

The Reality of Women's Studies in Community -Based Education

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Introduction

There can be no doubt that involvement in community-based education can profoundly change the lives of women. Women, for instance, who participate in personal development programmes gain skills and confidence and a new perspective on themselves as women within society. However, women's education starts with the personal, at the level of self-fulfilment. The Fermanagh Women's Network is an organisation which is actively engaged in the development of women as individuals and as members of their communities and is committed to developing women's consciousness and their desire and ability to bring about change in society. We view women's education as an important tool as it can develop the skills, confidence and abilities to effect this change. However, if this is to happen, the women with whom we work must not only be equipped with the necessary skills and confidence but must also be aware of the nature and extent of inequalities within society, the causes of these inequalities and be committed and willing to change the status quo. This is where Women's Studies enters the equation as this is the means by which women, in the main, develop the ability to analyse and challenge their position. That is the theory; but what is the reality of the role of Women's Studies in community-based education, if any? I think 'if any' is actually an extremely important part of that question, because, on the basis of my development work with women in Fermanagh, I come from the premise that we should not assume that Women's Studies plays a significant role in community-based education for the majority of women.

This paper will explore the reality of the position of Women's Studies in community-based education from my perspective as a development worker with rural women's groups in Co. Fermanagh. It will explore the factors which contribute to women's reluctance to engage in Women's Studies in a community-based setting and present a picture of the current situation in Fermanagh with regard to this. In recognising the need to include Women's Studies in women's education at a local level, it will identify the challenge facing us and suggest ways in which we can attempt to address that challenge.

Is Women's Studies a priority for women in locally-based women's groups?

Among a large number of women's groups, there are, I believe, a number of reasons why Women's Studies are not either a priority or of interest to the women involved. The first is, I believe a low level of awareness of the need to either examine or change the role of women in society. For many women, being engaged in low paid part time employment with bad terms and conditions or working on family farms without this contribution either being acknowledged or remunerated is a fact of life. There is little or no consideration given to whether this situation is acceptable, never mind challenging it or examining its root causes. These low levels of awareness are often associated with a shortage or absence of information about what is just and equitable.

A further explanation for the relative lack of interest in Women's Studies is the inability to relate the broader picture of Women's Studies to everyday life and situations. For many women whose greatest pressures are lack of time and energy, the issues which can be seen to directly impact upon and improve their lives are the ones most likely to assume priority. Therefore, attendance at cookery demonstrations in the weeks approaching Christmas is a much more attractive option to many women than, for example examining the impact of Christmas on single parents (the majority for whom are women) in low paid employment. Equally, for women who are living in difficult home circumstances, perhaps raising a family on a low income or suffering from rural isolation; being involved in a locally based women's group is a form of escapism. It is an opportunity, for one evening or morning of the week to be free from the pressure of responsibilities and the last thing many women in this situation will want is a serious discussion about, for example, women's position in society. These women live a disadvantaged and marginalised existence, discussing it in an analytical way on their evening out of the home and being presented with the responsibility of challenging it in that setting is not likely to be an attractive option. Therefore, although it is quite rational to assume that women who engage in any form of collective activity within their communities will inevitably initiate discussion about their roles within that community and indeed society as a whole, I believe that these groups of women are more likely to engage in a discussion about the practical realities of their everyday lives than they are about their position as women. Related to this perceived lack of relevance of the broader issues to the practicalities of everyday lives are feelings of powerlessness to effect change anyway.

Another explanatory factor for the relatively low interest in Women's Studies is the current social and ideological climate with its emphasis on personal development and individual achievement. Women's groups are not immune to this climate and therefore the broader aims of addressing inequality and the position of women in society lose priority to individual progression. One of the outcomes of this change has been an increased uptake in skills-based learning, such as computer training.

'Women's Studies' and 'Feminism' are terms that many women do not relate to. Many women are also part of the feminist backlash and are reluctant to be associated with feminism or Women's Studies because of wider society's perceptions of it. Furthermore, there are many women who quite simply do not understand what is meant by the term

'Women's Studies' and perceive it to be for 'feminists only' or to be narrowly associated with one particular issue, such as health.

Finally, there is also a low level of awareness among women's groups on the progression routes available to women. For women who have participated on personal development programmes and who have achieved a level of personal development which enables them to progress a stage further to Women's Studies, they must be presented with that option if they are to avail of it. We can only identify choices on the basis of our past experiences and the opportunities we have been exposed to. If experience to date has not included Women's Studies, women simply cannot identify it as an option for themselves. I believe therefore that one of the primary reasons for women continuing to engage in pre-vocational training year after year is the fact that they are unaware of the other options which are available.

Women's Groups' Educational Programmes: The Reality

All these factors considered, the result in terms of my work with women in Fermanagh is that all of the women's groups organise computer training, first aid, aromatherapy, etc. None of the nine groups with whom I work have opted to organise anything related to Women's Studies.

A further example of where the majority of interest lies among women engaged in locally-based education is the Fermanagh Women's Network's involvement in a women's training initiative entitled 'Opportunities for Women Learning'(OWL). The OWL project, developed by the Workers Educational Association, was designed to build the capacities of women, with the aim of empowering women both personally and collectively and to give expression to women's collective wellbeing through encouraging women to use the skills developed on the programme to engage in some form of social action within their communities (WEA, 1995). It was initiated in response to the increasing emphasis on individualism in women's education and was an attempt to return to the collectivism of previous decades.

The programme was divided into three modules 'Return to Learn' 'Women and Health' and 'Women into Public Life.' My role was to hold public meetings in rural locations throughout the county, promote the programme and encourage the participation of women. The courses offered were very diverse and were directed at women at varying stages of development. For example: 'Return To Learn' offered women training in skills analysis; confidence building; personal development; job search skills; numeracy; study skills; creative writing and information technology. The 'Women and Health' programme offered courses in, for example, personal history of health; feminism and health; external and internal factors on health; a woman's body; exercise; sexuality and HIV; emotional health; stress; assertiveness; positive thinking; mental health; political issues in health and an examination of the Patient's Charter. The final option, 'Women into Public Life' offered training in, among others, listening skills; politics (economics/feminism); women's history; the media; power and community development.

Examining the range of options, one could reasonably assume that there was something there for everybody. However, although I held public meetings in sixteen different rural locations around the county and enthusiastically encouraged the women to choose a variety of courses, only a small number of groups opted for some elements of the 'Women into Public Life' module, which examines women's role in society. A large number of the groups decided to engage in computer training which has traditionally been on offer to women in Fermanagh and this highlights the likelihood of women choosing options which are familiar to them. Furthermore, in a number of locations, after spending half an hour detailing the content of these courses, many women queried whether or not a first-aid course was available.

In summary, there are a number of factors which contribute to the fact that among the vast majority of women with whom I am currently working there is limited or no interest in undertaking Women's Studies.

The Challenge

While the above factors may offer explanations for the choice of many women to run one pre-vocational training course after another, it presents those of us who see a role for the inclusion of Women's Studies in some form in community-based women's education, with a dilemma. For as long as women do not see the relevance of Women's Studies to their lives, we are faced with the challenge of introducing the subject in such a way as to attract them. Women's Studies, I believe, must be presented to women in such a way as to appear meaningful and relevant to their everyday lives. We can not expect women's groups to automatically follow the progression route; pre-vocational training to personal development to Women's Studies/political awareness.

Addressing the Challenge

In addressing this challenge, we must take as our starting point that encouraging women out of the home to engage in any type of community education is progress, and it is this progress we must build upon. Women participating in community education will increase in confidence and self esteem by simply engaging with other women in their communities and by taking control over education in their own areas.

There are a couple of ways that we can address this challenge. Let me take the example of a computer training course which, in Fermanagh, is the type of training requested by most women. Over 300 women in Fermanagh participated in computer training over the past year, which for the most part means training for traditional type employment and typically in low paid secretarial work, Women's Studies could be introduced here by presenting a

module on 'Women in IT Employment' as part of their Class 1 training. This could provide an overview of women in traditional employment and associated salary levels. It could examine the use of IT in major companies or state agencies where typically the majority of women using their computer training will be doing so in their capacities as secretaries and compare this with the uses to which men typically put their computer training. Similarly, IT training could include a module on the Internet thereby exposing women to the opportunities presented by increased access to information.

A module examining the Government's reduction in the emergency health care budget and its impact on the lives of women could be presented as part of a first-aid programme. Women doing a cookery course could be presented with a module on women in the catering industry etc.

In short, pre-vocational training courses could be presented in an imaginative and holistic fashion. I believe that while presenting Women's Studies on its own will have limited attraction to the majority of women, if introduced on courses which have direct relevance and frequently tangible outcomes, it would broaden its appeal.

Another way of challenging this is by recognising that the factors presented as explanations for the lack of interest in Women's Studies refer to the majority of women. However, around any given county there will be a number of women in each area who have the interest and potential to take their education a stage beyond personal fulfillment. In recognition of this, the Fermanagh Women's Network is planning to provide a 'Women and Leadership' / 'Gender Awareness' course for women who fit into this category in a central location in the county. The rationale behind this is that the growth of these individual women will not be inhibited by their groups and in turn the groups will not have a social or political agenda imposed upon them when they are not ready for that stage of development. It is also possible that these women will subsequently introduce this learning to the other women within their groups.

However, it is important to remember that while the above paints a picture of the situation regarding the majority of women in the Fermanagh area, there are a number of women who have participated in personal development courses and look for progression routes to enable them to take their personal development a stage further. It is important also that there are Women's Studies programmes available for those women to ensure that their further growth and development is facilitated.

Conclusion

To conclude, I believe that there is a role for Women's Studies in community-based women's education but that this role must take cognizance of where local women 'are at' in terms of their own development, not where we as community activists and feminists would like them to be. If we are to meet the needs and interests of the women with whom we work we must recognise and accept that many women will only be interested in courses which have an individual outcome and those women who are interested in progressing to a more collective and critical approach must be catered for in an imaginative way. The crucial consideration is that we must be flexible in terms of how we present Women's Studies.

References

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