



Women: Your Community – Your Role A Cross Border Shared Learning Workshop

*Summary of roundtable
discussions*

**Thursday 6th December 2012
*Armagh City Hotel***

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Introduction of Overall Project

The Women's Resource and Development Agency (WRDA) and the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland and the National Women's Council of Ireland are partners in a Peace 3 project that aims to capture the experiences of women living through conflict and 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 second theme addressed in the project is 'Women: Your Community – Your Role'. Workshops were held in Rathcoole and Monaghan and a final cross-border workshop took place in Armagh on 6th December. A total of 30 women from Rathcoole and Monaghan attended this shared learning workshop and further developed some of the themes raised during the original workshops and proposed recommendations on how 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.

Methodology:

30 women from Rathcoole and Monaghan came together in a shared learning workshop to further discuss and develop recommendations on issues raised during the initial workshops.

The morning began with two presentations from Zoe Gudovic from the Women's Reconstruction Fund in Serbia and Angela Graham for the Cavan Family Resource Centre.

Lynn Carvill and Sinead Lynch presented a summary of the findings of the workshop discussions that happened in Rathcoole and Mongahan.

Facilitated discussions took place around 4 key themes:

- **Caring**
- **Mental Health/ Suicide**
- **Community Resources and Education**
- **Women's Exclusion in Decision-Making at Community and Political level**

Participants organised into mixed groups (Rathcoole/Monaghan) and moved around four themed tables spending 20 minutes dicussing each area. This ensured that everyone had a chance to address each of the themes.

Theme 1: Caring

'Caring Responsibilities' were viewed by both the women in Rathcoole and Monaghan as having a major impact on their lives and indeed taking up most of their time. 'Caring' is a gendered issue as the responsibility for caring mainly falls to women.

Childcare:

The constant juggling of childcare with paid work can be very difficult, especially when you are on a low income.

This is deemed particularly difficult if you are caring for a child with a disability or special needs. This is when the help of extended family members is invaluable as little support is available from statutory agencies. The view was that families in need were deprived of practical and emotional support from statutory agencies.

There were particular issues for parents of children with ADHD. The child can get support until he/she is 6 years old. Subsequently, they must go onto a waiting list.

It was suggested that general practitioners were throwing painkillers and anti-depressants at the problem, refusing to investigate underlying causes.

While school children get assistance in primary school, no help exists for children between the ages of 15 and 18. There is also a general lack of help for children in secondary education.

Autism is a growing problem and it often goes undiagnosed.

There was a view expressed that if we in our society could stop fighting over sectarianism – we could then move to deal with the real life important issues.

Social issues such as illegal drug abuse was raised as a further concern mothers had to deal with. Some mothers were struggling to care for teenage children who suffered ill mental health and misused drugs. They said there was little support available. One mother confronted the drug dealers as Police Service NI had refused.

Women from the southern border counties spoke of the difficulty as a lone parent, caring for and raising children while at the same time working part-time on mandatory labour market programmes (Community Employment). Society's message to lone parents is that 'caring is not valued'.

Some women had given up good jobs to have children. This was necessary as there was little flexibility in the labour market 20 years ago. There was a view that the job market is regressing in this was (losing flexibility for working mothers) because of the recession.

Adult/Elder Care:

Many participants had raised their children and now cared for elderly parents and some were doing both at the same time.

"I paid my mother back for caring for all of us by caring for her for 20 years."

Some of the women described the lack of support – home help only arrived at the last stages and often the women were worn out at this stage.

Other women held down jobs outside the home as well as raising children and caring for elderly relatives. This was only possible with husbands working opposite shifts.

The gendered presumption of 'caring' means there is an expectation that the daughter in the family will provide care. This can cause huge resentment in young girls and women. There is the added concern that many of the women providing care are neglecting their own health.

Other issues raised were the fears of proposals (in the North) around the context of Welfare Reform on the Bedroom Tax. Essentially this proposal would mean that tenants would lose part of their Housing Benefit if they had a spare bedroom in their house. It was also claimed that 'Carers Allowance' has just been cut.

Theme 2: Mental Health / Suicide

The second theme addressed in the cross-border workshop was that of ill mental health and suicide which was viewed as a growing issue in many communities (North and South). The women from Rathcoole believed this problem was exacerbated by stress and drug misuse. In Monaghan there is also a high suicide rate among young men, and drug misuse was also a problem. Furthermore, the financial crisis and ensuing austerity measures implemented by government had led to a cut in frontline services dealing with mental health issues.

Prescription Drugs:

The easy access to and misuse of prescription drugs was viewed as a huge problem in both communities. Free prescriptions in the North exacerbated this growing social problem.

People from the older generation get prescriptions from GPs and then give them to young people in Rathcoole. The young people often sold them on to others. It was the view of the Rathcoole women that GPs had a very laissez faire attitude to monitoring such prescriptions.

Suicide:

Concern about the rise in suicide, particularly amongst young men, was voiced by women from Rathcoole and Monaghan. Alcohol and drug misuse/abuse was seen as fuelling this.

While this particularly affects young men, the older generation is also affected but this is less recognised.

While drug and alcohol abuse were seen as detrimentally affecting mental health and suicide rates, another important factor was the impact and legacy of the conflict, especially on ex combatants and members of the police. Post conflict, many of the 'players' feel they no longer have a role in society. The women felt this issue was not dealt with effectively.

Support Needed to Tackle Ill-Mental Health:

The women wanted to see more resources provided to promote positive mental health and to deal with ill mental health. The cuts to mental health services, particularly in the South of Ireland, were seen as very damaging for communities.

The women believed it was particularly difficult for boys and men to discuss mental health problems. The issue of homophobia and discrimination against gay boys was believed to be a

problem in both communities but more so in Monaghan. While acknowledging this was less taboo than talking about suicide.

It was felt there is still a stigma around mental health illnesses such as depression, however, the women believed that some progress has been made in terms of reducing this stigma. Mental Health issues are less taboo and while this is a welcome development more work needs to be done to open the discussion.

People talk more about depression now – this enables people to get through it but men find it harder to talk. They need strategies to cope. There was a feeling that mental health issues always existed but now can be talked about.

Women and Mental Health:

It was a commonly held perception that women do not prioritise themselves and their mental health – but rather focus their efforts on their families. Female suicide has not grown at the rate of male suicide because women think about the consequences on their families. Women are also more likely to discuss problems (than men).

Theme 3: Community Resources & Education

Meeting Community and Generational Needs:

It was suggested that women living in local communities should be approached and their views sought on what they needed in terms of community educational services. The following methods were suggested:

- Developing a questionnaire to ascertain the needs of local women
- Holding information exchange events
- Public promotion of what already exists in terms of community education and resources
- Holding well publicised open days and information days and spreading information via 'word of mouth'
- The language used to promote courses or information evenings must be accessible
- Provision of education courses at various levels, meeting the needs of women starting education and those wanting to progress
- Meeting the educational needs of women across the generations – they will often be different
- Opening up community spaces that exist / removing gatekeepers
- Provision of a 'shared / neutral' space remains an issue in some communities
- Opening facilities and providing community education and resources at weekends
- Targeting young people and encouraging them to access current community provision

Some of the women from the border counties felt there was good information exchange in the their local community through public adverts and the local resource centre. There were also courses offered to women only. Services and facilities for the elderly were deemed pretty good. In Rathcoole the churches offered various facilities and services to elderly people.

It was recognised that sharing information amongst the women's group members can be simple and effective, it is harder to reach women outside of groups. Extra effort must be paid to this.

Accessing Support External to the Community:

Seeking help from outside the local community is another option. Subsequent to the initial event 'Women: Your Community, Your Role' event held in Rathcoole, Shankill Women's Centre have offered to provide training. Making connections like this and availing of what already exists in the wider women's sector can be very useful.

The women from Clones and Monaghan appeared to have more resources at their disposal than the women from Rathcoole.

Structural Challenges:

The women spoke of structural challenges. The lack of childcare facilities remains a key barrier to women's participation. Childcare services that exist are often cost prohibitive. It is expensive to pay for afterschools club and transport too.

Transport is also a problem. The men in the household often has the car and women must use public transport which does not meet their needs.

Jobs are very limited. Employment training programmes don't help to move people into work because there are no jobs to move into.

Theme 4: Women's Exclusion in Decision Making at Community & Political Level

The overall view was that there are too few women in decision-making roles, both at community and political level. Men continue to predominate at the higher end of most organisational structures. In our society men are more likely to hold positions of power.

Community Life:

Women are more likely to be found in decision-making roles at community level than at political level. However, it is often the case that women carry out most of the work in communities, while men remain in the majority of decision-making roles.

It was suggested that on some community boards/management committees, men have a disproportionate impact at decision-making level; small numbers of men can dominate discussions and decision-making. As one woman said, 'Women do the voluntary work but men make the decisions and take the glory.'

Participants involved in emerging groups said that local men had exerted pressure on them to apply for funding before they were ready. It is often the case that 'men become involved when there is money involved'.

While more men might be found at decision-making level, some community organisations find it difficult to get men involved in their activities. One group had started a football team which was bringing men into centre.

Participants also raised the persistent issue of people asking 'what about men's groups?' when talking about and raising issues pertaining to women's groups.

Politics:

There was a unanimous view that there were far too few women in politics. Politics is very much a male dominated environment and therefore unrepresentative of society.

Participants also said that there were higher expectations of female politicians than male politicians, often because women expected female politicians to represent 'women's issues' as well as the general issues. This can place a lot of extra pressure on women involved in political life.

In relation to the prevalence of men in decision-making roles, participants said that it was much easier for men than for women. Men have more time available to enable work outside of the home as they don't have the same level of domestic and caring responsibilities as women.

Structural Inequities:

Some participants took a historical view of the issue. They said boys and men are treated differently from girls and women from a young age. They spoke of how the largest piece of meat was given to the males at dinner time and how domestic roles were clearly delineated at an early age.

For some women, the reality is that they are controlled by their partners. They don't have access to the household bank account or to transport and they live in abusive relationships. In these type of abusive relationships men undermine the confidence of women and women find they cannot challenge the behaviour.

There was also concern expressed at current welfare reform proposals in the North, particularly how benefits would be paid to one person in a household. It is highly unlikely that this will be the women and will lead to an increase in financial abuse and control.

Conclusion and Way Forward:

It is important that there is equal involvement of men and women in community and decision-making roles but concern was expressed that women are often 'over-committed'. *'Women can't leave volunteer roles because there is no one to take over'*.

Some participants said that women have to learn to trust men to care for children and look after the house. *'It is women who need to change and 'move over'*. The current economic crisis might drive this with more women working outside of the home and men staying at home.

During the discussions a huge emphasis was placed on supporting women and helping them to build their self confidence. Women need to support women and they need to be seen to be doing so. Peer support is very important.

To build confidence, women must be able to access training to develop their skills. It is also important that younger women can avail of this. Women must have a vision of where they want to go and what they want to do and self confidence is a prerequisite.

'Critical mass' is also important. We need great numbers of women to be seen and heard in decision-making roles both so that men (and women) take notice and that their voices and opinions are heard and not drowned out.

We need to challenge gender inequality and sexist behaviour and work with men to promote equality. We need to make men our allies.

Balance is the goal. Women-only decision making is as undesirable as men-only decision making. Diversity is also important in the context of decision making. While gender is overarching and easy to identify, diversity in terms of social class, race, etc is also important.