

# **POSITION PAPER: SUSTAINING THE LIFELONG LEARNING WORK OF THE WOMEN'S COMMUNITY-BASED EDUCATION SECTOR - JUNE 2005**

## **1. Introduction**

The Women's Sector in Northern Ireland makes a significant and often undervalued contribution to the achievement of the goals of most government departments: health, culture, arts and leisure, enterprise, the environment, social, rural and community development. For the most part this work is carried out without access to the sustainable funding that would in turn free even greater potential for achievement within the sector. It is hopeful now that government policy is moving towards recognising women's work in areas of disadvantage and exploring ways that it can be made sustainable.

This paper concentrates on outlining specific areas of congruence between the work of the Community-based Women's Education Sector (CWES) and that of the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL). It describes how CWES is currently delivering on substantial elements of Government policy and presents evidence of this. The paper also suggests that by establishing sustainable partnership structures with CWES, DEL may achieve increased efficiency and effectiveness in developing and promoting the concept of lifelong learning across Northern Ireland (NI).

## **2.0 Current DEL Imperatives**

Current DEL Policy, as expressed in the consultation document, *Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland: November 2004*<sup>1</sup>, reveals a tight fit with the broader economic imperatives expressed in the *Economic Vision for Northern Ireland*. These are in turn dictated by the Lisbon Agenda (2000) that aims, through promoting a knowledge-based economy, to make the enlarged Europe the most competitive global region by 2010. In line with this, the *NI Priorities and Budget 2005-2008*<sup>2</sup> makes promoting the concept of lifelong learning central to both social and economic development. So, learning has become a pivotal factor in boosting productivity and advancing NI's role in the global market place.

**2.1** *The Essential Skills Strategy, FE Means Business* and other related departmental objectives are all consolidated in the overarching *Skills Strategy* the aims of which may be summarised as follows:

- Raise the profile and demand for skills, mostly with employers.
- Rationalise and improve current provision
- Address current low levels of skills in literacy, numeracy, ICT adhering to the targets set out in the *Essential Skills* strategy and introduce an entitlement to a first level 2 qualification for all over 19 years.
- Raise skills levels with a focus on the identified priority growth areas where skills gaps may occur: construction, hotels and restaurants, computer services, mechanical engineering and electronic engineering.
- Improve leadership and management capacity and the employability skills of team working, entrepreneurship, problem solving, flexibility and creativity.

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<sup>1</sup> DEL, (2004) *Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland*

<sup>2</sup> DFP, (2004) *Priorities and Budget 2005-2008*

- Increase the number of people in the workforce through an extended programme of Welfare Reform.
- Focus on 14-19 year olds – improving skills and keeping them in NI.
- Clarify financial arrangements.

**2.3** The document also highlights the impact of changing demographics and the ageing workforce/population. This concern underlies the need to retain young people in NI, to raise the skill level of those already in work, to increase the indigenous workforce and welcome and integrate those joining the workforce from elsewhere.

### **3. Women, employment and learning**

Women's more traditional work role has meant that they have become the mainstay of civic society and the linchpin in families and communities. In particular, because of their (usually unpaid/*second shift*<sup>3</sup>) role of caring for households – for children, disabled and elderly people - women are pivotal in the maintenance of a solidary society. In disadvantaged areas, through relationship networks and community development activities, women have grown reserves of social capital and contributed significantly to the NI peace-building process<sup>4</sup>. This all continues to be the case in NI even though the perceived gender employment gap is narrowing and increasing numbers of women (and fewer men) are working outside the home. Today, 62.8% of women over 16 are registered as employed compared with 73.4% of men. This compares with rates of 61.1% for women and 72.8% for men in the preceding five-year period<sup>5</sup>.

**3.1** In the whole field of lifelong learning women are central. At the crucial early-years stage of development, mothers are the primary educators of their children. Informal family learning responsibilities often revolve around the Mother and the acquisition of good attitudes to learning and sound *essential skills* are initially rooted in the home. Throughout the school years Mothers provide invaluable learning support. They nurture children through times of transition and assessment, supervise homework, encourage achievement, work on parent-teacher bodies and volunteer in classrooms to assist teachers. In terms of educational achievement, with the exception of the still gendered areas of engineering, technology and construction, girls and women are excelling in all areas and at all levels.<sup>6</sup> As individuals and groups, lifelong learning is something women are becoming very good at.

**3.2** Specifically in disadvantaged areas, women are deeply involved in the work of community development and lifelong learning. Government acknowledges this when it says:

*'... these organisations provide vital services to local communities such as adult training and childcare and should be supported by the relevant statutory agency.'*  
(DSD, 2005:14)

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<sup>3</sup> Research by Arlie Hoschild showed that even when working outside the home, women continued to bear the brunt of unremunerated home-based labour.

<sup>4</sup> Margaret Ward describes the essential role of women in post-conflict zones in the Introduction to the transcript of the 9<sup>th</sup> Torkel Opsahl Memorial Lecture given in Belfast by Christine Chinkin, December 2004: *Peace Processes, Post-Conflict Security and Women's Human Rights: The International Context Reconsidered*, NI: Democratic Dialogue. Also TWN, (2005), *Women Civil Society and Peace-building: Paths to Peace Through the Empowerment of Women*, NI:TWN

<sup>5</sup> DETI, (2005) Women in Northern Ireland: Labour Market Statistics Bulletin, NI: NISRA

<sup>6</sup> DETI, 2005:20-22. Women in Northern Ireland, NI: NISRA

The key indicator of the success of CWES is actually encapsulated in the name of the sector. CWES has not become bureaucratised and separated from communities. As well as being realistic about market forces, both local and regional CWES learning provision is flexible and responsive to community need. It is organic rather than fractured, sustainable rather than reactive, ecological rather than inefficient. Consequently, CWES is centrally placed to provide qualified and effective ambassadors of lifelong learning.

#### **4.0 The Community-based Women's Education Sector (CWES)**

Research carried out by the Community Foundation in Northern Ireland (CFNI) in 2001 identified 423 'activist women's groups' and 1071 'traditional women's groups'. Many of these groups value both women-only educational provision and other informal learning opportunities and a cautious estimate has been made of 500 women's groups involved in community-based education in NI<sup>7</sup>. The CFNI research found that approximately 68% of these groups are working in areas of urban or rural disadvantage where substantial learning provision is being made. The Rural Women's Network and WRDA Strategic Plan for 2001-2006 identifies 10,700 women learning annually through six rural women's networks alone. Other pieces of the statistical jigsaw have been provided through monitoring of Peace monies but the full extent of the lifelong learning provided by women in disadvantaged communities in NI has yet to be accurately mapped.

**4.1** Recently a more cohesive framework has begun to emerge that describes the ethos of CWES and will eventually allow for more precise measurement of the sector. A *three-regions* representative structure has been set up that will coordinate the work carried out in:

- Greater Belfast
- Derry and
- The Rural Women's Networks

Each group of regional providers has a spokesperson that represents the views of three advisory groups in the current Government Process to review the work and funding of the Women's sector. This representative structure in turn also allows for greater coordination and rationalisation of delivery and the development of a sustainable and efficient infrastructure.

**4.2** CWES members have agreed a value base that includes commitment to:

- A feminist ethos with female leadership
- Equality, justice and inclusion
- Activism and social change
- Identification with a global women's movement

**4.3** For the purposes of this paper, CWES has gathered together data from a sample (approx 50%) of its membership that indicates the capacity, scope and achievements of the sector. CWES includes only those organisations that are members or affiliates of one of the three regional groups and does not refer to the wider, uncharted women's community and voluntary sector. A list of CWES affiliates is detailed at Appendix 1.

What follows is an analysis of the data gathered from CWES member organisations that gives quantitative indications of the scope, experience and potential of the sector in the field of lifelong learning.

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<sup>7</sup> Feeley M., (2002:4) Summary of *Making Good Learning Partnerships*, ECNI/WRDA. This figure is based on numbers cited in research carried out by Kathleen Lynch (2000), Joanna McMinn (2000), NIVT (2001) Ruth Taillon (2001).

## **5.0 Capacity of CWES**

Among the learning providers surveyed there was a total of 375 years of experience of learning provision in areas of rural and urban disadvantage. The newest group had been in operation for just 2 years and the longest for 23 years. The average number of years' experience per group is 10 years.

Over the past academic year a total of 10,901 people have attended courses in the centres sampled. Of these 8258 (76%) completed pre-vocational, vocational and accredited courses. A further 2643 (24%) completed non-accredited, introductory and leisure courses. The range of vocational and non-vocational courses is outlined in Appendix 2.

## **5.1 Accreditation**

Most of the smaller groups provide and accredit courses through partnership arrangements with larger Women's Networks, FE and local training organisations, Open Learning Centres, WEA and Ulster People's College. Over a third of the larger organisations (15) are autonomous accredited training delivery agents for awarding bodies: OCR, OCN, CCEA, BCS, NIPPA, OTCT, and CITB<sup>8</sup>. In addition to this, groups work cooperatively with EGSA, Surestart, Youth Action, NICVA, RVH, Enterprise Ulster, LEDU, the University Sector, Schools and Cross-Border groups.

Many partnerships are negotiated respectfully and are successful and productive. In some cases groups continue to report that their relationship with FE is less than satisfactory; where women's premises are used to deliver courses, overhead costs are not shared and women's centres also meet childcare and other learner support costs.

## **5.2 Staff and organisational skills**

Women's organisations vary in size and human resource capacity. Most have a bank of tried and tested part-time tutors familiar with the ethos of women's education. Larger organisations have a range of specialist training and support staff: community facilitators, essential skills tutors, ICT tutors, outreach and educational guidance workers, policy and research staff, multicultural facilitators, media and political studies tutors, childcare staff, managers and administrative and finance workers.

Groups are adept at all stages of learning delivery from recruitment and initial assessment through to accreditation and progression. A random sample of a number of centres over the past 4 years showed an average 82% completion/accreditation rate with the majority of successful participants progressing to further training or employment.

## **5.3 Management of people and funds**

Most groups have incorporated and charitable status with vibrant voluntary management committees that are well-informed about the policy context in which learning takes place. Groups have become increasingly professionalised through the availability and management of funded projects. They have experience of monitoring and evaluating, preparation for audit and accounting for participants, staff and funds on an individual and network basis. One organisation has accessed over £2 million since 1997 and another has sourced an innovative mechanism for measurement of soft outcomes that has been disseminated throughout the sector.

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<sup>8</sup> List of acronyms at Appendix 4

#### **5.4 Premises and training resources**

A number of organisations own their own premises and several are purpose built to the needs of women's organisations where childcare is an essential learning support. Groups have used Peace monies to equip centres to a high standard with computer suites, childcare facilities, study space and welcoming drop-in centres. Some groups have resources and facilities that are shared with others including training equipment, library resources and course materials. Other groups survive in less suitable accommodation and with less adequate funding yet continue to provide a necessary service for those for whom movement outside their locality to access learning is impossible.

#### **5.5 Ethos**

The ethos of CWES is developed around the needs of women learners in both urban and rural environments. There is an acceptance that childcare, transport and course costs are barriers to women's inclusion in learning and these are sourced by the organisation whenever possible. Women are eased back into learning through taster sessions, introductory courses and supported with advice, guidance, counselling and a range of learning support mechanisms. The environment is informal, friendly, unbureaucratic and encouraging. Courses are facilitated rather than taught. The reality of women's lives is accepted and catered for rather than disregarded.

More often now centres are providing health support and counselling for those struggling with multiple inequalities and achieving a basic level of well-being is acknowledged as the first step in returning to learn.

#### **5.6 Innovation**

CWES has shown ingenuity, responsiveness and creativity in combining the learning needs of women and the realities of the wider funding and lifelong learning climate. Accredited courses are increasingly offered and where these are inappropriate, new programmes have been designed and accredited with OCN, public bodies and universities. These include: Personal development courses, ICT for Farmers, Women in Society, Community Relations and Conflict Management courses, Organic Gardening, Sexual Health, Active Citizenship, Active Listening, Community Publishing and Media Skills, Community Journalism, Understanding other Cultures, Joinery, Construction, Electrics and ICT courses. A full range of the mainstream and alternative accredited courses on offer is at Appendix 2.

CWES also values the place of 'leisure' courses as a way of preventing isolation, easing women's way back into learning and providing enjoyment. The range of these courses is outlined in Appendix 3.

#### **5.7 Aspirations/identified need**

In addition to the courses already on offer, CWES has identified a demand in the sector for additional Essential Skills and personal development, advanced ICT, computer accounts, business start-up, management and enterprise, health and therapies, childcare training and non-traditional skills.

## 6.0 CWES sustainability in the policy context

*The Economic Vision for Northern Ireland* (2005)<sup>9</sup> recognises the importance of community-based educational development activity as a cornerstone of its strategic economic agenda and commits it to:

*‘Develop confident, creative communities in previously deprived and marginalized areas as a basis for engagement in skills acquisition and to fully utilise the contribution of the Voluntary and Community Sector.’*(2005:16)

**6.1** In the *Positive Steps* report (2005)<sup>10</sup> the Government outlined its response to *Investing Together: Report of the Task Force on resourcing the Voluntary and Community Sector*. Minister of State, John Spellar affirms that:

*‘effective partnership working with the sector can help the government achieve its objectives.’* (DSD, 2005:2)

The report goes on to state that:

*‘Voluntary and Community organisations have a track record of tackling social need and deprivation and are well placed to develop and deliver improved frontline services particularly to the most disadvantaged people in society.’*(DSD, 2005:3)

Much documentary evidence does indeed exist of women’s capacity, effectiveness and efficiency in delivering on the goals of lifelong learning in disadvantaged areas. This is outlined in research into the Women’s Sector’s innovative role in community development, learning initiatives and in particular those activities funded through EU Peace monies and other funding sources.<sup>11</sup>

**6.2** *Positive Steps* further asserts:

*‘We want to ensure that organisations wishing to engage more in delivery of public services are facilitated to do so. Where there are barriers to greater involvement by the sector in delivering public services we will overcome them.’*(DSD, 2005:5)

Lack of quality and affordable childcare continues to limit women’s direct participation in many aspects of public life including statutory learning provision. Nevertheless WCES have created a flexible, vibrant and cohesive educational sector to meet the needs that are often neglected by a culturally inappropriate statutory provision. Women have demonstrated creative, entrepreneurial and financial acumen. They have shown leadership and management capabilities and developed a range of new and necessary skills to meet the challenges that faced them. In fact they have shown the majority of the qualities that the *Skills Strategy* and the *Economic Vision for NI* hold aloft as crucial for future economic (and social) well being.

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<sup>9</sup> DETI, (2005) *Economic Vision for NI*

<sup>10</sup> DSD, (2005) *Positive Steps*

<sup>11</sup> Joanna Mc Minn (2000). *The Changers and the Changed*, Doctoral Thesis, UCD. Ruth Taillon (2000) *The Social and Economic Impact of Women’s Centres in Greater Belfast*, WSN; North Belfast Women’s Forum, (2001) *Breaking Through*. See also TWN annual reports and EUSSPPR reviews.

### 6.3 The *Skills Strategy* emphasises the importance of:

*'creating a clear overview of what is needed and relating this to organisations and programmes which are in place already; seeking to integrate them, and as necessary amend them...'*<sup>12</sup>

This is a logical, efficient and equitable way to proceed. Quality of outcome is evident in CWES' educational work with women of all ages and backgrounds, with children and the wider community across NI. It is manifest in skills development and accreditation, in alternative, customised and mainstream learning programmes and in associated job creation and economic development.

Women now have skills and considerable infrastructure that, with sustainable funding for core salaries, costs and services, could be deployed in delivering on important aspects of the *Skills Strategy*. Closer cooperation would also ensure that women are fully represented in the development and implementation of lifelong learning to meet the real needs of disadvantaged communities. It is timely that restrictions placed on this collaboration by unhelpful structures be reviewed to allow women's fair inclusion in this area of learning provision.

## 7. Conclusion

This position paper shows that the CWES already makes a valuable contribution to achieving adult learning and employment targets and to ensuring the inclusion of disadvantaged women and communities. Evidence from other parts of the UK and from the Republic of Ireland<sup>13</sup> recognises that it is both efficient and productive to collaborate with the community sector in this regard. The *Skills Strategy* suggested by DEL has much to gain from working cooperatively with the well-established CWES to

- deliver on aspects of the *Skills Strategy* that address the needs of girls, women and disadvantaged communities and to
- use the skills and expertise developed by women to support other aspects of the *Strategy* and allied policy documents
- make use of the women's sector proven model of progression including the traffic light analogy, Red = non vocational, Amber = pre vocational and Green = vocational

The contribution that the Women's Sector have made to lifelong learning already, and can make in the future, is of enormous value and now needs to be sustained. Removing the persistent anxiety about core funding will free CWES to take its place alongside other providers, enrich the scope of lifelong learning generally and make inclusive, creative learning choices more freely available. Provision for CWES core resource needs will in turn ultimately ensure increased efficiency and effectiveness in developing and promoting the concept of lifelong learning across Northern Ireland.

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<sup>12</sup> *Skills Strategy*: (2004:13)

<sup>13</sup> NAO (December, 2004: 1) *Evaluation of the DfES, Skills for Life programme* and DES (2000: 111/114) *Learning for Life: White Paper on adult Learning* acknowledge both the benefits of partnership working and the success of community-based learning provision provided by the Women's Sector.

## **Appendix 1 - *The 3 regions CWES members***

### **Greater Belfast and regional**

1. Ardoyne Women's Group
2. Atlas Women's Centre
3. Ballybeen Women's centre
4. Ballymurphy Women's Centre
5. Clan Mor Women's Group
6. Carew Family and Training Centre
7. Carrickfergus Women's Group
8. Citywide Women's Consortium
9. Falls Women's Centre
10. Footprints Women's Centre
11. Greenway Women's Centre
12. Lesbian Advocacy Services Initiative
13. Lenadoon Women's Group
14. Links Women's Group
15. Newtownards Road Women's Group Ltd
16. Northern Ireland Women's European Platform
17. Shankill Women's Centre
18. Short Strand Women's Group
19. Training for Women Network
20. Walkway Women's Group
21. Women's Information Group
22. Women into Politics
23. Women's News
24. Women's Support Network
25. Women's TEC
26. Windsor Women's Centre
27. Women's Resource and Development Agency

### **North West**

28. Bogside and Brandywell Women's Group
29. Foyle Women's Information Network
30. Galliagh Women's Group
31. Waterside Women's Centre
32. Strathfoyle Women's Activity Group
33. The Women's Centre, Derry
34. Derry Well Women
35. Pathways (FWA)
36. Rosemount Women's Group
37. Strabane & Lifford Women's Centre

### **Rural**

38. Ballinderry Women's Group
39. Ballymaguigan Women's Group

40. Bellaghy Women's Group
- 41. Benedy Women's Group**
42. Cookstown and District Women's Group
43. Coyles Cottage Women's Group
44. Chrysalis Women's Centre
45. Draperstown, Straw and District Women's Group
46. Dungannon – First Steps Women's Group
47. Faughnavale Women's Activity Group
48. Granaghan Women's Group
49. Fermanagh Women's Aid
50. Fermanagh Women's Network
51. Keady Women and Family Centre
52. Lavey Women's Group
53. Loup Women's Group
54. Magherafelt Women's Group
55. Mid Ulster Women's Group
56. Moneyneena Monday Club
57. Newry and Mourne Women Ltd
58. Omagh Women's Area Network
59. Rasharkin Women's Group
60. Roe Valley Women's Network
61. South Armagh Rural Women's Network
62. St Lurach's Women's Community Group
63. Tobermore Women's Group
64. The Learning Lodge

## Appendix 2 – The range of Pre-Vocational, Vocational and Accredited courses

Accounts	Irish
Active Citizenship	Joinery
Alternative Therapies	Let's Talk Politics
Child protection	More than Just an Idea
Childcare	Mediation Skills
Confidence Building	Mosaics
Community Journalism	Organic Gardening
Community publishing	Parenting
Community Relations	Pathways to Inclusion
Competent Helper	PC maintenance and Repair
Conflict Management	Photograph Political Education
Counselling	Principled Negotiation Skills
Digital Photography	JEB Teacher's Diploma
Driving Theory Electrics	Retail Window Display
Essential Skills	Sign Language
Electrics	Signposts to Success
Electrical Maintenance	Spanish
ESOL	Special paint Effects
First Aid	Stepping Stones for Families
Food Hygiene	Stress Management
Health and Safety	Women's Health
HE Access Courses	Women in Business
Garment Making	Women into Politics
GCSEs	Youthwork Training
ICT and Word Processing	

### **Appendix 3 – Range of Non Vocational Courses**

Art and Crafts	Interior Design
Assertiveness	Keep Fit
Childcare	Local History
Community Development Skills	Open Door Provision
Confidence Building	Parenting
Cookery	Personal development
Culture and Diversity	Photography
DIY	Political Education
Family Learning	Spoken Irish
Health	Therapies
ICT	

#### **Appendix 4 - List of Acronyms**

BCS	British Computer Society
CCEA	Council for Curriculum Examinations and assessment
CFNI	Community Foundation for Northern Ireland
CITB	Construction Industry Training Board
CWES	Community-based Women's Education Sector
DEL	Department for Employment and Learning
DETI	Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment
DfES	Department for Education and Science
DFP	Department of Finance and Personnel
DSD	Department for Social Development
ECNI	Equality Commission for Northern Ireland
EGSA	Educational Guidance Service for Adults
EU	European Union
EUSSPPR	EU Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation
FE	Further Education
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
IFHE	Institute of Further and Higher education
NAO	National Audit Office
NI	Northern Ireland
NICF	Northern Ireland Civic Forum
NIPPA	NI Pre-school Playgroups Association
NICVA	NI Council for Voluntary Action
NISRA	NI Statistics and Research Agency
NIVT	NI Voluntary Trust
SfL	Skills for Life
RVH	Royal Victoria Hospital
TWN	Training for Women Network
UCD	University College Dublin
UK	United Kingdom
VTCT	Vocational Training In Complementary Therapies
WSN	Women's Support Network
WRDA	Women's resource and development Agency