

Women Take Part Briefing Paper

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

Women Take Part has been collecting information about two sides of the story:

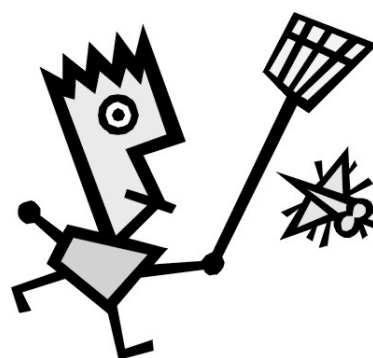
- **'what works'** in terms of approaches, initiatives and learning models that encourage different groups of women to become more involved, and
- **'what needs to happen'** so that structures, policies and organisations work in ways that encourage the recruitment and support of more women,

This paper is one of a set, the others include: **Context and Rationale¹**; **Methodology; Organisations and Structures; Support and Development; Closing the Gap: a framework for action and Organisation Case Studies**

Women's journeys to active, critically engaged citizens

While we appreciate that we are all unique individual women, treading our path and taking different routes, there is some value in drawing out the common experiences that women face. By understanding these, we can see what needs to change for women to make progress, both in terms of our own personal development and in terms of structures and processes that support or impede our progress. Recent evidence² highlights the need for organisations and structures to change how they do things if they want different types of people to become involved. The evidence shows that, even if women do 'get into' various governance structures, they still often experience the **'zapper effect'** or the

'concrete ceiling': not feeling equal, frustrated by the way 'business' is conducted, feeling knocked back or just not taken into account.



Based on existing research literature³ and issues that women have reported during our research⁴, a model⁵ is proposed which outlines the stages of the journey that women may take. It is, like all models, a simplified analysis that helps us to understand how 'under-represented' women may move from being 'uninvolved' to being 'critically engaged', and informs what is needed to support them along the way.

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

The stages are presented as steps in a progressive sequence. However, real life is generally more complex than this, with stops, starts, and movement backwards and forwards. Women will take different routes through the steps and we hope the model will be useful to them in making sense of their own journeys and in seeing the path they took or are taking.

We are interested in what is required in order for women to move from step to step and stay 'at the table' and be 'critically engaged' - in whatever context they find themselves.

Step 0: Not there - Women haven't considered getting involved in the public domain

Indicators: they

- ♦ are occupied by performing traditional family roles in the private & domestic sphere
- ♦ work long hours in low paid jobs
- ♦ are constrained and proscribed by gender expectations and gender roles
- ♦ juggle caring roles and economic roles
- ♦ are unconfident in their own abilities.... 'I can't do it ...' 'It's not possible ..' 'I haven't got time ..'
- ♦ feel unable to navigate their way in the world
- ♦ don't feel that they can change things
- ♦ don't know what's 'out there'
- ♦ don't see voting as particularly important or something they do
- ♦ are prevented from taking a role or an interest outside the private sphere
- ♦ do not see how the public domain relates to their lives
- ♦ do not question their position in society
- ♦ experience violence, intimidation and domestic abuse

Step 1: Getting there - Women want things to be improved for themselves, their families and communities and step outside the private domain. Indicators: they

- ♦ start to be involved in things outside the home, such as volunteering
- ♦ see the value of association or friendship with other women
- ♦ want to find out more about how the 'external world' works
- ♦ start to value their own skills and knowledge
- ♦ have more personal confidence and self-esteem
- ♦ want to improve their opportunities
- ♦ recognise they have rights to do things for themselves - and still have responsibility for the home, family and caring
- ♦ are encouraged to have interests and roles outside the home as long as family life is not disrupted
- ♦ have more awareness of what voting means for them

Step 2: Being there - Women are involved in public structures and community

Organisations. Indicators: they

- ♦ are involved in local community projects and civic structures
- ♦ know more about how decisions are made
- ♦ know more about the external public world
- ♦ feel they can contribute opinions and ideas and have something useful to say
- ♦ know more about others who are different to them
- ♦ learn the rules of engagement: how meetings work, how to get their voice across, how to read official documents
- ♦ make allies of others
- ♦ feel more confident in their own abilities
- ♦ see the value of networking
- ♦ feel they are 'not good enough'
- ♦ feel that they are not listened to and are undervalued at times
- ♦ are supported by family members
- ♦ wonder if they are doing things right
- ♦ question how they can juggle family expectations, their own expectations and other commitments
- ♦ limit themselves to what they know they can do
- ♦ still find it difficult to break out of traditional caring roles and housework

Step 3: Staying there - Women work with and within structures and organisations to deliver change based upon equality and social justice. Indicators: they

- ♦ know they can make a difference
- ♦ value their own contribution
- ♦ link local concerns to national and global issues
- ♦ feel able to question how things are done
- ♦ know what they want or need
- ♦ know where to go to get what they want
- ♦ understand the complexities around decision making and policy development
- ♦ see how power inequalities operate - for themselves and others
- ♦ understand how gender inequality affects them and other women and how race and class connect with gender inequality
- ♦ have a critical analysis of issues and events and can critically analyse official documents
- ♦ trust their own judgement when things feel wrong
- ♦ feel confident to say I don't understand and feel able to ask 'stupid' questions
- ♦ don't blame themselves when things go wrong
- ♦ see mistakes as opportunities for learning
- ♦ seek out active support from others
- ♦ reflect on and evaluate what they do
- ♦ take risks to get things done
- ♦ understand the value of collective action
- ♦ develop their own networks for support and development
- ♦ act as role models and support other women
- ♦ make demands on others to take a responsibility for maintaining family life and housework
- ♦ feel supported to have the time and energy to be engaged and involved

Initial findings

The Steps were sent out to approximately 45 individual women from different organisations across England, some of whom were already involved in the research, with a request for constructive comments and illustration from their own life and journey. To date, we have had 8 replies back with an astonishing amount of personal detail. (We expect many more to come rolling in over the next month). All indicate that the steps are very useful in making sense of their own 'journeys' to becoming active critical citizens.

The steps are accurate and relate to personal experience of many women. I like the way that you have illustrated the indicators in each of the steps, especially step 0 where there are so many women still in that step who do not realise how much influence they can have and how many things there are out there for them to get involved in. I also think Step 0 can have women who are highly educated and maybe in professional jobs but simply do not see that they have a voice

Does difference make a difference?

I think the steps are absolutely correct and I can identify with them going back to when I felt unable and lost.

In terms of the stages of the model, over time I have made steady progress from stage 1 to stage 2, although I don't feel that I have fully met all the indicators within stage 2 that would allow me to move up to the next level.

Steps can be interlinked or may overlap. Women may move through the sequence of steps, yet their journey is fluid, at one level they may 'want things to be improved for themselves, their families and communities and step outside the private domain', yet they may find they are still partially dominated or held back by the indicators in step 0.

One respondent suggested events act as triggers to a cycle of change, development and learning. For example in Step 1 there is the indicator...

'Women start to be involved in things outside the home such as volunteering'

...which could then lead onto the following:

- She is valued for her contributions, including her time, skills, commitment.
- She is engaging with a new group of people.
- She in turn is given a new opportunity to enhance or learn new skills, thus expanding on her existing knowledge base.
- She may wish to develop her skills by undertaking training within her area of interest.
- With her new found knowledge she may look at pursuing other more challenging roles.
- Ultimately, her self confidence, self esteem, sense of worth will be elevated.

Other comments relate to different trajectories - including what happens when women decide that participation is a waste of time, either because they find that their situation is not close to where power is, or because it's a very negative experience. It can seem all too time consuming for too little benefit. This relates to the *Briefing Paper, Closing the Gap*, which relates women's journeys to the organisational context within which they are active.

Does difference make a difference?

Women's experiences of both private and public domains provide the basis for the model. We all start our journeys in different places, for different reasons, and with differences between us, such as ethnicity, religion, disability, class, culture, income, and sexuality. These will have positive or negative impacts on our progress. The Steps seeks to encapsulate the experiences of **'EveryWoman/AnyWoman'** and so we anticipate that individual women will recognise significant aspects of their own journeys within it.

Stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination such as racism, homophobia and discrimination based upon disability, class, background, and culture will all affect women's journeys. ***The initial findings would seem to indicate that the steps are relevant for a wide variety of women.***

Some of the pen pictures below illustrate how women from very different backgrounds and cultures experience the same steps - played out in different ways.

Pen pictures

These have been extracted from the responses we received from a range of different women:

What prompted you to start your journey?

Being a 'girl' meant that I was going to be denied access to the boys world which I did not realise was different from mine. When I began Grammar School I also became aware of class divisions as I was plunged into another alien world where the girls were being primed for teaching/medical roles and the boys for positions of power.

Where did you start?

I became increasingly aware that I would never experience an ungendered thought. Society

What prompted you to start your journey?

Getting married and having children changed everything, no time to myself, only able to do domestic type jobs to fit around the children. My husband lost his job so we decided that one of us would go to college and retrain. He went and I was devastated, but supported him. He messed around and did not take it seriously, which made me very unhappy. I knew I could do it and gain more qualifications and make a better life for me and the children.

Where did you start?

I got divorced which was the start of my life. I went to college and studied to gain four A levels and several RSA's in IT. A wonderful tutor encouraged me to look at going to University and told me I could do it. Another male tutor and

I am a positive, enthusiastic and challenging person who often uses humour to explore difficult issues. I don't really buy into the sisterhood stuff as I don't necessarily think that I should have things in common with another woman just because we share the same gender! (Nor do I assume that I have anything in common with men - who don't!!). We are each unique and have different life experiences. It is the specific inequalities and disadvantage that we need to tackle - and it is everyone's responsibility to do so otherwise nothing changes.



mitigated against it and in many ways I colluded because I was battling to understand myself when my 'self' was being constructed by others. I wanted to feel 'safe' as myself but this meant accepting the role that society was imposing on me simply because of my chromosomes!! I was extremely angry but felt powerless and isolated in my struggle. I was always interested in psychology and in the 1960s I joined Woman's Lib where I began to explore 'feminist' issues with like minded women.

friend told me the way of work was changing and women would be working in higher paid jobs and equal to men. I listened and took his advice. I went to University and got my BA Hons, (I was the first person in our family ever to have a degree). On graduation day I was offered a 1 year research post, which was fantastic, I have never looked back. I have encouraged many more women since to do the same. I worked for the University to promote participation to educate hard to reach groups and the route they could take and the outcomes. My confidence grew, my ability to communicate and be around other people grew. I felt I was able to contribute and actually knew more than I thought I did. I realised I had life skills - I didn't even know what they were before.

What prompted you to start your journey?
Initially my desire to attend a course created by women for women was very appealing, given that I had worked predominately with women in the community. On a more personal level I wanted to develop professional relationships with other like-minded women who shared a common interest in women's issues.

Other key factors may have included my own personal experiences of the daily injustices faced by women, which are largely ignored by wider society, leaving you feeling voiceless about issues that affect you and women around you. This in turn gives way to feelings of frustration as you are unaware of how you can begin to initiate any form of change for yourself or other women.

Where did you start?

On reflection I believe my journey started when I was 16, having made a conscious choice not to remain in a forced marriage to a man who was my first cousin, and who was 15 years my senior. Leaving the marriage, severing all ties with my immediate family, and seeking refuge in a women's hostel, has shaped my life over the years. It was at this point in my life

where I began to make the transition from having every aspect of my life controlled, to being able to make my own life choices. This is where a deep seated desire to support women who had suffered similar abuses began. Prior to this stage my life had been contained in stage 0, as I believe this served a purpose, not for me, but for those whose belief systems are based on the subjugation and oppression of women, which results in the indicators listed during stage 0.

During this period of my life I had no inclination to assert myself educationally or otherwise, as from a young age the blueprint of my life had already been mapped out by my family, without any input from me. I was instilled with the belief that education for me was not a necessary prerequisite to be successful in life, success for women was measured purely on the basis of their domestic skills, and the role that they played out as a daughter, sister, and prospective wife.

Where do you feel you are now?

I lived in a violent marriage for ten years- I was a survivor not a victim!! I think the biggest problem is learning to love and value myself in a society that does not put much value on women - except as a cheap commodity. I am still frustrated at the aspects of me that are described as typically female, i.e. I cry easily, I take on carer roles, am in a 'woman's job, feel responsible for the success or failure of relationships. Perhaps I am more challenging than I need to be???? However, I am now 'old' and 'fat' and 'deaf' - which raises different issues for me to tackle!!

What prompted you to start your journey?
Desperate need to help the lesbian and gay community in the face of profound institutionalised homophobia

Where did you start?
Running a gay group and gay switchboard

A mixture of responses on barriers

What are/have been the significant barriers and how have you/do you deal with them?

- *Personal experience of childhood sexual abuse and domestic violence in adult life - I survived, I escaped and when I could I gained appropriate support for myself*
 - *Personal and professional experience of physical and attitudinal barriers as a disabled woman - worked in the field of disability and for a while became a disability equality trainer, ongoing challenges*
 - *Personal and professional experience of attitudinal barriers of being a woman and being a lesbian - on going challenges*
- ❑ My insecurity was a barrier – slowly rebuilt my sense of self (not quite there yet)
 - ❑ Partners – constant challenge trying to balance 'not being selfish' with fulfilling my 'needs'.
 - ❑ Children – they have been a barrier but also opened doors. However, there is always a mismatch between their needs and mine and theirs come first mostly, which is what I choose and the way I want it to be, but it is a barrier to me doing things which would get me there faster!

The barrier for me has been community leaders (mainly men) who do not want women to get together and work together. They are often suspicious because they feel 'they do not have control'. How I overcame this is, I started talking to community leaders and other senior figures on board because even though we know they want to block our work we still want to educate their wives, sisters, children etc... and the only way to do that is by providing a service for them and women so they do not feel excluded. This has worked for the community I work with but has been a struggle and a LONG process. Luckily I was working with some inspirational women who had determination and will-power to continue.

At what point did your aspirations change - when you felt that you wanted to move on or do more?

- When it became obvious that life was about either living as a victim or living as a survivor. Chose to be a survivor
- Accessing opportunities either when they came up, or seeking them out - accessing learning and development opportunities at work, becoming a member and subsequent chair of a domestic violence trust.
- When other people showed me they believed in me

What are the things that have most helped you get to where you are now?

- My own courage and self determination - growing up as a disabled person whose impairment changes, means you either make the most of what you've got or give up. I like to rise to a challenge
- Some family members, friends and present partner
- Seeking and accessing opportunities
- Learning from my mistakes

What next with the steps?

In the words of one respondent:

I feel it would be useful to indicate what has occurred or is happening that has assisted the women to progress through each of the steps - what has happened for the women at Step 0 which has assisted them to progress onto the next stage of the model. It is documented during each of the stages of the model what has been achieved at that particular level.

What would be equally as valuable is to identify some of the factors that enabled the growth of these women, in their emotional, mental, and intellectual capacity, as well as their ability to be able to take positive, informed, action. This would invariably give a much clearer indication of the learning/changes that are taking place for the women, and can be evidenced against a range of interventions that are occurring, in order to meet the desired indicators during each stage.

Notes

¹ Document in progress: will be available at www.changesuk.net

² Includes Councillors' Commission Report, Joseph Rowntree Foundation Report on Citizen Governance, Leadership Centre for Local Government, Where are the Women in LSPs: Urban Forum/Oxfam/Women's Resource Centre, Routes to Power: research on ethnic minority women and decision-making: Fawcett: see Bibliography which will be available on www.changesuk.net

³ Westheimer, J. and Kahne, J. (2004) What kind of citizen? The politics of educating for democracy, *American Educational Research Journal*, Vol. 41, No. 2, pp. 237-269; Take Part Learning Framework for Active Citizenship Learning www.takepart.org

⁴ Focus group reports will be available on www.changesuk.net

⁵ A simplified version of something complex used in analysing and solving problems or making predictions: Encarta