

# Catching the Wave: the many ways women have influenced change

Keynote presentation by  
Professor Liz Kelly

(Child and Woman Abuse Studies Unit,  
London Metropolitan University)



This document is the fifth public output produced as part of the Learning and Impact Services provided to projects funded through the National Lottery Community Fund's Women and Girls Initiative (WGI). The WGI was created by the Fund in 2016, in order to invest in services for women and girls across England.

'**Catching the Wave**' brings together the words and slides from Professor Liz Kelly's keynote speech during WGI Masterclasses delivered during 2018. It is a resource for those working on WGI projects to share with their colleagues, as a source of inspiration based on some of the history of the 'Women's Movement', the experiences and debates, ending with some strategies for women to think about for influencing those that make decisions and decide policies.



*"When we speak we are afraid our words will not be heard or welcomed. But when we are silent, we are still afraid. So it is better to speak."*

Audre Lorde

## Why a wave?

We've used the analogy of a wave for this *Masterclass* because it denotes a sense of movement, or a process of change. Waves are in constant motion, always renewing, altering the landscape – sometimes in small, sometimes in major ways. If you catch the motion of a wave means you can surf into shore: but only if you get your timing right....

We also talk about women's movements in terms of waves.

But another way of looking at women's movements and the way women create change is in terms of tapestries: lots of layers and interconnected threads from many diverse women over time and across places. And as in needlework, sometimes you need to unpick a section and start again, having learnt what did not work the first time.



## Who is influencing who?

The concept of 'influencing' comes from business, mainly marketing and many of the models seem to assume a default, straight white male approach. They emphasise the need for 'authority' – of voice, of getting the 'right' message.

However, there are many ways women have influenced change which have taken a different approach.



## Have we lost the 'we'?

We began with a 'we' – that all women were part of a movement, that violence affects all women and that women supported by services were invited to join the movement against violence. For example, the current director of the refuge I was part of founding in the 1970s lived there herself in the 1980s. I wonder, would that be possible now?

Do we, as Judith Herman noted 30 years ago, still see activism as part of dealing with the harms of violence?

How do we position ourselves in relation to the category 'survivor'?

How do we build a more inclusive movement? Who is not here?  
Why not?

## The Suffragettes: from writing and speaking to arson

When we think about the Suffragettes now, we tend to forget just how wide ranging their campaigning tactics were.

They had ongoing – and at times bitter and acrimonious debates about strategy and tactics.

The campaign involved meetings, petitions, processions, protests – and political promises which stretched over 2 decades.

Frustration for some translated into a politics of direct action – breaking windows, destroying paintings, setting post boxes alight, and a campaign of arson and bombing of buildings, piers etc.

Emily Wilding Davidson gave her life and many of those who were force fed in prison were never fully well again. As we celebrate their achievement today it is easy to forget how they were seen by contemporaries – and how such tactics would be seen today: as the acts of militants, extremists, terrorists?

Some of their approaches live on and have had a resurgence in the processions and handcrafted banners that took place in February 2018.



## Campaigning with women and their stories

Women's groups such as Justice for Women and Southall Black Sisters have led defence campaigns for individual women who killed their abusers and were convicted of murder.

They highlighted the disparity in the legal treatment of men and women – men who killed women could plead provocation. The campaigns have involved careful and detailed unpicking of legal constructs alongside working with women to tell their stories, building a momentum of support using the media and other means. The campaigns have been successful in finding new legal arguments and changing language, using feminist thinking. There has been much influence in individual cases and legal thinking, but our argument for a new legal defence of self-preservation was not successful.

## Women as Insider outsiders

From the 1990s, women have been increasingly invited to be part of consultations/ policy fora at national and local levels. We have had to learn to have influence – honing arguments, having data and stories, doing the homework. A key lesson has been the importance of being prepared – being two steps ahead. And often, the way we communicate has made a difference: as Patricia Yancey-Martin puts it, often *'Honey works better than vinegar.'*

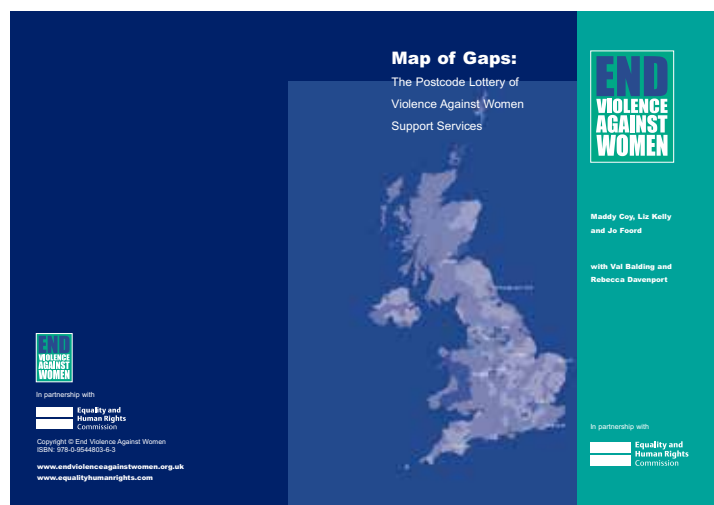
A core strategy has been to build coalitions of interest and perspective. An example of this was the change in the law around sexual offences, which brought together an alliance between women's groups, groups for older people and children's organisations to successfully influence for key provisions in the 2003 Sexual Offences Act.

Several of us were part of an external reference group – and we soon discovered that four of us there as representative of different 'interest groups' were feminists. We found ways of working across our different 'types' of feminism for a bigger gain. We organised before and after meetings – finding a common position, rehearsing arguments, logics, what data we might need, who would take the lead about what. We attended every meeting and cared about the whole agenda – only the disability groups also did this. We were engaged, creative and useful.



## Having a bright idea

Sometimes you can have influence by having a bright idea at the right time. An example of this is CWASU's work in 'Map of gaps.' This came about through a corridor conversation with a feminist geographer who happened to be located on our floor at the university – that so many mapping projects have no maps. We used money from Anita Roddick to map the range of VAWG services and the visual maps demonstrated more powerfully than any text the postcode lottery in provision. This influenced the Equalities and Human Rights Commission to pick up the issue.



## Changing the message: language matters

Women have a long history (herstory) of challenging language and turning traditional assumptions on their head. We need to keep doing this.

## Waving from social media

Recent times have seen women using social media as a way of building, communicating and mobilising movements. Obvious examples are #metoo and Times Up. There have been so many seminars/conferences which argue it has not done enough, yet there is little doubt that many, many women have been engaged. Have we really taken stock of what has been achieved? What and who has been influenced? We may be a bit previous in claiming too much success – but would there be a sexual harassment policy in Westminster without them?



## And finally, as summed up in this Jacky Fleming cartoon:



## Some strategies for influence

- Bring women and children's voices and experiences back into the centre, and also invite them to join movements to challenge and end violence.
- Find the feminists inside agencies/organisations and make strategic alliances.
- Be useful to civil servants/politicians/policy makers: being asked for advice means you can influence quietly but quickly.
- Be strategic: who do you need to influence and about what? How might you get them to listen?
- Small or larger changes: always try for more.
- Using a full range of approaches at your disposal: data, meeting women, media coverage, strategic litigation.
- Seeking alliances: who can you make coalition with?
- Having a campaign plan – and also having plans A, B, C and D.

This document was brought together by Di McNeish, DMSS Research, from the words and slides used by Liz Kelly, Child and Woman Abuse Studies Unit (CWASU), at WGI Msterclasses in July and October 2018. The Msterclasses were titled 'Catching the Wave: Influencing for Change'.

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