



Women: Legacies of the Past

Summary of roundtable discussions

Clones

3rd October 2013
The Cuil Darach, Clones, Co Monaghan

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Introduction of Overall Project

The National Women's Council of Ireland (NWC), the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland and the Women's Resource and Development Agency are partners in a Peace 3 project that aims to capture the experiences of women living through conflict and through the subsequent period of conflict resolution and peace building.

The aim is to learn from the experience of women who have lived through these processes and to try to identify ways in which to make a positive impact. Over two years this project will bring women together on a cross community and a cross border basis and they will have an opportunity to exchange learning with women from other conflict areas through the Foundations for Peace Network.

Key issues will be highlighted in different workshops which will take place throughout Northern Ireland and in border county areas. These are:

- Violence, safety and security
- Decision making and representation
- Women's rights are human rights – women and social justice
- Women and the legacies of the past
- Women and institutional change

The fourth theme addressed in the project is 'Women: Legacies of the Past.' Workshops were held in Belfast and Clones and a final cross-border workshop will take place in Belfast. At this event 'Women, Legacies of the Past: A Shared Learning Workshop' participants from the two previous workshops will come together to pull together the various strands of the discussions, develop recommendations and decide how best we can influence policy.

The final part of the project is aimed at placing on an international stage all that has been learned through the discussions between women from different communities and regions. The project will have two important outcomes:

- The learning gathered will be used for the design of policy recommendations that will be disseminated through the production of a Policy Report on Gender and Peacebuilding which will be primarily focused on influencing institutional change in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.
- A Tool Kit on Women and Peacebuilding: Developing Practical Approaches will be produced. This will be circulated internationally with the intention of influencing governments and agencies responsible for providing grants and assistance to war-torn societies.

Format

20 women from across Clones / Monaghan and the surrounding area attended a workshop to discuss and provide their personal perspective on issues on the legacies of the past that they are dealing with as women.

The morning began with a contextual presentation from Angela Graham from the Cavan Resource Centre.

Facilitated discussions took place around three tables with a scribe noting the issues that were raised. Participants were asked to focus their discussions around the following key questions:

Question 1:

How did the establishment of the border affect you as a woman in terms of

- your family
- your place in the community

and in what ways can you still feel the impacts of this?

Question 2:

What kinds of changes have you noticed in your own life, in your family life and in your place in the community since the Good Friday Agreement 15 years ago?

Question 3:

Do you feel it is better or worse for women now, than 15 years ago? In what way?

At the end of each table discussion the women were asked to prioritise a few issues and note these on a flipchart. The priorities from each table were then fed back for all the groups to hear.

A short plenary session ensued.

The following report summarises the topics discussed for each question:

Question 1:

How did the establishment of the border affect you as a woman in terms of

- **your family**
- **your place in the community**

And in what ways can you still feel the impacts of this?

The Division of Families

The location of Clones meant that when the border was established, the town was surrounded by it on three sides. This had a profound impact on families in a number of ways. Some of the women moved to Clones from the north with their parents during the troubles as their parents had been on the run. They recall a lot of crossing over and back across the border.

One participant shared how sometimes her mother could cross the border but her father was not allowed due to his status as a republican activist. The most extreme manifestation of this was when her father was not allowed to attend her mother's funeral. She went on to say that she and her siblings did not understand the situation until they were in their teens but it was the labelling of "terrorists" that they encountered in the south that "told her why they had to move in the first place."

Another participant talked about how her family too had moved to Clones from the north. Her brothers who were in the British army were not allowed to travel home to Clones and she also told about how her nephew who is currently in the British army is strongly advised by his superiors not to travel home to Clones. The women talked about how during the troubles it was always more problematic and worrying to care for boys. There were other participants who have family that immigrated to Australia that have not returned to Clones since the troubles because of being advised not to.

In this way families in this area have experienced a lot of division and isolation due to the establishment of the border.

Divided Communities

The divisions in the community in Clones which pre-existed the troubles were deepened with the establishment of the border. This division they said was felt more in the town communities than in the country where people tended to feel more protected and at ease.

All of the women talked about the inconvenience of being stopped or searched at the border checkpoints. The impact on a P1 mother is that she had to send her kids to the south. Kids are able to adapt.

It is a vast difference to raise your kids in south than north – didn't have to deal with the same stuff but the southerners who visit find it shocking. Still an uneasiness going into the north – being identified by car number plate / accent. Some women had no cars to cross the border, so didn't experience that.

A few participants said that if you were from the "wrong side" of the border you were stereotyped and criminalised if you happened to be catholic. The likelihood was a lot higher that Catholics would be stopped and searched. The women also felt that the British flag tended to be used as a way to "intimidate" Catholics crossing the border.

Other participants talked about there having been times when they and their families were afraid to go out of the house due to trouble in their housing estates which were divided. It was felt that it is really only the older generation that is fully aware of this divide and what it means.

Q2. What are the Changes in your lives since the Good Friday Agreement?

Dissolution of the Physical Border

The participants felt that the dissolution of the physical borders around Clones had made a significant impact on their lives. As one of the women said: “when the border was there “Northern Ireland was like another country – isn’t anymore.” Another participant said “It is great that it is gone and there is peace.” They talked about how the sense of threat in their lives had lessened now that the soldiers were gone from the surrounding area and the sense of freedom to come and go since the bridges and army posts were opened up again.

All of this equated for the women “less of a divide” on many levels including a greater sense of openness about one’s religion. Some of the women recalled how they no longer had to “illegally smuggle back butter, cigarettes, fruit and IP records.” They also felt that the building of the new road to Dublin signified a new beginning for the women of the north and the south to interact with each other.

Cross Community Cooperation

There was a general feeling that there has been a vast improvement in cross community cooperation and that a significant factor in this has been the peace funded community projects that have brought alienated communities together. There has as a result been a “softening in attitudes,” and “stronger, more certain” inter-community relationships.

The participants commented that the women’s peace projects in particular have been incredibly beneficial to them and that the opportunity to dialogue with women they normally wouldn’t have contact with has allowed them to learn things they never would have known. This in turn has allowed them to broaden their horizons in ways that have profoundly affected their daily lives.

Some of the women also talked about the fact that people are quite proactive in trying to “build bridges,” and that there is huge interest in projects such as Peacelink which brings kids from the north and south together through sport.

The element of secrecy that was always such a strong current in border town life during the troubles is no longer an issue – there is a lot more communication and no more “secret societies.”

One participant highlighted that there has been a big change in social life in Clones. For example pubs are “generally more communal” without the segregation of earlier years. A few of the women felt that there is still much to resolve in the north after 15 years and that there “is still a divide.” Due to their close proximity to the north this matters to them despite the fact that there may be already better conditions in their own small town.

Effects on Family Life

The removal of the border checkpoints has meant that for the families of ex-prisoners, visits back and forth are a lot easier and this has had a huge positive impact.

Participants talked about more open attitudes from the churches towards civil inter religious marriages which have also had a very positive effect on family life.

Effects on the Local Economy

The women talked about how the local economy had utterly changed since before and after the establishment of the border. Clones which had been a thriving town with many small local businesses lost custom from the surrounding areas and many businesses had to close down as a result. The women said that “Clones has gone downhill after partition,” and that it still had not recovered. Now people tend to travel to the bigger towns to shop and more people have the transport to do so and people from around the area tend only to come into Clones for football matches. Some of the women felt that Clones needs to be promoted to tourists as a beautiful historical town.

Q3. Do you think living in a border county is better or worse than 15 years ago?

Better

In general the participants felt that life has improved in the last 15 years and the positive comments by far outweighed the comments that outlined where further development was needed.

Cross Community Exchange

The women said that despite the fact that there are still underlying issues to be resolved within the community, the active presence of cross community organisations has dissolved a lot of the tension that had been there previously.

There are in general more community groups and projects which has facilitated greater understanding between religions and ideologies. Participants also talked about the de-stigmatisation of cross community marriage.

There was also positive feedback about the fact that there are now direct routes to go to church and other weekly activities now that the border checkpoints are gone.

In more recent years learning about different cultures and traditions through community projects has expanded further through the presence of migrant cultures and this was also praised by the women.

Domestic Violence

It was felt that there has been an improvement in women’s attitude to domestic violence and also in the services that are now available.

Women are now more willing to speak with confidence and courage about their experiences of domestic violence and are more willing to leave abusive husbands or partners.

There is a greater awareness about the prevalence of domestic violence and a greater availability of counselling for it.

Women are Finding their Voice

Many participants spoke in a very positive way in how women have progressed in using their own voices and “having their say.”

This they felt was due to the fact that women are no longer willing to be dominated to the same degree as 15 years ago. There are also more opportunities for a woman working outside the home which has equipped women with greater independence and confidence. Some participants commented that it is the increased solidarity that now exists between women that is contributing so positively to women finding their voice. This solidarity has been deepened through the networking and dialoguing opportunities provided by local women's groups.

Schools and youth culture, the women pointed out, are also proactive in encouraging young women to have a voice and to be treated more equally.

Although a few of the older women talked about how much pressure it is for young women to work in addition to caring for children and the home, other participants pointed out that women want to be out working so that they can enjoy greater independence and a higher standard of life.

Worse

A few of the women felt that while things had improved for women in terms of work and financial independence that in the end this simply constituted “double-duty” as many young women continue to take full responsibility for caring for the home and their children.

In addition to this, due to the recession women are accepting jobs far from home and face long commutes each day. In some cases they take full responsibility for their house mortgage if their partner is out of work.

It was felt that although women are now more inclined to speak out that it is often met with hostility. One of the participants also highlighted the fact that there are no women's refuges in Monaghan and Cavan and that the nearest one now is in Enniskillen.