



Women: Making a Difference A Cross Border Shared Learning Workshop

Summary of roundtable discussions

**19 June 2013
The Drummond Hotel, Ballykelly
Limavady**

**Written by:
Sinéad Lynch
Project coordinator for the southern border counties**



European Union
European Regional
Development Fund
Investing in your future

**Women Making a Difference
A Shared Learning Workshop
Summary of Roundtable Discussions
Limavady
19th June 2013**

Introduction of Overall Project

The National Women's Council of Ireland (NWC) 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 55 women from the Coleraine and Letterkenny areas attended a cross border, shared learning workshop to further discuss the topic of how women have made a difference on the level of institutional change.

The keynote speaker was Avila Kilmurray of the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland who gave an input from her point of view as one of the founding members of the Women's Coalition Party.

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

- 1. How can we challenge the male culture and traditions to make society more equal for women?**
- 2. What actions can we take to improve women's representation and decision making at all levels – community, voluntary and political?**

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.

Q1. How can we challenge the male culture and traditions to make society more equal for women?

Reflexivity In Women

Fear of Change

A strong thread that ran through all of the discussions in this workshop was the need for women to be more reflexive about their own attitudes regarding gender equality. It was felt that there is a fear of change within many women, a sense of 'not wanting to rock the boat.' Part of this, it was noted relates to a fear of taking responsibility.

Lack of Solidarity amongst Girls and Women

Some of the young women present stated that girls are not backing each other up in challenging sexism. They felt it is imperative to teach gender equality to girls from a very early age and that this is the only way to challenge traditions of inequality. It was also felt that 'women can be their own worst enemies,' and that they should 'not make value judgements' on each other.

Parenting & Domestic Roles

There was a strong emphasis on the importance of the broadening and redefining of traditional parenting and domestic roles.

The participants felt that what happens in the home has a deep influence on gender stereotyping and equality and that as such mothers in particular are well placed to positively shape their children's perceptions. It was also noted that many parents are perpetuating traditional roles and the question was asked about who should take ownership of changing this.

It was noted in particular that mothers need to take responsibility for how they raise their sons. Many participants said that mothers need to teach their sons to help in the house in the same way that their daughters are expected to and that the concept of "women's work" should be eradicated completely.

One participant added that girls should not be brought up to be regarded 'as slaves in the house.' But most importantly women need to 'model' what they teach and make sure that they themselves receive the respect they deserve. While it was acknowledged that some women wish to be in the home, the more dominant message of the discussion was that many women would like to either change or broaden this role.

The participants agreed very strongly that women need to start with themselves and that they indeed hold the power to make these changes within the home. In addition to this, men need to be made aware of sharing priorities within family life so that their female partners can reach a level that allows them to influence final decisions in public and political life.

It was acknowledged that children form their ideals both in the home and also through culture, media, school and friends. As such parents need to be mindful of what their children are absorbing and to address it by showing a model of equality in the home. Despite these 'wider influences,' the participants were in agreement that the central influence comes from the home.

In terms of how wider cultural stereotyping affects adults, it was agreed that men who choose to stay at home are criticised and that women who work outside of the home are likewise criticised. Participants felt that both genders need to ignore these traditional judgements when they are doing their best to create a home environment of equality.

A Peace III funded programme called 'Strength in Families' was discussed as a good project for the conscious transformation of traditional attitudes within the family unit. The programme is based on the philosophy to respect and value each person both inside and outside of the home. It also teaches that each person in the home is equal and for this reason the children also attend the course. It was noted that this kind of project is important for addressing the kind of family dysfunction that is passed down through generations.

Participants also talked about women being kept down by male members of their households. However they also highlighted the role that their own mothers have played in this. A number of participants who felt that they had very successfully challenged male culture within their own marriages stated that this process involved 'undoing the work of their mother-in-laws' who had convinced their sons of their sense of entitlement and superiority.

Maternity / Paternity Leave

Maternity and paternity leave was something that participants felt has a vital impact on the kind of influence women can have in the decision-making.

Choice, the participants said, is what is most important and changes made in maternity and paternity leave is what will create this choice. It was noted that there needs to be the same flexibility for men as there is for women after their children have been born.

It was also felt that women need to be a lot more supportive of other women's choices regarding whether to work or to stay in the home after their children are born.

Regarding the relationship between maternity leave and how it affects women's progression in the workplace, the participants talked about the need for women to be encouraged to really stand up for themselves regarding promotion within the workplace alongside being a mother.

Proper Education from The Beginning

It was agreed that proper education for girls and boys from the earliest years is absolutely indispensable. This would mean education that is underpinned by equal respect for both genders and the challenging of sexism.

There were a number of young women present in the discussion who explained the current reality within the school system which is still a long way from being a model of gender equality. For example even in mixed gender classes in which boys are greatly outnumbered, they are still the most vocal and confident; girls have great difficulty in speaking out within mixed gender settings.

One participant shared an experience about sexism in the classroom which she said was 'alive and well' – a male teacher accused two female students of being lesbians for having views on women's equality. She went on to stress the importance good male role models who can inspire boys and young men within the school system.

It was also suggested that it is vital to teach young people about healthy relationships and that young men and women need to understand 'violence in relationships is wrong.' The young participants shared how boys seem to be 'ok' on a one to one basis with girls but that when they are in groups with other boys that they speak in a degrading way to and about girls, display violent behaviour and sexually harass girls. In related comments, one of the younger participants said that girls need to be taught to 'negotiate contraception' and that they also need to be taught that they can 'say no!'

The sidelining of women's achievements both historically and in the present within the classroom was also identified as a serious fault line of our current education system. This enhances the lack of value girls put on themselves and that boys put on girls. Alongside the fact that girls are encouraged to do subjects such as home economics but not the more technical subjects, girls' confidence can be undermined by how they are treated within the school system and they can become 'brainwashed' into believing they are less valuable.

In observing how the power dynamics operate, girls very often do not have the courage to support each other in the face of the disrespectful treatment they encounter within education.

The idea of leadership courses for girls and primary school level was very strongly supported by the participants. It was felt that it is too late by the time girls get to secondary school as so many knocks to their confidence will already have taken place. Counselling was also suggested as a possible support.

Integrated education was recommended from nursery level onwards and importance of young people meeting and mixing with other groups was highlighted.

Life-Long Learning

Education for men and women as a life-long pursuit was identified as a necessity for negotiating new roles for future generations.

Confidence building for all people of all ages was regarded by many of the participants as key to creating a society in which people can achieve the things that they wish for.

There was also a discussion on the significance of women only groups and how these may be perceived by men. Sometimes men imagine that women's groups are about ceasing power and 'taking over the world,' which can cause them to feel threatened.

The inclusion of men into women's groups was raised a number of times as was the suggestion of finding non-confrontational ways to educate men about women's value such as 'empowering' men to understand women's roles and attributes.

On one hand it is within the women's only spaces that the deeper discussion about women's equality and value can happen but the question then follows as to how these groups can reach out to men's groups. It was suggested that women need to keep the 'dialogue with men open' in order to change the culture of gender.

It was, however, acknowledged that for many of the participants the greatest opposition can come from women on the journey towards greater gender equality.

Some participants felt that if as women, we have confidence that no one can treat us as second class citizens but that despite this women in areas of disadvantage in particular, *are* treated as second class citizens.

Media / Press and Gender Stereotyping

The position of influence that the media and the press occupy in shaping people's collective and individual perceptions of gender stereotypes was taken very seriously in the discussions.

There was a general feeling that women need to challenge how they are being portrayed in the press and media. It was also mentioned that women can be 'their own worst enemies' in how they are hesitant to go outside the norms that media stereotyping sets and the question of 'how we can challenge the female culture?' was raised.

An example was given of how when women go to the hairdressers they are offered many brands of women's fashion and diet magazines but not newspapers. Something as simple as asking for a newspaper could make a small difference.

Social Media – Challenges And Opportunities

The younger participants in particular discussed the pros and cons of social media. The lack of regulation in the social media world means that people can say whatever they want without facing any consequences. As such it has been used as a tool for the sexual harassment and threatening of young women by young men. Even - 'violent and horrible things go unchallenged.'

Conversely, the participants felt that it can aid in changing gender dynamics in that it creates an arena for young men and women to interact in non-traditional and less gendered ways.

It was also suggested that when used productively, social media is a great way to challenge sexist behaviour both online and in the media and twitter feeds 'Everyday Sexism' and 'I Need Feminism because...' were cited as useful sites for challenging the trivialisation of sexism and violence against women.

Rural Isolation

Women who live in rural areas tend to face a more embedded culture of gender traditions according to the participants. As such their suggestion was make alliances wherever it was possible with like-minded men and women.

Q2 What actions can we take to improve women's representation and decision making at all levels – community, voluntary and political?

Education Anchored in Equality and Human Rights

Primary & Secondary School Education

The participants felt that young people are key in creating a new culture of gender equality and they suggested that education needs to be anchored in values of equality, human rights and inclusion.

They highlighted the deeply significant responsibility that teachers hold in helping to shape the opinions of young people and the importance of teacher training that reflects the seriousness of this task. It was further stated that teachers need to focus on the empowerment of each student through praise and encouragement, rather than criticism. As such it is important that there are more appropriate role models within the education system.

The question was raised as to whether mixed gender schools are at this stage the most supportive environment for girls. The women felt that girls have a more positive and supportive experience of school within single sex schools.

The idea of engaging youth as soon as possible (e.g. from preschool and infant school) is absolutely essential and that girls need to be empowered from an early age.

Adult Education and Lifelong Learning

It was noted that more men are availing of self-awareness training, personal development courses and lifelong learning in relation to human rights and equality and that this is something that needs further development.

The participants strongly agreed that more opportunities need to be created for men to learn and work together within this context and also for opportunities to be created for men and women to do this together. This would be a very valuable way to gain greater understanding of each other.

Women in p/Politics

Training for Women

Many participants talked about the need for more education and training for women who are already involved in politics so that they can reach a level at which they can influence final decisions. Ideas were also shared by many participants about bringing women on a community level on to the next stage for example local council level.

It was also suggested that a great deal of this training should be designed to 'tackle women's self-confidence issues,' and create motivational drive to move forward.

While it was acknowledged that not all women would like to stand out front, it was also suggested that other women can support those who do want to. It was felt that there was a real need to promote the women who are already active in the community to become positive role models for other women. Education and training was recommended for women working on the grassroots level to representing their community on a political level. This would be a way of tackling the issues that genuinely affect our communities.

One of the younger participants shared how teaching politics to young women has a very empowering effect.

Participants also talked about the need for political parties to fund training for women.

While it was acknowledged that Peace projects have been extremely valuable, the shortcoming was drawn out that the work tends not to continue beyond the remit of the project boundaries.

Penalties for Sexism in the Political Sphere

The question was raised as to whether we have the tools for challenging sexism within the political sphere and if it is the case that there are currently no consequences for this, how is it going to be challenged in the future?

Participants shared experiences of how they were dismissive and ignorant treatment that they encountered from male politicians on entering political spaces. One participant mentioned the sense of women being treated as the 'tea makers.'

A People's Coalition or a Women's Coalition?

There were varying views on the value of creating an all-women's party; some participants felt it was the only way to make progress on family and women's issues on a political level however others suggested that we should be thinking in terms of a 'people's coalition' that brings all people together rather than creating divisions and deepening stereotypes. In relation to this a number of participants also suggested that more opportunities for men and women to work together should be created.

Creating Strong Networks

The value of sustaining the dialogue with like-minded people about women in politics was highlighted as an essential process for creating awareness around sexism in politics – 'we need to keep talking about it!' One participant recommended more of the informal 'kitchen table' conversations between like-minded women as a key part of this process.

The Importance Of Youth

The younger participants talked about the need to encourage youth councils and youth forums and about the importance of also listening to them. They also suggested encouraging as many young people as possible to vote and strategically outnumber those who are sexist in politics.

Holding Those in Positions of Power To Account

While participants acknowledged that change was necessary at every level of society, they also stressed the importance of those at the 'top level' allowing changes 'from the top down.' Women are being trained to a certain stage which stops right before they ever have a chance to influence final decisions and we need to challenge those who are creating barriers to genuine change. It was generally agreed that those who are ready to make changes do not have the resources in place but that in light of RPA now is the time to put these measures in place for women.

Optimisation of Women's Skills

The point was raised on how the skills women in the home employ are in fact highly transferrable to the public sphere. For example the skill of budgeting within the home can be transferred to the community sector. It was recommended by one participant to establish a community-based skills bank for women.

Understanding Diversity

It was felt that in Donegal many young people have never been out of their local area and 'don't know what's out there.' It is not uncommon for young people in this area to not have met people from outside their community. Participants felt that understanding diversity means not only gender equality but also equality on the basis of religion and culture. This is the work of learning to respect difference and identity. In this regard, the question of whether we have genuine representivity - not just in terms of gender but also in terms of race and religion – was posed.

Issues That the Participants Highlighted as being of Most Significance

Q1. How can we challenge the male culture and traditions to make society more equal for women?

- Women need to examine their own attitudes.
- Start with ourselves – stand up and make changes. We have the power.
- Needs to start within the family environment.
- Instead of ‘challenging’ – use less controversial approach. *Empower* men to understand women’s roles and attributes. Educate men and women.
- Men and women need to gain a better understanding of how the other thinks and more opportunities to work together on equality issues.
- Integrated education – nursery /primary school level.
- The point is how we bring up our own children to perceive women as they are the next generation.
- Women’s mind sets need to be addressed.
- Women have a fear of change – no one wants to rock the boat. This fear includes fear of more responsibility.
- In the home women can influence gender stereotyping and equality.
- Women need to be encouraged to stand up for themselves, e.g. promotion in workplaces.
- Surestart programmes make amazing inroads for women and challenges perception – the programme should be extended.
- Women can be their own worst enemies – they should not make value judgements on each other.

Q2 What actions can we take to improve women’s representation and decision making at all levels – community, voluntary and political?

- Women need to be empowered from an early age – when they are young girls.
- Education for women to equip them to move from working on the ground to representing the community on a political level.
- Target women who are already involved at a community level to take the next step onto local councils.
- Tackle women’s confidence issues. Create motivation and drive to move forward.
- Cohesive, collaborative training – no set agenda . . . bringing everyone onboard at the same time.
- Encourage youth council and youth forums and listen to them.
- Young people are key for creating a culture of equality / human rights / inclusion.
- More appropriate role models are needed within the education system.
- Flexibility for different roles – not every woman wants to stand at the front but we can support those who do want to.
- Change is needed at every level including top level allowing changes from the top down.
- More education for women at all levels.
- Create opportunities for understanding cultural and religious diversity – not just gender equality.