Women:
Community and Political Participation
A Cross Border Shared Learning Workshop

Summary of roundtable discussions

16th May 2013
The Westville Hotel
Enniskillen

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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 35 women from County Fermanagh and Sligo attended a cross border, shared learning workshop to further discuss the topic of women's community and political participation.

The keynote speaker was Maria Hadjipavlou. Maria is President of Hands Across the Divide and a member of the Cyprus Gender Advisory Team. Maria has promoted peace across the divide in Cyprus for the last twenty-five years and is a trainer in conflict resolution and has

been published widely in the fields of conflict resolution and gender issues. Maria spoke at the event about the work being undertaken by women in Cyprus on a voluntary basis to improve relationships between the Turkish Cypriot and Greek Cypriot communities. She spoke of the way women experience conflict and post-conflict situations in a particular way and how this brings a different dimension to the peace building process.

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

1. **What steps or actions could be taken to get more women involved**

   at community level?

2. **What steps or actions could be taken to get more women involved**

   at political level?

3. **Who takes these steps (who makes it happen)?**

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.

Synopsis of issues raised in relation to the above questions:

1. What steps or actions could be taken to get more women involved at <u>community</u> level?

Training and Education

Ongoing training and education provision for women at all levels was identified as a necessary action to allow women to progress in their communities.

Training and education aimed at young women was emphasised. Examples of good practice in relation to this were given such as the schools programmes offered by Fermanagh Women's Aid in local primary schools - 'Heading for Healthy Relationships' and 'Helping Hands'.

It can be difficult to get women to engage in training around community leadership, so it is important to have ongoing personal development courses available to allow women to build their confidence.

Training and education programmes must incorporate equality themes, challenging structural gender discrimination and racism.

Older women wanted to ensure that education and training would also meet their needs and aspirations. They more often than not enjoyed the social aspect rather than viewing it as a means to an end.

Inclusion and Sharing

Women's groups and community organisations need to engage widely in outreach activity to attract more women to their groups/centres and onto their training and education courses.

Personal contact for women (through outreach work) in many local communities is critical to enhancing participation. It is important that we work to overcome the exclusionary work of some gatekeepers in local communities. The objective is to build communities where everyone is included.

Sometimes it may be necessary to move beyond 'inclusion' to 'fair participation'. The point that men usually turn up at community meetings is when money is being discussed or that men are more likely to hold the Chairperson/Treasurer positions was raised. Women must be encouraged and supported to hold their share of these positions. A solution to this problem is ensuring gender balance on management committees and boards, including officer positions.

Recognising Women's Community Work

In the vast majority of cases, women are the driving force of work in their local communities. Women act when they see there is a need to be addressed and this work should be valued by the wider community. Even in the face of adversity, e.g. funding cutbacks, women will find solutions e.g. holding meetings in their home.

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Living in a rural area brings extra obstacles and it can be easy to become isolated. Inclusive networking events in rural areas are an important facility in this context.

How do we ensure this work is recognised and valued?

Visibility and Support

It was a commonly held view that women are not taken seriously and this must change. Women must become more visible in positions of power – we need more female role models to demonstrate the possibilities for younger women.

Acknowledging that many men are supportive of women, it was suggested that women need to support women and resist from 'pulling the ladder up after them'.

Women can often be self-critical and deprecating. We must work to build confidence and change this.

Challenging Culture and Discrimination

Cultural influences in our society lead to men and boys (often) being more valued than women and girls. Men are supported to succeed to powerful positions while women are supported to get married.

We must work hard to challenge discriminatory cultural attitudes embedded in our society while, at the same time, recognising difference.

Services and Supports: Childcare and Transport

The absence of accessible and affordable childcare was widely cited as a barrier to women's effective participation in community life. The solution is to ensure that there is an acknowledgement that many women fit their working lives around caring and there is a pressing need to enhance/create childcare provision. Rurality exacerbates this and this should be factored in.

The issue of patchy public transport provision was raised as a particular problem hindering women's participation in rural areas. The solution is a more integrated system that meets the needs of local people.

Dealing with the Past

An overarching issue identified by women was the need to deal with the legacy of the past in NI and the border counties. 40 years of conflict has been a barrier to women's participation. Pain and hurt exists and it must be dealt with in order to move forward.

Mistrust and fear of 'the other side' is still very much alive in communities. In many rural areas, cross-community work is just beginning and this work must be protected, supported and progressed. Work to build trust across communities must be encouraged and supported.

2. What steps or actions could be taken to get more women involved at <u>political</u> level?

Innovative Marketing and Campaigns

Very practical ideas were proposed to take action and encourage women to become more involved at a political level. These included:
- developing postcard campaigns getting women to write down what they want from their local politicians
- developing small video films promoting the needs and views of women
- creating film / drama / manifesto projects
- tackling issues that predominantly affect women eg. domestic violence, trafficking, and welfare reform

Creating and/or Seizing Opportunities

There are relatively immediate political issues that must be inclusive of women's views and concerns.

We must create and know when to seize opportunities and the current Review of Public Administration / Local Government Reform is such a time. It is important that we ensure the views of women are brought to bear on decisions around this project and simultaneously, the opportunity of imminent retirement of many local Councillors is used to create spaces for women.

It was suggested that there could be a rule whereby politicians must retire at a certain age, thus freeing up spaces for underrepresented groups eg. women.

Political Education, Training and Support

There is an ongoing need for political training and education aimed at women. As well as serving to develop knowledge of the political arena, it would also serve to build participants' confidence.

What does exist in terms of political education and training in the community must be joined up in a more coherent way to maximise effectiveness.

Participants want more events like this one (Peace III workshops) where they can network and have political (big and small P) discussions.

It was suggested that there is a need to (re) establish a political Women's Party.

Engaging Young Women

The need to engage young women was a consistent theme at these events. Political education must begin at a young age; we need to actively target and support young women.

We must change the mindset of girls where they think 'politics is not for me'. Gender stereotyping must be challenged at every level. 'Caring' responsibilities must be viewed equally as a male and female duty. Then this crucially important work in our society will become valued.

Positive examples of projects/movements to engage young women were:
- establishing groups like the 'Belfast Feminist Network'
- increasing women's participation and profile in Young Farmer's Clubs
- the Y project developed by the National Women's Council of Ireland.

Implementing Quotas

The implementation of gender quotas in terms of candidate selection by political parties was proposed as a positive action to ensure more women become involved in political life.

The political gender quota system as recently implemented in the Republic of Ireland (where political parties will lose state funding if they don't put a quota of at least 30% men and 30% women before the electorate) was lauded and held as an excellent example of taking positive action to increase gender balance in political decision-making.

It was felt by some that it was time to demand equality and inclusion rather than promote it.

Dealing with the Legacy of the Troubles

There is a need to deal with the legacy of our past; the conflict and the hurt that has been caused to people that has happened over four decades. Tribal politics, as often played out in Stormont, is unattractive to women and particularly young women. We need to deal with the legacy of the past in order to move forward and normalise politics.

Challenging Culture / Visible Role Models

Challenging the 'male' culture of politics is also necessary. Too often female politicians are treated shabbily and often derided by male politicians. Behaviour towards members of the Women's Coalition is clear evidence of this. Sexism and misogyny is unacceptable and must be challenged and eliminated from politics.

The media also have a role to play in this. Female politicians must be made more visible in the media. Young women need to see more female politician role models.

How politics is operationalised must also be challenged. The long work hours are anti-family and anti-women. Long hours are cultural rather than necessary as is evidenced by the Scottish political experience.

Sharing 'Women's Work'

For women to participate equally outside of the domestic sphere, domestic responsibilities must be shared between men and women. Many women are hindered from participating in community and political life because of caring responsibilities and for the most part these responsibilities are not shared equally within households.

Access to affordable and flexible childcare provision would also enable women to become more involved in political life.

We need to change social attitudes towards women and what society views as 'women's work'. The prevalent societal view remains that women should stay at home while men 'go out' to work. We must continually challenge sexist views.

Women themselves must overcome their 'guilt complex' juggling care and paid work.

Women must be encouraged to support other women.

Role of Political Parties

Political parties have a very important and positive role to play in proactively attracting, recruiting and promoting women within their ranks. Outreach to and support for women within political parties is crucial.

Men in political parties (as well as women) need to proactively seek out women, particularly young women and ask them to join the party.

3. Who takes these steps (who makes it happen)?

Citizens through use of community petition websites.

Political Parties need to use the Sex Discrimination Election of Candidates Order 2002 to implement Gender Quotas for candidate selection.

Women (and supportive men) across Ireland must lobby for a 50:50 balance on decision-making bodies and boards and political institutions.

The Education Minister must introduce politics and citizenship in the curriculum earlier. A gendered perspective must also be included.

Women across Ireland should come together and form a movement to support these endeavours and support each other. Labels (other than women) need to be removed.

The relevant Government Department must ensure greater Internet Broadband access in rural areas to enhance communication.

Women in NI and the border counties need to lobby the United Nations and ensure our voices are heard during the Universal Periodic Review.

Irish Government should lobby and UK Government should implement United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 in NI.

Politicians, Educators, Human Rights activists, grassroots women, journalists, communities all have a role to play in enhancing women's participation in their communities and political life.

Government must ensure women have equal access to money in old age e.g. pensions and childcare provision must be prioritised.