



# NIRWN NEWS

Autumn/Winter 2007

Issue 3

## World Rural Women's Day

Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network helped celebrate World Rural Women's Day on the 15th October. Delegates travelled from all over the Province to The Elk, Toomebridge to enjoy an event which was a celebration of different cultures, while at the same time bringing the serious issues facing women to the fore.



A section of the large audience who attended the World Rural Women's Day Event in Toome

Mary Duggan, Chair of NIRWN said “World Rural Women's Day has been in operation now since 1995 and we are delighted to bring women from Northern Ireland closer to women and cultures from across the globe.” Speaking at the event Hilda Stewart, former World President of the Associated Country-women of the World, told the audience that “As a member of one of the founding organisations I am immensely proud that this event is being celebrated by rural women right

here on my doorstep in Toomebridge. This day was set aside by us as a practical way of obtaining recognition and support for the multiple roles of rural women.”

The large crowd in attendance then enjoyed Graham Elliott representing the Sri Lankan Rural Women's Front giving an insight into this energetic and effective organisation. ArtsEkta provided entertainment in the form of Bollywood and Hawaiian dancing making sure that the audience joined in, ending the day perfectly with everyone gaining a much better insight into the issues facing rural women across the world.

Rural women's activities have been the backbone of rural community life, in terms of supporting farming and families and preserving the social capital of communities. This activity has often been viewed as a secondary activity which is not recognised or valued at decision making or policy level. Rural women have also been instrumental in taking risks, particularly in sensitive areas such as community relations and again a large percentage of this work has gone unrecognised or has not had the policy voice to support its development.



Entertainment was provided by Arts Ekta

NIRWN recognise that rural women are often the primary carers and we wish to acknowledge this contribution to the rural economy, which is often lost or overlooked when measuring women's contribution to the rural economy and society in general.

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The idea of a World Rural Women's Day to be devoted each year to honor rural women began at a UN Conference for Women in Beijing in September 1995. The International Federation of Agricultural Producers (IFAP), Associated Country Women of the World (ACWW), Network of African Rural Women Associations (NARWA), and the Women's World Summit Foundation (WWSF) were the main proponents of the day.

Rural women make up more than a quarter of the world population. They contribute to the wellbeing of their families and the development of rural economies.

**The Purpose of the Day** is to provide rural women and their organisations with a focal point to: raise the profile of rural women, sensitise both governments and the public to their crucial, yet largely unrecognised roles and promote action in their support. This action undertaken by rural and farming women in all parts of the world on the very same day strengthens the impact of the day.

## A Message from Graham Elliott, UK and Ireland representative of the Sri Lankan Rural Women's Front



It was inevitable that an organisation as clear in its intentions as the Rural Women's Front would, one day, become more widely known. Formed 19 years ago, RWF offers hope to some 7,000 women and their families in a society that, on the face of it gives equality to women, but under the surface propagates inequality and abuse. RWF is addressing the issues by:

- ◆ being a problem solving agency for the community through capacity building.
- ◆ protecting the rights of migrant workers (women who travel to the Middle East in search of paid work) & their families.
- ◆ strengthening the economy of rural women and increasing the production of foods and other goods through income generating projects (micro-finance).
- ◆ minimising violence against women and children through action opposing violence.



Elizabeth Elliott with Sri Lankan refugees

Sri Lanka is predominantly rural. The island is smaller than the island of Ireland yet has a population of 19 million people, 15 million of which live in rural areas. Women form the vast majority of the population. Food for the family is provided almost entirely through agriculture, be it by growing in a small

home garden, or by employment in one of the huge tea plantations that cover the hills. And it is mainly the women who are bringing in the income.

During my field visit to the RWF work areas I was hugely impressed by how, despite their poverty, the people I met made every effort to provide for me and make my visit tremendously worthwhile. Some, I was told, even borrowed good clothes to wear.

Poverty encourages desperate means through which to escape its consequences. Many rural women are lured to the Middle East to work as housekeepers with the intention of sending their income home for the family. Many of these migrant workers find themselves isolated, sometimes abused, with no means of returning to their families. RWF is successfully lobbying government to help these women return safely to their loved ones.

**Can you help?** A £ goes a long, long way in Sri Lanka. We need a mere £20,000 a year to continue to support our 7,000 members, with a little over for development. Can you imagine how much it would cost to keep an organisation in Northern Ireland with that size of membership and variety of services, going for a year.

So can you help? Even small amounts go a long way. If we can raise one years' funding we will have some breathing space to identify future funders to take us beyond 2008.

**Exchange Programme.** In 2008 we are starting an Exchange Programme where people (mainly, but not exclusively, women) involved in rural/community development and/or peace building will travel to Sri Lanka to spend two weeks with the staff and volunteers of the Rural Women's Front. Half way through there will be a break in a place called Unawatuna on the south coast which has a gorgeous tropical beach, sheltered by a coral reef.

**And a big "Thank You!"** NIRWN were kind enough to ask Elizabeth and I to make a presentation at the World Rural Women's Day event in Toome on 15<sup>th</sup> October. During lunch someone suggested a collection for the Rural Women's Front. £320 was gathered in and presented to us. So a big thank you to NIRWN and all who donated.

If you feel you can help with fundraising, or would like to find out more about the Exchange Programme, please contact: Graham & Elizabeth Elliot, 5 May Street, Waterside, Londonderry, BT47 6EZ; Tel. (028) 71 347733; Email: [rwfsupport@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:rwfsupport@hotmail.co.uk)



The Women's Centres Regional Partnership (WCRP) is a newly emerging Partnership of four leading regional and sub regional women's organisations linking with fourteen frontline women's organisations across Northern Ireland.

This new partnership has emerged from the report of the review group on women's organisations providing support and services to disadvantaged areas.

The four key lead partners of the Partnership are the Women's Resource and Development Agency, Women's Support Network, Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network and The Women's Centre, Derry. The fourteen Women's Centres are spread across Northern Ireland with seven from the Greater Belfast and Lisburn area, four in the North West and three in Dungannon, Magherafelt and Craigavon. Together the WCRP will seek to develop and strengthen a regional infrastructure which will support community based women's organisations across Northern Ireland. The WCRP will tackle women's inequality and disadvantage and support community development in the most marginalised and disadvantaged communities.

For further information check out their website on [www.wcrp.org.uk](http://www.wcrp.org.uk)

## Focus On: Mid-Ulster Women's Network

Mid Ulster Women's Network was formed in 1995 to provide support, advice, information and signposting services to Rural Women's Groups throughout Mid Ulster. At present they have over 20 member groups from as far apart as Dungannon and Rasharkin and also important links to organisations such as Cookstown & Dungannon Women's Aid and Magherafelt & Cookstown Volunteer Centre. They are a useful avenue for Voluntary / Statutory agencies who wish to make contact with rural women.

Currently Mid Ulster Women's Network are completing two projects with the help of their members. The Book Project, funded by CFNI, involves collecting information from local women on the advantages and disadvantages of living in a rural area with an emphasis on how living here has changed over the years and especially since the cessation of the troubles.

The Drama Project, funded by Arts Council NI, involves highlighting relevant local issues such as Drugs Awareness, the implications of the arrival of many Ethnic Minorities in this area and the closure of Hospital Services in Mid Ulster. The Network has used the services of the Off the Cuff Community Theatre Group in the past as they find Drama is a very useful tool to raise awareness.

Their Cross Border links with Inishowen Women's Information Network have continued through the involvement of women from Mid Ulster on an 'Effects of the Troubles' Programme. This has been a great opportunity for local women to meet and network with their southern counterparts.

**Elaine Devlin Co-ordinator of Mid Ulster Women's Network** said "NIRWN has been beneficial to us and we are pleased to have been involved with them from their beginning. Their Policy Worker consulted with a group of our members on a Housing Executive Consultation earlier this year about rural housing issues. This is a subject close to the heart of anyone living in a rural area and our members were delighted to take part".

**Mid-Ulster  
Women's Network**  
Unit C11 The Business Centre  
80-82 Rainey Street  
Magherafelt  
BT45 5AJ

T: 028 7963 4781  
E: [mwncoord@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:mwncoord@yahoo.co.uk)



Front row l-r Fiona O'Kane and Elaine Devlin from Mid-Ulster Women's Network

Back row l-r Mary Duggan, Siobhan Doherty and Louise Coyle from NIRWN

## Healthy Living Event

Mid Ulster Women's Network and NIRWN came together on the 15<sup>th</sup> November to host a Healthy Living evening in The Elk, Toomebridge. The event saw a range of activities aimed at promoting healthy eating, a reduction in stress and developing a healthy attitude to day to day living. Women were offered the opportunity to have their BMI tested, to have reflexology and hand massage, to learn about maintaining a gluten free diet and much more.



Some of the ladies who attended the Healthy Living Evening in The Elk, Toomebridge

Speaking at the event Siobhan Doherty Co-ordinator of NIRWN told us, "Healthy living is one thing which concerns rural women. By having this event tonight we are helping to bring a number of health related activities to rural women, where they can learn about their diet, stress levels and general health related issues". Siobhan went on to say "Both organisations work directly with rural women and it is in our interest to promote opportunities for them to come together to talk to each other and at the same time develop their knowledge about health promotion for their well being". Elaine Devlin from Mid Ulster Women's Network said, "I am delighted to see such a large turnout at this event. We work with a large number of women's groups in the Mid Ulster area and to see them come together at an event like this just demonstrates to our Network the importance of developing the linkages with women on the ground".

The women who attended the evening were treated to a lavish array of healthy foods including a large variety of gluten free food. The event was a huge success with over 70 women of all ages attending on the night.



*Pictured at the Gender Awareness Information Seminar in Enniskillen are:*

*l-r Margaret McCanney and Hazel Hicks, Fermanagh Women's Network; Dr James Magowan, Community Foundation for Northern Ireland; Hilary Sidwell, Western Health & Social Care Trust; Eithne McNulty, Trocáire; and Ann Orr, Women In Agriculture.*

*Photograph Courtesy Impartial Reporter, Enniskillen*

## Gender Awareness Seminar

**Fermanagh Women's Network** are leading the way in addressing the issue of gender equality in the county. Earlier this year they held a seminar to highlight the experiences of how both men and women are affected by these issues.

Margaret McCanney from Fermanagh Women's Network (FWN), who presented the seminar, explained the role of FWN and the facilities it provided in the county. She went on to outline the meaning of 'gender equality' and explained it is the opposite to gender inequality, in that it aims to promote the full participation of women and men into society.

However, Ms McCanney stated that women are often hit hardest by gender inequality. For example, Fermanagh District Council has five female Councillors and 18 males, while the senior management team of the Council, which has seven posts, is made up entirely of men.

If you would like more information on Fermanagh Women's Network Gender Equality Strategy contact Margaret on 028 6634 3814 or email: [fwnwomen@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:fwnwomen@yahoo.co.uk)

## Rural Young People Having a Voice

Northern Ireland Rural women's Network joined forces with Youth Action Northern Ireland and Rural Community Network (RCN) to host two events for young people from rural areas of Armagh and Tyrone.

The events were a great success offering rural young people the opportunity to discuss and explore the issues impacting on their lives in a fun and creative way.

The first event took place in May in The Linen Green, Dungannon and aimed to find out what issues impact on the lives of young rural people and assess what they felt were the needs of young people within their communities. Through a variety of interactive activities various topics such as; transport issues, interests in drama and performing arts, lack of healthcare information and leisure activities and curiosity about people of other nationalities joining their communities were highlighted.

This relaxed and informal fact finding session helped all organisations identify the needs of the young people and the findings were used to plan and organise a larger Interactive information event on September 22<sup>nd</sup> in Eskra Community Centre.

The September Event which included Interactive workshops on; ethnic diversity, health and stress management; hip hop dancing and disability awareness was attended by over 40 young people from rural areas.



*Some of the young people who took part in the Youth Action Event held in The Linen Green, Dungannon in May*

## Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network

Cookstown Office  
15 Molesworth Street  
Cookstown  
BT80 8NX

T: 028 8676 9191  
F: 028 8676 5644  
E: [info@nirwn.org.uk](mailto:info@nirwn.org.uk)

Armagh Office  
The Volunteer Centre  
3 College Street  
Armagh  
BT61 9BT

T: 028 3752 3442  
E: [majella@nirwn.org.uk](mailto:majella@nirwn.org.uk)

Larne Office  
Unit 18 Stylux Business Park  
Lower Waterloo Road  
Larne  
BT40 1NP

T: 028 2826 7552  
E: [edna@nirwn.org.uk](mailto:edna@nirwn.org.uk)

