women cited as the main barrier affecting an organisation's ability to provide consistent, high-level services; that is, the inability to find stable funding sources. In line with the findings of this study, the WRC (2006a) notes that women's organisations, along with the rest of the voluntary and community sector, experience particular funding problems including;

- Short-term, project oriented funding
- Lack of funding for core costs, for example, staffing, utilities, maintenance of premises
- Limited capacity for fundraising and battling with bureaucracy
- Funders' failure to implement full-cost recovery
- Increased competition for funding

For most women's organisations, the lack of core funding to pay for premises and their upkeep, salaries for staff, and the cost of everyday running lies at the heart of their financial problems. As charitable and not-for-profit organisations they do not receive mainstream funding. Moreover, the majority of centres involved in this research provide services which are free at the point of access. Many service providers feel strongly about the continuing need for free provision as this benefits both families on low incomes and because income distribution within families may be unequal, women may not have access to 'spending money'. Charging for services, therefore, may further exclude already marginalized people. Octavia explains here how the unequal distribution of power in families can lead to women being unable to access economic resources and so be unable to engage in self-development which incurs cost;

*'although she wants to educate herself she can't come into the category where to get her education free because her husband's got this job but he won't give her the money to do it'* (Octavia, early 40s, volunteer, mother, Humberside).

The lack of both mainstream core funding and/or funding through revenues generated by service provision means that most women's

organisations seek external funding through an ongoing cycle of applications to other charitable and grant giving bodies, such as the Lottery Fund. The funding that they are able to apply for is usually targeted to specific, short-term projects, rather than on everyday staffing and running costs, and unlike other not-for-profit and charitable foundations their access to fundraising among the wider populace is limited by the general misconceptions about gender equality and the presumed restricted remit of women's centres.

Time and energy spent on funding bids was felt by many to be excessive and to divert their human resources from what they saw as their main purpose. The negative effects of annually based 'panic funding' also absorbs organisational and emotional resources. Many women's centres we spoke to had regularly been weeks or days away from having to significantly reduce their services and opening hours or even close.

As we discuss in further detail below, the underlying financial instability of women's organisations and the continual quest for new sources of funding makes it difficult for providers to plan strategically as they constantly try to shape their programmes to meet the aims and objectives of current funding. It also militates against efforts to provide a secure and stable environment for women.

### **3.3.1 Funding priorities and trends**

Dominant funding paradigms often take on board and operate in response to current social trends and 'buzz words' whether emanating from the government or from mainstream media and popular culture.

The introduction of the contracts culture in the voluntary sector presents additional challenges for women's organisations as the emphasis changed from getting support for a 'good cause', to providing services that purchasers and funders need and/or want to buy (Riordan, 1999, cited in Soteri, 2002). The problem posed by that approach is two-fold. Purchasers and funders may not always know about the specific needs of particular groups and individuals in particular social situations. They may also make categorical assumptions about the kinds of people that require certain kinds of services.

Service providers, for example, mentioned that the appropriation of certain language and labels was something they did not feel entirely comfortable with. However, buying into these 'trends' often enabled them to secure future funding. The requirement to 'tick the boxes' of funding bids, for example by detailing levels of socio-economic, and educational deprivation experienced by the project beneficiaries, can then serve to perpetuate stigmatising stereotypes women's centres work to breakdown, as one service provider commented;

*'If the women saw this... It's like saying they're all on the bones of their ass... and they'd kick against it... because people don't like to be labelled with that deprived thing... And I think we're putting these in, funding bids, and this is all the... the barriers and the stigmas that we're trying to break down... but we're still putting them in because we have to get the money in to change that'* (Focus Group, women's service providers, Humberside).

This is not an isolated observation. Research carried out by The Women's National Commission also highlighted the dilemmas and contradictions faced by women's organisations between trying to pursue their own local objectives and compromising values that are forced upon them by funding requirements of external bodies (Scott, 2001). Funding trends also mean that certain members of the community are prevented from accessing service provision. For example, there has been a recent focus on engaging 16-19 years olds in education and employment and, as Gabriel points out, this served to exclude older women;

*'The [project] where I worked previously was aimed at 16 to 19s but there was so much provision for 16 to 19s. Whereas, we had so many women who came to us who were probably 19 to 24 who wanted to do things and even 24 plus but there was nowhere they could get funded places to do things'* (Gabrielle, early 40s, part-time administrator, mother, Humberside).

The nature of that funding also required quantifiable objectives and outputs, with emphasis on accredited courses and progression upwards;

*'The way learning is funded as well is a big barrier because you're expected to progress upwards, to get funding for courses [...] is very much hierarchical, so you'll do a level 1 and then you'll immediately go to a level 2'* (Ella, late 30s, manager, community sector, volunteer, Humberside).

The accreditation of learning and the trend towards ‘measurable outputs’ is often seen as a barrier to service provision that aims to cater for *all* women; that is, it potentially excludes certain categories of women. For example, older women who don’t need to be on structured learning pathways and those women who are experiencing difficulties and cannot commit themselves to regular learning. The importance of maintaining possibilities for non-accredited learning was a recurrent issue for many of the women who participated in this study, as the comment below illustrates;

*‘It’s a shame nowadays that everything needs to be accredited, sometimes I just want to attend things for pleasure and fun or to meet people’* (Focus group, women accessing women’s services, Humberside).

Cutting funding for non-accredited courses is also short-sighted as it often provides an essential stepping stone to accredited training. Moreover, women who have already had bad experiences of formal education and who do not feel ready to embark on accredited training may be set up to fail by being steered onto such a course due to lack of alternatives and then not managing to pass or complete the training. This could have deleterious consequences for their self-esteem and willingness to engage in future provision.

### **3.3.2 Instability in service provision**

The constant chase for new sources of funding on projects initiated externally means that well-established and successful initiatives may have to be cancelled because of lack of funds. The unstable nature of many women specific services often mirrors the lives of those women

who most benefit from their service. Women need to feel confident that a service they come to trust is going to remain a permanent fixture in their lives as long as they need it;

*'There's nothing worse than a service being available for the public and everybody's enjoying it and it's making an impact and then it gets taken away, and we're getting now where the community and the public are saying 'oh, another scheme which will be gone in a couple of months, couple of years' and they need consistency' (Octavia, early 40s, volunteer, mother, Humberside).*

The emotional and experiential aspects of this dilemma are much harder to quantify and can easily be overlooked. Service providers who are struggling to secure future funding highlighted that the stress and pressure as well as the guilt and responsibility felt is at times overwhelming.

At the time of the research, Pamela was the coordinator of a thriving women's centre. When we spoke to her the organisation she worked for was having serious problems securing funding for the following year and was under the threat of closure. The centre was subsequently forced to significantly reduce its services and make all paid staff redundant;

*'Okay, so the funding is an absolute nightmare. Even though you know you're doing all you can, but the funding just hasn't been given or it isn't seen as a priority. Which is perhaps gender-biased, I don't know, but I think it's just statutory versus voluntary biased sometimes. That the*

*government and the statutory agencies don't see it as a right that a women's centre should be there [...] the money should be there [...]. I try to remain optimistic, and we're working hard for it not to close [...] is there going to be this last minute pot of money? [...] I mean the absolute ludicrous thing is that this is not a sinking ship. How can they let it [close] when they see what we've done? It's always that knife-edge thing [...] I'll hang on to the last minute and if it closes I'll go, I'll be able to move on, I know that. But those people who were there, what do they do then? Where do they go?'*

The reality of closing and changing services when vulnerable and disadvantaged women have come to rely on them can be detrimental to women's experience and their ability to continue moving forward, as Wendy reveals below;

*'Yeah well you do harm, and you lose total credibility with the women in the community that you're there for. Because how do you then take away that lifeline?'* (Wendy, late 30s, manager, community sector, volunteer, Humberside).

Moreover, taking the service away and causing more disruption and pain in women's lives goes against the entire ethos of what women's organisations are working towards, placing service providers in difficult ethical positions. Some told us that if funding were to cease they would continue to run reduced provision on a voluntary basis. As Nasreen who works with BME women comments below;

*'I would say even if I didn't get paid and there were some course here I'd happily just come in, volunteer and do it, but what we've seen the difference in the women its amazing, its amazing what we've achieved'* (Nasreen, mid 20s, part-time manager, community sector, Humberside).

In summary, a lack of statutory funding directly limits the work of women's organisations to fill the gaps left by publicly funded mainstream service providers. However, the wider consequences of this under-funding is that women's organisations are frequently stretched and diverted from their core activities in the quest to find new sources of support, cannot engage in long term planning, and are sometimes forced to alter their programmes according to the requirements of funding agencies rather than the needs of their users.

### **3.4 Networking**

As indicated in the introduction, there are a small but significant number of women's Trusts and Networks in the Yorkshire and Humber region, and our research has drawn in particular on the Hull Women's Network. However, women working in women's organisations and centres in Hull and elsewhere in the Yorkshire and Humber Region thought that there was a need for women's services to forge stronger and wider networks amongst a broader range of statutory and non-statutory agencies.

The need to foster multi-agency partnerships was of particular concern to those working in BME women's services. Some BME

women's services, particularly those operating in less culturally diverse areas, said they felt 'isolated' and 'cut off' from other locally run women's services. BME communities cannot be seen as one homogenous mass, they have differing needs and requirements. However, many smaller ethnic minority communities have little provision or assistance and find it difficult to subsist without networks and support;

*'I feel let down by the women's centres and women's provisions in [area]. I personally feel they do not do enough to attract BME women at all, I do not feel that they are not particularly interested in engaging with BME women or the different communities [but] for example, over seventy women use the BME group I mentioned earlier, does that not say something, does that not suggest that there is huge demand for something and it does not necessarily have to be specific provision' (Lindsey, mid 20s, civil service, housing sector, Humberside).*

Women play a key role within their communities as they often form the very backbone of community cohesion and local neighbourhood relations and women being seen working together to form local partnerships form a vital part of this cohesion. The demographics of our local areas are changing and it is important that the voluntary sector and specifically women's services are seen to be leading the way in forging new partnerships and establishing long-term relationships to support one another;

*'But I think it's getting that 'anything is possible' atmosphere, which I think, you know, a women's centre*

*does. It encourages all different types of women to blend together'* (Pamela, early 40s, manager, community sector, volunteer, Humberside).

## 4.0 Conclusions and recommendations

*'Political rhetoric about women's equality fails to be matched by public investment in women's organisations'* (Riordan, 1999:32, cited in Soteri, 2002).

This report focused on the work of women-only services in the Yorkshire and Humber Region, exploring in particular on the work of women's centres that together make up Hull Women's Network. It has shown how women's organisations meet a wide variety of women's needs, fill gaps in mainstream service provision, and help to transform women's lives and through them the lives of others. Further, the report has demonstrated that much of the work that women's organisations do is seriously undervalued and unrecognised: the latter is most explicitly seen in the government's lack of commitment to providing long-term funding for women-only services. That the work of women's centres is undervalued and under-resourced, however, is no doubt also tied to the more general lack of recognition given to women's work and contribution - within and outside of the home - in society as a whole, a lack of recognition that is, ironically, further exacerbated by a popular perception that gender inequalities are now a thing of the past.

On a more positive note, in 2007 the government initiated a Third Sector Review and produced consultation documents which state their recognition of and commitment to community and voluntary sector organisations. They acknowledge the work that this sector performs, recognising that they are:

- bridging divides between different communities and bringing people together, reducing tensions and helping to create tolerant and cohesive communities
- delivering community-based solutions and action, empowering communities to make a difference
- playing a leading role in the delivery of the Supporting People programme, tackling and preventing homelessness, social housing, tenant engagement, and transforming neighbourhoods
- bringing a user perspective and involvement of local people in the services they receive, including those who may be 'hard to reach', disadvantaged or excluded
- helping citizens to represent their views to the state and helping to build accountable local government
- supporting community enterprises to realise economic opportunities, address under representation of particular groups especially the most marginalized in society, regenerate places, and help communities to thrive

(Department for Communities and Local Government, 2007:8)

As this study has demonstrated, women's voluntary and community organisations are successfully performing all of the above roles in a diverse range of communities. If acknowledgement of this work is being mainstreamed into government policy, this is a very welcome

initiative. The Third Sector Review goes on to recognise the challenges faced by the sector and commits itself to:

- recognise the role of the third sector in our work
- reduce inconsistency in how we work with the third sector
- listen and learn from the voice of the third sector
- create a framework for strong local partnerships
- ensure fairness in service delivery

Finally, they propose to improve future policy by:

- improving how we work with the sector
  - enabling the sector to be an effective local partner in place shaping
  - moving to a more strategic partnership and funding relationship with the sector
  - supporting sustainable investment in community anchors
- (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2007:11)

These commitments are a positive step forward but the women's voluntary and community sector should keep a weather eye on progression. We recommend that the government act fast to turn the policy rhetoric into reality as the truth is that the continued existence of women's centres and women-only safe spaces is under serious threat.

In order to ensure that women-only services are not over-looked in the current government strategies further research is needed that can help quantify the value of women's organisations and the work they

do ‘filling the gap’ and ‘picking up’ from statutory service provision. However, it is also important to acknowledge that it may not be possible to place an economic measure on much of the work that women’s centres do. Moreover, such ‘bean counting’ can be counterproductive and exclusionary, forcing women’s centres to address the requirements of funding bodies rather than meet the needs of the women they seek to serve.

Finally, we call for greater cooperation and knowledge-sharing between existing women’s organisations and networks, particularly across and between ethnic, religious and community boundaries. Although women’s needs vary considerably, there is nonetheless much that they share in common. This is in line with government policy to move toward a more strategic partnership with the sector, to facilitate this, women’s organisations need to form themselves into stronger strategic partnerships through which they are better placed to work with, and challenge, government policy and strategy. Indeed, it is only by greater collectivity that women’s organisations and women-only service providers can ensure that local and national government policy makers fully recognise and account for the contribution that women’s organisations make both to the lives of individual women and to society as a whole.

## **4.1 Recommendations**

- A fuller study needs to be undertaken to assess the social, cultural and economic impact of women’s organisations for society as a whole. This could include a cost-benefit analysis

- There is a need for greater capacity-building within women's organisations, for example, further assistance could be provided to support organisations with financial processes and funding applications and the application processes themselves could be simplified and made less time-consuming
- At local levels, there should be greater recognition of, and financial provision for, the work that women's organisations do in 'filling the gap' and 'picking up' from statutory services. At national level, women's services should ensure their voices are heard within government policy-making
- Promotion of greater networking and knowledge-sharing between women's organisations, be they based on locality, religious or ethnic affiliation, or around particular gender issues such as domestic and sexual violence, education or employment. This would also encourage the recognition of diversity as a strength of the sector
- The formation of stronger strategic partnerships amongst women's voluntary and community organisations would facilitate greater power-sharing and policy input at both regional and national levels. More work needs to be done to strengthen such partnerships, and links between partnerships both in the Yorkshire and Humber Region, and nationally, for example, linking into the Women's Resource Centre's current partnership-working

- A gender analysis needs to underpin all new policy and legislation, including the Third Sector Review, followed by regular gendered impact assessments
- Continued monitoring of the government's Third Sector Review and lobbying for transformation of policy into action for positive change

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