

POSITION PAPER – SUSTAINING THE WORK OF THE WOMEN’S SECTOR IN RURAL AREAS

1 Introduction

For the purpose of the Government Cross-Departmental Review Group¹ deliberations on sustaining the work of the women’s sector, the sector has been divided into three constituencies; Greater Belfast, Derry and Rural. This paper presents a specifically rural perspective on the other five position papers developed to inform the review process (Childcare, Community Based Education, Community Development, Infrastructure, Policy). It also comments briefly on the role of DARD in relation to women’s development. Different emphasis afforded to each section in this paper is a reflection on a greater degree of difference in the rural dimension to the policy area and is not intended to reflect priority.

2 Context

The rural women’s sector straddles two sectors, consequently and importantly, this also means two policy areas. It is an integral part of both the women’s sector and the rural development sector. The consequence is that historically it has fallen outwith the responsibility of both policy frameworks in resource terms as one government department has deemed it to be within the other’s remit. The sector therefore has struggled to exist with adhoc, short-term cocktails of funding and in the absence of a policy framework. This review provides a welcome opportunity to agree the most appropriate framework to locate the work undertaken by the rural women’s sector.

The other papers have clearly outlined the roles, outcomes, benefits and context of the women’s sector, this paper will set the context of the second policy area, namely rural development, as its starting point. This section therefore begins with a consideration of some factors which need to be taken into account in the rural context and then outlines the key components of rural development policy and infrastructure pertinent to the rural women’s sector.

2.1 Defining ‘rural’

Despite the importance of the term ‘rural’ as it is used as a basis for policy analysis, targeting and service delivery, there is no agreed generally accepted definition of ‘rural’. The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) defines rural areas as all parts of Northern Ireland outside the Belfast metropolitan area,² the city of Derry and the 20 towns with populations greater than 5,000 people.³ While this definition is also shared by DECAL, there are variations in the definitions used by other government departments. The commonly held view being that Belfast and the City of Derry are urban areas, the *‘differences appear in the classification of rural areas with definitions ranging from areas outside the two main urban centres to the total areas outside greater Belfast, Derry and populations of 3,000 or greater’*⁴.

¹ Established in March 2005 to consider longer-term support to the women’s sector and appropriate departmental responsibilities.

² This includes borough council areas of Carrickfergus, Castereagh, Lisburn, Newtownabbey and North Down.

³ DARD Rural Development Programme 2001-2006

⁴ DARD ‘A Study on Rural Policy’, March 2005

To retain consistency with the demarcation agreed with the Government Review Group, the term 'rural' as used in this paper refers to all of Northern Ireland outside greater Belfast (including Belfast, Castlereagh and Lisburn council areas) and the city of Derry. It is therefore inclusive of all towns outside these areas regardless of population. Thus, this definition embraces a considerably higher population than is understood by many government departments as constituting 'rural'.

2.2 Population & Density

Within the definition of rural being used for the purposes of the Review, the population breakdown⁵ according to the categorisation of the women's sector is as follows:

Belfast	452,573,
Derry	105,066 and
Rural	1,127,628.

Applying the NI average ratio of men and women in the population as 49:51 %, the population of women is approximately as follows:

Belfast	230,812
Derry	53,584
Rural	575,090

The population density (number of persons per hectare) is also a major consideration in policy development and service delivery in rural areas. The population density in Belfast is 24.15; Derry 2.71 and in rural areas ranges between .31 in Fermanagh to 9.37 in North Down.

2.3 Noble Indices and the Rural Context

The remit of the cross-departmental review is to consider the role of the sector in providing support and services to women in disadvantaged communities. The use of the term 'disadvantaged communities' does not readily apply to the rural context. The use of the Noble Index of Deprivation for instance is a much disputed tool for identifying disadvantaged communities in rural areas. Its emphasis on benefit based deprivation fails to take account of other factors which significantly contribute to disadvantage in a rural context such as limited access to services, mobility, visibility and isolation.⁶ Furthermore, the use of the multiple deprivation matrix (MDM) is unlikely to identify people living in poverty in rural areas because of the geographic mix of people with different incomes and lifestyles within rural communities. People living in poverty and experiencing other forms of exclusion live alongside people enjoying lifestyles free from disadvantage.

⁵ Census statistics, (2001) Source: www.nisra.gov.uk. Crown copyright material is reproduced with the permission of the Controller of the HMSO.

⁶ NI Review of Deprivation (the Noble Index) response from RCN

Capturing the location of women experiencing disadvantage and marginalisation whether they are Traveller women, women on low incomes, women experiencing domestic violence, women seeking asylum or refugee status, etc., is difficult within the confines of this tool of measurement. The rural way of living, it is important to note, can add to the experience of marginalisation. Women in rural areas who experience disadvantage and marginalisation such as Traveller women, lesbian women, non-national women, wives/partners of ex-prisoners or ex-prisoners themselves, women with disabilities, younger and older women, etc., it can be argued, experience a greater degree of isolation in rural areas. Some, who in an urban area would have access to support networks or may even live within a community of interest, are less likely to do so within a rural context. Very often, the only opportunity for women who fall into these categories to be involved in development initiatives is through those provided by the mainstream women's community sector. Their involvement however, is likely to be masked, as a geographic measurement of deprivation or disadvantage does not take account of individual circumstances.

2.4 Rural Development Policy and Infrastructure

This section provides a brief overview of the key components of the rural development framework. Far from being comprehensive as this is quite a complex and detailed policy area, it is intended to provide the information necessary for the remainder of the paper.

Rural Development Review

DARD is currently undertaking a fundamental review of rural development policy. The aim of this review is to look at the economic, environmental and social needs of rural communities, to establish the rationale for Government intervention and to assess the effectiveness of current policy and delivery mechanisms. As part of this process, a major study of rural policy in NI was completed by PricewaterhouseCoopers in March 2005. This study will inform the development of proposals for the review of rural development policy. These will be subject to public consultation in Autumn 2005.

Rural Development Programme (RDP)

The Rural Development Programme supports community-led projects that stimulate the economic and social regeneration of the most disadvantaged rural areas in the North of Ireland. The Rural Development Programme (current phase 2001-2006) is administered by DARD and the Rural Development Council. The Programme refers to the need to increase the levels of participation of groups which have been under-represented, this includes women. It further identifies women as a target group with the implication that it will actively encourage the participation of women in rural development.

Rural Development Council (RDC)

The Northern Ireland Rural Development Council (RDC) is a non-departmental public body which operates at a regional level across rural Northern Ireland and is one of the core delivery agents of the RDP. It delivers funding primarily to the community and voluntary sector, conducts research and also provides evidence based policy analysis and information.

Rural Community Network NI (RCN)

The Rural Community Network (RCN) is a voluntary organisation established by local community organisations to articulate the voice of rural communities on issues relating to poverty, disadvantage and community development. It is a membership organisation with over 500 members, is managed by a voluntary committee and is core funded by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. RCN supports a rural support network infrastructure of 12 Rural Support Networks (RSNs) covering all rural areas of Northern Ireland through its Community Development Support Unit and administers core funding to these networks via its RSN Building Sustainable Progress (BSP) Support Programme. RCN is currently undertaking a strategic review.

Rural Support Networks (RSN's)

The sub regional rural support network is made up of twelve rural support networks which have developed over a period of time and geographically cover the entire rural area of NI. The aim of the RSN's is to provide a support network for community groups throughout rural NI. At present the RSN infrastructure has a membership of over 850 groups. This infrastructure facilitates lateral networking among groups and also serves as a communication channel between government departments and groups and vice versa (via RCN and the RSN's).

Rural Women's Policy Forum (formerly known as the Rural Women's Think Tank)

This forum was formed as a direct outcome of a conference on women in rural development organised by the Fermanagh Women's Network in partnership with RCN. The purpose of the Forum is to provide a space for dialogue and debate between the rural women's sector and government departments on policy issues. It has a particular focus on how to promote equality for women within a rural development framework. Regular Forum members include representatives of DARD Equality and Rural Proofing Division, DARD Rural Development Division, DSD, OFM/DFM Gender Equality Unit, Rural Development Council, Rural Community Network NI, the WRDA and representatives of the rural women's sector. It is the only structured forum for regular direct policy engagement between the rural women's sector and government departments.

Rural Women's Consortium & the Sectoral Programme

The Rural Women's Consortium comprises the six rural women's networks (Fermanagh, Mid-Ulster, Newry and Mourne, Omagh, South Armagh and Roe Valley), RCN and the WRDA. The consortium has evolved; from an informal partnership of women's networks and the WRDA, to a group which developed a joint strategic plan in 2001 to meet the needs of women in the areas covered by the rural women's networks; to the development of a strategic and operational plan, known as the Rural Women's Sectoral Programme. This Programme which has recently been awarded funding by DARD is aimed at supporting women's development across *all* of the rural North and to promote the active involvement of women in all aspects of the Rural Development Programme and sector.

The purpose of the Consortium is to set the strategic direction and oversee the effective delivery of the Rural Women's Sectoral Programme.⁷

Women in Development in Rural Areas

There are a number of important contextual points which need to inform a discussion on the women's sector in rural areas. Firstly, there is very little information available on women in rural areas. While there is a significant body of research on women on farms, the same research interest has not been attached to women who live in rural areas who are not on farms.⁸ Secondly, there is no baseline information to assess the extent of participation by women in rural development initiatives or on the number of women involved in project applications.⁹ Thirdly, Shortall and Kelly's CAP Reform research in 2001 noted that most women did not recognise their activities in local voluntary community groups or associations as involvement in rural development activities, nor did women recognise their involvement in rural women's groups as rural development.¹⁰

Therefore, the quantitative information which would be a useful addition to this paper is not available for the constituency as a whole i.e. the rural women's sector throughout NI. Where possible, quantitative information from a particular area will be used as an indicator of the situation.

3 Infrastructure

Infrastructure – the current situation

The challenge in defining the women's sector identified in the infrastructure position paper is one which equally applies to urban and rural areas. In rural areas, the women's sector shares the defining characteristics of being women led and of existing solely or primarily to benefit women through the activities or services it provides. There are, as indicated above, no accurate figures available on the number of women involved. A useful indicator is that of involvement in the six existing women's networks. 1,500 women are involved in local groups affiliated to the networks and approximately 10,700 women a year access local education/learning opportunities through their work.¹¹ This number is limited in reflecting the sector however as a number of key women's sector initiatives exist outside the geographical areas covered by the existing infrastructure.

There are however a number of features which differentiate the women's sector in rural areas from the overarching definitions as presented;

- The distinction between 'traditionalist' and 'activist' does not apply, or certainly applies to a significantly lesser extent in rural areas. The 'traditionalist' groups, namely the Women's

⁷ Rural Women's Consortium Manual (draft) July 2005

⁸ Shortall, Sally, 'Equality Proofing CAP Reform' Pilot report, Fermanagh Women's Network and RCN, NI 1999.

⁹ Shortall, Sally, 'Women in Rural Areas in NI,' RCN

Shortall, Sally and Kelly, Roisin, Gender Proofing CAP Reform, 2001

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Rural Women's Networks and WRDA Strategic Plan 2002-2005

Institutes, the Methodist Women's Association and the Presbyterian Women's Association are a divergent group within themselves. In particular, some women's institutes have, latterly, begun to organise and develop activities not dissimilar from more recently formed women's groups. For example, the Tamlaght WI in Fermanagh secured funding to build its own centre from which it organises a range of educational programmes. Similarly the description of 'activist' organisations does not match the more recently established women's groups in rural areas. While active in social change this tends to take place at a community rather than societal level, they would in the main not describe themselves as feminist and while individual members may be committed to an equality agenda, it is unlikely to be reflected in the group as a whole or in the activities of the group. There is a much higher degree of similarity therefore in rural areas between the 'traditionalist' and 'activist' women's groups as described in the paper, a consequence of which is that some groups which fit into the former category have begun to question why they do not have access to the same developmental support and resources as the latter.

- The distinction between frontline women's organisation and sub-regional organisations does not apply consistently across rural areas. While networks in Fermanagh, South Armagh, Mid-Ulster and Newry and Mourne are congruent with the model as outlined, women's networks in Omagh and Roe Valley double as both networks and centres, performing a service delivery/frontline and networking/umbrella function and therefore do not easily fit into the model presented in the infrastructure paper.
- The definition of frontline refers to 'working' directly with women in a local neighbourhood to provide services, which suggests that paid staff perform this function. Women's groups in rural communities depend exclusively on voluntary effort. Women in rural communities are not the recipients of services provided by staff of women's groups, *they* provide these services on a voluntary basis. The exception is that of women's centres, who do employ staff. However, there are only 5 areas in the rural North who fall into this category, the remaining rural communities are served by voluntary efforts. These groups do however need resources to pay tutors and facilitators, venue hire and other programme costs. Infrastructure support must factor in the small grants support system needed to sustain these activities.

Infrastructure – the gaps

There are three significant gaps in the current infrastructure, one of which is structural and two are related to function:

- There is no women's development infrastructure (as defined by Knox¹²) in a number of geographical areas throughout the North. These include county Antrim, North Armagh, South Derry, North Down and South and West Tyrone. Some of these areas also lack any form of women's development activity.
- There is a policy deficit within the rural women's infrastructure. No rural women's organisation employs a staff member with a policy function. This role, therefore has been performed over the past number of years by volunteer members of Network management committees with an interest and expertise in policy issues or by development workers, employed to deliver on developmental objectives. The outcome is that function has been

¹² Knox, C. 2003. *Resourcing the Voluntary and Community Sector – Infrastructure Working Group – Paper to the Task Force.*

performed to an absolute minimum and this has been ad-hoc, frequently responsive and essentially has afforded little opportunity to make a real impact.

- The 'representative' function of networks in rural areas has not been fully realised. Limited resources over the past 5 years or so has resulted in women's networks typically employing one development worker and one (usually part time) administrator. There has been limited scope for a representative function in other strategic community and local development initiatives with the result that the needs and priorities of half the population have not been taken in account in a range of policy development and service delivery. The absence of a women's perspective is all the more significant given the onus on organisations to meet their obligations under Section 75.

In summary, while elements of the rural women's sector mirror those of its urban counterparts, the lines of demarcation are not as clear and there are serious gaps, both structural and functional. The sector has grown organically with the result that there is a high degree of variety in functions between organisations with apparently similar roles. The solution, therefore, in terms of sustaining the work needs to reflect both the complexity of the situation and the significance of the gaps.

It is perhaps more pertinent to consider 'roles' and 'function' in the women's sector in rural areas and consider where and by whom these functions can best be carried out and resourced rather than limiting the function of organisations and groups to a model of infrastructure. In other words, it is important to draw a distinction between the work which needs to be sustained and the infrastructure necessary to sustain it.

Infrastructure – the DARD proposal

Since this paper was commissioned, a proposal had been made by DARD to the rural women's sector on the issue of infrastructure support. This proposal comes on the back of years of discussion and negotiation between DARD and the rural women's sector, supported by both RCN and the WRDA. These discussions focused on a requirement that DARD provide mainstream support to the rural women's sector in the same way as it supports the rural support network infrastructure. The proposal now 'on the table' is the DARD response. It is important to note that this is at a very early stage and therefore little detail is available. However, the main components of the proposal appear to be as follows:¹³

- Funding could be provided for a single rural regional network to serve as the women's sector infrastructure in rural NI;
- Funding would be channeled through the RCN as an additional component to its RSN (BSP) Support Programme;
- A number of development workers covering rural NI could be employed. It is likely that DARD would require that the coverage of the workers be co-terminous with the outcome of the Review of Public Administration (7 or 11 area options, the 15 area option does not work as a co-terminous arrangement);
- This network would receive BSP funding in the interim with the potential for mainstream funding from DARD in the long term in line with the RCN and RSN network infrastructure.

¹³ Minutes of Rural Women's Consortium meeting, July 19th 2005

At this point, there are a number of key issues for consideration. These include; the most appropriate governance structure of the proposed new network, the way in which the relationship with the WRDA and RCN would be defined and how local ownership of this new structure could be ensured.

Mindful of the importance of these issues the following section starts to unpack the thinking on how this proposal could evolve in practice. It applies the comments on the infrastructure as presented in the previous section and considers the way in which the DARD proposal *could* be tailored to meet the infrastructure needs of the rural women's sector.

Proposed new Rural Women's Network

The single rural regional women's network could do the following:

1. Employ 7 development workers across rural NI to provide developmental support to the work of the frontline groups, be they community based women's groups or women's centres. The role of these workers could include supporting new initiatives in areas where there is currently a weak women's development infrastructure (irrespective of this proposal, their development will be resourced through the sectoral programme);
2. Employ three workers at a regional level to perform the following functions;
 - Manage and co-ordinate the work of the regional network,
 - Conduct research on issues relevant to rural women,
 - Coordinate the policy function of the rural women's sector, essentially 'rural proofing' work within the women's sector and 'gender proofing' work within the rural sector. This work could subsequently inform and be linked to the policy function of the WRDA and RCN as regional infrastructure organisations and
 - Build capacity of rural women at a local level to enable them to influence policy in their respective areas.
 - Develop the potential of the rural women's sector to have greater impact on mainstream rural development activity.

In the context of this proposal, there are a number of additional features which require consideration:

- as a regional organisation, the Governance of this Network would need to reflect the diversity of the women's sector in rural areas and include networks, centres, community and interest based women's groups, women's institutes, etc. It would also need to ensure a geographical spread. Depending on the outcome of discussions on the role of the WRDA and RCN, their role as part of the governance structure would need to be considered;
- the outstanding functions needed to support the rural women's sector at a regional level need attention. For example, those of Human Resource Management, Finance and Governance support to the sector, both at regional and local level. These functions could be performed either by RCN in line with the existing model of support to RSN's (or an RCN role could be informed by this model) or by the WRDA as the function is consistent with its role as a regional organisation supporting the women's sector;

- the function of women's groups, centres and networks across rural NI in service delivery work would need to be sustained as will any new initiatives which may emerge as a result of the sectoral programme. This work could be resourced by government departments responsible for contracting service delivery agreements;
- the development support needs of community based women's groups and centres could be met by the team of development workers;
- this proposal should not preclude any women's group, organisation or network from sourcing funding independently to run specific projects in their areas and
- ways in which the 'representative' and 'policy' and functions be carried out at a local level need further consideration.

This section has looked at ways in which the rural women's sector could 'fit' into the DARD proposal and in so doing has identified other points for consideration. At this point, there are more questions than answers. Furthermore, consideration of any proposal which involves structural change is difficult. Notwithstanding that, an offer by DARD to offer mainstream support to the rural women's sector is a welcome development. The above, as an initial reflection on the DARD proposal, is intended simply to support thinking.

There is no straightforward 'rural' solution to infrastructure. There are a number of functions which need to be carried out to sustain women's development work in rural areas. Where these functions are best placed is not necessarily within the confines of the existing infrastructure or an extension of the existing infrastructure, suffice it to say that the work is crucial and the existing infrastructure inadequate.

4 Policy Function

Building on the discussion in the 'policy paper' on the potential for policy development if women were resourced to play their full part in policy making, the following outlines the *additional* policy functions of the rural women's sector. Essentially the policy function of the rural women's sector needs to take cognisance of its dichotomy in terms of roles.

The additional roles can be divided into responsive and pro-active.

Responsive

- Develop and coordinate a rural perspective on policy responses centrally coordinated by the regional women's organisation (WRDA).
- Gender proof from a women's perspective rural development responses coordinated by the regional rural organisation (RCN).

Develop a pro-active response in the following areas;

- The role of women in agriculture;
- Promotion of equality for women within the Rural Development Programme and other rural development initiatives such as LEADER, INTEREG, CRISP, etc.;
- Promotion of equality for women within all levels of the rural development sector ranging from local community groups to organisations which operate on a regional level;
- On policy issues which are of particular relevance to rural women such as lack of childcare opportunities in rural areas, changing nature of the farming industry and the consequences for

the family farm, increase in crime in rural communities, lack of transport and the absence of employment opportunities for young women in rural areas, etc.

5 Childcare

The nature of the relationship between childcare and the women's sector is significantly different in urban and rural areas. As the childcare paper clearly demonstrates, the relationship in urban areas is an inter-dependent one; not so in rural communities. The women's sector and the childcare sector are, in the main though not exclusively, separate sectors in rural areas.

There are a number of factors at play here including the dearth of childcare provision in rural areas generally and the subsequent lack of expectation among rural women that their childcare needs will be met in any way other than through solutions they devise themselves. Women in rural areas have developed ways of coping with the absence of childcare, ways which frequently place a burden on other women as it is often family members and neighbours who assume responsibility for childminding. The enormous discrepancy in the cost of childcare services to the women's sector referred to in the childcare paper (North West £217,000; Greater Belfast £1,100,00 and Rural Areas, £157,000) is not a reflection of lack of need in rural areas, it is a reflection of an under-developed women's sector in the first instance and one which has had to develop ways of coping without childcare in the second.

There is a need to develop an extensive, creative and tailor made system of childcare in rural areas. Many rural areas, as described in the childcare paper are virtual childcare free zones. This need however is not necessarily linked to the women's sector. The need is determined by the demands of a modern society in which women play an increasingly active role in the paid economy and as much research has shown, their options for progression within existing employment are severely limited by childrearing responsibilities. The childcare section in this paper will not focus on making the case for a range of childcare provision in rural areas, it will take as a given in terms of need. The discussion will focus on childcare provision as it relates to the women's sector and in particular on the issues raised in the childcare paper. There are a few points of distinction between rural and urban areas in relation to childcare and the women's sector:

- Most of women's sector activity in rural areas (particularly in outlying rural areas as opposed to larger towns) takes place in evening and term time therefore provision of a crèche would not support these activities;
- The 4th type of childcare support referred to in the childcare paper is the main form of childcare provided by the women's sector in rural areas i.e., one off allowances or mobile crèches. When the option of a crèche or childcare allowance is offered for daytime activities, the allowance is the preferred option of the majority of women.
- Women's development activity takes place within small geographic areas as community organisation is linked to a sense of identity and belonging. Low population density frequently makes it difficult to make a case for local crèche provision to support developmental activities, i.e. the childcare cost per participant could easily outweigh the programme cost, a point rarely taken on board by funders.

- In order to participate in women's development activities, women use whatever 'system' they have developed to support other aspects of their lives. In reality, this is likely to entail extended family members or neighbours taking responsibility for childminding. In so doing, this masks the need to develop childcare support services in rural areas. Children are looked after because women in the extended family step into the role of unpaid carer. Notwithstanding the major consequence that many women having raised one family without remuneration are left with the role of looking after the next generation, there are additional secondary considerations. Firstly, with increased numbers of older women working outside of the home, that extended family support system is not there for many women and less likely to be in the future. Secondly, while this system may work with women who have extended family links in communities, it leaves women such as non-nationals, people who have moved in from urban areas because of a lifestyle choice or as is likely in rural border communities, displaced because of the conflict, without options and subsequently excluded from community activity.
- The provision of childcare allowances is not straightforward. The introduction of standards and regulations relating to childcare work, while well-intentioned, can impede solutions to the provision of childcare in rural areas. Members of extended families and neighbours will not necessarily be registered childminders and may not want to go through the process of registration, particularly if this is to cover one off events such as a women's development programme. In other words, the standards and regulations militate against the culture which has evolved.
- Standards and regulations also apply to running temporary crèches. Many community venues, where women's activities are organised are not registered or meet the standards necessary to provide childcare facilities.

The childcare sector itself is a separate and critical part of the rural development landscape. Childcare provision in the form of playgroups, after-school clubs and all day care in rural areas is run on a voluntary basis almost exclusively by women. The contribution of these women to rural society is crucial. A recent study in Fermanagh showed that 864 childcare places are provided in the county through the voluntary efforts of women. By comparison the private sector provides 257 places.¹⁴

To focus on the cost of childcare to support women's development (or indeed in its own right) in rural areas is to start the discussion in the wrong place. In rural communities the childcare infrastructure needs to be built. The nature of rural communities, in particular the low population density in many rural areas, requires a range of solutions to the provision of childcare. This includes investment in training, playbuses, all day care centres, adaptation of rooms in community venues suitable for occasional childcare use, etc.¹⁵ Most importantly it requires an approach to childcare whereby rural communities can develop proposals to suit their own circumstances. It is one policy area where one size will certainly not 'fit all'.

¹⁴ Crawley, Marie 'Stepping out as Equals', Fermanagh Women's Network 2005

¹⁵ Additional information available in findings from the Cross-Border Childcare Project, cited in Shortall, Sally, 'Women in Rural Areas in Northern Ireland', RCN, 2005

6 Community Development

As outlined in general terms in the community development paper, women in rural areas also make an enormous contribution to community development, both through women's development activities in its own right and by developing other aspects of their communities. There are numerous examples in rural areas of women's groups assuming a role as active agents for change on behalf of the community as a whole as well as on behalf of women.

Within the context of rural development, there is however a problem with recognition and acknowledgement of this work. 'The under-representation of women in rural development' is a much cited, yet mis-leading statement. The issue of whether or not women are represented is one of definition and value. The women's sector in rural areas reaches between ten and twelve thousand women, the childcare sector in rural areas providing thousands of childcare places is almost exclusively run by women and women are involved in community development associations and groups in approximately equal numbers to men¹⁶. This is to name but a few of the types of groups which contribute to rural development, there are numerous others in which women play an active role such as carers groups, active age groups, youth clubs, etc.. Women are therefore critical actors in rural development initiatives and are not only represented in rural development initiatives; dominate some, most notably the social development part of the sector.

The 'under-representation of women' in rural development is experienced through the lack of women in key decision making positions and the absence of a gender analysis informing work which is accepted and defined as 'rural development.' This is best demonstrated by looking at DARD itself in which the post of Permanent Secretary and 5 of the 6 of the most senior officer positions are held by men. On the Rural Stakeholder Forum¹⁷, 3 of the 21 members are women, 18 are men.¹⁸ The Equality and Rural Proofing Division within DARD is not represented on the Forum.

The significant under-representation of women in rural decision making is further reflected in the range of decision making bodies throughout the region¹⁹. This is despite international obligations to support women in decision making (as detailed in the policy paper).

Shortall further argues that the under-representation of women in rural development as cited by DARD may refer to their under-representation in economic rural development initiatives and indeed research recently conducted in Fermanagh bears out this point²⁰.

The issue then is one of definition and value. There are different interpretations of what work is valued and considered necessary to develop and sustain rural communities. Women's development work for example has not, in the main, been eligible for funding under the Rural

¹⁶ Ibid., The survey conducted in Fermanagh showed that 49% of those active in community development groups are women, 51% men.

¹⁷ The Forum's remit is to ensure that the fullest possible stakeholder input on strategic issues is available to the Minister and the Department to inform and guide Departmental decisions and actions. The Forum will also enable stakeholders to share their views and positions, thereby improving the common understanding of cross-cutting issues. Source: www.dardni.gov.uk

¹⁸ DARD, 'A Study on Rural Policy', March 2005

¹⁹ Crawley, M and O'Meara L, '*Balances along the Border: A Gender Audit in Northern Ireland and the Six Southern Border Counties*', WEFT and WRDA, April 2005

²⁰ Ibid.

Development Programme or other funding streams such as LEADER, CRISP, etc.. Ironically, neither women themselves or DARD identify this work as either community development or rural development when clearly it employs community development principles to undertake rural development.

Furthermore, in rural communities, the lines of demarcation between various groups in the community are fluid. Given low population density and within that, average levels of community activism, the number of people active in development initiatives in rural areas is frequently quite small. It is commonly the case that women involved in the community based women's group are also involved in the youth club, local community association, etc., with the same general intent, to improve the quality of life of people in the area. It is somewhat ironic that this contribution to the community; if given under the auspices of the community group is defined as rural development and therefore eligible for funding under a range of sources, if given, by the same person, with the same set of skills, to the women's group is neither considered to be rural development nor eligible for funding!

Finally, in relation to community development, as clearly articulated in the other papers, the community based women's sector accesses women across the full range of ethnic and religious background, ages, sexual orientation, etc. By doing so, it also reaches families. Rural communities are becoming increasingly diverse with significant numbers of people living there from a variety of non-national backgrounds and indeed from urban centres. The women's sector has a track record in accessing women from a diversity of backgrounds and as such is uniquely placed to access marginalised rural families whose existence is often hidden.

7 Education

The paper on education which makes the case for a stronger relationship between DEL and the community based women's education sector applies to both urban and rural areas.

The rural women's experience of community based education has been that locally based groups have devised solutions to bring accessible, affordable learning opportunities to their own locality, for example, the use of a laptop suite of computers to decentralise IT education.

A consequence of a policy shift which strengthens the relationship between DEL and the community based women's sector is that in the majority of rural areas which lack women's centres or specific women's education and training projects, it removes opportunities for women's centred education and this is indeed a huge loss to the community based women's sector.

Furthermore, there is a problem in applying this model to rural communities in that there is frequently only one institution to fulfil the role as provider, i.e. the local FE college. The challenge then is to draw a diversity of providers into rural areas to ensure that the women's sector have more than one option.

8 DARD

As stated at the outset, the main purpose of this paper was essentially to ‘rural proof’ the other papers submitted as part of the government review. There is insufficient opportunity to comment in detail on the work of DARD. However, it would be remiss not to make some general points at such a crucial time in government thinking in the context of both the review of rural development policy that of support to the women’s sector²¹.

In terms of how the work of DARD could take into account the needs of rural women and meet its responsibilities under equality legislation, the following should be borne in mind²².

- There is a need for DARD to consider a vision for rural women, both in terms of a vision for rural communities from a women’s perspective and secondly how it sees the role of women in rural life.
- There must be an honesty and open-ness to acknowledging the inequalities which *do* exist in rural society, particularly in terms of the under-representation of women in decision making;
- In promoting gender equality in rural communities there is a need to develop a culture of shared responsibility between women and men for shaping a future based on gender equality;
- The achievement of gender equality in rural communities must be based on a recognition that to achieve equality of outcome in any activity or service will require an unequal investment. Working from a position of inequality, there must be recognition that the same treatment will not necessarily provide equitable results. Specific strategies aimed at women will be required to level the playing field;
- Dual approaches are needed, in the first instance there is a need to conduct gender impact assessments on all elements of the Rural Development Programme and other funding programmes to ensure that women and men benefit equally from all elements of Programmes. Secondly there is a need for women only initiatives. Both approaches are interlinked and it is widely accepted that gender specific work is essential if effective mainstreaming within generic programmes such as the Rural Development Programme is to take place;

Other pro-active measures DARD could usefully implement include:

- Resource and pilot specific initiatives based on good practice from elsewhere such as training courses specifically tailored for women on farms in for example; administration, farm production, beekeeping, aquaculture, organic farming, accounts, running B&B’s, and the introduction of microcredit schemes to support the development of community

²¹ Crawley, Marie ‘*Rural Women – A Vision for the Future*’ paper presented at FWN/RCN Women in Rural Development Conference, May 2003

- businesses²³. Include modules on women in decision making in agriculture and rural development in all training programmes;
- Insist on the inclusion of crèche facilities in all new capital projects such as building community and enterprise centres;
 - Ensure that all DARD documentation is addressed to all members of the family farm unit;
 - Include a gender equality training component in all training programmes funded by the Department (similar to the model implemented by the Gender Equality Unit in the South of Ireland under the National Development Plan, in which training is provided on gender issues in areas as diverse as crime, arts and culture, enterprise development, agriculture and rural development etc.);
 - Ensure that organisations involved at any stage of the roll-out of the Rural Development Programme undergo gender equality training and subsequently produce policy statements which include gender equality targets;
 - Develop indicators for gender equality in all areas of DARD's work.

9 Conclusion

The other five position papers comprehensively outline the contribution of the community based women's sector to society. This paper has outlined rural factors to be taken into account in overall discussions. The effective implementation of any government policy requires a different approach in rural and urban areas; this includes the community based women's sector.

With both rural development policy and the nature of government support to the community based women's sector under review, there is a unique opportunity to develop policy frameworks and commitments which ensure that the women's community based sector, which plays such a crucial role in rural Northern Irish society, is sustained and developed. There is furthermore an opportunity for DARD to commit itself to ways in which it can address the needs of disadvantaged rural women on one hand, and promote equality for women in rural society on the other.

²³ University of Strathclyde, '*Gender Equality in Agriculture and Rural Development*', NDP Gender Equality Unit, Dublin

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