

Negotiating the Mainstream: A Rural Women's Network Perspective

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Introduction

'The times they are a changing' - or at least the belief that they are keeps us going! The nature of the state we live in, the departments which determine our policies and the politicians which govern us could change dramatically within the next couple of months or indeed they could remain the same! Either way, the society we live in and the structures which govern that society have already changed dramatically over the last year or so. One of the most important developments has been the introduction of Equality Legislation as part of the 1998 NI Act which legislates for equality proofing and the establishment of an Equality Commission and which, if fully implemented could for the first time result in effective, quality mainstreaming. This case study will outline the work of the Fermanagh Women's Network thereby providing an example of the type of work which is taking place in the women's sector in the North of Ireland. It will then examine the issue of mainstreaming and some of the challenges which lie before us in the implementation of an effective mainstreaming agenda, particularly in relation to gender mainstreaming.

Background

The Fermanagh Women's Network was established in 1992 by a group of women who saw a need to both assess and address the needs of women throughout Co. Fermanagh and who had a vision of enabling women to participate fully in the social, cultural and economic life of their communities. In a county with a severe gender imbalance in elected representatives and a development sector which lacked a focus on the need for gender specific development, the Network assumed the onerous task of seeking to bring about gender equality in Co. Fermanagh. In pursuit of its overall aim, Fermanagh Women's Network's intervention is a sensitive one that is not overtly feminist but instead is quietly determined in both its underpinning ideology (which must recognise the need for gender equality) and in its good practice (which must recognise the stage of development women are at). The work of the Network can be divided into four main areas; Local Development; Information Provision/Development of Resources; Health Development and Strategic, Policy and Partnership Work.

Local Development Work

The local development work is the backbone of the Network and indeed is also our main success. This work involves setting up women's groups and providing ongoing support, assistance and strategic development to these groups when they are established. Over the past 20 years, we have developed the infrastructure of women's groups in the county from 5 to 22. By establishing women's groups in local communities, we access hundreds of women who would otherwise not participate in any form of community activity. We equip these groups with the skills, confidence and knowledge necessary to co-ordinate and resource their own programmes of work, which typically focus on providing pre-vocational training for women in their areas. Each group initially receives intensive training - we then provide them with advice, support, information and strategic developmental support on an ongoing and regular basis. It is this capacity building work which lies at the heart of the Network.

The local development work also has a number of other components - the Network organises regular seminars and information days which provides the groups with an opportunity to network, share ideas and experiences and also equips them with the knowledge, ideas and encouragement for their strategic development. One of the current shortfalls in the community based women's groups is the absence of women with strong leadership and facilitation skills. A recent initiative in the local development activity has been the provision of a training programme in facilitation and group work skills for 15 women who are currently active in women's groups. The programme entitled 'Community Facilitators' was developed as a partnership arrangement with the Belfast based Women's Resource and Development Agency and essentially involves transferring a model which has been operated successfully in Belfast to rural areas. The 15 women trained by the Community Facilitators Project have acquired the skills necessary to facilitate, lead and inform social and political discussions within their groups. It is anticipated that this will encourage the exploration of questions around gender equality among women at a grassroots, community level. We produce quarterly newsletters which we distribute directly to over 800 women in the county. These provide information on training opportunities, funding, etc. We supplement these with monthly mailings to groups. Our focus on information is to ensure that rural women have equal access to the diverse range of opportunities which are currently available for women. We also develop resources in responses to groups' needs.

The Network has a mobile suite of computers which is made available to the county's women's groups to enable them to engage in computer training-hundreds of women have availed of this suite over the past couple of years and it remains our most popular resource. The Network's strategic plan outlines an increasing focus on the potential for IT. The aim is to open up the world of technology for rural women - to enable them to use it as a tool of communication, as a means of accessing information and equally importantly as a means of increasing their employability by equipping them with the skills necessary for today's world of technology. This is particularly important in a rural context. Advances in technology such as video conferencing, and e-mail (although their full potential has yet to be realised in rural NI) have the capacity to overcome the travel, distance and time factors which are so often cited as major barriers for the economy and indeed the social sector in rural areas. It is

our hope that when these advances are introduced on a widespread basis that women in rural Fermanagh will have the capacity and confidence to assume a key role in their implementation. We are also currently working on our own web site, which when completed, will incorporate a web page developed by each of the women's groups in the county.

Health Development Project

The health development project within the Network has just been completed.

One of the primary areas of work in this project has been the establishment of a 'Listening Ear' service which is effectively a telephone Helpline for women who simply want someone to talk to. We formed a Women's Health Network which brings together Health and Social Services policy makers and practitioners and other voluntary agencies who have a remit for women's health. The project also facilitated discussions with local women's groups to encourage them to develop a focus on their own health. In the medium term, it is planned that there will be a meeting of the two latter areas of work and that the women in these groups will develop sufficient confidence, and place sufficient priority on their own health to participate in the Women's Health Network. This will facilitate direct dialogue between policy makers and clients.

Strategic, Policy and Partnership Work

One of the most exciting new developments in the Network has been the recent completion of a study which sought to assess the feasibility of Equality Proofing CAP reform. The study has identified many questions in relation to women and the agricultural economy; the nature of CAP Reform, the impact of the Equality Legislation, and the relationship between the reform of CAP and the Rural Development Programme. Indeed, in the course of this research, some interesting questions around the need for mainstreaming equality emerge. For example, it concludes that it is, in the main, women who pursue farm diversification initiatives and thus highlights the need for Department of Agriculture, Northern Ireland (DANI), farming organisations and LEADER groups to actively target women. The research indicated the need for further work to establish whether gender discrimination, not necessarily direct, by DANI was taking place. It concluded that gender mainstreaming of DANI initiatives would have a positive impact and highlights those women who would most benefit.

We are also involved in a partnership, again initiated by the Women's Resource and Development Agency called 'Future Search - Into the Next Generation'. This initiative was developed to directly address the question of sustainability of work within the women's sector - which is the biggest single issue currently facing women's organisations. After months of careful planning, the project brought together all the key stakeholders in women's development - ranging from the EU, Government departments, regional support agencies to locally based women's groups. The purpose of the initiative was to build strategic alliances between the government, statutory and voluntary sectors and to explore creative and innovative ways of ensuring the progression of the women's sector into the millennium.

One of the most important aspects of our strategic and policy work is participation in partnerships and assuming an active role in the work of other organisations. The purpose of this engagement with mainstream development initiatives is an attempt to ensure that a gender and/or equality perspective is included in their work. A recent example of where the Network's involvement has made a very positive contribution in this regard is the development of the Fermanagh District's Council ten year Integrated Development Plan. The Network's involvement ensured the creation of an Equal Opportunities/Social Inclusion working group (to sit alongside Tourism, Agriculture and Rural Development, Education, IT, etc.,). The result has been the creation of an equal opportunities strategy within the Integrated Development Plan and the identification of equal opportunities as a cross cutting theme for all elements of the strategy. Obviously, the effectiveness of this at implementation stage remains to be seen. It is within the area of strategic and policy work that the question of mainstreaming arises, both discreetly and explicitly.

The Policy Context

Defining Mainstreaming

As we will see in the following section, 'mainstreaming' is a word which is becoming increasingly commonplace in the vocabulary of the women's sector in the North of Ireland. So, what do we understand by mainstreaming? For the purposes of this paper, I will use a Council of Europe definition; 'gender mainstreaming is the (re)organisation, improvement, development and evaluation of policy processes, so that a gender equality perspective is incorporated in all policies at all levels and at all stages, by the actors normally involved in policy making'. It essentially means that 'gender equality becomes a full part of common policies'. It is not designed to replace policies which deal with specific problems relating to gender inequality, rather it is a strategy which complements this approach in pursuit of the same goal: gender equality.

The FWN and Mainstreaming

As the above case study demonstrates, the work of the Fermanagh Women's Network has become increasingly involved in initiatives which are (although this is not always explicitly stated) concerned with the question of mainstreaming gender equality. This has evolved for two reasons, the first is the actual need to pursue a mainstreaming agenda in pursuit of gender equality and the second is the increasing emphasis being placed on

mainstreaming by policy makers at a NI, UK and EU level. Organisations like the Fermanagh Women's Network who adopt a gender specific approach have as their premise a recognition of the fundamental imbalance between women and men. This results in a firm commitment to, and recognition of the need for quality gender specific work as a necessary prerequisite to effective mainstreaming. For organisations like ours, negotiating the mainstreaming agenda will be an interesting challenge.

While the mainstreaming agenda of the FWN is clearly seen from the organisation's perspective as complementary to its gender specific work, encouraging the policy makers to see the need to retain the gender specific dimension may well be a challenging one. Indeed, the challenge is twofold. In the first instance, the challenge lies in policy makers interpretation of mainstreaming and their understanding of how it sits with a gender specific approach (and consequent willingness to resource gender specific work).

From a government perspective - the development of a mainstreaming policy could be interpreted as a means by which to replace or gradually erode the need for work with specific target groups, such as women. In an environment where there is increasing pressure on government resources - 'mainstreaming' could be its 'opt out' clause. If generic policies (and for the moment let us use the example of local development initiatives) are equality proofed and in theory men and women benefit equally from these initiatives - why then also resource work which targets just women? (There are lots of good reasons, but from a government auditors perspective, there are probably an equal number not to).

Secondly, the challenge lies within the sector as a whole and its willingness to both accept and address the imbalance between men and women as part of its commitment to mainstreaming. To illustrate this challenge, I will discuss the example of rural women's networks vis a vis sub regional networks. Firstly, however, it is important to outline the current legislative context in which this situation arises.

Equality Legislation

The most important policy consideration in any debate on gender mainstreaming in a NI context is the recent introduction of equality legislation - Section 75 of the 1998 Northern Ireland Act (NI Act) which was a direct result of the Belfast Agreement and built on the Policy Appraisal and Fair Treatment (PAFT) Guidelines introduced in 1994. The NI Act legislates that each public authority is required to have due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity between certain different individuals and groups (this includes 'men and women generally'). Schedule 9 of the Act makes detailed provision for the enforcement of duties under the Act which will be overseen by an Equality Commission. (McCrudden 1999) The Equality Commission has recently been appointed. All public authorities will be obliged to submit an equality scheme within six months of its establishment. In addition to choosing how the public authority does not directly or indirectly discriminate, it must actively seek ways to encourage greater equality of opportunity through their policy document. They must also consult, in accordance with any directions given by the Commission, with representatives of persons likely to be affected by a scheme. (McCrudden 1999). The safeguard of equality enshrined in the Belfast Agreement and the subsequent legislative obligation on all public authorities to evaluate policies to ensure that a gender equality perspective is incorporated at all levels is a landmark in terms of gender equality, without a doubt.

Women's Networks and Mainstreaming

So, how is this likely to be implemented? Central to this issue is the question of resourcing. Currently, there is no Government Department in NI with a remit for funding women's development - ideally - the situation would be that projects would be funded through the various government departments - in which case rural women's projects would be funded by the Dept of Agricultural Rural Development Division, women's health projects would be funded by the Dept. of Health and Social Services, women's education and training would be funded by the Dept. of Education and so on. At present,

none of these departments see the resourcing of work within the women's sector as being a part of its remit (although it does occasionally occur in an unstructured way). The outcome of this at present, is that responsibility for resourcing crucial work within the women's sector more often than not falls outside the remit of Government departments. With the result that, in the main, groups tend to approach semi-public bodies for funding, EU sources or Trust funds who access their finance from NGO sources.

The implementation of the Equality Legislation should result in women and men benefiting equally from all government policy - where this does not happen by default - it should happen by design. Let us take a look at the rural development picture. In NI, there are 12 sub regional networks (S.R.N.'s) which typically comprise of local development associations, community groups, economic development initiatives, tourism projects, etc. In some instances, women's groups are also members, but this tends to be the exception rather than the rule. The sub regional networks play an extremely important role in acting as an advocate for their member groups and assuming a role in relation to policy work. They are an essential cog in the wheel of rural development and through their umbrella agency, the Rural Community Network NI are a point of reference for government in relation to rural policy. There are five women's networks - only two of whom cover a similar geographical area to a sub regional network (Fermanagh being one).

It is anticipated that it is through the DANI Rural Development Programme (the programme for the 2000-2006 period is just being finalised) that these sub regional networks will receive a substantial amount of their core funding in the future. We should assume that given that the work of the sub regional networks does not benefit men and women equally that equality proofing will highlight this and women's networks will also be funded by the Rural Development Programme - to redress the imbalance between women and men. However, reality sets in. A crucial consideration is

the limited availability of resources. Again, in a NI context - should devolution take place (certainly, not a given!) and for the first time NI politicians will have to be made decisions about budgets and priority allocation of resources there will be some very difficult decision making around allocation of government funding. It is clear therefore given budgetary constraints, that in the long term, it will be very difficult for both the generic sub regional networks and the women's networks to survive.

The question arises therefore in what way can the women's networks and the sub regional networks develop to ensure that they can mutually survive. Indications are, that if women's networks are to survive - an amalgamation with the sub regional networks will be necessary. Undoubtedly, assumptions will be made that because the sub regional networks are 'generic' (the definition assumes inclusive) that the amalgamation will result in a lesser status for, or an assimilation of, the women's networks. An outcome of their assimilation will be the resourcing of the work through the mainstream. For the women's sector, this raises obvious concerns about the work being diluted, the focus being diverted and the conditions being removed where women's personal and political development can be nurtured and developed. The challenge will be to ensure that mainstreaming is not interpreted as 'assimilation'. While the legislative position may support effective mainstreaming the challenge will be to persuade our colleagues in the voluntary sector that effective mainstreaming is a process which demands commitment and requires a fundamental re-think of established norms and behaviours.

Central to this question is the ability of the women's networks to negotiate the 'gender agenda'. For the most part in rural women's development, work with women which has a 'gender agenda', or a feminist perspective (to coin one of the latest phrases on the NI circuit) is a relatively new phenomenon. The majority of women's groups have not reached that advanced stage of development where they are skilled, confident and autonomous enough to influence policy and articulate their own case for the retention of a gender focus. Engaging in this debate in a climate which is not necessarily receptive will not be easy.

Conclusion

With the introduction of the Equality Legislation and the emphasis on mainstreaming by the Labour Government, the opportunities for effective gender mainstreaming in NI have never been greater. On the other hand, should implementation of mainstreaming policy be ill thought through and combined with lack of commitment to gender equality - the risk of jeopardising the gains made in women only development have never been greater. The implementation of any policy which requires a fundamental change in attitudes - (even though that change may not be consciously resisted) is a difficult task - and in no place more so than NI. The baseline within the women's sector clearly recognises the imbalance between men and women -achieving widespread acceptance for this will not be easy. The extent to which mainstreaming and the equality legislation will be successful from a gender perspective will depend greatly on the effectiveness of the recently appointed Equality Commission. Their task is an onerous one, not least because the gender agenda within the Equality Commission will be competing for priority with equality along sectarian lines.

However, the realisation of the principle of equality as enshrined in the Good Friday Agreement must lie at the heart of the new structures and society we are creating - translated into positive action and ultimately, financial support . Otherwise, we risk the creation of a society where discrimination and disparity of treatment remain commonplace expressions - the difference being that this time they will apply to gender and not religion or political persuasion.

There has been no history of the politicians of NI championing the cause of women's rights or women's development. For the moment, in the ground breaking times we live in, that is unlikely to change. However, in this time of transition, while there is an inkling of potential to create a brighter and more equitable future for women in the North - we, in the community based women's sector have a moral responsibility to use whatever resources within our means to realise it - mainstreamed or not!

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