



**nirwn**  
Northern Ireland  
Rural Women's Network

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## **Defining Rural Poverty**

**Position paper on key issues and recommendations  
for rural women in Northern Ireland for Department of  
Agricultural and Rural Development (DARD) Anti  
Poverty Strategy and Programme in Northern Ireland**

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## **Introduction**

Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network (NIRWN) is a regional network established to articulate the voices of women in rural areas. NIRWN is uniquely placed to provide a strategic overview of the key issues and concerns of rural women throughout Northern Ireland (NI).

We welcome the opportunity to present the key issues of rural women that will assist in the development of an Anti-poverty Strategy and Programme. An Anti-poverty Strategy and Programme should be based on strong rigorous research. This should improve the understanding of the pathways into and out of poverty.

Our policy remit and practical experience of dealing directly with women provides us with a unique insight into the problems affecting rural women and the issues most pertinent to them. The main barriers identified through qualitative and quantitative research for rural women are:

- Lack of childcare facilities
- Education and development
- Transport infrastructure
- Lack of access to employment possibilities
- Health and social welfare
- Housing
- Under representation of women in decision-making structures
- Attitudinal
- Domestic Violence.

NIRWN holds the view that there needs, above all, to be clearer political direction. The Northern Ireland Office (NIO) ministerial team that currently governs Northern Ireland must take responsibility for a regional Anti-poverty Strategy and connect it with others, and thereby ensure that clear social-democratic political values drive a credible strategy to achieve an inclusive and tolerant society.

Poverty only makes sense if understood as a relative quality. It is inequality that is the problem at root. (NICVA, 2004). Rural women straddle two sectors, gender and rural, therefore face dual discrimination for their gender and location. Rural women make up 29% of the population as a whole (Census, 2001). Overall the whole dimension of poverty and social inclusion as it impacts on rural women needs to be reflected in the key priorities of an Anti-poverty Programme and Strategy.

## **Childcare**

A recent report 'Investing in the Future' on the demand for and supply of rural childcare found evidence that affordability, availability and accessibility are the main problems in relation to childcare for parents.

Research commissioned by the Equality Commission in 2003 on the demand for and supply of childcare in NI found evidence that affordability and availability were the main problems in relation to childcare for working parents. As a result, relatives and friends play an important role in providing childcare. Grandparents were found to be particularly important. Around 1 in 5 of the children of working parents, and over 1 in 3 of children aged 5-11, are cared for entirely by a relative or friend. Analysis of the costs of childcare revealed that an important reason for this reliance on informal childcare was cost. Lone parents in NI face a specific disadvantage as their earnings are about one third lower than the United Kingdom (UK) average for lone parents (Gray & Brugel, 2002).

The Cross Border Rural Childcare Project (1997 – 2000) highlighted a very low level of childcare provision in rural Northern Ireland and Ireland in comparison to urban areas and to the levels in other regions of Europe.

There is a general acknowledgement that the lack of childcare provision is a major barrier to women to accessing other key services, education, employment, health. Responsibility of childcare lies predominantly with women. The structure of the world of paid work continues to favour individuals without dependents or caring responsibilities. The economic activity rate for women of working age with dependent children is 63% compared with 67% for those without children. (DETI, 2005).

Feedback from women indicates that the cost of childcare within Further Education is prohibitive and often there are not enough childcare places to meet the demand. (WCRP, 2008). Research has also highlighted that although women have higher educational attainment on average than males, rural women constitute a less mobile workforce compared to men, mainly reflecting family responsibilities (Rural Childcare Stakeholder Group, 2008).

Opinion poll data shows that the public wants the Northern Ireland Executive to make childcare a priority. 83% of the 1,024 respondents polled in a recent public attitudes survey commissioned by Northern Ireland Child Minding Association (NICMA) thought the Executive should prioritise the provision of good quality, affordable childcare.

### **Recommendations:**

- Provision of comprehensive childcare which is free or highly subsidised for those who cannot afford it
- Provision for accessible, quality and sustainable childcare
- Rural specific research on childcare provisions as a means of identifying needs required

- Employer prejudice needs to be addressed by providing incentives for employers to introduce and maintain flexible/family friendly work practices
- The recommendations from the 'Investing in Future' Rural Childcare Stakeholder Group to be implemented and monitored.

### **Education and development**

Education is a key concern for rural women. A recent report on Women's Centres' Community Based Education highlighted a number of barriers to women in education:

- Childcare
- Care (Elder and Dependent care provision)
- Personal development
- Time and cost of classes
- Transport and location
- Negative experiences

Community education in Northern Ireland provides accessible learning at a number of different and important levels. It is geographically accessible, delivered literally on people's doorsteps. It is financially accessible, often free at the point of entry. Community education plays a key role in rural development in that it overcomes the barriers the traditional education routes for rural women. Education has a positive knock-on effect, not only having a beneficial impact on the life of the individual women but also on the family and in the local community (WCRP, 2008).

The current piecemeal of funding arrangements for Community Education is unsatisfactory. Community education has mainly been dependent on Peace monies. With a shift in focus of Peace III grants, it places concerns with regards to the future of Community Education (WCRP, 2008). We consider this to be a key issue. The future uncertainty of Community Education disregards the evidence and research that shows that community education in particular is an effective and efficient intervention to increase skills for rural women.

NIRWN recognises that by strengthening the role and position of women in their own communities through training and development opportunities, will lead to the advancement and empowerment of women. NIRWN have delivered accessible training for 919 rural women to date, over the period of 16 months. Courses include confidence building and accredited courses, leading to further opportunities in education, employment, and playing an active role in local communities, through sitting on decision making boards and committees. Feedback received from courses has been extremely positive. Comments from the Chair of a rural woman's group in Co Down commented:

*'The feedback was very positive from the group. They really enjoyed themselves and learned a lot. One woman has now joined a computer course in the WALD centre something she would never have dreamed about*

*before....She needed that little step up, to feel good about herself and be aware of her inner strengths and that's what this course has done for her and others'.*

### **Recommendations:**

- NIRWN consider that investment in community education is a critical step to increase access for women and disadvantaged groups and is a major social inclusion issue
- Training and development opportunities presented to rural women through NIRWNs 'Get on Board' accredited programme and other courses is continued.

### **Transport**

Recent research by The Countryside Agency (2000) for the UK found that transport is the single most important concern of people living in rural areas. A number of other studies have identified transport as a major barrier to social inclusion in rural areas. Rural areas are often presented as a single homogenous entity, but in reality, the diversity of the rural transport experience cannot be overstated. Rural transport opportunities and constraints vary across different localities.

Age Concern Northern Ireland's research for 'Agenda for the Age – The Road Ahead for Older People in Northern Ireland' showed clearly that available, affordable and accessible public transport is what members of the older community in Northern Ireland require most from a transportation strategy. A key concern highlighted in the report for older people living in rural areas is that they experience particular problems and difficulties in terms of accessibility and availability of public transport. This is particularly poignant for rural women, given their longer life expectancy.

Recent reports from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and other think-tanks have highlighted lack of transport as the overriding cause of social exclusion in the countryside, particularly amongst the young, the elderly and the disabled.

Transport is inextricably linked to accessing other key services. Meeting rural transport needs would overcome access to vital services including, childcare, education, employment, as well helping to address the issue of social marginalisation that many rural women face.

### **Recommendations:**

- Developing a typology of rural areas and a range of optimum transport solutions could assist rural transport policy making. More detailed information is required to shed light on the diversity of rural transport conditions
- Good practice development in the Netherlands and Switzerland combining special needs transport and conventional public transport in a door-to-door service available to all should be implemented. Investment is required to meet rural transport needs and that community transport should be free at the point of delivery

- Government policy output on transport must be rural proofed to ensure rural transport issues and needs are sufficiently prioritised.

### **Employment**

NIRWN through its work strives to highlight the inequalities that rural women face. The last census showed that almost 35% of Northern Ireland's population live in rural areas. The viability of taking up low-paid, low quality jobs when public services such as transport and childcare are scarce is an issue that further depresses the possibilities of people in the most disadvantaged areas accessing employment. Quality employment opportunities are few and far between in many rural areas. Increasingly, only temporary or part-time jobs are available. Part-time jobs may suit some women, particularly those with young children, but in general there is a call for employment with better conditions.

Although the number of females in employment is rising, this positive statistic thins when it is noted that the number of women in managerial and positions of authority is significantly less than their male counterparts. 1 in 4 women work part-time and earn 30% less than full-time men (on a pro rata basis). 26% of women in employment are in administrative and secretarial occupations, compared with 6% of men. Only 8% of working women are managers and/or senior officials, compared with 12% of men. (DETI, 2005).

Women in Northern Ireland are less than a 1/3 likely to be entrepreneurs as men, and the gap between male and female is the widest of all the UK regions. Whilst acknowledging the particular differences involved as women approach entrepreneurship, it is interesting to note the following as a demonstration of the real gap and the economic potential. If as many women as men were engaged in early stage entrepreneurial activity in Northern Ireland this would lead to 28,500 more female entrepreneurs, making Northern Ireland the leading region in terms of entrepreneurship. (Invest NI, 2005).

Mobility is undoubtedly a crucial aspect of accessing and retaining employment for working rural dwellers. From a rural development policy perspective, measures designed to enhance the mobility of rural dwellers are therefore a priority. Moss & Wallace (2004).

### **Recommendations:**

- Further research into the employment gains received through Rural Development Programme (RDP) (2001-2006) for rural women is required
- DARD could examine the possibility of a 'one-year' grace period in which benefits will not be touched to give the new business a chance. This is vital if women are not to find themselves caught in the poverty trap.

### **Health and social welfare**

The basis of rural women's health plight is their poverty, which is associated with poor health (Rogers, 1982). While poverty imposes these conditions on

all poor women, the rural environment imposes the additional condition of lack of transportation, health services, marginalisation and fewer available resources. Socio-economic factors such as low income and poor housing conditions cause stress and feelings of powerlessness amongst women. The complex interplay of these factors can impact adversely upon rural women's mental health.

### **Recommendations:**

- The disparities in income between people on high incomes and the low paid; the gap is already huge and getting worse. If welfare to work measures are to have any success, they must be linked to the provision of services such as transport, childcare and services for rural women that will facilitate paid employment
- Taxation and benefits (eg child benefit to combat child poverty) and the national minimum wage. Action should recognise that a key weakness of Northern Ireland compared with Britain is the low level of wages in the private sector
- Accessible family planning and women's health and counselling services
- In the absence of opportunities to employment there must be a real commitment to the essential need for a strong social protection system for those who are unable to access employment.

### **Housing**

The demand for homes in the countryside have pushed up prices to a level which makes accommodation prohibitively expensive for many local people. The potential impact for future population stability through impacts on household formations, will have an impact on rural women.

### **Recommendations:**

- Increased provision of social housing in view of the difficulty low-income families have in finding a place to live in an inflated housing market.

### **Under representation of women on decision making boards**

Women are significantly under represented as elected representatives, 18 of the 108 Members of Local Assembly (MLAs) elected to the NI assembly are women, representing 16.7%. 18% of local Councillors are female. Women are under represented on Education and Library Boards and on Further Education Boards. It is broadly acknowledged that while women make up the majority actively involved in local rural community development, there is a minority of women in senior/decision making positions in key rural development organisations (RCN, 2007).

### **Recommendations:**

- Research to identify skills gaps on current management committees of rural women's committees/groups
- Long term funding to support rural women's infrastructure
- Positive action steps to ensure gender representation
- Gender awareness training programmes

- Mentoring support initiatives.

### **Attitudinal**

Traditional perceptions on the role of the rural women is still prevalent. Challenging mindsets and attitudinal change will be vital and necessary if we are to enter the future as equal partners. Testing the traditional stereotype of the contented home-loving farm woman whose interests centre around her family as part of the perceived rural idyll will be key to attitudinal change.

### **Recommendations**

- Attitudinal survey on the perceptions, experiences and barriers of rural women in NI
- Sustainable investment for regional, sub regional and local level women's infrastructure organisations, to continue to challenge traditional mindsets/perceptions at regional and local levels.

### **Domestic Violence**

The PSNI has experienced a 36% rise in the number of domestic incidents reported in the last 2 years, with the most recent figures showing that police attend a domestic incident every 22 minutes of every day. Domestic Violence in rural Ulster is a more widespread problem than many would wish to believe (Smyth, 2008). The social exclusion that rural women face, often inhibit them to seek the resources and help needed. The Professional Officer for the Community Practitioners' and Health Visitors' Association's for Northern Ireland stated:

*“The domestic violence record in Northern Ireland is appalling...Domestic violence accounts for one third of all recorded crime in Northern Ireland and a third of all domestic abuse occurs when a woman is pregnant. There needs to be greater public awareness of this issue, and...a strong lead [needs to be taken] on this.”*

Very few data-based studies of rural domestic violence against women exist, but the already significant problems are likely exacerbated by rural factors. Poverty, lack of public transportation systems, shortages of health care providers and decreased access to many resources such as advanced education, job opportunities and adequate childcare all make it more difficult for rural women to escape abusive relationships. In addition, rural health care providers may be acquainted with or related to their patients and their families, creating a barrier to disclosing abuse confidentially and thus further isolating these women. Geographical isolation and cultural values, including strong allegiance to the land, kinship ties and traditional gender roles also increase the challenges faced by rural women when they attempt to end the abuse in their lives.

Rural poverty is a particular concern regarding domestic violence and studies have shown that poverty greatly contributes to family and relationship stress and limits the victims' ability to leave abusive partners or family members.

**Recommendations:**

- Sustainable funding for outreach work and programmes with women in rural areas
- Education programmes for schools and youth services to incorporate domestic violence issues into their work
- Public awareness campaigns that focus on educating the public about the many myths and stereotypes related to domestic violence, which in itself is an important part of increasing support for, and encouraging reporting from, those experiencing domestic violence. Campaigns needs to be long term and properly resourced. Effectiveness requires repetition, building on previous gains in awareness. There is a need to improve access to information in rural areas
- Further research is required on the causes, consequences and nature of rural women experiencing domestic violence.

**Other key recommendations:**

- Overall the whole dimension of poverty and social inclusion as it impacts on rural women needs to be reflected in the key priorities of an Anti-poverty Programme and Strategy.
- Investment in a long term sustainable approach for sustaining regional, sub regional and local rural women's infrastructure is required.
- Clear identification of the target group(s) and selection of indicators of poverty, which are capable of being monitored need to be key
- To develop a greater understanding and recognition of the needs of rural women, by continuously researching and reviewing needs and measuring the relevance and impact of services.