

Women: Making A Difference

Summary of roundtable discussions

**6th June 2013
The Bushtown Hotel
Coleraine**

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Introduction of Overall Project

The National Women's Council of Ireland (NWCI) and the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland (CFNI) and the Women's Resource and Development Agency (WRDA) 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 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

Over 50 women from the Coleraine / Ballymoney and surrounding areas attended the workshop to explore the broad issue of women's participation in institutions and bodies, particularly those established since the Peace Process e.g. Civic Forum, Policing and Community Safety Partnerships, Neighbourhood Renewal Partnerships, Good Relation Working Groups, Social Investment Steering Groups, Economic Regeneration bodies, etc.

The workshop aimed to gather women's views on women's involvement in civic engagement, and women's views towards participation and whether women's involvement in public life has changed in the last 15 years. A panel of three speakers provided a gendered perspective on their own experiences of being on such boards/bodies and highlighting how women make a difference at this level. This was followed by a question and answer session with the panel in order to provoke some thinking around the issue of women's civic engagement to inform the roundtable discussions.

Facilitated roundtable discussions took place around six tables with scribes noting the issues that were raised. Participants were asked to focus their discussions around the following key questions:

- 1. How would having more women participating and making decisions on strategic bodies / decision-making institutions, make a difference?**
- 2. Do you feel women's participation on these bodies/groups is better or worse now, than 15 years ago? In what way?**

At the end of each table discussion, the women were asked to prioritise the main issue or area of importance they felt strongest about. Participants were given dots to place on the flipchart in order to stress what they felt was most important to them overall. The table facilitator was then able to feedback the key points to the wider group.

A short plenary discussion ensued after the facilitated workshops.

Below is a synopsis of the discussions.

1. How would having more women participating and making decisions on strategic bodies / decision-making institutions, make a difference?

Women Make Decisions Differently To Men

There was general consensus amongst participants that women bring a different perspective in decision-making roles and there is a real need to have more women in these roles. The involvement of women in public decision-making was viewed as positive. Women used 'empathy rather than sympathy' when analysing issues and making decisions.

Women are influenced by their vast experience of domestic and home life as well as the external environment. This enables them to 'bring a more holistic approach to dealing with issues and making decisions. It was suggested that women think of others and therefore more naturally represent others. They also consider the needs and views of men; they are more inclusive and flexible when making decisions. Women are influenced by their experiences as a daughter, mother, wife, sister and friend. It was also believed that women are better communicators and listeners. They can see the overall picture when making decisions.

That women thrive in community development roles was also raised during the roundtable discussions. They bring a 'common sense approach' to problem solving and because of their experiences they are much more likely to tackle social issues and prioritise the health and education agendas.

It was also said that women 'are more likely to look to the future rather than the past' and this was particularly important in Northern Ireland. Women can compromise more easily than men and they can 'resist the pressure of staying in the past'. They can often bring a sense of compromise to a situation.

In relation to how women make decisions differently to men, participants thought that 'women deliberate on and calculate issues differently'. They take time to weight things up and take more time to analyse issues recognising that decisions affect others. It was believed that if there were more women in important decision-making roles, this would lead to higher levels of respect. Some participants also believed that women have to work harder to fit in to the male world. They often have to prove they are sharper and brighter than the many men around them to have a seat at the decision-making table.

The desire for balance was a strongly held view. As one woman said – 'men and women are like a bird with two wings - they need two wings to fly'. Having both women and men making decisions was the preferred model rather than one or the other or a minority of either.

Current Situation of Women in Decision-Making Locally

Participants believed female role models in decision-making are very important to encourage other women to put themselves forward. While some female managers and co-ordinators of local community organisations sit on various strategic bodies, participants believed there was still a need for more female role models. It was acknowledged that 'caring responsibilities' held many women back.

At one of the tables there was a good discussion around women's local political representation, particularly in relation to representation at local government level and local government reform. It was noted that 5 of the 22 local councillors are women and it was a strongly held view that a greater representation of women would make a huge difference as it is currently very male dominated. Some participants believed that men lacked respect for women and that women really have to fight to get opinions across. It can be a huge struggle for the women to get their voices heard.

In terms of the Review of Public Administration, the women raised the issue of the lack of gender balance on the powerful 'Transition Committee' which is charged with overseeing the massive project of local government reform. Local female councillors had tried to ensure there was good female representation but it had been difficult. The group initially met in the middle of the day. Only one of the twenty representatives was a woman; now there are four out of the twenty – so things have improved. The Transition Committee now meets at 4.30pm which may have enabled more women to participate.

Some participants also spoke of a local Community Development Association where women were viewed as note takers. One participant said, 'You have to work to gain male respect but it helps when you are older.'

Some participants thought that while there is still clearly more men in decision-making roles, there has also been an increase in the number of women and there are now more women who can support each other to get their views across.

Women's Participation in Local Community Development

Participants were also very keen to discuss the impact of European Peace funding on women's participation in their local community. At a basic level European Peace funding has 'enabled women to come out of the house and meet each other and work together'. There are so many more women involved in community development now. More importantly it has really helped women to become involved in cross-community work. Women's groups – groups for older women and for younger women – are growing all the time. Women are gaining confidence and becoming empowered from working together.

A gap in terms of addressing 'need' was identified as mothers who had young children availing of Surestart programmes. These programmes come to an end when a child reaches the age of 4 and this can be very upsetting and distressing for young mothers who have started their own journeys of education/confidence building while their children were availing of Surestart. This gap could be filled by services provided by a women's centre/group but these do not exist everywhere.

Quotas

During many of the discussions participants raised the issue of using 'quotas' as a mechanism to redress gender imbalance in decision-making. Some participants felt strongly that there was enough of a skill base amongst women to fulfil quotas but that if quotas were to be introduced, the use of this mechanism must be accompanied with good selection processes and support for new candidates. Some participants believed the use of quotas would be seen as tokenism and others said that this view must be resisted. Men fear letting go of power but it must happen.

The bottom line is that a diverse representation on boards and bodies leads to better decision-making. Some participants said 'quotas' were necessary to kickstart change. Some believed

that 'the right women must be identified for the roles'. Women shouldn't be pushed or forced into roles.

There was also an example of where a government department has pushed to have men included on a women-only board of a housing association. Yet this doesn't happen in terms of addressing chronic gender imbalance on most boards heavily weighted towards male representation.

2. Do you feel women's participation on these bodies/groups is better or worse now, than 15 years ago? In what way?

Situation Is Neither Better Nor Worse

Some participants felt that little has changed for women over the last 15 years. Women in Northern Ireland have been gravely affected by our political history. Many are interested in becoming more involved in their communities or in politics but there are fears and external factors that work against this.

Essentially men still dominate in most spheres of life and particularly in decision-making roles. There is not enough young women engaged in these areas and we need to attract more young women to decision-making roles. Childcare persists as a major barrier to women's participation across the board but it is a particular obstacle for women living in rural areas where childcare provision is even more scarce. It was also suggested that more traditional views of a woman's role being in the home was more prevalent in rural areas.

It was further suggested that 'men don't like being told what to do by women' and that men's control of money is still a huge issue for too many women and families. This is important in the context of the current Empty Purse Campaign that is happening across Northern Ireland.

These participants believed it was now time to provide support, training and affirmation to women with a view to improving the numbers of women in decision-making and to ensure their voice is heard.

Situation Has Improved (With Caveats)

Many participants held the view that women's lives have improved over the past 15 years.

It was suggested that there has been much advocacy and lobbying to progress women's equality in various areas but not so much about increasing gender diversity on decision-making bodies. Examples where there is clearly change were cited as:

- women can now be religious leaders
- women (through community groups) are recognising the diversity of women and reaching out and working with other women eg. women from ethnic minority backgrounds
- social media is a new concept and has had both positive and negative impacts on the lives of women
- societal opinion towards 'feminism' has changed for the better
- more older women are ensuring their voices are heard through their work with community groups and their representation on the Pensioner's Parliament
- policy makers have come to accept the need for early intervention measures to prevent social problems happening. This has been hugely beneficial for women and children.

Many participants cited the availability of local community based education has had a major beneficial impact on women over the last 15 years. Much of these education programmes have been offered by local women's groups and resourced through European Peace and International fund for Ireland resources. They have have been instrumental in building the confidence and skills of women in their community and equipping women with the skills to be

a voice for their community. Women today can also avail of business training provided by social enterprises. This was less available 15 years ago.

Women have progressed from this to building partnerships and alliances, working across communities and this was deemed very important, particularly in a rural context. They have shared their knowledge, experience and skills. While, women are very much involved in their communities through local community groups and organisations, caring responsibilities and time commitments can still pose barriers to women's participation.

Having said all of this it was still acknowledged that women do not have as much time to devote to work or voluntary commitments outside of the home as men in general. While there are better educational opportunities for women now than 15 years ago – they often reach the middle tiers of education and not beyond.

Lengthy discussions also took place around women's position in the workplace. Generally, the view was that there are many more women working outside of the home and in good jobs but still, few are to be found at the top tier.

It was suggested that is not just a 'glass ceiling' but a 'sticky floor' and the 'sticky floor' is preventing women from getting near the 'glass ceiling'. Apart from a few notable exceptions (eg childcare, primary school teaching, nursing etc) women tend to be concentrated in the lower tiers of careers and men at the higher echelons. Subject choice in school was also heavily gendered and this followed onto career opportunities. It was suggested that gendered career choices are cultural. Society plays a large influence on the choices women make.

Women in Political Decision-Making

The issue of women in political decision-making was discussed at most of the tables. For some, politics was viewed as one of the last bastions where women had to make a proper breakthrough.

It was noted that there is no training available for women who want to move into politics and this was needed. The provision of such training would be very timely as there is a new dynamic within local councils – older men and retiring and younger people are moving in.

It was acknowledged that women must juggle so much and try and achieve a balance in their lives and this is particularly difficult when 'politics' is one of the balls. However it was suggested that particular focus must be on new generations of young women and that included providing positive role models for them now. It was noted that it is much more acceptable for women to take up public roles now than 15 years ago.

Some participants saw community work for women as a route into political life. There are also many more women on 'Boards' – but representation on 'Boards' remains very male because of church and political representation. That rural communities are more conservative/traditional in nature must also be considered by women.

While women have made some inroads in some aspects of political life (particularly at local council level), issues of confidence still need to be dealt with. Women need to put themselves forward. Political education would also help in this respect and it needs to be included in the school curriculum and young girls in particular should be taught about the gender imbalance in political representation and the consequences of this.