

Women's Networks: The Emerging Voice in Rural Communities

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When the Fermanagh Women's Network was established in 1992, networking among rural women's groups in the North of Ireland was a relatively new phenomenon. Now, rural women's networks are sprouting up all over the place with enthusiasm, determination and a sense of 'why have we waited so long?'

As new women's networks develop, it is an opportune time for the Fermanagh Women's Network to reflect on some of the challenges which it is presented with. The issues raised here are by no means definitive but will perhaps provide some food for thought for the emerging women's networks.

In the first instance, it is useful to note that the word 'network' itself is limited in terms of its description of what women's networks actually do. The work of the existing organisations involves substantially more than developing a good network of contacts and linking up with other women's groups. 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.

Secondly, an important consideration for women's networks is the impact of the development of the network as an organisation on the work of the local groups. Encouraging women representatives from local groups to get involved in network structures ensures representation, accountability, effective communication. However we must examine 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 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 the stronger, more confident members of the local groups who tend to get involved in the network structure.

Women's networks, particularly because of the resource and development aspect to our work 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. 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. Striking this balance is a particular challenge for rural women's networks.

Finally, another 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 it priority however, we must consider closely the impact of not having a 'woman specific' input into shaping the future of rural communities and establish the exact nature of our long term goals and vision.

The potential for women's development in rural areas is enormous, with women's networks playing a pivotal role. We are faced with many challenges, some relevant to all women's 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 networks as they clarify for themselves (and within the rural development sector as a whole) their role in rural communities. Women's networks have the capacity to make a huge impact on the lives of women in rural areas but 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.

Paper published as:

Crawley, M. (1997). 'Women's Networks - the emerging voice in Rural Communities', Network News, Rural Community Network.