Women Centred Working – Defining an Approach

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People that work in women centred environments can clearly identify what is or is not a women centred way of working. Women that benefit from such provision are also able to identify whether a service is women centred or not. However it is difficult to put your finger on what is a women centred approach in terms of a definition as it includes a whole range of components and these are linked together by certain values and ethos.

Here is an attempt to isolate and define the core components of what women centred working at its best should look like. This makes no comment on the type of organisation or the primary aim of any service so could hopefully read across several sectors, not remaining exclusively in the women’s voluntary sector.

I identify the following core components of women centred working as:

1. Focussing on women’s expressed need and lived experience
2. Underpinned by understanding of women’s needs and lives
3. Informed by an understanding of what works for women
4. Located within a women only, safe and enabling environment
5. Have a holistic approach
6. Delivered with quality and professionalism
7. Delivered in a coproduced way
8. Requiring specific skills set
9. Flexible and supportive working environment
10. Facilitating service integration and pathways
The services that have been developed for women offenders and women at risk of offending through Women’s Community Projects and centres across the country have enabled the approach to women centred working to be recognised and valued more widely by government departments and public services. This has been assisted by two recent reports, Women’s Community Services: A Wise Commission Report by the New Economics Foundation, 2012 and “The development and impact of community services for women offenders: an evaluation” by the Institute for Criminal Policy Research, 2013. The profile of this approach has been maintained through the umbrella organisation, Women’s Breakout and by individual services themselves through publications and events.

Women centred approaches are important to understand for policy and service plans designed to improve life outcomes for women with multiple disadvantage, whether these relate to criminal justice, health, housing and homelessness, substance misuse or abuse. Women within each service area will be experiencing a multiplicity of compounded and interrelated issues and this very complexity of need has additional impacts of women’s inability to cope, to have hope, to make decisions or to make informed choices.

Whilst organisations such as WomenCentre have developed their women centred approaches over many years of service experience, a wider range of organisations are developing their women specific approaches to address gender equality issues within a wider service provision framework. The core components presented below summarise vital aspects of an approach that would seek to be regarded as women centred.

Many elements of an effective women’s centre are the same as other effective enabling and supportive environments. The critical factor is that at their best they are inclusive, informed, involving, personalised and high quality provision that is also women specific.

1. **Focussing on individual women’s expressed need and lived experience**

The first understanding of the women centred approach is that it is personalised and responsive to the life situation of each woman. Women need to be validated by an initial response which is non judgemental and which listens carefully to build an understanding of their unique experience and set of circumstances. It is this approach which starts with initial, face value acceptance and reassurance of support that enables a bond of trust to be initiated as the foundation point for future work.
Commitment to respond to women’s needs

This element of the approach is undertaken by key workers, triage workers and volunteers and focuses on core person centred principles of being genuine, having empathy and assuring confidentiality, always however within the confines of public protection and safeguarding. Within service environments this approach is embedded within an initial assessment process and an explanation of service offers and consent requirements. This commitment to be led by women expressed choices and needs will run through her engagement with services and will be underpinned by the flexibility and resourcefulness of workers, which in turn will be supported through adequate supervision and training.

An important aspect of a commitment to respond to women’s needs and to be guided by their life experience is the role of women’s focus groups, which can be supported to develop a confident voice of challenge and reality testing within an organisation. They lead on approaches to involvement of all women in the service.

2. Underpinned by understanding of women’s needs and lives

Women’s centres are characterised by an understanding of the realities of the lives of women and girls, which is enhanced by the lived experience of a predominantly female workforce. This understanding has often been developed in an organisation through its ongoing work to listen to the life situations that women describe. Having an ability to gain trust over extended periods of time can enable women’s centres to build an understanding of the complexities of women’s lives, especially as women develop their own self awareness and grapple with often seemingly insurmountable problems in their lives.

As a result of this women’s centres build a legacy of experiential knowledge about the impact of past experiences on life trajectories.

Organisational understanding of the impact of childhood abuse, living in local authority care and living in violent households informs the organisation’s approach with women.
Similarly the everyday experience of supporting women through the difficulties in their lives brings a clear focus to problems within the system, including those designed to provide elements of support, such as health and social care systems. This position of standing alongside women in their struggles for increased safety and wellbeing, gives women centres a strong responsibility to make invisible need visible and unheard voices listened to. Women and girls reach points of crisis at different points throughout their lives and many of these are connected to such life stages and events as adolescence, intimate relationships, pregnancy and motherhood, ill health, separation and loss. Women centres provide a whole life approach that also understands these within the context of disadvantage.

In a more practical sense, women centres are closely connected to lives of women and ensure their services and opportunities fit with this. They take account of school times, of providing facilities for younger children, for the different cultural needs of women and the need for differentiated offers for lesbian and bi women, for girls and for older women. Women-centred working is challenged by its aim to be there for ALL women that can benefit from its services, to understand and champion the equality issues for women.

3. Informed by an understanding of what works for women

Women centres have a unique position of being designed for women by women. They exist as a response to women’s need for women only spaces, where there is a subtle difference in language, assumptions and expectations. Their responsive and individualised approach to women means that their practice is being challenged on an ongoing basis to enable it to meet the priority requirements for women at any given time. Women need approaches that recognise and are built on processes to overcome barriers to coping and moving forward in life. Women need to feel safe and welcomed enough to be themselves. Trust is the vital ingredient – trust which is about empathy, understanding, respect and honesty but also trust that the organisation is actually equipped, informed and able to be of value in supporting positive change. Essentially women centres understand that women need an offer that is on their own terms, that gives them a sense of respect and hope and that is able to get to the very core of issues they may have.
4. Located within a women only, safe and enabling environment

The most basic feature of a women’s centre is that it is a women only space. This is vital as so many women have experienced gender based violence in their lives. Even more pervasive, though, is the way in which women are made to feel inferior, irrelevant or invisible within male dominated settings. Women value the safe haven that women centres provide that enable them to develop a sense of their own personal identity and self esteem. Women centres understand the lack of confidence and trust as well as high levels of fear and anxiety experienced by many women and have enabling, empowering approaches that recognise women’s own strengths, capacities, skills and qualities and aim to believe in women when they have lost their own self belief.

On a practical level women centres are concerned about keeping a level of safety and security and are highly sensitive to issues of confidentiality. The environment becomes enabling through its involvement of women in different aspects, such as through volunteering roles, becoming a member or supporter of the organisation. Women centres also provide opportunities and activities that are not just about service provision but may be about having fun together, being creative or holding events.

5. Have a holistic approach

Womens centres take a whole person approach. Unlike most service access points, women do not have to identify and isolate specific issues to receive a service. Women centres understand that most issues for women are linked with other issues, some being a root cause to another issue, and most of them compounding each other. For example many women engage with a women’s centre because they just cannot cope and don’t know where else to turn. The presenting problem then is often one of emotional and mental wellbeing and while these are being addressed through a therapeutically informed approach, a woman can be more explicit about her life situation and all the issues that may be involved in this. Both organisational experience and a large body of research confirms that women often experience multiple and complex needs that would include over four of the following areas: mental health problems, drugs or alcohol issues, housing problems, poverty and debt, physical health problems, concerns over children, domestic abuse and lack of basic skills.
Womens centres acknowledge this nature of complexity and meet this through their person centred approach as well as providing support across all areas. Whilst usually not specialist in all areas, women’s centres are equipped with information, links, access and collocation arrangements and pathway and referral routes to a wide array of local services. This approach enables women’s centres to have a women focussed view of the local offer for women and provides a very different perspective to that of other providers or commissioners.

The whole person approach also means that women centres will embrace all aspects of a woman’s life, whether practical, physical, mental, emotional or more deeply personal and spiritual. Many women centres include complementary therapies as well as learning opportunities, counselling and creative activities, reflecting their holistic ethos.

6. Delivered with quality and professionalism

Whilst remaining responsive and flexible, effective women’s centres need to operate in a professional manner and implement high quality services. Women centres, both as service providers and advocates, are the interface between women and girls at risk and the public sector. To affect positive outcomes for women and girls women centres need to operate with the same code of public sector duty and develop respectful relationships with colleagues in other service areas. To remain sustainable women centres need to raise the profile of their own organisations, the needs of the women and girls they support and their approach. Developing influence is therefore a vital activity of a women’s centre, whether this be with the wider community, amongst decision makers, among partner organisations or with commissioners.

The key messages of any women’s centre can only be credible if it is backed by a track record of effective practice and well managed service delivery. Of course the bottom line for all women’s centres is their success in obtaining grant funding or winning contracts that fund their service delivery and managing income from a range of diverse funding streams.

The following elements are all critical in operating as an effective women’s centre:

• Strong structures of governance and accountability
• Effective systems of management and supervision
• Clear standards of ethos and expectations, delivered through robust recruitment, induction and training.
• Effective policies developed, reviewed and implemented.
• Equality and diversity commitment
• Monitoring and outcomes measurement systems in place.
• Effective communication, both internally and externally.
• Commitment to ongoing organisational improvement.
• Quality assurance
Championing an aspiration to build self confidence

7. Delivered in a coproduced way

Coproduction has become an important concept in the aspiration to achieve more effective services. The way this is applied to the area of service delivery is described well by the New Economics Foundation report, – ‘Right Here, Right Now – Taking Co-production into the Mainstream’, (July 2010):

‘People’s needs are better met when they are involved in an equal and reciprocal relationship with professionals and others, working together to get things done’

They describe the key characteristics of co-production as:

• Recognising people as assets
• Building on people’s existing capabilities
• Promoting mutuality and reciprocity
• Developing peer support networks
• Breaking down barriers between professionals and recipients
• Facilitating rather than delivering

8. Requiring specific skills set

Effective women’s centre services are delivered by staff and volunteers who are committed to the ethos and mission of the organisation, usually in a very personal way, as it needs to resonate with their own experience of life as a woman. Whilst individual on one level the core skills and qualities are carefully selected through recruitment processes as well as supported through induction and training programmes and the wider communication of organisational values and vision.
The approach entails system navigation and advocacy

This is highly valued by the organisation and not taken for granted at any time. This is shared by all staff and volunteer roles across the organisation but is particularly the case for all staff and volunteers involved with any engagement with women and girls or with wider partners. Elements of training that are vital to support a basic core skills set are: the women centred ethos and approach, building positive relationships, confidentiality, domestic abuse awareness, information giving and signposting, professional boundaries and good listening and communication skills.

Vital within most centres are the workers who first engage with women, who require expertise and relational skills for the dual nature of engagement:
- Firstly to build trust
- Secondly to elicit information to make assessment of risk and need

The quality and skill set requirement includes:
genuine rapport and empathy, gender experience awareness and unexpressed gender solidarity, understanding of trauma and abuse related impacts, experience of diverse presentations and emotional displays, ability to establish a shared “starting point”, ability to divert from the victim/helper scenario, solution focussed approaches, developing framework for coproduced approach, ability to reflect back personal qualities, strengths and abilities, sharing of a tried and tested and trusted organisational approach.

Other knowledge and skills requirements are the understanding of key areas to include within a holistic assessment and the communication skills that facilitate a meaningful assessment process. These include the use of appropriate and clear language, leading an assessment process which is embedded and explained which can be paced and added to or amended of the course of weeks or months.

Workers are made aware of the way their work and service fits with wider local agendas and also with relevant national policy and priorities to ensure context and an understanding of shared goals and objectives.
Women’s needs can be ignored or remain invisible

9. Facilitating service integration and pathways

A core component of women centred working is its role in enabling diverse services to be meaningfully linked to support positive life outcomes for women. Providing a whole woman approach necessitates women centres to liaise, refer and signpost to a wide range of services and agencies. The approach entails system navigation and advocacy as in so many situations coordination of agency involvement is vital. At an individual level this places the responsibility on the caseworker to take a proactive role in facilitating the coordination or sequencing of service involvement.

This in turn requires confidence in effective engagement with a range of multiagency processes, including Multi Agency Risk Assessment Conferences for domestic violence (MARACs), Multi Agency Strategic Safeguarding Teams (MASSTs, MAST or similar) and child protection meetings/arrangements. Some workers and teams may have a closely linked service delivery arrangement, such as women centred community services for women offenders that have developed collocation arrangements with the Probation Service, three way supervision planning with the service as well as formal Through the Gate arrangements with local prisons. Additionally women centre workers may need to call professionals meetings to develop approaches which are similar to the Team Around the Child Approach but which are “Teams Around a Woman” approach.

Women centred working demands the continuous challenge to develop links and cross agency understanding and cooperation to deliver better outcomes for local women and girls. This interweaving of local services, including health, mental health, substance misuse, criminal justice, voluntary sector, housing providers, learning providers and community groups places women centred working at the very core of good local practice for women and girls.
10 Informing strategic decision making, planning and commissioning

Following on from the unique role that women centred working takes, it becomes both necessary and natural that the approach also includes local and wider strategic involvement. Having an understanding of women’s lives, and the barriers they face, gives those working in the women’s centred way a valuable vantage point from which to contribute to many different strategic agendas. The trust based nature of the relationship that women have with women centres enables women centred organisations develop a close-up view on the realities of everyday lives and it is this very day to day and personal level experience that decision-makers need to give focus to in order that their decisions may produce the positive outcomes and impact they desire.

Women centred working highlights the injustices that exist within the system and the way women’s needs can be ignored or remain invisible. It is this level of awareness that motivates women centred representatives to take their place around tables that belong to much broader or higher level agendas, whether in relation to criminal justice, physical or mental health or safeguarding and parenting. Using practice based evidence, evaluation and research findings, organisational understanding and case studies enable women centred representatives to convey the knowledge they hold to enhance the awareness and content of decision making processes.

Whilst often challenging nature, women centred contributions can be welcomes as for many investing and focusing on improving issues and lies for women can have a powerfully positive impact on the improved outcomes for children families and communities. It also enabled a possibility of efficiency through joined up practice, increased public and social value and hits so many social and health related priorities through a single, holistic approach.
WomenCentre is a women’s centre in the Calderdale and Kirklees areas of West Yorkshire, founded by local women in 1985. It provides a range of services through women’s one stop shops in Halifax and Huddersfield, and satellite in Dewsbury. These include domestic violence, women offender, early intervention, mental health and wellbeing, learning and skills and asylum seeker service. These are linked with a wide range of external services and partnerships to provide a strong resource for local women, girls and families.

WomenCentre has a track record of influencing policy and practice at a local, regional and national level and undertakes development work to improve safety and wellbeing outcomes for women and families, eg with local authorities, mental health providers and commissioners as well as work in other areas to develop women’s strategies and provision.

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