

Women: Community and Political Participation

Summary of roundtable discussions

**18th April 2013
The Clinton Centre
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 40 women from County Fermanagh attended a workshop to discuss and provide their personal perspective on issues affecting women's community and political participation.

The morning began with Aideen McGinley OBE providing a contextual presentation to the audience.

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:

Questions for workshop:

We wanted to find out views on women's participation at community level and political level.

Q.1 How would more women making decisions in community life and political life make a difference?

Q.2 Do you feel women's participation in community and political life 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 issues 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. All notes and feedback are included in the written report.

A short plenary discussion ensued after the facilitated workshops.

Below is a synopsis of the discussions.

Q1a How would more women making decisions in community life make a difference?

Education

Initial responses to this question addressed what women needed in order to become more involved in decision-making. The first 'need' identified was education. Women throughout their life should be able to access education. As one woman said, *'Educate the woman and you educate the whole house'*. Some of the participants said that many women of the older generation need to access education on financial capability.

There was a specific call for women to be able to access education specifically in financial capability. This was seen as an issue for older women who become widowed and find themselves responsible for the household finances for the first time. To have access to such courses through local women's groups would be a welcome development.

Attending meetings/courses through local women's groups was cited as a great way to build social networks and for women to learn from each other.

Building Confidence

The second issue the women raised as necessary to address in order to get more women involved in decision-making was 'confidence building'.

Participants said that women need more advice and guidance and upskilling to develop confidence. Being part of a women's group is a great way to develop confidence.

There was a view that women do not value themselves and a real imperative to build the self confidence and esteem amongst women. Many women have 'run out of energy' – they need empowered and supported.

Women's groups are playing a vital role in communities and society and much of this work is not recognised. The work of women in the community (much of it behind the scenes) should be recognised and valued.

Women and Caring

As well as addressing issues of education and confidence building participants also believed that women's role as carer resulted in them having less time to take on decision-making roles external to the domestic setting. Family commitments are never ending and it just isn't the same for men.

Childcare provision is patchy and hugely expensive – and this doesn't help women move into decision-making roles. Some of the women said there should be crèches available within work places.

On a general level, participants believed that sexism was pervasive. There is a culture where 'men are men and women are women' and men are happy to remind women that they are 'just women'.

Quality of Life would Improve

When addressing the question of how having more women involved in decision-making at community level, there was a strong view that it would lead to an improved quality of life for all – young and old, protestant and Catholic, men and women.

Having more women in decision-making would provide more balanced information to government to inform policy development. An example given was the current health strategy 'Transforming Your Care'. The women wondered if a gendered perspective had been used in developing this policy. Women are responsible for 'caring' in the main. If government are withdrawing services in this area, the work will fall to women.

Other policy areas such as Reform of Local Government, childcare, education and flexibility in work all need to have woman's perspective and this is often missing. Some women spoke about the work Michelle Gildernew has pushed in terms of rural childcare provision when she had been DARD Minister and how it was lost when she left.

There would be more focus on family and social issues. Women use their emotional intelligence more than men and they give a different view as, often their priorities are different. Women are also more empathetic.

Women tend to get things done; they are more proactive. They have a better overview of social problems. Men are more of the view 'if it's not broke, don't fix it'. When women are represented at decision-making level there is a noticeable lack of value placed on the needs of women and children.

There was also a clear view expressed that having an all female decision-making forum is as undesirable as the current situation. Balance is what is required.

Q1b How would more women making decisions in political life make a difference?

When addressing the issue of more women in political decision-making, participants also mentioned some of the barriers facing women. The lack of maternity leave for female politicians was viewed as a problem, as was the lack of female role models and dearth of childcare.

The Male Culture of Politics

The culture of politics was viewed as problematic to women. It's a very male, often aggressive and adversarial.

Participants lamented the fact that women who entered public life often took on male traits and 'played the man's game'. The perception was that they often lose their femininity and take on male behaviours.

The difference between aggression and assertiveness should be taught to political and public representatives.

There was acknowledgement that to have a political life women had to develop a certain level of toughness. The example given was Monica McWilliams and how she stood up to the male politicians. Women had to be very assertive to break into the male dominated world of politics. Much of politics is about playing games and many women simply don't like this. Thus men tend to be more involved in politics with a big 'P' and women more likely to be involved in their community dealing with local issues.

There was also some discussion around the perception that women often don't support women and this needs to change.

Would women make a difference?

The general view was that men in power do not care about women's issues. Women need to be there to ensure that the social, cultural and economic issues that matter to women are addressed. Only women really know 'women's issues'. Childcare, rural issues such as isolation or older people and transport, security and education issues would all be addressed in a more informed and rounded way.

Participants said we need more female role models in political life. Women can be more approachable than men – having women there would make politics more inclusive and transparent. Women would 'cut through the waffle and get things done'.

Again Michelle Gildernew was held up as good example of a female Minister who ensured women's issues were brought to the table in terms of rural policy development.

While politics was viewed as a male bastion of power, another example given was sport and particularly the GAA which was viewed as 'closed jobs for the boys'.

The women believed that there has been some change in terms of women making different job choices and also men working in what would be perceived as 'female' jobs. This was viewed as a positive thing.

As in community decision-making, the women believed that there should be balance in political decision-making. In representative roles like this it should be 50:50 male and female, mirroring the make-up of society. Some women also advocated that quotas be used to make this happen.

Finally in relation to this question the women said that it is important to recognise and value the differences between men and women. Diversity is a good thing and leads to better decision-making.

Q2 Is women's participation in community and political better or worse now, than 15 years ago? In what way?

The general view was that women have become invisible in legacy discussions. There has been so much pain and sorrow for everyone affected by the troubles but women have struggled to find their place in the aftermath. It is also the case that many women have become heads of their households, where their husbands died in the troubles. A discussion also took place around funding community development work. As this is where women are more prevalent in decision-making roles, if the funding dries up, women will lose their jobs. That the legacy of the troubles is viewed through a male lens is exemplified by the Peace money going to the maze project – which is viewed as 'male history'.

Decision Making in Community life

Participants thought that women were much more likely to be found in decision making roles in the community than in political life. Community work suits women better as change happens much quicker than in political life.

In terms of how things have changed over the last 15 years, women have been helped to come together in groups and fund pieces of work through European Peace funding. Before this there was little funding available to enable women to come together and work together.

There is much more activity at a community level now than there was 15 years ago and much more available for women in terms of community education and courses.

Women's participation has ensured there is a more nurturing environment in some local communities and it was believed that their participation at community level has resulted in a greater societal acceptance of women entering public life.

Decision Making in Political Life

Participants voiced a desire to see more women influencing politics in Stormont and in London. They believed that there were more women in political decision-making roles now than 15 years ago – but there still wasn't enough.

There were noticeably more women in Councils but it was acknowledged that the 'game of politics' was not appealing to many women. Women can be put off politics as it often appears to be about scoring points and party politics. Timing and length of meetings can also put women off and there is no recognition of childcare responsibilities. All in all the political process and political parties can put women off becoming involved. There was also a perceived requirement for ruthlessness to get involved in politics.

There was some discussion about the welcome success of the Women's Coalition at the beginning of the Peace process and participants wondered what had happened to the party.

The main view was that politics is still male dominated with women often working behind the scenes.

Women's Lives have Improved

Many of the women believed that the lot of women generally has improved over the last 15 years. Young women are more independent. They are more likely to be working in good jobs for more than just 'pin money'. Their lives are very different to those of their grandmothers. Many more women are out working and it is even sometimes the case that fathers stay at home and care for children.

Young women are educated – they will not be held back.

Women also believed that life has changed for women who haven't married. While their voices were frequently silent within community life in the past – they have shown they can successfully fight for themselves and support themselves.

It was noted that equality is now a legal requirement and this has had a beneficial impact on women's lives.

Women's Lives are Worse

Some of the women said that although legislation promoting equality has been enacted in NI, attitudes have not changed. Gender specific assumptions prevail and mindsets have not changed. While men have a support system (usually their wives) that allows them to become involved in politics; this is not replicated for women.

There is a need to focus our efforts on promoting positive change for the next generation of young women.

Equal Pay has yet to be realised and lack of confidence and shouldering most of caring duties and responsibilities persists in holding women back.

Job segregation is still the norm. Women are still likely to be found in lower paid jobs and men dominate management roles. This persists even though many more women are in the paid workforce.

Conclusion:

Before sharing the main findings from each table at a short plenary session, the women were asked to prioritise the issues they believed to be important. The issues identified are detailed below.

- Access to education throughout a woman's life was seen as being vitally important, building women's skills and confidence. Women need to be taught to value themselves and recognise their skills and abilities.
- Childcare provision and support must be addressed in order to enable women to participate in decision-making roles.
- Women have to work much harder than men to and be more assertive to succeed in a male dominated world. It is important that 'assertiveness' does not become 'aggression'. It is important to have female behavioural traits as well as male ones in decision-making contexts.
- Politics is not very appealing to women – it is often perceived as a male game. There must be cultural change in order to make it appealing. Women are much more likely to be drawn to the less aggressive work of community development.