

Women: Your Community – Your Role. Have Your Say!

Summary of roundtable discussions

Monaghan

Thursday 15th November 2012
The Four Seasons Hotel, Monaghan

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**Women:
Your Community – Your Role.
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Introduction of overall project:

The National Women's Council of Ireland (NWCI) and 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 the next 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: Barriers to Participation. Workshops were held in Rathcoole and Monaghan and a final cross-border workshop will take place in Armagh on 6th December. At this event 'Women, Your Community – Your Role: A Shared Learning Workshop', twenty 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:

Over 40 women from across Monaghan and the surrounding area attended a workshop to discuss and provide their personal perspective on issues on their local community and barriers to participation in their community.

The morning began with two speakers who each provided a contextual presentation. Rachel Doyle from the NWCI explained the significance of UNSCR1325 and Siobhan McLaughlin from the Donegal Travellers Project talked about the various dimensions of women's organising in Donegal and the barriers to participation that the women have faced over the years. There was also poetry and song by members of the local 'Hands Together' group who are Peace 3 funded.

Facilitated discussions took place around six tables with a scribe noting the issues that were raised. Participants were asked to focus their discussions around the following 2 key questions:

- What stops you from doing what you want to do in your life? What would you change?
- Do you feel women's lives are better or worse now than 15 years ago? In what way?

At the end of each table discussion the women were asked to prioritise 1 issue and note these on a flipchart (using a red dot); the priorities from each table were then put up on the wall for all the groups to see. At this point all of the women had a chance to read what other tables had discussed and prioritised. The women then had the opportunity to read priorities emanating from the other tables and place blue dots beside those issues raised which they may not have thought about or discussed at their own table, but deemed important.

A short plenary session ensued.

The following report summarises the topics discussed for each question:

Q1(a) What stops you from doing what you want to do in your life?

Introduction

The issues identified in the Monaghan workshop constitute a matrix of barriers to participation that keep the women from progressing in the way that they feel they would like to and indeed are entitled to.

Lack of confidence and fear of speaking out were issues that were raised throughout the discussions alongside the undervaluing of women's contribution in the home, the community and the workplace. This in addition to women's exclusion from formal political life and the assumption that the state make regarding women fulfilling all necessary caring roles in the community point to internal and external barriers that both run parallel and inform each other. The socio-economic barrier was also a thread that underpinned most of the discussions the effects of which are deeply significant and far-reaching.

Women's Position in the Family

It was noted that women tend to support everyone in the family and absorb feelings of inferiority. The women felt that their own desire to be 'good mothers' and their prioritisation in taking responsibility for family issues has left them in a position that places their own needs last. There was strong agreement that the societal perception of the women is that of the housewife as the natural and expected role and that 'women's primary place is in the home.'

The women also highlighted the fact that the role of carer is foisted onto women not only in terms of caring for children but also for other vulnerable members of the family such as the elderly and those of poor health. They also added that successive budgets cuts to services to the elderly which has resulted in women taking on these caring roles are calculated strategies on the part of the state and amounts to nothing other than "using the recession as an excuse" - for the state to pull back from its responsibility.

Attitudes Towards Women in the Workplace

It was strongly and widely agreed amongst the women that while many women had succeeded in entering the workplace in recent decades, the undervaluing of women's work in the home had simply been transferred to the workplace. In other words women's work both within the home and within the workplace is now undervalued.

There was recognition of inherently sexist attitudes operating within the workforce both by men and by women. One way in which this sexism manifests is through the pressure that is put on women to choose 'either' having a family or having a career. The women also pointed out that this sexism can also play itself out between women themselves - with those who choose to stay at home with their children judging those who choose the focus solely on their careers and vice versa.

These sexist attitudes that over-emphasise women's role in holding the family together are at the root of a commonly-held perception that the breakdown in community life which is a direct result of complex factors relating to the economic recession is in fact a result of 'women going out to work.'

Sexism in relation to work and the recession has also become clearly visible in the increasing difficulty that women have accessing paid employment while access to unpaid voluntary work is not difficult to find.

Many women have had to return to their previous lack of financial independence or being 'kept women' which has impacted on their sense of agency.

Women as Carer's in the Family and Community

An issue that was highlighted throughout discussions was the caring role that is in part foisted upon women within the family and the community. The participants felt that the state 'expect' that women will do the caring work in the family and in the community without being paid.

Moreover the lack of availability and the cost of childcare also makes it difficult for women to get out to work when they have young children.

Some participants noted that in terms of women's work and contribution to the community being valued, they felt that women's ability to show affection and express emotion creates a 'barrier' for them.

The Community Sector

The Challenges of Volunteering

A number of women talked about the socio-economic challenges of working both as volunteers and on funded CDPs since the economic recession.

Volunteering costs money and for most of the women they are already struggling to get by financially. One participant told of how she works as a cleaning lady in the evenings in order to

fund her volunteering. These costs include travel when she doorsteps and home-visit women who are isolated in remote rural areas. There is also communication costs and having no base to work from means using one's own resources.

These efforts amidst such trying circumstances are motivated by the women's desire 'to hear from the women themselves'. This particular discussion was held at a table at which there were a quite a mixture of women from the community sector - the majority of which work unpaid in the community. Some of these women highlighted the importance of involving the most isolated women as it tends to be the 'same women who turn up to activities all the time.'

They also talked about how funded projects often put serious constraints on what can be achieved on a community level. There was a clear sense that the women felt a distinct lack of support from community structures such as the local county councils who they felt had a lack of interest in the women's situations and showed a real lack of responsibility. They also talked about how the state's withdrawal of support from the community sector meant that the community itself need to compensate for the lack of support by working even harder.

One of the results of falling resources is that women are not being informed about their rights and entitlements and often do not even know where to go to access support of various kinds. Another participant spoke about her struggle in entering back into community life after her children were reared and had left the home. She explained she feared not 'having the knowledge' to start volunteering in the community or in going back to education but that it was the encouragement of a friend that had drawn her in.

She added that there needs to be better support structures and also more care in how these structures operate.

Abuse of Power in Community Groups

The issue of building trust on a community level was also raised. Some women felt that it can be difficult to get groups together in the first instance due to the sense of isolation that women are experiencing. Moreover there were strong views amongst a number of women about the damaging effects of power-abuse within the community and voluntary sector.

Another participant shared her experience of volunteering in a local community group in the hope of contributing to her community and overcoming her sense of isolation. She was bullied so badly by two of the board members that she withdrew her involvement in the group and this led to further isolation not only for herself but for the rest of her family. This experience elicited

responses from the rest of the group on how they had experienced or witnessed these kinds of dynamics at work in local community and voluntary work. They felt that members of local boards and committees stayed for too long leading them to believe that they have 'ownership' or 'authority.' It was felt that there is an unfortunate lack of support for women who volunteer both on a structural and a personal level.

Some of the participants felt at a loss to know how to deal with abuse of power. They told how the norm is that anyone who challenges it will not be backed up by fellow volunteers, will not be listened to by those who 'hold the power' and ultimately experience greater isolation instead of the solidarity that they seek in volunteering. These kinds of negative experiences lead to a reluctance to get involved in community projects again. Conversely, other participants felt that one of the things that have changed for the better in recent years is the fact that women are more willing to speak out against the misuse of authority and that they feel they will be listened to.

The Sexualisation and Objectification of Women's Bodies

The sexualisation and objectification of women's bodies was identified as an issue that lies at the core of the under-valuing of women both in wider society and by themselves. It was felt that the ceaseless assault of consumer images issued by the media and advertising that women are subjected to, compound the lack of self-confidence that women have inherited due to their long history of subordination in society. This creates that message that women's inherent value is expressed through how their bodies look and to what extent they compare to the images released by the world of media and advertising. This creates a no-win situation for women in which they feel they are both constantly on up for public scrutiny but also that it defines them as physical / sexual beings to the exclusion of their myriad of valuable skills, talents, ideas and visions. As women it is not a choice but an inevitability to have to continuously have this.

Consumerism and Advertising

Other participants talked about how young women are led by superficial values of marketing and this is creating which focuses solely on image. The immediacy of gratification that this offers consumers cultivates a lack of taking responsibility in young women and this in turn has created a real challenge for intergenerational communication and learning between women.

Women and Political Decision-Making

There was a clear sense of the multiple barriers that women encounter is having their perspective heard in the formal political sphere.

It was felt that nepotism, cronyism, political dynasties and the 'jobs for the boys' mentality continue to dominate the culture of formal politics. There is also the mystification factor that uses consciously inaccessible language that people on the ground do not always understand. It was suggested political decision-making needs to be 'stripped back and opened up.'

Women who do get as far as entering politics must then face the barrier of being either the only woman in the room or being hugely outnumbered. For these reasons many women do not want to get 'sucked into the political system.'

Gender and conflict

It was suggested that the experiences and role of women during conflict to post-conflict is only just now starting to be recognised and explored. Historically and traditionally males are viewed as the victims of war and conflict.

Q1(b) What would you change?

Networking and solidarity

The participants acknowledged the importance of spending time together in order to reflect on issues that women have in common and to work together to highlight those issues. It was suggested that women need to self-organise rather than relying on anyone else and that they need to use the internet to create alliances through networks and forums. Participants also talked about strengthening the role of existing women's groups. It was also widely suggested that women have a duty to support each other – to listen, to care and to strive to understand where other coming are coming from.

It was suggested by some participants that it needs to be acknowledged that there is still no gender equality – this needs to be said and named. The progress made in the 60s and 70s gave the illusion that gender equality had been dealt with and it did bring certain gains. Now, young women are not tuned in to feminist ideology as well as some older women. We could even lose some of what we have gained in the struggles for women's rights if we are not careful.

It was also suggested that wider groups of women need to be brought together by organisations with improved communication in a style that 'everyone can understand.'

Education

The participants noted that women need to be written back into history and into the present time. This they felt, is integral to giving young men and young women a proper education.

The necessity of educating men was also highlighted as well as the need for 'mothers to educate sons' about what gender equality means. It was noted that gender equality is a 'different' kind of feminism to what went before.

Some participants felt that women have received a lot of education over last years – the question is now: how to we move forward to the next level. There was a real sense of urgency regarding this. One participant suggested that for some women they feel too old to change now.

Women in sport – support and encouragement. Empowerment needs to start in schools and colleges, have people come and educate the kids properly on these things

Women and Political Decision-making

In terms of what the women felt needs to change it was strongly agreed that female role-models are very important. There should be local female TDs who are active specifically on women's issues; this work should in particular take in the more isolated rural areas of Monaghan. It was also suggested that women should not wait for change, that the only way change would happen is if we make it happen and that women's strength is also in their ability to make things happen. The example of setting up female political parties such as the Women's Coalition in northern Ireland was offered as one possible option.

Youth and Active Retirement Projects

There was some concern about the lack of youth projects in Monaghan. These have fallen from 17 to 2 projects over the course of the recession.

It was suggested that there needs to be more intergenerational work, particularly youth and active retirement projects.

Mental Health

The benefits of alternative therapies was highlighted by participants as a route that should be utilised to greater affect in supporting women. It was felt there needs to be a greater focus on group work and using creativity as a means for healing.

More specifically it was suggested that drama, dance, mindfulness, exercising and journaling – in collaboration with skilled facilitators and other women is a constructive way to help women build their confidence. It was felt that there needs to be a greater use of creativity in the

frontline mental health services and that there needs to be less stigmatisation of mental health challenges.

Women's Role in the Family

One of the changes that the women felt needs to take place is a more 'open' kind of parenting in which roles are explored and rediscovered. It was also felt that women need to stop taking on so much responsibility and to entrust their male partners with more responsibility in the caring roles.

It was also pointed out that the Irish constitution needs to be changed if it is to become a document that acknowledges the rights and entitlements of women.

Some participants said that women need to trust men more, hand over more jobs and responsibilities relating to care. And it was also pointed out that men need to become more active in taking on caretaking roles within the home. A number of participants explained the importance of women being able to choose what they want to do without feeling a lack of value or self-worth.

Men need to support women so that they can progress in their lives - women's and men's attitudes need to change.

Women as Carers in the Family and Community

In terms of what needs to change it was suggested that sexism in the needs to be challenged, particularly in relation to overt and covert pressure that pushes women to choose between having a family or developing their career.

Female Asylum Seekers

One of round table discussions was held between a group of asylum seekers who clearly outlined what needs to change for them in order to overcome their current barriers. Participants stressed that residency is imperative in order to be able to work and develop their education and training. More generally they stressed their need for independence and choices in their lives. They felt that training in English language needed to increase to help them to progress and they highlighted the necessity for the pre-existing education of asylum seekers to be recognised.

The participants also talked about the importance of various kinds of support, particularly for female asylum seekers. They also noted that support organisations need to be resourced a lot better than they are at present.

Q2 Do you feel women's lives are better or worse now than 15 years ago and in what way?

The participants felt that 'much has improved and in many ways'. The improvements of the last 15 years are listed below:

- Women's issues / equality is being put on the agenda and this has resulted in high levels of awareness.
- We talk more about the issues now.
- Women are more willing to speak out against the misuse of authority and feel they will be listened to.
- Higher level of education now.
- More women out working – gives financial independence and increased confidence
- Boys are being raised differently and men help women out more in the home.
- Health issues for women have progressed – smear / breast-checks.
- More information is available to women about being health-conscious and there is a focus on prevention.
- Attitudes have changed around miscarriage
- Some women can now determine size of families
- There is more help and resources around bereavement.
- There is greater freedom to travel cross-border
 - Only now realise how much it interfered with life.
 - Some women used to be put off the bus and experienced intimidation and control.
 - All of this is a huge change for women in Monaghan – in particular for women in Clones who had been surrounded by the border.
- Peace III has helped to break down barriers
- IT mean there is less isolation
- More opportunities but difficulty to access (worse)
- More security now – safer. Peace of mind. (female asylum seekers and migrant participants)
- We are more aware of bullying – internet
- Education changed (migrant participants)
- No violence – increased personal safety.(female asylum seekers and migrant participants)

- Better medical / health system – can access. (female asylum seekers and migrant participants)

However, there were a number of issues that participants felt have disimproved over the last 15 years –

- Violence against women is still an issue.
- Domestic violence is worse maybe due to unemployment.
- Female asylum seekers have to deal with deterioration in their mental health on moving to Ireland.
- More drugs.
- Alcohol abuse, bigger drink culture.
- More young people smoke, especially girls.
- More violence in community, maybe result of drugs and alcohol.
- ‘Higher financial expectations on us now and it’s a big problem (car tax, household charges, and probably water).
- Communities are more selfish, no neighbourliness, both adults out working, no time.
- Recession has created isolation – can’t even afford to go out for a coffee.
- ‘Our kids are being socialised by social media’
- Less youth clubs since the recession (in Monaghan has gone from 17 to 2).
- Grandparents are providing more and more support for families (since recession) and can be taken for granted - childcare is very expensive.
- Transport is an issue especially for the elderly – lack of buses.
- Cuts to caring professions have led to unnecessary suffering of the elderly and the health boards have also been unsupportive in this regard.
- Young women are not involved women’s rights activism now.
- We now place too much expectation on ourselves due to having to juggle more things.
- More expected – without the necessary tools.
- Women in their late 20s and 30s feel discouraged from having families by their workplaces.
- Although there’s more opportunities but difficulty to access.
- Young women are adjusting to poverty.
- Financial situation changed without role changing.
- Prospects for young people are worse than 15 years ago – more emigration.
- People are more stressed and worried about the future.

Priorities and Conclusions:

All the points that follow are the issues that the women prioritised out of all of the findings as being the issues of greatest importance to them.

Q1 What stops you from doing what you want to do in your life? What would you change?

- Lack of confidence, 'we hold ourselves back because we are fearful or shy.'
- In 'supporting everyone' as the expected role, women absorb feelings of inferiority.
- Women's work inside and outside of the home is undervalued.
- Perception of women as the 'missus' or the 'housewife.'
- Young women feel discouraged from having families by workplaces.
- Female asylum seekers do not have access to work, education and life choices due to lack of residency.
- Bullying of female volunteers by local board and committee members.
- Difficult to challenge the abuse of power in the community sector.

The participants highlighted the following suggestions as the priorities of what they would like to change:

- National organisations need to have a clear message and drive implementation that supports local women's groups.
- More care is needed for the elderly and a fairer deal for carers.
- More organisations should provide opportunities to bring women together with better communication in a style that everyone can understand.
- Women need to be able to choose what they want in life without feeling a lack of self-worth for it.
- More focus on creative ways of confidence-building both individually and in groups, with skilled facilitators.
- More support from men and from society towards women so that they can 'push forward' Men's and women's attitudes need to change.
- Changes in parenting – more open, sharing and caring.
- Change constitution to support the rights and entitlements of women.
- 'Name women in the life cycle.' Write them back into history and the present.
- Quicker asylum system for asylum seekers and more resources for the support organisations.
- More support specifically for female asylum seekers.

Q2 Do you feel women's lives are better or worse now than 15 years ago? In what way?

Areas that are better-

- More women are willing to speak out against the misuse of authority.
- IT has made communication between women a lot easier, creating more support and solidarity.
- Female asylum seekers feel safer since moving to Ireland and children are safer.
- Female asylum seekers have better health care since moving to Ireland,

Areas that are worse –

- Violence against women is still an issue.
- Women are more stressed and worried about the future.
- Financial restriction of the recession hit women particularly hard.
- Grandparents are providing more financial and practical support for their families as childcare is so expensive.
- The education of female asylum seekers is not recognised.
- Lack of residency means female asylum seekers can't work and access education.
- Wider and more extreme abuse of drugs and alcohol in the community.
- More expected without the tools.
- Young women are not involved in women's rights now.
- Young women are adjusting to poverty.