

Handbook for Women's Resource Centres

The work of a Women's Resource Centre



PHOTO: LANI NOREKE

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The work of a Women's Resource Centre

Work in a Women's Resource Centre makes use of the driving forces women possess and takes a grassroots perspective as its starting point. It provides women with the opportunity to design activities based on women's needs, resulting in activities designed by women for women. A Women's Resource Centre gives women a chance to use their knowledge and competence and represent women's interests in regional and local development work.

The building bricks

Grassroots perspective

A Women's Resource Centre takes local needs and conditions, seen from the grassroots perspective, as a starting point and develops activities accordingly. Empowerment, the power of the individual, a belief in knowledge and the power of individuals to influence their own situation in society, are trademarks of the activities of a WRC.

Meeting place and local needs

A WRC is a meeting place for women based on women's needs and wishes. Work within the WRC may include guidance, competence development, social meetings, personal development, family matters, job creation, breaking isolation, security, information, IT, entrepreneurship, exchange of experience, business advice, mentorship, lectures, seminars and courses. A WRC gives women advice (counselling and mentorship) as to how to proceed with their projects or business ideas.

The WRC is intended to be an open and neutral actor, to be a neutral meeting place for networking groups of women, and to be available for all women who are looking for active change and development in their work. It is often the first step in the process of progressing in working life. When women work together on their own terms and together identify problems and solutions, this also triggers development processes that increase women's opportunities for participation in community life.

Open meetings, where activities and projects are discussed and decisions made about focus, planning and budgets, increase participation among women, members of the WRC, and the community around them.

Basic principles

Empowerment

The mobilisation of women's own resources is an important foundation for the work carried out in WRCs. Taking responsibility for one's own life and work is a fundamental concept. Within the framework of a WRC women are given scope to develop their ideas, dreams and wishes. It is not the aim of a WRC to take care of women who seek their help, but rather to give them guidance towards self-help. The task of a WRC is to support women's ideas and help them find ways of developing them.

Empowerment:
when people gain the power and status to take control over their own lives and use their own resources.

Networking

The working model used by WRCs is networking on various levels: local, regional and transnational. The networks explore ideas and potential areas for collaborative projects. When participants have some common interest, cooperation follows naturally. The driving forces of the women themselves and the needs conditioned by their own reality can in this case be utilised. Empowerment becomes reality.

Management by demand

The WRC is designed to be an open and neutral actor. For the efficient use of existing resources, the work needs to be monitored from the viewpoint of the needs and situations of the women concerned.

Flexibility

Keeping women's needs in focus, the work should develop in a flexible and process-oriented manner. Projects and activities therefore need to be followed up and documented continuously. This documentation can be used as the foundation for changes and for development of the work in the WRC.

Knowledge and ethics

Focal point for knowledge

The WRC is a meeting place for women founded on women's needs and wishes. The WRC therefore comes to act as a focal point for knowledge and experience about women's lives and living situations, which is of great value in the development of society. The WRC can be a centre for information and documentation, for opinion-building in gender equality issues and a tool for gender equality work in the area. The WRC acts as a watchdog on women's interests in regional and local development work.

It is also of great value to have this type of knowledge of society, making it possible to help women identify the means (financial or/and other) for realising their personal development and professional aims.

Respect and equality

Empowerment strategy involves special interpersonal techniques which it is necessary for those running the WRC to master. These techniques are grounded in the basic ethics of respect and equality between all people regardless of education, status, age and so on. One such basic technique includes focusing on the strengths and not on the weaknesses of every single woman.

Integration

WRC work is pervaded by a positive attitude to integration. All women regardless of ethnic origin can be active in a WRC. Utilising every woman's unique experience and competence, so that the diversity of society becomes a functioning whole and mutual asset, is important, as is ensuring that all women are allowed the chance of personal and professional development. In this way the labour market opens up for people from other countries and cultures.

Target groups and profile

A basic premise of a WRC is that its activities are open to all women. Activities, special efforts and projects are carried out to meet needs or address problems that are important for women. This can touch many different areas of women's lives, as we have given examples of

earlier. It is important that every activity and project has a clear target group, so that the problem it is designed to solve really can be solved.

A WRC is rarely able to work with all relevant questions, but must instead prioritise a few important areas in their activities and must consequently limit their target group. So a WRC may offer certain activities of interest to all women and in addition to that a special area, for example women living in the countryside or women who want to start a company.

A WRC should also work to increase awareness in society about the terms women live on and contribute to women gaining greater influence in local and regional development. In this respect the target groups are authorities, public bodies, organisations and politicians.

The needs and wishes of the women involved, which guide the concrete measures and projects that the WRC work with, contribute to establishing the profile of the WRC in question. In the same way as the target groups can change over time, so can the profile of the WRC develop and change.

Legitimacy and lobbying

Legitimacy

A wide contact network is necessary for a WRC to achieve success. This is vital so that the surrounding society perceives the WRC as a legitimate actor. Achieving legitimacy requires patient, tireless work and many contacts with decision makers, politicians, cooperation organisations, authorities, and media in the geographical area where the WRC is operational.

The involvement of the women themselves is the most important prerequisite for achieving legitimacy. Involvement must be utilised and respected. A highly involved board or steering group is also essential.

Legitimacy:

When something is accepted as correct, permitted or justified in a society according to the prevailing norms and values of that society.

When a WRC has legitimacy the work it does is respected. This facilitates cooperation with other actors in society and can lead to opportunities for financing activities and projects. Working to establish a WRC's legitimacy involves a constant balancing act between internal integrity and external adaptation.



Lobbying

Central to achieving legitimacy is to establish contacts with individuals who in various ways are tasked by society to work for and contribute to equality in the labour market, equality in the world of business and industry, equality in research work, or equality in education. These people are to be found as employees or elected representatives in regional, county, and local governments, national parliaments, and the European parliament. Other important people to establish connections with are representatives of organisations and associations in those areas where the WRC is active. A wide contact network facilitates operations and results in the ability to influence, to the extent that women's lives and conditions can be improved.

For WRCs that work locally it is natural to have contacts on the local level. WRCs that work regionally have regional contacts and a WRC that works on the national level has contacts on the national level. The European organisation Winnet Europe, which is the organisation for national WRCs, has contacts in Europe, for example within the EU and on an international level.

Master Suppression Techniques

Anyone working for equality is often met by more or less active resistance. This can be expressed in various ways. An example of this is what we call master suppression techniques.

The concept of master suppression techniques was coined by Berit Ås, a Norwegian politician and researcher into women's issues. Master suppression techniques are methods used to keep or gain negative power over other people, or ways of asserting oneself through repressing other individuals. To start with Ås defined five techniques that she called: making invisible, ridiculing, withholding information, double punishment and blame and shame. Later, Ås also identified objectifying and force/threat of force as ways of gaining negative power, to dominate other people.

Berit Ås liked the idea of five strategies, using one finger to represent each technique and encouraged her female political colleagues to signal to each other with their fingers every time they felt they were being subjected to suppression techniques, for example, if a woman thought she was being ridiculed, she raised two fingers. This made master suppression techniques visible and through this they soon understood that what was happening was nothing personal, but rather strategies being used against them.

FACTS

The five master suppression techniques

"Master suppression techniques" is a term coined by researcher Berit Ås, to show how certain techniques are used more or less consci-

ously for gain and keep power. Master suppression techniques are a common form of harassment.

Counter strategies and confirmation techniques can be used to break the pattern and protect oneself.

Domination technique	Counter strategy	Confirmation technique
Making invisible You, or a group that you belong to, are treated as if you are not there or are insignificant.	Taking space Demand attention, train your voice.	Making visible
Ridiculing You, or a group that you belong to, are referred to or are treated in a denigrating manner.	Question Protest, don't join the laughter.	Respecting
Withholding of information You, or a group that you belong to, are kept in ignorance about something.	Cards on the table Demand to know what's going on.	Inform
Double punishment Whatever you, or a group that you belong to, do, it's wrong.	Break the pattern Confront and question the criticism.	Double reward
Blame and shame You, or a group that you belong to, are blamed for being the person you are or something you have said or done.	Intellectualise Analyse and challenge others to defend themselves.	Confirm yourself and others