

## Women's Resource Centres

### A Swedish model being internationalized

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### Introduction

In this text, the Women Resource Centre model is described and analyzed for the purposes of the international project WINNET 8. Especially, the development of the model in Sweden and its internationalization is focused along with the specific character of the model and its role in the WINNET 8 project.

WINNET 8 ([www.winnet8.eu](http://www.winnet8.eu)) is a European Union capitalization project of Women Resource Centres (WRCs) promoting gender equality in regional growth policies. The project aims to shape regional, national and EU-level policies and development programmes that relate to women's status in the labour market and ensure these policies are integrated into mainstream provision. The project shall contribute to regional growth by improving women's participation in the labour market, focusing on horizontally

segregated labour markets, the lack of women in innovation and technology and the lack of women in entrepreneurship.

WINNET 8 involves regions in eight member states: Bulgaria, Finland, Greece, Italy, Poland, Portugal, Sweden and UK. The participating regions from the Nordic countries have among the most horizontally segregated labour markets in EU-27, while the regions involved from South and East Europe are less segregated. On the other hand the employment rates among women are lower. The consortium of WINNET 8 builds on successful practices from the III C project W.IN.NET and the III B Baltic Sea project FEM where several of the partners were involved. WINNET 8 thereto involves local and regional authorities, managing authorities, research institutes and NGOs. The project shall reinforce the Roadmap for Equality between Women and Men and the gender dimension in the Lisbon Agenda. The project will build capacity for implementation of policies, practices and WRCs.

This text is disposed as follows. Firstly, the historical development of the WRC model in Sweden is described. This is followed by a recite of the internationalization of the WRC model ending up in highlighting its role in the WINNET 8 project. Thereafter, the specific character of the model is outlined. Finally, it is discussed how the WRC model has been reflected in research about gender and regional development.

## 1. The development of the WRC model

In the early 1990s public funds were initiated to encourage the establishment of WRCs in Sweden. The aim of the public funding of WRCs was to increase women's participation in regional development policy development and implementation. In 2005 there were approximately 150 WRCs in Sweden (*For gender equality in regional development 2005*). Existing research depict how WRCs systematically have organized themselves at the local, regional and national level in Sweden by linking public, private and non-profit sector and academia around different topics such as entrepreneurship, labour market participation, new technologies (e.g. ICTs), services and creative industries (c.f. Lindberg 2010). They have operated with a double strategy of support and counselling to individual women and strategic actions intended to evoke structural change in policies.

Gender equality is established as a specific policy area in Sweden since the 70's. The Swedish gender equality policy aims to "create the conditions for women and men to enjoy the same power and opportunities to influence their own lives" ([www.sweden.gov.se/sb/d/4096](http://www.sweden.gov.se/sb/d/4096)). "Gender mainstreaming" is the Swedish government's primary tool for achieving this goal, implying that the Swedish gender equality policy is to be implemented in all policy areas as well as in all phases of decision making (Sternier & Biller 2006). The regional growth policy is thereby prescribed to acknowledge gendered dimensions and initiate actions intended to

attain gender equality. Regional growth policy (although named regional development policy up till 2006) is executed by the Swedish government in a severely altered form since 2001, emphasizing regional strengths instead of regional weaknesses. Gender equality is on the policy level often included in the concepts of "sustainable development" and "sustainable growth" (the latter is the preferred term by the Swedish government in office 2010-2014). In the Swedish national strategy for sustainable development, it is stated that "Greater gender equality (...) is essential for to the promotion of sustainable development" (*A Swedish strategy for sustainable development 2003/2004*, p 8). As a complement to the strategy of gender mainstreaming – or as a part of it as Squires (2005) suggests – positive actions for women are executed by the government within both gender equality policy and regional growth policy. Among other things, this includes public funding of WRCs.

The public funding of WRCs in Sweden was initially channelled through the County Administrations operating at the regional level. Since 1998 the funding of local and regional WRCs is instead distributed from the national level by the Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth (earlier named NUTEK, now Tillväxtverket). The Swedish National Federation of WRCs (earlier NRC, now Winnet Sweden) was established as a non-governmental and non-profit organisation in 1999 in order to secure the sustainability of the WRC model in Sweden. The lobby activities from 1999 until 2001 focused on securing positive actions for women – as some actors chose to

characterize the WRC program – as a tool within regional development and growth policies. In this struggle, they enjoyed the support of the Swedish parliament boards for business development and regional development. Thanks to these efforts, positive action for women – in the form of public funding of WRCs – was brought back onto the policy agenda in Sweden after having been marginalized in the name of “gender mainstreaming”. As a result, a new WRC programme period was launched also in 2002, stretching three years ahead. New WRC programs have subsequently been launched every third year. Apart from securing public funding of WRCs, the demand for change articulated by NRC included funding of these organizations’ basic, everyday activities without any project activity being required.

At the turn of the millennium the government’s instructions to grant funding to WRC activities were changed. In addition to help increase women's participation in regional development policy the WRCs were now specifically prescribed to contribute to sustainable development and gender equality within various regional policy programs, such as the regional growth programs (RGPs) and the European Union Structural Funds. This task was reinforced in 2010 when the WRCs no longer could be granted funding for direct support to individual women (who they had been giving support and counselling). Instead, the public funding would solely support actions intended to evoke structural change in regional growth policies. These winds of change were illustrated by the national agency changing the name of the policy program from “Resource Centres for

Women” to “Resource Centres for Gender Equal Growth”. The pre-existing WRCs did not adopt this change of name, however. Instead, they had already changed the official names of their organizations from “Women Resource Centre of (e.g.) Stockholm” to “Winnet Stockholm”, where “Winnet” is to be read as an abbreviation of “Women In Net”. They thus preserved the focus on women rather than abandoning it.

## 2. Internationalization of the WRC model

Gradually, the WRC model has been adopted internationally supported by various European Union funds (Danilda et al 2009). In 2006 Winnet Europe was formed as a non-profit organization, gathering WRCs from 21 countries ([www.winneteurope.org](http://www.winneteurope.org)). The aim of the organization is to develop and implement a model for this kind of network organization comprising quality standards for efficacious actions by the WRCs. Since Sweden joined the European Union in 1995, local, regional and national WRCs have been active in transnational projects. A survey reveals that over 60 percent of the WRCs in Sweden had participated in one or several projects with partners from other countries (NRC 2008). The rationale for participating in these transnational projects was manifold, e.g. to get funding in order to secure the survival of the WRCs, to develop new approaches and methods and to learn from women initiatives in other parts of Europe. For some WRCs international cooperation has been a strategy for achieving legitimacy and visibility in their own local community. Some of the WRC project proposals being

denied funding from local, regional or national policy programs in Sweden with the justification that “the idea is not innovative” have been perceived as highly innovative in transnational EU programs. Linking a WRC to European network has evoked interest – and eventually funding – from authorities at home.

Parallel to the developments of WRCs in Sweden, similar processes emerged in other EU member states during the 1990s and contacts between women’s networks in different countries were initiated. An important first step towards a European network for WRCs was a call for pilot projects in the EU programmes RECITE II and ECOS OUVERTURE, 1997/1998, funded by the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF). Some of the resources in these programmes were ear-marked for integration of women into economic life and eleven European networks promoting WRCs were selected for funding in these programmes. One of the networks supported by RECITE II 1998-2001 was European Network of Resource Centers for Women (ENREC). The network – led by an Italian organisation – involved partners from Sweden, Greece and Finland. ENREC aimed at creating a permanent transnational network but this objective was not reached, however. Instead a European training model for WRCs was developed along with basic material for starting up and managing WRCs according to the Swedish model. The networks and WRCs established with the support from RECITE II and ECOS OUVERTURE was the second step towards a European network of WRCs. Some of the partners involved in these networks joined forces and applied for funding from

the ERDF programme Interreg III C in 2003 for a project called W.IN.NET (European Network of Women Resource Centres). W.IN.NET capitalised on experiences from six of the networks in RECITE II and from nine EU member states. Similar to ENREC, the project aimed at creating a European network of WRCs. Furthermore, the objectives in W.IN.NET were to exchange experiences in the field of local development and gender equality policies, define benchmark indicators for WRCs, local policies and gender equality, and improve approaches for supporting women in entrepreneurship and in technology as well as women facing social exclusion.

In 2006, the association Winnet Europe was formed, gathering WRCs in 21 of the 27 EU member states ([www.winneteurope.org](http://www.winneteurope.org)). The successful results in Interreg III C – where temporary projects were transformed into a durable organization, i.e. Winnet Europe – increased the legitimacy and visibility of WRCs in EU. W.IN.NET is for example mentioned in the Operational Programme for Interreg IV C (European Union 2008) for the period 2007-2013 and several examples of WRC practices are highlighted in a newsletter focusing on “Gender Mainstreaming and Regional Development” from the European Commission in 2007. As a result of W.IN.NET, a position paper about women and ICTs was presented for the Directorate for Information Society and Media at a seminar in Brussels in 2006 (*Interreg 3C W.IN.NET project position paper on Getting into ICTs 2006*). At a seminar during the Finnish EU Presidency in the autumn of 2006, Winnet Europe was asked to arrange a seminar to present the work of WRC s in the field of “Women in

Technology and Science". Besides W.IN.NET another WRC project initiated in Sweden that has gained high visibility is Female Entrepreneurs' Meeting in the Baltic Sea Region (FEM). The project received funding from Interreg III B Baltic Sea Region (BSR) 2004-2007 and the participating organisations came from Sweden, Finland, Norway, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland. Lead Partner for FEM was the Ministry of the Interior in Finland. Baltic-Russian-Swedish Resource Centre for Women in Östergötland, played a key role in the design and implementation of FEM. The project also involved NRC and regional WRCs. Many of the FEM partners are now members in Winnet Europe. Thanks to a lot of effort by and co-operation between the FEM and Winnet Europe partners to support governmental representatives from Sweden and Finland with information of the results of the above mentioned projects, it was possible to secure that the gender perspective was included in the Baltic Sea Programme.

Effective lobbying and participation in a broad spectrum of different EU programmes explain the successful internationalization of the Swedish WRC model, the creation of hundreds of WRCs throughout Europe and the visibility of WRC at the EU level. Strategic lobbying has triggered the interest for the model also among members of the European Commission such as the Commissioner for Regional Policy. In late 2006 a dialogue started between Winnet Europe, the European Commission and DG Regional Policy on how to capitalise the successful WRC initiatives within the international program Interreg IV 2007-2013. The dialogue

also involved the Swedish and Finnish Federations of WRCs, the Swedish Ministry of Enterprise, Energy and Communications, NUTEK and participants from the FEM project such as the Finnish Ministry of Interior. This dialogue resulted in an application for funding from the Nordic Council of Ministers and some of the resources were allocated for a conference with the theme "Women's Entrepreneurship and Regional Development with a Focus on WRCs" arranged in Stockholm, October 2007. The Conference gathered 180 policy makers, WRC representatives, experts and researchers from 18 countries. One result from the conference was a European action plan for promoting women's participation in regional development, especially in the fields of entrepreneurship, innovation and ICT. After the conference, NRC and NUTEK decided to invite all Swedish regions to a dialogue about a joint application for funding from Interreg IV C in the form of a "Capitalisation project". Partners from the W.IN.NET and FEM projects and organisations from European regions where WRCs were not yet established were also invited to participate. In January 2009 an application for a project called "Women Resource Centre Fast Track Network" was sent to Interreg IV C with the Municipality of Älvdalen as Lead Partner. This formed the basis for the project WINNET 8, being pursued 2010-2011. The consortium of WINNET 8 thus builds on successful practices from the III C project W.IN.NET and the III B Baltic Sea project FEM, where several of the partners were involved. The WINNET 8 project intends to increase the capacity for implementation of a gender perspective in policies and practices on the basis of the

earlier experiences of internationalizing the WRC model.

### 3. Character of the WRC model

The WRC model will now be described in detail. The initiation of public funding to encourage the establishment of WRCs in Sweden was motivated by the severely uneven representation and resource distribution between men and women in regional development policy program. The funding to WRCs was intended to reinforce the pre-existing grass root movement of women's organizations enhancing women's ability to live and work in rural areas. Over the years, WRC has come to constitute a model for achieving gender equality in regional development policy in both rural and urban regions. The main target group of WRCs are women wanting to realize their ideas of new businesses, innovations, employment, projects etc. The WRCs provide these women with business counselling, information, training and joint action networks. Thereto, policy makers and civil servants constitute an important target group for the WRC activities, striving to affect the formulation and implementation of policy programs from a gender perspective. According to Winnet Europe, the main functions of a WRC are to:

- Empower women
- Be a neutral meeting place for networking groups of women
- Be a centre for information and documentation

- Give women advice (counselling & mentorship) how to realize their projects or business ideas
- Mediate contacts with women's networks

The WRCs have been formed by the needs identified in their immediate surroundings, entailing that each WRC has its own, unique profile. This implies that their organizational form differs. Many WRCs are NGOs, managed by idealistic committees in which the members receive no financial reimbursement for their efforts. Both the Swedish and European head organizations of WRCs are NGOs. Some WRCs constitute a part of the business departments at the municipality, thus incorporated in the public sector. Others are run by private enterprises (SMEs) in close co-operation with other local actors and/or running WRC on behalf of a municipality. Irrespective of their unique profiles, several of the WRCs have commonly developed a certain type of business counselling. This type of counselling is characterized by non-hierarchical relations between the counsellor and the person being counselled. In contrast to traditional forms of business counselling to (potential) entrepreneurs in Sweden, the WRC type of counselling does not presuppose that the client is subordinate to the advisor, passively accepting the knowledge being passed on. Instead, the WRC model emphasizes an exchange of knowledge where both the client and the counsellor are expected to contribute on equal terms. The business ideas are thus discussed in a mutual manner and are not subject to condemnation or glorification from the counsellor (Johansson 1997 & 2008). This

strategy of empowerment and mobilisation of women's own resources also permeates other WRC activities such as training and networking.

The construction of joint action networks involving different groups and actors is another feature of the WRC model. In order to help women realize their ideas, WRCs have systematically constructed new constellations of actors that are capable of contributing. Depending on the geographical context, WRCs have involved e.g. SMEs, global corporations, banks, business development centres, employment offices, public authorities, research institutes, consultants, educational associations, NGOs and foundations. The involved actors adhere to different sectors of the society - the public, private, academic and civil (non-profit) sectors. Each actor has contributed with knowledge about for example financing, product development, marketing and work-life balance. Within areas such as health care, tourism and local food production WRCs have organized joint action networks of SMEs working together with public authorities, universities and NGOs in order to strengthen the potential for innovation and commercialization of new products and services.

Besides business counselling and construction of joint action networks, the WRC model comprises project development and implementation. The projects managed by WRCs target different areas identified as crucial for the expansion of women's entrepreneurship and innovation. The development of certain business areas - such as tourism, health care, culture/arts,

handicraft/design and ICT - has constituted the core of many WRC initiatives. Projects have targeted entrepreneurship among different groups of women such as for example ethnic minorities, unemployed or students at universities. Other initiatives have focused on provision of gender equality awareness and training for policy makers and business advisors. Some initiatives have comprised lobbying activities promoting policy measures securing the influence and benefit of women in regional development policy. Such lobbying activities have taken place locally directed to municipalities and business development actors, regionally to the County Administrative Boards, nationally to governmental agencies and public ministries, and internationally to the European Commission.

The business areas targeted by the WRCs activities have primarily been the ones where most women are working. Due to the strongly gender segregated labour markets in Sweden and Europe, the private and public service sector has been ascribed a central role in WRCs efforts to attain gender equality in regional development policy. In the case of WRCs, the service sector includes health, care, tourism, culture/arts and handicraft/design. However, the ICT sector - characterized by a predominance of men as employees and entrepreneurs - has also been given high priority even since the first WRCs started in the late 1980s. WRCs have thereto been involved in establishing thematic centres focusing on women and technology, designing specific programs for attracting more women to ICT and initiatives for cross-fertilization between the ICT sector and the tourism sector. Some WRCs have

also been involved in reinforcing gender equality within the steel industry and other male dominated sectors.

#### 4. The WRC model reflected in research

In this section, the WRC model is discussed in the light of existing research about gender and regional development. There exists a handful of research studies carried out on WRCs, primarily carried out in Sweden. Some of these studies have been executed within the frames of on-going evaluation efforts connected to the WRC programs managed by NUTEK/Tillväxtverket. Two final reports from on-going evaluations have so far been published (Forsberg et al 2004, Ramböll 2009). Other studies have been carried out in direct cooperation with different WRCs (e.g. Axelsson & Ungmark 2000, Pettersson & Saarinen 2004, Stenmark & Johansson 2005, Johansson 2008, Lindberg 2010). In this section, the WRC model will be discussed in the light of a selection of current research about gender and regional development.

Some of the most recent research studies of WRCs have focused their similarity to the joint action networks being promoted in prevalent regional growth policies, primarily those that are labelled “innovation systems” and “clusters”. These are two different types

of joint action networks, enhancing innovation by cooperation between actors from different industries and sectors of society. Innovation systems are a certain type of joint action network where actors from the public, private and academic sectors cooperate. The main purpose with this cooperation is to enhance the development of new knowledge that is relevant to all three sectors, and to transform this knowledge into innovations (i.e. new products, services, processes and organization). Clusters are another type of joint action networks gathering firms located in the same geographical area exchanging knowledge, staff and information on a common area of production. Existing research exposes how WRCs can be classified as innovation systems in the sense that they link actors from different spheres of society in order to develop new knowledge to be transformed into innovations (Danilda et al 2009, Lindberg 2010). In the Declaration of Intention written together with NUTEK, NRC highlighted how the Swedish WRCs had created an innovation system focusing women’s areas of concern in regional development, also encompassing the European level (*For gender equality in regional development* 2005). Several WRCs have also promoted clusters in their areas of activity, such as services and creative industries.

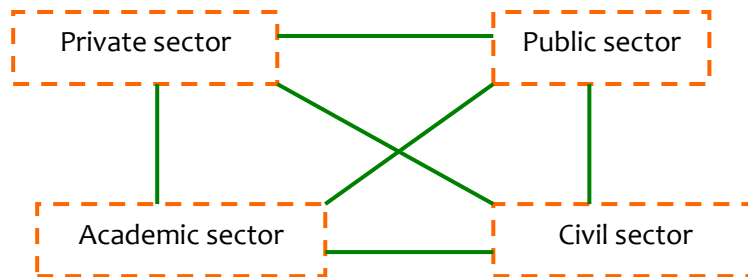


However, the studies reveal that the WRCs do not entirely correspond to the models and norms displayed in the use of the innovation system and cluster concepts in contemporary innovation policy and research (Danilda et al 2009, Lindberg 2010). The deviation can mainly be derived to two constituents: The range of actors and areas being involved and the measures for business counselling being utilized. Both these constituents imply that the WRCs creatively have elaborated the prevalent models for promoting innovation one step further. Rather than engaging solely the industry and the academy – as in the narrow approach of Double Helix – the WRCs have involved actors from the state as well, as in the broader approach of Triple Helix (c.f. Lavén 2008, Leydesdorff & Etzkowitz 1996). The role of the Swedish state and the EU institutions has in fact been crucial for the WRCs strive to get funding and access to partners abroad. However, the examinations also reveal how a fourth group of actors have been central to the process of internationalisation, namely the civil sector. This sector is constituted by NGOs running their activities in a non-profit manner, thus reaching beyond the borders of commercial enterprises, political institutions and scientific academy. This motivates a further development of the concept of Triple Helix, introducing a third category of helixes: the Quattro Helix.<sup>1</sup> See *Illustration 1*

In this kind of helix, it is not only the commercial, political and theoretical potentials in the innovation system cooperation that are regarded to be of

importance, but also the idealistic ones. The organization of a Quattro Helix innovation system by WRCs thus partly overlaps with Lundvall's notion of a broad approach to innovation systems, emphasizing the importance of people, skills, relationships and interactions as well as the role of basic research, workplace development and low technology sectors (Lundvall 2006). NGOs with limited financial resources have earlier seldom been perceived as key actors in the partnerships for local and regional development in Sweden. A broader approach to innovation systems – as manifested by the Quattro Helix – acknowledges the important role of the civil sector and might bring about a change in the assessment of NGOs within regional growth policies and innovation policies. The conclusion that WRCs can be classified as innovation systems – but thereto reach beyond the limiting understanding characterizing the concepts of innovation system, cluster and Triple Helix – calls for further development of existing theories on how innovation is promoted by joint action networks (Lindberg 2010).

<sup>1</sup> The concept of Quattro Helix are similar to the concept of Quadruple Helix, employed by e.g. Carayannis & Campbell (2009) and the NGO Baltic Fem ([www.balticfem.com](http://www.balticfem.com)).



*Illustration 1. A Quattro Helix innovation system (Danilda et al 2009)*

The development includes 1) a new operationalization of ‘innovation’, ‘innovation systems’ and ‘clusters’ to comprise a wider range of actors and areas and 2) a shift from ‘triple helix’ to ‘quattro helix’ as a theoretical model in order to include the non-profit sector as well. Policy implications to be drawn from the analysis are the inclusion of a wider range of actors and activities in the innovation policy priority patterns, reaching beyond segregating and hierarchical notions of gender.

The conclusions drawn about WRCs in research have implications for the scope of WINNET 8, problematizing the gendered structures of policy and research. According to the project plan, WINNET 8 shall contribute to regional growth by improving women’s participation in the labour market, focusing on horizontally segregated labour markets, the lack of women in innovation and technology and the lack of women in entrepreneurship. In the light of the focus areas of WINNET 8, existing research highlights how WRCs challenge the pattern of prioritization in innovation policy and

research due to the horizontally segregated labour market. They prove that additional actors and areas are important for creating innovation and growth, not least women and areas employing many women as the services sector. Thus, the research problematizes “the lack” of women in innovation and technology as well in entrepreneurship. WINNET 8 aims to shape regional, national and EU-level policies and development programmes that relate to women’s status in the labour market and ensure these policies are integrated into mainstream provision. The research contributes to these aims by exposing how the doing of gender in policy programs affects women and men in their everyday life, delimiting or granting access to public funding of different kinds. Up till now, joint action networks comprising many women mainly have had access to funding from policy programs promoting gender equality and women’s entrepreneurship. They have thus so far been excluded from funding targeting innovation networks, delimiting their access to higher amounts of grants covering a longer period of time. The WRC model constitutes an alternative to this logic

of public promotion. They open up the arena for promotion of entrepreneurship and innovation for a multitude of actors, areas and innovations.

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