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

Summary of roundtable discussions

East Antrim

Thursday 8th November 2012
Eastway, Rathcoole

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Introduction of overall project:

The Women's Resource and Development Agency (WRDA) and the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland and the National Women's Council of Ireland 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 30 women from across East Antrim 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 Betty Carlisle MBE providing a contextual presentation telling the audience how Shankill Women's Centre started and how it has developed over the years.

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.

Synopsis of issues raised in relation to the above questions:

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

The women had a wide and varied discussion on issues they perceived presented barriers to participating fully in their community and beyond.

Self esteem/Confidence:
Poor self-esteem and self confidence was raised by many as an obstacle. Many of the women 'didn't believe in themselves'. Low levels of confidence and self esteem led to them holding back from participating fully in their communities. Local programmes and events were seen as 'not being for me'. This was coupled with a lack of 'peer participation'. A desire to be 'accepted, included and not judged' was expressed.

Support with Caring responsiblities:
It was clear from discussions that the women felt strongly that 'caring responsibilities' took up a very large part of their time and that their inability to access affordable and appropriate childcare hinderered them from participating in activities and work outside of the home. Some cited care responsibility for elderly relatives as an issue; others care for their own children and some women provided childcare for their grandchildren. While lack of 'caring' support was viewed as a barrier, the lack of support in terms of caring for disabled children/relatives was raised as a very serious concern.

General childcare facilities, while scarce, were available but cost was viewed as a further barrier for women. Private childcare was viewed as prohibitively expensive and also limited in terms of availability ie. impossible to access for evening work. Therefore many women relied on grandparents for childcare. The most marked gap in childcare support and provision was viewed in relation to children with special needs and children with disabilities. It was strongly felt that that there is a total lack of childcare provision in relation to support for children with special needs and children with disabilities and this was a huge barrier to women's participation outside of the home.

The need for education in relation to parenting skills and 'special needs' and helping children with aspergers syndrome and ADHD was also expressed.

Unemployment:

There was a strong view that there were few jobs available locally and unemployment was an enduring problem across the area. As it was problematic for the local men to access employment, many of the women didn't think it was worth trying. Even for those who were highly motivated it was viewed as an almost impossible task to find a job. Women spoke of the lack of availability of part-time employment that would allow them to juggle their domestic responsibilities with paid work. Lack of public transport to access jobs outside of the local area was also cited as a problem.

Health/Mental health

Ill health and mental health were purported as being key issues for women. Depression was prevalent and there was a lack of local mental health service provision. The women said that there was still a lot of stigma surrounding poor mental health but that more positive media coverage on the issues was helping.

Issues around family planning services were also raised; specifically that there is no women's clinic and family planning services can only be accessed by appointment and there were often delays.

Education:

Various concerns around education provision were raised by the women. They believed that there was a real need for more community based education addressing literacy and numeracy essential skills and also women only education courses.

There was also a real need for community based education to address issues around diversity eg. Culture, disability, religion etc. This would go some way to addressing what was viewed as a key problem in the community – bullying.

Essentially they believed there was a lack of locally based education courses for women, as well as a lack of funding for training, lack of childcare and affordable afterschools provision and many local facilities were not actually accessible to the local community. Everything closed down at the weekend – when it was most needed.

Bullying and lack Facilities for young people:

This issue was raised as a key concern by participants and was viewed as a major problem within the local community.   They expressed worry about children's welfare and the belief that

'bullying' was on the increase. It was not safe to let young children to go to local parks as these spaces were used by teenagers to drink alcohol.

There is a notable lack of facilities available for children who are 12+. Specific facilities were needed for these kids including information and preventative work. Children need to be educated in terms of 'diversity' and difference eg. Disability and ADHD. It was believed that this would reduce bullying. More help for parents, in terms of advice and information was also expressed.

Infrastructure:
Important infrastructures such as transport and community resources were viewed as deficient.

The capacity to work on funding applications in terms of time and resources was a problem. It was difficult for small groups to access funding and comply with all that comes with securing funding – all of the paperwork!

The women wanted to see more facilities made available for older people and youth. They wanted a support structure to deal with pressing community issues eg. Suicide. A view was expressed that there should be a more 'joined-up' women's partnership.

Lack of information on 'what was available'
It was a strongly held view that there was a lack of information on what facilities and resources actually exist for the local community and that this was only apparent to those 'in the know'. It was 'who you knew' that opened up this kind of information.

Feelings of 'being out of the loop' and a lack of general awareness were cited as key concerns for women in terms of trying to connect with what was happening in the local community.

Internal Community issues
Finally, the issue of internal community friction was raised as a concern and barrier to full participation in local communities. Local people were divided politically and there are few community venues that local people view as neutral. The perceived 'neutral' venues that do exist were costly.

Some of the women spoke of their fear of speaking out within the community, in case it offended someone and led to repercussions for themselves or their family. The women believed that externally there was a poor image of their community.

They also believed that there was a distinct lack of political leadership shown within their community. Politicians were 'nodding dogs'.

Q1(b) What would you change?

Help with caring:
The women wanted more help and support with caring. This could be in the form of improved availability of affordable childcare, financial help with childcare costs especially for people on low/medium incomes or proper childcare facilities for children with disabilities.

Carers of people who are ill/disabled required extra support, ideally based in the local community. It was also a strongly held view that 'Access NI' checks should happen for anyone who is providing care.

Community development and facilities:
The women were very keen that local positive stories are promoted to dispel apathy within the community. They believed that there was a strong need for area regeneration eg. Rathcoole should be reclassified as an 'area of need'. There was a real need for the provision of better facilities for community development work and local service provision.

The women wanted training and employment provision for young people and the long term unemployed. They wanted better access to the local community groups for women, children and families.

People who lived in the local estate should be able to attend school in the local area. The school should be right at the centre of the community – the hub of the community. They wanted to see more events happening through the school and better use made of the football pitch

Changing attitudes:

The women wanted to see changing attitudes to anti-social behaviour. They also held a strong view that the attitudes of some local men needed to change in terms of how they treat 'women – only' groups.

Training/Education:

'More and high quality education available to all' was expressed as a desire. The women wanted to see training courses for parents, on essential skills and particularly they wanted courses to develop women's confidence and self-esteem.

Coupled with wider community based education provision was the need for information to be disseminated widely through the community.

More Information to reduce Isolation:

Participants really wanted to see more networking and sharing of information. They wanted to see outreach work happening locally to ensure that those most in need could access information on what services existed locally. There was a view that there was a lot of isolation experienced in the local community and that this must be tackled. Networking, sharing facilities and ideas and engaging local volunteers were cited as a way forward.

The need to make better use of current resources was stated and more effort to work together to prevent suicides in the local area was also viewed as important

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

Generally the women felt that the issues of concern they are facing now are as numerous but generally different than those from 15 years ago.

Community:

The community was perceived as being more fragmented now than 15 years ago. There was less communication with neighbours etc. Facilities and services available have been depleted over the years. Advice services were viewed as difficult to access and this created more problems due to the current recession.

While there is money going into the community there was a prevalent view that it mattered 'who you knew' in order to access certain facilities/services. Many discussions and decisions that impacted on communities 'happened behind closed doors' and in essence were exclusive. Also there was a view that community work was benefitting men more than women.

It was reiterated that there was still a real need to educate and train women, provide childcare and develop local women's groups.

A major change was cited as cross-community work being more acceptable within the community. People were more willing to come forward to do community work.

Some women also felt safer in their community now than then.

Social Issues:

Unemployment, mental ill health and suicide and drugs (legal and illegal) were all viewed as a growing concern.

The lack of jobs and training for young people in the area was viewed as a major concern. Lack of childcare provision for young women doesn't help. Suicide and poor mental health were seen as more of a concern now than 15 years ago. Ease of access to both illegal drugs and prescription drugs (through GPs) were seen as leading causes in the increase of mental health problems.

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Welfare Reform was also mentioned a very current concern for the women. Cuts to welfare benefits were frightening at a time of high unemployment and recession.

Children's Safety:

Some of the women said that they dreaded the future for their grandchildren. Bullying (against children and young people) was a major and increasing concern and was much more prevalent than 15 years ago. Due to the internet and modern technology (mobile phones and social networking sites etc.) it was impossible for young people to escape bullying or to have a place where they could feel safe. Bullying can now occur 24/7.

Generally the women were worried about children's safety whether from negative peer pressure or from strangers coming into the area.

There is also more financial pressure coming from children wanting more expensive gadgets and clothes.

Political landscape:

It was a general view that violence still existed but that it was more hidden than before and people were afraid to speak out. Fear of violence still exists but it has moved from fear of other community to fear of 'own' community. There is a much greater fear within 'your own community'. Many areas were still under the infuence of paramilitary control. 'Paramilitary control' was viewed as synonymous with 'male control'. Their power and influence depends on the community but - 'you still have to speak to them to get what you want/something done'. 'Men deal with the money, drugs and power – women are not interested'.

Many believed that the Peace Process has had little impact on women. It was suggested that the PUL community have not benefited from the Good Friday agreement and nothing specific for women was put in place. There may be a few more women in political life but they are not listened too. In communities controlled by paramilitaries women's are especially mute. It was a generally held view that there was not enough female politicians. 'Women are brought in to make the tea'. 'We need to change the attitudes of men AND women'. At one table it was stated that government were consulting with men (and not women) on issues affecting women eg. abortion.

It was suggested that there should be a 'review and community consultation' on the Good Friday Agreement.

Women, mothers, wives feel more fear now – alcohol, drugs, rape, STDs etc. Aggravation over parades has increased over the years and advances in technology are used in riot situations. It was suggested that recreational mini-riots were encouraged and organised quickly at interface areas using social media and mobile phones. This is a change from 15 years ago.

Women's Lives:

For some there have been positive changes to women's lives over the last 15 years. Some believed that women are stronger now. Women are more independent; they can be more than mothers and have more options open to them, above and beyond a 'caring' role in the family.

Some of the perceived positive changes over the last 15 years include:

- Women have more confidence
- Women have more legal rights e.g. employment.
- Women who want to be can be more than carers for their family
- Women are not as intimidated by men
- Women now have "role models" in public life.
- Fears are uniting women regardless of political views.
- Women "think outside the box" more.
- Women are more open to other views.
- Women speak out more.
- Women are more united now.
- Women feel more empowered.
- Women can 'go out socialising without partners and with other women'
- Women have a voice now
- Women are no longer viewed as 'barefoot and pregnant'
- Life is better now but it depends on age and the area where you live
- Women are more equal
- There is more support for single parents
- Women have more and better choices

Participants also believed that there have been some negative changes over the last 15 years. These include:

- Women are put under much more pressure now
- Women have to work harder.

- Women don't have the same opportunities as men eg. employment
- Women are put under pressure to work hard at home and outside the home
- Some successful women change and conform to stereotypical men – they don't help other women.

It was suggested in relation to all of the above it would be good if women encouraged and helped each other more.

Priorities and Conclusions:

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

What the women prioritised in relation to this question was the need for more information as to services available locally. This was coupled with the need for community work to become more transparent. It shouldn't be about 'who you know'. Services and resources must be available to all.

Money, transport and facilities for special needs children and adults and support for single parents were all prioritised as significant obstacles to leading fulfilling lives.

The desire for women's courses to develop confidence and self esteem was also reiterated as a priority as was the need for accessible commmunity education, parenting skills and suicide amd mental health support.

Other areas prioritised included:

- Addressing chronic unemployment - Help to set up support structure for community issues e.g. suicide.
- Access NI checks for carers
- Addressing breakdown in community and lack of communication
- Effort to engage participants and volunteers locally
- Addressing low self esteem

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

On the positive side, participants felt the women had more opprtuinities – they could be more than mothers and carers and they welcomed the fact that there were more women in public life.

On a less positive note, participants prioritised the follwoing issues:

- Men (rather than women) were consulted on what are essentailly women's issues eg abortion
- Paramilitary male-dominated influences keep women down. Depending on the area where you lived, egos still had to be stroked to get what you want.
- Concern about drugs and suicide is never far away.
- Drugs are a major issue now and a cause of mental health problems.
- The community needs more information on welfare reform
- Aggravation over parades has grown over the years
- Women (mothers/wives) feel more fear <u>now</u> because of drink, drugs, rape, STDs etc
- Fears are uniting women regardless of political views.
- Greater fear of 'own' community rather than the 'other' community than 15 years ago.
- Women are less intimidated by men.
- There is a need to educate women and develop more women's groups and training programmes with childcare attached.