

A paper on

# Women-Only Services and their Benefits

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# Acknowledgements

The Women's Resource and Development Agency (WRDA) has been working with women and providing support to women's groups and networks across Northern Ireland since 1983. WRDA's vision is of a fair and equal society where women are empowered and are a visible force for change and influence in all areas of life.

Our mission, as a regional organisation, is to advance women's equality and participation in society. We work with women to achieve social, economic, political and cultural transformation. We engage across all traditions with women based in the most disadvantaged urban and rural areas of Northern Ireland.

Our work covers a wide scope and keeps us right at the heart of local communities. We are a membership organisation, existing for the benefit of our members, representing their interests and informing them of the latest issues affecting the women's sector. Our membership includes a wide range of local and international women's groups and organisations, as well as many individuals.

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# Introduction

**This paper seeks to demonstrate the need and benefit of women-only services across Northern Ireland as well as providing the women's community and voluntary sector with a tool to lobby for funding as well as to highlight the uniqueness and benefits of women-only services, not just for women but families and the community as a whole.**

The background to this paper is that women's organisations and groups are, increasingly, being asked to justify their women-only services, with some having to make alternative arrangements to offer services to men as a condition of their funding.

The question of “*why women only?*” challenges and raises an important question for not only the women's community and voluntary sector but for government, funders and society as a whole.

Questioning women's groups and women's organisations about their single sex policy can be seen to embrace and promote an understanding of an equal and “post gender” society. One in which women and men are equal and therefore gender-neutral treatment for all is appropriate. Unfortunately women have not achieved

equality with men. Indeed, the “gender neutral” terminology in common use is evidence that there is a continuing need for women-only services and more specifically the gender neutral language needs to change particularly in policy strategies which dictate government direction and spending allocations.

Justifying why women-only, is not a new development. The women's sector in Northern Ireland has been confronted with this issue for the last decade. In 2008 Margaret Ward pointed out that, [...] *the other is a lack of political will to continue to support the women's sector, either out of a mistaken belief that women are now equal to men and therefore do not require special treatment, or from a mistaken reading of s 75 to the effect that women and men have to be treated the same in all respects.*”

To explore this issue at the micro-level, interviews were conducted with women's groups and organisations across Northern Ireland. The aim was to explore why they see a need for women-only spaces, the interviews also explored the benefits of women-only spaces and the impact of such spaces on women's well-being, that of their families and the local community.

# Methodology



## *Research methods*

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This paper reflects the three different stages of work undertaken for this study. The first phase being the preliminary desk research, the second semi-structured interviews and finally the production of the paper itself.

The research utilises qualitative research methods which were used to gather data about the women's community and voluntary sector and the community and voluntary sector more generally. To this end, interviews were held with a sample of women's groups and organisations across Northern Ireland.



## *Ethical Considerations*

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Due to the sensitivities of women-only services interviewees were first approached by email. Verbal agreement was obtained and the information gathered remains unattributed to protect the anonymity of all participants.



## Why Women-Only

### *Setting the Scene*

Research carried out in 2001 found that women's organisations and groups were providing support to local women through a diverse range of activities and making a valuable contribution to "promoting equality, social and economic inclusion, peace building and the development of the voluntary sector and

volunteering." (NIVT) The research went some way to encapsulate what had been known for some time, that women's organisations and groups contribute to society as a whole.

In legislative terms, Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act (1998) provides a statutory basis

for public authorities to have due regard to promoting equality of opportunity between a number of groups, including “between men and women generally” (S.75 (1)(b)). This means any policy decision should be assessed to ascertain the impact on equality between women and men. However, application of Section 75 appears to be a tick box exercise, indeed the Gender Equality Strategy has not made any significant change in the position of women in Northern Ireland with major barriers to women’s participation in all aspects of their lives continuing.

Internationally, the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), noted concerns that women in Northern Ireland lack the same equality protections as their counterparts in mainland GB, they also noted their concerns about women in Northern Ireland suffering from multiple discrimination (2013).

Funding to women’s organisations and

groups is piecemeal (OFMDFM, 2012), with many using a variety of sources for core costs and many other funding streams for programme costs including social economy enterprises. Infrastructure support for women’s organisations and groups sits with the Department for Communities and the Department for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs. Five strands exist with one of these being support for women in disadvantaged/rural areas. The programme (Regional Infrastructure Support Programme) aims to ‘maximise the ability of women living in disadvantaged/rural areas to contribute to their communities’ (2012).

With the Regional Infrastructure Support Programme currently under review, there is no guarantee that funding for women living in disadvantaged and rural areas will continue in the same way. Moreover, the lack of gender proofing policy decisions by government can only continue to impact negatively on the women’s sector and those who use their services.



*“As you can imagine government is still dominated by men and by patriarchal perspectives. Patriarchal and traditional attitudes so it’s important for us to also work strategically on pushing women’s equality and promoting feminist attitudes and values at government level and at a strategic level in Northern Ireland.”*

## *How Do Women-Only Services Benefit Women?*

The research found that women-only services are designed around the individual needs of women in a particular area, women's organisations

and groups place women firmly at the heart of their decision making processes, with many describing this process as being 'women-centred'.



*“We recognise all the barriers that women face. We seek to address all of those barriers by building their confidence and self-esteem. We also work with other women's organisations strategically across Northern Ireland.”*

Most of the organisations that participated in the interviews felt strongly about continually having to highlight the reason for women-only services, indeed a number cited evidence which highlights that generic services often fail to meet the needs of women particularly those from areas of disadvantage.

Many noted there were a range of issues faced by women that were not being

addressed, some of these included access to abortion, issues surrounding the health needs of lesbian women, mental health services and counselling. While a number commented that women have not reached equality with men stating this as one of the main reasons why women-only services are needed.

Participants were asked to describe the benefits of women-only services. The common themes that emerged were:

- » A safe, supportive and empowering environment
- » Holistic service – meeting the diverse needs of women
- » Meeting the education and childcare needs of women and children
- » Enhancing women, children, families and the community.



*“We are an education centre, we are women-led and we provide classes and courses. We build confidence, help women with assertiveness and help them find employment and transform their lives.”*

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### **Safe, Supportive and Empowering Environment**

A woman-only space is a safe place where women can discuss their needs confidentially. Women can share their experiences and meet other women for support and encouragement. It's a space to give

women the opportunity to develop a positive self-image. The interviewees described the woman-only space as crucial and extremely important to women in meeting their particular needs and circumstances.



*“It is very important that women who enter our centre feel secure and safe. They have complex issues; they need a lot of support.”*

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Empowerment of women who enter women's organisations and groups seems to be related to the information and choice they are provided with. One interviewee highlighted the importance of women being provided

with information so they can make informed choices. Others talked about the empowerment of women and how it manifests itself in greater self-confidence and a greater ability to articulate their needs.



*“We never tell a woman what to do. We're here to give her options. It's up to her which one she decides.”*

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Women coming together to share, to learn and to talk to other women also lends itself to the act of empowering. Interviewees used examples of how women have been able to organise

themselves to deal with issues in their own lives and also to address local community issues i.e campaign for playgrounds or street calming measures.

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### **Holistic Service: Meeting the Diverse Needs of Women**

Women's organisations and groups are not homogeneous but there is some synergy between them,

in that they offer a wide range of support services to women and their families which can include:

- » A befriending and listening ear service aimed at breaking down isolation and exclusion.
- » Confidence building, and health and well-being courses such as Yoga, drugs and alcohol awareness.
- » Specific services to survivors of rape, child abuse, adult abuse, sexual violence, domestic violence and crime.
- » Benefits' advice, information and support including debt advice.
  - » Education through GCSEs and NVQs.
- » Assistance with CV production, job search, interview techniques, presentation skills and job applications.
  - » High quality, accessible and affordable childcare.
- » Volunteering opportunities providing training and support.
  - » Support projects for parents including young mums and those with young children.
- » Conferences, seminars and workshops on issues affecting women's lives.
  - » Information sharing and awareness raising.



*“While a woman may initially come in looking for advice on benefits, she may end up on one of our courses, to gain new skills. You need to unwrap the various problems and deal with them in a holistic way.”*

A recurring theme from several interviews was the way in which women’s organisations and groups are able to respond to the individual needs of women and their families by putting in place a tailored service. Several interviewees felt that the success of their women’s organisations was the holistic way they worked and the flexibility of

being able to respond quickly to the individual needs of women.

The evidence suggests that women’s organisations and groups have built up a range of expertise in offering services to women which has been gained through practical hands on work and high quality training and support.

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### **Meeting the Education and Childcare needs of Women and Children**

The availability of good quality and affordable childcare is an essential building block for women who participate in education and training. Research by the Women’s Centres Regional Partnership (2008) identified the lack of appropriate childcare as the single biggest barrier to women’s participation in education, training and work, as well as public and political life.

Training and education is an important part of what women’s organisations and groups offer. Interviewees emphasized that delivering courses is always a response to the needs of the woman first and foremost especially to develop their self-confidence but then to aid them in gaining new skills and getting back in to employment. The training offered has been described as flexible,

offered at times to suit the needs of women with caring responsibilities and the provision of childcare to look after young children. Comments pointed to a lack of confidence from users of women's organisations and groups to travel to other settings for training and education with many not feeling confident enough to participate in 'mainstream' education, feeling more comfortable in a women-only setting.

The positive impact of training and education programmes on women was also highlighted. This included increased confidence and self-esteem,

a feeling of independence, with some women progressing to higher education while some progressed to employment.

While this provides evidence that women's organisations and groups play a very important role in providing education to women in disadvantaged areas it also points to the fact that they also contribute to the development of communities, particularly women from the Black, Minority and Ethnic communities. With many women's organisations and groups offering interventions especially tailored to meet their individual needs.



*“Because we could see by transforming our own experience and women in the community through education, the transformation is great. And when you support a woman and her child, the knock-on effects on the child and the rest of the family are enormous. It also goes on to develop the community.”*

The importance of building confidence and self-esteem in women cannot be underestimated, however interviewees were keen to point out that this must happen before women can progress or participate

in further learning and development opportunities. Many have seen the positive results of such self-development courses and stress the importance of these as well as more traditional educational courses.

## Enhancing Women, Children, Families and the Community

From the interviews undertaken, women's organisations and groups offer added value to children, their families and the community in which they

serve. Numerous examples were given of how the lives of their participants had been transformed by the services on offer.



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*“A husband of a participant called the other day to thank us for what we are doing for his wife. He said it was helping at home, not just for his wife but for the children and him.”*

Positive impacts included improved mental and physical health, better job prospects through training, increased confidence and self-esteem and better skills. Research participants articulated very well the impact of their services on women's families and communities which is also greatly enhanced. For instance, the effects of domestic violence within a household on children has been an issue which has been well highlighted in the report

by the Women's Centres Regional Partnership 'Women's Experience of Violence: A Pilot Study (2009)'. The report states that children in a domestic violence household '...were exhibiting behavior problems, including aggressive and anti-social behavior.'

One of the most striking impacts noted of the women-only services relates to the support offered to women suffering domestic violence and abuse.

Women's organisations and groups being able to help women protect their children by offering childcare facilities and education programmes such as the 'Helping Hands for Children' (Women's Aid) which raises awareness of acceptable and unacceptable behavior in themselves and others.

Interviewees also highlighted the positive impact of their services to the community, citing examples of women feeling empowered and better

able to support their family or women supporting others in the community with their issues by volunteering to share the new skills they have acquired.

The above goes some way to illustrate the services offered by women's groups and organisations not only improves the life of the individual woman but it also improves the life of her family, particularly children and her community.



*“The benefits can sometimes be quite abstract... the atmosphere is different in women-only than in mixed groups. The domination of men which often silences women is not there so in a woman-only space they are able to articulate their thoughts, gain self-confidence and speak out.”*

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## Conclusion

All of those who took part in the research were asked if they would refer to their organisation as a feminist organisation or something else. Most of those who participated did identify as being feminist with a few referring to their organisations as women-focused. Whatever they identified as, at their core were

feminist values, focusing on the needs of women, being run by women for women, empowering women, building women's confidence, supporting women, their children and families. Many were also too well aware for the need to strive for equality between women and men, recognising that discrimination still

exists and that the most effective way of ensuring equality and ensuring women's rights are upheld was through a woman-only space. The interviews, without doubt, highlight that women only services are still needed and that they play a critical role to the individual women, their families and the community. Those, particularly government,

who continue to ask a women's organization or group to justify "Why Women?" undermines the very ethos and aims under which it was established in the first place and will only prove to be detrimental in meeting the needs of women, children, families and communities unless we all recognise that women have yet to achieve equality with men.

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