

# Women's Networks: The emerging voice in rural communities

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While the Women's Movement has been thriving in Belfast and Derry for well over 20 years, it is only within the past couple of years that the women's sector has begun to develop in rural communities. Women's groups are mushrooming all over the place with the active support of both the rural women's networks and the WRDA. While many of the challenges presented to rural women's networks as outlined below will be a case of 'been there, done that' to urban based women's organisations, there are a number of issues which are particularly pertinent to the rural networks.

When the Fermanagh Women's Network was established in 1992, networking with women in rural areas was a relatively new phenomenon. Now that we've been negotiating the high roads and by roads for six years and as new rural women's networks develop, it is an opportune time for the Fermanagh Women's Network to reflect on some of the challenges which we feel are presented to rural women's networks. The issues raised here are by no means definitive but will perhaps provide some food for thought for the emerging rural networks.

In the first instance, it is useful to note that the word 'network' itself is limited in terms of its description of what rural women's networks actually do and perhaps we need to look at re-naming ourselves. The work of the existing organisations involves substantially more than developing a good network of contacts and linking up with other women's groups to work on issues of common concern. We tend to be resource and development organisations for locally based women's groups with networking being one aspect of what we do and also a process by which we work. The women's network is very often the only women's organisation in a given area, so all areas of work fall into its lap, and typically into the lap of one over-stretched worker: local developmental support (in Fermanagh's case - to 18 groups), information, resources, seminars, policy, regional initiatives, training, lobbying, raising awareness, etc., etc. In our spare time, we network!

Given the low population densities in the areas in which we work (and subsequently the small pool of women from whom both membership of the network and the groups are drawn) an important consideration for women's networks is the impact of the development of the network on the work of the local groups. (Bearing in mind that Fermanagh for instance, with its 18 women's groups accounts for only 3.5% of the total population of NI and has a population density of 29 people per sq. km compared to a NI average of 111). Encouraging women representatives from local groups to get involved in network structures ensures representation, accountability, effective

communication. However it is worth examining whose needs are being addressed by this involvement. In effect, we are asking women who already tend to have more than their fair share of work through combining home management, child-rearing and other caring responsibilities, employment, farm accounting, running a local women's group, and god forbid - having a personal life, to get involved in another layer of meetings, to read another layer of documents, to drive another, perhaps 50 miles a month to a two hour meeting and to assume responsibility for a county wide organisation. Regardless of how empowering this involvement may be, it is undoubtedly an added pressure. It is critical for the development of rural women as a whole that this does not result in work with the local group being sacrificed. This is particularly important if we consider that, in the main, it is stronger, more confident members of the local groups who tend to get involved in the network structure. It is also the more politicised women who tend towards getting involved in the networks. If the development and politicisation of groups at a local level is to be nurtured and sustained, we must critically examine how compatible this is with the development of a strong central structure.

Rural women's networks, like the urban networks, must strike a balance between building and supporting a solid infrastructure of locally based women's groups and striving for policy change at a regional, national and international level. This issue has become particularly pertinent since the introduction of the Peace and Reconciliation Programme.

The considerable emphasis placed by the Programme on the inclusion of women (with the subsequent development of many regional policy initiatives combined with the development of new partnerships and structures) resulted in many new demands being placed on women's networks to get involved. Again, to focus on the rural context, with only one women's development worker per county, that worker could quite easily spend her time travelling around the North representing the views of women she never has an opportunity to meet! While obviously, it is extremely important to ensure the particular representation of rural women at a policy and decision making level, it is equally important that emerging women's groups are provided with the support and assistance necessary to allow them to take root and grow.

Finally, a particular issue for rural women's networks is the extent to which they get involved in generic rural development issues. Rural women's development falls neatly into two sectors: the women's sector and the rural development sector. While the temptation may be to build up alliances within the women's sector only, it is important not to ghettoise women's development within the rural sector. Rural development is a women's issue. Every decision taken regarding rural areas impacts upon the lives of women. Our input into rural development policy is crucial. However, because of the limits on our time, energy and resources, getting involved in generic rural development can become a secondary consideration for women's networks. In denying its priority, however, we must consider

closely the impact of not having a 'women specific' input into shaping the future - to coin a phrase, of rural communities. The long term goals and vision of women must be reflected in rural development policy.

The potential for women's development in rural areas is enormous, and also essential, if the future NI is to incorporate a rural society where women's role is an active leadership one. Women's networks are playing the pivotal role in this development. We are faced with many challenges, some exciting, some daunting, some relevant to both urban and rural networks but some, such as those mentioned above, of particular relevance to women's networks in rural areas. These challenges, however, when examined, discussed and ultimately addressed, will strengthen the rural women's sector as we clarify for ourselves, and within the rural development sector as a whole, our role within rural communities. Women's networks have the capacity to make a huge impact on the lives of women in rural areas and are also in a key position to ensure that mainstream rural development reflects the interests and perspectives of women thus ensuring a more holistic approach to rural development. And we've only just begun.

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