"*I could do that!*"– The role of a women's non-governmental organisation in increasing women's psychological empowerment and civic participation in Wales[☆]

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	Empowering women and girls, and increasing their participation in civil society, has become a core focus of international sustainable development policy. However, there is a lacuna regarding research into the role of women's Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) which improve women's psychological, feminist empowerment in the United Kingdom and so findings are presented here from an in-depth qualitative case-study of a Welsh women's NGO which aimed to psychologically empower women and, subsequently, improve their civic participation. The women interviewed experienced increases in their individual psychological empowerment, formed important 'sisterhood' and friendships, and did become more involved in civil society. The paper centralizes the ways in which the NGO played a key role in individually empowering interviewees, further equipping them with skills and resources to enable their future participation in civic life. This paper makes an original empirical and conceptual contribution by adapting Zimmerman's Psychological Empowerment Framework to offer new insights into the processes of engendering civic participation and empowering women in a feminist group context.

Introduction

This paper explores the role of a Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) in Wales working to psychologically empower women with the aim that they would then become more involved in civic society and their community. Drawing on an in-depth qualitative case study, the paper provides rich insight into the successes and challenges of a civil society organisations working to psychologically empower women. Conceptually, this paper draws on Marc Zimmerman's theory and frameworks around psychological empowerment (Zimmerman, 1995), adapting and supplementing his original framework to provide a holistic overview of the role the NGO fulfilled for women's empowerment. As the following analysis and findings illustrate, this NGO succeeded in improving women interviewees' psychological empowerment through providing skills, confidence, and knowledge, as well as social capital through long-lasting relationships and networks. Moreover, the paper explores how this NGO played a pivotal role in women's empowerment outcomes, showing that it improved interviewees civic engagement and participation which itself, in turn, also creates opportunity for future empowering experiences.

Despite the inclusion of women's empowerment in domestic and international sustainable development policy, being a signatory to CEDAW, and the Equality Act 2010, the United Kingdom (UK) still experiences gender inequality.[1] Its efforts have largely been focused on paternalistic encouragement of measures to improve equality and empowerment in formally colonised countries, meaning that inequality within UK borders is given little attention. Consequently, politics and public life in the UK remain male-dominated spheres (Hansard Society, 2019; Hibbs, 2022; Uberoi et al., 2021). The inclusion of women's empowerment in the international sustainable development agenda and literature (see UN Sustainable Development Goal 5) has also meant that much existing empowerment research has concentrated on NGO programmes for economic and educational empowerment of women and girls in countries in Asia, Africa, and South America (see Cheston & Kuhn, 2002; Downs, 2007; Hatlebakk & Gurung, 2014; Klugman et al., 2018; Mahmud, 2003). Whilst both undoubtedly important areas of focus, the literature search conducted for this study found that NGOs specifically centred on improving women's psychological empowerment

in the UK remain under-researched. The British Council (2016) did recently explore gender equality and empowerment in the UK and included some short case studies of UK organisations and initiatives aimed at women like Girlguiding, Inspiring Women, and Chwarae Teg, but in-depth academic studies are not readily available.

NGOs and social movements have always been key drivers for social change (Eschle & Stammers, 2004; Pearce, 1993), achieving crucial socio-political milestones such as women's electoral enfranchisement. State devolution and de-centralization in the UK has meant, however, that improving women's empowerment and achieving equal participation now relies heavily on meso-government and non-state partnerships – the role of NGOs has altered (Bache & Flinders, 2004; Chaney & Fevre, 2001). Equalities NGOs, whilst retaining their role of unifying voices of dissent and lobbying governments on equalities issues (see, for example, the work of Chwarae Teg in Wales or Engender in Scotland), are now also service providers and partners in the delivery and implementation of sustainable development and inclusion, and devolved government's equality policy agendas (Alcock, 2012; Brandsen & Pape, 2015; Powell, 2013).

Consequently, non-state actors are brought into multi-stakeholder partnerships to build equality, and achieve sustainable development goals through engaging otherwise-excluded communities, and because, given their voluntarist foundations and altruistic morals and values, they deliver projects at a lower cost than the state (Nikkah & Redzuan, 2010; Streeten, 1997; Zapata & Townsend, 1999). Assessing the successes of these such organisations is therefore of significant importance to understand whether steps towards women's empowerment and equality are being achieved. In Wales, devolution has enabled the creation of distinctive equalities laws and a commitment to gender mainstreaming, with the former First Minister Carwyn Jones outlining his aims of becoming a 'feminist government' (Welsh Government, 2018). Devolution has carved out a space for equalities organisations in third sector partnerships, and gender equalities organisations are playing a crucial role in lobbying Welsh Government on its equalities agenda (Minto & Parken, 2020; Welsh Government, 2019). The author would signpost, for example, Women's Equality Network Wales' (WEN Wales, 2020) 'Manifesto for Closing the Gap on Gender Inequality in Wales 2020', created and co-signed by seventeen other equalities organisations. Accordingly, this research explored the role of *Grymuso Merched* (an anonymized title; Welsh for 'empowering women'), an NGO in Wales which aimed to psychologically empower a diverse range of women to enable their future involvement in civic life.

The remainder of this paper is divided into four parts. Firstly, the amended conceptual framework for psychological empowerment (Zimmerman, 1995), and the role of NGOs in delivering gender equality outcomes are detailed to frame the findings. The paper then briefly considers literature on gendered civic participation to frame later discussions of the empowerment 'outcomes' of the interviewees. The methodological approach and case study site are subsequently outlined, and key findings then presented through the lens of the amended framework for psychological empowerment. Finally, I offer an overall conclusion exploring how well the NGO was perceived by interviewees to have achieved each element of the Psychological Empowerment Framework operationalized here.

Background and context

Conceptualizing empowerment

This section outlines the conceptual framework for the ensuing analysis. Marc Zimmerman's (1995) Psychological Empowerment Framework was adapted to better suit exploring the processes of women's empowerment through a feminist group setting. A contested term, 'empowerment' is understood here as a 'process by which people […] and communities gain mastery over issues of concern to them' (Zimmerman, 1995, p. 581). 'Empowering women', therefore, is defined

as a process or a 'journey' by which women gain mastery, agency, and control where they previously had little, and can affect change. This suggests an internal component to empowerment which looks at personal gains of self-efficacy, with women discovering the 'power within' (Oxaal & Baden, 1997, pp. 1–2). Thus, psychologically empowering women firstly means ensuring that women realise they have the power, self-confidence, and knowledge to make decisions and collaborate with those who share similar goals to implement change in their community (Townsend, 1999). Zimmerman's (1995) influential nomological Psychological Empowerment Framework is comprised of three inter-related 'components': intrapersonal, interactional, and behavioural, which recognize not only the temporally fluid and socially contextualized nature of individuals' empowerment, but also the 'confluence of macro and micro level forces' at play (Speer, 2000, p. 52).

The 'intrapersonal' component of Zimmerman's framework concerns self-efficacy and individuals' perceived competence for civic activity. Individuals need to believe that they are 'capable, through participation and engagement, of having an impact in decision-making' (Christens et al., 2014, p. 1768). Ergo, empowered women will have the self-confidence, self-efficacy, and the belief that they have the necessary skills to exert control over decision-making processes and systems – all key 'psychological predictors' (Barrett, 2012) and 'essential prerequisites' (Cornwall, 2007) of civic participation. To provide intrapersonal empowerment, an empowering NGO must build women's confidence, transferable skills, and self-belief.

Zimmerman's second, 'interactional' factor addresses individuals' levels of socio-political knowledge, and the extent to which individuals understand change-making opportunities available within contexts (Zimmerman, 1995; Zimmerman & Rappaport, 1988). Political engagement forms a key part of this component, as understanding political systems, institutions, and political and civic affairs governs the belief that one can affect change and participate. Women must understand political and civic systems, know how to acquire, mobilize and manage resources, and be able to make appropriate choices to effectively participate and affect societal change. Improving interactional empowerment therefore means enabling women to 'bridge the gap between perceived control and taking action' (Zimmerman, 1995, p. 589).

Zimmerman's final, 'behavioural' empowerment factor, surmised as 'participation in the life of a community, particularly in democratic decision-making processes' (Zimmerman, 1995, p. 590), is more contested because it is argued to detail empowerment 'outcomes', rather than be part of the empowerment process (Christens, 2012; Christens et al., 2014; Riger, 1993). The behavioural empowerment aims of *Grymuso Merched* were to augment women's participation in their community and "increase the profile of women in the public domain" (Rosa, NGO organizer). Therefore, whilst this component is often replaced by a relational component (discussed below), it is retained but reframed here as 'civic participation'.

The operationalized framework is supplemented here with a relational factor. This fourth factor incorporates more complex relationships that develop through a shared or communal empowerment process or journey (Christens, 2012; Christens et al., 2014). This moves away from previous empowerment theory which 'ascribed primacy to individualism' (Riger, 1993, pp. 279–280), and allows us to assess the impact of the organisational practices of *Grymuso Merched*'s feminist group setting on women's individual psychological empowerment. This allows for exploration of communion and cooperation, examining how women build relationships, coalitions, and solidarity.

Importantly here, empowerment is not a linear process with a defined beginning or ending, nor does psychological development occur in a step-by-step process. It is recognized that any resulting civic participation (behavioural factor) women experienced after the NGO, given that it would improve her connection to the community and civil society, may lead to closer knowledge of socio-political contexts and, thus, resulted in further empowerment. The amended Psychological Empowerment Framework (see Fig. 1) is therefore presented as a four-
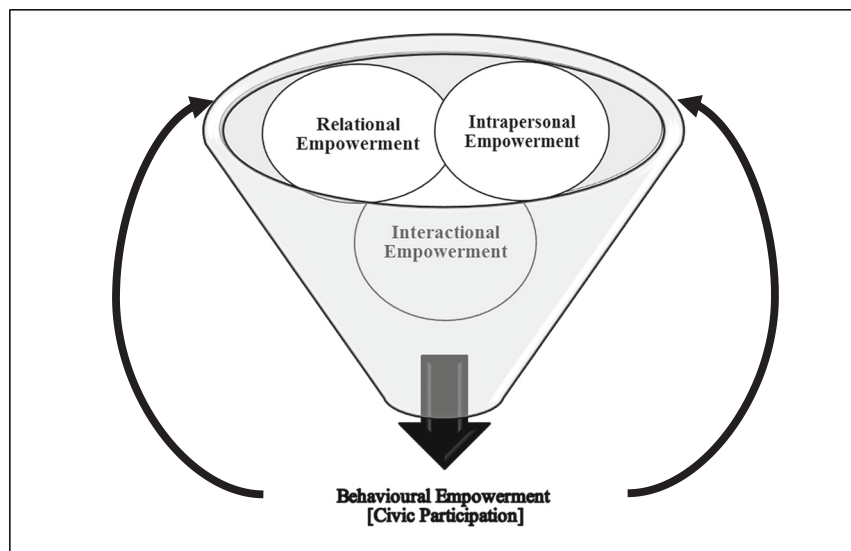
Fig. 1. The adapted Psychological Empowerment Framework operationalized in this research understood as a cyclical process.
Source: (Hibbs, 2018)

part cyclical concept, encompassing the four empowerment factors, allowing for holistic exploration of the impact of group settings, whilst retaining that empowerment through the NGO was only part of women's empowerment stories.

Gender and civic participation

Civic participation can be defined as working in co-operation with other individuals or organisations to achieve a shared goal and have an impact on one's community (Barrett & Brunton-Smith, 2014). It is distinguished from political participation which denotes engagement within more formal political or electoral systems through, for example, voting, standing for elected office, or political party membership and activism. Civic participation is conditioned by numerous factors which can be broadly divided into: a) demographic factors (socioeconomic status, race and ethnicity, gender, for example), b) macro contextual factors (electoral systems and structures or political institutions), and c) social factors (the family, peers, education, media, or workplaces). The intersection of these factors has, historically, meant that civic participation is highly gendered, with studies finding that, because of gender roles and socialization, women often lack the required resources, self-efficacy, and social capital needed for engagement with civic and political life (Galligan, 2012; Keen & Cracknell, 2018; Maguire, 2018; McNeil et al., 2017; Women and Equalities Committee, 2017).

Importantly for this study, gender intersects with other demographic factors, including ethnicity, religion, age, and socioeconomic status, to affect levels of civic participation. *Grymuso Merched*'s (GM) core goal was to individually 'educate and empower' women to improve their participation in civic life. In our interview, Emmeline, the NGO founder, explained how she deliberately approached refugee, asylum seeker, and ethnic minority women from the most deprived areas of south Wales. Other organisers stated the goal was to encourage these women to "come out of the home [as] keeping them chained in the house was not an option" (Rosa, NGO organizer). This echoes Townsend (1999, pp. 68–73), for whom the house is 'restrictive, limiting, [and] disabling', and corresponds with low levels of civic activity. Leaving the house is therefore regarded as the decisive empowering moment, or 'first action of power', whereby on exit women are more likely to take on a role in their community. This goal distinguished GM from other Welsh women's NGOs, which were instead focusing efforts on women being elected to formal political positions, becoming local councillors, standing for local/national/parliamentary elections, or gaining board positions.

Research into women's participation in public life must pay attention to those factors which intersect with gender to have a negative impact on women's participation and empowerment (CARE, 2006; Women and Equalities Committee, 2017). Regarding race and ethnicity, ethnic minority women have been shown to participate more in voluntary civic activities *within* their own (or other) ethnic minority communities (Jensen, 2010; Stepick et al., 2008) through forming bonding social capital (Putnam, 2000), but face barriers to engagement outside of these boundaries (Wadia & Joly, 2011). The nature and extent of a first-generation, migrant Muslim woman's civic participation is therefore likely to be distinct from those of a white, middle-class, university-educated woman born in the UK (Barrett & Brunton-Smith, 2014; Wadia & Joly, 2011). Dealing with intersectionality and disaggregating the monolithic category of 'woman' is necessary to discover whether NGOs are psychologically empowering *all* women, or just the 'usual suspects' (white, middle-class women). Accordingly, this research focused on gaining an understanding of how *Grymuso Merched* empowered a group of women from a diverse range of racial and ethnic, religious, economic, and educational backgrounds who faced multiple barriers to civic participation.

Methodology

The case study

Methodological choices are rooted in epistemological considerations about what constitutes knowledge and reality, and the following analysis takes a feminist interpretivist approach, contending that realities are multiple, relative and that knowledge is socially constructed within gendered contexts (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). Accordingly, analysis prioritised meanings, motivations and experiences, and viewed participants as autonomous and active social agents (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Schwandt, 1998) with their own personal empowerment journeys.

In practice, this epistemological approach entailed retaining the voice of participants as much as possible, moving away from reductionist analyses of women (a long-silenced and marginalised group) and their experiences. An in-depth qualitative, case study approach was adopted, which engendered sensitivity towards participants' perceived previous lack of power and uncovered the subjective meanings that the women had regarding their own empowerment journeys. Though the author had no prior involvement with the NGO studied, there was a

shared commitment to the feminist factors and ethos of the NGO. Feminist interpretivism further allows us to reflect on our positionality as a feminist researcher, and work with data critically to ensure that interpretations are not overshadowed by being a 'fan of feminism (Mahoney, 2018)'. This approach enabled a holistic understanding of the complexities of the organisation, and flexibility and plurality of research methods – semi-structured interviews, documentary analysis, and a visual pre-interview task were used here.

The case study site

Grymuso Merched (GM) was a women's NGO based primarily in the larger cities and towns of south Wales with chapters in two cities.[2] It was funded through Welsh Government small-scale 'project' funding bids[3] and had a small core of tutors, administrators, a steering group,[4] and in its final months, a trustee board. It offered three inter-related courses to "educate and empower women in Wales to […] take a more active role in public life" (wording from *Grymuso Merched*'s Stage One Trainer Handbook). The NGO project was comprised of three courses. Stage One was an introductory course delivered in the community and aimed to empower women through confidence-building, equipping them with transferable skills, and improving their socio-political knowledge and understanding. Stage Two, delivered in partnership with a local university, equipped women with presentation and writing skills necessary to contribute to more formal areas of political and civic life, and gave them an academic qualification. The final Stage Three course, which is not discussed here, focused on women in the workplace and was aimed at encouraging women into management (a different behavioural empowerment goal). Although some interviewees had completed all three courses, the findings presented here relate primarily to participants' experiences on the Stage One course. Every woman involved with *Grymuso Merched* was required to complete Stage One before, if she desired, progressing to Stages Two and Three. Therefore, it can be considered the foundation and core of *Grymuso Merched*'s empowerment delivery and the beginning of the women's journeys.

Grymuso Merched ceased operation in Spring 2017 following difficulties regarding funding, and internal issues with staffing. Whilst full detail cannot be provided here to uphold confidentiality and anonymity, the organisation was well-known, had a track record of demonstrating results, and had always attracted ongoing funding for its work. However, interviewees identified an over-reliance on "particular people", meaning *Grymuso Merched* was "bound up with good friendships and partnerships" (Rosa) which left it vulnerable following changes in personnel. The NGO project founder – Emmeline – had spearheaded and led the project since its inception and the NGO folded shortly after she stepped down due to serious ill-health. Other central contributors to the project left shortly after and the project ended within a year. This is a common phenomenon within the NGO sector and has been characterized as 'trees dying from the top' (Hailey & James, 2004). Other contributing factors included the perceived priorities of political gatekeepers on increasing the number of women in formal public appointments, and the reluctance of other women's NGOs to form partnerships to deliver projects. GM could not, because of its primary focus on individual psychological empowerment, provide quantifiable outcomes of women taking up public appointments and thus could no longer attract

funding.

Data collection

Given the author had no prior involvement with the NGO, there had been some consideration of an ethnographic element involving attending the Stage One course to enable the organic recruitment of interviewees and personal reflections on the course, however, the folding of the organisation weeks before data collection prevented this approach. Seven semi-structured, face-to-face interviews lasting between 1 and 2.5 h each were therefore the main source of data. Five women had participated in and subsequently facilitated the NGO courses from the mid-2000s to its closure in 2017. Two organisers: Emmeline (NGO founder), and Rosa (Stage Two co-ordinator, head of the partnership with local university, and steering group member) were also interviewed. Semi-structured interviews were chosen as they produce 'more fruitful and significant data' (Westmarland, 2001) by enabling 'emotional closeness to the persons studied' (Jayaratne, 1983, p. 145) through the breaking-down of barriers between researcher and participant. Moreover, because *Grymuso Merched* had lost its funding prior to data collection taking place, uncovering the subjective and qualitative processes of women empowerment journeys could not be undertaken through any method other than thoughtful reflective discussion between researcher and interviewee.

Participants were recruited via a gatekeeper who initiated contact with six of the seven participants. The gatekeeper had been a course participant and, later, a tutor on the Stage One course, and thus her longitudinal engagement with the NGO meant interviewees came from different cohorts of *Grymuso Merched* course attendees. The seventh participant was recruited independently at an event about women in public life at which the author was present. Clearly attention must be paid here to recruitment of participants through a gatekeeper – by remaining in communication with the gatekeeper, it was likely that the sampled women had positive, empowering experiences with the NGO and were beneficiaries of the programme. Those with more negative experiences or for whom GM was not an empowering experience may be excluded here and so this limits the representativeness of the sample and, subsequently, means that generalisation of the paper beyond the research participants and documentary analysis is also restricted. However, more positively, the circumstances enabled interviewees to provide frank reflections on the NGO's successes and failures without fear of repercussions for the organisation.

The interviews were audio-recorded with participant permission, and transcribed verbatim by the researcher, creating circa 60,000 words of transcribed material – data saturation was felt to be reached given the length of the interviews and repeating patterns across the data. A pre-interview visual 'timeline' task was also completed by three participants to enable them to reflect on their experiences and to illustrate their empowerment journey (Mannay et al., 2017). Interview data was further supplemented with documentary analysis of the NGO's training handbooks and other documents, access to which was provided by the gatekeeper, and Emmeline and Rosa. The data then underwent thematic analysis or 'searching across the data set' (Braun & Clarke, 2008, p. 86) to find patterns, using the altered theoretical Psychological Empowerment Framework. Ethical approval for the study was provided by the Cardiff University ethics committee.

Findings

Turning attention now to the findings, the Stage One course aims can be easily mapped onto the empowerment cycle framework outlined in Fig. 1. Documentary analysis of *Grymuso Merched*'s *Stage One Trainer Handbook* found that the NGO expected that women should gain: (1) an understanding of decision-making processes – **interactional empowerment**; (2) the skills to put together and believe one can make a case or campaign effectively – **interactional and intrapersonal**

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[2] The NGO had, at one point, established a chapter in north Wales but this only ran for a year due to staffing issues and is not discussed here.

[3] Emmeline (NGO founder) explained that this was "something like £30,000 a year" with which she "employed [herself], employed an administrator" and ran the three 'stages' – she and other interviewees characterized this as "an impossible task" and a "shoestring budget".

[4] This consisted of Emmeline (founder), Rosa (partner with local University/ Stage Two course organizer), and the tutors on the Stage One course, as well as GM participants (this was explained by Rosa in our interview).

empowerment; (3) the confidence to take their case/campaign forward – **intrapersonal empowerment**; and (4) the skills and ability to build alliances – **relational component**. By empowering in these areas, the NGO wanted women to be able to undertake increased civic activity (**behavioural** empowerment). Drawing on the rich accounts of the seven women NGO organisers and course participants, the following discusses whether the NGO delivered the four factors of the empowerment cycle framework.

(i) Intrapersonal Empowerment

Looking first at intrapersonal empowerment, documentary analysis of *Grymuso Merched*'s *Stage One Course Handbook* showed improving women's confidence and self-efficacy, key aspects of intrapersonal empowerment, was addressed through a day-long session on 'Confidence Building' during the six-day Stage One course. This, Rosa argued, was to equip women with "the skills to articulate their feelings much more positively and clearly, succinctly, and to use all of the tools available [to them]". Bandura (1994, pp. 71–81) defines self-efficacy as 'people's beliefs about their capabilities to produce designated levels of performance that exercise influence over events that affect their lives'. High self-efficacy increases positive success visualizations, encourages ambitious goal setting, and solidifies commitment to activity and re-engagement in civic participation in the face of failure.

Exploring whether interviewees perceived themselves as more confident and better equipped for civic participation after their involvement with GM, interview data showed that the women interviewed felt their intrapersonal empowerment had improved. For example, whilst Mary had not perceived herself as lacking in confidence prior to her attendance on GM's course, she was clear in her interview that GM helped her to realise the relevance of her skills and how to harness her confidence. Jane (NGO participant and, later, tutor and Board member) also discussed that the course gave her, and those she later taught on the course, a 'voice':

> For me personally, it gave me a different perspective on life, on how you can have a voice and not be afraid. If there's something I really don't like, I can say. […] And even for a lot of women who came on the [Stage One] course programme […] they didn't have a voice at all and, by the end of it, you couldn't shut them up!

Harnessing one's confidence and discovering their voice was mentioned by all participants, as well as the ability to use one's experience and mobilize resources to effect change even in the face of confrontation or set-backs. The NGO Handbook explains that participants should have an "understanding of blocking tactics and how these can be overcome" and Sylvia (GM participant and, later, tutor) spoke of how she was educated about "the kind of back-offs that you can be told" when debating. These were skills she had since used in her role as a local councillor:

> **Sylvia**: You know the kind of lines they use […] you think, okay this is it, they're trying to just evade the issue and not look into it. So, going back and […] holding them to account […] it was something I picked up on the course and I still use it even now.

Other examples were given by almost all interviewees of how debate and practical skills learnt on the programme have empowered them to overcome challenges in subsequent civic participation. For example, Charlotte spoke about how *Grymuso Merched* taught her information gathering skills and encouraged her to approach organisations such as the Office for National Statistics which had since helped her run a successful hairdressing business.

Considering the tactics and tools that GM used to improve interviewees' intrapersonal empowerment, one of the key approaches GM employed in this area was 'guided mastery treatment' (Donohue, 2005). This is an approach commonly used in therapy where feared activities –

such as public speaking or overcoming setbacks – are identified as issues, modelled, and then broken into easily mastered subtasks first carried out within a 'safe-space'. Documentary analysis showed that on Day 2 of Stage One course, for example, women were asked to identify their personal issues and barriers to civic participation before carrying out activities to address this. As Emmeline (organizer and founder) described, women would take guided, small steps to build a hypothetical campaign around a community issue of their choosing:

> Let's get a park bench. So how do we go about getting a park bench? So, we campaign. Shall we have a sit-in, shall we write letters, should we invite a councillor here to talk to us? […] We'd have a room, and they would discuss it and they would trial their ideas.

Giving women a 'voice' was a core aspect of raising self-efficacy here –women needed to be empowered to employ the appropriate language and debating skills to affect their chosen sphere of civic participation. As Zukin et al. (2006) contend, education has significant influence over one's levels of civic and political engagement and participation, and providing training and skills, such as the ability to debate or write campaigns or letters and participate in open hypothetical debate and discussion in the 'classroom', is a precursor to participation outside.

This approach empowered women to 'make their own revolution' and steered away from 'teaching' towards facilitating. Women were encouraged to share past experiences and setbacks as key learning tools, with empowerment being crucially enabled by the group dynamic of the NGO courses. It was clear for interviewees that the 'women-only' (term used by interviewees) space was vital for ensuring 'a safe, supportive and empowering environment' (Finlay, 2016, pp. 9–10), and delivering intrapersonal empowerment:

> **Sylvia**: I don't think it being a mixed gender, they would be able to share as much as they did when we were just women.

> **Emmeline**: Those women were in the room with other groups of women, and they didn't feel silly saying things. […] so, it was always based on your own, everybody in the room, bringing their experiences.

This tells us that women interviewed, and the NGO organisers, felt the 'women-only' group setting of *Grymuso Merched* enabled the sharing of gendered situated and lived struggles and experiences. It must be noted here that both cisgender and transwomen took part in the courses[5]:

> Yes, we did have several transwomen on the [*Grymuso Merched*] courses. We did think long and hard about it - it was 'back in the day', remember, but - as with all the other groups of 'underrepresented women' who attended the courses - we all learnt a lot from each other…There were two particularly active groups of transwomen I recall - one on [the] course in North Wales and another on [the] course in West Wales.

> (*Response obtained from Emmeline through follow-up email*)

Grymuso Merched's advertisement materials also outlined how the courses were 'self-selecting' for any woman who identified herself as benefiting from attending such a course. Temporal and geographical constraints and the limited capacity of a small dissertation study meant that interviews with transwomen for this research were not possible, but evidence suggests that *Grymuso Merched* was trans-inclusive. The NGO was a diverse group space with 'underrepresented' (Emmeline's term) women of different ages, cultures, religions, with disabilities, and backgrounds which interviewees argued allowed for the sharing of lived

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[5] The author extends her thanks to the anonymous reviewer of this article for bringing attention to this important and salient issue.

experience and situated knowledge.

Achieving intrapersonal empowerment further entails a normalization process whereby women realise they can 'venture into previously restricted areas' (Owen, 2017, p. 21). Rowlands (1997, p. 23) contends that an individuals' empowerment journey must lead them to 'perceive themselves as able to occupy decision-making space'. To achieve this aspect of empowerment and to normalize women's involvement in civic life, *Grymuso Merched* employed role models and mentors. The first of these was a "community guest […] who has made a difference in their community […] someone who has identified a need and done something about it" (*Grymuso Merched* Stage One Trainer's Handbook) – for example, women who had started protests, those involved in charities or pressure groups, and other campaigners. The second role model was a "political guest" such as a Councillor, Assembly Member,[6] or Member of Parliament.

As Bandura (1994, p. 3) contends, 'vicarious mastery' and being exposed to the successes of comparable peers strengthens one's self-efficacy, encouraging women to believe they possess the 'capabilities to master comparable activities to succeed'. Previous research by High-Pippert and Comer (1998) has demonstrated the empowering benefits of women seeing other women as legitimate political representatives. Interviewees praised this approach and Mary (NGO participant and tutor) recalled how meeting Bethan Jenkins (former Assembly/Senedd Member) made her realise that "they're just ordinary people" and resulted in this belief that: "I could do that, I could do something […] anyone can do this if they just want to!".

Stage Two of GM's programme continued this vicarious mastery approach and use of mentors. Whilst interviewees were mostly positive, Emmeline admitted that there had been challenges and setbacks with the NGO's use of mentors:

Was that successful? I would probably say only 50% and […] I'm going to put about 70% of the blame on the mentors who […] gave up more than the women gave up. [For example] one Assembly Member [said to a woman] "Oh I'm off to a busy meeting, you sit here with my secretary, and she'll tell you what I do".

Evidently, some mentors may have had a disempowering effect on women outside of this study, though Emmeline suggested that they always tried to rectify any issues. The woman in question above, for example, was subsequently mentored by a local councillor who was extremely encouraging and was the key driver in the woman subsequently joining the same political party and running for office. This suggests that involving role models and mentors, when the mentors were appropriately engaged, can be a successful method for achieving intrapersonal empowerment (Laukhuf & Malone, 2015; Liang et al., 2002). The women interviewed, therefore, did feel more confident and self-efficacious, suggesting their intrapersonal empowerment was improved.

(ii) Interactional Empowerment

Self-efficacy, confidence, and self-belief are insufficiently empowering without knowledge of how to navigate and influence one's specific socio-political context. Consequently, GM needed to address the interactional factor and improve women's socio-political knowledge of Wales. This was recognized as crucial by Emmeline and Rosa who spoke about how they were determined to empower women to "become part of the system by understanding the system" (Emmeline), but also to challenge it and not be "passive" (Rosa). As such, GM dedicated an entire day

of the Stage One course to explaining the political structures in Wales and the UK.

Many of the women who attended GM's courses were not educated or born in the UK and had moved to Wales as adults. Some extant studies claim that ethnic minorities and, particularly, first-generation migrants are less likely than white, British-born citizens to report knowing a 'fair amount' about politics, are less likely to be included on the electoral register, and will vote less (Uberoi & Johnston, 2019). As Larsen et al. (2004) contend, the commitment 'to understand the political workings of a different culture' can be daunting for migrant communities, especially if they consider their 'true home' to be elsewhere, and also requires the sacrifice of time to learn how systems work. The present study reveals how NGOs can interactionally empower through ensuring that this information is disseminated among these groups. Charlotte, originally from Nigeria, told me:

I knew there was the Parliament, but I didn't know the workings of it […] it was from [*Grymuso Merched*] that I learnt the stages of the government from the local government going up […] I now have a good grasp of it because of [*Grymuso Merched*].

This interactional form of empowerment is crucial as it governs women's involvement through their (un)awareness of opportunities available to them within the systems of political and civic life (Zimmerman, 1995). Mary stated:

It is useful to know how things work […] even things like getting involved in, you know, Neighbourhood Watch.[7] […] it's quite useful to understand how things work, cause you need to, if you need, if you want to put things right.

In addition to teaching about governmental systems, it was through inviting members of the political 'elite' to be role models and mentors and organizing trips to visit the Senedd, that GM ensured that politics and the 'system' became less of an abstract concept. Such trips were remembered fondly by interviewees.

Emmeline was clear that it was not the organisation's intention to create passive and compliant women and she wanted women to feel able to tackle traditional organisational structures. Accordingly, it was important for *Grymuso Merched* to change the women's preconceived ideas and knowledge about society and aspects of their lives. *Grymuso Merched* employed an 'open classroom climate' where women could share views, regardless of controversy or the likelihood to offend, and it would be explored and discussed.

Emmeline: We used to have a rule that you could be un-PC. So, it was okay to say something or ask a question about somebody's disability or about their race or background or home country. […] because we wanted to be as open and un-PC as we could be. […] But it was better that they said it and then we could move them into not feeling like that.

Whilst it was disconcerting to hear that the leader of an equalities NGO encouraged women to share politically 'incorrect' views, it is worth considering here that interactional empowerment involves learning about socio-political contexts and that, through directly addressing and openly discussing views of a problematic nature and "mov[ing] them into not feeling like that", GM could be considered to be educating women in a 'safe' environment where they may receive a less vociferous response than in wider society. 'Political correctness' was viewed as restrictive by Emmeline, who did not want women to feel as if some topics of discussion were off-limits – this was perceived as particularly important for women who may have felt unable to discuss such matters in other settings. As such, the present findings align with earlier work

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[6] 'Assembly Member' was the term used for elected politicians in the previously-named National Assembly for Wales, Wales' devolved political legislature following the 1997 devolution referendum. The name has since been changed to Senedd Cymru (Welsh Parliament) to reflect the heightened powers of the devolved legislature, and elected politicians are now known as 'Senedd Members'.

[7] A grassroots charitable movement comprised of volunteer-led schemes to prevent crime in England and Wales (Neighbourhood Watch, 2020).

which state that an 'open classroom climate' is an important tool for political education and enhances civil society engagement, political knowledge, levels of trust, and integration (Hahn, 1998; Torney-Purta, 2002; Torney-Purta et al., 2003).

There are important questions here whether the NGO was a 'safe' space for all participants, as it may have been that some attendees felt uncomfortable with the questions or 'un-PC' environment that Emmeline encouraged. Though this was not mentioned by interviewees here who valued such discussions and opportunities, this may again be an impact of the sampling technique. Interviewees were positive about the NGO's ability to empower within the interactional factor, particularly in building political knowledge. The importance of an open and 'safe' group setting was once more highlighted as enabling the second, interactional factor of the psychological empowerment cycle, as well as the continued importance of vicarious and guided mastery approaches to skill, knowledge, and confidence building to improve women's ability to understand how best to enact change in their community.

(iii) Relational Empowerment

The original PEF as conceptualized by Zimmerman allows for an exploration of how empowerment may take place at the individual level, but the nature of GM as an organisation psychologically empowering through group settings[8] means the supplementary relational component is of significance here. Interviewees perceived *Grymuso Merched* as providing a welcoming atmosphere and inclusive safe-space environment, and data suggests that they left with an important resource for relational empowerment: social capital. Defined as 'the connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness' (Putnam, 2000, p. 19), social capital is crucial to women's psychological empowerment as it leads to a sense of shared identity, trust, and a strong sense of community that is strengthened upon re-activation. Social capital can further lessen and, in some cases, eliminate the negative impact of other disadvantages or barriers to empowerment, including deprivation.

If we consider Larsen et al.'s (2004) findings on neighbourhood social capital, women's social capital originates from the formation of bonds among women which, in turn, will create relational empowerment and enable them to protect and pursue their collective, often gendered, interests through social actions that enhance and protect their well-being. However, whilst GM undoubtedly offered this 'bonding' social capital among women as a homogenous group, it also offered more vital 'bridging social capital' between different groups of women. Varshney (2001) makes a distinction between 'bonding' and 'bridging' social capital, arguing that bonding social capital is defined by its intraethnic characteristics which lead to small, ethnic enclaves and insular communities, increasing the likelihood of conflict. To achieve engaged, empowered communities and societies of peace, however, bridging social capital is necessary. Bridging social capital is interethnic and, by its very definition, builds bridges between heterogenous groups of people, improving communication, trust, and collective action – all necessary skills and resources for community empowerment.

Christens (2012, p. 122) sees 'bridging social divisions' as a core aspect of the relational empowerment factor as it gives people an understanding of 'the role that isolation and group divisions play in maintaining power asymmetries'. This then encourages women to be part of networks that contain individuals different from themselves and to harness their individual psychological empowerment and apply it to group contexts. Thus, the present data make a key contribution to the field and highlight the role played by feminist group work in harnessing social capital and empowering with others across divides.

Individuals in insular communities may not have the opportunity or time to spend in places where they were relationally empowered or could build bridging social capital themselves. It was important to *Grymuso Merched*'s organisers to empower such communities. Emmeline said she targeted:

> migrant women [who had] their own little support network. They were doing fine but were not settling into the wider community.

For Orton (2012, p. 5), developing relationships and networks must include the 'enabling of migrants to engage with people in the receiving society', as well as other migrant populations.

This study provides new insights in this regard. All the women interviewed talked about the lasting friendships and networks cultivated by their involvement with GM. The friendships were particularly valued because they spanned racial boundaries and broke down cultural and religious barriers. It became clear through all seven interviews, that the diversity of the women involved with GM was particularly cherished:

> **Emmeline**: We had a mix of women, some still seeking asylum, women engineers […] an ex-bank manager […] we had also the women who lived in [DEPRIVED AREA], had six kids, never worked, left school at 15. But the friendships that evolved were amazing.

> **Rosa**: They immediately bond, they gained those feelings of caring for each other and looking out for each other. Not in a sort of emotionally, soppy sort of way – none of that – but, like, solidarity.

Other interviewees enthused about engaging with women from other cultures and learning about their traditions. Angela spoke about how she set up a recipe and food exchange through GM where she shared traditional Welsh dishes and other women cooked dishes from their own cultures in return. For Mary, the diversity enabled her to confront her personal preconceived judgements, something echoed by Jane:

> **Mary**: [through *Grymuso Merched*] I've got to understand Muslim women […] that's been the medium through which I've met Muslim women. And think that that's been good because it's broke down a barrier for me. I just feel that the divisions that we have in society are because we don't understand one another and when you have the opportunity to come close to them, it takes the fear away.

> **Jane**: Breaking down those barriers, it does. I think that's one of the main things for me that it was, breaking down those barriers and seeing the friendships that grew out of it.

The foregoing is significant as, as Houston and Wood (1996, p. 54) contend, it is this lack of understanding about those who racially differ from us which prevents bridging social capital and intersectional feminist empowerment from occurring, as we often prejudge others by our own cultural standards. Mary's quote illustrates how it provided opportunities to understand other cultures and traditions (like Eid or St. David's Day[9]) – a key aspect of the interactional and relational factors of the PEF.

As previously discussed, as with NGOs which are characterized by their founder, Emmeline's personal morals significantly underpinned GM's approach – she believed in equality and inclusion, and valued spaces where women with vastly different political, cultural, and religious backgrounds could meet, arguing that "integration is all of our problems […] it belongs to all of us, we all need to integrate". Integration, as a term, has been widely critiqued (see, for example, Wieviorka, 2014) and is a term which does not sit particularly comfortably with this author. When embedded in the full context of Emmeline's account, however, the seemingly untenable use of outdated modes of definition did not preclude the wider commitment of the NGO to work with women as equal partners whom they could learn with and learn from.

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[8] Stage One courses were attended by approximately twenty women in each iteration.

[9] National Patron Saint Day of Wales.

Integration, for Emmeline, meant appreciation of difference and building bridges between communities to share issues and develop understanding:

> I used to get organisations saying: "Will you run an ethnic women only group?" No. There's absolutely no point in doing that. "Will you run a visually-impaired women's group?" No. Cause they all know what their [own] issues are […] And the point is to get people to come together […] to share the issues.

As previously mentioned, the NGO's comfortable and open environment was appreciated by all the interviewees:

> **Charlotte**: I felt /so much/ a part of a family that I forgot that I looked different.
> _____
> **Sylvia**: Women were friends despite having those different views […] it's a legacy that the NGO has left among us: these relationships.

Kilby (2011, p. 128) argues NGOs can be forced to 'limit engagement with groups to a specific time-period' due to funding pressures, yet the organisation of GM's course delivery addressed this well as Emmeline consciously organised the course over a six-week period. This meant that, as Sylvia stated, "it was almost like being together for six weeks rather than just six days [which] enabled those relationships to develop".

Furthermore, women were encouraged to complete at least Stages One and Two and had opportunities to progress within the NGO itself, being invited back to act as tutors or mentors. This enabled chosen women to take on a facilitator role in a familiar and supported environment – extending the guided mastery treatment approach, and meant future cohorts were taught by those who "understood […] because they'd all been in that place themselves" (Emmeline). This extension of the guided mastery and normalization approaches was identified as valuable by interviewees. The women leading the sessions had overcome their own barriers and felt empowered – it proved to the new cohort that *Grymuso Merched* did, indeed, individually empower.

All interviewees mentioned that the friendships they formed through *Grymuso Merched*'s courses continued long after their involvement was over. Moreover, these relationships were characterized by shared solidarity and were embedded in collective activism meaning that, often, the women still relied on each other for advice or help years later:

> **Jane**: Even the group that I studied and trained with back 8 or 9 years ago […] even now you could pick up [the phone] and say, 'I'm planning on doing this could you come and talk?' and they would.

Whilst it is pertinent again here to consider that the sampling technique may limit findings, as six participants had remained in close contact with the gatekeeper since their involvement with GM, interviewees were speaking of continued friendships with women not interviewed because they had been part of different cohorts to each other. The unique nature of the friendships as embedded in activism meant that the women interviewed had an established sisterhood to call upon in the years that followed. There was an agreement across the interviewees that the legacy of GM was these friendships. The accounts of the facilitators and participants in this study suggest that the NGO as a feminist group setting was effective in providing a space which can develop bridging social capital, and led women to evaluate previously-held racial, religious, and cultural prejudices.

(iv) Behavioural Empowerment

A key element to evaluating *Grymuso Merched*'s success relies on evaluating the interviewees' behavioural empowerment: did they feel sufficiently empowered to civically engage after the NGO? Retaining behavioural empowerment in the framework enabled a fully holistic view of whether *Grymuso Merched* empowered women to engage with civic society. As explained, empowering women to 'get out of the house' through any small-scale civic participation and activism was a clear goal (Townsend, 1999). Data presented here show that all the women interviewed experienced increased civic participation since their time with GM, suggesting the NGO had an impact on the behavioural empowerment of the interviewees.

As Table 1 below shows, participants' successes were diverse and included: academic degrees, business entrepreneurship, community action, and further involvement with the NGO itself. Sylvia's achievements can also be categorized as 'formal political participation' as she was elected as a local councillor shortly before data collection, something she identified as a direct result of *Grymuso Merched*'s success in empowering her.

Despite significant evidence that they had achieved behavioural empowerment outcomes, Mary and Charlotte both expressed regret that they had not done *more* following their experience with GM. Charlotte spoke about how a negative experience in her local community centre had discouraged her, supporting the conclusion that, whilst she believed that the NGO had a positive impact on her, empowerment remains a cyclical, not linear process and that behavioural empowerment 'outcomes' can instead lead to erosions of empowerment. More positively, Charlotte described her hair salon as 'an extension of *Grymuso Merched*' and explained that she modelled it on the open and welcoming

Table 1

Comparison of participants' Behavioural Empowerment outcomes before and after *Grymuso Merched*.

Participant	Activity before *Grymuso Merched*	Activity after *Grymuso Merched*
Mary	• Some involvement with her local church	• Bachelor's degree • Currently studying a funded Master's and PhD • Active citizens participant • Local foodbank volunteer • International exchange programme • Toddler group run and kids' club by Church • Charity fundraising • ESOL course-teaching English as a second language • Neighbourhood watch
Sylvia	• Completed PhD • Involvement/work with other women's NGOs in area	• Elected local councillor • School governor • Contested Senedd and Westminster elections • Continued work with women's organisations
Angela	• Volunteered for multiple organisations	• Master's degree • Homicide Officer and Victim support volunteer • Director of community project • Volunteer with prisoner rehabilitation project • Visiting hospital patients • Working as school Restorative Officer
Jane	• Involvement with a small group campaigning for/looking at women's sessions at a local leisure centre • Volunteering in her child's school	• Tutor/Board trustee for *Grymuso Merched* until closure • Working for education provider • Teaching English as a second language • Community learning representative
Charlotte	• Some involvement with local church activities within her community	• College training in hairdressing • Winner of entrepreneur awards for a successful salon business • Involvement with political party • Involvement with other NGOs including Active Citizens and Step Up Cymru

environment she'd experienced at *Grymuso Merched*.

Indeed, behavioural empowerment and civic participation will often involve moving from smaller, community-based activities to other, perhaps larger activities later. As Emmeline states and as explained through the diagram earlier, the empowerment journey is not always a simple, linear process, and external factors can limit empowerment outcomes:

A lot of women have gone on and a lot of women will go on […] So that's empowerment - they've gone back to their communities, and they may not have been active straight away. We all have different circumstances, you know – shit happens.

Therefore, whilst some interviewees may not have achieved their own desired standards of civic participation when interviewed, as Table 1 shows, all had carried out more civic activities after involvement with *Grymuso Merched*.

Conclusion

This research makes an original empirical and conceptual contribution by adapting Zimmerman's Psychological Empowerment Framework to offer new insights into the impact that an NGO feminist group setting had on five women's individual psychological empowerment. Supplementing Zimmerman's (1995) PEF with a relational component and retaining the behavioural component, meant that the study produced a holistic assessment of *Grymuso Merched*'s role in these women's empowerment journeys. Conceptually, therefore, this research highlights the potential of employing an altered and bolstered Psychological Empowerment Framework to analyse the successes and failings of non-state actors, particularly those which offer their empowerment programs in group settings.

At the core of the study, data showed that women interviewed experienced improvements in all the framework's factors or empowerment 'components' with varying levels of success. The interviewees experienced improved self-efficacy, confidence, and socio-political knowledge, for example – key aspects of interactional and intrapersonal empowerment. The NGO organisers experienced difficulties and setbacks with some of the tactics used – for example, some role models were disinterested which, it was suggested, fettered the empowerment of some course attendees and disrupted empowerment journeys. Conversely, the organisational structures engendered relational empowerment which was found to be significant, providing interviewees with long-lasting, division-spanning friendships, and the transferable resource of bridging social capital, allowing for opportunities for the empowerment cycle to continue in civic society. The success in this area meant the women interviewed were often including each other in activity after their time on the NGO – as tutors on the courses themselves, or from being called upon to help a fellow NGO woman, thus resulting in the continuing of the psychological empowerment cycle. Importantly, by retaining the behavioural component of the PEF, this research draws the conclusion that the interviewees did civically engage more after their time with *Grymuso Merched*.

In conclusion, *Grymuso Merched* was perceived as offering empowerment to the women interviewed here who had not already been targeted by larger-scale, less diverse women's NGOs with more quantifiable 'formal' goals, and who felt they were often side-lined in mainstream civic and political discussion. This research has evidenced the ways in which this NGO marked a pivotal moment in these women's lives and had long-lasting effects on their confidence, self-efficacy, and civic participation. The demise of *Grymuso Merched*, following a combination of factors including the serious illness of Emmeline, other core organisers leaving with her, and difficulties in attracting funding, was perceived by interviewees as leaving a significant gap in the provision of collective feminist empowerment for a diverse range of women in Wales. Interviewees expressed that they were still many women in Wales they

knew who would benefit significantly from being empowered through an NGO like this, which, as Angela eloquently described:

"Was absolutely emotionally overwhelming: you saw broken people repaired, fitted together and standing up for themselves, taking a role that they maybe never thought they could do."

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