

## 6. Raising Voices

Training for empowerment for women experiencing poverty in Britain



*Women participating in training to strengthen their confidence and improve economic literacy*

The UK may be a developed country, but almost 25 per cent of the population live below the poverty line. Women experience higher levels of poverty than men, just as they do in other parts of the world. Encouraging and supporting poor women to voice their own experiences and speak out to challenge the inequality that they face are vital to overcoming poverty in the UK. Recognising this, Oxfam GB has worked with partner organisations to enable women to meet with and lobby the civil servants and politicians who make decisions that impact on their lives.

## Background

Oxfam GB set up its UK Poverty Programme in the mid-1990s. Right from the start, the decision was taken to focus on gender inequality. This is because even in such a rich country, women are more likely than men to experience poverty at some point in their lives.<sup>1</sup> Single women pensioners are more likely than single men pensioners to live in poverty in retirement.<sup>2</sup> A combination of factors including occupational segregation and the fact that women are more likely than men to be in part-time work, due to unpaid caring responsibilities, means that women's incomes are on average lower than men's.<sup>3</sup> And women bringing up children on their own find it hard to afford child-care to enable them to go out to work.

Women's poverty in the UK is often caused not by direct discrimination against women, but by the fact that many women's life paths do not fit the pay and reward systems of organisations, or the way in which pensions and other state benefits are earned. For instance, women are more likely than men to take periods of time out of paid employment in order to have and bring up children, which has an impact on their National Insurance<sup>4</sup> and pension contributions and thus their entitlements to state benefits. While girls have the same educational opportunities as boys, and often do better at school, once they leave school, economically disadvantaged girls (and the women they become) come face-to-face not only with gender-related structural barriers which may limit opportunities available to them to enter paid employment and access state benefits, but also gendered assumptions about what they can and cannot do. These assumptions, along with the low levels of confidence that many women living in poverty experience, are as hard to overcome in the UK as they are anywhere else in the world.

Understanding this context makes it easier to see why building poor women's confidence to challenge their economic position, and the structures and forces keeping them there, is an important anti-poverty measure. From the start, Oxfam GB's programme in Wales, the north of England, and Scotland, saw the importance of building women's confidence to help them recognise how the structures of society and the economy keep them in poverty, and to tackle the situation to their own advantage through lobbying for changes to the policies that uphold this structural inequality. Unless women can take a lead, individually or together, nothing will ever change, even in such a developed country.

In this paper we reflect on what approaches Oxfam GB has found successful in the UK, what has not worked so well, and what we have learned about how to support women's participation and engagement with providers of public services.

## Raising women's voices at the local and national level

### Creating space for equal participation

Women's lives are busy and the unpaid caring roles that many women undertake mean they are less likely to be able to enter the public arena than men. We also believe that gender stereotyping has as much influence on women's own perceptions of their abilities to participate in decision-making processes, and on general assumptions regarding whether or not women make 'good' leaders in the UK, as it does in the developing world, and that tackling this will take many years. In light of these realities, Oxfam GB's UK programme is based on the belief that the following things need to take place in order to create the space for poor women's equal participation:

- decision-makers need to be sensitised to the need to listen to women at the local level, especially those living below the poverty line<sup>5</sup> or those living in poor communities (this will lead to policies that draw on these women's insights and experiences and the knowledge that they have of how poverty affects their communities);
- women experiencing poverty need to make their voices heard with decision-makers, and learn how to lobby; and
- women need to be prepared to become decision-makers themselves.

### Oxfam GB's work on women's leadership

With the aims identified above in mind, Oxfam GB and our partners have worked on a range of projects using different methods to support women's participation and leadership. These include the 'Engendering Change' project, which focuses on building women's political understanding of who decision-makers are at both local and national levels in their political context, and strengthens their capacity and skills to influence those decision-makers.<sup>6</sup> Elsewhere, working through the ReGender Project, Oxfam GB has piloted capacity-building for women in urban areas experiencing regeneration.<sup>7</sup>

In addition to the projects above, Oxfam GB has worked on two projects that have enabled women to gain a greater understanding of the structures that sustain gender inequality and keep them in poverty. The two projects – one focusing on economic literacy and empowerment in Scotland, the other a participatory research project on women's experiences of poverty – have helped participants to challenge those structures by voicing their own experiences, and their demands, to civil servants and politicians at the local and national level. This paper discusses lessons learned from these two projects.

## Working at the local level: 'Women's Economic Empowerment' project

In 2006–2007 Oxfam in Scotland ran a series of training courses on women's economic empowerment, in collaboration with local agencies in three deprived areas in Scotland: South Lanarkshire, Dundee, and Inverclyde. The courses were intended to build women's confidence to think about their futures, to bring out their experiences of paid work and their views on local services such as transport and housing, and to provide an opportunity for them to voice their experiences to a local job-support agency (Routes to Work South) and to local service providers. The courses ran for two days a week for four weeks, and participants were recruited by Oxfam GB staff working in those areas. The courses were facilitated by someone with extensive experience working on empowerment projects. The sessions began with the women discussing a short film which dealt with direct discrimination. From this, they went on to look at power, how it operates, and what impact it has on experiences and opportunities. This analysis of power and its impact is something that is frequently missing from training with women living in deprivation in the UK.

None of the participants was in paid work, but almost all had a strong desire to work outside the home. All experienced significant barriers in entering the labour market, such as the need for flexible hours, or the problem of low self-esteem. Oxfam GB staff went out to find and recruit the poorest women in the community, who did not usually attend such events. The women on the women's economic empowerment training in Larkhall, South Lanarkshire, spoke of the sessions as 'lighting up so many lightbulbs for me' and helping them to '[learn] to stand up and be counted and not just blend into the background'.

## Working at the national level: 'Women's Voices of Experience' project

In England in 2006, Oxfam GB worked with the UK Women's Budget Group (WBG) on a participatory research project with women living in poverty. The aims were to involve women in exploring their experiences of poverty, to bring out what they thought the solutions might be, to give them training in how policy making at national level worked, and to build their confidence and skills to meet civil servants and influence them to incorporate their views and experiences into public policy. The WBG contacted 12 local women's organisations providing information, advice, and support to women in the English Midlands, in London, and in Wales. It brought a total of 47 women together for training, and supported their attendance at a seminar in London to meet civil servants from the UK Government

Treasury and Department for Work and Pensions, and members of Parliament.

The first phase was an opportunity for women to map their regional experiences of living in poverty. They discussed their individual experiences, and from this drew comparisons that allowed them to then articulate their collective needs. The second phase brought women from the regions together to understand better how decisions are made at the level of national government. This covered basic government structure, and some of the factors which influence decision-making. There were two strands for discussion: one focused on women's experiences of claiming state financial support, and the other had a broader focus which the women chose themselves. The themes they raised included isolation, children, and child-care; employment and education; physical and mental health; and the 'postcode lottery'.<sup>8</sup> The women involved felt a real sense of solidarity having worked in this way.

## Lessons learned

### **Poor women need extra practical and financial support**

It cannot be emphasised enough that poor women need extra support to get their voices heard in any kind of public arena. In the first place, they are often not part of established networks to receive information, such as community newsletters or playgroup and nursery notice boards. Recognising this, in the Women's Economic Empowerment project in Scotland, Oxfam GB recruited participants by word of mouth, as well as via regular community notices. To ensure that their participation was as convenient and as low-cost as possible, the women were given attendance bonus vouchers for £50 negotiated by Oxfam GB with South Lanarkshire Council. In addition, they were collected and taken home by taxi, child-care was arranged and paid for, and lunch was provided. The course was scheduled to fit in with school hours and was intensive, yet did not interfere with the qualifying hours for their state benefits.<sup>9</sup> Oxfam GB knows from experience that these methods work in ensuring the participation of women whose family and financial situation would otherwise prevent them from being involved.

The Voices of Experience project identified key organisations working with women living in poverty, and co-operated with them to identify women who would be interested in participating. Arrangements for support with travel and child-care were also made, but the project's wider geographical spread (Wales, the English Midlands, and London) meant that for some of the women, travelling to London to meet civil servants and staying overnight felt like too big a time commitment. Others who could arrange child-care for this length of time felt it was a welcome break. The ethical guidelines for the project recognised that women should be invited in pairs or with

a project worker rather than being expected to come alone, so that they did not feel isolated and unsupported. Payment for their voluntary time spent on the project, whether in meetings or travel, both for the women themselves and for the facilitating organisations, was an issue addressed with only partial success. While the participants were paid for their time, the organisations involved in setting up and running the meetings felt that insufficient funding had been allocated to them, given the amount of time needed to organise these events.

### **Building solidarity among women**

Our experience of working with established or nascent women's groups across the UK has taught us that we cannot assume that women have any sense of shared solidarity. This is partly because discrimination against women is less visible than in other countries, and also because feminism is now labelled in the public mind as old fashioned and extreme. Many women we have worked with see calls for gender equality as '1970s bra-burning', and see no need to get together as women. In the ReGender project mentioned above, one of the dawning realisations for the newly formed groups set up to learn about gender and to lobby regeneration decision-makers was the need to ask the question: what are the men doing in our community? They learnt that as women they had barriers and issues in common, but also recognised that they were very active in unpaid community activities such as organising child-care and events for young people, and adult education. They also realised that on the whole, men were not participating in these activities. In North Wales, the women then went to men they knew, and asked the question: why don't men help? As one of them said, some men are just as involved as women in looking after children, and taking them to and from school, and jobs around the house, so why are they not involved in the community? Some of the men approached did join the community activities planned.

### **Challenging gender stereotyping**

In Britain, as in the rest of the world, gender stereotyping is a significant factor in determining women's (and men's) ideas about who they are, and what activities are appropriate for them to do. The Equal Opportunities Commission<sup>10</sup> in Scotland recently concluded a study of occupational segregation which showed that women will readily train to be child-care assistants (poorly paid) but rarely consider becoming mechanics (better paid).<sup>11</sup> To try and challenge this, Oxfam in Scotland has worked with council officers in South Lanarkshire who provide careers advice to girls and boys at school. These officers were unaware that the advice they offered channelled girls into poorly paid and stereotypically 'female' jobs such as shop work or hairdressing, and boys into better paid ones such as carpentry or plumbing, or other apprenticeships, until it was brought

to their attention by the Oxfam GB staff member who sat in on careers advice for boys and girls. Once this was pointed out to them, many welcomed the realisation, and have tried to change the way that they respond to clients as a result.

### **Helping women to raise their voices**

Not only do women need to have the confidence to believe that they have something to contribute, that they *can* make other choices, and that decision-makers need to hear about their experience, they also have to be encouraged to make that contribution.

The capacity-building work with women has been very effective in helping women gain confidence, helping them to understand that their problems are often created by structures and are not their personal fault, and that they are not alone, and helping them to understand how policy is made.

In the Women's Economic Empowerment project in Scotland, the facilitator made a point of starting the training with a discussion of the nature of power and influence. From this the women understood that power was an issue, and they needed to engage with it. Not only did they come to see that many of the problems they faced were due to their own lack of power to make life choices, but also that they found it difficult to challenge others who were in positions of power. For instance, in Larkhall, one of the areas targeted in the project, women realised that they could challenge their children's schools to provide inclusive school outings that do not stigmatise the poorest children who cannot go because their parents are not able to pay. Feeling able to challenge individuals who run services for their children was a real step forward for these women in terms of their confidence and skills, as was the opportunity to put their views strongly to the local job-advice centre.

In the Women's Voices of Experience project, participants recorded their experiences and thoughts by writing them down on pieces of coloured paper. These messages were then fitted together like a patchwork quilt, in a way that built the women's sense of being connected, and reinforced their sense that they had issues in common. The women highlighted not only their entitlement to a decent income, but also their rights to respect and dignity through the unpaid contributions they made to society.

### **Encouraging the powerful to listen to poor women?**

There are two sides to empowerment: building the confidence and skills of people in powerless positions, and ensuring that they are able to occupy a position where they can talk on relatively equal terms to those people with power to make decisions that affect their lives. This paper has described attempts to do the former: we still have a lot to learn about how to do the latter. We need to spend as long preparing the ground with decision-makers so that they are able

to listen, as we do building the skills and confidence of women so that they feel they can speak up. It is a delicate balance: bringing women face to face with decision-makers who then do not treat them seriously can make them feel disempowered, or angry, or both. In the projects described here, Oxfam GB has attempted to prepare both sides prior to meeting, to make those meetings as constructive as possible. But this has had mixed results.

As part of a wider project in Scotland to influence council officers and decision-makers to mainstream gender in service delivery, Oxfam GB worked with Routes to Work South, a local job-advice service in South Lanarkshire. This went some way towards preparing the ground for Routes to Work South to 'hear' what the women were saying about their needs and experiences, during sessions organised as part of the Women's Economic Empowerment project, making it a fairly positive experience for the women who took part. Because the women knew Routes to Work South as a local agency, and knew what they did in the neighbourhood, they could make suggestions in the knowledge of how this would impact on services affecting women like them. Likewise, in Oxfam GB's earlier 'Get Heard' project, a series of meetings between civil servants and anti-poverty organisations established the principles of effective participation (giving it time, providing financial support to people experiencing poverty to enable them to participate, actually listening to participants, and following this up with action) before the project began. Because this led civil servants to have a better understanding of *how* to listen to people, the consultation was wider and more successful than it might have been, and some of the priorities identified by people experiencing poverty were incorporated into the UK National Plan on Social Inclusion, 2006.

In the Women's Voices of Experience project, WBG members were able to contact civil servants and members of Parliament whom they knew, and to persuade them to meet the women. Unfortunately, several of the members of Parliament who promised to come pulled out at the last minute, creating much disappointment. Such is the nature of lobbying the world over, but for women with no experience of this type of work, it felt like a snub. The women also became aware that while civil servants found the experience of meeting them face to face a rewarding one, the gap between what is politically achievable in changes to the benefits system, and what the women felt was necessary to alleviate poverty, is wide, and seemingly difficult to overcome.

## Conclusion: Oxfam GB's ongoing role in the UK

So what does Oxfam GB have to offer in promoting women's leadership in the UK, and is it sustainable? Some of the answers to these questions are connected to the position of Oxfam GB's UK



Poverty Programme in relation to other anti-poverty organisations and agencies active in the UK.

Women and local officials involved in projects are often surprised, but very appreciative, to learn that Oxfam GB is not involved in this work in order to 'tick boxes', and does not just seek short-term results. We are able to provide resources on a small scale, with no conditions, on terms which the women set themselves. While our projects in the UK are relatively small, we can give sustained and flexible support.

That said, we continue to ask ourselves questions about the sustainability of this work, both for us and for the partners we support. In the UK, compared with other organisations and agencies, we have relatively few resources, but where we are able to add value, and have staff already on the ground, Oxfam GB's work can have a longer-term impact. For instance, in the Women's Economic Empowerment project, we worked in three areas of Scotland, in which Oxfam GB staff members were already engaged and where we already had connections with other organisations and an established record of working on gender in regeneration areas. Another challenge that we and our partners face is that building the capacity of women at the local level is resource-intensive. For instance, the WBG, as a network of women interested in policy and gender analysis, found that they were unprepared for the degree and intensity of support needed not just for the women, but also for the partner organisations with whom they worked on the Voices of Experience project.

We will be monitoring the results of the projects described to establish more clearly whether we are contributing to real long-term change in encouraging women's participation and getting them into positions of leadership. However, we expect to continue working with women for their advancement in economic and political leadership, as we believe this to be at the core of tackling women's poverty in Britain.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Women's Budget Group (2005) 'Women's and children's poverty: making the links', [www.wbg.org.uk/documents/WBGWomensandchildrenspoverty.pdf](http://www.wbg.org.uk/documents/WBGWomensandchildrenspoverty.pdf) (last accessed November 2007).

<sup>2</sup> New Policy Institute (n.d.), 'The Poverty Site', [www.poverty.org.uk](http://www.poverty.org.uk) (last accessed November 2007).

<sup>3</sup> New Policy Institute *ibid.*; Women and Equality Unit (n.d.) 'What is the pay gap and why does it exist?', [www.womenandequalityunit.gov.uk/pay/pay\\_facts.htm](http://www.womenandequalityunit.gov.uk/pay/pay_facts.htm) (last accessed November 2007).

<sup>4</sup> In the UK, everyone in paid employment contributes part of his or her income to the National Insurance scheme. In return, people are entitled to state benefits. Some of these, such as free health care under the National Health Service, and child benefit, are available to everyone, regardless of how many National Insurance contributions they have made. Others, including pensions, are dependent on how many contributions someone has made over the course of his or her life.

<sup>5</sup> This 'poverty line' is not the same as a comprehensive definition of poverty. As in other developed countries, poverty is a complex issue in the UK, relating not just to individuals' and families' capacity to access income, but also to their capacity to access credit, or to save for the future. For more information visit [www.oxfamgb.org/ukpp/poverty/thefacts.htm](http://www.oxfamgb.org/ukpp/poverty/thefacts.htm) (last accessed September 2007).

<sup>6</sup> For more information about the Engendering Change project, and Oxfam's partner organisation Engender, please see [www.oxfamgb.org/ukpp/equal/engenderingchange.htm](http://www.oxfamgb.org/ukpp/equal/engenderingchange.htm) (last accessed November 2007).

<sup>7</sup> Regeneration projects, usually funded by government, renew buildings, roads, public facilities, and communities that are run down and poor. Poor women rarely have any influence over how these projects are planned and delivered. The ReGender project built women's sense of solidarity and recognition that they have issues in common. It has supported women in three areas in Glasgow, Llandudno, and Manchester to lobby local decision makers for their needs to be recognised and considered in urban design and the delivery of public services, such as employment support, transport, and economic development. For more information on this, please see [www.oxfam.org.uk/resources/ukpoverty/oxfamwork.html](http://www.oxfam.org.uk/resources/ukpoverty/oxfamwork.html) (last accessed December 2007).

<sup>8</sup> 'Postcode lottery' is a phrase used to describe the uneven provision of public services in the UK, whereby the services provided in poor areas are fewer and of poorer quality, and people living in these areas feel they are looked down upon, and that service providers treat them with less respect.

<sup>9</sup> In Britain people claiming state benefits are allowed to work for up to 16 hours a week without losing their entitlement to payments such as income support from the government.

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<sup>10</sup> The Equal Opportunities Commission was originally established to monitor the implementation of the Sex Discrimination Act (1975) and the Equal Pay Act (1970). It is now the leading agency challenging sex discrimination and gender inequality in the UK. It has recently been subsumed into the new Commission for Equality and Human Rights ([www.eoc.org.uk](http://www.eoc.org.uk)).

<sup>11</sup> EOC Scotland (2006) 'Occupational segregation in Scotland – progress report', Glasgow: EOC Scotland, available at [www.eoc.org.uk/PDF/Occ\\_seg\\_in\\_Scotland\\_progress\\_report\\_1\\_Aug\\_2006.pdf](http://www.eoc.org.uk/PDF/Occ_seg_in_Scotland_progress_report_1_Aug_2006.pdf) (last accessed October 2007).

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## Oxfam GB

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