

## 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Interview Deirdre Transcript

*Please introduce yourself and your role at the Women's Resource and Development Agency.*

My name is Deirdre Quinn and I'm the Training and Development Manager at WRDA.

*Thank you. Tell us a bit about yourself and your journey as a feminist.*

Oh, my journey as a feminist. That's interesting because I'd probably say until I joined WRDA I'm not sure I would have even considered myself as a feminist. I've brought up three children on my own for twenty years, I ran my own business for ten years, I've worked in the Community sector from I graduated in Scotland. I lived in Scotland for twenty years and then moved back to Northern Ireland about ten years ago. So, probably wasn't until I joined WRDA that I would of started thinking about my views and where I was in terms of feminism. I've always, as it turns out, actually I've always agreed with the principles I just hadn't called myself a feminist, but I've always worked in the Community sector, I've always worked with disadvantaged groups just not specifically with women.

*Tell us about the origin of the Community Facilitator programme.*

Ok. So, the Community Facilitator programme started in 1995 I believe, so nearly 30 years ago. Long before my time, but it was set up to address, to upskill women from marginalised and disadvantaged communities to tackle the inequalities that they were facing. So even way back then, that community development approach, which was way ahead of its time.

So, in essence it's a capacity building programme that is aimed at upskilling women, many of whom have had maybe a negative experience of formal education but have a lifetime of rich experience that would be good to share. Early research told us that these are the women that need to be involved and working within their own communities to help other women. By training women as Community Facilitators, it increases the level of education that is available to disadvantaged women, it increases their employability. But its also about capacity building, it increases the community infrastructure because all of the women who take part in the programme make a commitment to take their skills back into the community for the benefit of local women. So, it's a win-win really, the women are trained as Community Facilitators and then they take those skills back and roll them out for local women.

At the time, 30 years ago, or just close to 30 years ago, there was a little bit of a negative press around training in the women's centres, and for some there was this idea that the women's centres ran "wee courses". You know, not substantial training but just little courses to get women through. The Community Facilitator programme actually was a challenge to that. It is a weighty programme, it's a formal level 3 qualification in leaning and development and it looks at all of the academic theory around teaching and then a lot of practical facilitation skills. I think it was probably in response to that kind of negativity.

Once trained the Community Facilitators deliver a range of health programmes to women throughout Northern Ireland. The current programmes are the Breast, Cervical and Bowel Screening Awareness programmes, but over the years there has been a range of health programmes from Parents Promoting Healthy Habits, Cardiovascular Health, Alcohol, Counting the Cost, there's been programmes on women's health and the menopause, so a whole range of health programmes.

We train the Community Facilitators to have a facilitated dialogue approach, and what that means is rather than going and delivering a lot of information, they provide information but they also allow people to express their fears and ask questions and to have their voices heard really. That kind of peer to peer education, its known as peer education, that model we understand gives a much deeper engagement. Then as a result of that I think the Community Facilitators are viewed as role models, or certainly as credible sources of information. There seen as having an awareness of local issues because they're from the community and they've been through the same experiences.

Naturally, all of our programmes are delivered in women-friendly environments that are local, supportive, accessible, inclusive. We provide bespoke sessions also to all groups with additional regionally as well. We tailor the delivery for whoever's in front of us.

*What has the impact of the Community Facilitator programme been?*

Oh goodness, so going for nearly 30 years. The Community Facilitator programme has evolved and grown immeasurably over the last 28 years. We've delivered courses regionally to all kinds of groups and it has ensured that WRDA has a very powerful regional presence as a leading feminist organisation.

In terms of the impact I think it can be measured on a couple of different levels. So for example, for the women who've completed it, the feedback from many community facilitators is that it has been life changing, in terms of personally. So they complete a Level 3 Certificate in Learning and Development, so they're awarded that on successful completion, which is a widely recognised training qualification. So it has opened doors from that point of view for an awful lot of women who weren't quite sure what work they wanted to go into but once they completed the course it has increased their employability. But I think perhaps as importantly, if not more importantly, I think what it has also done is a lot of the women that come on the Community Facilitator's programme have quite low confidence to start of with and possibly haven't had a formal education, or much of a formal education. The programme really empowers women to make choices in their lives so quite often it acts as a catalyst, actually, for moving forward. It's hard to quantify but we know that feedback from the Community Facilitators has been fabulous over the years and, in fact, many are now working within the Community Sector, leading up some of the organisations.

In terms of the impact of the programmes, over the years we've delivered a range of different programmes in addition to our current cancer screening awareness programme. We've run Parents Promoting Sexual Health, mental health and

wellbeing, cardiovascular awareness, Alcohol Counting the Cost, Parents Promoting Healthy Habits, and women's health. These have all been delivered regionally, often to marginalised groups living in areas of deprivation. You're talking about directly impacting at need, again, its that kind of community development approach.

Then, still on impact, some statistics. So for example, just from the last year in terms of the Breast, Cervical and Bowel WRDA delivered 199 Breast, Cervical and Bowel Screening Awareness sessions regionally to 2068 participants. That's just in one year. This included many workshops for groups that had additional needs. The numbers there were 78 sessions delivered for 674 participants with additional needs. The additional need could have been any type of disability or mental health problem. We've delivered a lot to groups whose first language isn't English, we've had translators in. We've worked a lot with the Travelling community. In fact it covers all of the Section 75 groups.

So, in terms of impact that was just in the last year, over 2000 participants. A thorough review of the evaluations would tell you that the overwhelming majority of participants say they will now go on to go to the screening. So they will go to the breast screening when they get an invite, they will go to cervical, and they will complete the FIT which is the bowel screening test. In addition to that, once they come away from the sessions they share that information. There has been analysis done and we reckon participants disseminate the information to other folk by word of mouth and giving copies of the handouts to anywhere between 3 and 40 other people. That can include mothers, daughters, sisters, dads, friends, neighbours. Again, just community development in action, developing capacity from the ground up. That's just the last year, so if we're going 28 years, you can imagine how many people and the impact that the programme has had.

*The Community Facilitator programme was fully redesigned in 2018, what improvements or changes have been made to the programme?*

Ok, yes it was and actually the changes were just at the time I took up post at WRDA. The main change was the change in awarding body, that was the initial thing. The Community Facilitator programme, before hand, the Level 3 Certificate, was a qualification that was awarded by OCR. OCR were based in England and in 2018, or 2017 I think actually, I'm not quite sure why, they pulled the plug so we needed to look for another awarding body. In Northern Ireland, OCNNI are the main awarding body here and as an organisation WRDA hadn't worked with them so I opened up a conversation. They linked us up with a business advisor and they took us through the steps to having the Level 3 Qualification OCN accredited. But we used that to have a look at how the programme was, in terms of resources. We revised some of the resources and we also streamlined the delivery. So the entire course runs now, from start to finish, over 3 months. So that includes the practical delivery. I think before hand it was over about 6 months.

WRDA is now an OCN awarding centre and we've kind of used that as the blueprint for having a lot of the other courses OCN accredited so its been a bit of a springboard for WRDA in terms of getting into the qualifications, linking training to qualifications.

### *What impact has feminism had on adult education?*

Well, feminism has been a positive force shaping how adult education is delivered, certainly within the women's sector. For example, all the training WRDA engages with is with a gendered lens and is informed by WRDA's work on the barriers that women face accessing education. That includes approaches designed to address these, so for example in light of a lot of women citing "no confidence" as a barrier a lot of the training that we do would work on sharing life experiences rather than any necessity to have formal background in training or qualifications to get onto the training. Participants are encouraged to reflect upon their own knowledge and experience.

Additionally, I think feminism has meant that when you're thinking about training your model is one of flexible delivery. That can be applied to the duration, how long it runs, the timing, the location, and the training methods. So you're always thinking about what barriers women specifically bring to the training. So we could include things like options for mornings or afternoons, or starting after kids have been dropped to school, finishing courses earlier, it could even be evening and weekends. Always taking account of childcare needs which is one of the biggest barriers for women.

But I think also recently, personally there is a real momentum in terms of feminism now. I think there's finally an acceptance that women need to be treated equally and I'm not sure that was around before ten years ago. I think because of that a lot more women are signing up for courses, are challenging themselves. Where they would have thought, before hand, "well maybe not me", now actually they're putting themselves forward and saying well this is one of my rights.

So I think, hard to quantify, but I think its all very good and I think the movement will help to address the inequalities, definitely, and help level the playing field.

### *What is the adult education landscape like at the moment?*

Ok, I think I would have to say that the adult learning landscape at the minute is pretty fragmented in Northern Ireland and very poorly funded. I think, probably from 2008 in fact, it has had its funding cut almost year upon year. Northern Ireland is unlike any other part of the UK as well, in that there is no statutory body responsible for adult learning. So for example, in Ireland you have an organisation called Aontas, which is the national adult learning organisation advocating for the right of all adults in Ireland to quality, lifelong learning. In England there is an organisation called the Learning and Work Institute that has a similar role, again statutory funded, but there's no such thing in Northern Ireland. So, actually in Northern Ireland what you have are lots of different community organisations putting on a lot of quality, fabulous adult learning, but all fighting for funding.

To make matters worse, since Brexit we kind of knew we were going to lose ESF, the European Social Fund money, and ESF funded a lot of the Community and Voluntary sector. Almost anything to do with employability would have been funded through ESF, and just this year people have lost the last of it so it has really hit the

Community and Voluntary sector hard, the people who are delivering this training. So it's a little bit bleak.

WRDA are members of an organisation called FALNI, which stands for the Forum for Adult Learning Northern Ireland. So FALNI are working to become a registered charity, the process has already started. Ultimately the aim is to get statutory recognition, to become the Aontas of Northern Ireland, or the Learning and Work equivalent here. FALNI is led by Colin and Trevor Nielsands along with other Community sector organisations like NICVA, ourselves, OCN, CITB, Belfast Met, and loads of organisations. So we're currently lobbying for permanent funding for the adult learning sector but, as we speak, I would have to say it's a challenging road ahead.

*Thank you Deirdre.*