

CASE STUDY 8: ENGAGING WITH LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Think about the **overall economic context**



Build **ongoing** relationships with **gender equality** champions in local government

Know your **equality** and **anti-discrimination law**



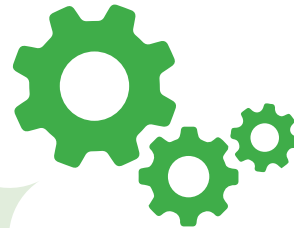
Map out **how women and men interact** with local government



Engage with **other** local **social justice groups**

Understand **how** local **government budgets work**

Support local women's **networks** to engage with budgets and economic policy **on a continuing basis**



CASE STUDY 8: ENGAGING IN DIALOGUES WITH LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Local government can advance gender equality and women's well-being in many ways. For example, through the provision of local social and physical infrastructure that reduces the amount of unpaid work that women have to do, by the creation of good quality employment directly and indirectly, through local government contracts with suppliers, and by advancing women's role in decision-making as elected representatives and in advisory bodies.

However, the status quo is left unchanged when local governments fail to prioritise gender equality and the well-being of women. If local government cuts funding for social and physical infrastructure in ways that add to women's unpaid work and reduce women's good quality employment, it has an adverse effect on well-being and gender equality.

1. Map out how women and men interact with local government
2. Understand how the local government budget works
3. Identify the overall economic context
4. Know your equality and anti-discrimination law

1. MAP HOW WOMEN AND MEN ENGAGE WITH LOCAL GOVERNMENT

In engaging with local government, first you need to map how women and men currently interact with local government. In England, WBG found that **women use local services to a greater degree than men**, because of their need for care services, both for themselves and for other people that they care for, including children, those with chronic illnesses or disabilities, and older people. But there is evidence that many needs are unmet. Women are a majority of local government employees, largely because of occupational segregation – local governments are responsible for services such as education and care which are seen as 'women's work'. But increasingly local governments have contracted out the provision of services to for-profit organisations which tend to provide worse pay and conditions of employment. Women are a minority of councillors and mayors, the people who make the decisions about the local budget. For example, in England women make up only 33% of councillors and 17% of council leaders.⁴³

43. Fawcett, (2017), Does Local Government Work for Women? Interim Report of the Local Government Commission, available online at <https://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/News/fawcett-report-reveals-sexism-commonplace-local-government>

2. UNDERSTAND HOW LOCAL GOVERNMENT WORKS

A second task is understanding how the local government budget works. WBG identified what services different tiers of local government are responsible for providing and how they fund these services.

We discovered that:

Councils are legally required to set balanced budgets at the start of each financial year. Unlike the national government, they cannot carry forward a deficit at the start of every financial year.

In England the tax raising powers of local government are limited and most of the funding comes from grants from national government.

The main tax instrument is Council Tax, a tax levied according to the value of the property in which households live (irrespective of whether they own or rent it). It was not possible to determine directly what share of Council Tax is paid by women, and what share of women's income goes into paying to this tax. But we did find that the Council Tax has not kept up with big increases in the market value of residential property, and that because of this wealthier people (who are disproportionately men) are not paying a fair share of this tax.

Local councils produce a three-year financial plan as a framework for the annual budget that sets out the amount of money they expect to receive from the national government and how much they plan to raise through Council Tax and other charges, and through borrowing to fund new physical infrastructure, such as roads. It also sets out how the money will be spent. Some local councils organise public consultations before finalising the three-year financial plan but they are of very limited scope and generally do not make an effort to involve women's organisations.

3. ECONOMIC CONTEXT

A third task is identifying the overall economic context: is funding being cut or expanded? In England in the period 2010/11 to 2015/16 there have been huge cuts to funding because the national government has cut back on grants to local government and has put pressure on councils to freeze Council Tax. If a council wished to increase the rate of Council Tax by more than 2%, they would have to conduct a referendum. If funding had been expanding, it is more likely that the budget would have a positive impact on gender equality – but not inevitable. The impact depends on what social and physical infrastructure is given priority.

4. LEGAL CONTEXT

A fourth task is investigating how far anti-discrimination and equality laws impinge on what local government can do. In England, Scotland and Wales, the Public Sector Equality Duty requires local government to demonstrate (among other things) that they have due regard to equality when making their decisions (there are different equality laws in Northern Ireland).

In order to do this, councils should conduct an equality impact assessment and make it publicly available. But **our action research showed that often gender impact is left out**. For instance, an equality impact of a proposal to reduce subsidies to buses service recorded that gender impact was 'not applicable', ignoring evidence that women make more use of bus services than men. In other cases, the gender impact assessment was inadequate. In one case, it was acknowledged that budget cuts would mean cuts to jobs, and the majority of those losing their jobs would be women, but this was not seen as a reason to rethink the cuts. Indeed, some local authorities argued that there was no discrimination provided women's share of job cuts was equal to their share of jobs, ignoring the fact that such cuts disproportionately affect women as a social group, and as such are contrary to the Equality Duty.

GENDER RESPONSIVE BUDGETING

We concluded that local council budget decision-making was driven by the search for more ‘efficiency’, and this was narrowly defined in terms of cutting financial costs. Application of **gender responsive budgeting principles would have required local councils to investigate whether they were really achieving more efficient use of resources or, in reality, making ‘false economies’**. For example, were they transferring costs from the paid economy to the unpaid economy by requiring women to do more unpaid work to compensate for the loss of services, with negative effects on women’s physical and mental health and ability to undertake paid work?

We also discovered that it is important to look beyond the budget, to consider strategic decisions on the development of the local economy, and how local government works with private sector businesses. In England we found that Local Enterprise Partnerships are important but pay little attention to developing jobs for women and support for women’s businesses, and have few women members.

WHAT WBG DID TO TRY TO BRING ABOUT CHANGE

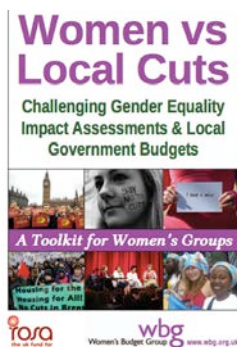
In order to engage with local government we needed to:

Support local women’s networks to engage with local budgets and economic policy on a continuing basis, since most of them have little experience or knowledge of budgetary processes, local government’s procedures and local economic strategies, and very little funding.

Maintain ongoing relationships with gender equality champions in local government in the face of turnover of staff and elected representatives.

Engage with other social justice groups active at local level who do not have a gender equality perspective.

TOOLKITS



WBG created two toolkits, one of which focused on how women could campaign locally to improve specific local services (‘Making Your Voice Heard. A Women’s Toolkit for Local Lobbying’, produced in 2011), and the other focused on how women could challenge local budget cuts (‘Women vs Local Cuts. Challenging Gender Equality Impact Assessments and Local Government Budget’, produced in 2013).

The ‘Making Your Voice Heard’ toolkit was developed from a workshop held in Wolverhampton, in partnership with a women’s organization called Platform 51. It was made available online through the Women’s Budget Group website.⁴⁴

The ‘Women vs Local Cuts’ toolkit was developed through workshops with the Women’s Equality Network Somerset in the town of Taunton and with the Women’s Employment and Enterprise Unit in the city of Norwich, and was later made available online.⁴⁵ This toolkit was used in workshops with the Women’s Resource Centre in London and with UNISON, a British trade union.

The toolkits focused on providing both background information and key guidance focused on specific examples, and tried to present the material in a lively and interactive way. We included lots of tips about where to

44. WBG, (2011), Making Your Voice Heard Toolkit, available online at <https://wbg.org.uk/resources/making-voice-heard-toolkit-local-campaigning/>

45. WBG, (2013), Women vs Local Cuts: a toolkit for action, available online at <https://wbg.org.uk/resources/women-vs-local-cuts-a-toolkit-for-local-action/>

get relevant information for your locality, especially through online sources. Where information was not publicly available, we explained how to make a Freedom of Information Request to local government bodies to try to get access to more information. The toolkits also discussed what action women could take, including getting publicity in local media, writing to local councillors and attending council meetings to ask questions during the Public Question Time.

WORKSHOPS

WBG organised three workshops in three large English cities to build capacity for feminist analysis of local economic issues. The first workshop was held in Bristol in 2016 (see *Case study 10: Working with other Civil Society Groups*).

The second workshop was held in Manchester in 2016 and it focused on the devolution of more responsibilities from national government to the Greater Manchester council and the promise of more funding for investment in physical infrastructure, such as railways, to improve the local economy. The workshop facilitated discussion with local women's organisations about how they could engage with local economic policy issues, and with local organisations focusing on development of local economic alternatives about how they could incorporate gender equality issues in their activities.

The third workshop was held in London in 2017 to discuss women and the housing crisis, and consider whether the Mayor's housing strategy could deliver for women. The participants included several members of the Housing Committee of the Greater London Housing Assembly, as well as speakers from organisations campaigning on women's housing needs. Discussions in break out groups came up with recommendations for improving the Mayor's housing strategy.

We found that local governments in the UK have very little room for manoeuvre, since they have extremely limited revenue-raising powers and have received a rapidly dwindling funds from central government but are obliged to provide a range of statutory services. Even the most progressive councils have had to cut services that are important for gender equality and women's well-being. In these circumstances, it is important to focus on central government too.

The Public Sector Equality Duty has the potential to have a significant impact but in practice can be interpreted in a very superficial way. Public bodies are obliged to have due regard to equality but not to take action to mitigate an adverse impact. Moreover, although all council websites have a lot of information, it can be very difficult to obtain the specific financial and other information needed to judge the gender impact.