



Consortium for the Regional Support for Women in Disadvantaged and Rural Areas

Community-based women's education/training: Women's perceptions of gaps in provision

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This research has been undertaken collaboratively by the members of the Consortium for the Regional Support for Women in Disadvantaged and Rural Areas (hereafter, either the Women's Regional Consortium or simply the Consortium), which is funded by the Department for Social Development in Northern Ireland (hereafter, DSD) and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development in Northern Ireland (hereafter, DARD).¹

The Women's Regional Consortium consists of seven established women's sector organisations that are committed to working in partnership with each other, government, statutory organisations and women's organisations, centres and groups in disadvantaged and rural areas, to ensure that organisations working for women are given the best possible support in the work they do in tackling disadvantage and social exclusion. The seven groups are as follows.

- Training for Women Network (TWN) - Project Lead
- Women's Resource and Development Agency (WRDA)
- Women's Support Network (WSN)
- Northern Ireland's Rural Women's Network (NIRWN)
- Women's TEC
- Women's Centre Derry
- Foyle Women's Information Network (FWIN)

The Consortium will be the established link and strategic partner between government and statutory agencies and women in disadvantaged and rural areas, including all groups, centres and organisations delivering essential frontline services, advice and support. The Consortium will ensure that there is a continuous two way flow of information between government and the sector. It will ensure that organisations/centres and groups are made aware of consultations, government planning and policy implementation. In turn, the Consortium will ascertain the views,

¹ The remaining paragraphs in this section represent the official description of the Consortium's work, as agreed and authored by its seven partner organisations.

needs and aspirations of women in disadvantaged and rural areas and take these views forward to influence policy development and future government planning, which will ultimately result in the empowerment of local women in disadvantaged and rurally isolated communities.

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Executive Summary

As research affirms, women in disadvantaged and rural areas across Northern Ireland can experience different kinds of marginalisation, exclusion, isolation and vulnerability.² These experiences can include distinct forms of educational disadvantage³ characterised by difficulties affecting access to, retention within, and progression from, educational and training processes in the statutory sector.⁴ Equality in education ‘matters’ in the modern context precisely because ‘*education is indispensable for the full exercise of people’s capabilities, choices and freedoms in an information-driven age*’.⁵ Consequently, educational disadvantage can profoundly impact individuals’ life prospects and well-being.

Community-based women’s education/training in Northern Ireland, as beyond, has tended to emerge and evolve in response to such educational disadvantage and associated unmet learner demand, with the express aim of accommodating that demand.⁶ The purpose of this brief paper is to capture what women currently living and working in some of these areas perceive⁷ as gaps in existing provision.⁸

To that end, the project encompassed focus group and survey engagement with women in rural, urban and town sites, some of whom, as service providers, were directly engaged in the delivery of such education/training. The principal findings of the project are as follows.

² See, for example, B. Hinds, ‘The Northern Ireland economy: women on the edge? A comprehensive analysis of the impacts of the financial crisis’, WRDA: Belfast, 2011.

³ Educational disadvantage is a contested notion. As understood here, it is associated with the denial of equal ‘access to and participation within different levels of formal education’, correlated with other forms of disadvantage; K. Lynch and J. Baker, ‘Working paper 28, equality in education: an equality of condition perspective’, *Theory and Research in Education 2005*, Vol. 3, No.2: 131-164, p.1.

⁴ On this see, PWC, ‘Longitudinal evaluation of the learner access and engagement pilot programme - final report’, DEL: Belfast, 2012; H. McLaughlin, ‘Women living in disadvantaged communities: barriers to participation’, Belfast: WCRP, 2009; and, M. Feeley, ‘Making good learning partnerships: examining the experience and potential with the community-based women’s education sector and the further education sector’, Equality Commission for Northern Ireland: Belfast, 2002.

⁵ J. Baker, K. Lynch, S. Cantillion and J. Walsh, *Equality: from theory to action*, Palgrave Macmillan: Basingstoke, 2004, p. 141.

⁶ Feeley, op. cit.

⁷ So the focus is explicitly on women’s *perceptions* of gaps. Any empirical evaluation/testing of this claim-making to establish/quantify ‘actual’ gaps is beyond the space and remit of this paper.

⁸ Broadly, such provision may be characterised as education/training for women by women in women-only community spaces aimed at addressing the diverse learning needs of educationally disadvantaged women. Feeley, op. cit., pp.iii-iv.

Summary of findings

Nature of perceived gaps

- Perceived gaps in provision cut across a plethora of contrasting disciplines, levels, intended learning outcomes and cohorts, reflecting diverse learner needs, interests and perspectives.
- Reported unmet learner demand ran along a continuum from demand for unaccredited non-vocational provision through to demand for accredited vocational variants.
- Learner cohorts affected by perceived gaps in provision, both young and older women, included groups of individuals marginalised in multiple ways, such as Traveller women, women asylum seekers and refugees, lone parents, women with disabilities and women with mental ill-health, including conflict-associated conditions.
- Under-provision was reported across rural, urban and town sites, but was reported as particularly pronounced in some non-urban responses.⁹ In some rural cases, identified gaps in provision equated to the reported absence of any kind of local provision.
- Discussions underlined the importance of addressing gaps in capacity building provision to effect remedial change, not only at the level of the individual, but also, in consequence, at the level of the family, the community and society at large. The last category concerned discussion of perceived gaps in capacity building to enhance the participation and representation of women from disadvantaged and rural areas across *all* sections of the public sphere, including within peace-building processes and structures.
- Perceived gaps were associated with a dearth of 'real options' for older and young women in disadvantaged and rural areas, such as progression pathways in vocational/technical training proffering part-time, flexible participation to meet the needs of those with caring responsibilities and those in part-time employment. Notably, the latter included those young women not in employment, education or training who do not meet the age range criteria for statutory sector 'NEETs' provision.

⁹ For a recent diagrammatic overview of urban/rural differentials in the regional distribution of Executive funded community-based women's education/training, see DSD/OFMDFM, 'Review of government funding for women's groups and organisations', DSD/OFMDFM: Belfast, 2012, p.32.

Reported causality and remedial actions

- Provider respondents cited lack of sustainable funding and lack of necessary additional capacity due to lack of additional funding as major explanatory factors for reported gaps. As a result, their proposals for remedial action to address perceived unmet learner demand were, in the main, fiscally framed.
- There was also a broad consensus that the further education sector could and should do more to address perceived gaps through committing to enhanced collaboration and partnership working with the community-based women's education/training sector, helping to develop and deliver sustainable local projects to meet locally identified learner need.¹⁰
- In large part, rurally reported gaps were attributed to what was termed 'historic underinvestment in rural areas', encompassing urban/rural imbalance in government departmental funding of the wider women's sector.¹¹ Respondents consequently stressed the importance of 'rural proofing' any future educational policy/programming affecting women in the community.
- At every stage of engagement, it was held that perceived gaps in provision for older women and unaccredited provision reflected an apparent funding bias at the level of public policy, constituting the prioritisation of both accredited provision and provision for young persons, specifically NEETs provision.
- At every stage of engagement it was also emphasised that if government wants to take proper account of the specific and diverse unmet learner needs of educationally marginalised women in disadvantaged and rural areas, then it should have its funding policy properly recognise the role of unaccredited, non-vocational, recreational, motivational and personal development provision in addressing the impact of that disadvantage on such women's well-being and everyday lives. Within this context, more public sector support for such provision was called for, particularly delivery aimed at addressing issues of low self-esteem, social disconnectedness and mental ill-health, including conflict-associated conditions.

¹⁰ On this, see Feeley, op. cit.

¹¹ As the Executive's own research puts it: '*compared with levels of government funding to women's groups in urban areas, there was a relatively low level of government funding to rural women's groups*'. DSD/OFMDFM, op. cit., p.13. We return to this important point later, in further discussion of the project findings.

- Across all engagement processes, it was judged imperative that community-based women's education/training should include accessible childcare support (free/affordable) to enable marginalised women to avail of learning opportunities. From this perspective, widespread concern was raised about the sustainability of such support and associated implications for future gaps, including concern over the as yet undetermined future of DSD's Women's Centres' Childcare Fund (hereafter, WCCF), which underpins such vital frontline support.

Recommendations

The project recommendations that follow from these findings are set out below.

Further research

- Further research is required to interrogate and contextualise these perceptions of unmet learner demand and to establish the precise nature, extent and causality of actual gaps, as well as their cumulative impact on affected women's everyday lives, including those who are multiply disadvantaged. The Consortium recommends that the Executive commit to sponsoring such research.
- Further (and cyclical) research is also required to map the precise nature of the relationship between perceived gaps and the behaviour of the further education sector, including differentials across outreach funding patterns at the level of the local and the regional. The Department for Employment and Learning (hereafter, DEL) should commit to sponsoring such research.
- Given the nature of reported gaps and associated unmet learner demand, government should also specifically commit to further research on access to learning opportunities affecting older women and those young women not in employment, education or training who fall outside of age qualification for statutory NEETs provision.

Holistic and integrated approach

- Government should develop a holistic and integrated cross-departmental approach at the level of strategic policy development, implementation and review to properly identify and address the learning needs of educationally marginalised, multiply disadvantaged women, mapping implications across all

key emerging strategies, policies and programmes in the context of all section 75 categories. This should include providing for more meaningful stakeholder engagement with affected women across all pertinent educational policy development, planning, implementation, monitoring and review processes.

- DEL should encourage further and more meaningful collaborative working between the further education sector and wider women's sector, to identify and address gaps in existing provision across all constituencies of learner need among educationally disadvantaged women.
- Integration of childcare support and education/training: government should consider further the question of free/affordable childcare for educationally marginalised learners in disadvantaged and rural areas, to include proper consideration of the potentially adverse impact on learner access were the WCCF discontinued. This question should be looked at in the context of the ongoing policy debate on the development of the full childcare strategy.
- The Executive should ensure proper recognition of and support for the role of unaccredited provision in addressing women's marginalisation and isolation in disadvantaged and rural areas, particularly personal development provision aimed at tackling issues of low self-confidence associated with educational disadvantage, as well as mental ill health, including conflict-associated conditions and those associated with rural isolation.¹²
- Capacity building and empowerment: the Executive should seek to have its policy and programme development take fuller account of the relationship between women's educational disadvantage and gender inequality, in representation and participation, across all areas of the public sphere. In a post-conflict context, it is clearly imperative that particular emphasis should be placed on remedial action to address gender inequalities in respect of representation and participation in peace-building processes.
- Rural provision: any future statutory educational investment for women in the community should be specifically aimed at remedially addressing the adverse impact of 'historic underinvestment in rural areas'¹³ on women's access to learning opportunities. To that end, government should ultimately ensure that

¹² See, M. Allen, 'Rural isolation, poverty and rural community/farmer wellbeing - scoping paper', Research and Information Service Briefing Paper, NIA: Belfast, 2014.

¹³ On this, see DSD/OFMDFM, *op. cit.*

all subsequent initiatives in this policy area are rural proofed, providing investment and delivery mechanisms that properly address the additional interacting structural barriers to learning affecting women in rural isolation, such as lack of access to transport, local service provision and childcare.¹⁴

¹⁴ Allen , op. cit.

Section 1 Introduction

1.1 Background

In 2012, DSD in partnership with DARD launched a programme aimed at providing regional support for women in 'areas of greatest need' of Northern Ireland, defined as disadvantaged and rural areas.¹⁵ More precisely, the programme sought to 'serve the needs of marginalised and isolated women'¹⁶ in these areas by 'enabl[ing] them to tackle disadvantage and fulfil their potential in overcoming the barriers that give rise to their marginalisation [a]nd experience of poverty and exclusion'.¹⁷

The Women's Regional Consortium is funded under this programme, and the research brief for this project originated and was formulated within this policy context. That brief is as follows: *to conduct research on women's perceptions of gaps in community-based women's education/training, specifically in respect of perceived unmet learner demand among educationally marginalised and isolated individuals in disadvantaged and rural areas.*

1.2 Aims, objectives and scope

Accordingly, the overall aim of the paper is to capture in 'snapshot' format what women in some of Northern Ireland's disadvantaged and rural areas identify as gaps in existing community-based women's education/training affecting educationally marginalised and isolated individuals.

Three main research objectives pertain:

- to explore the notion of community-based women's education/training, specifically as responses to the learner needs of educationally disadvantaged and isolated women;
- to capture affected women's perceptions of potential gaps in existing provision; and,
- to formulate recommendations for policymakers and relevant others aimed at remedially addressing any reported unmet learner demand.

¹⁵ DSD/OFMDFM, op. cit., p.43.

¹⁶ Ibid.,p.41.

¹⁷ DSD/NISRA, 'Regional support for women in disadvantaged and rural areas: survey of women's groups analysis', DSD/NISRA: Belfast, 2013, p.3.

Scope

The subject of gaps in existing community-based women's education/training in disadvantaged and rural areas of Northern Ireland represents a complex, multilayered area of potential research, which may be alternatively approached from any number of different perspectives, both empirical and qualitative.

The research brief of, and prevailing constraints on, this small-scale project delimit its scope *specifically to capturing and analysing what some women in such areas perceive as gaps.*

As such, the paper is not designed to offer any kind of empirical evaluation (comprehensive or otherwise) of whether any perceived gaps are in fact 'actual' gaps, or to map the geographic distribution of any actual gaps. These are potential questions and subjects for further (quantitative) research in this underexplored area of the literature.

1.3 Methodology

The project employed a mixed methodological approach, combining desktop research with focus group and survey engagement as follows.

To capture the experiential knowledge and perceptions of women living and working in areas of greatest need on the subject at hand, the following were facilitated:

- ten focus groups, convened during the period May to August 2014, in Belfast, Derry, Forkhill and Craigavon, including engagement with providers of community-based women's education/training;
- an online survey of rurally located women's groups/organisations, which also included provider engagement, undertaken during May and June 2014; and,
- an e-questionnaire survey of women centre providers, conducted in August 2014.

Women at a local level not directly involved in provision were first asked for their views on whether additional provision was required for educationally disadvantaged and isolated individuals in their localities. Answering this question in the affirmative

prompted exploratory discussion on how affected women might potentially benefit from such additional provision.

By contrast, although providers were also asked the question of gaps, in this case answering in the affirmative prompted exploratory discussion about the kinds of factors that prevent their organisations from remedially addressing reported unmet learner demand.

Appendix 1 provides further detail on all engagement.

1.4 Layout

To theoretically frame the project and set out the context within which community-based women's education/training has tended to emerge and develop in the Northern Ireland case, we begin in Section 2 by exploring the notion of community-based women's education/training, specifically in respect of educationally disadvantaged and isolated individuals. The section will examine the nature of the relationship between structural inequality and educational disadvantage, the impact of educational disadvantage on women's everyday lives and the emergence of community-based women's education/training as a response to such disadvantage.

The outcome of the research engagement is then introduced in Section 3, capturing the perspectives of both affected women and providers. The paper concludes in Section 4 by summarising the project's key findings and setting out policy recommendations to take account of reported gaps and associated unmet learner demand.

Section 2 Framing the project, setting the context

2.1 Introduction

Building on the widely accepted interpretation of community-based women's education/training as local communities engaged in developing responses to women's educational disadvantage,¹⁸ this section seeks to theoretically frame the project and set out the context within which such provision has tended to emerge and develop in the Northern Ireland case. In so doing, it explores what is meant by the notion at the heart of this project, i.e. 'community-based women's education/training for educationally marginalised and isolated individuals in disadvantaged and rural areas'.

Accordingly, we will focus on such provision specifically as contrasting community responses to different kinds of educational need,¹⁹ which can be associated with structurally generated educational disadvantage and other related structural gender inequalities; and which aims at capacity building to effect some kind of remedial change, whether at the level of the individual only or also, in consequence, either at the level of the family, the community or society at large.

2.2 Structural inequality and educational disadvantage

This sub-section briefly explores the nature of the relationship between structural inequality and women's educational disadvantage.

In large part, diversity in community-based women's education/training is attributable to the impact of the particular structural context of a given case within which such provision emerges and develops, including key differences in how communities educationally respond to experiences of structural inequality and associated educational disadvantage.²⁰ For this reason, in order to explore more fully the notion

¹⁸ WERRC, 'At the forefront: the role of women's community education in combating poverty and disadvantage in the Republic of Ireland', Aontas, Dublin, 2001.

¹⁹ As will be made clear, although this provision is first and foremostly about addressing educational disadvantage, in accommodating the diversity of learner need among marginalised and isolated women in disadvantaged and rural areas, it can involve learner engagement across a range of prior attainment, from little/no attainment through to third level qualification.

²⁰ Clearly, such diversity also reflects a more fundamental characteristic: educationally disadvantaged women in Northern Ireland, as elsewhere, do not constitute either a homogeneous or fixed group. Rather, they are differentiated by key demographic factors such as age, level of educational

of women's community education/training within the Northern Ireland case, it is instructive to seek some understanding of the complex context-specific structural relationships that have impacted its emergence and evolution. As we shall shortly see, in this particular case, these relationships include interactions between structural factors associated with conflict and post-conflict society, as well as ongoing gender inequality across society at large, in both the private and public spheres.

As research affirms, women in disadvantaged and rural areas across Northern Ireland can experience different kinds of marginalisation, exclusion, isolation and vulnerability.²¹ These experiences can include distinct forms of educational disadvantage characterised by difficulties affecting access to, retention within, and progression from, educational and training processes in the statutory sector.²² The nature and extent of this educational exclusion and disadvantage can, of course, vary from individual case to case. In the more severe cases, educational marginalisation of this kind can result in affected women having 'little or no qualifications'.²³

The structural factors of gender inequality and disempowerment underlying these experiences of educational disadvantage can tend to be overlapping, persistent and mutually affecting, comprising complex interactions between various socio-economic, cultural, political and legal phenomena. And, this overall picture may be further complicated by the cumulative structural impact of the so-called 'legacy' of the Northern Ireland conflict on women's everyday lives,²⁴ as well as the impact of other interacting factors such as minority status and ethnicity.

For example, because socio-economic status ('social class background') can be a major determinant of educational outcomes, including literacy levels, qualification

achievement, ethnicity and geographic location, which in combination can give rise to different learner 'constituencies'. Each of these constituencies is characterised by specific and evolving learner needs, interests and perspectives. Where delivery agents seek to meaningfully and effectively address such heterogeneity in need, the inevitable outcome is heterogeneity in provision.

²¹ On this, see McLaughlin, *op. cit.*; Hinds *op. cit.*; and, PWC, *op. cit.*

²² Feeley, *op. cit.*

²³ PWC, *op. cit.*, p.ii.

²⁴ See, for example, M. Tomlinson, 'The trouble with suicide mental health, suicide and the Northern Ireland conflict: a review of the evidence', DHSSPSNI: Belfast, 2007.

and grading,²⁵ and 'low income is a strong predictor of low educational performance',²⁶ girls and women from poorer backgrounds may be at greater risk of educational disadvantage. That risk may in turn be compounded by cultural factors associated with the gendered division of labour in the private sphere, including the assumed role of women as primary care givers, which can impede participation, retention and progression by placing a disproportionate unpaid work burden on women.²⁷ Research affirms this association by identifying lack of appropriate childcare as a fundamentally enduring barrier to the engagement of socio-economically disadvantaged women in education/training across Northern Ireland.²⁸

In turn, these experiences of vulnerability may be further compounded by the impact of conflict associated experience on women's well-being, including their mental health. Research indicates that socio-economically disadvantaged women 'are at a greater risk of depression compared to less disadvantaged women'.²⁹ And, this picture is complicated still further in virtue of the fact that the 'burden' of conflict associated anxiety and depression tends to fall disproportionately on women.³⁰ Such exclusion may be compounded yet still further by non-recognition and non-accommodation in the public sphere of minority status, needs and interests.³¹ So, for example, the experience of educational disadvantage may be more pronounced among women from the Traveller community.

On this view, 'the more equal societies are in economic and social terms, the greater the likelihood there is of having gender equality in education'³² and, consequently, women's educational disadvantage in the Northern Ireland case and beyond may be best understood and potentially addressed in the context of wider discourses around equality, social justice and structural/institutional change.

²⁵ Lynch and Baker, op. cit.

²⁶ D. Hirsch, 'Experiences of poverty and educational disadvantage', JRF: London, 2007, p.1.

²⁷ See, for example, R. McQuaid, H. Graham and M. Shapira, 'Child care: maximising the economic participation of women', Equality Commission Northern Ireland: Belfast, 2013.

²⁸ Ibid. See also, McLaughlin, op. cit.

²⁹ M. Teychenne, K. Ball and J. Salmon, 'Educational inequalities in women's depressive symptoms: the mediating role of perceived neighbourhood characteristics', *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, Dec: 9(12): 4241-53, 2012.

³⁰ Tomlinson, op. cit.

³¹ K. Lynch and M. Feeley, 'Gender and education (and employment): gendered imperatives and their implications for women and men: lessons from research for policy makers', European Commission: Brussels, 2009, p.7.

³² Ibid., p.8.

2.3 Impact of educational disadvantage on women's everyday lives

So far, we have explored the nature of the relationship between structural inequality and women's educational disadvantage in the Northern Ireland case. We turn now to a brief consideration of how such disadvantage may adversely impact women's everyday lives in multiple ways.

The patterned structural educational disadvantage previously described can produce and reproduce inequalities that negatively impact women's everyday lives on at least three interacting levels. First and foremost, at the level of the individual, such disadvantage can interfere with and disrupt personal development, impeding processes of self-actualisation, self-esteem and self-confidence and reinforcing experiences of social isolation and disconnectedness.

Second, educational disadvantage can in turn contribute to the exclusion of women as active agents from the public sphere, constraining their life chances across categories such as social mobility, lifetime earnings, status, health and well-being. In large part, this is because educational attainment, and the personal development it may confer, can be a determinant of the extent and nature of women's economic participation/independence, affecting the likelihood not only of employment per se, but also of sustainable employment, career progression and occupational mobility.³³ At the same time, of course, work in itself can also potentially contribute to personal development,³⁴ so that educationally disadvantaged women who have been unable to access personal development opportunities through education may consequently be denied access to such opportunities through employment.

Research affirms that this association between educational attainment and economic participation/independence can contribute to educationally disadvantaged women becoming 'trapped in a cycle of welfare dependency and isolation'.³⁵ For this reason,

³³ S. Leitch, 'Leitch: review of skills, prosperity for all in the global economy – world class skills: final report', HMSO: London, 2006.

³⁴ Lynch and Baker, op. cit.

³⁵ L. Patterson and K. Dowd, 'Using the women's community education approach to deliver community employment training: a case study from Longford women's link', Aontas: Dublin, 2010, p.121.

it has been suggested that opportunities for education/training comprise the '*principal catalyst*' for women's increased economic participation.³⁶

In turn, increased economic participation/independence for women associated with access to education/training opportunities may be viewed as 'key factors in ensuring women's full participation *at all levels* of society'.³⁷ On this view, women in Northern Ireland who lack economic independence due to educational disadvantage can be prevented from contributing not only to civil society at the level of community, but also to wider society. The former denotes the exclusion of women from key associational sites such as community development/engagement processes. The latter denotes their exclusion and under-representation in public life 'across all major positions of political, economic, social and judicial power', constituting a 'gender-related systemic impediment to... access[ing]... decision-making' sites,³⁸ such as peace-building processes.³⁹

The ultimate inherent danger in such public sphere exclusion and associated disconnectedness, marginalisation and isolation is, of course, that some women's agency might become totally restricted to the realm of the private sphere, wholly characterised in terms of assumed role of 'economically inactive', unpaid primary care giver/domestic labourer. Women who participated in the research processes underpinning this project highlighted this potential danger, reporting how educationally marginalised women in disadvantaged and rural areas can become disempowered in welfare dependency and isolation.

Finally, research also indicates that women's educational disadvantage can adversely impact family outcomes. For example, it has been suggested that it can affect later child outcomes by suppressing women's aspirations for their children's educational attainment.⁴⁰ There is also evidence that low attainment among children from poorer backgrounds is linked to disadvantage '*well into adulthood*'.⁴¹ This points

³⁶ C. Lidell, 'The caring jigsaw: systems of childcare and education in Northern Ireland', Save the Children: Belfast, 2009, p.28.

³⁷ Patterson and Dowd, op. cit., p.121.

³⁸ M. Potter, 'Review of gender issues in Northern Ireland', 2014, OFMDFM: Belfast, p.2.

³⁹ On this, see Hinds, op. cit.

⁴⁰ Lidell, op. cit.

⁴¹ Hirsch, op. cit., p.3.

to the longer-term (inter-generational) aspect of the relationship between educational disadvantage and economic marginalisation, according to which ‘the relationship between poverty and low achievement ... is part of a wider cycle in which family disadvantage is passed on from one generation to the next’.⁴²

2.4 Aims of provision: responses to educational disadvantage

In sum, it has been argued that the educational disadvantage experienced by some women in disadvantaged and rural areas across Northern Ireland, associated with multiple structural forms of marginalisation and exclusion, can potentially hold adverse outcomes not only at the level of the individual, but also the family, the community and wider society. These conditions can in turn generate local constituencies of educational need associated with the imperative to effect positive change and outcomes at each of these levels. This sub-section considers how community-based women’s education/training provision in disadvantaged and rural areas of Northern Ireland may be characterised as responding to, and seeking to accommodate, that differentiated need.⁴³

Differing aims – differing needs

Clearly, the aim of community-based women’s education/training provision will differ depending on the specific learning need to which it responds, and the kind of intended positive change associated with fulfilment of that need. Responding to need associated with effecting change at the level of the individual, the aim of such provision may be construed in terms of personal development and self-actualisation, addressing self-esteem and self-confidence issues associated with marginalisation, while also promoting the capacity for critical reflection. Of course, there may also be a concurrent emphasis on the social dimension of such provision, in terms of its

⁴² Ibid., loc. cit.

⁴³ It is important to note that the emergence of such provision may also be viewed as responding to the ‘inaccessibility’ of further education for particular groups of women, associated with such barriers to women’s learning as course, childcare and travel costs. On this view, community-based women’s education/training addresses learner needs that ‘go unmet in the statutory sector’ and ultimately seeks to ‘ease/maximise’ educationally disadvantaged women’s access to, retention within, and progression from, educational and training processes; Feeley, op. cit., at p.34, p.xiii and p.69.

potential to address social disconnectedness among marginalised and isolated women.⁴⁴

Such provision may also be valued as a means to an end beyond the level of the individual: whether at the level either of family, community or wider society. In responding to educational need associated with effecting change at the level of the family, the aim of such provision may be some kind of family support, whether, say, in terms of programmes in parenting or nutrition; or, it may instead be indirectly aimed at contributing to positive family outcomes by enhancing women's prospects of economic participation.

In responding to educational need associated with effecting change at the level of the community, the aim of such provision may be articulated in terms of community development. In the Northern Ireland case as beyond, that aim may be differently interpreted depending on practitioners' divergent positions on the purpose of community development/education, as mediated through competing ideological discourses.⁴⁵ For example, for some providers the aim of education for community development has been expressly conflict-defined, posited in terms of promoting good community relations, while for others it has instead been expressly geared to effecting structural objectives posited in the language of equality, social justice and participative democracy.⁴⁶

Responding at the level of society at large, the aim of the provision under review may be to increase the participation of women in public sphere processes that ultimately extend beyond the local. A case in point is capacity building provision to stimulate increased participation of women within peace-building processes. As things stand, the latter is, of course, innately constrained by the failure of the Northern Ireland Executive to fully implement United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000), which 'promotes women's protection, participation, and

⁴⁴ On this, see, for example, B. Loughran, 'Evaluation of year 3: Regional Women's Centres Learning Partnership Project, 1st May 2011 to 30th April 2012', RWCLPP: Belfast, 2012.

⁴⁵ See, T. Lovett, C. Clarke and A. Kilmurray, *Adult education and community action*, Croom Helm: London, 1983; also, Feeley, op. cit.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

leadership in the full spectrum of peace-building processes'.⁴⁷ Mainstreaming the resolution in policies and programmes could potentially help remedially address such exclusion.⁴⁸ Research affirms the ongoing need for capacity building on this front.⁴⁹ As we shall later see, this need was also identified within the engagement processes underpinning the project.

Education for conflict transformation of this kind ultimately aims at preparing women to contribute to the development of more just, democratic and accountable political arrangements and social institutions.⁵⁰ Of course, at the same time, community-based women's education/training in the context of both conflict and post-conflict Northern Ireland society has also aimed at mitigating conflict experience at the level of the individual, including the impact of conflict on women's well-being, most notably their mental health. As we shall also later see, the findings of this project indicate perceived gaps in such provision.

As previously implied, the aims of community-based women's education/training in the Northern Ireland case are neither discrete nor mutually exclusive. Rather, they can instead interact with and cut across each other, producing hybridised aims and outcomes. As a result, as observed, the benefit that such provision can confer at the level of the individual may in turn deliver benefits at the level of the family, the community and wider society. So, for example, what counts as education for personal development may also count as education for community development. As will be shown, participants in the data collection processes that informed this paper anecdotally evidenced these benefits.

In short, community-based women's education/training provision in disadvantaged and rural areas across Northern Ireland responds to different kinds of shifting locally

⁴⁷ C. O'Rourke and K. McMinn, 'Baseline study on UNSCR 1325 - women and peacebuilding toolkit: sharing the learning', Transitional Justice Institute: Belfast, 2014, p.15. See also Hinds, op. cit.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p.18. The latest United Nations' report on the United Kingdom's record on women's rights from the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women has highlighted this ongoing exclusion, restating the human rights case for government action to remedially address same. UN, 'CEDAW: Concluding observations on the seventh periodic report of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland', UN: Geneva, 2013.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ C. O'Rourke, 'Dealing with the past in a post-conflict society: does the participation of women matter? Insights from Northern Ireland', *William and Mary Journal Women and Law*, 35, 2012.

identified learner need, thereby potentially contributing to different kinds of capacity building at the level of the individual, the family, the community and wider society. So responding to diversity in learner need invariably stimulates diversity in provision.

Two concluding points of clarification are in order on the nature of this diversity. First, it is important to reiterate that such diversity can include engagement with a range of prior learner attainment: while some learners may have little or no qualifications, others might instead have third level attainment. So, for example, as the research findings of this project indicate, because social isolation and associated mental ill-health can cut across *all* levels of attainment, perceived gaps in existing provision include ‘motivational/recreational’ learning opportunities for rurally isolated women graduates with mental ill-health.

Second, given the diversity in perspectives across the women’s sector, such provision may or may not be explicitly articulated in distinctly feminist discourse and critique: ‘[the sector reflects] a wide range of viewpoints, from feminist ... to those with a more traditional approach’.⁵¹ So although such provision certainly has ‘strong roots in the women’s movement’, as well as in community development and adult education discourses, there is a marked ‘variation in the degree of radicalism’ among delivery agents.⁵² That said, in so far as they seek to address women’s educational disadvantage associated with the impact of patterned structural inequalities, these responses may be at least partly interpreted as addressing the outcomes of gender inequality.

No guarantees

There are, of course, no guarantees that community-based women’s education/training will fulfil any of its intended aims, whether at the level either of the personal, family, community or wider society. To a large extent this is because, as we have seen, educational disadvantage is structurally generated. And, as such, the ambition to effectively tackle it and its implications ultimately calls for structural remedies to the multiple aspects of disadvantaged women’s lives that correlate with educational marginalisation.

⁵¹ DSD/OFMDFM, op. cit., p.14.

⁵² Feeley, op. cit., p.25; p.26.

On this view, community-based women's education/training is innately constrained in the extent to which it can remedially address the impact of educational disadvantage on women's everyday lives. A brief illustration should help illuminate this point. The effectiveness of such provision, as potential progression pathways to increased economic participation, will ultimately depend on the kind of structural status quo that prevails for each individual learner following her educational experience. More precisely, it will depend on the nature of the labour market and, in particular, the availability of the kind of job opportunities that could potentially help guard against the risk of in-work poverty by proffering a 'living wage' and some kind of job security, as opposed to the kind of low-pay, low-status, low-skilled and temporary jobs of which the United Kingdom has 'a large number ... compared to other developed countries'.⁵³

2.5 Section summary

In sum, this section sought to theoretically frame the project and set out the context within which community-based women's education/training has tended to emerge and develop in the Northern Ireland case. Such provision has been characterised as contrasting community responses to different kinds of locally identified educational need; such need may be associated with women's educational disadvantage and other interacting structural gender inequalities; and, such responses tend to aim at mitigating that disadvantage to effect different kinds of positive outcomes, whether at the level either of the individual, the family, the community or society at large.

We turn now to an exploration of the substantive findings that emerged from the engagement dimension of the project.

⁵³ K. Schmuecker, 'Future of the UK labour market', JRF: London, 2014, p.1.

Section 3 Perceptions of gaps in provision

3.1 Introduction

This section captures and analyses the perspectives and experiential knowledge of women living and working in disadvantaged and rural areas across Northern Ireland, who engaged in the project's focus group and survey processes, on the subject of perceived gaps in existing community-based women's education/training for educationally marginalised and isolated individuals. Participants fell into two broad cohorts: those who were involved in the delivery of such education/training (hereafter, 'providers'), and those who were not but who were instead in some way and to some extent affected by the perceived gaps, whether directly or indirectly (hereafter, 'affected women').⁵⁴

3.2 Reported gaps

Participants overall (both affected women and providers) reported an extensive range of perceived gaps in existing provision and associated unmet learner demand, which cut across rural, urban and town sites. This perceived undersupply encompassed a plethora of contrasting disciplines, levels, intended outcomes and cohorts, reflecting diverse learner needs, interests and perspectives. These perceptions are discussed below and later summarised in Appendix 2.

The overall reported typology of perceived unmet learner need was broad, comprising a continuum from unaccredited vocational/non-vocational categories through to (employer recognised) accredited vocational/non-vocational variants. These ranged from so-called soft outcome options, geared expressly toward such outcomes as personal development and social connectedness, through to progression pathway options, geared expressly toward such outcomes as employment, self-employment and occupational qualification, as well as access to further/higher education and training. So, for example, affected women reported unmet learner demand in subject categories that included confidence building, leadership, empowerment, lobbying, community development, craft, leisure, health, technical training, so-called 'up-skilling', business, childcare, counselling, technical

⁵⁴ I say 'affected' in so far as these gaps can impact not only the women themselves but also, in consequence, their families, local communities and wider society.

apprenticeships and language courses for ethnic minorities. Providers also reported heterogeneity in unmet learner need. For instance, the majority of women centre questionnaire respondents reported gaps across twelve categories of provision,⁵⁵ while all reported course waiting lists (for the period 1 April 2013 to 31 March 2014) that fell across four discipline categories.⁵⁶

This diversity in perceived unmet learner need reflected the broadly held position among participants that additional provision was required to help build such capacity among educationally disadvantaged and isolated women as might potentially effect remedial change in their everyday lives, whether at the level of the individual only or also, in consequence, either at the level of the family, the community or society at large. The last category concerned discussion of perceived gaps in capacity building to enhance the participation and representation of affected women across *all* sections of the public sphere, but notably peace-building processes and structures

The implied learner typology was also broad. Respondents overall identified gaps in provision to meet the learner needs of marginalised and isolated women who fell into the following cohorts: ethnic minority women, including asylum seekers, immigrant groups and Traveller women;⁵⁷ young women and older women; lone parents; unemployed/economically inactive women; 'hard to reach' and 'hard to engage' women; vulnerable women living alone; women with caring responsibilities; women with poor health and/or disability; women seeking to re-enter the labour market; women pursuing progression pathways to further/higher education and training; women with little or no qualifications; women in search of routes to self-employment; socially disconnected women; women in low paid, low status and low skilled jobs seeking to move into skilled employment; women seeking occupational qualification;

⁵⁵ These categories are as follows: accredited courses; unaccredited courses; vocational and technical courses; courses aimed specifically at younger women; courses aimed specifically at older women; courses aimed specifically at unemployed and/or 'hard to reach' women; provision for ethnic minority women; courses offering progression pathways to further/higher education and training; personal development courses; health related courses; essential skills courses; and, GCSE maths/English provision.

⁵⁶ The four categories are: health/personal development, leisure/craft, essential skills and accredited vocational/technical

⁵⁷ Research indicates that asylum seekers and refugees in Northern Ireland can face 'great difficulty' in accessing English language classes. Law Centre NI, 'Access to free ESOL classes for asylum seekers and refugees'. [Online]. Available at: <http://www.lawcentreni.org/policy/policy-briefings/694>

and, women seeking capacity building training to facilitate greater involvement in their communities and beyond.

In some cases, reported gaps in provision equated to perceived severe under-provision. For example, one women centre respondent reported: 'there is next to no community based education in our area outside of what we provide', while one rural provider described how 'locally based free provision has almost disappeared'. In some rural cases, identified gaps in provision equated to the total absence of local provision. As one rural survey respondent put it, 'there is no training where I live [which is a] very remote area, all services [are] located at least 12 miles away', while another reported 'a lot of training is Belfast based and, when I ask for it, it very often is not available outside of Belfast'.

3.2.1 Common themes

Common themes emerged across all stages of engagement. It was judged imperative that the particular learning needs and interests of vulnerable, educationally marginalised and isolated women should be established locally in 'bottom-up' analysis, and that the accommodation of this demand should also be addressed locally in 'grassroots' delivery. Rural respondents complained that in some instances locally delivered provision did not respond to locally identified needs analysis but rather to 'top down' analysis carried out by 'regional training bodies, DEL and DARD', so that there was sometimes 'no consultation with [the] community on what [was] needed'. One respondent attributed this apparent lack of alignment between bottom-up needs analysis and local delivery to 'officials in Belfast – DEL, DARD, TWN etc. ... [who] are only worried [about] meeting targets... [thinking] they know best'.

At every stage of engagement it was also judged imperative that community-based women's education/training should include appropriate, accessible childcare support (whether free or affordable) to enable marginalised women to avail of learning opportunities. Within this context, the continuing importance of such provision within the women's centres' delivery model was expressly underlined. The provision of education/training in the centres is integrated with the delivery of other essential frontline women-only services, including advice, advocacy and family support. Such

integrated delivery ultimately allows centres to adopt a holistic approach in accommodation of the often complex service needs of vulnerable, marginalised and excluded women in disadvantaged areas.

Different kinds of vulnerable learner cohorts directly benefit from this integrated delivery, for instance, lone parents and ethnic minority women, including immigrants and asylum seekers. Accordingly, participants expressed deep concern at the likely threat to such delivery were WCCF discontinued (the aforementioned DSD emergency childcare funding package for women's centres, currently in place until March 2015). We return to this important point shortly, in the context of exploring what participants identified as required remedial actions to address identified gaps.

There was a broad consensus that unaccredited provision was especially important to accommodate the learning needs of vulnerable, isolated and 'hard to reach' women, for whom the prospect of accredited programmes might only be feasible after participation in initial unaccredited personal development programmes, such as 'coping and resilience skills' training. This point was especially emphasised in the rural case, in light of enduring infrastructural inadequacies in areas such as transport, which, as research affirms, can exacerbate experiences of vulnerability and isolation.⁵⁸ As one respondent put it:

unaccredited courses are important to combat isolation and loneliness... [which are] huge issues in rural areas for women, particularly with the lack of transport ...there is a need to deliver [additional] training opportunities that allow for the social interaction of women.

The importance of unaccredited programmes was also underscored in respect of a perceived pronounced undersupply of delivery aimed at taking account of women's mental health issues. Two examples were highlighted: that affecting rurally isolated graduates and that associated with the so-called 'legacy' of the Northern Ireland conflict.

Finally, there was a perceived severe undersupply of delivery for older women, both accredited and unaccredited, associated with a reported disproportionate emphasis in statutory funding policy on provision for young women. The reported dearth in 'real

⁵⁸ See Allen, *op. cit.*

options' for older women prompted a call for progression pathways in vocational/technical training proffering part-time, flexible participation to meet the needs of those with caring responsibilities and those in employment. At the same time, however, widespread concern was also expressed that some young women aged over 25 who are not in employment, education or training are being 'excluded and left behind' because they are ruled out of statutory NEETs provision.

3.3 Reported impact of gaps

Respondents stressed the positive impact that community-based women's education/training provision has already had on women's everyday lives in disadvantaged and rural areas and, by consequence, on their families, communities and wider society. And, it was subsequently observed that additional benefits for marginalised and isolated women could potentially be achieved were the identified gaps remedially addressed by affected stakeholders. The perceived impact of reported gaps was therefore articulated in terms of the preclusion of the following potential benefits.

The range of perceived potential benefits of community-based women's education/training, associated with different kinds of capacity building, cut across the following categories: personal development, including enhanced agency, empowerment and self-actualisation; improved health and well-being, including mental health; increased social connectedness; increased participation in the public sphere; improved family life, including improved outcomes for children following raised educational aspirations within households; and, community development associated with the embedding of a so-called 'culture of learning' at the local level.

As previously noted, in some rural cases, perceived gaps in provision included the reported absence of any kind of local provision. Participants emphasised the adverse impact of such absence on women's life prospects and well-being, as neatly captured by the following respondent comment: *'how do women improve their [lives] if education/training is not available?'*

3.4 Reported explanations for gaps and remedial actions

Clearly, further research is required to interrogate and contextualise these perceptions of unmet learner demand and to establish the precise nature, extent and causality of any actual gaps, as well as their cumulative impact on affected women's everyday lives. Examination of the complex interacting factors underlying the perceived gaps is beyond the scope of this project. That said, to aid *some* understanding of these factors in the context of this brief paper and point the way to further research, providers were asked to identify first, the main factors that prevented their organisations from addressing the reported gaps and then, potential remedial actions to address these factors. Responses to both questions are discussed below and later summarised in Appendices 3 and 4.

Reported explanations for perceived gaps

Funding of community-based women's education/training comes from a number of sources, both statutory and non-statutory. Almost all of the factors cited by respondents as barriers and challenges to addressing gaps in provision were associated with the implications of reported funding inadequacies, particularly although not exclusively with statutory funding, and associated uncertainty over sustainability. As one survey respondent put it: 'sustainability is one of our greatest concerns'. So, for example, even though a lack of childcare capacity to support additional delivery was cited as a significant factor in under-provision across different sites, proffered explanations for this deficit tended to involve some kind of resource constraint, such as lack of full cost recovery.

As noted, women's centres' questionnaire respondents reported gaps in provision across twelve classifications of provision. Reported explanations for their inability to address those gaps were classified in two broad categories, both of which concerned prevailing resource constraints: lack of additional/sustainable funding; and, lack of necessary additional capacity due to lack of additional funding. These included: staff retention difficulties due to the precarious nature of funding, impacted by an absence of core funding for 'essential' personnel; lack of physical space to deliver additional provision; lack of funding to increase capacity in delivery of vocational/technical opportunities for learners aged over 25; cuts in further education funding for community provision; and, match funding issues.

Providers described how the cumulative impact of such resource constraints jeopardised community-based women's education/training. As one respondent put it: 'it is difficult to plan progression when we struggle to survive keeping the doors open on a daily basis'. This relationship between sustainability and gaps in provision is well established in the literature:

it would seem to follow that if the providers who are best placed to provide accessible, barrier-free education for women are under-resourced, or worse still, disappear altogether, women in disadvantaged urban and rural communities will have lost what for many is their only viable route to education and training.⁵⁹

As we have seen, in some (rural) cases, a total absence of any kind of community provision was also reported. In large part, this absence was attributed to funding deficits that reflected longstanding rural/urban statutory resourcing differentials across the sector, captured as 'historic underinvestment in rural areas'.⁶⁰ Recent government research on this subject has given some indication as to the scale of the underinvestment, acknowledging that '*compared with levels of government funding to women's groups in urban areas, there was a relatively low level of government funding to rural women's groups*'.⁶¹

Within this context, the decision-making of further education colleges was critiqued, with respondents attributing under-provision and/or non-provision to policy development that encompassed severe cuts to outreach provision. For example, one provider reported that 'there is next to no community based education in our area outside of what we provide [the regional further education college has] ...cut back virtually all their support for education in the community other than what can be provided using special funding'.

Reported remedial actions

Service providers were also asked what they considered government and relevant others could/should do to help address these reported gaps in existing provision. As we have seen, delivery agents explained these gaps largely in terms of problems

⁵⁹ See McLaughlin, *op. cit.*, p.90.

⁶⁰ On this, see DSD/OFMDFM, *op. cit.*

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p.31 and p.13.

with statutory funding. It followed that their proposed remedial actions were framed principally in terms of effecting changes to funding behaviour, policy and practice in the public sector. These proposals are discussed below and summarised in Appendix 4.

Motivated thus, to address the question of sustainability, a number of participants appealed for longer term and core funding from the Executive. Government has, of course, already spelt out its case against such proposals. Its recent review of women sector funding made that case by emphasising that, in a context of extended austerity, it *'will be important for women's groups to explore new ways of achieving sustainability'* through social economy model income generation and diversification.⁶²

Various groups also urged that government explicitly recognise and reflect the importance of 'learning for learning's sake' across its educational policy development and planning. From this perspective, they called for greater government support for unaccredited provision to guard against a perceived disproportionate emphasis on accredited provision, within a reported context in which 'it is becoming increasingly difficult to secure funding for education and training especially if it is unaccredited' (survey respondent). The further education sector was particularly critiqued on this front: 'further education doesn't run community classes where the outcome is the learning and not the qualification' (survey respondent). Since, in many cases, perceived gaps in provision were attributed to changes in further education sector policy and practice, respondents critiqued the status quo of control and distribution of core funding by that sector. Accordingly, they called for enhanced engagement and partnership working between the latter and the community-based women's education/training sector.⁶³

Against this backdrop, it was observed that government policy development had failed to properly recognise and take full account of the particular educational and training needs and interests of marginalised and isolated women. Respondents subsequently suggested that, in order to properly identify and address the diverse learning needs of educationally marginalised and isolated women in disadvantaged

⁶² DSD/OFMDFM, op. cit., p.20.

⁶³ See Feeley, op. cit.

and rural areas, government should develop a holistic and integrated approach across all relevant departments at the level of strategic policy development, monitoring, implementation and review. For example, it was proposed that as the Executive progresses the development of the full childcare strategy, it should give due consideration to accommodating the particular childcare needs of vulnerable/marginalised women in disadvantaged areas by safeguarding and extending provision under the integrated model of delivery in women's centres. The social justice case for retaining WCCF was consequently underscored.

3.5 Section summary

This section sought to articulate the perspectives of women living and working in disadvantaged and rural areas across Northern Ireland on the question of gaps in existing community-based women's education/training for educationally marginalised and isolated individuals. As observed, perceived gaps in provision cut across a myriad of contrasting disciplines, levels, intended outcomes and cohorts, reflecting diverse learner needs, interests and perspectives. Participants posited claims as to the likely impact of perceived gaps, and providers articulated potential remedial actions to help mitigate that impact. Following on from this claim-making, the paper concludes in the next section by laying out some recommendations to take account of these substantive concerns.

Section 4 Conclusion

The overall aim of this brief paper was to capture in snapshot format what women in some of Northern Ireland's areas of greatest need identify as gaps in existing community-based women's education/training for educationally disadvantaged and isolated individuals. To that end, the project involved focus group and questionnaire engagement with women living and working in these areas, including providers of such education/training.

As we have seen, the project findings indicate that affected women identify an extensive range of gaps in provision and associated unmet learner demand, which cuts across rural, urban and town sites as well as a plethora of contrasting disciplines, levels, intended course outcomes and learner cohorts. As we have also seen, in large part, providers tend to attribute their inability to address these reported gaps to ongoing resource constraints, broadly, issues of sustainability.

Further research is required to interrogate and contextualise these perceptions of unmet learner demand and to establish the precise nature, extent and causality of actual gaps, as well as their cumulative impact on affected women's everyday lives. Government failure to properly collect, disseminate, analyse and rely on pertinent data in its strategic decision-making processes can act as a substantial barrier to effective policy development, implementation, monitoring and review. And, as such, additional research of this kind is necessary to ensure that any future policy planning in this area may be more fully informed, evidence-based and, in consequence, potentially more effective.

We have explored the notion of community-based women's education/training specifically as contrasting community responses to different kinds of perceived educational need, which can be associated with educational disadvantage and other interacting structural gender inequalities that restrict women's access to, retention within and progression from formal education/training. Within this context, it has been emphasised that women's educational marginalisation is a structural phenomena that can ultimately only be meaningfully and effectively tackled with *substantive* remedial change that cuts across both the private and public spheres,

whether either at the level of the cultural, the political, the socioeconomic or the legal.

These observations, findings and conclusions have informed the formulation of policy recommendations to address the subject at hand. These recommendations are set out below following a summary of the project's key findings.

Summary of findings

Nature of perceived gaps

- Perceived gaps in provision cut across a plethora of contrasting disciplines, levels, intended learning outcomes and cohorts, reflecting diverse learner needs, interests and perspectives.
- Reported unmet learner demand ran along a continuum from demand for unaccredited non-vocational provision through to demand for accredited vocational variants.
- Learner cohorts affected by perceived gaps in provision, both young and older women, included groups of individuals marginalised in multiple ways, such as Traveller women, women asylum seekers and refugees, lone parents, women with disabilities and women with mental ill-health, including conflict-associated conditions.
- Under-provision was reported across rural, urban and town sites, but was reported as particularly pronounced in some non-urban responses.⁶⁴ In some rural cases, identified gaps in provision equated to the reported absence of any kind of local provision.
- Discussions underlined the importance of addressing gaps in capacity building provision to effect remedial change, not only at the level of the individual, but also, in consequence, at the level of the family, the community and society at large. The last category concerned discussion of perceived gaps in capacity building to enhance the participation and representation of women from disadvantaged and rural areas across *all* sections of the public sphere, including within peace-building processes and structures.

⁶⁴ See DSD/OFMDFM, *op. cit.*

- Perceived gaps were associated with a dearth of ‘real options’ for older and young women in disadvantaged and rural areas, such as progression pathways in vocational/technical training proffering part-time, flexible participation to meet the needs of those with caring responsibilities and those in part-time employment. Notably, the latter included those young women not in employment, education or training who do not meet the age range criteria for statutory sector ‘NEETs’ provision.

Reported causality and remedial actions

- Provider respondents cited lack of sustainable funding and lack of necessary additional capacity due to lack of additional funding as major explanatory factors for reported gaps. As a result, their proposals for remedial action to address perceived unmet learner demand were, in the main, fiscally framed.
- There was also a broad consensus that the further education sector could and should do more to address perceived gaps through committing to enhanced collaboration and partnership working with the community-based women’s education/training sector, helping to develop and deliver sustainable local projects to meet locally identified learner need.⁶⁵
- In large part, rurally reported gaps were attributed to what was termed ‘historic underinvestment in rural areas’, encompassing urban/rural imbalance in government departmental funding of the wider women’s sector.⁶⁶ Respondents consequently stressed the importance of ‘rural proofing’ any future education policy/programming affecting women in the community.
- At every stage of engagement, it was held that perceived gaps in provision for older women and unaccredited provision reflected an apparent funding bias at the level of public policy, constituting the prioritisation of both accredited provision and provision for young persons, specifically NEETs provision.
- At every stage of engagement it was also emphasised that if government wants to take proper account of the specific and diverse unmet learner needs of educationally marginalised women in disadvantaged and rural areas, then it should have its funding policy properly recognise the role of unaccredited, non-vocational, recreational, motivational and personal development provision

⁶⁵ On this, see Feeley, op. cit.

⁶⁶ See DSD/OFMDFM, op. cit.

in addressing the impact of that disadvantage on such women's well-being and everyday lives. Within this context, more public sector support for such provision was called for, particularly delivery aimed at addressing issues of low self-esteem, social disconnectedness and mental ill-health, including conflict-associated conditions.

- Across all engagement processes, it was judged imperative that community-based women's education/training should include accessible childcare support (free/affordable) to enable marginalised women to avail of learning opportunities. From this perspective, widespread concern was raised about the sustainability of such support and associated implications for future gaps, including concern over the as yet undetermined future of DSD's Women's Centres' Childcare Fund (hereafter, WCCF), which underpins such vital frontline support.

Recommendations

The project recommendations that follow from these findings are set out below.

Further research

- Further research is required to interrogate and contextualise these perceptions of unmet learner demand and to establish the precise nature, extent and causality of actual gaps, as well as their cumulative impact on affected women's everyday lives, including those who are multiply disadvantaged. The Consortium recommends that the Executive commit to sponsoring such research.
- Further (and cyclical) research is also required to map the precise nature of the relationship between perceived gaps and the behaviour of the further education sector, including differentials across outreach funding patterns at the level of the local and the regional. The Department for Employment and Learning (hereafter, DEL) should commit to sponsoring such research.
- Given the nature of reported gaps and associated unmet learner demand, government should also specifically commit to further research on access to learning opportunities affecting older women and those young women not in employment, education or training who fall outside of age qualification for statutory NEETs provision.

Holistic and integrated approach

- Government should develop a holistic and integrated cross-departmental approach at the level of strategic policy development, implementation and review to properly identify and address the learning needs of educationally marginalised, multiply disadvantaged women, mapping implications across all key emerging strategies, policies and programmes in the context of all section 75 categories. This should include providing for more meaningful stakeholder engagement with affected women across all pertinent educational policy development, planning, implementation, monitoring and review processes.
- DEL should encourage further and more meaningful collaborative working between the further education sector and wider women's sector, to identify and address gaps in existing provision across all constituencies of learner need among educationally disadvantaged women.
- Integration of childcare support and education/training: government should consider further the question of free/affordable childcare for educationally marginalised learners in disadvantaged and rural areas, to include proper consideration of the potentially adverse impact on learner access were the WCCF discontinued. This question should be looked at in the context of the ongoing policy debate on the development of the full childcare strategy.
- The Executive should ensure proper recognition of and support for the role of unaccredited provision in addressing women's marginalisation and isolation in disadvantaged and rural areas, particularly personal development provision aimed at tackling issues of low self-confidence associated with educational disadvantage, as well as mental ill health, including conflict-associated conditions and those associated with rural isolation.⁶⁷
- Capacity building and empowerment: the Executive should seek to have its policy and programme development take fuller account of the relationship between women's educational disadvantage and gender inequality, in representation and participation, across all areas of the public sphere. In a post-conflict context, it is clearly imperative that particular emphasis should be placed on remedial action to address gender inequalities in respect of representation and participation in peace-building processes.

⁶⁷ See, Allen, op. cit.

- Rural provision: any future statutory educational investment for women in the community should be specifically aimed at remedially addressing the adverse impact of 'historic underinvestment in rural areas'⁶⁸ on women's access to learning opportunities. To that end, government should ultimately ensure that all subsequent initiatives in this policy area are rural proofed, providing investment and delivery mechanisms that properly address the additional interacting structural barriers to learning affecting women in rural isolation, such as lack of access to transport, local service provision and childcare.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ On this, see DSD/OFMDFM, *op. cit.*

⁶⁹ Allen, *op. cit.*

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Section 6 Appendices

Appendix 1

Summary: Focus group, survey and e-questionnaire engagement

Focus groups

- NIRWN facilitated event: Forkhill Women's Centre, 14 June 2014
- Women's Centre Derry facilitated events: 23 and 30 May 2014
- Greenway Women's Centre event, in partnership with WSN: 28 May 2014
- WSN facilitated event: 20 August 2014
- Women's Tec, in partnership with WSN, two events: 8 July 2014
- Chrysalis Women's Centre facilitated events: 10 and 12 June 2014
- Happy Stitchers' Group event, Belfast: 16 May 2014

Rural survey: undertaken by NIRWN from 30 May to 13 June 2014, sent to women's organisations/groups.

Women's centres' e-questionnaire: sent to 14 regional women's centres⁷⁰ in August 2014; 6 responses received.

⁷⁰ Atlas Women's Centre; Ballybeen Women's Centre; Chrysalis Women's Centre; Falls Women's Centre; First Steps Women's Centre; Footprints Women's Centre; Greenway Women's Centre; Kilcooley Women's Centre; Magherafelt Women's Centre; Shankill Women's Centre; Strathfoyle Women's Centre; Waterside Women's Centre; Windsor Women's Centre; and, Women's Centre Derry.

Appendix 2

Summary: Perceptions of gaps in provision among survey/focus group participants

Categories of perceived gaps

- Unaccredited/non-vocational
 - Recreational/motivational: to 'combat isolation and loneliness'
 - Personal development: to address self-confidence issues
 - Leisure/craft
- Accredited/vocational (such as, business/finance, childcare, ICT, counselling and secretarial)
- Courses aimed specifically at young women
 - Those in low paid/low-skilled employment seeking to move into more skilled employment
 - Those who fall outside of NEETs criteria
- Courses aimed specifically at older women ('older women' variously defined: in some cases defined as aged over 35, in other cases over 40 and in yet still other cases over 60); including, provision for those looking to return to work and those interested in 'learning for learning's sake'
- Courses aimed specifically at unemployed and/or 'hard to reach' women
- Provision for ethnic minority women
 - ESOL courses for immigrant groups and asylum seekers
 - Traveller provision
- Courses offering progression pathways to further/higher education and training
- Progression pathways to employment and self-employment, including provision for women wishing to return to labour market by 'up-skilling'
- Health related courses, including mental health
 - Emphasis on provision for conflict-associated mental ill-health and rural instances
- Essential skills courses ('one-to-one' support in literacy/numeracy/ICT)
- Arts, humanities and social sciences

Appendix 3

Summary: Providers' perspectives - reported explanations for gaps

- Sustainability issues and associated 'lack of continuity'
- Challenges/concerns around departmental funding practices
- Lack of full cost recovery
- Lack of necessary additional capacity due to lack of additional funding, including lack of physical space, properly trained staff and childcare places for course participants
- Either absence or undersupply of further education outreach provision
- Premises/travel arrangements unsuitable for disabled learners
- 'Historic underinvestment' in rural areas across departmental funding

Appendix 4

Summary: Providers' perspectives on remedial actions

- Improved learning partnerships between further education and community-based women's education/training sectors
- Enhanced partnership working between local and central government
- Executive should:
 - improve departmental funding practices, for example, in respect of advance funding notifications;
 - further support personal development programming;
 - adopt 'whole person' approach to subject at hand by 'link[ing] health and education';
 - provide: core funding for 'essential staff'; longer term funding; additional funding to cover early years childcare; and, a 'strategic funding package from one source';
 - reconsider provision for young people aged over 25 who are not in employment, education or training, addressing related barriers to learning;
 - ensure 'bottom-up' needs analysis informs any community-based provision it supports;
 - take account of the role of childcare in the community-based women's education/training sector whilst developing the full childcare strategy;
 - support community transport schemes in remote rural areas to enable access to community-based education/training opportunities;
 - invest in improved progression pathways to employment, giving women 'real options'; and,
 - rural proof all future education policy/investment affecting women in the community.