



Roads to Learning

A Study of Education and Training by Women's
Groups in North and West Mayo.

2004

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Commissioned by Women of the NorthWest

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.

Women of the North West are grateful to the Gender Equality unit of the Department of Education and Science for the opportunity to undertake this study

Special Acknowledgement is due to the Women's Groups and individual women for their contribution and participation in this work. More importantly, this study was made possible by the work of local Women's groups in promoting Adult Education and training for their groups and communities. Gratitude is also extended to the voluntary management committee of the Women of the North West:-

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Executive Summary

This study profiles the nature of the education and training programmes undertaken by Women of the North West (WNW) and the loose '*network*' of women's groups associated with the organisation. It measures the programmes effectiveness in providing women with viable options for progression to further education, training, community activism and self-fulfilment. The study further identifies the significant features of good practice, which are associated with implementing education and training programmes in North West Mayo.

The decrease in population, the changing structure of the local economy and the particular social fabric of North West Mayo have all contributed to the sustained presence of disadvantaged social groups in this rural setting. Education and training programmes provided by WNW and other women's groups have attempted to stem this recurring disadvantage.

Despite the shifts in global and European policy trends, adult and community education in Ireland is still an underdeveloped and under-resourced element of the education sector. The fact that there has been a variety of policy outputs and reports does not mean that progress has been substantial or successful. More of the same appears to be the case in relation to voluntary activity. Practical measures to sustain and support development of voluntary activity in Ireland have been slow and inadequate to date. Despite the discourse and awareness raising of voluntary activity over the last three years, the gap that appears is not the level of theory or discourse, but at the level of practice and provision of resources promised to enable volunteerism to develop in Ireland.

The women who participated in the education and training provision delivered by WNW and the '*network*' of women groups in North West Mayo clearly sought to address gaps in their education and training cycles and the problem of social isolation, lack of access and participation to 'formal' education and training programmes. The development and maintenance of this education and training process is the product of considerable voluntary activity.

Overall, the outcome of the education and training process is the engagement of a number of communities in North West Mayo in pre-development initiatives for women. In some cases the work has gone beyond predevelopment. Through the community education and community development process, their knowledge became recognised, expressed, shared, and increased. The process enabled capacity to be built, confidence levels to increase, and personal empowerment. However the most striking aspect of the outcomes is one of which the community and adult education process has been halted and thus has not reached its full potential.

Introduction

Over the past ten years Ireland's strong economic record exceeded the expectations of even the most optimistic forecasters. This period also saw a significant rise in the level of government spending in sectors such as education, health, physical infrastructure and increased investment in anti poverty/social inclusion measures. However, despite the improvement in the overall economic health of the nation, there is continued evidence of the prevalence of poverty and social exclusion in some disadvantaged urban and rural communities. In many rural areas the effects of out migration, inadequate services and few employment opportunities remain key concerns.

Ireland has a strong record of using community development to address the challenges of rural disadvantage. Women of the North West Ltd. (WNW) is a community development organisation who addresses the many manifestations of rural disadvantage in North West Mayo by supporting and facilitating women's personal, social, cultural and economic development. This study presents the results of recent survey research which examines the actions of WNW and its loose '*network*' of women's groups in terms of their operation, activities and outcomes, and assesses the extent the experience has impacted on women and communities in North West Mayo.

Chapter 1 provides background information on Women of the North West and outlines the rationale for the study and its aim.

Chapter 2 provides a snapshot of the policy context and current thinking on community education and voluntary activity in Ireland.

Chapter 3 outlines the key findings of the survey.

Chapter 4 makes a series of conclusions and recommendations concerning future actions.

Chapter One

Background to the Study

1.1 Population and Economic Trends

The area of North and West Mayo covers a large mountainous rural area with a low population density. This dispersed nature of the population not only adds to the isolation felt by many members of the community but also diminishes the efficient and effective delivery of support and resources by public services. The area that WNW considers to be its' operational environment includes 32 Electoral Areas. This area governed has a population of 22,782.

Table 1: Population - Area

Year	1996	2002	2002 (%)
Population	24,242	22,782	
Male		11,577	50.8%
Female		11,,205	49.2%

Source: CSO, Census 2002.

The above table shows that the population of North West Mayo a population decrease of 1,460 in the inter-censal period. Further more Professor Seamus Caulfield of UCD North West Mayo is the only region in the State, which is in '*demographic crisis*' (Source: *The Irish Times Newspaper, November 20, 2002*). There are a number of key factors, which have fuelled this decrease in population. Emigration was a well-established practice in North West Mayo. While the 1990s saw this practice lessen, the more traditional economic structure of North and West Mayo with it's over dependence on marginal farming coupled with the absence of economic and social opportunities continue to facilitate out migration to the magnetic hubs of economic activity.

In many cases previous experience of various elements of urban living (ease of access to educational, social, recreational and commercial services) during periods of (tertiary) education and training combined with lack of work opportunities militate against the return of the skilled younger population to their native area. The underdeveloped physical infrastructure and reduction or absence of public services, lack of local childcare provision and limited transport services render it difficult to obtain suitable employment. An absence of alternative job opportunities, the restricted nature of the local labour market opportunities combined with 'quality of life' factors such as deficiencies in recreational provision and difficulties in accessing various public services all exert adverse effects on the attraction and retention of inward investment and people.

1.2 Background to Women of the North West.

Women of the North West (WNW) were established in 1994 and are based in Moygownagh Community Centre 13 miles northwest of Ballina. WNW is the principal organisation in an informal 'network' of 37 women's group in North and West Mayo (*Appendix 1*). The organisation is principally about the promotion of social, cultural and economic development of rural women. The implementation of education and training programmes suitable to the situational needs of women is central to the work of the organisation. A further key objective of the organisation is to increase the capacity of women to participate in decision-making structures at local, regional and national levels. Its' vision statement asserts that "*Women of the North West exist to create a learning environment where women and men have the opportunity to explore, participate in and achieve equality of citizenship*" (Women of the North West Community Development Project, One Year Work Plan 2003 -2004).

WNW fully embraces the notion of community development as defined by the Area Development Management Ltd. (ADM): "*a developmental activity composed of both task and process. The task is the achievement of social change linked to equality and social justice, and the process is the application of principles of participation, empowerment and decision-making in a structured and co-ordinated way*", (ADM, 2003 Local Development Social Inclusion Programme Guidelines, Dublin). The organisational objectives reflect a community development ethos at its centre underpinned by a number of key practices and procedures namely – trust, communication and facilitation of participation and leadership. In addition, WNW also attempts to employ a Community Education approach. By taking up Paulo Freire's process of '*concretisation*' resulting in education, which instead of creating power elites liberates people and sows the seeds for further social change (Freire, P., 1970 *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Seabury Press, New York).

This combined community development/community education model employed emphasises the importance of the empowerment of the target group to take control of issues and factors that impact on their lives and to develop the capacity to effectively address the problems associated with their particular community. The organisational target groups include:

- *Unemployed and underemployed women and men.*
- *Women active in the community.*
- *Management teams of women's groups.*
- *Farm Families.*
- *Education and Economic Policy makers and planners.*
- *Health Professionals at a regional and national level.*
- *Local regional and national politicians.*

[Source: Women of the North West Community Development Project, One Year Work Plan 2003 –2004]

1.3 Education and Training Provision

In 1995 WNW and NUI Galway collaborated on a research programme and the subsequent report *Putting Value on Women's Work, Moygownagh Women's Project (1996)* highlighted that farm women's work both inside and outside the home is undervalued. Informed by the research process and its outcomes two EU Programmes were successfully delivered - **Moygownagh Women in Community Leadership** (1996 - 1998) and **New Opportunities for Women Programme** (1997- 1999).

The objectives of the **Moygownagh Women in Community Leadership Programme** concerned the facilitation of the understanding of decision making processes, an examination of obstacles to equality, an insight into local political grouping and the building of effective communication, alliances and campaigning strategies (Flannery, M., 2000. *The Effectiveness of Community Based Education and Training in increasing Rural Women's Involvement in Civil Society: Moygownagh Women's Project*. . The evaluation of the programme indicated that this community based educational and training programme was highly successful. Drawing women from the informal 'network' of women's groups the programme exposed them to new ideas, social analysis, gender awareness and organising skills. Solidarity among women was strengthened and women gained confidence to participate more fully in the social and economic action of their communities. (*Women of the North West, Evaluation Report 1999, Moygownagh Women in Community Leadership*).

Between 1997 and 1999, Women of the North West delivered an **EMPLOYMENT NOW** (New Opportunities for Women) Programme. Funded under the European Community Initiatives and co-financed by FAS, the overall aim of the project was to support women in accessing employment opportunities and strengthening the effectiveness of locally based women's groups. While the focus of the NOW project was on information technology skills training, participants also acquired skills in personal development and general business administration skills. Thirty-three women, twenty seven of who were farm women participated in NOW. The programme recorded a hundred per cent completion rate (Flannery, M., 2000)

In addition to the above mentioned programmes numerous less well-funded courses have been delivered by WNW and the wider 'network' of women's groups in the region. Apart from the above mentioned programmes little examination of the impact has been carried out of other education and training programmes delivered by Women of the North West and other women's groups. For the most part this has been due to the constraints placed by the funding providers. Funding is generally provided for the delivery of a programme and not the pre development or post analysis necessary to garner lessons for future initiatives.

1.4 Aim of the Study

The growth of women's groups in rural Ireland has arisen from the practical needs of rural women. The declining nature of agriculture, labour market demands, rural isolation, and lack of services and the general absence of rural women in decision-making structures has contributed to the growth. These factors have caused women to re-examine their lives and the result is that women are determined to create and have an influence on their own development. Education opportunity and training are essential elements in women's personal, social and economic development of themselves and their communities. This study profiles the nature of the education and training programmes undertaken by WNW and the 'network' of women's groups and ascertains their effectiveness in providing women with viable options for progression to further education, training, community activism and self-fulfilment. It further identifies the significant features of good practice, which are associated with implementing education and training programmes in North West Mayo.

Firstly, the methodologies employed consisted of a survey of experiences of WNW. This part of the work was the informing process to the refining of the research methods used. Contact was made with the Women's Groups in the region introducing the research rationale. This was followed by the delivery and the administration of a questionnaire amongst women's groups in the region. (See Appendix). Part of this fact finding process engaged the organisation in phone contact with individuals groups. Despite the organisational proactive approach to the engagement of groups in the delivery of the questionnaire only sixteen groups completed questionnaires out of the thirty seven targeted. The resulting 43% response rate was disappointing. Further communications with the groups and with group representatives has indicated that the questionnaire was too lengthy. Moreover, in trying to explain the lack of response it must be noted that group personnel had changed over time and consequently the value of their experiences was lost to the research. Finally two focus groups composed of service users were facilitated by the independent researcher as means of enhancing the research findings In total twenty four women participated in these discussion groups.

1.5 Conclusion

Chapter 1 has been concerned with providing the background and operating context of Women of the NorthWest and the 'network' of women's groups. In addition, it offers a snapshot of some key social and economic patterns emerging in North West Mayo. The decrease in population and the changing structure of the local economy and social fabric have all contributed to the sustained presence of disadvantaged social groups in this rural setting. Education and training programmes provided by WNW and other women's groups

have attempted to stem disadvantage. Community development and community education is at the centre of the approach implemented by them. This study aims to highlight the effectiveness and impact of these programmes on women and their communities. It was designed to be as widely consultative as possible to integrate the sense of the learning experience of the individual groups and women who participated in education and training programmes delivered by the Women of the North West and the '*networks*' of women's groups over the past ten years.

Chapter Two

Policy Context

The following review of pertinent policy developments and lessons emerging from practical implementation of initiatives are necessarily selective and are not intended to provide a comprehensive overview. However, it does, focus on key matters that relate specifically to the issues examined in this study – *community education and voluntary activity*.

2.1 Community Education

Our education system developed in an era when all of the formal state-supported education that a person received in their lifetime was 'front-loaded', to happen in sequence without any gaps. While adults have always learned through experience and through informal education, the State has not involved itself until recently in lifelong learning, other than funding education and training initiatives to reduce long-term unemployment, or meeting the specific skills needs of industry.

Outside the formal educational institutions, there has been an exponential growth in community education and training activities in disadvantaged communities. New routes of educational development have resulted, which in turn give rise to a demand for access to the formal education system by adults who did not have this option when they left school. Individuals are supported in raising their expectations and look to community education for learning which has a particular relevance to their lives and community.

There is much uncertainty about the definition of Community Education. Much of the scholarship and discourse surrounding Community Education over the last decade has in some ways served to confuse rather than clarify what community education is and what it aims to achieve.

For the purposes of this study Community Education is defined as: "*A process of empowerment, social justice, change, challenge, respect and collective consciousness. It is within the community and of the community, reflecting the development needs of individuals and their locale. It builds the capacity of local communities to engage in developing responses to educational and structural disadvantage and to take part in decision making and policy formation within the community. It is distinct from general Adult Education provision, due both to the ethos and to the methodologies it employs*". (AONTAS, 2000, *Community Education Policy Series*, AONTAS, Dublin).

According to the Department of Education and Science, community education is defined as a particular model and method of education. The definition further expands this understanding under four aspects.

- **Being firmly community based, with local groups taking responsibility for and playing a key role in organising courses, deciding on programme content and recruiting tutors.**
- **An empowering process, working as an equal partner with the knowledge, skills and experience a learner can offer, and taking account of the cultural and other needs of participants.**
- **An agent of social change and community advancement, which helps communities and individuals to develop strategies to take a more active role in decision making on issues which affect their lives and those of their families and communities.**
- **A process built on models of active participation, inclusive discourse and decision making.**

The White Paper on Adult Education reflects the change in emphasis from the front-loading model of educational provision to one in which lifelong learning became – at least in the espoused theory and rhetoric – the overriding principle. This document is the main platform for change in adult education provision and notes that adult education is the “*last area of mass education which remains to be implemented in Ireland*” (p.10).

However, against the backdrop of European social inclusion policies and social partnership governance the emphasis on education as a free market product to boost competitiveness and economic growth has been amplified to include concern and interest for the educationally disadvantaged in the White Paper on Adult Education. Hence, government policy views education regardless of its delivery approach and philosophies through an economic lens. Much of the community education discourse refuses to accept economic development as part of its mission. Going against this trend WNW have focused on community education as a tool for economic development, considering economic goals and outcomes to be a key indicator of their effectiveness.

This rare take on community education also found a foothold in the “*NOW Find a Way - Recommendations for Ensuring Flexible Approaches for Women Accessing Training, Education and Self Employment*” 1997 (EMPLOYMENT NOW Rural and Urban Economic Development Theme Group). It confirms this view and attempts to clarify the means through which disadvantage is perpetuated within the education and training systems with a particular focus on how educational disadvantage obstructs women’s transfer out of unemployment and social exclusion, reinforces inequality and inhibits genuine learning. It further suggests that the objective of national policy should be to assist in creating options, which motivate,

encourage and affirm women learners as well as give them a passport to further education, training and employment.

“NOW Find a Way” argues that the key issue in terms of tackling inequality and disadvantage is the underlying ideology which informs the design and delivery of education. However, there exists a difficulty of creating ladders of access into and progression from initial to further education and training. Women still have a range of specific needs and still experience inequality and disadvantage regarding education and training including:

- *Limited access,*
- *Lack of progression routes from training and education,*
- *Lack of appropriate forms of education and training delivery, and*
- *Unrecognised needs which women have in relation to family responsibilities and social exclusion.*

The philosophy of empowerment emerged as the underlying philosophy that guided the choice of approaches adopted by EMPLOYMENT NOW projects. WNW and the ‘*network*’ of women’s groups fully embrace such a philosophy. This philosophy encompasses a commitment to ensuring that practices and procedures used resulted in positive experiences for the individual woman and that the successful elements which contributed to achieving this could be used in the design of effective interventions for other members of the community. The very obstacles and barriers identified in ‘*NOW Find a Way*’ still encountered by women range from the personal/intrinsic and cultural to structural. A vast array of recommendations explicitly recognized the flexible and women-friendly supports practiced under NOW. These ranged from location/times/duration of education and training opportunities to the provision of essential support structures such as tutorials, transport, child and elder care support and guidance. Much of these recommendations WNW and the ‘*network*’ of women’s groups in North West Mayo have adopted and implemented.

2.2 Voluntary Activity

There is an increasingly extensive body of literature available on the complex issue of voluntary activity. Since 2000, there have been a number of developments concerning volunteerism mostly in the areas of social partnership, local government reform and new policy directions. Perhaps the most crucial is *Supporting a Framework for Voluntary Activity: A White Paper on a Framework for Supporting Voluntary Activity and for Developing the Relationship between the State and the Community and Voluntary Sector,* 2000 (Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs). For the first time Government formally recognised the contribution made by volunteers to the development of our society. Coupled with this, it stated that the work of volunteers is also crucial to the well-being of our society as a whole, and its structures, as “*an active Community and Voluntary sector contributes to a democratic, pluralist society provides opportunities for the development of decentralised and participative*

structures and fosters a climate in which the quality of life can be enhanced for all (Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs: *Supporting Voluntary Activity* 2000:32, 1.4).

Much was promised in the Government's White Paper, including multi-annual funding, designated voluntary activity units in relevant Government Departments, holding of regular policy discussions in order to allow for wider consultation and participation, substantial funding and above all a government commitment to follow up and implement all the decisions in the White Paper. The Government at the time of the launch of the White Paper was careful to make clear that it was intent on enabling the voluntary sector to work more effectively. Subsequent to the Government's White Paper the Programme for Prosperity and Fairness provided for the establishment of the National Committee on Volunteering. This Committee's the most significant output of this committee has been its report "*Tipping the Balance – Report and Recommendations to Government on Supporting and Developing Volunteering in Ireland*". The report provided findings from research and consultation commissioned on volunteering in Ireland, as well as recommendations on policy and infrastructure.

A review of the above documentation and information indicates that there is a clear acknowledgement of the necessity for and centrality of voluntary activity in Irish society. Despite volunteerism centre stage position since 2000/2001 very little impact has been felt by volunteers on the ground to date, this is particularly borne out in the findings of this study in North West Mayo. While these policy documents suggest that voluntary activity is still an important feature of Irish society it continues to be faced with a number of difficulties. The emergence of new domestic and EU development structures, Local Government Reform, and the recognition of the Community and Voluntary Sector as a 'group' within national and local level partnership structures, has produced a plethora of for and structures at which local volunteers are being asked to represent their communities and sectors. However, it is rare that structures who require the contribution of volunteers conduct their activities in a manner that recognizes the limitations placed on those who attend in a voluntary capacity.

2.3 Conclusion

Despite the shifts in global and European policy trends, adult and community education in Ireland is still an underdeveloped and under-resourced element of the education sector. It has been much served recently by a plethora of policy developments – having languished previously as a poorly championed area. That there has been a variety of policy outputs and reports does not mean that progress has been substantial or successful. More of the same appears to be the case in relation to voluntary activity. Practical measures to sustain and support development of voluntary activity in Ireland have been slow and inadequate to date. Despite the discourse and awareness raise of voluntary activity over the last three year, the

gap it appears is not the level of theory or discourse, but at the level of practice and provision of resources promised to enable volunteerism to develop in Ireland.

Chapter Three: Study Findings

This chapter presents an analysis of the data from the questionnaires administered to WNW and the '*network*' of women's groups and the focus group discussion process.

3.1 Profile of Women's Groups

Ninety four percent of respondents indicated that they were based in a rural area. The majority of groups categorized themselves as women's groups (65%), community/voluntary groups (6%), or other (6%). The category of other included groups for older people, people with disabilities and carers. Many groups are relatively recent in origin with half the groups being established in the last six years. Each of these women's groups are autonomous of Women of the North West and membership ranged from 10 to 25 members per group.

Respondents stated a myriad of aims with the majority of groups stating more than one aim; however some common themes did arise. Thirty-four per cent stated that **education and training provision** was their main reason for existence. It is not surprising that in such a remote rural area as North West Mayo a high percentage of groups acknowledged that the **lessening of social/rural isolation** (23%) was their key aim. **Community Development** also featured as a significant aim among the respondents (15%). **Personal development/empowerment** accounted for 12% of replies. The reminding responses indicated that 8% aimed to encourage women to **return to work** while a further 8% stated that the combating of social exclusion was of primary importance.

The array of aims among the women's groups in the region suggests both positive and negative implications. For instance, the data suggests that each community is different; therefore each group reflects the unique characteristics of the community in which it is located. Thus, each group is merely responding to their member's needs and the needs of other women in their local communities.

However, the lack of coherence in their aims may also indicate a certain fragmentation amongst the women's groups displayed by the lack of co-ordination in aspirations. While the groups reflect the individuality of their communities the following question must be raised – why is there such a wide range of aims that potentially could lead to duplication of actions and resources?

3.2 Voluntary Activity and Community Activism

Only two groups who responded employed full time staff to support the activities of the groups between 1992 and 2002. In total they employed eleven staff on a full time basis. However, one project accounted for ten of these full time employees (a social care project). Again only two groups employed staff on a part time basis. One of these groups also employed one full time member of staff as mentioned previously. A total of four part time staff was employed in the sixteen groups between 1994 and 2002.

Two groups indicated that they had the support of Community Employment personnel during this period. However, it is the voluntary activity which stands out as being the main source of personnel to run and support the actions of the groups. All groups depend highly on voluntary participation in order to deliver their activities. Three groups indicated that volunteers were 'employed' full time (36 volunteers), while a further eight groups stated that they volunteers were 'employed' on a part time basis (71 volunteers).

All of these volunteers were women. It is clear that even by the sheer numbers involved this unpaid labour makes a significant contribution to the local communities of North West Mayo, to the groups with whom they work and their contribution also has an input to the maintenance and growth of social capital and civil society in the region. The voluntary contribution to the development, support and implementation of the group's activities in North West Mayo is crucial.

Thirty-eight percent of volunteers planned and developed the education and training courses, 31% helped with the practical organisation of the courses and a further 31% assisted in the funding process. However, the absence of political or lobbying groups among the survey sample is obvious. It is notable while the women's groups tend towards community activity none indicated an involvement in political activity. This is a crucial exclusion as these women's groups profess to be driven by community education - "*an agent of social change and community advancement*" (DES, 2000) and community development principles. The political aspect is an essential component of both. It is the key mechanism by which to bring about structural change. This raises the question as to how useful the learning arising from the education and training process engaged in by WNW and the other women's groups actually is, beyond the personal benefits for the women. The Coalition of Grassroots Women (1997) highlighted that '*community education is a structured process of conscientisation and awareness raising of groups of adults around key issues that affect their lives and are learning through participatory action in their communities*'. However, this process of conscientisation appears to be limited among the sample groups. In fact, it appears that the process has only achieved the individualistic/personal aspect of development.

Women volunteer to organise, deliver and implement education and training programmes in WNW and the 'network' of women's groups for a broad range of reasons. The work undertaken by the local groups has a strong anti poverty focus, so too does the desire to contribute towards the creation of a more socially just society. Many of the volunteers feel a passion to work toward change as the result of having experienced poverty and/or social/rural exclusion themselves. Alongside those factors that are seen to be of a philanthropic nature, volunteering is also regarded among these groups as a social activity. They feel that their work enables them to meet other people and develop new interests. However, volunteers in the groups are experiencing a number of difficulties. It is clear from the data that some of the volunteers felt undervalued. In other cases they feel that they are not equal to the task due to lack of appropriate training. Finally the volunteers are often volunteering full time hours. There is strong feeling among respondents that they are '*asked to do too much*' and this will ultimately be detrimental to WNW and the other women's groups as volunteers feel '*burnt out*' and in some cases resent the organisations.

3.3 Funding

Funding for the individual groups come from a myriad of sources. WNW is core funded by the Department of Rural, Community and Gaeltacht Affairs under the Community Development Programme. As previously stated it has been proficient in attracting European funding over the last ten years. Good relations with FAS, the Western Health Board and the VEC have also assisted the organisation in developing and delivering education and training programmes funded by these organisations. The education and training courses delivered were locally based and primarily promoted the inclusion of women in the broader community.

With regard to the other women's groups in the region a wide range of funding sources were identified by the respondents. The Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs was again identified by the majority of groups (32%) as their main source of funding. The VEC (23%) was also recognized as another key funder of these groups. The Western Health Board (22%) and FAS (17%) were also important sources of funding. Other sources of funding (lesser amounts of funding or once off funding) identified included:

- *Department of Health and Children*
- *Department of Community Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs*
- *Pub quizzes/sponsored walk*
- *Access to Community Centre*
- *Local Community Development Project*
- *Local School*
- *Local fundraising*

Indeed State agencies provided considerable support beyond monetary investment to WNW. This support often took the form of advise, guidance and endorsement of actions. FAS in

particular contributed substantial support through direct cash injections of over £210, 000 (Source: WNW) for EMPLOYMENT NOW (match funding) and return to work courses to WNW. FAS funding has had a very significant impact in terms of facilitating WNW to participate in EU funding initiative by providing match funding but also focusing on women's need to gain economic independence through education and training for work. Additionally, in excess of £115,500 was allocated to the 'network' of women's groups in North West Mayo between 1994 and 2002 by State agencies – FAS, TEAGASC and VEC (Co. Mayo VEC). The types of courses supported included personal development and computers. While personal development could include examination of women's voluntary activity and community development responsibilities, in general the courses pursued more individualistic concerns.

From the questionnaire responses groups identified a varied amount of annual funding. Six of the group indicated that they did not receive any annual funding, while one group stated that the annual funding varied. Seven groups stated annual amounts, which varied from 200 euro to 5,000 euro (three stating 4000 euro). One group said that they received approximately 1,500 euro but not on a regular basis and have received no funding since 2002. One group indicated an annual income of 150,000. The latter is funded by the Western Health Board and employs ten staff to provide caring resources to older people in the community and therefore quite an unique case in comparison to the rest of the sample data. The groups own fund raising activities also contributed to the funding process. Non- monetary type support was considered by groups as a type of funding for instance groups counted access to premises as a form of funding.

The White Paper on Adult Education recognized community groups difficulties with the funding process when it stated "*not only the inadequacy of financial and other resources at their disposal, but also to the short-term nature of much of their funding: the multiplicity of funding sources; the differing demands of the respective funders*" (DES. 2000 115:5.8). However, the educational agenda has become very crowded, public funding is subject to heavy constraints and the needs of those whom opportunity appeared to pass by have come into competition with many other concerns. As one of the women reflected, "*education needs to be a continuous process, with proper funding mechanisms put in place to help this happen. If communities do not have a proper budget there is no way progress can take place for these women*"? Despite policy declarations and indeed some real progress like the delivery of the Community Education Facilitators the stop-start funding approach remains a challenge for organisations like WNW and other local community groups.

3.4 Education and Training Courses Delivered and Accredited

The range of education and training courses delivered by the groups were extremely varied. Figure 1 below highlights the types of education/training courses which were delivered by WNW and the 'network' of women's groups.

Information Technology courses were delivered by the majority of groups (13). The computer courses delivered ranged from beginners to advanced levels. ECDL and FETAC accreditation was provided in three cases. The funders for the information technology courses included FAS, Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs, Mayo VEC, EU (NOW).

Social activities comprised a high percentage of programme activities. These social activities (12) ranged from gardening to cookery demonstrations to outings for older people. It is clear that these types of actions assisted in engaging women in social interaction but also as an introduction to learning. Again this funding came from a range of sources, including own funds, Mayo VEC, LDP and FAS. Support/Counselling type course also rated highly among the respondents.

Eleven groups indicated they had delivered such courses as parenting classes, childcare courses, Diploma in Social Care, and caring skills for carers. Interestingly five of the eleven groups who delivered these support type courses ran stress management courses, which indicate a strong demand for this type of course.

Not surprisingly, personal development courses were also popular among the respondents. Eleven groups indicated that they had delivered such courses. These types of courses included assertiveness courses, personal effectiveness and self esteem building.

Ten groups stated that they had provided health promotion courses mostly focused though not exclusively on women's health. General health issues were addressed through a series of seminars, first aid, reflexology and holistic medicine courses.

Seven groups provided a variety of cultural activities especially through the medium of art. It was delivered both as a form of therapy as well as a method of enhancing the artistic skills of the women involved. Mayo VEC, Mayo County Councils Arts Budget and the Western Health Board as well as groups own funds contributed to the funding of these types of courses.

Back to education courses such as those which assisted women in improving their reading and writing skills were provided by six groups. Sources of funding for these programmes included the County Mayo VEC. Community development type courses were delivered by five groups. They were funded like the previously mentioned courses from a variety of sources, including FAS, EU funding initiative (NOW) and LEADER.

Finally, Enterprise development courses were provided by 4 groups. The courses included business training, introduction to business plan and parish auditing and development of business ideas. Funders of this type of course included Mayo VEC and Mayo County Enterprise Board.

It is apparent from the findings that WNW and the '*network*' of women's groups have developed a considerable experience in implementing the lifelong learning paradigm. However, the question arises as to how much of the above listed education and training provision is community education and how much is adult education? Certainly many of the elements of community education practice are employed. It is clear that the courses provided were based on the principles of personal empowerment and acknowledged previous experience. They provided a space for reflection which encouraged debate and problem solving. However positive action to challenge inequalities remains absent.

In terms of certification all respondents indicated that they have provided some form of certification. All considered it to be of great importance that the women's participation and skills gained be acknowledged and celebrated. A variety of sources of accreditation are evident, formal (i.e. recognised and has currency) accreditation by FETAC accounts for 20%, NUIG (11%), Iar Ros Teicneolaíochta (11%), Order of Malta (11%) and ECDL (11%). It is not possible to discern from the data if VEC/WHB (11%) and FAS/VEC (5%) was formal or

informal (i.e. certification of participation or attendance). Certification of attendance was considered by 20% of respondents to be a form of accreditation.

While the accreditation picture appears to be adequate to the needs of the women participants, a question does arise as to the how closely it meets the needs of their communities and the community and voluntary sector at large. In 1994, AONTAS/NOW published '*Can You Credit It?*' (Mary B. Kelly, 1994, AONTAS/NOW), which explored the implications of accreditation, for learners and groups in the community sector. Kelly pointed to the fact that women's groups had immense experience as learners and trainers in community groups, but were often blocked from accessing paid employment opportunities that arose when their communities received substantial development funding simply because of lack of appropriate accreditation. While experience and practical knowledge is of great value in both the voluntary and paid employment spheres when it comes employment decisions accreditation still remains the method of proof that the individual has met certain standards required for the work. The accreditation provided on the courses provided by Women of the North West appears to be ad hoc and unfocused on the possible progression routes for the women. The issue of accreditation is beyond the scope of this particular study however it does require further investigation and resolution.

3.5 Target Groups

As figure 2 below indicates a vast array of target groups was identified by the respondents. The question as to whether the group's specifically targeted areas of disadvantage i.e. the less articulate, less confident and most disempowered is not easily answered from the data. However, in conversation with the co-ordinator of WNW and focus group discussion members it is clear that universal provision of education and training is an accepted procedure. The reason for this is the possible vulnerability of people in a rural community who may be labelled as poor, disadvantaged or marginalised if they are specifically targeted for a certain education and training course. Therefore it is necessary to open courses to all in the community in order to avoid any stigma occurring. It is a difficulty which many rural development organisations and groups grapple with on a daily basis.

From the sixteen groups who responded to the survey a total of **2,110** people, the vast majority of who were women took part in education and training courses organised between 1992 and 2002. While many of these women were repeat participants and may have participated in more than one course nevertheless this number indicated a strong interest to participate in education and training.

3.6 Needs Assessment

Groups were asked to identify their method of needs assessment. The ethos of consultation in the development of its education and training process is obvious from the findings with the most popular method identified as focus groups (45%), followed by public meetings (22%). The remainder indicated information from other organisations (11%), surveys (11%) and listening days (11%). .

3.7 Location and Supports

Community venues accounted for the majority of responses to this question. It is clear that local access to education and training provision is a priority among the groups who responded to the survey. In relation to supports only 13% of respondents indicated that they paid their participant travel allowances. This is surprising in that much of the learning from programmes like EMPLOYMENT NOW would suggest the necessity of travel allowances particularly in isolated rural communities. However a number of reasons can be surmised for this low percentage of groups providing travel allowance. Firstly financial constraints is a key factor as most funding provision will cover the delivery of the course – materials, tutor or venue and not addition costs such as travel. Secondly the ‘spread out nature’ of the ‘*network*’ of women’s groups and the fact that each group aims to provide education and training provision at a local access point lessens the need for great distances for participants to travel.

None of the sixteen respondents provided childcare/eldercare allowances. Again this is surprising as most good practice guidelines would suggest that this is a necessary constituent of any community education or adult education course. Again the financial constraints which most of the groups operate within are a clear factor in the non provision of childcare/eldercare provision. Also the tradition of 'informal' nature of childcare and eldercare in this rural area is a contributing factor. Grandparents, neighbours, older siblings, partners and extended family still provide much of the childcare/eldercare provision in these communities, mainly because there is no 'formal' alternative.

Despite a lack of travel and childcare/eldercare supports other supports were offered in some cases to compensate for the lack of the former or in other cases as simply a matter of course. These supports included group support and encouragement (7 groups), computer access (5 groups) and guidance/counselling (3 groups). The generation of a culture of group support and encouragement is not necessarily one which naturally evolves. It must be recognised that encouraging such a culture of support and 'sisterhood' takes much effort on behalf of the facilitator/tutor and organisation itself. What has been particularly striking during the course of this research is the culture of support among the women. However, it appears that this culture of support and 'sisterhood' does not offer a ready made platform for political or cultural transformation of the local communities.

3.8 Main Benefits to Participants

A range of participant benefits were identified in the study and they can be broken down into three categories – *personal, social and economic*. In terms of personal benefits 19% of respondents indicated that their participants improved in confidence and a total of 14% indicated improvement in numeracy and reading/writing skills. In terms of social benefits 15% indicated increased social interaction however only 16% indicated improved leadership skills/community action. The remainder of respondents identified a variety of economic benefits such as 9% stating that their participants developed new job skills from the education and training process they underwent. One of the most positive factors identified by the groups is the support that their participants received from each other (21%); positive dynamics are fostered through facilitating groups and times of classes so that participants could work together, demonstrating that when they are treated as active learners, they take responsibility not only for their own learning and co-operate to make the experience a positive one for their group. They collectively identify their own learning needs and solutions. Through group processes, they recognised and validated their own knowledge and learning skills, and gain confidence in another way of working that did not characterize their prior experiences of formal education. Their reflections implicitly criticize the traditional model of education that did not previously serve them well.

While the community education process had a clear impact on the participants by developing group solidarity and lessening social isolation the main outcomes for the participants appear somewhat personal in nature. However when asked if they considered education and training provision increased women's participation in local community action 37% of respondents indicated that women on foot of participation in education and training showed very significant involvement in local community action. A further 19% stated that women were now driving social and economic change in their communities as a result of the education and training process they had engaged in, while another 19% indicated that there was a greater visibility of women in local community action. Twenty five per cent acknowledged that there no increase in local community action in their communities. Overall this picture is very positive. Therefore it would appear that the '*process of communal education towards empowerment, both at an individual and collective level*' (DES, 2000:110) has been achieved to a degree.

3.9 Major Issues

Groups were asked to identify what they considered to be the major issues which they grappled with in relation to the delivery of education and training in their local communities. It is clear that funding remains a difficult issue for groups (30%). The lack of volunteers also featured strongly among the responses (17%). This manifested itself by the "*responsibility for organising and delivering courses falling to a few*". Lack of support such as childcare/eldercare and travel accounted for 13% of responses.

Conflict between local groups was an interesting issue in that this was identified throughout the research. Competition for funding and determination to '*offer more to the community*' were suggested as reasons for such conflict among community groups.

3.10 Focus Group Findings

The Focus groups sessions served to reinforce many of the findings from the questionnaire survey. When asked to articulate the reasons they participated in the education and training programmes organised by WNW and other women's groups the participants indicated the following:

[1] Personal and Social Reasons:

- Need to overcome the problem of social isolation through a '*social outlet*'.
- Need to seek something new and the expectation that there should be more to life.
- Life changes caused by children leaving home and the consequent ending of caring responsibilities.
- Opportunity to expand leisure activities.

- Tailor made courses providing suitability of timing, support through childcare/eldercare payments and travel expenses.
- Free education and training courses.
- Need to find a way to increase confidence and self esteem.

[2] Economic Reasons:

- Need to find a way to increase economic status...
- Access to training in new technologies, business skills, and further development of leisure pursuits, confidence building skills and job preparation strategies held the hope of future employment opportunities.

The members of both focus groups also articulated the learning experience they underwent as follows:

- An atmosphere of openness, transparency, trust and honesty.
- Accessible geographically.
- Support mechanisms in place.
- Feeling part of directing own involvement through consultation and support of staff of WNW in particular.

A number of key effects/key outcomes were apparent from the discussions. All indicated that they felt sheltered in a community setting. While all of the women identified the gaining of confidence and self actualisation during the education and training process few identified the need to challenge oppression or even define how it manifested itself in their lives. There was an awareness of a sense of personal responsibility to the community for some women but by no means all. Interestingly this was more prominent in the Ballycastle group who were all over 45 as opposed to the Moygownagh group which had a greater number of the less than 35 age group.

3.11 Conclusion

The women who participated in the education and training provision delivered by WNW and the 'network' of women group in North West Mayo clearly sought to address gaps in their education and training cycle and the problem of social isolation and lack of access to, and participation in 'formal' education and training programmes. The development and maintenance of the education and training process is the product of considerable voluntary activity. Overall the outcome of the education and training process is the engagement of a number of communities in North West Mayo in pre development as a stepping stone to further community and adult education. In some cases it has gone beyond pre development. EMPLOYMENT NOW is one such example. It enabled women to progress to a variety of situation – work, community activism and self-fulfilment.

However the striking aspect of the outcomes of this study is one of which the community education process has halted and has not reached its full potential. The groups undoubtedly have personal, group and community development on their agendas.

Through the community education and community development process, their knowledge became recognised, expressed, shared, and increased. The process enabled capacity to be built, confidence levels to increase, and personal empowerment. It has transformed the lives of many women who have been traditionally excluded from participating in the education and training process. The outcomes have demonstrated what can develop when women are given a chance to voice their own education and training needs, organise their own training and determine their own pace. The findings are testimony to the process of personal transformation that has occurred. That this transformation does not extend beyond the personal in most cases does not diminish the outcomes nor is it a weakness of the process but more of an opportunity as Chapter Four will articulate.

In this study, participants identified the elements that constitute good practice in building courses around people. They identified the factors that made participation possible for them. The interventions challenged the perceived 'sink-or swim' competitive nature of much of mainstream 'formal' provision. A number of key concepts and principles which underpin the work of WNW and the '*network*' of women's groups that are absent from the more mainstream model of education and training include: *flexibility in timetabling and location, voluntary activity, support and reflective practice.*

When education and training programmes are organized to fit women's commitments, many things become possible. Respondents clearly identified location in local communities as making it easier for them to access and enjoy education and training. Flexibility also refers to the way in which the courses responded to the needs identified by the participants. It is obvious too that instead of learning and working competitively as is traditional in the mainstream education and training fora, the group participants worked co-operatively. The model of group work and negotiation so successful in community education has been successfully transplanted and replicated by these groups.

Chapter Four: Conclusions

This chapter elaborates on a number of themes, offering an insight into the issues that impact on WNW, the women's groups and the diverse communities of North West Mayo. In addition, this section identifies their unmet needs, which, have not been addressed at present and outlines some recommendations for WNW to consider in the context of developing its Community Development Strategy for 2005 – 2007. Inevitably, these recommendations concern policy makers both locally and nationally.

The key themes as identified through this study are as follows:

- *Education and Training*
- *Network Identity*
- *Community Development*
- *Rural Social Exclusion*
- *Employment and Enterprise Supports*
- *Family Supports.*

Each of the above themes are presented in more detail in the following sub sections.

4.1 Education and Training

It is well documented that education and training can provide a progression route for individuals who experience social exclusion. The range of education and training programmes which have been pursued by women's groups guided and supported by Women of the North West since 1992 in general aimed at providing second chance opportunities for participants, lessening social exclusion, isolation and activating community development. However, it is evident that there is still further work to be done in this area due to a number of issues identified through this study.

These issues include:

Progression and Dependency

The underlying principles of right of access, supports for participants, and treating women as equal partners in education and training, are principles that are clearly present among women's groups in the region. However, there is a missing link. It is apparent that many of the women have not being guided towards a route to learning and advancement by their group's collective decisions regarding the selection of courses. Furthermore, there are no progression routes obvious or available. The next step for many of the women who participated in these education and training processes is not available. It is clear from the

study that the wide range of education and training enabled some participants to progress. However, the overall impression is that of an incomplete process for many of the participants. Given the wide range and quality of education and training options made available to women since 1992, it is therefore somewhat surprising that such low number of these women have progressed to further education, community activism or work.

For many of the women what has occurred has been very valuable pre development education and training but not life changing progression. Linked to this lack of progression is the notion that dependency has arisen. The women's groups are often the only providers of education and training in the region embracing many of the community development and community education principles. Encouraged by WNW the person-centred, reflective and esteem building nature of the women's groups are extremely attractive to women.

However, the autonomy of these groups leads them to act and direct themselves. While this is important and necessary for their own credibility in their communities it also allows for a lack of awareness of the 'bigger picture' and long term development and the need to ensure that women are guided towards independence. This lack of awareness of long term vision manifests itself in the development of a short term actions where many of the groups allow women to move from one course to another without any reflection as to what it will change in their participant's lives or their communities. Many of the groups are comfortable with the position of 'provider' of education and training and allow this dependency to develop. They may feel that if they are in a position to 'give something' to the women therefore their existence is justified and respected. WNW has facilitated and supported the growth of these women's groups and acts as a conduit for funding but has very little authority in directing the women's groups' actions.

Perhaps the main reasons for these *cul-de-sacs* as the women's groups themselves identified, is the need to chase funding and fit the funding template to the need rather than the need to the template. Despite increased investment in community education and adult education interventions in recent years, many of the groups find it difficult to attract the resources necessary to meet the needs expressed within their communities. While it may be argued that there will never be enough resources for groups to meet identified needs, it is clear that there is a need to revisit how women's groups are resourced at local level to work with excluded members of their community. Inadequate financial resources for education and training within the communities of North West Mayo is one that has had a stifling effect on creativity and action over many years. It is difficult for instance to develop a long-term vision if a group cannot depend on funding longer than one to two years. Strategic planning if it is to influence change within a communities must cover three or ideally a five year period however funding for such timeframes is near impossible to engage.

Appendix

List of Women's Groups in North West Mayo

Name of Group	Contact
Women of the North West	Moygownagh, Co. Mayo
Agleam Women's Group	Clogher, Blacksod, Ballina
W.I.S.H Women's Group	56 Corcoran Tce., Ballina
Ballycastle Women's Group	Main Street, Ballycastle, Co. Mayo
Ballycroy Women's Group	Dooriel, Ballycroy, Westport, Co. Mayo
Bangor Women in Sport	Cloontakilla, Bangor Erris, Ballina
Bangor Women's Group	Bangor Women's Group, Bangor Erris, Ballina
Belmullet Women's Group	Inver, Barnatra, Ballina
Bellacorick Women's Group	Tawnagh, Bellacorick, Ballina
Bofield Women's Group	Bofield, Ballina, Co. Mayo
Belderrig Women's Group	Cregganbeg, Belderrig, Ballina
Carrowmore Lacken Women's Group	Carrowtrasna, Carrowmore Laken, Ballina
Cooneal Women's Group	Raheen, Killala, Co. Mayo
Crossmolina Women's Group	20 Erris Rd., Lecarrow, Crossmolina
Crossmolina Women's Group	Ballina Rd., Crossmolina
Culleens Women's Group	Belleek, Ballina.
Drum Women's Group	Mna Gheata Mhor, Drum, Clogher, Ballina
Drum Women's Group	Mna Gheata Mhor, Drum, Clogher, Ballina
Meitheal Mna Iorrais	Mount Jubilee, Bangor Erris, Ballina
Geesala Women's Group	Mna Goath Dubh, Muingtreaana, Geesala, Ballina
Geesala Women's Group	Mna Goath Dubh, Geesala, Ballina.
Glencastle Women's Group	Glencastle, Bunnahowen, Ballina
Glenamoy Women's Group	Milltown, Glenamoy, Ballina
Inver Women's Group	Inver Women's Group, Glengad, Pullathomas, Ballina
Keenagh Women's Group	Keenagh Ballina
Kilfian Women's Group	Annaghbeg, Ballycastle, Co. Mayo
Killala Women's Group	Ross, Killala.
Killala Women's Group	Killala Community Centre, Killala
Killglass Women's Group	Kilglass, Enniscrone, Co. Sligo
Kilmurray Women's Group	Ballyscanlon, Rakestreet, Crossmolina
Kilcummin Women's Group	Gorthleatilla, Glenamoy, Ballina
Kilcummin Active Age Group	Glencullen Lower, Bangor Erris, Ballina
Mna Le Cheile+B8	Bofield, Bonniconlon, Ballina
Moygownagh Women's Group	Croughan, Garranard, Ballina
Moygownagh Active Age Group	Driminangle, Garranard, Ballina
Pullathomas Women's Group	Knocknalower, Barnatra, Ballina
RosSPORT Women's Group	Aughoose, Pullathomas, Ballina
Rehins Women's Group	Carrentila, Knockmore, Ballina

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