GOOD RELATIONS WITH A WITH A GENDERED LENS

A toolkit for practitioners

A visible force for *change*

GOOD RELATIONS WITH A GENDERED LENS:

A TOOLKIT FOR PRACTITIONERS

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Introduction

Women's Resource & Development Agency (WRDA) has been working on peace-building work since early in its 38-year history. As a women's organisation committed to empowering women to be a visible force for change in our society, this work has been done with what we call a gendered lens; a perspective that is sensitive to the unique impacts that conflict has on women, and that values the powerful contribution that women made and continue to make to building and sustaining peace.

A good deal of this work has been focused on delivering programmes in the community, working with grassroots women's groups, women's centres, and others, to collect and to understand the views, concerns, and perspectives of women in Northern Ireland. We have also produced toolkits for those engaged in peace-building work. This guide is intended to build on both strands of work, and to provide a toolkit for practitioners and facilitators who are engaged in good relations and community relations work to deliver their programmes.

Principles of working with a Gendered Lens

Our work in the field of good relations and peacebuilding is informed by UNSCR 1325, a Security Council Resolution that pledges to work on the disproportionate impact of war and conflict on women and girls and pledging to involve women and girls in the peace and resolution processes after war. It "*affirms that peace and security efforts are more sustainable when women are equal partners in the prevention of violent conflict, the delivery of relief and recovery efforts and in the forging of lasting peace.*"

This affirms what we know from experience in Northern Ireland, but the view of many of the women we work with is that the peace-building work that women did before the 1998 Good Friday / Belfast Agreement has been largely forgotten, as have the lessons learned in that time.

Further, women have told us through a public survey carried out in 2018 that they find spaces designed to discuss community relations issues rarely take account of their particular way of working, their style of engagement or their priorities in terms of which issues are addressed.

The respondents to this survey had the following concerns about community relations work:

- It takes a very narrow view of "two communities" which side-lines those of mixed background, more recent arrivals and those who do not identify as either.
- It has tended to put men at the centre of Good Relations work and to continue the practice of putting women's interests, issues and needs on the back burner.
- It can be confrontational in style and women find that hard to engage with or be heard in.
- Programmes tend to be at inconvenient times or locations for those with caring responsibilities, working a shift pattern, or without access to transport.

By adopting a gendered lens, these issues can be addressed and even pre-empted and avoided as much as possible. Examples of this include:

- Creating women only spaces, even if the larger group is mixed, where participants can engage in discussion without concerns about the style of discussion that drowns out their voices.
- Co-design of the programme of events so that it includes priority issues for women.

- In regards historical programmes, it is vital that women's contributions are centred or at least included, both for accuracy and to ensure engagement from women.
- The programme should be mindful of the material concerns of women participants, which are often cited as reasons for their non-involvement, and this is outlined in the Recruitment section below.

Recruitment

Recruitment for Good Relations work with women can be challenging for several reasons.

Bearing in mind that the situation in many communities is one where paramilitaries still maintain a degree of coercive control, many women fear speaking out about controversial topics for fear of reprisal. For that reason, people can be reluctant to be seen engaging in peace-building work, especially cross-community work.

In addition, women in general are not encouraged to take part in these discussions – either at local level or at national level. Many recall all too vividly the reaction to women representatives from the Women's Coalition at the Forum talks before the peace agreement was written, they see the abuse women receive in politics and they calculate that they would be wiser to talk only among themselves – something that has always happened behind closed doors.

On top of all that, women are often acutely aware of the peace-building work that was done by themselves, their peers or their predecessors throughout the conflict, and the way in which this was discounted or dismissed once agreements were in place. Many found their experiences belittled, their insights dismissed, and their experiences labelled second-hand. It was a men's war, they are told, you stayed at home then and you would be well-advised to stay there now.

These concerns can be summarised as follows:

- Fear of retaliation from paramilitaries.
- Wariness of cross-community projects.
- Reluctance to speak about any political issues, especially contentious issues.
- Fear of visibility as a woman and the critique that this may bring.
- Cynicism about the weight that their perspectives will be given, based upon negative experiences in the past.
- Wariness about a particular venue or site.

All told, recruiting for this kind of work takes time and patience, and a willingness to be accommodating and flexible. Further, many of the women who are keen, or can be persuaded, to take part face additional barriers, and these need to be adjusted for as much as possible. Potential practical barriers, particularly relevant to women, include:

- Caring responsibilities that mean they are not available at certain times or on certain days.
- A higher tendency of women to be working shift patterns that are not easily moved (for example in health and social care, retail, or hospitality.
- Lack of access to transport to reach physical venues.
- Lack of access to technology, or to reliable broadband, in the case of online work.
- Whether there is on-site, affordable childcare.

There are ways to overcome some of these concerns, and they should be addressed where possible. Suggestions for ways to deal with this include:

- Work with individuals or groups to agree a site or venue before settling on it and presenting it as a final decision.
- If no agreement can be reached, suggest rotating venues.
- Allow flexibility with regards to time and dates to accommodate as many as possible.
- Ensure that childcare is budgeted for, or that the venue is child-friendly or childcare spaces are available, for example in women's centres.
- Budget for travel costs for participants if possible.
- Be prepared to begin online sessions with an explanation of the mechanics of the platform (muting, sharing screens, etc).
- Allow for the fact that it can take time to build trust and comfort levels so that productive work can be achieved.
- Genuinely productive Good Relations work is produced when everybody in the room is agreed about the intended outcomes. For this reason, an introductory session outlining the intention of the work is vital, so that participants can feed in and air any initial thoughts.

Ground Rules

Ground rules are essential to properly delivering training or facilitation community relations conversations, especially longer-term engagements. They can ensure that everybody knows what standards they are held to, and that everybody else is held to the same standards. They can be the best way to ensure that the space is what is often called a "safe space" – one where views can be heard openly and considered thoughtfully, but equally one where speakers are asked to show the same degree of measure and consideration in the views that they express.

This can seem oddly formal to some participants, but using this system invariably bears fruit, and this is particularly true when working with a group that is cross-community, where participants do not have a previous relationship, where participants do not know each other personally but know each other "by reputation", or any combination of these factors apply.

Ground rules work best when they are designed and agreed by the participants themselves in the form of a contract; this way everybody understands that they are mutually bound by these terms of engagement Ideally, this can be printed, signed by each participant, and then kept by them. Facilitators may find it useful to display the agreed contract prominently in the room if possible, particularly when working on especially thorny subjects, as it can help to keep disagreements respectful. Facilitators should encourage all participants to familiarise themselves with this, and it can help participants to feel more comfortable if, rather than directly question or confront a fellow participant, they can direct a question to the facilitator, asking whether the contribution violates the agreed ground rules.

Examples of ground rules that have worked with groups include:

1. One speaker at a time.
2. When someone speaks, we all listen.
3. Phones on silent / vibrate – if we need to take a call, we go outside to take it.

4. Confidentiality is important – what is said here stays here.

5. No question is wrong, or too foolish or too obvious.

6. We break at (x time) for (x minutes) and we begin at (x time) promptly.

7. Honesty is important, but we will not be deliberately hurtful.

8. We will respect each other's views and try to understand each other.

9. If we are upset, we will speak out about it and aim for resolution.

10. We will mix with each other and get to know each other as people.

11. We will respect the venue and its rules.

12. We will apologise when we need to and own our mistakes.

While some of these – for example around timekeeping, respecting the venue and so on – are designed primarily to ensure that the process runs smoothly, the overall goal is the creation of a safe, respectful space, where people are aware that some difficult subjects may arise and that there is an agreed approach in place for dealing with these topics. Even the seemingly trivial rules around timekeeping, keeping phones on silent and mentions of feeling free to ask questions have a deeper goal; when participants are repeatedly late, casual about taking breaks and so on, it can lead to distrust and a feeling that they are disrespecting the process. To get genuinely useful work done, no detail is trivial. The bulk of the rules, however, are geared towards managing difficult conversations, which merits its own sub-section.

Managing difficult conversations

The goal of this work is the conversations themselves. Facilitators may have targets, individual participants may have specific issues that they want raised, but the facilitator sets the agenda, and their focus should be on the end goal of facilitating a healthy and productive conversation.

There are several things that the facilitator can do to ensure that this conversation is facilitated as smoothly as possible:

- Ensure that participants know what to expect from each meeting, so that they are prepared as fully as possible.
- Remind participants of the agreed contract on ground rules in every meeting.
- Where small group work is taking place in a cross-community group, ensure that the small groups are themselves reflective of the larger group make-up.
- The facilitator should be aware of all discussions taking place in small groups, and be ready intervene where necessary, whether because discussion has stalled or because disagreement has broken out.
- Facilitators should avoid declaratory statements or leading questions on sensitive issues, instead asking open-ended questions along the lines of "why do you think that might be?"
- Allow the participant to speak for themselves and their experience, be careful not to construe their view as indicative of their community etc.

Things do not always run as smoothly as the facilitator may like, however, and where disagreement occurs and/or feelings are hurt, there are steps that can be taken, including:

- Speak privately with all individuals involved in any verbal altercation.
- Where somebody is upset, ensure that they are spoken to first.
- They should be reminded of their agreement to the contract and encouraged to identify if their words or actions violated some of the agreed rules.
- When people have had some time to reflect, the facilitator should address the issue with the group. This should be done in a way designed to focus on the lessons learned and the importance of the contract, rather than to make anybody feel guilt or shame.
- Follow-up is essential, particularly when this interaction has taken place online.
- The facilitator should ensure, when doing work online or in person, that all participants have a way of contacting them in case they need reassurance before returning to the group in future.

Agreeing outcomes

Talking is difficult, reaching agreement is even more difficult. Patience is essential and this process must not be rushed. At every stage, participants should be reminded that they can raise concerns or reservations about the process itself or about its outcomes. Beginning with common ground is certainly the most promising way to begin, and there are tools available that can guide facilitators in having these conversations.

Principles that often work well in practice include:

- Initially, divide the group into smaller groups of 3-4 and give them different topics to discuss. Do not rush them.
- These topics should then be rotated among each group to ensure that there is input from everyone on each topic.
- Each suggestion or idea should then be discussed by the group as a whole, and further suggestions can be added as a result of these discussions.
- Every participant can respond to every suggestion, and each suggestion should be classified under the following 4 categories:
  Consensus
  Agreement
  Reservations
  Block
- Where there is consensus, no further discussion is necessary. It is useful for participants to see the degree to which they have common ground with each other, and for facilitators to draw attention to this fact.
- Where there is agreement, it is valuable to draw out where there may be more serious reservations that have not been vocalised – can some of these issues be moved to consensus? Should they perhaps be moved to reservations?
- Where there are reservations, reasons should be parsed carefully, bearing in mind the agreed contract on ground rules. Participants must not feel forced to agree; their views must be centred in this work, over any desire to complete the work.

- Where reservations are intractable, the facilitator should acknowledge this and record the central reasons why agreement cannot be reached.
- Any suggestions that are blocked outright should be considered off the table for discussion.
- In practice, however, even when participants have deep reservations, the blocking option is rarely used if the process has been one where a safe space has been created and nurtured and everybody feels able to speak their mind.
- Rather than try to force agreement on issues so troublesome to so many, we should instead seek creative solutions to these seemingly intractable problems, and these should ideally be suggested by the participants themselves.
- These suggestions could be short-term, localised interventions, or longer-term, policy-focused proposed solutions.
- Facilitators should ideally be prepared to help connect participants with organisations, lobby groups and others that may help them to push for changes that they have identified as necessary in their community.

Conclusion

Women make up more than half of our population, but their participation in community relations programmes is less than it ought to be. If we want to build a lasting peace, we must include women. If we want to include women, we need to do so in ways that best facilitate them.

This Toolkit is designed to provide a practical guide for those engaging with women in their community relations work and provides practical steps that can be taken to develop women's involvement in this field.

The best community relations work with women will always be done by specialists in the field, who have the necessary experience and whose work precedes them, and these organisations should be supported, securely funded, and promoted at every opportunity. Their contribution has been, and continues to be, invaluable to our peace.