

WOMEN'S COMMITTEES IN SCOTLAND

Sue Lieberman

Preface

The growth of Women's Committees has been one of the more striking developments in Local Government in the past decade. From the first, established by the Greater London Council in 1982, the spread has been rapid. There are now approximately 32⁽¹⁾ full standing Women's Committees or sub-committees throughout the UK, of which five⁽²⁾ are in Scotland with at least two more pending; not to mention a comparable number of Equal Opportunities Committees. All represent an attempt to tackle the inequality which women experience in relation to local government as an institution and to the services which it provides.

In common with other positive action initiatives in local government, in particular those on race and disability, Women's Committees have grown in part from a specific political base, referred to variously as the 'New Urban Left'⁽³⁾ or as 'Local Socialism'.⁽⁴⁾ This represents a conscious attempt by a new generation of more radical Labour councillors to redefine political affiliations in terms of a coalition of various groups experiencing different forms of disadvantage, and no longer purely class ones; what, in Gramscian terms, is often described as 'the urban dispossessed'. This attempt is by no means a phenomenon common to all Labour councils, but has more clearly emerged in those areas where there has been an occupational shift of power in local Labour party politics towards a professional often university educated class. Not surprisingly, the first six Women's Committees were in London, where the Labour Party has a stronger numerical following from within the middle-class intelligentsia than in the industrial heartlands.

This provides the *political* context in which Women's Committees were first set up. It still remains a distinct strand in the establishment of many Women's Committees. But the trend has now spread to the more traditional Labour heartlands, of which Scotland may be considered an example. The experience of Women's Committees in Scotland is therefore of interest in that it allows for a contained look at an area where the conflict between fashionable ideas and established interests may be more overt, and in this sense can offer a more variable commentary on the ups and downs of Women's Committees than may be the case 'down south'.

Of course, even allowing for the contextual changes in which Women's Committees have been allowed to develop, it goes without saying that the major thrust behind their being set up in the first place has been the impact of the women's movement. Women's Committees represent the first specific attempt to translate into institutional terms action to meet the needs of a discrete group within the population whose demands were underpinned by a distinct body of ideology. In this sense, Women's Committees were in advance of similar efforts on race, disability and homosexuality, where coherent theories as against the practical effects of disadvantage were either less clearly formulated or popularised. So Women's Committees also act as a commentary on the difficulties and conflicts involved when theory meets reality; that is, when a body of ideas which are essentially at variance with institutional norms are translated into the institutional setting.

Not surprisingly, the establishment of any Women's Committee is almost invariably accompanied by controversy. I say not surprisingly, because such a venture challenges simultaneously a number of interests and structures within local government: political, economic, institutional and personal. The overriding task of the Women's Committee has to be to cope effectively with these conflicts and to achieve some recognisable progress. Unfortunately, the job is often made considerably more difficult by a lack of clarity from the outset as to the complex nature of these conflicts and as to what realistic objectives there might be. The fact that, despite the difficulties, Women's Committees are not only spreading but in most cases achieving important results is a tribute to the dedication of those involved. It should not blind us to the fact that many of the difficulties they face are unnecessary. If the same degree of care and thought was given to the establishment of a Women's Committee as, say, to a programme of decentralisation of services, responsibility for success or failure would depend less heavily on the abilities and efforts of a few individuals. Realpolitik, however, dictates that marginalisation is an essential component of seemingly positive responses to movements which fundamentally challenge the distribution of power and wealth in society.

This chapter does not purport to be a detailed examination of the work of Women's Committees in Scotland. Neither time nor resources permit such an exercise. The intention is to provide a general background as to the context and thinking behind the setting up of Women's Committees; to describe some of their achievements in Scotland; and to discuss some of the political and organisational problems affecting them. The focus is specifically on Women's Committees, rather than on the more broadly titled Equal Opportunities Committees⁽⁵⁾, since the former are more politically and publicly exposed and act more as a focus, variously, of support and opposition. The experience of Women's Committees *qua* Women's Committees therefore provides more of a statement on the impact of controversial experiments on established institutions. The

chapter concludes with an assessment of the principle of a Women's Committee. The emphasis throughout should be understood as applying to Scotland, except where otherwise stated.

THE ORIGINS OF WOMEN'S COMMITTEES

Women's Committees began in London, in circumstances of particular political and ideological change. These circumstances will be briefly described. But the spread of Women's Committees to Scotland, and possibly to more 'conservative' councils in parts of England, has taken place against a somewhat different background. It is important to acknowledge these distinctions. At the end of the day, different political ideologies may be less important than a deeply-rooted sexism in explaining the difficulties all Women's Committees seem to face. However, we have to recognise that both factors – and others – exist and interact, affecting both the climate of opinion and events. There is no blueprint for success. But unravelling the issues which affect and influence may help those involved in the setting up of Women's Committees to understand realistically what action they may need to take or to avoid in order to maximise their chances of succeeding.

In London, Women's Committees seem to have broadly emerged from a combination of two dominant factors. One was the growth, during the 1970s, of a new left-of-centre movement in the Labour Party which had its feet, for want of a better word, in community politics and the politics of protest. The 'generation of '68', having found that there were limits to the effectiveness of direct action moved systematically into mainstream politics during the next decade in order to influence and change from within. Others still stayed on the outside, preferring to channel their political energies through independent movements, such as the tenants' movement, or more formalised pressure groups such as Gingerbread and Child Poverty Action Group. Nevertheless, there remained considerable movement between the two.

The relationship between community action and formal political change is a fascinating area of study, and one quite relevant to the issue of Women's Committees. Are women better off continuing to organise outside of mainstream structures? Or should they join power structures in order to effect change? In reality, these choices are not mutually exclusive. But they form a continuing dilemma for feminists in trying to decide the best means of achieving change, and the experience of Women's Committees has not necessarily resolved this dilemma.

The other major strand in the evolution of the first Women's Committees was the growing articulacy of the Women's Movement. This had also in part developed from the radicalisation of politics in the late 1960s and 1970s in which many of the women involved, influenced by the

growth in feminist ideas, began to recognise that 'gender-blind' political action in effect left women's social and economic position unchanged. During the 1970s, a wealth of feminist theory and writing developed, analysing patriarchy, language, marxist theories of reproduction, the family, sexuality and other major issues associated with the complexities of women's position in society. This profoundly influenced the development of the Women's Movement and of particular women's interest/action groups. Some groups – notably, Women's Aid groups – even began to gain tenuous access to resources, to set up refuges for women experiencing domestic violence. Although in truth such initiatives could be unconsciously dismissed by those in power as *merely* meeting the requirements of a particular form of social deviance, they were important for giving women themselves a recognised basis from which to analyse and challenge the social meaning of violence towards women in general.

This growth in confidence and awareness underpinned the thinking of those women now moving into mainstream politics at the local level. They began to see – often from their own experience – that the under-representation of women in politics and attitudes towards childrearing and domestic roles were closely intertwined. The work of the Women's Movement pointed them to a realisation that systematic discrimination, intended or unintended, affected women's opportunities in every sphere of local government activity. The question was, what to do about it? And the answer, to Valerie Wise, elected to the new Labour administration at the Greater London Council in 1981, was to set up a committee specifically devoted to the promotion of women's interests.

This move was tremendously attractive to London feminists. Hundreds turned up to each of the GLC Women's Committees open meetings. Undoubtedly, it spurred women on to call for similar moves in their own borough councils. By the end of 1982, no fewer than five other councils in London – all Labour-controlled – had established full standing committees or sub-committees of central committees. The GLC's became by far the biggest, with a staff approaching 100 at abolition in 1986. It also continued to set the pace, establishing norms such as popular consultation, strategy working parties and high grading of staff.

This rapid growth was very influential in other areas. Women in the Labour Party up and down the country, who had perhaps been struggling for years to get women's issues onto the agendas of their local parties, saw the establishment of a Women's Committee as an immediate vehicle for getting women's concerns addressed. Younger men councillors, who increasingly were coming to dominate local political scenes, began to see women's committees as a hallmark of what a 'right-on' new Labour left council should be doing – along with initiatives on race, disability, and socialist enterprise. In this way, the impetus to set up Women's Committees

shifted from having a fairly strong popular feminist base to being more heavily determined by party caucuses.

The crucial issue in all this seems to be the extent to which 'fashionable' political causes reflect and relate to the needs and interests of the electorate. The Women's Movement has often been accused of being white, middle-class and able-bodied. It is often – in my view, correctly – argued that whereas *some* issues are common to all women, others – particularly the effects of race and class – have distinct effects.⁽⁶⁾ Women's Committees in London were greeted with enormous enthusiasm by organised white women's groups, but they soon ran into conflict with black women's groups over issues of race. This is symptomatic of the frequent gap in experience between promoters of Women's Committees and the communities they are intended to serve. In London, the general absence of black women from the mainstream Women's Movement and of black people from the Labour Party meant that this separation could initially be overlooked. In the industrial areas of the north, where working class experience still underpins the Labour Party, and therefore local politics, to a much greater extent, the gap between 'middle-class theory' and 'working class experience' could not be so overlooked. In Scotland, there were no great calls from an organised women's movement outside of the Labour Party for Women's Committees to be set up. Most of the initial battles have been fought purely within the confines of the political structures, and can crudely be characterised as being between men (and sometimes women) on both the traditional right and the far left of the Labour Party, in opposition to women activists supported by middle class men in the centre left ground.

Thus, of the five women's committees currently in existence in Scotland, only one – Stirling's (which was the first in Scotland) – came about as the result of a decision by the Labour *Group* running the council. This decision, crucially supported by the influential leader of the council, Michael Connarty, came as a result of direct influence from the GLC in the person of Valerie Wise. The others were all the result of manifesto commitments, made through the party *membership*. This difference is important. It creates the possibility of an initiative being imposed on a potentially hostile ruling group. Not only, therefore, does this mean that the Women's Committee has to establish its credibility with women outside the council; not only has it to find a way of tackling discriminatory practices and perceptions throughout the administrative structures of the council; it may have to do this in the face of obstruction within the ruling group. This may in part explain, for example, why there was a year's delay between the establishment of a Women's Committee in Edinburgh, and the setting up of a unit to service the committee.

This extremely unpromising starting point is not inevitable; nor does it undermine the case for a Women's Committee initiative *per se*. But it does call for better reflection by those responsible for the initiative as to the

subsequent strategies that will be needed to overcome those barriers. Too often, the achievement of a Women's Committee is seen as an end-product in itself, with insufficient thought as to the continuing support it needs. This can result in a feeling that the Committee has been abandoned to its own fate, and this is an inauspicious atmosphere in which to begin work.

It should be said that continued reference to the Labour Party in relation to Women's Committees is not a sign of partisanship. It is simply the fact that the vast majority of all Women's Committees, and all of the ones in Scotland, have been set up by Labour Councils. The other major political parties do not tend to display the same interest. Indeed, the position of Conservative councillors in Scotland can generally be described as one of overwhelming hostility to the concept and existence of Women's Committees. The SLD, on the whole, is more supportive – indeed, the previous Alliance parties demonstrated much the best track records, *pro rata*, in encouraging women into active politics. However, it has to be pointed out that in Aberdeen, the Women's Committee set up under a Labour administration was abolished when the Liberal Party took control in 1986, and was replaced by an Equal Opportunities Committee, an ideologically different vehicle that blurs the distinction between different forms of disadvantage and oppression.

All this may look somewhat invidious. After all, the women's movement is non-partisan, and the ideology of feminism is often antagonistic to the theories underpinning mainstream political parties. For example, conventional Marxist theory pays no attention to the role of women in the production of wealth or the reproduction of labour: consequently, women's work becomes invisible. Thatcherite ideology is explicitly geared to the exploitation of women in their domestic roles, although individual women may escape this through personal access to the benefits of the free market. The concept of gender equality is not specific to a class perspective; in fact, it sits well within a Liberal ideology. Be that as it may, for better, for worse, the development of Women's Committees is, at present, closely tied up with Labour party politics, and it is within that framework of class, race, gender, populism and radical town hall politics that Women's Committees currently exist.

THE WORK OF WOMEN'S COMMITTEES IN SCOTLAND

"For too long, within the Council and the local community, decisions about how money was spent, and what the priorities were, were in the hands of committees that were largely made up of men. The Women's Committee is trying to change this, because women have an important contribution to make in decisions....."

The District Council set up the Women's Committee to make sure that the voice of women and the interests of women were well

represented and are made to count....."⁽⁷⁾

Broadly speaking, the work of Womens' Committees falls into three distinct fields of operation. I shall define these as:

- a) providing a direct service or support to women, often a new/experimental service, or support in an area outwith the council's own direct interest;
- b) working with other departments and committees of the council to modify existing service delivery in women's interests; and
- c) tackling the council's employment practices and conditions of service

All of these function within a broader framework still, viz. to raise awareness and to ensure that women's issues are placed on the local authority agenda, as the above quotation suggests. Nor are the three fields mutually exclusive; for example, provision of a workplace creche or a cervical cancer screening programme for women employees intrudes into both (a) and (c). However, some kind of categorisation is helpful in order to identify patterns and the ones I have used offer a reasonable starting point.

It also has to be observed that there may be a difference in level of operation between a Women's Committee functioning at Regional level, and one at District level. Of the five Women's Committees presently operating in Scotland, three are district committees (Stirling, Edinburgh and West Lothian), and two are regional (Lothian and Central). If generalisations can be drawn from such small samples, the more localised nature of district councils tends to result in more direct contact work with women in communities outside the council; whilst the much larger size of regional councils, geographically, as employers of women, and as responsible for the two largest of council services (education and social services), suggests the more strategic importance of focussing on work internally.

Looking at the three areas outlined above, it is immediately noticeable that activities associated with the first, ie. providing a direct service or support to women, have received by far the most attention. Childcare, health, and violence recur the most frequently until now as issues to which Women's Committees in Scotland and their units have addressed themselves.

Childcare stands out as the single biggest concern. All three District Councils have operated Christmas shopping creches; Stirling with such success that a permanent shoppers' creche has now been established, with over 35,000 registrations in its first year of operation. Creches at Women's Committee meetings both inside and outside the council have also been

established as a norm, and the provision of workplace creches pursued with varying degrees of interest, if with no practical outcome to date. Some committees/units have initiated discussions with other sections of their councils with a view to improving childcare provision associated with leisure or educational opportunities, although progress is inevitably slow.

That childcare should receive so much attention from Women's Committees is hardly surprising. The restrictions imposed on women's lives through their responsibility for childrearing are such that to talk of opening up opportunities for women in any field of activity is meaningless unless alternative childcare provision is made. Even to consult with women in the community is affected: preschool children have to accompany their mothers to meetings; women have to leave activities at 3 o'clock to pick up their children from school; single parents cannot leave their children to go out at night. "Who cares for the children?" is one of the key questions in a feminist analysis of societal organisation. It is inevitable that Women's Committees will at an early stage address themselves to this issue in some way.

To a lesser extent, it is also inevitable that, at some level, Women's Committees will take an interest in health issues. Women's health has been a major area of interest and activity in both the women's movement and in community work with women for the past ten years. This is for three reasons: one, women have particular health needs associated with their reproductive system; two, again as a result of their role within the family, they have greater contact with health services; and three, the health service is dominated by men in crucial areas of diagnosis and resource allocation, hence power is perceived to be misused in various ways to subordinate women's personal and collective interests. Health has also become one of the most highly politicised of public service issues over a long period; not only in relation to the NHS, but also as a result of various forms of government propaganda: on smoking, alcohol and drugs, for example. Public consciousness of health as an issue is high, and it is therefore not surprising that it is an area in which women are readier to mobilise. The promotion of cervical cancer screening, the support given to hospital and other women's health action groups, and the organising of women's health events, all of which have featured in the work of Women's Committees, can be viewed to a large extent within this context.

Violence against women is another theme which echoes around Women's Committees. Violence, or the fear of violence, whether physical or sexual, affects women's lives to a quite remarkable extent, for example, restricting women's freedom of movement at certain times or in certain areas. The law, the police, physical planning, public transport, street lighting and specialist support services are all involved. Women's Committees in Scotland have variously organised local conferences on the issue of violence, sought dialogue with police forces, supported Women's

Aid and Rape Crisis Centres, and lobbied for improved public safety measures.

That these three issues – childcare, health and violence – have received such particular attention from Women's Committees in Scotland tells us something about the processes through which the committees operate. All these issues have gained emphasis as a result of the contact Women's Committees have had with women and women's organisations in the community. They are major issues for women, as already explained. It is therefore of particular importance for the credibility of Women's Committees that they are seen by women to achieve something in these areas. The very newness of Women's Committees, quite apart from their political vulnerability, means that they will be heavily scrutinised; thus raising a positive public profile for the committee, and one which can not only generate active support from women in the community but may serve to deflect or moderate criticisms and hostility from other quarters, becomes closely tied up with the need to "deliver some goods" in areas which women have identified as of special concern. Another clear example is the provision of grant-aid to women's groups and organisations. At least two Women's Committees (Lothian and Edinburgh) have made grant-aid an important point of contact with women's groups, and one which features significantly in their publicity. It may be pertinent that both these committees are in councils with established traditions of grant-aid.

The second area of activity is by far the most complex, and one, correspondingly, in which there are fewer examples of specific achievements to point to. The reasons for this will be discussed further on. In many respects it is the most fundamental purpose of Women's Committees to change the unconsciously discriminatory norms by which councils have hitherto functioned in their policies and service delivery; therefore all Women's Committees/Units, however tentatively at first, must take this on.

Many early initiatives are patchy. Subsequently, most Women's Committees recognise that more time has to be devoted to building structures and systems of communication internally before real change can be achieved. After two years, for example, Edinburgh established a Women and Housing Sub-Committee, jointly serviced by officers from the Housing Department and the Women's Unit, to look more systematically at women's housing needs and council responses. Stirling determined in its fourth year to focus on leisure and recreation services as a main service area where gender analysis and positive action measures would be needed. Central Region has prioritised the development of good communication systems within the Council, whilst Lothian has looked to the provision of childcare in all educational establishments as an initial major service objective. Edinburgh provides another example of a different approach. In its first year, the Women's Committee gained the agreement of the

Recreation Committee to employ two specialist fieldworkers within the Recreation Department to develop women's involvement in sports and recreation activities. This is a logical – and, one may argue, a more natural – extension of the Women's Committee's own grassroots work, as it provides for more consistent contact and development work with women, whilst freeing the Women's Committee to focus more on policy issues.

These examples – none of them earth-shattering – indicate a variety of approaches which can be taken to changing service delivery. All are equally valid, and which approach suits which situation will depend on a variety of circumstances, not least of which is what will gain cooperation and support from others. It is often a source of considerable frustration to Women's Committees and their officers that it is relatively easy to gain contact and response from women directly, and relatively difficult to tackle the local authority itself. However, it has to be recognised that a local authority is a large organisation and change will tend to occur slowly, especially with the minimal resources at the disposal of most Women's Committees. In this sense, it is unwise to expect – or to fear – too much of Women's Committees; the setting of modest attainable objectives and a realistic timetable is a far more useful approach.

To a large extent, this is also true of work on the council's own employment practices. Work on this area is central to Women's Committees' concerns, for local authorities are major employers of women and for the most part of women at low grades. In Lothian Regional Council, for example, some 20,000 women are employed out of a total of 28,000 within the workforce. Of these the majority are employed in low grade, low paid jobs with only a small proportion of women attaining top management posts. It is well recognised that women on the whole will continue to predominate at the low-paid, part-time level of the employment market without attention being paid to improved maternity rights, childcare, career breaks, training and confidence building, and a variety of other issues. An Equal Opportunities policy is an essential corollary of a Women's Committee, and Women's Committees will usually enter into this area of work in response to developments – or sometimes lack of developments – in the personnel arena.

Two Women's Committees in particular have prioritised this area of work. In Stirling, the Women's Committee was involved with Personnel in producing an Equal Opportunities policy; and in Lothian, issues such as equal pension and sickness rights, and improved maternity conditions, have been the focus. Prioritising employment matters requires a similar approach to working on service delivery, with two important differences. One is that it is a more concentrated area of work than the council's entire service operation, and one in which it may be possible to achieve consolidated results more quickly. The other is that it brings a third party onto the scene: viz, the trade unions. Depending on circumstances, the

latter can be a source of support or obstruction, for they reproduce many of the same conflicts over the importance of gender issues to be found within the Labour party, both being movements which have evolved in a society and a class based on the gender division of labour.

This section has not set out to document every activity undertaken by Scottish Women's Committees to date. The purpose has been to indicate the kind of approaches and priorities Women's Committees have adopted, and to suggest the rationale for this. The range of work touched on by most Women's Committees is merely reflective of the tacit expectation that they should tackle all issues of gender disadvantage. Almost any issue of interest to a local authority has relevance to women; realistically, choices have to be made, and the early years of a Women's Committee's life are as much about choosing the most effective directions as they are about being able to point to a list of achievements.

Problems & Issues

"If the combined job descriptions of most local authority women's officers were boiled down to one sentence it might read something like this:

'To change the world within 37 hours a week, but to do so using minimal resources, with due care not to attract adverse publicity and preferably without causing any discomfort to the deep-seated beliefs and traditions of the public, the council as a whole and the Labour Group in particular'."(Anon)

The setting up of a Women's Committee is almost invariably accompanied by two reactions: support and hostility. As already suggested, support tends to come in the first instance from women within the Labour Party, from some (but not all) women councillors and from some, usually younger, male councillors and party members who aspire to non-sexist practice. By contrast, hostility, frequently quite overt, comes at a political level both from opposition parties (especially the Conservative party) and from within the ranks of older, male party members, and at an administrative level from within the machinery of the local authority itself. Women's Committees usually spend much of their early years in treading a delicate line between wanting to convince supporters of their worthiness, whilst assuaging some of the hostility. As the above quotation suggests, they do so with minimal resources and with maximum expectations, and it is therefore within the difficult area of idealism and theory versus realism and practice that so many problems tend to arise.

The origins of these problems are both confused and complicated. At a political level, leaving aside the simplistic and largely uniform hostility of the local Conservative party, Women's Committees stand at the crossroads

of socialism and feminism, and they are vulnerable on both fronts. The power struggle that has been waged within the Labour Party for the past 10 years or more, between, broadly speaking, the old right guard, the hard left and the centre left directly affects Women's Committees both before and after their establishment. Crudely speaking, the 'old right' of the party, which dominated it until the 1970s and which is still very strong in the old Labour heartlands, depends on a traditional membership which is heavily dominated by working class, male trade unionists. Both their personal and political position is bound up with a set of family relationships in which women have always been subordinate, for example, by providing the appropriate domestic arrangements by which men can, at a much earlier age and to a far greater extent than women, enter actively into politics or trade unionism. While this still applies in large measure to the whole of society, it has been challenged by the Women's Movement; and given that the latter is generally speaking middle class and educated, it allows traditionalists to dismiss it as irrelevant to a working-class party.

This attitude has found more clearly articulated echo from within the ranks of the hard left. To a large extent, the latter is a reworking of the traditional Labour base, albeit with a refined sense of Marxist purism. In the ideology of the hard Left, the class struggle is supreme, while 'positive action' whether on gender, disability, sexual orientation or race is seen as a diversion from the main task (although racial initiatives are sometimes coopted). The most obvious example of this in practice in a council is in Liverpool, where, in contradistinction to other Labour authorities where a 'new Left' group had ousted a traditional one, the hard Left leadership after 1982 successfully opposed any call for the establishment of a Women's Committee.

Women's Committees gain the majority of their political support from the 'middle left' ground, where they are part of a reworking of socialist concepts, and of efforts to reach out to a new, mixed audience of voters. But support may only go so far, and they are not infrequently caught up in some of the wider power struggles between left and right in which compromises and changes of allegiance are often made. The sheer lack, in numerical terms, of women councillors is a serious disadvantage when it comes to the Labour group holding firm to an anti-sexist course of action.

In Scotland, whilst things are changing, much political power still resides with the traditional sector of the Labour Party. In some areas, this means that a Women's Committee simply will not be set up; in others, that if one is set up, it will have considerable difficulty in challenging certain political norms within the Labour Group. A brief story, not from Scotland, will illustrate both the difficulty in separating the personal from the political, and the tensions that can result. In the early 1980s, I helped set up a local community health project, funded through the Urban Programme, in the north-east of England, in a traditional working-class area, where

there was a close relationship between local male trade unionists and the local male councillors. This project concentrated substantially on work with women, including helping women to become more conscious of their own needs and more assertive. The resultant change in family politics led many of their husbands to lobby the councillors to withdraw funding from the project, which they held responsible for their wives' new attitudes. The project survived, but largely because the old right wing were no longer in the ascendancy in the council itself.

This example also illustrates another problem for Women's Committees: that of control. In traditional Labour areas, there is often a reluctance to support 'independent' groups, and a corresponding tendency to steer all new developments directly from the council. Even in areas where financial support is given to independent community groups, it is usually accompanied by a requirement that the council, in the person of local councillors, is strongly represented on the group. This may create difficulties for women's organisations who may view this as incompatible with their own aims and structures – for example, the inclusion of men in their decision-making. Where Women's Committees, therefore, may aim to work with and support women's groups in the community, they may find themselves on the horns of a dilemma between encouraging independence and conforming with group policy on control. It is noticeable, for example, that in the two areas, Edinburgh and Stirling, where councils have supported the establishment of new technology training centres for women, both centres have included male representatives of the funding councils in their management arrangements. There is no suggestion that this in itself has been a source of conflict in either situation, but it is certainly an area in which purist feminist ideology has to meet the political requirements of the ruling party.

One particular arena in which political battles are always waged is that of the budget. The combined weight of political opposition to a Women's Committee usually means that compromises are made over the size of budget the committee can wield, including how many staff it can appoint, whether it gives grants, and what direct powers are at its disposal. A great deal of significance is attached to this – some real, some symbolic. The Women's Committee need a reasonable budget in order to appoint sufficient staff and to undertake some initiatives, like a shoppers' creche, or consultation meetings. Most of the Scottish Women's Committees are resourced to the bare minimum, most evidently in their staffing. But arguments in favour of apportioning a budget to reflect the size of the female population are somewhat simplistic. The Women's Committee is not the only committee to deal with women, and its initiatives are as much to do with demonstration as actual provision. If the Women's Committee is successful, it is arguable that the effect will be apparent in other committees of the council 'bending' their programmes; if it is not, a substitution budget will not tackle institutionalised sexism in the long run. Whilst the size of the

budget is important, it is not necessarily in having a large budget that the Women's Committee will be most successful. Success will lie more importantly in the way in which the Committee and its officer(s), interface with the rest of the council.

So far I have dwelt in some detail on the political constraints affecting Women's Committees. However, there is an equally, if not more, important arena of conflict to be found within the bureaucratic complexities and subtleties of the local authority as an institution. Here, the puny resources invariably allocated to a Women's Committee, coupled not infrequently with a lack of clarity as to realistic objectives, priorities and means, are a crucial factor.

A local authority is a large organisation, with a complex structure and a well-established system of decision-making and implementation. Almost all main service committees have large departments with substantial staff at their disposal; advice, in the form of reports, is presented to these committees in time-honoured ways, and decisions having been made, the result is handed back to officers for implementation. Overall policy direction is given to a central Policy and Resources Committee, which in more sophisticated councils is serviced from a relatively small Chief Executive's Department, whose job it is to coordinate and corporately manage the individual service departments.

In contrast, a Women's Committee is often serviced by one Women's Officer, charged with the unenviable task of taking forward work in the interests of women in all areas of the Committee's interest: publicity and campaigning, forging links with women in the community, setting up new initiatives *and* introducing non-sexist policies and practice throughout the council. It is a job demanding a high level of commitment, and frequently characterised by burnout within the space of 2-3 years. In Scotland, four of the five established Women's Committees are serviced by one Women's Officer, who in turn may have the support of some clerical and administrative assistance.

A whole host of questions attach themselves to this situation. What background, skills and expertise will the Women's Officer be expected to have? What grade will she be paid on? Who will she report to? And, most important of all, how will she be supported to make sense of the quite unrealistic expectations attached to her job, to define achievable priorities, and to deal with the hostility and obstacles placed in her way? All of these questions have surfaced at some stage in the life of all Women's Committees in Scotland; not all of them have been satisfactorily answered.

It is worth examining some of the issues at stake here. To begin with, the background and skills of the Women's Officer herself. The choices here are as wide as the choices of the work of the Committee. A Women's

Officer may have a background in the women's movement, in community work, in adult education, in trades unionism, in local politics or in local government. She will seldom have experience in more than two or three of these areas. Selecting an officer with a particular background or interest inevitably means predisposing the work to take a certain direction, at least initially; it also means that a considerable amount of learning will have to take place to cope with the other areas of the Committee's interest. For example, an officer with experience of local government will understand how to go about building bridges with departments, but may have less experience in 'outreach' work with women in the community. Neither background is of itself more appropriate, but the unavoidable result of having only one post to fill is that of having to give a certain preference to one set of skills, which may or may not be in accordance with the requirements of the situation once the officer is in post.

Here the issue of management support becomes of central significance. Most Women's Units are placed in a central department – usually that of Administration or of the Chief Executive. The strengths and weaknesses of this decision need to be carefully considered. An officer, part of whose job it is to persuade the rest of the council to modify its policies in the interests of women, needs access to policy structures. Some councils do not have those structures; or do not have effective ones. Or a more senior officer may take the view that, because the Women's Officer reports directly to the Women's Committee, she is either outside his (usually his) jurisdiction or does not need supervision. This results in a failure to integrate the Women's Officer within the power structures of the council, and thus in her marginalisation. It will make her job of working to change the council considerably more difficult and may reinforce a pressure to concentrate more on working directly with women outside the council or within the council's workforce.

Linked to this is the issue of pay. The grading of Women's Officers is in itself quite a contentious issue, with those opposed to the initiative seeking a lower grade of pay, and supporters arguing for a salary scale commensurate with the responsibilities of the post. Here again, the hierarchical nature of local government is a factor. Power and responsibility are measured in terms of pay; the lower the grade, the less access the officer will have to certain layers of decision making. As it happens, this is one area in which, under the influence of Stirling, Scotland has succeeded in establishing a better norm than amongst the early Women's Committees in England⁽⁸⁾, with the majority of Women's Officers graded on PO2/3 – a reasonable position within the echelons of lower management.

A reluctance to appoint more than one Women's Officer inevitably restricts the work a Women's Committee is able to undertake. However, even where a decision is taken to appoint a number of officers, other

questions arise. In Edinburgh, three Women's Officers were appointed simultaneously. Under pressure from the district women's party, and in contrast to the proposal by the Personnel Department, they were appointed on the same grade and as a collective. Now this raises some very interesting issues. Collectives are a hallmark of feminist ideology. They are adopted as working arrangements deliberately to counterpose traditional hierarchical systems which are perceived as being male and oppressive. Even in autonomously-run organisations, they experience difficulties inherent in the nature of collectivity, and it is not uncommon for members of a collective to feel frustrated, abused or similarly oppressed. The advantages of a collective are usually considered to be that they equalise responsibility for decision-making, and therefore are democratic, and that they share out all the tasks. This process is almost always more time-consuming than conventional forms of decision-making.

But local government is of its very nature a hierarchical institution. Creating collective arrangements for Women's Units may make a decisive political statement about challenging oppressive 'male' structures. They may achieve less decisive political reality in terms of effective functioning and change within the norms of the organisation. The time, necessary to collectives, spent on discussion, sharing information, agreeing on priorities and tasks, and overcoming disagreement, does not sit easily in an institution where management is by results and where the requirements of the committee cycle are pre-eminent. Moreover, any conflict, which as indicated is far from uncommon in collectives generally, within a unit as politically exposed as a Women's Unit, may reinforce a prevailing scepticism within the authority's officer corps towards the whole initiative.⁽⁹⁾

These issues all revolve around the difficulty of reconciling theory with reality. As such, they are not confined to Women's Committees, but have relevance to any situation in which new concepts, especially politically vulnerable ones, are applied to local government traditions. What Women's Committees demonstrate is that feminist ideology cannot revolutionise local government overnight. Indeed, the very act of setting up a Women's Committee suggests a tacit acceptance of the need to conform to some extent in order to work and to change from within. The choice is not between feminising local government and betraying all feminist principles by being coopted wholesale; rather it is about selecting forms of action that will advance women's interests as broadly, and at the same time as specifically, as possible, taking account of the culture, history, organisational systems and political realities of the authority.

In this section, I have discussed some of the political and structural issues affecting Women's Committees as a commentary on their need to look realistically at the strengths and weaknesses of their situation. The clearest message is that limited resources and internal opposition constrain

what can be achieved; therefore time and thought need to be given to the most effective ways of achieving structural change. In the last section, I will consider what future lies in store for Women's Committees and whether there are alternatives for improving women's lot in relation to local government.

THE ONLY WAY?

Women's Committees have now been in existence for rather less than ten years; in Scotland for less than five. Already in parts of England there are signs of a shift away from Women's Committees, even where they have been established. Does this suggest revisionism on the part of radical left politics? Or is it indicative of a legitimate reappraisal of how women's equality may be best achieved?

Women's Committees have undoubtedly made a mark on local government politics and have achieved a great deal, both practically and in raising women's profile and awareness. Yet they are still very much on the margins of local government, still subject to political controversy, and still struggling, in an unfavourable financial climate, for better resources. The question therefore has to be asked: are Women's Committees the only or even the best way of achieving change for women in local government?

I am not going to provide any simple answers to this question. Uncritical defence in a sensitive area is as unhelpful to an initiative's consolidation as unremitting attack. The mistake, in my view, lies in the unhesitating pursuit of one sole goal, regardless of possible alternatives. The key question for any council should not be, "Shall we set up a Women's Committee?", but "How can women's equality best be achieved within this council?", and underlying this, "What priority do we give to tackling gender disadvantage?" The answer to this may well be a Women's Committee; equally it may not, and I say this without in any way wishing to detract from the achievements existing Committees have made.

The advantage to setting up a Women's Committee is that it makes a decisive political statement – at least in the public mind – about a council's commitment to gender equality. It acts as a focus around which women can mobilise, and it should also act as a positive influence on other sections of the council. The disadvantage is that a Women's Committee can be a very empty gesture; it can lack political strength and real political support, can be poorly resourced, can raise unrealistic expectations, and can distract from other arenas of action. Thus in some ways it is a mixed blessing rather than an unequivocal good.

In one sense, it is impractical to take the view that a Women's Committee is the *only* means of achieving change for women. Many councils will never, for political reasons, set up a Women's Committee.

Though often these will be Conservative-controlled councils with little or no interest in women's equality, it would be short-sighted to write off all councils as incapable of positive action. Initiatives of specific benefit to women can and do take place in councils without Women's Committees, or outside a Women's Committee's jurisdiction. East Lothian District Council, for example, which lacks a Women's Committee, has for many years had some housing policies more sensitive to women's needs than some councils with Women's Committees. In Edinburgh, the decision to set up a women's new technology training centre came independently of the Women's Committee, though the decision to appoint specialist staff in the Recreation Department did not. Further, equal opportunities policies and programmes can as – or sometimes even more – effectively be pursued through mainstream Personnel functions. Each local authority's starting point varies, and what works in one cannot automatically be transferred to another.

It is likely, however, that the establishment of a Women's Committee gives greater impetus to such initiatives, since it establishes a body with a specific interest in ensuring that they continue and spread. The benefits of this, however, have to be weighed up: in some authorities, a lower profile may be considered to be a more effective route so as not to raise powerful antagonisms. Underlying tensions within the ruling group can easily be exposed by a confrontational attitude on the part of a Women's Committee, and this may actually harm certain proposals that may otherwise have gone through. Judgements have constantly to be made over the balance to be struck between ends and means.

Women's Committees, are not the only mechanism through which work of benefit to women can develop. In some cases, they may for quite valid reasons be thought to be less appropriate than other methods. The unique value of a Women's Committee is that it provides a focus and a direction for women and for work on women. But – and it is an important but – Women's Committees are not a substitute for action by the council; their role is to draw attention, to pioneer, and to promote change within the council as a whole. If this is not recognised and accepted by the rest of the council, the restrictions on the Women's Committee will be such as to provoke legitimate questioning of the purpose in setting it up.

Since the early days of Women's Committees, things have changed quite markedly. Some councils have consolidated the establishment of a Women's Committee by setting up in addition specialist Women's Units in service departments. Others have abolished their Women's Committee, reduced its powers or have merged it into a broader Equal Opportunities Committee. London boroughs with severe financial crises are particularly evident in the latter course, and this completes a rather depressing circle. If Women's Committees, which proliferated in the south in the heyday of radical town hall politics, are so vulnerable to financial pressures, has their

existence seriously tackled an inherent sexism in local authorities, or done other than to confirm women's marginalised position in an economy and a society dedicated to other priorities? Indeed, what future is there for Women's Committees under the continued onslaught on local authorities by central government?

The prospects for Women's Committees may now be bleak. Yet for all this, Women's Committees have made gains for women. They have increased women's access to resources, and have legitimised their demand that their needs be taken seriously. They are still on the increase in Scotland, and the longer that each Committee is in existence, the more chance it will have to consolidate its work and to influence other sections of the Council. As one Scottish Women's Officer has put it: "The face of local government has been changed beyond recall. Women have been put on the agenda, and that can never go back." Women's Committees may be under-resourced; they may be subject to political whims; and there may be alternative routes towards gender equality. But, for as long as local government continues in its present form, Women's Committees remain a valid and a viable option to begin tackling the disadvantage that women experience in their everyday lives.

Sue Lieberman works part-time for Lothian Regional Social Work Department and part-time as a freelance writer. From 1985-87 she worked as a Women's Officer in Edinburgh District Council.

References

1. This figure excludes lower status structures such as Women's Forum, Officer Women's Unit only, Women's Panel and Women's Working Party. Details obtained from the National Association of Local Government Women's Committees, Pankhurst Centre, Manchester.
2. During the course of writing this chapter, the Women's Committee in Aberdeen was restored, bringing the total number in Scotland to six.
3. John Gyford, "The new urban left: a local road to socialism?", *New Society*, 21 April 1983.
4. Martin Boddy & Colin Fudge (eds), *Local Socialism*, Macmillan.
5. Equal Opportunities Committees usually refer to equal *employment* opportunities within the Council for a range of disadvantaged sections in Society: Women, black people, people with disabilities, and gay people. They do not therefore provide the same political focus on gender disadvantages, though they may be less diffuse in their field of operation.

6. See, for example, Hazel Carby and Pratibha Parmar, separately, in CCCS, *The Empire Strikes Back*, Hutchinson, 1982. Also various other writings by Parmar in, for example, *Feminist Review*, No.17, Autumn 1984.
7. Stirling District Council Women's Committee *Newsletter*, Spring 1986.
8. As evidenced by Isabella Stone in *Equal Opportunities in Local Authorities*, Equal Opportunities Commission, March, 1988.
9. Edinburgh District Council has now abandoned collective arrangements within its Women's Unit.