

# How to start a consciousness raising group



A FiLiA legacy project

# Starting a women's group is a revolutionary act!



The women's group is  
the essential organising  
unit of women's  
liberation and  
resistance.

Consciousness raising groups were developed by Second Wave feminists as a way of working together, learning from our experience as women in developing our political analysis and, importantly, to take action together.



Writing by **Lynn Alderson**, second-wave radical feminist and lifelong activist.

Design by [radicaldesigns.co.uk](http://radicaldesigns.co.uk)



# What is consciousness raising?

Consciousness raising (CR) is a way for women to talk to one another, sharing our own experiences of being raised as girls and women in our society where women are undervalued and under great pressures.

It isn't therapy, although it can be very helpful to talk about some of the things we find difficult in life with others who share those experiences, different because we look at the ways in which our experiences are not just individual ones, unique to ourselves, but common and part of what makes us women. Women's groups are also the basic organising tool of feminist action, or women's liberation movements. The act of bringing women together to understand our oppression more deeply and to resist it leads to action and fighting for justice for all women. Many women may share feminist ideas but it is only by action that we build a movement and CR is first and foremost about sharing our understanding of oppression and working together to end it.

Evolved during the Second Wave of feminism in the 1970s it continues to be a simple way of structuring group discussion, to use our experience as the basis for building the political theory of feminism, solidarity and the strength which enables us to act together.

Doing CR means exploring what is the truth of our lives and our experiences rather than what we are supposed to think and feel about our lives. It's a way of exposing the myths and lies and bringing out what is the reality. For example, during the 70s women explored their experiences of male violence.

Previously it had been widely socially accepted that male violence was about individual bad men or a few men behaving badly and even that it was caused by women who provoked them or 'asked for it' — somehow, our fault. But when women shared experiences, it became obvious that it wasn't an exceptional thing but worked as a way of men imposing control — all women were aware of the risk and often intimidated or frightened from doing things. We began to see how it worked in all our lives, whether we had been victims or not.

And that changed everything from the way we understood what was happening to us, to what we did about it. That insight, that it was about power, not abnormal psychology or the odd 'bad' man, is now widely accepted, feminists having fought for recognition of the truth for women. This truth (along with others) keeps on being rediscovered by women. The most recent demonstrations and outpourings of anger around male violence against women show that it is far from being ended, in spite of the many years feminists have been working on this issue.

The feminist actions that did arise during the Second Wave of feminism, Reclaim the Night demonstrations and training government agencies, however, led to the setting up of refuges and services for (and often by) women who had been abused, much wider recognition of the issues from government and institutions, and many changes of political policy and legislative change.

CR is also a way of building friendship networks and mutual support between women that might want to work together, to get involved in political protest, or form a project that they think needs doing and to work out how best to address the issues collectively. And that is very important, and never more so than now, when women are under such attack on social media and feel under great pressure to be everything from a glamorous sex-object to a good mother, and to work both outside and inside the home, but who often are very isolated. Coming together builds both individual and collective strength.

It can also be great fun — sometimes you have to laugh even when addressing serious and difficult things. We learn together by listening to each other and thinking it through, because only women can understand and speak for women, and feminist organising is about making our voices heard. We are so much stronger together, both in standing up for ourselves and for other women.

## Ground Rules

A group meeting could begin with a quick round of the circle of women to say a little about how they are, or to briefly introduce themselves if not everyone has met before. Meeting in informal, private spaces such as each other's flats, houses, whatever, is best if it is possible.

You don't have to sit in a circle, but try to make sure you have a way of going round the whole group and that no one is sitting, for example, at the head of a table, as this is a process in which every woman is an equal participant,

even if one or two have taken on the tasks of organising.

You then go on to the main topic. Generally, this would have been chosen in advance, to give everyone a chance to think about it, and maybe to read something on the subject.

Each woman tries to talk from her own experience and about her own feelings on the subject. Go around the group, offering everyone roughly the same amount of time in which to speak — timing each, if necessary, as some women find it much easier to talk about themselves than others do.

But the principle is that every woman has a valid contribution to make, leave the space for each even if she doesn't begin immediately, don't jump in. If a woman wants to pass, give her the opportunity to speak again later.



## Confidentiality

This is very important as for the whole process to work, you need to build trust in each other. So, make it explicit that no one is free to repeat what any woman has said outside the group.



## Honesty

Be as honest as you can with each other. This should get easier as the group gets to know one another better. It doesn't mean you have to talk about the worst thing that ever happened to you at the first meeting. You decide what is appropriate for you. But you give the best, most thoughtful contribution you can.



## Listening

This is active listening, not sitting there and thinking about what you are going to say when your turn comes, but really listening to what another woman is saying. Sometimes women are not used to talking about themselves or being heard, just truly listening, paying attention with respect can be important. You are listening for similarities and differences and not making assumptions that we are all the same or have had the same experiences or think of them in the same way. We can learn as much from our differences as what we have in common.



## No interruptions or questions

Let each woman speak. Go on to the next. Part of this collective process is that whatever response you have to each speaker, when you have heard everyone, your perspective tends to change and it becomes more possible to see the bigger, political picture.



## General discussion

When every woman has had her turn, you can open it up into a more general discussion. Again, try not to let one or two dominate. Take responsibility yourself for leaving space for other women to contribute, but this is much more informal and should be a space where everyone can explore what they have heard and the conclusions arising from it.

You may decide that you want to give more sessions to the same topic or to go away and read something. Or you may want to have discussions about where you go from there and what you might do together. Working together on something practical or a project or even going on a demonstration together can really build up solidarity and respect.



## Women only

This process is based on women learning about our lives as girls and women, experiences only we have. There is also an indefinable effect which being and working in a women-only environment has that can be very radicalising.

You begin to see other women and yourself in a different way. We can thrive when we are not expected to act out the traditional power relationships between men and women. It can be really different and transforming if you haven't had that experience — and one of the reasons women have always had to fight for the right to meet and organise as women. It has great radical potential.



## Commitment

It may take a while to build up something that feels trusting and a space where you can be honest and freely share your thoughts. There may also be conflict at times; it would be remarkable if not. So, the commitment is to keep on trying and to deal with differences with respect, being patient and thoughtful and again, really listening.



Many women are also fundamentally angry and frustrated with the injustice and pressures of living in an oppressive society that impacts us every day. We are all damaged by living in the patriarchy. The best thing to do with anger is to use it as fuel for action.

Plan out your meetings well in advance and try to be committed to attending them all if you possibly can. That's also about valuing what you are doing together as women, giving it some importance in your life, something you need, want and have a right to, but which won't happen if you don't commit to making it happen.

And, essentially, be committed to challenging sexism, racism, classism, anti-lesbian feelings, all the many ways in which women experience oppression, whether or not you have women affected by those particular issues in your group.

Understanding our lives as women and committing to change means giving due weight to the liberation of all women and trying to understand the different ways in which women are oppressed.



## Closing the Group

If you have enough women, or you feel you've got to the point where bringing in new ones would stop the flow you have managed to get going, then it's fine to close the group. If other women want to join, encourage them to start another. Help them if you can. When other women hear about your group, it often inspires them to want to be in one themselves, and it spreads.

Numbers need to take into account the need to give everyone time to talk. If you only have a couple of hours in an evening then you can give about ten women five minutes each to speak and have an hour for your general discussion.

But ten is quite a lot for this sort of talking and I would suggest that anywhere between five and eight would work very well. It might be possible to start at three and look for others to join you. It's not always easy to find women, although our experience at FiLiA has been that there is a great deal of interest, almost a hunger, amongst many women to come together in a political way.

If you are not all in the same location, then there are alternative ways of working and, for example, there are groups who go away together for a weekend, several times a year, and work intensively, and it may be that you have no alternative but to consider online groups. Being together in real life is, however, much to be preferred.

# Kinds of Groups

There are many other forms of groups, for example, support groups which come together to give mutual support to women experiencing some of the same difficulties as, for example, groups for survivors of male abuse have done very successfully. There are also groups that already exist, say to do a practical project together, such as forming a housing group or creating a publication or newsletter, and using the CR format sometimes may be useful for them in helping to create a closer and more effective group.

There are groups who have been active over many years based on a specific focus: Black or Asian or Jewish women's groups, for example, or lesbian groups, or mothers, or older women — or activity-based such as writers' groups or groups wanting to know more about health issues and women's bodies.

But you can use CR to explore all manner of things. Maybe begin with choosing topics that you know every woman has experience of or which are very open, such as 'how has society's attitudes to women undermined or limited you?' or contradictions such as 'women have the right to wear whatever we want, but I don't feel OK about seeing women dressed as though they were in a porn film'. Using 'I' rather than talking more abstractly can help. Go on to other subjects such as sexuality, which may be harder to tackle, when you have created some trust and understanding together.

Beginning with the understanding that the personal is political and coming together in a collective commitment to take action...

***this is how we build a movement.***

