

From Listening Ears to Belly Dancing: Networking- the Fermanagh Way

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'Grant aided or taken for Granted?' was a report compiled in 1992 which documented the women's voluntary sector in Northern Ireland. At the launch of the report in Enniskillen, the Fermanagh Women's Network was born. Inspired by the activities of other women's groups in the rest of Northern Ireland, the 80 women at the launch agreed that they would benefit from active involvement in a women's organisation. For the first three years of its existence, the Network conducted a wide range of activities as a voluntary management committee, with a lot of support from Eithne Mc Nulty, then Development Officer with the Rural Development Council. In those three years, the Network had developed into a strong management committee with clear direction and had established its community base very firmly in the county.

The Fermanagh Women's Network is now actively engaged in 5 areas of work:

- Local Development
- Information Provision and the Development of Resources
- Health Development
- Strategic and Policy Work
- Internal Management and Development.

Since the employment of development staff in 1995, the Network has developed the infrastructure of women's groups in the county from 5 to 20 with two county wide groups- an older women's group and a group for women with disabilities. In setting up women's groups, the Network explores issues around the group's formation, for example, 'Why set up a group? Why set up a 'women only' group, setting aims, fundraising, budgeting, etc. When the group is established, the groups operate autonomously but with development support from the Network when needed, Community based development with the women's groups is the backbone of the Fermanagh Women's Network and is an ongoing feature of its work. One of the most exciting outcomes of the local development work has been the training of 13 women as community facilitators (trained by the Women's Resource and Development Agency (WRDA). In terms of the future, in addition to filling the geographical gaps in Fermanagh, we also plan to initiate women's groups with the ethnic minority women in the county.

In terms of information provision, we produce three newsletters per year which are disseminated to over 800 women in the county, send monthly mailings to the women's groups, produce a tutor register, and have a mobile suite of computers which is used by the groups for computer training. Promoting the use of IT is an important aspect of our work and this year we plan to secure funding to upgrade the suite of computers to enable women to undertake Internet and E-mail training in their own areas and also to produce a web page which will be incorporated into the Fermanagh Women's Network web site. We run seminars and information days, for example, a recent one

was 'Using the Arts'; aimed at encouraging women's groups to take their arts and crafts skills a stage further by translating them into arts projects. That day was a huge success and had eighty women belly dancing, drumming, snapping photographs and writing short stories! Forthcoming ones include 'Using the Media' and a seminar which will advise on accounting procedures for women's groups.

The Health Development initiative within the Network is a two year project aimed at encouraging women to develop a focus on their personal health and to encourage statutory agencies to develop a focus on women's health. As part of the project - among other developments, a 'Listening Ear' service has been established which is a confidential listening service for women.

The Network also devotes a considerable amount of time to policy development and strategic work to ensure that the needs of rural women are included on a policy making agenda. For instance, at the moment, in partnership with the Rural Community Network NI, we are involved in a project which is assessing the feasibility of equality proofing CAP Reform. We are actively involved in the Into the Next Generation initiative, led by the WRDA, which is looking at the long term sustainability of the women's community based sector.

As a network we are confident that we have made considerable inroads in impacting on the lives of women in Fermanagh and also on highlighting the importance of women's development in rural areas, on a county, regional and national level. The women's groups which form the Fermanagh Women's Network have created a crucial dynamic in rural communities. They have facilitated the active involvement of a large number of women in the lives of rural communities - in the main - women who have not been involved in any other form of development activity. They have raised the confidence, self esteem and skills of a large number of women. In terms of the future, it is important that 'women only' development continues to take place because, as we have learned, it is only in this context that women will develop confidence, skills and belief in themselves. In tandem with this, it is anticipated that those active in women's groups will in the longer term begin to take an active role in generic development organisations or perhaps that women's groups will seek representation on local development associations.

Women's networks are, in many instances, unleashing talents, energy, skills and confidence which were heretofore dormant in rural communities. In doing so, and in enhancing the quality of the lives of women involved in their activities, they are fulfilling a very important role in rural communities - in its present and its future.

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