

# Mother's Economic Rights (MER) Task Force Action Kit:

## *Meeting Formats*

*(in Plenary)*

*by Laird Schaub*

2/13/01

Here is a breakdown of five basic plenary (meetings of the whole) techniques to be considered as alternatives and/or supplements to open discussion. In all cases I'll try to give you a typical definition for how and why they might be used. It is certainly OK to modify anything here to suit a particular situation; just be sure that you are clear each time about the ground rules for that specific application.

### 1. GO ROUND

**Basic understanding:** everyone gets one turn to speak without interruption. At the conclusion of the go round there is typically an attempt to summarize the input and offer time for evaluative comments.

**Options:** sometimes everyone is expected to speak. sometimes not; sometimes people can speak a second time (time permitting) after everyone who cares to has spoken once; sometime the amount of time person is limited; sometimes the facilitator reserves the right to ask clarifying questions (I like doing this).

**Application:** when you want to make sure that you have surfaced the widest possible breadth of input; when you suspect some in the group are having trouble finding their way into a fast-paced open discussion; when you feel the weight of the consideration deserves a slower, more deliberate approach.

**What to watch out for:** people exceeding their allotted time (if that's defined); people trying to speak twice before everyone has spoken once.

### 2. BRAINSTORM

**Basic understanding:** soliciting unedited and unevaluated ideas/suggestions on a specific topic. Responses should be scribed on large paper (or chalk boards) so all can see.

**Options:** sometimes the facilitator calls on people who raise their hands, sometimes you just let people speak "popcorn" style (when you're hot, you pop), slowing them down only when the easel scribe is having trouble keeping up.

**Application:** this is great for gathering the widest possible range of ideas in a short time. The exercise itself can (should?) be fun and a useful break from open discussion.

**What to watch out for:** stopping too soon--in the first burst of responses, you'll get mostly predictable input, then there will be a lull, and then the most creative and possibly breakthrough input will occur in a second rush. Be vigilant about interrupting

evaluative comments; negative responses will inhibit creativity--remind the group that nothing has been agreed to yet, you are only gathering ideas.

### 3. FISHBOWL

**Basic understanding:** a small subset of the whole group will gather together in a one place (often the middle of the room) to discuss a topic while everyone else watches watch; the key is getting all important viewpoints represented in the subgroup

**Options:** sometimes this is facilitated, sometimes not; usually there is a time limit for how long this will go on; sometimes there is room in the middle or at the end for the observers to offer comments.

**Application:** this can be usefully employed to sharpen the focus of a conversation when it is clear that a small number of people carry the strongest views or have thought most deeply about a topic--the idea being that any agreement among that subgroup on the topic will probably be agreeable with the whole. This prevents diffusion and keeps the conversation well focused by given exclusive air time to a select few.

**What to watch out for:** bringing together protagonists on a topic can heighten tensions and you may want a facilitator that can handle the strong feelings and expressions that may result; monitor the observers to see if they are having trouble with this (either by losing interest or by getting riled up)--the fishbowl may need to be interrupted to check out what's happening outside the ring.

### 4. COUNCIL

**Basic understanding:** this is similar to a go round in that typically one person speaks at a time, with the rest of the group expected to devote their full attention to that person. It differs from a go round in that there is typically an effort to establish a sharply different mood for the council, and there may not be time set aside for comment. It is essentially a time to listen deeply, and is typically the only thing attempted in that session. Usually there is a "setting the stage" introduction which includes some modification to the physical environment (even a different room) and an invitation to participants to enter into a reflective mood to look deeply into themselves for input on the topic. Usually the council is formally opened and formally closed.

**Options:** there may be a request that people only speak once, or there may not; it is less common for a facilitator to ask clarifying questions in this format. Sometimes there is a talking object used, some physical item where only the person holding the object may speak, and the speaker lays it down when done. Typically there is no limit on how long a person may speak during a council.

**Application:** generally this is reserved for topics where there is expected to be strong feelings and deeply held views; you are making an effort to distinguish this from ordinary discourse, to elicit more heartfelt statements; it is important to create a suitable "container" or safe place for this to happen.

**What to watch out for:** comments or actions (laughter or jokes) which compromise the mood or safety. Generally councils are rare (unless that kind of experience is one of the things the group exists for) and they can lose their power if done too often.

## 5. GUIDED VISUALIZATION

**Basic understanding:** the group creates a special time for doing the visualization; everyone gets into a comfortable position, and the facilitator leads the group into mindfulness of the issue to be addressed and allows everyone to sit with it in a wakeful dream state, preferably with their eyes closed. After a suitable period of time (5-15 minutes), everyone is brought back to the present and given space to share the images that arose for them during the silence. Once everyone has shared, the group is asked to reflect on what they think the stories mean and how that might offer insight into moving past the stuck place on the issue. The idea is to access intuitive knowledge about the issue, while setting aside the rational.

**Options:** this can be done in a wide variety of ways; the key is be authentic and to let go of trying to control what happens.

**Application:** excepting where this practice is a regular aspect of how the group chooses to access their "truth" (and there are groups which do), this is a relatively rare approach, reserved for moments when the group appears stuck after considerable deliberation, and does not wish to delay a decision.

**What to watch out for:** it's important that the facilitator can lead the group into the visualization in an even-handed way which does not suggest any particular solution. And it's important to allow everyone to describe what they "saw" during the visualization before any interpretations begin. One of the delicate parts of this approach is the group's willingness to engage in the intuitive; for some this territory is too unfamiliar to feel comfortable.

*Thanks to Laird Schaub for permission to post this piece on the website. Laird is an expert facilitator and group consultant who lives at Sandhill Farm. Contact: RR1 Box 155, Rutledge, MO 63562; 660-883-5545; [laird@ic.org](mailto:laird@ic.org).*

Tree Bressen  
1680 Walnut Street  
Eugene, Oregon 97403  
541-484-1156  
[tree@ic.org](mailto:tree@ic.org)

**For more information regarding NOW-NJ Mothers' Economic Rights Task Force, Chapter MER TF development, or to receive additional action kits, please contact Laurie Pettine at [mertf\\_info@nownj.org](mailto:mertf_info@nownj.org) or 973-214-2643.**