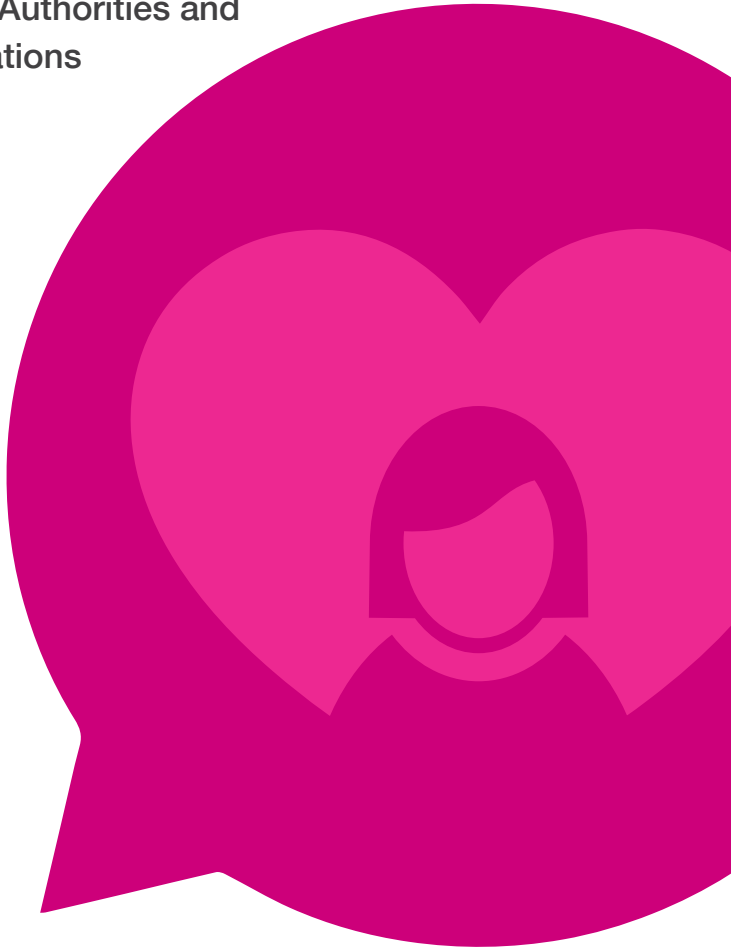


# Women at the Heart of Public Consultation

A guide for Public Authorities and Women's Organisations



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# Introduction

This guide is intended to provide advice for all those engaged in promoting women’s participation in public consultation. The case for proactively working to increase the participation of women in public decision making has been established by a number of international bodies that place obligations on the government and public authorities. For example, the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women requires the State to take action to ‘ensure to women, on equal terms with men, the right to participate in the formulation of government policy’. (CEDAW, Art. 7) The UN’s Commission on the Status of Women, the Council of Europe and the UN Security Council have all made similar recommendations. The Women and Peacebuilding Toolkit highlights the importance of women’s participation in order for the application of the principles of UNSCR 1325 on women, peace and security to be implemented effectively in Northern Ireland:

“

*The challenges of ensuring participation and empowerment lie at the core of UN Security Council Resolution 1325, with the additional dimension of working to ensure that such participation is inclusive rather than elitist in nature. It has long been argued that an inclusive approach requires an investment in the empowerment and confidence-building of women, alongside proactively creating space for both their voices to be heard and their ideas and priorities to be reflected.*

”

**(Women and Peacebuilding Toolkit, 2012)**

Domestic commitments were made in the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement which includes a provision to fulfil ‘the right of women to full and equal political participation’ and ‘the advancement of women in public life’. Whilst the St Andrew’s Agreement failed to mention women at all, the Stormont House and Fresh Start Agreements have both committed to addressing the participation of women in community development and ‘the advancement of women in public life.’ The Northern Ireland Executive’s most recent Gender Equality Strategy which expired in 2016 makes multiple commitments to tackling the structural inequalities that have created barriers to women’s participation ‘at all levels of civil society, economy, peace building and government’.

However, even with these high level policy commitments, on a day to day basis it can be hard to recognise why it is necessary to proactively make space for women’s voices. If you don’t work in the field of gender equality it can be easy to assume that the equality of opportunity that is now embedded into our society through anti-discrimination law means there should be no difference in how women and men experience the world. Gender neutral policy making is very common because we can forget that equality of opportunity is not the same thing as equality of outcome. As you read this guide it might help to keep the following reminders handy to return to if you find yourself questioning whether or not a person’s gender would be relevant.

## Why ask women?

- » Women have only had access to public life for a tiny proportion of recent history. We are still underrepresented in all arenas of public power and decision making. When a woman decides to speak up her confidence is affected not just by personal factors but by the legacy of exclusion we are still fighting to overcome.
- » Sexism is real and affects all women. You will struggle to find a woman who has not had some experience of having been treated unfairly or had limiting assumptions made about her on the basis of her gender. These experiences along with the traditional social expectations that women and girls grow up with, can restrict our ability to participate in public life. With 1 in 5 women in the UK having experienced sexual violence, this severe form of sexism and misogyny affects women's wellbeing and confidence.
- » Caring responsibilities still have a much bigger impact on women's lives than on men's, particularly childcare but also caring for older, sick or disabled relatives. 92% of single parents in Northern Ireland are women and within families of all kinds women still undertake the majority of unpaid caring work. This affects our educational and employment opportunities and choices and has a particular impact on women in disadvantaged communities.
- » The symptoms of gender inequality in our society affect different women differently. Some women bear the brunt of gender inequality due to other intersecting barriers connected to poverty, disability, race or sexual orientation. If we can understand the way to address gender inequality for the most marginalised women then this will benefit all women.



### ***Participation is a priority for the women's movement***

We're not interested in simply having women's perspectives included as an afterthought. We're here to make sure women get the chance to change things. The inclusion of women in decision making should upset the status quo. It should put their stories and experiences at the centre of public policy and not on the edges.

We have produced this guide to demonstrate that women have the power to change the way society works and how services are shaped. It happens when they are supported to step into the process with the confidence to tell their stories and demand action from those who make decisions.

In order to reimagine how women's participation can make a real difference, we need to raise expectations on both sides of the conversation. What do we do about the fact that women's organisations feel 'over-consulted', with the same people turning up to make the same demands but very little action taken? How can we improve the practice of statutory agencies whose community engagement activities can exclude many women because they fail to address the barriers women face? We hope that this guide can help us work towards improving participation practice with disadvantaged or marginalised women.

## Levels of Participation

There are many different ways that the public can be invited to get involved in shaping public policy and some are better than others. Hart's ladder is one of the best models for helping us analyse the participation opportunities that we are creating and assess how meaningful they are. Roger Hart designed it in 1992 for UNICEF to promote youth participation but it can be applied to any public engagement in decisions that affect people's lives.

It looks like this:



Hart's ladder challenges us to aim for the highest possible level of participation when women are involved in public decision making processes.

The bottom 3 rungs do not constitute participation at all. They could be things like paying women to endorse a policy decision, seeking out women to be in the photograph on the front of a new strategy document or having a 'token woman' at an event or on a panel.

The majority of the participation opportunities that communities have access to fall on the next 2 rungs – informing and consulting. Consultation is not the ideal method of involving communities in planning and decision making but it can be meaningful if it's done in the right way and with the right attitude from the public institutions.

For example:

Narrow audience	Broad and diverse participants
Limited ways to engage	Range of options for how to engage
Late in the process	Earliest possible stage in the process
No real desire to make changes	Willing to change in response to feedback
No follow up or evidence that it made a difference	Follow up with consultees to show how their input was taken on board

The top 3 rungs of the ladder deal with examples of true shared decision making and community led planning. These methods will have the best outcomes for those involved as they will be empowered and see the direct impact of their involvement. It will also lead to the best policy outcomes for the public institutions as the work will reflect the needs and aspirations of the communities affected.

Increasingly, public institutions in Northern Ireland are trying out new ways of doing this such as forming ‘co-design’ groups when new initiatives are being implemented. However, if these processes do not address the inherent power imbalance when public institutions hold all the resources or if they only involve those who have traditionally been ‘gatekeepers’ in communities, then the voices of grassroots women are more likely to be excluded.

### ***Why is this guide only about consultation?***

As consultation is the most common method of inviting community participation, this guide focuses on how best to ensure women have access to consultation and can use the process to become empowered agents of change. We hope the guide will provide useful tips and ideas for both public authorities and community based women’s groups working together to have women’s voices included in consultations. However, this doesn’t take away from the fact that we should all be aiming for more meaningful participation opportunities than just consultation, as is our right, and challenging public institutions to invest more time and resources into working with women in the community to create policy, plan services and make decisions that affect their lives.



## **Including Women in Public Consultation**

### **Getting it Right**

Women’s community and voluntary sector organisations have been supporting women in disadvantaged and marginalised communities to engage in public consultations for many years. Whether the subject is community safety, peacebuilding, health and social care, childcare or education, we have worked to ensure that the different experiences women have because of how gender affects our lives, opportunities and responsibilities are reflected in decision making.

Public bodies have made significant improvements in consultation practice in recent years, both at Executive and Local Government level. However, this progress can always be reversed, such as the reduction in the time periods allocated to Executive consultations from 12 to 8 weeks as outlined under the Fresh Start Agreement. There are also some persistent barriers to best practice, particularly when it comes to how women are able to access the consultation process.

This chapter contains advice in the form of 5 Top Tips based on the many years of experience that women’s groups have in promoting women’s participation in public policy making. Included within this advice are suggested actions that both public authorities and women’s groups can take in order to get the best out of the consultation process for the women involved and for all women that the policy will have an impact on.



## Work together

It is hard work organising public consultations. Especially if the policy or strategy is broad with far reaching implications for a number of interested groups. Engaged public authorities will want to meet with everyone who might be impacted in order to get their views and avoid unnecessary problems further down the line. But often women are overlooked as a group that we need to create specific consultation space for. Women have a range of interests and perspectives, not all women have the same barriers to overcome, and designing opportunities for women to speak about issues in relation to their gender can seem daunting.

This is where the experience and expertise of the women's community and voluntary sector is so important. They have made all the mistakes so others don't have to. They have listened to what puts women off participating and what is more likely to make them feel supported to get involved. Most importantly, they have built up relationships and trust with women in disadvantaged communities – those who are bearing the brunt of gender inequality in our society. All the best planning in the world can still result in an empty consultation workshop if the women you need to hear from don't know and trust those involved in delivering it.

Partnering with community women's groups helps deal with the power imbalance that is present when decision makers seek the views of those most affected by their decisions. Taking a 'we'll come to you' approach demonstrates a commitment to including people and if it's not possible for a public body to take their sessions out into community groups then women's organisations often can, if given the right resources to support them. Having workers and volunteers from a women's organisation involved in facilitating the session, choosing the venue, even in designing the consultation materials makes a huge difference to how comfortable women will feel about attending and contributing.

## Public bodies can:



- » Reach out to community based women's groups, seek their help and approach them as equal partners in the process. Listen to their suggestions on how your consultation process could be improved as they are more aware of the barriers at a local level and can help you get the best out of the process in the long term, even if it means making some changes.
- » Be honest about the limitations as you plan the process together. For example, one of the biggest barriers to effective and meaningful consultation is cost. It's important to work out what you can achieve together with the resources available. There will also be limitations around how progressed the policy or strategy is and how much is likely to change in response to the feedback women share. Most 'consultation fatigue' in the women's sector comes from the experience of being contacted too late in the process to have a meaningful impact on the outcomes and seeing very little change as a result.
- » Consider working with already established groups – women's confidence can be enhanced if the setting is familiar and the other participants are not strangers. Remember there is a very great likelihood that some women will have never given their views in a group before and would not feel comfortable coming to an open, public consultation session.

## Women's groups can:



- » Remember how much you have to offer and the unique position you are in to be able to bridge this participation gap. Don't downplay the skills and experience that are within your group or organisation and don't be afraid to engage with public authorities as an equal partner.
- » Think about how you can be more inclusive in your own community and bring in the voices that are least likely to be heard. Sometimes the same people participate in every workshop or focus group and you might

have to reflect on your own barriers to getting new, less experienced women involved. Continue to challenge the gatekeeping of community participation that often side-lines women but don't become your own gatekeepers – keep challenging your group to reach out to more diverse groups of participants.

- » Don't be taken advantage of. Partnering with a public body to ensure that women get the best access to decision making does not mean you have to do all their work for them. Women's organisations are best placed to support a public consultation process where they are properly resourced to do so.



### ***Make time for accessible face to face engagement***

Many public bodies increasingly favour online consultation surveys. This makes a lot of sense – in theory it makes for a very open process that anyone can participate in from the comfort of their own home, it's an easier way to collate and categorise the responses and it has a small environmental impact. However, these surveys can vary greatly in terms of how user-friendly they are. The length of some surveys can be off-putting, the terminology can create a language barrier or make the respondent feel like they don't know enough to take part, and the binary 'agree/disagree' nature of many questions hides the complexity of how people feel about different issues.

Some women's organisations employ policy workers or lobbyists who have the experience necessary to find their way round an online consultation survey and submit evidence on behalf of their members or service users. But most don't have that luxury and so expecting grassroots women to participate in this way can be unrealistic. It's crucial that any consultation includes a face to face option for participation, but this can bring a different set of barriers. If a public body organises a consultation workshop women's involvement might be influenced

by a number of factors. Evening events are often most difficult for those with caring responsibilities, childcare provision is rarely offered, the cost of travel to get to the venue may not be covered (which has a particular impact in rural areas with poor public transport connectivity), and using public buildings can make the venue intimidating or inaccessible to many women who feel alienated from such formal settings.

### **Public bodies can:**



- » Design and plan engagement opportunities that are responsive to women's needs and the practical and social barriers they face. It always helps to talk to women's organisations to help identify the best way to do this. Different demographics of women will face different barriers and there will be a range of possible solutions that you can try.
- » Childcare is always a key priority in addressing barriers to women's participation. Increasing access for women with childcare responsibilities may include choosing a time for the engagement session during which children are at school or childcare support is available. Providing crèche facilities would be ideal – bear in mind that women's centres make an excellent venue because most have childcare facilities on site and crèche places can be made available if booked in advance.
- » Set the tone of the engagement in a way that deals with the legacy of women's lack of access to formal decision making processes. The atmosphere should be as informal and non-intimidating as possible. Facilitate conversation in a way that is non-judgemental and makes it safe for women to talk about their experiences without feeling dismissed. The use of women facilitators with experience in community facilitation can help with this. A familiar, community based venue is most likely to feel like a safe, accessible space.
- » Even if you plan a session with lots of thought put into how to be responsive to women's needs, if they don't know about it they won't come. Review how your sessions are advertised and think about how accessible they appear to women from disadvantaged communities. Is the style and

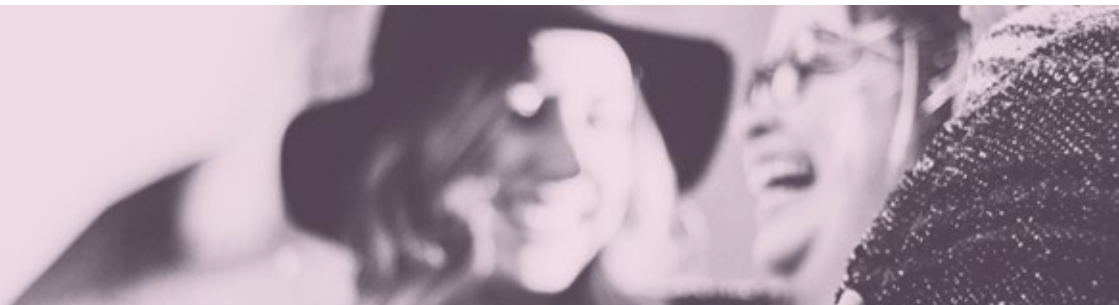


content of the invitation or flyer overly formal? Have you approached network organisations with access to community based women's groups to ask them to include the invitation in their own newsletters? Have you made any statement about how you will provide for children, even if it's just a line to say 'child-friendly' or 'childcare available on request'?

### Women's groups can:



- » Talk to your own community members or service users about how much they engage in public consultations – what puts them off, what would they need to have in place to make participation easier? In advising public bodies about how to improve accessibility you need to keep going back to the source.
- » When consultation opportunities arise make a point of bringing women from your community or service users rather than just going yourself. While it might be easier to go and speak on behalf of the women we work with it is better to work towards having those women in the room themselves. If you're finding it hard to make this happen, think through all of the reasons for that and feed this back to the public authorities as barriers they need to address.
- » Do some work with women in advance to build their confidence and help them feel prepared for going to a consultation session. Maybe support the group to work out in advance a few key points they want to make in relation to the topic being discussed.



### Keep your language accessible and relevant

In spite of many years of focus on 'plain language' and accessibility, too many public policy documents are still laden with jargon and buzz-words that may be 'on-trend' in the policy world but mean very little to ordinary people. Whether it's 'inter-agency', 'innovation', 'outcomes based' or 'maximise impact' these words and phrases have to be either accompanied or replaced by real descriptions of what they mean.

This public policy language barrier can have an impact on lots of people and there is a strong case for making policy and strategy documents more accessible so that the public generally can better understand them. However, we have to remember the lack of access women, particularly those from disadvantaged communities, have had to formal spheres of decision making and influence. It can be particularly off-putting to women if they do not recognise the relevance of policy language to their own lives and it gives them the impression that they are not the right people to be giving their opinion. For example;

*'When you try to have a say you can be talked down to or made to feel stupid because you don't understand what they mean. But how we women articulate things is important. We know what will work and what won't and they should let us say it the way we say it.'* (Participant, WRDA submission of evidence, The Belfast Agenda Consultation 2017)

### Public bodies can:



- » It's difficult to avoid jargon entirely in policy documents as you try to work out the best approaches and solutions to difficult public policy issues, based on evidence and expert advice. While you may have to reflect this terminology in the end product, it's vital that what is presented for consultation is easy for the public to understand. Being open to hearing a different way of articulating the issues can only increase the potential for your policy to have a positive impact in the community.

- » There's nothing like a consultation workshop with a group of women who aren't used to participating in formal decision making to put the substance of your proposals to the test! If what you've written isn't backed up by details about what will actually be put in place and how this will be achieved, then you can expect them to pull you up on that. Whatever your policy is aiming to achieve, make it meaningful and relevant if you want to get women's views on how it might affect them.

#### Women's groups can:



- » If you are facilitating a consultation workshop with women, don't be afraid to translate out the jargon. Your session shouldn't have a disempowering effect on the group so it is more important to present the ideas in relevant, accessible language they can engage well with than to stick strictly to the policy terminology. But do let the officials know that you've had to do this so that they'll be aware of the fact that you've addressed a barrier they should have been addressing themselves.
- » Experienced policy workers or lobbyists will tell you that certain terminology exists because it's second nature to the officials who work in that field and they aren't aware it's not accessible language. But sometimes it can appear to be masking a lack of substance or detail. It's helpful if you can work out the difference by talking it through with the officials yourself and asking questions. If they can provide you with more detail on an issue or plan then the language barrier can be easily resolved.
- » As far as possible, plan engagement opportunities so that women's stories told in their own words set the agenda rather than a rigid consultation framework. See Tip No. 4 for more on the importance of storytelling!



4

#### *Listen to the stories*

There is a barrier to participation in conventional consultation exercises that can often be overlooked and it is the intimidation some people feel when asked for their opinion on a topic that they don't feel well informed about. When we think about who attends engagement sessions or submits evidence to online questionnaires, they tend to be a select group of people who feel confident enough in their own knowledge of the issues and the political context to be able to give their views. If we want to get any sense of how policy impacts on everyone else, then it might require us to ask a different type of question.

If opinions are formed from the way we process our lived experiences then there is a stage we are skipping over when we engage with people. We should be asking them to tell us about those experiences; to tell us the stories of their families and communities. For women, this is a particularly important approach to take due to the legacy of exclusion from the public sphere. Whereas an opinion can be questioned, criticised or undermined, your story is your story – you are the authority on your own life. You can speak with confidence about how the issues being discussed have affected you.

It's also important that we don't have a preconceived idea about which stories are important. Women tend to bring experience of both the domestic (private) sphere as well as the public environment, thus enabling them to apply a holistic approach to dealing with issues. (Women and Peacebuilding Project Toolkit, 2012) Many aims of public policy are ultimately targeted at improving life for people in communities, in families, and in the home, and yet those with most experience in the private sphere are the least engaged in shaping this policy.

For example;

*‘Women know best what the housing needs are. And we are usually the last to be asked. That’s why we have to kick up such a fuss when things go wrong. But if they just involved us in the planning they could save themselves a lot of mistakes.’* (Participant, WRDA submission of evidence, The Belfast Agenda Consultation 2017)

#### Public bodies can:



- » The most open approach when attending a storytelling session is to take a back seat and demonstrate that you’re there to listen to whatever the women want to share. The opposite of this would be to attempt to direct the conversation and seek approval for plans or ideas that you’re already hoping to pursue. Obviously the reality for any conversation has to be somewhere in the middle – you know what information is going to be the most useful to inform your work and the thinking of those decision makers further up the chain. It’s OK to try to draw that out, as long as you remember not to knock people’s confidence by appearing to dismiss something they’ve shared.
- » Binary options (do you agree or disagree, support this proposal or not etc.) are key features of many consultation documents but in a storytelling session they are often useless. If a proposal sounds good on paper, of course it can be easy for any consultee to say they support it, but that only scratches the surface of what that person can contribute. Storytelling with women’s groups can access the untapped expertise of a group of people who have seen many similar proposals come and go, understand what made them succeed or fail, felt the frustration of watching the good ideas lose funding or had to pick up the pieces at a community level when statutory agencies fail to deliver. Consultations that do not make space for listening to women’s stories are missed opportunities to get the best results.

#### Women’s groups can:



- » Most consultations are not currently designed to make room for storytelling so it may fall to you to adapt the materials. Have a look

at the proposals contained in the draft policy and draw out the key themes. From these themes you can design open ended questions for women to discuss.

- » Make sure the women are reassured that you are looking for their stories, not their opinions. Some may have had negative experiences of focus groups in the past and lack the confidence to speak up. It helps to say a few words at the start to explain how this session will be different, why you are using storytelling and how important it is that their stories are heard by those with power to make decisions that affect them.
- » Take measures to ensure that the environment is safe for women to share stories, remembering that talking about your personal experience makes you more vulnerable than simply saying what you think. Work out an appropriate level of confidentiality to agree with the group, let them know the limits of that should they disclose anything that might require you to act to protect a child or vulnerable adult. Reassure the group that you will not include any identifying information in the final report.
- » For a storytelling workshop to be successful it helps to split into groups of no more than 6-8 people and have a facilitator and note-taker at each group. You’ll want to take more detailed notes than you might at a normal focus group as you are aiming to present the stories as close as possible to the women’s own words. If you are working with a group who feel confident enough to do so, you might want to record audio of the discussions or even invite people to tell their stories on camera. Transformative storytelling techniques often use drama and film to convey the power of the stories in order to bring about social change.
- » At the end of a storytelling session you will have pages and pages of valuable material that you want to submit to the consultation. However, since most consultations require that you use a questionnaire or follow a particular format, you will have to do some work to arrange the stories in the best way to be submitted. It can be a bit like writing up a piece of research – draw out the key themes and show where there are patterns or trends but make sure you include as much as you can of the stories in the women’s own words. That’s what will have the greatest impact.



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### ***Make women visible in the product as well as the process***

Supporting women to participate is a big ask, it requires time and resources from workers in both statutory and women's community organisations. The women who take part have been challenged outside of their comfort zones, they have spoken honestly about their lives, and they have overcome sexism, low expectations of change, and the voice in their heads that tells them their stories don't matter. One of the biggest frustrations for those of us who support women in these processes, particularly those who normally have little or no access to power and decisionmaking, is that usually the end product bears no evidence of the gendered perspective. Even where women's input is taken on board and reflected in the final content of a policy or strategy, often it is included as a general issue with no connection to the fact that it means something particular to us as women.

#### **Public bodies can:**



- » Don't be afraid to highlight the gendered nature of an issue being addressed by public policy. Gender neutral policy is ineffective - we don't make policy in a social vacuum and you should aim to promote equality, not just recreate the same patterns of inequality that existed before. At the very least policies and strategies should take the inequalities and differences between men and women into account and make them visible.
- » Statutory duties that address equality issues mainly deal with consideration of any adverse impacts that a policy might produce. On this basis alone many policies get screened out of equality impact assessment processes

and opportunities are therefore missed to use policy as a vehicle for creating a more equal society. Other statutory duties, such as the duty under the Human Rights Act to ensure that everyone has equal access to their rights, can provide a framework for introducing policy that takes a more proactive approach.

- » Remember that you should be planning to follow up any consultation exercise with feedback on how the consultees views had an impact and so you will need to prepare information to take back to women's groups on how women's experiences and gender inequality will be dealt with in the final product.

#### **Women's groups can:**



- » When you're supporting women to participate in a consultation it's important to try to focus their input on what affects them as women. There's nothing wrong with discussing the issues they're most concerned about, even if they're not gender-specific, but take every opportunity to ask how they and other women in their communities are experiencing it. This will help clarify for policy makers what they need to reflect when taking women's views into account.
- » Getting feedback from a public body on how the women's views were taken on board is a vital part of the process. It creates accountability for those making the decisions as without follow up then consultation can merely be a 'tick box' exercise. It also demonstrates respect for the time and energy given by the women who have shared their stories and makes the experience more meaningful if they can see the difference they have made. While our own work schedules can be full and move on quickly, we should give time to making sure that follow up work happens, even if it takes a long time to get feedback.



## Community Planning in Belfast

### A Case Study

**women's**  
RESOURCE & DEVELOPMENT AGENCY  
Supporting Women's Groups and Networks Across Northern Ireland

### Women Campaigning for a Better Belfast

Wait till you hear what happened to me...

Belfast's first community plan, **The Belfast Agenda**, has been published and **WRDA wants you to get involved.**

The community plan covers 4 themes and it's vital that we tell our stories of how these issues affect women's lives.

**Please come along and get involved.**

To register contact **Katie** on [info@wrda.net](mailto:info@wrda.net) or **02890 230 212**.

Shankill Women's Centre	02/02/2017 10.30am-12pm	Women in the Community
WOMEN'STEC	07/02/2017 10.30am-12pm	Women, Work and Money
Belfast Feminist Network (The Hive)	16/02/2017 19.00-20.30pm	Women and the City
Windsor Women's Centre	24/02/2017 10.30am-12pm	Women, Education and Employment

[www.belfastcity.gov.uk/belfastagenda](http://www.belfastcity.gov.uk/belfastagenda) Belfast City Council

In 2016, with the support of Belfast City Council, WRDA produced a booklet called 'Women Speak Out on Community Planning'. This publication was the result of a series of workshops with community based women's groups who were asked to comment on what they thought local councils should do to ensure women have equal access to the community planning process. It highlighted some of the ways in which women's lives are often fundamentally different to men's and the participation barriers they face as a result. It noted that all women face the barrier of structural sexism that has meant women have never had access to power and decision making on an equal basis with men. The booklet recommended that councils prioritise women from the outset, demonstrating their commitment to gender equality by setting clear standards or principles on how women's voices will be included. It also urged councils to adopt a gender lens so that all policy can be analysed in relation to how different groups of women are likely to be impacted. Finally, it stressed the need for practical barriers to be removed when designing consultation opportunities in order to maximise the chances of women being able to participate.

With further funding from Belfast City Council, WRDA was able to pursue a second stage of this work – putting it into practice. We designed a methodology for supporting women in disadvantaged communities to participate in the public consultation on Belfast's draft community plan, The Belfast Agenda. After initiating contact with the Community Planning team in Belfast City Council we were delighted to discover that this work would tie in well with their existing public engagement strategy and that they were open and willing to try something new and different!

So did we practice what we preach? Let's have a look at how we implemented the 5 Top Tips during this project.



### **Work together**

- » WRDA and the CP team at Belfast City Council built a good relationship. We met several times and planned the sessions together, with WRDA proposing the best methodology for engaging women’s groups. The CP team were able to express what would be most useful for them to get out of the process and participated with a willingness to support something different without trying to control it.
- » WRDA also worked in relationship with community based women’s organisations to build their trust in the process. We did face to face groundwork with workers in women’s centres, explaining the kind of process we were aiming for, encouraging them to support new women to get involved and making sure they had adequate resources to enable them to host the sessions.



### **Make time for accessible face to face engagement**

- » To address the issue of childcare we used women’s centres where childcare was available with prior booking.
- » Women’s centres and training organisations also provided a familiar, local venue where women felt comfortable.
- » The sessions were women only which allowed us to focus entirely on hearing women’s views without the constraints associated with mixedgender spaces.
- » We set the tone of each session as informal, relaxed, and non-judgemental and reassuring the groups that their participation was valued.
- » With the help of the workers on the ground we were able to engage with diverse groups of women, most of whom had no prior consultation experience.
- » The CP team from Belfast City Council attended all sessions in order to demonstrate their commitment to the work and their desire to hear women’s views first hand. They had a listening and supportive role and helped with the practical running of the session.



### **Keep your language accessible and relevant**

- » The 4 themes being explored were re-worded in the advertising material to direct them towards women. This made it much easier to generate interest:

Growing the economy – Women, work and money  
 Living here – Women in the community  
 City Development – Women and the city  
 Working and Learning – Women, education and work

- » We identified sub-themes from the commitments made in the community plan that we felt would connect with women. These were then printed on flash cards as topics for discussion and everyone was invited to lift one from the table and tell a story connected to it. For example, in the ‘Women in the Community’ session the sub-themes included ‘housing, health services, older people, young people, childcare, safety, inequality and community relations’. In the ‘Women, work and money session’ they included ‘training and skills for women’, ‘competitive labour = low wages?’ and ‘economic inactivity = women doing unpaid work?’
- » Where necessary WRDA translated out policy ‘jargon’ from the draft community plan. We provided feedback in the submission about the ways that we addressed this accessibility barrier.





### ***Listen to the stories***

- » Storytelling was used as a more accessible way of engaging and we explained to women why their stories are so important.
- » The method was based on transformative storytelling for social change but was kept quite simple as we only had one-off sessions with each group. With longer term engagement more creative ways of representing the stories could be explored.
- » We reframed the questions from the consultation questionnaire away from binary options. There wasn't time to cover all the material in the draft community plan so we chose depth over breadth, focusing on commitments and workstreams identified under the plan's 4 priorities for the next 4 years.
- » As outlined above, we put flash cards before each group with a discussion topic on each one and asked the women to 'tell us about how this affects you and women in your community'. We also undertook a sorting exercise asking the groups to numerically prioritise the proposed workstreams in order of which they felt would have most impact.
- » We ensured that there were enough facilitators and note-takers to split into smaller groups of 6-8 people. WRDA's community facilitators were used as they have training and experience in working with women and supporting their participation.
- » A significant amount of work was required to collate the stories and translate them back into a format that could be fed into the consultation.



### ***Make women visible in the product as well as the process***

- » After collating the stories at all 4 sessions WRDA made a 20 page submission through the online consultation survey. This included some analysis of themes that emerged across the discussions and focused on suggesting priority issues for women evidenced by the participants' stories.
- » The following 5 themes emerged:

#### **Key themes:**

- **Childcare:** Affordability, accessibility, and the need for a childcare strategy for the city if any of the proposals are to benefit women on an equal basis with men.
- **Community education:** A clear message that women returning to education as adults needs to be supported and anger that access to learning in community based settings has been removed.
- **Accountability for inclusive growth:** Strong support for the idea of inclusive growth but not much confidence that it will happen in practice. All partners to the community plan must be committed to inclusive growth, understand how to achieve it and be held accountable.
- **Housing:** the housing need in this city is at crisis point and it was a priority for all the women we spoke to, across all themes. Investment is needed now.
- **Equality:** Women did not get a sense that equality was a core aim of the community plan and felt that equality for women in particular needs more visibility and targeted measures.

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*When we started this project we had one goal – to be better at getting marginalised women’s voices included in public decision making. The success of this has been down to the openness of everyone to challenge themselves. The CP team were brilliantly open and supportive, the women’s centres did the leg work to sell the idea to their communities and the women who took part pushed themselves to speak up. The richness of the stories that were produced is far beyond what I was hoping for and I know it caught the attention of the CP officials. The biggest challenge for me was trying to balance the negative experiences women wanted to share with their ideas and proposals for solutions as storytelling lends itself more to the former than the latter. It also fell to me to make the feedback ‘fit’ into the formal consultation process without losing the integrity of the women’s own stories in their own words. Ideally I would like to work longer term with a group of women so that they could submit the evidence in the way that they prefer.*

Kellie Turtle, WRDA

*The women we invited to the session are not used to being asked for their views. Decisions get made all around them and they never seem to be consulted, just left to deal with the aftermath. We need more opportunities like this to get them in the room. I was able to get women involved in this because I work within a network here in North Belfast. We have that infrastructure to get the word out to women on the ground and we have links with lots of different groups. But what about in the areas where that doesn’t exist? Women have no way of knowing about these opportunities and that worries me because their voices are still not being heard. I think it’s important to have sessions like this with women in the room telling their stories away from all the community gatekeepers who usually dominate consultations with their own agendas.*

Eileen Weir, Greater North Belfast Women’s Network (host of one of the sessions)

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*The Belfast Agenda is the city’s first community plan and outlines the aspirations and ambitions to help make Belfast a great place to live, work, study, visit and invest in. As part of the public consultation on the draft Belfast Agenda, the council and its community planning partners were keen to ensure we heard from as many people as possible and, in particular, to try and hear from those ‘seldom heard’ voices. We wanted to build on the relationships of trust and accessibility that community organisations such as WRDA have, and so the opportunity to work with the WRDA in this project was warmly welcomed and particularly timely.*

*We valued being invited to participate in the individual sessions arranged by the WRDA and the council officers involved felt privileged to hear first-hand the honest and powerful personal stories of the participants, who put faces and voices to the areas of work mentioned in the Belfast Agenda. These shared experiences have helped us shape the final Belfast Agenda and will contribute to the ongoing work of the plan. We would like to especially thank all those who participated in the sessions, for trusting us with their stories, and to the WRDA for enabling us to collaborate in this way. We would be keen to utilise this model of engagement in the future as the Belfast Agenda develops.*

Councillor Deirdre Hargey & Councillor Aileen Graham  
(Chair & Vice Chair of the Women’s Steering Group,  
Belfast City Council)

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