

POSITION PAPER: THE CONTRIBUTION OF WOMEN'S ORGANISATIONS TO COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT IN DISADVANTAGED COMMUNITIES JULY 2005

1. Introduction

Research undertaken by NIVT (now Community Foundation Northern Ireland) in 2001 describes the work of the women's sector in Northern Ireland as follows: "Through its infrastructure, comprising regional support organisations, networks, women's centres, and local groups engaged in a diverse range of activities, it has made a valuable contribution to promoting equality, social and economic inclusion, peace-building, and the development of the voluntary sector and volunteering" (NIVT, p.1). This paper builds on that work, and summarizes the contribution made by women's organisations to community development in disadvantaged communities.

1.1 Which Women's Organisations?

This paper will touch upon the contribution made to community development by women's organisations at all levels, including local women's centres, regional networks, and the regional support organisations, as research has shown that all make a difference to disadvantaged communities across Northern Ireland.

1.2 What is meant by "Contribution to Community Development"?

According to the Task Force on Resourcing the Voluntary and Community Sector, community development can be defined as: "empowering individuals and groups to tackle issues that affect their lives and the communities in which they live". The Task Force acknowledges that to do this, people need to work together, and "in partnership with other groups and statutory agencies" (*Investing Together* p. 19).

Women's organisations by their very role and remit contribute first and foremost to community development by providing life-changing opportunities to women across the full range of ethnic and religious backgrounds, ages, sexual orientation, abilities and educational levels. There are many evaluations of the impact of this work and this paper will not attempt to repeat that here. However, the reach and impact of many women's organisations goes much further than the immediate benefit to their direct service users. For example, WSN states that "women's centres are invariably at the heart of community development initiatives within their communities such as economic and physical regeneration projects" as well as their participation on "a wide range of advisory bodies and partnerships" (WSN, 2002).

This paper therefore acknowledges the activities and services offered to individual women as a contribution to community development in its own right, and also considers the contribution that women's organisations have made to the development of other aspects of their communities. This includes benefits to other sections of the population, contributions to wider community regeneration projects, engagement in the provision of improved local services, and also their ability to transcend the boundaries of local communities, including cross-sectoral partnership and interagency work, and cross-border and cross-community work.

1.3 What is meant by "Disadvantaged Communities?"

There are a range of measures of disadvantage including the Noble and Robson Indices, and other government and funder-led criteria for targeting programmes and funds. NIVT's 2001

research identified 423 “activist” women’s organisations, many of which were operating in areas or with groups experiencing socio-economic marginalisation and disadvantage. Two thirds of women’s organisations stated that the majority of their members and beneficiaries were on low incomes, with 40% stating that more than 75% were on low incomes. Sixty-eight percent of women’s organisations were located in electoral wards designated as deprived as per the Robson indices, and 26% of groups surveyed stated that ethnic minority women were among the recipients of their services or beneficiaries of their work (NIVT, p.4).

Almost all the women’s organisations featured in this paper are either based directly in, or work with beneficiaries from, areas exhibiting both urban and rural socio-economic deprivation. Many are in target areas of the Department for Social Development’s (DSD) Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy. Others fall into rural areas considered by the Department for Rural Development (DARD) as requiring additional support, for example under the Rural Development Programme.

2. Contribution to Community Development

To answer the question “what is the contribution of women’s organizations to community development in disadvantaged areas”, it is useful to provide examples of the activities and impact of women’s organisations at all levels.

2.1 Women’s Centres

There are a number of Women’s Centres in Northern Ireland, at least eight in Greater Belfast, two in Derry, and some of the women’s networks also consider themselves to be “centres”. While they are by no means homogeneous, there is also much synergy in the mix of services, facilities and activities they offer. Ruth Taillon’s research into the eight women’s centres in Belfast (Taillon, 2000), and NIVT’s research, demonstrate a high degree of confluence between services and facilities offered at the women’s centres, which can be summarised as follows:

Provision of safe, accessible space for women and other groups to meet	Community relations, cross community and cross-border working
Education and training	Community leadership programmes
Personal Development	Political education programmes
Social education and health awareness programmes	Seminars and talks on issues such as domestic violence
Women’s health programmes, resources and libraries	Representation and networking
Creative therapies	Support and advice to women who are survivors of domestic violence and sexual abuse
Young women’s groups	Summer schemes for women and children
Peer support programmes	Language, history and cultural projects
Information and advice services, some formal, some informal	Recreational activities
Provision of childcare / crèche provision	Provision of advice and referral to men
Support for individual women and local women’s groups	Opportunities for informal interaction through drop-in services
Involvement in wider community development activities	Contribution to community regeneration initiatives

Research shows a range of positive impacts for participants in skills development, awareness and confidence. The centres’ work also impacts on community relations and on exclusion and marginalisation through domestic violence, illness, etc., and provides opportunities to explore individual, community and wider identity issues. Clearly, the range of provision means that the women’s centres’ impact goes beyond providing development opportunities for individual women, and constitutes a significant contribution to wider community development in their areas. Examples of this wider impact are outlined below.

2.1.1 Windsor Women’s Centre

Windsor Women’s Centre was established in 1990 and its provision coincides with much of that described above. The Centre is involved in work with local area community groups, multicultural work, on-going cross-community projects, and was instrumental in setting up the South Belfast Advice Consortium (Ballynafeigh, Southcity, Windsor Women’s Centre). It also participates in local and city-wide campaign networks on issues of common interest.

The Centre is actively involved in a range of partnerships concerned with, amongst other issues, area regeneration, health, youth and the elderly:

Neighbourhood Area Partnership	Surestart Board
South Belfast Partnership Board	Women’s Support Network
Highway to Health	Citywide Consortium
Engage with Age	Royal Focus Groups
Eastern Childcare Partnership Board	N.A.P.s
Youth Forum	V.C.U
Greater Village Regeneration Trust	Women’s Policy Forum
Greater Belfast Community Network	Greater Belfast Community Network
District Childcare Partnership	Women’s National Commission

The Centre also works on a networking basis with:

South City	Probation Officers
Amber House	Rape Crisis
Olympia Community Centre	Educational Psychologists
Highway to Health	Health Visitors
Windsor House	Education Welfare Officers
Women’s Aid	Liaison with Primary Schools on issues such as enriched curriculum, case conferences, and parent participation
Social workers	

The Centre also hosts a range of one-off information events as needs arise in the community, including, amongst others:

Anti-racist training	Action Cancer mobile unit
Conflict resolution	Dog fouling
Gender strategy	Environmental issues
Gender awareness	Electoral identity cards

The Centre is also actively involved in Cross Community Work with Poleglass Women and Roden Street Women's group, Cross Border Work with Ballyshannon and Longford, and transEuropean work with the Czech Republic.

2.1.2 The Women's Centre Derry

An evaluation of the Women's Centre completed in 2003 (McLaughlin, 2003) revealed that the impact of the Centre's programmes – mainly accredited education and training courses and classes included increased confidence, self esteem, contacts, qualifications, progression to employment, leading to greater degrees of economic activity and financial independence and/or further education (McLaughlin, 2003, p. 123).

But the Women's Centre has historically played a much greater role than educational service provision, and has contributed much to the life of the city. Through its Outreach (now Equality) programme, it has proactively targeted women who traditionally did not access the Centre's facilities. This included developing a Literacy and Sewing Project for Traveller Women; a programme of education and support aimed at young mothers aged 16 years +; the establishment of a summer scheme with women from the Unionist /Protestant community in Newbuildings, and work with the Chinese Community Association, to promote the participation of women from the Chinese community in Centre programmes. In the twenty years since its foundation, the Centre has made a range of interventions in community development in the city, including support for the establishment of local groups including Strathfoyle, Shantallow, Creggan, Tullyally, Strabane and Lifford, and the Waterside; membership of the City Partnership Board's City Vision 2020 process, and representation on the Equality Commission.

The Centre's purpose-designed building, based in the City Centre and accessible on foot from the City's most disadvantaged areas, is considered a model of accessibility for people with disabilities, both in terms of its physical design and its equipment. It is also designed to minimise energy use, with the entire building based upon a movement-sensitive energy saving lighting system. According to the evaluation, the development of the Centre's premises was considered of great significance as an urban regeneration project, bringing as it did a semi-derelict town centre building into meaningful use through sympathetic restoration (McLaughlin, 2003, p. 40).

The evaluation revealed that one of the Women's Centre's major contributions to community development was its active participation in the City Partnership Board, which consulted with all Derry citizens in order to set a vision for the City for the year 2020. In 1998 a Vision Statement was agreed for Derry, and from then onwards, issue groups worked on how to take the various ideas forward. The Women's Centre's impact can be seen in the first plan created from the City Vision process, through specific proposals around support for different household models and parenting skills, crèche facilities, flexible work patterns and greater involvement of women in public life (McLaughlin, 2003, p. 41).

2.2 Women's Networks and their locally-based membership groups

There are a number of women's networks across Northern Ireland. For the purposes of this work, attention is focused on six rural women's networks: South Armagh, Newry and Mourne, Mid Ulster, Omagh Area, Roe Valley, and Fermanagh Women's Networks. Below is a list of activities, based on feedback from three of the above networks, encompassing the range of services and facilities they offer, which include:

Support for development of women's groups in the area, including help with accessing funding	Telephone assistance / Signposting
Capacity Building sessions for women's groups	Tutor data base
Information sessions	Signposting for individual women and groups
Networking events on a county wide basis	Identify and meet the training needs of the women's groups in the areas of health and wellbeing, capacity building, active citizenship, lobbying, IT, consumer awareness and several other educational and recreational accredited training (Newry and Mourne Women's Network).
Quarterly Cluster Group meetings of Women's groups in four geographical areas in the county (Fermanagh Women's Network)	Lobbying on behalf of rural women to ensure that they are no longer isolated and are part of the bigger picture.
Monthly information newsletters	Regular 'Women Talking' Magazine (Fermanagh Women's Network)
Provision of laptop computer suite	

The networks have membership spread across Northern Ireland's towns, villages and isolated rural areas, (for example Fermanagh Women's Network has 28 member groups, Newry and Mourne has 18). The networks increase groups' access to information and services, including IT services, access to appropriately skilled tutors, and access to other women and communities. They facilitate action on shared needs and issues of concern, and give local women and women's action visibility at county and regional level. They also provide a platform for the input of women, often from isolated rural communities, into district and regional development issues.

The women's organisations who comprise the membership of the networks are based in the heart of local communities, and their day-to day work includes the provision of the following "frontline" activities and services at a local level:

Educational courses including Capacity Building, Facilitation Training, Women & Health, Art, Photography, Alternative Therapies, Women in Politics, Citizenship & Media Training	Wellbeing and Recreational courses and activities such as Yoga, Salsa Dancing, Walking, Swimming, Armchair Exercises, Beauty Therapy, Floral Art
Health courses and sessions such as Healthy Lifestyles, and Drugs & Alcohol Training & Awareness	Culture and history, and Cultural awareness (Group for women from ethnic minorities)
Sign Language to increase deaf awareness	Disability awareness (Group for women with disabilities)
Social Awareness Sessions on Volunteering, Benefits Systems etc.	Community safety
Exhibitions	Developing community venues
Summer schemes	Organic Gardening
Organising Playgroups	Environmental issues (village enhancement schemes, renewable energy)
Promoting health issues	Cross-border exchanges

Cross community activities	Negotiation Skills & Facilitative Leadership Training
Peace building activities	Gender Mainstreaming

Clearly all of this work has specific benefits for the women involved, including: decreased isolation, a greater sense of community, a sense of empowerment in tackling the problems of isolation and rural disadvantage, opportunities to engage in activities which offer the opportunity of working beyond their own area and learning and sharing with women from across the border, and those from the “other side” of the community.

Beneficiaries of these activities include women from ethnic minority backgrounds, women with disabilities, children and young people. Taillon highlights the fact that diversity work, awareness-raising and training finds a natural home in many women’s groups. She mentions Al-Nisa Muslim Women’s Group as an example, and also points to work to develop awareness and understanding of the gay and lesbian communities and work with the disabled and deaf communities.

Many of the member groups of the women’s networks also engage in activity which could be said to have benefits and impacts for wider community development, for example the **Lack Women’s Group**, members of **Fermanagh Women’s Network**, who have successfully lobbied for road safety measures in the village, and plant and service hanging baskets and window boxes in the village in co-operation with Fermanagh District Council. They have set up the ‘Lack Rural Women’s Centre’ in what had been the Orange Hall, which they are now striving to develop into an accessible community venue with disabled access and a renewable energy heating scheme. They run a children’s summer scheme, and are involved in a cross-border, cross community project with a Women’s Group in Sligo. Many of the women also play active roles in the local Community Development Association.

Also members of Fermanagh Women’s Network are **Boho Women’s Group**, who have developed a Cross Community Playgroup and are involved in the local Community Group and also a Rural Community Transport scheme. They are assisting a Cross Border Eco-Tourism Partnership, and are establishing a cross-border women’s group. They also play a key role in the annual weekend festival in July.

Many of **Newry and Mourne Women’s Network’s** member groups tell a similar story. The development worker there reports that: “Canal View Women's Group has been extremely proactive in contributing to community development within their area. Such has been their success that the entire Estate in which they live has had a major regeneration make-over. This has been achieved through the women working extensively through participation in local development planning of their Estate in partnership with the local Housing Executive and Newry & Mourne Council. They were instrumental in ensuring that activities within their Community House extended to all members of the community with particular emphasis on catering for the younger generation through Mother and Toddler Groups, Discos, and Fun activities and outings which has contributed in the long term to a drop in anti-social behaviour within the area”.

2.3 Regional Organisations

There are also a variety of region-wide bodies offering support to women’s organisations. These organisations also frequently engage in activities which impact on particular disadvantaged areas and target groups. Examples include **The Women’s Resource and Development Agency (WRDA)**, whose Breast and Cervical Screening Awareness

Programme, in partnership with EHSSB, North and West Trust, South and East Trust, Action Cancer, and the Ulster Cancer Foundation, has tackled low take-up of screening services in a novel and highly effective manner. The pilot evaluation considered the programme to be a unique cross-sectoral intervention in breast and cervical screening uptake in areas of disadvantage across Belfast, with 15 community facilitators trained, 150 women attending awareness-raising sessions, 77 participants reporting attendance at breast and cervical screening as a direct result of the programme, and a reported 160 additional women acting on course information received by word of mouth from course participants, constituting a high degree of added value for the programme (McLaughlin, 2002, p. 33).

According to Taillon, “Promotion, advice, support, delivery of training and social partnership participation around healthcare is a major function of [the] women’s community sector. Virtually every organisation, from the smallest neighbourhood women’s group through to major infra-structural bodies are involved in the provision of support, information and training, those with the necessary expertise also provide advice and counselling. The range of health promotion activities, a proportion of which are funded / part funded by Social Services Boards and Trusts or delivered as part of statutory healthcare initiatives such as, Investing in Healthy Communities, Surestart, Healthy Years Programme, Healthy Living Programme, is considerable” (Taillon, *Health & Well-Being Services*, 2000). Certainly, the health activities of many women’s organisations are congruent with and complementary to the aims of the government’s *Investing for Health* Programme. Taillon points to the way in which organisations such as **Derry Well Woman** work with statutory providers:

“Derry Well Woman is an award winning holistic voluntary women’s health centre which aims to provide care to all women in the NW and to provide an alternative health service to women who may, because of age, culture, racial origin or particular health issue, feel alienated by the prevailing medical system. It seeks to develop constructive and positive relationships with medical, nursing and voluntary services and to provide ongoing training to volunteers. It is the only centre of its kind in NI” (Taillon, *Health & Well-Being Services*, 2000).

Women’s Aid is a regional organisation with local branches which provides advice, support and emergency accommodation for women and children experiencing domestic violence, and works closely with community based women’s centres and networks.

Many projects which have a clear policy application also have real implications for women working on the ground in disadvantaged communities. Examples include the **The Making Women Seen and Heard** (MWSH) project, an alliance of Women’s Support Network, Women into Politics, Unison and the National Council for Women of Ireland which came together in 1995 to lobby for incoming EU funding to be directed to areas and communities in greatest need, and **Women into Politics** (WiP), about which Taillon remarks: “the active support of the Belfast Women’s Centres and the Women’s Support Network enabled WiP to take the initiative during the first cease-fire period to develop discussion and dialogue on how women felt about entering the world of politics and the public domain. WiP has worked towards increasing women’s representation in politics and public life and have assisted in the promotion of issues of concern to women further up the political agenda” (Taillon, 2000, p. 112).

3. Social Capital Summary

As Government has indicated that it intends “to vigorously promote the use of the social capital indicators developed by Community Evaluation Northern Ireland (CENI) on behalf of DSD” (*Positive Steps*, pp. 6-7), it is useful to reflect on the contribution of women’s organisations to community development in disadvantaged communities in these terms, particularly as WSN has stated that “The work of the community-based women’s sector is ‘Building Social Capital’ in action” (WSN, 2004). CENI identifies three forms of social capital: Bonding, Bridging and Linking.

3.1 Bonding

Bonding is described as “the internal cohesion or connectedness in a community. In a bonded community constituents are empowered, organised, internally cohesive and connected” (CENI, p. 12).

The Government, in its *Priorities and Budget 2005 – 2008*, states as one of its key aims “Building Equality and Community Cohesion” (*Priorities and Budget*, p. 2). The capital generated by women’s organisations in this regard is considerable. Women’s organisations, in providing support and services to women in disadvantaged communities, bring women from local communities together, to learn, to create, to exchange information, to build relationships. They are particularly effective at empowering local women to improve their own lives, and to organise themselves to address local issues. Participation in women’s organisations draws women who might otherwise be marginalised and isolated into a collective as well as personal development experience, leading to increased individual and collective capacity at local level. The connections that women make through these activities are often the motor which drives them on to further progression and development.

3.2 Bridging

Bridging is described by CENI as “the levels and nature of contact and engagement between different communities. A bridging community is connected to other communities and is itself accessible to outsiders” (CENI, p. 12).

WSN describes women’s organisations as “bridge builders between communities” (WSN, 2004). By targeting services on women from all backgrounds, including different ethnic and cultural backgrounds, different ages and different levels of physical and sensory abilities, connections are made between women who would otherwise remain isolated from each other and unaware of each other’s life experiences and concerns. Particularly important is the fact that women’s organisations can add value by reaching groups that public sector organisations cannot, and by crossing a range of interest groups, areas and activities. Women’s organisations provide a forum in which women from different backgrounds and cultures can make connections with each other. As is evident from this report, many women’s organisations are engaged in cross-community and cross-border work, as a way of enhancing mutual understanding, and achieving shared goals together. In their preparedness to engage with other communities, women’s organisations help build better relations within and between communities. In generating bridging capital in this way, women’s organisations can contribute to the Government’s stated goals of “building good relations between different communities and reduce sectarianism and racism”. They can also help build “strong and cohesive communities in which cultural differences are accepted, respected and celebrated” (*Priorities and Budget*, p. 27).

3.3 Linking

According to CENI, linking refers to “relations between community and voluntary organisations and resource agencies and policy makers. A linking community has connections to attract resources and influence policy and decision-making” (CENI p.12). As WSN puts it:

“Women’s organisations work in partnership with the public sector in their local areas and through hard work, commitment to principles and the learning gained from experience, they have developed a model for the delivery of integrated services at local level. Their representatives spend much unremunerated time actively participating [at] meetings, working in district level partnership boards, building partnership arrangements with local hospitals, trust and boards, and making contracts to deliver a wide range of public services and accept referrals, placements etc. And they engage in consultations, campaigning, lobbying and policy work at local, regional, national and global level, making the connections, developing participative democracy and active citizenship” (WSN 2004).

The commitment of the women’s sector to “linking capital”, and the resultant increased efficiency and effectiveness through joint working, is entirely in line with the government’s commitment to partnership working (*Priorities and Budget*, p. 27), and resonant with the overall aim of the Department for Social Development (DSD) which is “together, tackling disadvantage, building communities” (*Priorities and Budget*, p. 147).

4. Conclusion

It has been possible in this paper to give only the briefest outline of the contribution of women’s organisations to community development, and much more could be said. However, the process of writing this paper has given rise to two key observations:

1. That women’s development *is* community development, and
2. That “wider community development work”, far from being an added extra to the work of women’s organisations, is a central part of the standard repertoire of many women’s organisations in disadvantaged communities.

In this respect, women’s organisations have an unparalleled scope and reach. This makes them important independent contributors to their communities of geography and interest, and also ready and dynamic partners for government in the development and implementation of policy, and the delivery of services.

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