

Women: Making a Difference

Summary of roundtable discussions

**12th June 2013
Letterkenny**

**Written by:
Sinéad Lynch (Project Coordinator for Southern Border Counties)**



European Union

European Regional
Development Fund

Investing in your future

Women: Making a Difference
Summary of Roundtable Discussions
Gallaghers Hotel, Letterkenny
12th June 2013

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 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

11 women attended a workshop to discuss and provide their personal perspective on issues on women and institutional change.

The morning began with a panel presentation from Finola Brennan of The National Women's Collective, Donegal Women's Collective, Mary McKenna of the Donegal Domestic Violence Services and Lynn Carvill, a former member of the Civic Forum.

Facilitated discussions took place around two tables with a scribe noting the issues that were raised on the broad question: 'How would having more women participating in making decisions on strategic bodies / decision making institutions, particularly those established since the Peace Process (i.e. over the last 15 years) make a difference?'

Participants were asked to focus their discussions more specifically around the following 2 key questions:

1. How would having more women participating and making decisions on strategic bodies / decision-making institutions, make a difference?
2. Do you feel that women's participation on these bodies /groups 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.

Below is a synopsis of the discussions.

1. How would having more women participating and making decisions on strategic bodies / decision-making institutions, make a difference?

Experts in Collaboration with Diverse Experience

Participants shared how they saw women as having particular expertise in collaboration, a lot more so than men. They felt that women have, generally speaking, a consultative approach that includes multiple perspectives.

This approach is a benefit that has been created by their unique life experiences that have resulted from women's centuries of historical experience at the centre of family life. This has created a natural predisposition to focus on the common good in contrast to men who generally tend to be more power-orientated.

Participants suggested that if there were more women on decision making bodies, their focus on family welfare would be carried into the processes which would be incredibly beneficial to society.

The work that women do in the home was likened to that of a manager. The value of this particular type of managing is that it tends not to be rooted in power for women – which when transferred to decision on strategic bodies and decision making institutions – is highly unique and beneficial for all involved.

Two examples of women within the political sphere that epitomised the 'soft power' associated with these kinds of qualities are Mary Robinson and Mary McAleese, whom the participants felt are 'fabulous role models.'

A Feminist Perspective on Decision Making Bodies

The value of having a feminist perspective on decision making bodies was highlighted as a necessary means to challenge biased attitudes and behaviours.

The participants observed that in Ireland all of the final decisions that impact in a significant way on society are made by men – this also includes decisions on issues that are well beyond men's experiences. One example that was given of this was the male dominated discussion on abortion.

It was suggested that due to a deep seated fear of sharing or 'giving up' power, men in Ireland 'won't accept women's opinions.' It was felt that women are included at some levels as a means of 'pacification' but that women are not 'actively included.'

As such many women feel that participating in these kinds of spaces is tantamount to 'collusion.'

In Donegal only 3 of the 29 county councillors are female and none of the 9 urban councillors are women. One participant highlighted the serious need for more projects that address gender balance on decision making bodies.

Developments in Education

Education for the Youth

The participants talked about the need to provide equality education for boys and girls from an early age so that both do not see the other as a threat. The rationale for this is that children are very accepting and have an innate sense of fairness when they are young. This means that by gaining 'a proper education' early on they are able to hold onto and develop their natural capacity for equality. It was also suggested that children's innocence allows them to 'see to the heart of matters,' and that they consequently have more insight into equality issues than adults.

The introduction of civic social political education (CSPE) as an exam subject at junior cert level was said to have been highly beneficial for teenagers in terms of understanding gender equality. Participants suggested that this kind of education needs to be introduced a lot earlier.

It was acknowledged that the role of the youth council has been instrumental in helping young people understand gender equality.

Education within the Home and Flexibility within Gender Roles

An area that participants suggested further development in terms of education was the home.

They felt that this is the primary site for learning and that role-modelling happens within the family has an immense impact.

It was suggested that there should be training to help men understand how important they are as fathers and that there needs to be greater flexibility in domestic roles.

Moreover, participants said that many women feel that men don't know how to run the home and are as such reluctant to share their responsibilities. In this way it was suggested that women need to take responsibility for making changes in the division of labour in the home. In other words women 'need to let go of control in the home if they want to participate more in community and political life.'

A number of participants talked about how there has been a tradition to give men 'preferential treatment,' within the home in the form of 'pampering.' It was suggested that women need to reflect on this and see if there could be a more balanced approach to how men and women are treated within the home.

In terms of power relations within the home, it was suggested that domestic violence is learned behaviour and that women who have witnessed it from childhood tend to expect to be undermined by men.

While there was no dispute over the fact that there needs to be suitable education for enabling women politically, it was also suggested that regardless of a woman's role in the community – the role she assumes is vital in forming the perceptions of her children. For this it is important to have a 'network of support.'

Participants also pointed out that all of us are both learners and educators throughout our lives.

Normalisation of Gendered Behaviour in Politics

It was mentioned a number of times that we live in a 'catholic, patriarchal society.'

The participants felt that the realm of politics is still the 'boys network' and that women's tendency to show empathy and emotion is frowned on within political life. They said, however, that the 'Maggie Thatcher' style of engagement seems to be acceptable.

More specifically if the lack of women's voices within the recent abortion debate in the south was highlighted and also about the surreal situation that saw final decisions on this being made by men who in fact have no experience themselves of the issues.

One participant pointed out that when people speak from the heart that they are listened to in current times as there is a collective desire for a leadership of care.

It was suggested that many women distance themselves from politics as they think it is about conflict and 'men shouting at each other.' Children also tend to perceive it in this way. One participant said that if women realised that politics is just about 'everyday living' and how to 'improve community life' they would not take this kind of distance.

In this regard participants felt it is very difficult to diffuse the 'old boys network' to the extent that makes it obvious that politics is about the lives of everyone in the family and in the community.

Comments were made about the strategic ways in which women are used in politics. It was also noted that cooption within political parties is a regular occurrence and that women are strategically positioned to get the vote in particular areas. To say that there is an imbalance of power in Irish politics would be to understate the situation.

Despite the changes that have resulted in the 30% female candidate selection, there was a lack of conviction about this having any kind of meaningful impact on the power imbalance, given the underhand ways in which politics operate in Ireland.

A few participants felt that having more women in the political sphere would mean that actions would be taken more efficiently and swiftly and that a lot more would be achieved within the 9-5pm timeframe as opposed to the 9-midnight timeframe. Another participant suggested that politicians often must do evening work in the form of meeting and greeting and that male politicians are able to do this because they have a female partner keeping things running at home. Conversely one of the main barriers for women wanting to get involved in politics is the that they do not have this support of their male partners within the home.

There was strong agreement over the necessity of mentoring young women to participate in politics.

2. Do you feel that women's participation on these bodies /groups is better or worse now, than 15 years ago? In what way?

Changing Gender Dynamics within the Family

Participants felt that there has been a marked improvement for women in terms of the structure of the 'nuclear family.'

A few decades ago it was completely unacceptable for a woman to have a baby outside of marriage and it was also frowned upon if a woman decided to leave her husband and raise her children alone.

It was felt that single parents – both men and women – do not have to endure the same kind of marginalisation that they have in the past.

It was suggested that women now realise that they 'don't have to put up with nonsense.'

In terms of further development the participants suggested that mothers need to teach their sons to value women and that boys and young men be encouraged to do the traditionally 'feminised' subjects in school, such as home economics. They also suggested that parents need to really 'nurture' their sons.

Three participants shared personal experiences from their families that illustrated how they were very much encouraged by their fathers to take on careers that were traditionally male and told that they could accomplish anything they wanted. Conversely the same participants spoke about how it was their mothers that did not support them in this regard.

These participants talked about the 'empowering' experience they had in being supported by their fathers in this way. They did, however, stress that despite the positive foundation that had been laid for them in the home that they encountered prejudice regarding their 'empowered' way of approaching their careers from wider family and the community.

This discussion was rounded up with the conclusion that women should stay firm in choosing exactly what they would like for their own lives and not to be swayed by other people's agendas or narrow views.

It was noted that these kinds of gender prejudices can be stronger in rural areas.

Finally it was suggested that sometimes women are afraid to 'be seen' to fail and that it is vital that women push themselves out of their 'comfort zones,' taking on the attitude that if something does not work out it is not a 'failure' but that that it is an indication that they need to try things in another way. In other words it is vital that women never give up.

Finally it was mentioned the traditional role of women has been greatly influenced by the UK as a result of the movement of Irish women over to the UK for pregnancy terminations.

Changes in Education

There were a number of young women present in the discussion who were able to highlight how things have changed in the education system for young women and also what still needs to change.

They noted that even in situations where boys are outnumbered by girls in the classroom that the girls are afraid to speak out and use their voices. However one participant shared her experience of how after 12 months of volunteering together with other young women she noticed that they learned to support each other and speak out in the classroom.

Another young woman talked about the lack of role modelling for boys within the school system and about how sexism is often encouraged. She gave a real life example of a male teacher whose behaviour was 'highly unprofessional,' in that he asked girls had expressed views on gender equality 'if they were lesbians.'

It was noted that women's self-esteem builds through experience they get older and that there is a need for a 'safe space within the educational system for young women's voices to be nurtured.'

Participants talked about how much more still needs to happen within the education system in empowering young men and young women. It was noted in particular that young men need to be 'nurtured,' by appropriate role models.

It was felt that school is a wonderful place to introduce ideals of equality and acceptance but that this should happen from pre-school level in fact.

The work that is being done in schools by the Donegal Domestic Violence Services was lauded as being incredibly valuable and is certainly a significant development of the last 15 years. Participants felt that this kind of engagement is vital for men and boys.

In terms of further development it was suggested that working with children from a very early age within education is the key. Children's 'honest, open and fair,' approach gets 'right to the heart of matters.'

It was acknowledged that the youth council have had a significant role to play and this is one that should be encouraged even more, including mentoring for young people.

The Benefits of Crossborder / Peace-Funded Work

There was very positive feedback on the effect of cross border and peace-funded work.

It was felt that EU and peace funded work has improved the quality of life for women in that it has created spaces for women to gather, share and to learn to be empowered together.

It was however added that there is a need to include 'all' and not just 'some' women and that these changes whilst positive within the realms of an individual woman's life or within a community group – has been a kind of contained change that has not be followed up on or extended beyond women's community groups. In otherwords beyond the all-female community spaces there is still in fact a 'lack of equality for women,' in Donegal.

The Contribution of Community Education

The value of community education was said to have made a 'massive difference,' over the last 15 years.

The example of the 'Women into Public Life' project was mentioned as a very positive experience for the women involved. It was emphasised that these kinds of projects 'need to be delivered locally.'

The recognition that 'we are all learners and educators,' is a new realisation over the last 15 years that has been a direct outcome of the contribution of community education.

It was also mentioned that the feminist perspective that has been present in some community programmes has created a sense of solidarity between women and has addressed the sense of isolation that many women in Donegal might have previously experienced.

It was also noted that women are definitely more visible now than 15 years ago and that this is in part due to the great support that they have been giving each other.

To challenge gender inequalities having had the awareness of what needs to change and how for each person woman or man to take responsibility in making a difference.

Under Resourcing of the Women's Sector

It was noted that there have been huge cuts to the women's sector in recent years which has seriously impeded the progress that was being made regarding women's equality.

Participants talked about how funding criteria has moved from social to economic areas and that there is no long term financial commitment to women's groups.

Consumerism, Media and the Sexualisation of Women – Who Needs to Change?

There was a discussion about where the responsibility lies in challenging the sexualisation of women by the media.

Some participants talked about women's lack of visibility in terms of political participation – however in this part of the discussion it became apparent that women are indeed visible – but not in the ways that many women would like to be.

It was noted that it is women's responsibility to challenge the sexual stereotyping by the media, something which participants felt has become more extreme in the last 15 years.

More specifically the music industry that shows a culture of the pornification of women needs to be challenged. This, participants felt is a 'subtle desanitisation of human life,' and is an attack on the 'respect and dignity of women.'

We need to reflect on what we do and don't want visibility on.

It was also noted in relation to women who hold positions of power in the public eye, that there is a tendency for the media and wider society to focus on appearance rather than achievement. The example was given that the media were always attentive to which designer had designed Mary McAleese's suit or dress for civic appearances but with Michael D Higgins he 'might as well have bought his suit in Dunnes Stores for all we know.'

In this regard participants said that women are complicit in this focus on women's appearance and that we can all be guilty of passing comment on how women in the public eye look.

It was suggested that because there is such a strong focus on how women look and that this focus is on the sexual objectification of women – that this seriously impacts on how women see themselves.

One participant stressed the importance of women accepting themselves as they are rather than trying to fit in with a cultural stereotype. It was also noted that young women have become a lot more focused on how they look in recent years and that in this way actively participate in being visible in the wrong way.

The observation was also made by participants that no matter how women are or what they do that the media will always question it. As such there is also an unconscious absorption of media views in society that causes everyone to objectify and question women.

In terms of younger women it was also observed that social media, including the use of instant photo and instant video is playing a significant role in perpetuating gender stereotypes.