

# Feminist values and the governance of feminist organisations



[www.crfr.ac.uk](http://www.crfr.ac.uk)

Centre for Research on Families and Relationships • Briefing 70 • December 2013

## References

- Rape Crisis Network Ireland (2010). 'Rape Crisis Centres: Best Practice Model'
- McMillan, L (2007). 'Feminist organising against gendered violence', Palgrave Macmillan: Basingstoke Hampshire
- Hudson, M & Ashworth, J. (2012) 'Delivering Effective Governance: Insights from the boards of larger charities' Centre for Charity Effectiveness, Cass Business School.
- Hyde, C. (2000). 'The Hybrid Non-profit: An Examination of Feminist Social Movement Organisations' Journal of Community Practice, Vol. 8(4).
- Maier, S.L. (2008). 'Are Rape Crisis Centres Feminist Organisations?': Feminist Criminology, 3; pp. 82-100.

## Authors and acknowledgements

This briefing was written by Shirley Otto and Sarah Morton and edited by Sarah Burton.

The Feminist Governance Project is a collaboration between the Centre for Research on Families and Relationships (CRFR) at The University of Edinburgh, Rape Crisis England and Wales (RCE+W) and, Rape Crisis Scotland (RCS).

The funding for the project came from the Scottish Funding Council Interface Scheme and is administered by CRFR.



## contact crfr

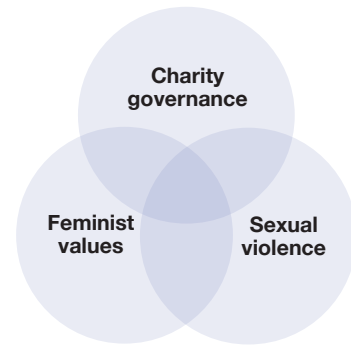
For a full list of Research Briefings visit our website [www.crfr.ac.uk](http://www.crfr.ac.uk)

Centre for Research on Families and Relationships  
The University of Edinburgh,  
23 Buccleuch Place, Edinburgh EH8 9LN

Tel: 0131 651 1832  
Fax: 0131 651 1833  
E-mail: [crfr@ed.ac.uk](mailto:crfr@ed.ac.uk)

A consortium of the Universities of Aberdeen, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Glasgow Caledonian, Highlands and Islands and Stirling.

# Feminist values and the governance of feminist organisations



## Introduction

Globally, diverse organisational structures and practices have emerged from the work of women's organisations groups and networks. Evolving beyond collective working, feminist organisations have taken on complex dilemmas and demands to find ways of running services and centres consistent with feminist values.

Governance – the contribution of charity trustees – is an integral part of providing assistance to survivors of sexual violence. What has not been attended to, whether by practitioners, social scientists or policy-makers, is the impact of feminist values on governance practice in charities dedicated to services for survivors of sexual violence.

This briefing reports on a project to examine the integration of feminist values and the governance of charities for survivors of sexual violence in the UK; and highlights the implications for the training and development of trustees, and charity regulation.

## Background

The aim of the project is twofold:

1. To develop a conceptual framework that integrates feminist values (i.e. the values of Rape Crisis England and Wales and Rape Crisis Scotland), governance in charities and the impact of work on sexual violence.
2. To provide recommendations for a training course(s) and material for guiding and supporting trustees of rape crisis centres.

The study took as its touchstone the definition of sexual violence adopted by rape crisis in the Rape Crisis Centre Best Practice Model.

'Sexual violence is a crime and an abuse of power, which (1) is one result of unequal power between perpetrator and victim; (2) reinforces the inequality of power in this relationship; and (3) reinforces the inequality of power between men and women. Sexual violence is one of the ways in which men enact their dominance in a violent way over women, children and other men. The violence is both a cause and a consequence of gender-based inequalities. There is systematic and structural discrimination against women and other vulnerable and marginalised groups in society'. (Rape Crisis Network Ireland, 2010).

## The study

The study explored three areas of interrelationships:

- i. Feminist values/charity governance
- ii. Charity governance/sexual violence
- iii. Feminist values/sexual violence

## Key points

- Trustees and staff have a conspicuous appetite to understand, articulate and own feminist values.
- Feminist values matter to the nature and arrangements for charity governance.
- Feminist governance spotlights value-awareness, accountability, robust support structures, activism, apprenticeship and survivor's voice.
- Feminist governance practice requires attention to communication, role clarity and relationships.
- Feminist governance requires commitment to empowerment.
- Feminist governance requires individuals to take emotional responsibility.
- Feminist governance requires management of 'contested' areas.
- Feminist trusteeship enhanced by investment in training and development, particularly skills in decision-making, collaboration, emotional intelligence and managing differences.
- Feminist trusteeship contests conventional understanding of the duties of charity trustee in the UK.

Information was collected by:

- Literature search for accounts of organising and feminist values, feminist organisations (e.g. McMillan, 2007 & Hyde, 2000), charity governance and the implications for organisations (and the people in them) of secondary traumatic stress, i.e. the impact on trustees (and the relationships with staff and volunteers) of work with sexual violence.
- Visiting and listening to trustees of rape crisis centres.
- Running workshops for trustees, volunteers and staff, for example, at conferences.
- Interviewing individual practitioners, academics and trainers.

Reading, visits and interviews were used in the early stages of the project to inform and develop concepts. Interviews and workshops were used to fine-tune and ultimately validate the framework for understanding feminist governance.

## How does this research contribute to what we already know

Charity trusteeship is a seriously under researched area (Hudson & Ashworth 2012) in the UK, despite the importance of governance to the operation of charities. This project is pioneering in this respect and in being one of a small number of studies that questions aspects of charity law in Scotland and England and Wales.

## The findings

### Feminist values

It emerged that a key dilemma was the word 'feminist' and the values associated with it. For many trustees, staff or volunteers 'feminist' is a vague and contested word with no agreed specific meaning.

Studies suggest many people associated with services for women adhere to feminist values (e.g. Maier, 2008) but have some unsettledness about using the word – 'feminist'. This is based on the assumption that there are or would be negative associations in the minds of stakeholders and partners (e.g. statutory authorities and funders), such as being anti-male.

Examples of positive associations were: women-centred; empowerment, collaborative working, participatory democracy and being rooted in gender equality.

### Governance

Registration of charities in the UK requires the establishing of a hierarchy; charity trustees have overall control of their organisation and are formally accountable for the outcomes of the work of the organisation. Increasing regulation – for example in employment law, health and safety, disclosure – underpin the importance of clear and defined roles and relationships and the processes for accountability. At the same time structures for funding and service delivery are more complex with the growth of partnerships and collaborations; all of which create dilemmas for both charity trustees and managers of centres and services.

How are trustees of feminist organisations, on the one hand, to minimise differences in power and control and on the other fulfil their duties and avoid potentially serious liabilities?

### Governance and working with sexual violence

The responsibilities of trustees of centres working with sexual violence were identified as ensuring,

- Quality supervision – three strands are essential: (i) emotional support, (ii) management oversight and (iii) across-the-board communication.
- Culture of consultation and involvement – front-line staff and volunteers being told about/ explained to about what's happening in the organisation.
- Diversity of types of work, of staff and volunteers, to vary demands of front-line work and to counteract feelings of powerlessness leading to 'burnout'.
- Social/peer relationships that are inclusive and appreciative.
- All roles include being an 'activist' element (i.e. promoting feminist values) including working for social change/justice/against gender inequalities and for the well-being of women and girls.

### Outcomes

A 'model' for describing feminist governance – integrating values, good governance practice and processes for sustaining those working with survivors of sexual violence – has evolved through this study's consultation with trustees, staff and volunteers of rape crisis centres and services in workshops, and in individual interviews.

## Policy implications

Tailor-making governance to 'fit' feminist values relies on external as well as internal changes in policies and practice, as indeed will any other type of organisation, or cause, rooted in power-sharing and/or concerned with the use and abuse of power by hierarchies. Feminist governance asks fundamental questions of charity law's insistence on a single stewardship structure and the difficulties it can create with partnership working, and how it might hinder shared accountability with staff and survivors, and sister organisations.

## Practical implications

### Trustees to acknowledge

- Duty to sustain core values.
- Duty to act with integrity.
- Duty to oversee accountability.
- Duty to ensure survivor's 'voice'.
- Actively consult and involve volunteers and staff.
- Seek clear structures and roles.
- Promote support and development/ways of avoiding burnout.
- Promote empowerment, learning and development + 'activism'.
- Need for succession planning.
- Regularly check and fine-tune internal communication.

### Develop sustainable roles and relationships

- Clarify, respect and adhere to expectations of authority, tasks and activities – as individuals and collectively.
- Write down expectations and use at induction etc.
- Review roles, boundaries, interrelationships (e.g. annually) and workload.

### Talk values

- At induction of trustees, volunteers and staff.
- As part of training.
- During supervision and appraisals.
- At Away Days.

### Talk about power

- Consider the positive use of power.
- Build in formal/structured ways of checking feelings at the end of meetings/at Away Days etc.
- Consider 360 degrees appraisal (e.g. every two years).

### Training to include

- Values and how they are implemented internally and externally.
- Crafting realistic decisions and sustaining them.
- Collaborative working (including negotiation skills).
- Apprenticeships to take on roles in the Centre (including trusteeship).
- Constructive challenging.
- Managing 'contested' areas and relationships.

## Feminist Governance 'Model'

### Attitudes and assumptions

Essential to challenge gender oppression;  
Believe in solidarity of women working for women;  
Respect for women's lives;  
Committed to providing safe spaces for women survivors;  
Need to negotiate 'contested' areas e.g. local planning partnerships.

### Values

Solidarity based on anti-patriarchy:  
\* Activism for social change  
\* For, of and by women

### Outcomes

Values explicit in recruitment, awareness training and induction;  
Values evident in strategy and shape of services; support for activism;  
Aim for women-centred HR policies;  
Protective of women's and girls requirement for safety/male-free spaces;  
Mentoring re. working in 'contested' areas;  
Seek to collaborate with sister organisations.

Central function of trustees – in role and as individuals;  
Importance of openness and transparency.

Accountability  
\* Values  
\* Behaviour  
\* Organisational activities/outcomes  
\* Use of resources

Evident in induction, training and support of trustees;  
Intelligent processes/ procedures for accountability;  
Included in strategic planning & review;  
Working to ensure services for women and girls are sustainable.

Value and celebrate difference within a feminist framework;  
Essential to seek diversity and support negotiating common ground.

Inclusive

Trustees from range of backgrounds; programme for negotiating differences; induction & training addresses dilemmas.

Interdependence of values and behaviour;  
Power (authority to act/decide) located in roles and functions not personality;  
Essential to actively empower women to i. have a voice, ii. carry out roles including how to be trustees.

Positive power  
\* Use not abuse  
\* Invest in empowerment

Clear well-defined roles; authority exercises according to functions; training in learning & performance management;

- Apprenticeships
- Succession planning
- Self-help and development programme (tailored); learning & development core to supervision & appraisal/other HR procedures
- Spaces to check/challenges perceived abuse of authority/power

**Structures**

- Clear and appropriate
- Promote involvement /consultation
- Adhered to (and changed as required)

**Meetings**

- Well organised
- Information is right
- Decisions are crafted (e.g. based on evidence/learning)
- Robust accountability

**Being employers**

- Reliable and transparent

Survivors have the right to i. be listened to; ii. to influence the shape of services/campaigns, iii. to determine their own journey/ approach to well-being.

Survivor's voice

Active use of ways of 'hearing' & affirming survivor's voice; processes for accounting to survivors; evidence of influence of survivors in strategic planning & review; survivors involved in lobbying and in local planning.

Belief in interrelationship between personal + political + performance;  
Openness about feelings balanced with respect for others;  
Owning and being responsible for expression of strong feelings (e.g. confrontation, sexual and personal disclosure).

Emotional responsibility

Reflective spaces in meetings, in supervision and appraisal;  
Training in interpersonal skills, emotional intelligence, self-management and managing conflict.  
Groundrules and codes of conduct up-to-date, used and reviewed.