Women: Community and Political Participation

Summary of roundtable discussions

2nd May 2013
The Glasshouse Hotel
Sligo

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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

26 women from across Sligo / Leitrim and the surrounding area attended a workshop to discuss and provide their personal perspective on issues on women's participation in community and political life.

The morning began with a contextual presentation from Noirin Clancy from the Women into Public Life project.

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

1. **How would having more women making decisions in a.) community life and b.) political life, make a difference?**

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 a few issues and note these on a flipchart. The priorities from each table were then fed back for all the groups to hear.

A short plenary session ensued.

The following report summarises the topics discussed for each question:

Q1(a). How would having more women making decisions in community life make a difference?

It was noted that given that women represent half of the population in Ireland, it is strange that this is a question we have to ask in the first instance.

On an individual level it is not easy for women to make a significant difference – a critical mass is needed before we start to see a transformative impact in the community.

Women's Action-Based Approach

It was noted by a number of participants that the greatest potential impact of higher female participation is to be found in their action-based approach to social problems.

In perceiving a problem, women have both the tendency and ability to 'get to where the problem is and deal with it.' They can use their own experience to relate to the problem and tackle it head-on in contrast with what participants felt was a more masculine approach: to talk about issues but ultimately just put them on the back-burner.

In this regard it was also highlighted that men have a level of comfort with sitting on boards 'for the sake of it' without ever feeling the need to contribute time or ideas whereas if women commit to having a function on a board they will actively engage with the issues at hand, informing themselves in the areas in which they are lacking in knowledge.

Representation and Hierarchy

It was acknowledged that while at community level there are a good balance of men and women engaged in creating change, that women's participation decreases with ascending hierarchy; women become less visible on boards and agencies.

As such the previously mentioned action-based approach becomes lost at a decision-making level as a male-orientated way of coming to agreement is prevalent. Decision-making processes then become less participatory and discussion-based and more about endorsement. It was also noted that men tend to be more 'reward-focused' both on a community and a political level.

It was further noted that the more powerful the board or committee, the less participation and discussion there was likely to take place. Moreover it seems that decisions are regularly made 'outside of board structures' and the ethics of this style of 'governance' remains unchallenged by men.

Many women do get involved in the community and voluntary sector because being based in the home gives them the flexibility to do so however it is nonetheless mainly men who take on the 'leading roles' within the community sector.

Shared Participation and Responsibility

It also acknowledged that domination by women in decision-making is also not a useful solution. One participant gave the example of an all-female board she has been part of as being 'an awful experience' and that all female participation led to micro-management and getting too caught up in the 'nitty gritty' of issues.

In order to spearhead a new and more participatory style of decision-making, a gender balance is vital. i.e. neither male nor female domination. Each gender has unique experiences and in order to truly support the needs of *all* of the people, both lenses must be looked through. This calls for 'balanced decision-making.'

Many participants pointed out that the committees and boards in the community and voluntary sector tend to be dominated by men. It is rare to find equal participation on boards and chairs of boards and committees are invariably male. This results in the sidelining of the female perspective which tends to focus on the needs of all of the community. It was also pointed out that there are more than enough capable women to participate on boards and as chairs.

Q1(b). How would having more women making decisions in political life make a difference?

A Perspective for the Needs of the Family and the Whole Community

Many participants were convinced that the involvement of more women in political life would result in a greater focus on the needs of the family and *all* people in the community. This they believed was due to women's unique experiences in nurturing, in their ability to listen, understand and empathise with the struggles of other human beings.

It was felt that a greater number of women would bring in the 'women's perspective' which is nothing other than a focus on the needs of everyone in the family and the community.

A number of participants talked about Marian Harkin, MEP for Ireland North & West Constituency and how unlike her male colleagues, she interacts with the public. The question was raised more generally about how willing male politicians are to interact and respond to the requests of the people they represent.

They also noted that because of her European focus it can be easier to create positive outcomes for women. One participant also gave the example of her campaigning Europe to get a special mirror on lorries for the 'blind spot'. This is an example of how women look at what will benefit the wider community and act accordingly.

It was more generally noted that all the fact that the Irish government is predominantly male is reflected in the decisions that are taken regarding budget allocation – money is not used in ways that benefit children and family life.

An Understanding of Marginalisation and Diversity

For women who live at the margins of the community such as asylum seekers and traveller women, participation is significantly more difficult. Therefore our approach to balanced gender participation must be culturally aware also.

Many participants felt that the way in which marginalisation and diversity is ignored and glossed over at the political level must be discussed, debated and challenged and that the 'cosiness must be broken.'

In terms of women's representation, recognition that women are a diverse group – is essential. It is impossible for one or two women to represent all women.

One participant acknowledged that every women will at some time in her life experience marginalisation due to 'being a woman.' As such women as a broad group in society have generally speaking, a better understanding of marginalisation and a greater empathy with the marginalised in our communities.

There was a great deal of discussion on the unfair situation that asylum seekers face. Whatever about the challenges that citizens face in participating in community and political life, as non-citizens asylum seekers do not even have the right to participate.

A number of female asylum seekers involved in the discussion agreed in their experience women listened when they shared about the conditions they are forced to live in and that they

believed that having more women in political life would lead to better conditions for asylum seekers. They pointed out that local politicians, most of whom are male – have never come to visit them. They also suggested that it is not up to them as asylum seekers to come out into the community – that they are afraid and do 'not have a voice'. Irish citizens should go to them in their direct provision centres and show that they are welcome. They need to feel this before they 'come out and participate.'

Despite this there already is good participation of female asylum seekers in women's community groups and that we must be careful not to automatically say that they or women in general do not have a voice. The very fact that we do meet on a community level and have these kinds of discussion is powerful and not to be under-estimated.

A number of participants strongly recommended that rather than first focusing on getting 'more Irish women in politics' and then focusing on culturally diverse women being represented that it is crucial that we set the example by promoting women of all cultures and backgrounds to run for election. It was also suggested that even if female asylum seekers cannot vote or run for election that we should still be working together and that they can certainly support in preparing other women for election. It was noted that women of diverse backgrounds have immense knowledge, experience and skills to share. For example the female asylum seekers experience of living in conflict zones is invaluable for the island of Ireland as a post-conflict society.

The Need for the Creation of Solidarity Between Women

Participants talked about how the 'old boys club' culture shared by men means that they are able to operate as a group in contrast to women who act from an individual position. In other words 'you are on your own.' The need was highlighted for women to strengthen their communication and networks in order to support each other in entering positions of responsibility.

Q2. Do you feel women's participation in community and political life is better or worse now, than 15 years ago? In what way?

The Importance of Role Models in the Last 15 Years

Some participants felt that the impact of Ireland having had two female presidents over the last 15 years should not be underestimated. Both of these women made great advances in terms of humanitarian action, diplomacy and their general approachability. In particular Mary Robinson did more to contribute to the peace process in Northern Ireland than any of the men in the south who held power at the time.

A momentum has been and will continue to be created as a result of the work of both female presidents.

It is important that young generations of people grew up when both women held presidency so as to normalise the idea of women holding power. Conversely it was noted that when young women grow up without female role models in politics they grow up to understand the role of women as the 'doers' and men as the 'decision-makers.'

It was noted that on a local level participation of women in politics has been very poor. However a number of participants mentioned Marian Harkin, MEP for Ireland North & West Constituency and how unlike her male colleagues, she interacts with the public.

Crossborder Relations

A number of participants spoke about the positive contribution of crossborder projects in the last 15 years. One participant gave the example of a crossborder women's poetry project which had been an enlightening experience for her. She told about how although it had been a disturbing experience going across the border, the women 'respected each other's stories and of how now the 'artwork remains.'

Participants also highlighted the difference it has made to their ease of travel to the north that there are no longer soldiers patrolling the border areas.

It was also acknowledged that valuable crossborder youth projects have taken place for example those that use sport to bring young people north and south, together.

Violence at a Community Level

Some of the women talked about how although some of the more overt violence has reduced since the peace process that violence still exists in other forms on a community level. Concern was expressed about how young people are entrenched in violence – that it lives on beneath the surface in our communities and is easily activated.

This tendency towards violence is being exacerbated by the various manifestations of crime, poverty and stress resulting from the economic recession. Unemployment is leaving young people with too much spare time and creating conditions for destructive anti-social behaviour. It was further noted that people become unemployable when they have been out of work for too long.

Recession and Contraction of the Community Sector

A number of participants felt that where women's situation should have improved over the last 15 years in terms of advocacy, in fact energy was still being poured into service delivery on a community level.

Furthermore, due to the recession women have been losing autonomy on a community level as a result of funding cuts. More generally it was felt that women have been left to 'pick up the pieces of austerity.'

It was also noted that some of the community-based initiatives are nothing other than 'tick-box exercises.' The example was given of the projects carried out with traveller women – where organisations work with the women but never go back to measure impact and outcomes.

A number of participants also observed contraction on the level of the individual due to fear and uncertainty fuelled by the recession. They felt that rather than challenging inequality, many people 'shut-down'.

Progression in 'Women's Issues'

The participants acknowledged gains made for women regarding freedom to use contraception and more open discussion about sex. It was however also acknowledged that progress needs to be made still since contraception is seen as a 'women's issue.'

The personal safety and security of women was also highlighted as an area that had gained greater attention in recent years. Although despite increase in these discussions it was felt that domestic violence had become 'almost acceptable.'

It was felt that sexism still exists at all levels of society and that women's participation has not improved at a political level. Despite the fact that women are the majority they are treated as a minority and do not have a voice on a number of levels.

The Political Response to Cultural Diversity

It was noted that despite the significant expansion in diverse cultures in Ireland over the last 15 years that there has been a lack of responsibility taken on a political level.

Politics in Ireland remains a 'closed shop' and the cultural diversity which is meanwhile the reality of our demographic is not reflected in who represents us politically. Participants felt that politics should be representative of our population.

One participant also felt that particularly in rural Ireland that there has been a general reluctance in Irish people to acknowledge and adapt to the multi-cultural nature of their own country and that the government bear a responsibility in educating and creating awareness about treasuring cultural diversity. More generally there is structural support of discrimination towards immigrants.

Another participant spoke about how the rapid change in Ireland's cultural demographic could have potentially sparked actions for positive change that would have included higher participation of women in politics but that this had not happened.

However it was also acknowledged that the gender quotas are a step in the right direction.

Education and Job Creation in the Last 15 years

Positive progress in local third level education was highlighted through the continuing development of Sligo IT. However it was also noted that so many graduates have had to leave since 1998 in order to find work outside of Ireland.

It was also noted that the west of Ireland is a 'black spot' in terms of job-creation and this is due to local polities not delivering on the promises they have been making.

A New Critical Awareness towards Politics

A number of participants highlighted a general raising of collective critical awareness in Ireland in relation to the reality of our political culture. This awareness is also linked in to what is happening on a global level where we are seeing the 'stifling' nature of political life. Corruption has been revealed and people are no longer so easily fooled.

Our Current Opportunity to Create Change

Despite the gap that still exists between our discussions on women in community and political life and what is happening in terms of participation, one participant spoke about how we are 'on the cusp of great change.'

There is power in the fact that women are getting together at the grassroots level to hear each other's ideas, support each other and strategise.

Although women tend to perceive the problems that need to be solved they tend not to believe that they can effect change and use their voices. Participants felt that women are still fearful of getting involved in politics.

As such it is also very much up to women to put themselves and each other forward – 'we must change.' Women do not even need to be on the same parties as it may not be practical to have a party of independents but at the same time than having our needs swallowed up by party lines we can be supportive of each other across political parties.