

# Rural Women's Manifesto

## Rural Women Speak



**Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network (NIRWN) is a regional network established in 2006 to articulate the voice of women in rural areas.**

NIRWN's mission is to influence key decision makers through providing a voice and representation for rural women, ensuring their equal and valued position in society.

Women in Northern Ireland have not been afforded the opportunity to participate equally in progressing the country from a post-conflict society to a peaceful society. This is having a negative impact on their social and economic development, particularly those already experiencing disadvantage, such as rural women. NIRWN advocate for the full implementation of international mechanisms UNSCR 1325 and CEDAW. This would ensure gender balanced decision making places, such as NI Executive, local councils and boards. NIRWN holds the view that the lack of gender parity that exists throughout Northern Irish society is a key factor in hindering the development of a new, shared future which our Government should be working towards helping achieve. It is imperative that our region has 'visible' women at decision making level if sustainable peace is to be achieved.

Women in rural areas have suffered disproportionately in that funding has been necessarily addressed to security issues in major towns and cities, whilst their plight and particular circumstances have been ignored. It is imperative that women in rural areas are listened to and responded to appropriately so that their historic invisibility is not mirrored in a post-conflict society.

NIRWN host two annual regional events each year to celebrate World Rural Women's Day, in October, and International Women's Day, in March. With 200 women in attendance at our

recent events, we canvassed women's views on what the existing and emerging issues were for them, their families and their women's groups, and received overwhelming feedback. As a result, we issued a research survey<sup>1</sup> to capture the issues identified in more detail, which was filled in by over 100 women across all Council areas in the region.



Stormont lit up in purple for International Women's Day 2015

The research clearly indicates that rural women are under increasing pressure from the economic climate. Historic underfunding of rural women's activities and underinvestment in rural areas; centralisation of service support; lack of infrastructure, and the burden of caring responsibilities is leaving rural women experiencing more poverty and social isolation than ever before. This bears out what NIRWN has learned through our work with the Rural Women's Policy Forum; NI Rural Development Programme Monitoring Committee; Rural Development Programme Local Action Groups Gender Advisory Panel; Rural Proofing; Rural childcare and others.

The Rural Women's Manifesto is a collation of NIRWN's key findings from rural women on the issues directly impacting on their lives, and what actions decision makers need to take to address them.

*1: Contact NIRWN for a copy of full survey findings*

# Caring Responsibilities

It is part of our rural and cultural tradition that women in families bear most of the caring responsibilities in terms of childcare, elder care and caring for those with a disability. Caring responsibilities often isolate women, particularly those in rural areas who may become excluded from fully participating in social, economic and community-based activities. Flexible, affordable, accessible quality childcare is very difficult to find in rural areas. Distance from work means rural women's childcare starts earlier and ends later, up to 2 hours a day more than their urban counterparts. This can make childcare unaffordable and work/life balance unrealistic. The recent economic downturn has also had an impact on grandmothers, who are increasingly required to shoulder greater childcare responsibilities.

*"There is an expectation in rural areas that women will take on the role of carer thus impacting on their ability to fully participate in work and other social and community activities"*

*"The situation is getting worse with women moving into retirement and immediately taking on care responsibilities for grandchildren due to the high cost of childcare. Our area also has a higher than average level of people caring for disabled/older people, but no support structures for those carers"*

## We call on decision makers to:

- **Recognise the work of carers**
- **Provide adequate resources, support and respite for carers**
- **Agree a Rural-proofed Childcare Strategy that delivers flexible, affordable, accessible childcare options for rural families**
- **Acknowledge that childcare is both a social and economic issue; encouraging mothers to return to work or training needs to be supported by affordable childcare provision**

*"If I didn't own a car it would be very difficult to travel, even to local towns as there are very few buses available"*

*"There is a high demand on the community transport, so at times there is none available and the Translink service has only 2 buses a day. We are 13 miles from the nearest town, 16 from the nearest hospital and 10 miles from the doctor's surgery. Lack of transport is a serious problem"*

*"Rural transport is vital to be able to access key services and to access friends and family. I have witnessed a significant reduction in rural transport services"*

# Rural Transport

Women are much less likely to have access to their own private transport than men. This means that women depend much more on public transport, and are at an economic disadvantage to men. The accessibility of education, training, work and childcare provision and the cost of public transport are factors in determining women's participation, especially in rural areas. The economic disadvantages of lack of access to transport are compounded by the impeded ability to access basic services and social isolation. Feedback from NIRWN members clearly indicates that transport provision varies greatly across the region depending upon where you live, and often provision is linked to the school terms, resulting in no service during holidays.

## We call on decision makers to:

- **Deliver better, more frequent and more affordable public transport, which takes account of women's needs all year long**
- **Develop more strategic, long term support for local community transport schemes in rural areas geared towards enabling women to access appropriate childcare, work, education and training**
- **Ensure public and community transport take account of the needs of women with disabilities and women who have children with disabilities**



## Rural Development

Rural women play a vital role in farm families, businesses and as entrepreneurs. Whilst the Rural Development Programme for NI provides a strong platform for women's needs to be articulated, women continue to be an underrepresented group across Programmes to date. The new 2014-2020 Programme needs to be made accessible to rural women. The Rural Development Programme has the potential to be transformative for rural women by engaging them in decision making; supporting entrepreneurship; improving villages and developing rural tourism, but rural women must be recognised as a target group and actively sought to engage in the Programme.

*"It always seems so complicated. Not for the average person who does not work with this sort of funding all the time"*

*"I think if rural women are to play a role in this there needs to be far more engagement and communication to raise awareness about the RDP and how women can be involved if they are not on a LAG Board"*

*"A lot of it is based around farming families and in rural areas not everyone is living on a farm. The legislative requirements and total funding costs are not sufficient as many women do not have the extra money to contribute towards a project...if it's a pilot project it needs 100% funding with technical support"*

### We call on the Managing Authority to:

- **Develop a communication strategy that delivers communication of the Programme effectively to rural women specifically**
- **Consider the particular needs of rural women at each development stage of the Programme**
- **Ensure that the LAGs have a 50:50 gender balance over the course of the Programme**
- **Look at innovative approaches of collecting gender disaggregated data on Programme beneficiaries**

### We call on the Government Departments to:

- **Work with the Managing Authority to look at ways of collaborating and maximising the delivery of the Programme e.g. DETI to increase female entrepreneurship**

## Education & Training of Women

The right to education is one of the most important means to achieve gender equality. Education and training need to be delivered over the course of a lifetime, adapting to changing life circumstances and reflecting rural women's needs at the time. Community based education and training for women is imperative in rural areas. It is a fundamental building block in supporting women to rebuild confidence and capability to enter the work place, and as a means to access lifelong learning in its own right to maintain overall wellbeing. Community based education is generally delivered based on the local community need, and as such takes account of the complexity of women's lives and barriers to education such as childcare, course fees and academic environment.

*"Community based education, as with rural transport, has been significantly cut. Community education programmes are often a gateway to more formal programmes and are extremely important"*

*"Urban women have had more opportunity to avail of training"*

*"Community based education is important but other issues such as access to affordable childcare and affordable studies need to be addressed in order for women to avail"*

### We call on decision makers to:

- **Rural-proof education and training investment**
- **Address the barriers to rural women's lifelong engagement in training and education and resource these barriers**
- **Provide a range of education and training options, offering both accredited and non-accredited training**
- **Recognise low confidence as a major barrier to women's participation in education**
- **Ensure training can be delivered in the rural communities**

# Rural Women, Poverty & the Economy

Household incomes, poverty rates and the labour market have all worsened in the last five years. The farming and the construction industry, which once sustained and extended families through male employment, can no longer do so. This has resulted in the need for rural women to take on extra work or return to the workplace, often in part-time, low paid jobs. Paid work is not equal for women and men. Two thirds of those earning minimum wage or below are women and women's annual earnings are on average 33% below that of men. The poverty rate for pensioners is higher in NI than in other parts of GB with nearly half a million pensioners in NI living below the poverty line, including fuel poverty.

Women are outliving men in a population which is living longer but lacks the infrastructure to support this emerging demographic. Many rural women have embraced self-employment and entrepreneurship but would like support to achieve sustained business success. They require networking opportunities, mentoring and training and support that is not just focused on extra job creation and export. Rural women would also like embryonic start up business support that is not focused on farm diversification, for those women who are considering self-employment but do not live on a farm. Without a thriving rural economy, rural way of life is under threat.

## We call on decision makers to:

- **Introduce a dedicated women's employment strategy to address the dominance of women in low paid work**
- **Take account of the effect of the economy on older women and take measures to mitigate against pensioner poverty**
- **In consultation with rural business women; create a sustained support structure for small rural business owners**
- **Address inadequate infrastructure support such as poor mobile telephone coverage, including roaming charges in border areas and lack of Broadband provision to enable rural businesses to flourish**

*"Many women, particularly from the farming background, would benefit greatly from support in relation to business. Often this can be crucial for their financial survival and in many instances may be the one thing that keeps the farm family afloat"*

*"We need funding and business support for rural women, particularly rural women with children"*

*"Being a woman running your own business can be isolating but more so in rural areas, where there is less chance to network/collaborate. A lot of business support focuses on exporting...but a lot of women in business are running local services. They still need support... networking, IT/social networking/marketing support. Broadband access is also a critical issue"*

*"Because of a lack of reliable public transport and a dearth of community based education projects, many women, especially those tied to caring or farming responsibilities, are socially isolated"*

*"Many women experience isolation in the rural community due to a lack of opportunities to interact socially"*

*"Very much so, especially for people like myself who have moved into the area. It's very easy to feel isolated"*

*"The cuts in support for women in rural areas will have a detrimental effect on their physical and emotional health and wellbeing"*

## Social Isolation, Health & Wellbeing

Rural life is often portrayed as idyllic, countryside living where life is slower and the beauty of the surroundings compensates for the lack of services that may be available in an urban setting. This can be the case; rural life has a lot to offer many. This image does not however account for the impact of lack of service provision on health and wellbeing. Rural Women's Groups and Rural Community Groups offer a vital link to rural women and their families in reducing social isolation; providing activities; a base for service delivery and often, bespoke support. This work has been historically under resourced<sup>1</sup>, yet has the potential to save the economy by addressing social isolation's inevitable Health & Wellbeing impacts. Rural women experiencing domestic violence are more vulnerable due to their social isolation and distance from service support.

*1: Review of Government funding for the Women's sector OFMDFM/DSD August 2012*

## We call on decision makers to:

- **Support the call made by the UN's CEDAW Committee in 2008 for increased and sustained funding" for women's groups**
- **Implement the delivery of Health & Wellbeing Programmes in rural areas specifically targeting rural women**
- **Address the historical underfunding of rural women's provision**
- **When budgeting, take account of the specific needs and challenges faced by rural women and their children when experiencing domestic abuse**

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