

## **Building Solidarity:**

Women and Local Development



National Women's  
Council of Ireland

Comhairle Náisiúnta  
na mBan in Éirinn

## **REPORT FROM THE NWCI MILLENNIUM PROJECT ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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The views expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the views of the National Women's Council of Ireland.

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## **1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

In January 1999, the National Women's Council of Ireland initiated *Women Mapping the New Millennium*, a national research, analysis and action study. The research focused on six key areas of enquiry: women and local development, health, work, education, violence against women and poverty. The aim of the study was threefold. First, to provide women across the country with the necessary skills and opportunity to have their voices heard. Second, to obtain women's views on each area in order to inform the NWCI's lobbying and policy strategies in the future. Finally, to explore and evaluate a model of participatory research and analysis which might form a basis for future ongoing research of this nature. This research could prove capable of assisting policy-makers and advisors, agencies, advocates, women and their communities with timely and appropriate information for policy formulation at local, regional and national levels.

This report presents the outcomes of the second of the above aims, that is, the views of the participants about women and local development in Ireland.

### **1.1 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The study was conducted using a Participatory Learning and Action (PLA) approach, which seeks to build bridges between locals at 'grassroots' level and policy makers at local, regional and national levels. Researchers who use PLA emphasise the fact that engaging in participatory research is a two-way learning process for all involved; that movement towards action is a central aim of the process; that a participatory approach can work equally well in urban and rural contexts and that the techniques can be adapted and applied to a wide range of issues.

In the local development component of the study, 16 facilitators engaged in research with 82 women across 5 counties, urban and rural.

### **1.2 LOCAL DEVELOPMENT BRIEF**

The Local Development component of the Millennium Project sought to elicit the following views from the participants:

- Levels of knowledge about groups that are involved in local development in Ireland, described as pre-identified 'power groups';
- Descriptions of other groups that women see as 'power groups' in terms of local development in their local areas;
- Actions from power groups that were considered to be empowering and/or disempowering to the research groups involved in this component of the Millennium Project;
- Descriptions of local development processes perceived as enabling for women in Ireland.

This report presents a cross-analysis of the results from the research involving participants from eight women's community groups. The cross-analysis is framed by a review of barriers to women's participation in local development in Ireland identified in the literature as well as some of the challenges that threaten the sustainability of women's groups in Ireland.

### **1.3 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the conclusions and recommendations which emerged from the local development component of the Millennium Project.

### 1.3.1 Conclusions

- The research groups identified lack of information from pre-identified power groups<sup>1</sup>, and, in particular, from the local authorities as a central disempowering experience. Information and knowledge are critical to the success of participatory democracy. Participants stressed the importance of models of participation in which information is readily accessible and where there is equity of participation for all groups involved. Information should be targeted at women and should take into account differing access to information for groups that are marginalised and discriminated against.
- The research groups described new local development<sup>2</sup> processes which would address women's social exclusion. These included the need for women-friendly ways of working, more education and training opportunities, the provision of childcare supports and the election of more women to local government. The research conveys the importance of women's community groups devising their own terms of reference for participation in local development and points to the transformative possibilities of those strategies.
- The inflexibility and use of the Live Register is still an impediment to women's access to education and training in their communities. Research groups perceived VECs and FÁS to be operating according to a top-down, non-woman-friendly approach. Lack of information and bureaucracy in FÁS operations result in women being unaware of the opportunities open to them and lead to misunderstandings about access to those opportunities. It also fails to honour the diversity of women and their needs which are related to socio-economic background, ethnicity, sexuality and ability.
- In general, community and voluntary groups were deemed to be more empowering to the research groups than the pre-identified power groups. Further research needs to be done on the women's community sector in order to identify: (1) the supports needed by groups to secure sustainability, and (2) the manner in which women's groups operate in that sector. This research would build on the research done by the Millennium Project and by *Framing the Future* (Kelleher et al., forthcoming 2001). *Framing the Future* is the first ever national audit of women's groups, their nature, structure, activities and aspirations.
- PLA and other participatory methods of research are important opportunities for members of women's groups to gain the knowledge and confidence to participate in local development in their local areas. Through involvement in such processes, women's groups can themselves work towards gaining the information and skills needed to secure resources, recognition and representation. These three types of supports were identified by WEFT (2000) as key to the sustainability of women's community groups in the Southern Border Counties.

### 1.3.2 Recommendations

#### **That the National Women's Council of Ireland should:**

- Develop a comprehensive policy on local development, including a commitment to further developmental work, similar to the Millennium Project, with its affiliate groups.
- Initiate further research on women's groups to investigate the following: 1) the experiences and actions which women's groups find empowering and disempowering for their work; 2) the types of information that women's groups would find useful to their work, and 3) the quality and nature of the involvement of representatives from women's groups in participatory democratic structures throughout Ireland.

#### **That the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment should:**

- Ensure support for childcare is included in all mainstream training opportunities.

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<sup>1</sup> These groups were identified by the NWCI Policy Team as being common to local development processes in Ireland. They were: Local Authority (Managers and Staff), Local Authority (Elected Councillors), Local Authority (Strategic Policy Committees), Vocational Education Committees, FÁS, County Enterprise Boards, LEADER, Area-based Partnerships, Health Board and URBAN.

<sup>2</sup> The term local development in this report refers to the pre-identified power groups named above as well as power groups identified by the participants as part of local development in their areas. Thus, in this report, the term local development also includes statutory groups.

- Insist that each County Enterprise Board should develop a programme for women's enterprise development by employing a Women's Enterprise Officer who would link with women's community groups in their designated areas in order to support and develop women's enterprise.

**That the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs in the implementation of the *White Paper, A Framework for Supporting Voluntary Activity and for Developing the Relationship between the State and the Community and Voluntary Sector 2000* should:**

- Re-assign a specific funding line for women's community groups in the Community Development Support Programme, and immediately implement its commitment to multi-annual funding, single-line funding and single-line reporting mechanisms for community and voluntary groups.
- Ensure that the depth and breadth of the work of women's community groups is well represented in their research programme on the community and voluntary sector. Sources such as the Millennium Project and the *Framing the Future* research, both commissioned by the National Women's Council of Ireland, that provide a picture of the work of women's community groups should be drawn on for this purpose. Participatory methods of research could fruitfully be used to elicit information – such methods tend to increase the capacity of groups to engage in an analysis of issues such as local development.
- Recognise the lessons which have emerged from this research pointing to the need for supports to be developed and enhanced to secure the sustainability of the women's community sector.

**That the political parties should:**

- Initiate campaigns to ensure that there is a balanced representation of women and men in their candidates for local elections and that they develop systems of support for women wishing to run for local election.

**That each and every Local Authority should:**

- Ensure that every SPC has representation from **at least** one women's community-based group focused on a wide range of issues.
- Initiate an information campaign to inform the general public about their role and function, their commitment to social inclusion and the changes taking place with regard to plans for better local government. This campaign would use a variety of media, paying heed to differences in terms of access and need, particularly for those in rural areas.
- Consult with women in women's groups about initiating practices that are empowering to women and eliminating those considered disempowering. Again, this could be done using participatory methods.

**That FÁS should:**

- Initiate an information campaign to inform women more comprehensively about the eligibility criteria for courses and the opportunities available to them. Information should be targeted at women and should take into account differing access to information for groups that are marginalised and discriminated against.
- Design and offer courses that are women-friendly, i.e. notheld exclusively between the hours of 9-5, courses that are part-time, etc.
- Identify alternative routes of entry into training programmes for women who are not eligible via the Live Register.

**That the Vocational Education Committees should:**

- Adopt a bottom-up approach to meeting women's needs for educational opportunities in the community, especially with regard to women who are particularly marginalised in Ireland, for instance, older women, refugee women, women of ethnic minorities, lesbians, women with disabilities and women living in poverty. Women's community groups targeting disadvantaged women should be consulted with regard to the needs assessment and design of courses.





## 2. INTRODUCTION

The National Women's Council of Ireland is a non-governmental organisation (NGO) currently operating as an agent of change<sup>3</sup> with, and on behalf of, women in Ireland, facing a complex and rapidly changing society and culture. Over the past years, the work of the Council, coupled with that of other agencies and organisations, has achieved significant and life-enhancing change in ordinary women's lives. In 1998, approaching the third Millennium, and cognisant of significant shifts in the political, economic and social landscape in Ireland, the Council recognised that new models of partnership were rapidly emerging. This indicated the need, in turn, for new models of communication and information flow between people at local 'grassroots' level, policy makers, and the NWCI as a social partner. In seeking to develop and explore such a model, the Council proposed its Millennium Project: *Women Mapping the New Millennium*.

### 2.1 WOMEN MAPPING THE NEW MILLENNIUM

*Women Mapping the New Millennium* is a national research, analysis and action project that seeks to foster a process of empowerment that "has the potential to radically redesign the current paradigm that continues to produce social exclusion" (Zappone, in Kirby and Jacobsen, 1998). It is a capacity-building programme that goes beyond the traditional notion of 'consultation' toward an active participatory experience of research, analysis and action.

The key objectives of the project are to:

- Design and explore an innovative model for forming national and local policy through direct participation by local actors;
- Provide women across the country with the training and capacity to conduct sustained social research and analysis;
- Encourage women to analyse the social and economic implications of their activities;
- Produce ongoing, up-to-date research on key experiences of women's lives – poverty, healthcare, work, etc.;
- Build towards sustainable development of initiatives at local level.

At time of publication, we have a partial picture as to the extent to which the last of these objectives was reached. It is the NWCI's task to take the results of the research into the national policy arenas to which it has access. This work is ongoing. An evaluation is planned for the future in which policy-makers will be asked as to the Millennium Project's effect on Irish social policy.

We have evidence that some, but not all, of the women involved in the project have fed the results of their research into their local policy-making arenas and/or have initiated an action at local level as an outcome of their research and the skills gained through participating in the project. While this 'action' phase was built into the project, it was optional for facilitators. For a number of reasons, for instance, lack of time or resources, not every group could progress action at local level. Also, groups may have started these initiatives long after the end of the project. A mail-out at close of the project asked facilitators to outline what ways they had used the skills gained through involvement with the project. These descriptions are available in the full reference report of the project available in the NWCI.

In many ways, the Millennium Project was a first step towards sustainable local action by the women involved. It represents the beginning of a developmental process. It illustrates the need for women to

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<sup>3</sup> Agents of change or 'change-agents' is a term commonly used in majority-world development planning to denote organisations (governmental and non-governmental), institutions (public and private), community activists and communities themselves, policy-makers and advisors, individuals and professionals (e.g., researchers, technical experts, etc.) who seek to foster positive change in people's lives at community, national and/or international level.

receive information, financial and training supports to pursue further projects which would enable them to investigate and challenge their environments.<sup>4</sup>

## **2.2 RESEARCH AREAS**

Six broad areas of research enquiry were identified via consultation with Council affiliates and advisory personnel:

- Women and Poverty
- Women and Health
- Women and Work
- Violence against Women
- Women and Education
- Women and Local Development (rural and urban)

## **2.3 WOMEN AND LOCAL DEVELOPMENT**

Given the changes which are taking place in local government and local development currently, it is incumbent on policy-makers and agencies to ensure that attention is given to the ways in which women and women's groups can participate in new frameworks. In order to do, this we also need to look at the nature of women's participation in current structures since they are the building blocks for future participation.

Policy documents such as *A Framework for Supporting Voluntary Activity and for Developing the Relationship between the State and the Community and Voluntary Sector* (Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs, 2000), *Preparing the Ground* (Department of the Environment and Local Government, 1999) and *Better Local Government: A Programme for Change* (Department of the Environment, 1996) all make a commitment to increase the involvement of the community in the creation of participatory democracy, so that social exclusion can be tackled at local level. However, there is much evidence to suggest that women's community groups continue to be devalued and marginalised in their work at local level, raising concerns as to whether or not they are considered to be an integral part of community representation.

## **2.4 PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH APPROACH**

Given this brief, what shape might our research take? How research is designed, and from whose perspective, radically informs the content and results of any research project, which in turn, informs the policies developed in response to those results. The Millennium Project utilised an emic<sup>5</sup> approach and participatory methodology, which is described in detail in the methodology section of this report.

## **2.5 THE POLICY-INFLUENCING POTENTIAL OF THE MILLENNIUM PROJECT**

The Millennium Project has the potential to address several 'audiences' and therefore to influence policy at various levels. Intended audiences for the results and recommendations of this study include: the National Women's Council of Ireland and its affiliate membership, policy-makers and advisors in key Government departments, NGOs, agencies, community groups and activists concerned with the issues which formed the research agenda.

We hope that our discussion of women and local development will encourage all agencies at local level to become more women-friendly and thus, more responsive to women's needs at local level. We hope that the results of the research moves policy-makers towards a better understanding of what women's community groups need for sustainability and equity of participation in local development. We also hope that this research will provide a mandate for a renewed commitment by the NWCI and other support networks for women's groups in Ireland to developmental work with their affiliated groups.

Policy-makers and advisors cannot develop viable policy in a vacuum. They require constant assistance from those who are the intended beneficiaries of the policies. At the same time, women cannot hope to

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<sup>4</sup> This issue is explored in more depth in, O'Reilly-de Brún at al. (2001). *The Millennium Project: Women Mapping the New Millennium Executive Summary*. Dublin: National Women's Council of Ireland.

<sup>5</sup> To distinguish between the terms 'emic' and 'etic': etic research is conducted from the outsider's perspective, while emic research takes the insider's perspective on board as the framework from which to explore and understand the issue in question. The terms are drawn from anthropology (Goodenough: 1956) and were borrowed from linguistics. Emic research is also known as ethnoscience, the New Ethnography, ethnomethodology and componential analysis.

improve their situation if their voices and expertise remains unsolicited and unheard; they need constant assistance from those who have the power and vision to seek that expertise and build it into effective policy. A feature of the Millennium Project is the model it employs in order to bring women's experiences, their needs, suggestions for change and potential solutions, into the heart of action and planning at local, regional and national level.

### 3. LITERATURE REVIEW

Local development in Ireland is a diverse and complex field and a comprehensive review of the topic is beyond the scope of this section. Given our brief, we will analyse briefly recent literature exploring what it means for citizens of a country to participate in civil life and the nature of this participation at local level for women and women's groups in Ireland. This will set the context for the results of this component of the Millennium Project. Comparisons between the results of this research project and recent literature on local development will be undertaken in the discussion chapter.

#### 3.1 ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP: TOP-DOWN OR BOTTOM-UP?

Ireland lags behind its European neighbours in developing strategies to foster a redistribution of power via local government and local development (Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs, 1999). This is because of its highly centralised governmental system. The way in which local development and community development are defined has an impact upon how citizens participate in civil life. In Ireland, a distinction is made between community development and local development. Community development is perceived to be transformative, a critical, bottom-up process engaged in by community and voluntary groups which is not limited by geographical boundaries:

*'Community development is a collective process through which members of communities and groups share, reflect and analyse their own experiences, identify their needs and work towards making appropriate changes at an individual, community and society level'* (Meitheal Development Limited, 1999).

It is important to note that the word 'community' is used throughout this report to refer to communities defined by geographical area and/or interest, e.g. disability. According to Area Development Management Ltd. (ADM), the company that manages the Local Urban and Rural Development Programme, local development is contingent upon community development and involves harnessing communities and groups to improve local social, economic and cultural conditions:

*'The primary focus of local development is the development of area-based interventions to complement mainstream or structural policies addressing long-term unemployment, economic marginalisation and social exclusion. The aim of local development is to provide the structure, funding and support for each of the three sectors: the statutory sector, community sector and the traditional social partners, to act for the benefit of the area'* (ADM Ltd., 2000).

Local development in the Irish context aims to build on existing structures in the community, including that of community groups already engaged in community development work. Given the richness and diversity of groups in any given area, various forms of knowledge about participation and consultation, for example, intersect and may either be legitimated or devalued in local development processes (Abram, 1998).

Participation or **active citizenship** (Chanan, 1998) in local areas takes place within this framework. Active citizenship is the process whereby individuals in their communities move from the private sphere to participation in community activities such as social groups or activism. Fostering this is a policy priority at Irish and EU level. The most recent policy document addressing this issue in Ireland is the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs (2000) *Framework for Supporting Voluntary Activity and for Developing the Relationship between the State and the Community and Voluntary Sector*. This framework is operating from the following definition of participation:

*'Participation can be defined as an exchange between citizens and government, between those who make policy and people affected by policy choices [the precise form of which] is shaped by the problem at hand'* (Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs, 2000).

This definition raises questions as to who is allowed to initiate the exchange between policy-makers and those 'affected' by policy choices and who designates groups as service providers supplying an essential service to a community or communities. Tension may arise between the State and the community and voluntary sector in terms of a conflict between two types of democracy: participatory democracy and representative democracy. Ideas about participation, consultation and what constitutes a bottom-up process are contingent on the type of democracy espoused by different interests. Representative democracy is

indicated by the State's definition of participation. It is predicated upon the belief that the structures that are already in place - in this instance the Local Authorities and local development agencies – have the capacity to represent their communities effectively or that, with certain improvements, they would be able to represent their constituencies more effectively. In comparison, participatory democracy is:

*'...concerned with how unequal distribution of power and resources affects people's daily lives and how they can influence decision-making which affects them. Participatory democracy implies that the power to make decisions should not be left to a small number of people, but that power should be more equally shared among citizens, so that everyone has an opportunity to influence collective affairs'*  
(Community Workers Co-operative, 1998).

This concept of democracy necessitates the transformation of structures already in place or their substitution with a system of alternative structures operating in tandem with representative structures. Tensions may arise between the State and the community and voluntary sector because the agencies and structures operating from a definition of representative democracy tend to have more power than those employing a definition of participatory democracy. This power differential results in a tendency in which frameworks are imposed on the local area rather than the community being empowered to initiate the policy choices to be made (Abram, 1998).

This is not to say that communities throughout the Republic play a passive role by any means, but that a conflict between the community and voluntary sector and the State is sometimes in evidence because of different understandings of democracy and participation.

As there is no agreed model for participatory democracy (Community Workers Co-operative, 1999), there can also be tensions between groups over how participatory democracy should be implemented. Differing definitions of participation have ramifications for the capacity of women and women's groups to become involved in local development, how effective they can be in that work and the resources they can avail of to ensure their full participation.

### **3.2 MONITORING WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN LOCAL DEVELOPMENT**

A recent European manual on integrating gender equality into local and regional development asserts that: "Greater participation by women in social and economic development is crucial for the effectiveness and sustainability of the development process" (Braithwaite, 1998). In Ireland this tends to happen in policy but not in practice (Barry, 1998). Barry notes that implementation has not happened because of the lack of the resources necessary to facilitate greater participation by women. (Ibid.). Furthermore, policies have tended to focus on employing women within local development agencies rather than on harnessing women's power as social actors to contribute to, and be targeted by, development processes in their local areas. The participation of women in local development in Ireland is also affected by:

- the misperception of women as an homogenous group resulting in lop-sided development processes and a lack of focus on the diversity of women with regard to economic disadvantage, ethnicity, sexuality, ability and so forth (Braithwaite, 1998);
- the lack of mechanisms to enforce equality policies in statutory groups (Barry, 1998), for instance to ensure equal representation of men and women from statutory groups on boards of Partnerships<sup>6</sup>;
- the lack of consultation with women's community groups about gender-sensitive planning and local development practices;
- the inability of women to access community training and employment schemes due to the inflexibility of the Live Register;
- the need for a structured support system for women involved in local development, particularly as they participate in the work of area-based Partnerships and other agencies where there is a patriarchal organisational culture (Barry, 1998; CAN, 1997).

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<sup>6</sup> Throughout this report refers to Area-based Partnership companies.

These obstacles are further exacerbated by wider issues to do with discrimination against women such as the lack of recognition for women's unpaid and voluntary work done in community groups and inside the home (CAN, 1997; Chanan, 1998; WEFT, 2000).

An evaluation of the last Operational Programme for Local Urban and Rural Development (ESF Evaluation Unit, 1999a) pointed out that there was limited participation of women in enterprise and employment initiatives, particularly in the work of the County Enterprise Boards. Barry (1998) and Walsh (1998) both suggest that the targeting of women by the County Enterprise Boards has not been focused enough. An evaluation of equal opportunities and the ESF (ESF Evaluation Unit, 1999b) suggested that, "overall female participation in the ESF supported education and training continues to mirror female labour participation rates. Therefore, ESF supported programmes are unlikely to stimulate change in the labour market to any great extent." It concluded that the primary target should be women in low income households (Ibid.). The Unit (1999a) suggested that there be better linkages between County Enterprise Boards and Area-based Partnerships to ensure a more targeted response to the long-term unemployment experienced by the socially-excluded in local areas.

Gender mainstreaming is now obligatory across all European Union structural funds including those that fund the new Local Development Programme. In the last Local Development Programme, ADM set out very clear criteria to show how different plans addressed gender issues. However, as suggested above, these commitments have not been implemented in practice (Barry, 1998; NWCI, 1997).

The following solutions to these difficulties have been suggested:

- Building support networks for women involved in local development (ADM, 1999a; Barry, 1998).
- Creating a place on Partnership boards for women's ways of working (CAN, 1997).
- Enforcing the 40/60 gender split required for State boards.
- Gender and equality training in all local development and statutory agencies.
- Consultation with women's groups in devising local area plans and to explore ways of encouraging women to become involved in enterprise development, particularly, women who experience marginalisation in their local areas.
- Provision of childcare and other women-friendly supports so that women can access community education and training and also become involved on boards and in other local development arenas.
- Research and data collection that accurately profiles the situation of women in their communities i.e., availability for work outside the home, contribution to productive economy through reproductive labour, levels of social and economic disadvantage and diversity between, and among, women. This is otherwise known as 'profiling disadvantage' (ADM, 1999b).

### **3.3 WOMEN'S COMMUNITY GROUPS: SUSTAINABILITY AND SUPPORT**

Many women's community groups in Ireland working with women take women's own lived experience as the starting point for that work. Costello (2000) points out that: "There is consistent evidence that women involved in women's groups seek measures which address their practical gender needs arising from their gender-specific roles within the family and society." The work done by women in community and women's groups is integral to: 1) encouraging women to become activists in their communities by facilitating a recognition of their structural oppression (Crawley, 1998), and 2) to addressing women's social exclusion through education, training and other activities. Local development agencies need to harness this energy. In addition, individual women need to be targeted in order for the local development process to be sustainable.

Costello (Ibid.) also suggests that there is a progression to women's involvement in women's community groups. She makes a distinction between women's groups that engage in, for instance, the provision of social activities for their members and those that operate from a community development perspective and seek to transform the economic, cultural and social conditions that oppress women. She maintains that each type is important to women's development in the sense that women may move from participation in a crafts group, for instance, to a group engaged in community development. She then suggests that the key to

getting women involved in more formal political spheres is progression from the first type of group to the latter and involvement with the latter as a springboard to more formal politics such as local government or taking part in partnership processes. Her typology is key in that it gives recognition to all types of women's groups as vital to women's development but she also illustrates how different types of involvement have different outcomes for the development of women in their local areas.

Women themselves may or may not participate in community development depending on the type of group in which they are involved (Ibid.), but all women's groups around the country contribute to improving quality of life for women in Ireland. Consultations with these groups are vital in ascertaining the views and needs of women. Groups which include marginalised women offer an important means of accessing the opinions of the most marginalised.

The discrimination against women's community groups mirrors that against individual women (WEFT, 2000). The central issue is the lack of recognition for the services provided by women's community groups, such as education, training and general support or social opportunities for women. Women's community groups have been proven to abate women's isolation in the home, enhance self-esteem and increase their labour force participation (Costello, 2000). However, there continues to be a lack of funding for women's groups (WEFT, 2000). In their recent report on *Supporting a Framework for Voluntary Activity* (2000) the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs did not discuss gender-specific criteria in relation to the provision of an enabling framework for voluntary activity.

It has also been pointed out that women often operate at a different level to men in local and community development (Laurie et al, 1997). Divisions between the private and the public spheres result in a perception that policy and politics are male activities and the 'softer' forms of community participation are female. Thus, women's community groups are seen to be single interest because their work addresses 'women's issues'. While women are well-represented in the community and voluntary sector, and this can be seen in representation of that sector on Partnership boards, the lower status of women in Ireland and the divide between public and private spheres means that women are not well represented in formal political spheres or in leadership positions in statutory agencies. Furthermore, they are not targeted at local level for what are perceived as male activities, such as enterprise development (Ibid.). Costello (2000) also demonstrates that in multi-purpose community groups, women are likely to be assigned gender-specific roles.

WEFT (2000) identifies three types of supports that women's community groups in the Southern Border Counties need for sustainability. The first type is resources, including core funding and less rigid criteria for that funding. Expertise and knowledge sharing are also resources required in the sector which could be developed through the creation of more frameworks for networking.

The second type of support that women's community groups need is recognition. WEFT (Ibid.) acknowledges that there have been increased opportunities for women's groups to be involved in participatory democracy in recent years but stresses that in order for this support to be maximised, women's community groups need resources like childcare, networks and confidence-building for individual women so that they can engage in what can often be unfriendly environments for women.

The third type of support that women's community groups require is that of representation. In other words, gender equality guidelines need to be followed in all political structures and women must be encouraged to become involved in them. Individual women also need to gain further information, either by means of networking or other opportunities, about the ways in which structures operate, as well as training to 'take the power' to be involved in exercising their rights (Ibid.).

### **3.4 SUMMARY**

Recent studies suggest that while the women's community group sector is thriving in Ireland, it continues to be faced with a number of difficulties resulting in groups' and individual women's marginalisation in participatory democracy and local development in Ireland. It is still incumbent on the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs, and local development agencies to ensure that community-based women's groups have the same opportunities as other groups to shape blueprints for participatory democracy and the development of their local areas.

## **4. METHODOLOGY**

### **4.1 INTRODUCTION: THE DEVELOPING**

#### **RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RESEARCH METHODS AND SOCIAL POLICY**

Research approaches and methods radically influence research content and, consequently, the policies designed in response to that content. Traditionally, research funding in Ireland has privileged large-scale survey-style research, and it has been a struggle to find support for smaller-scale qualitative research.

The NGO sector has made strategic decisions regarding what type of research is necessary to support particular policy outcomes, but the salient question that remains is this: Is it the intention of social policy research to describe the current situation, to change it, or both? (Cantillon, 1998). What might small-scale predominantly qualitative research projects like the Millennium Project contribute to each of these objectives?

Many authors have demonstrated the inability of researchers using exclusively quantitative methods to attend to the “persistent requirement in social policy to understand complex behaviours, needs, systems and cultures” (Ritchie and Spencer, 1994; Cantillon, 1998; Hallett, 1996; Ruspini, 1999). As Irwin (1987) says, “Human behaviour and social existence is a subjective and wilful construction and requires drawing close to subjects in their natural contexts and understanding the fundamental human process.” This ‘drawing close’ can best be achieved by using qualitative approaches because they provide “an opportunity, albeit briefly, to see the world from another person’s point of view” (Schein, 1995).

This is a lesson strongly reflected by what policy-makers in ‘developing’ countries in the majority world have learned: all the components of social policy – not just the technical and economic, but also the social and cultural – have to be taken into account (Kane and O’Reilly-de Brún, 2001). All the parties involved in research and policy-making - governments, sponsors, local people, and external experts - have a unique perspective to contribute (Cernea, 1991). This holistic approach to research and effective policy-formation demands that we make the best possible use of available methods and techniques, and involve local people - in our case, women accessing local government and governance - directly in the process of research, analysis and action-planning.

### **.2 FROM THE OUTSIDE IN, OR THE INSIDE OUT?**

#### **CONTRASTING APPROACHES TO RESEARCH**

Research is designed and approached in two main ways, which contrast strongly in terms of perspective, method and therefore outcome. The more traditional approach, and the one most people are familiar with, might be described as doing research ‘from the outside in’. This is called the ‘etic’ (see footnote #5) approach, and is reflected in the question: “What do I see these women doing/ how will I describe their experiences?” Such research is conducted from the perspective of professional ‘outsiders’, perhaps a team of researchers, or an organisation commissioning a piece of research. The framework for the research is decided in advance, and the ‘research group’ is usually perceived as a passive participant in the process.

In contrast, taking an emic approach means doing research ‘from the inside out’, and is reflected in the question: “What do these women see themselves doing/ how do they describe their experiences?” This approach sees the research group as expert in its own right, and takes that perspective on board, often placing it in positive articulation with other expert opinion. In emic research, the language and categories of analysis used by the group become the framework or lens through which the data is viewed and analysed, and the research group is involved in an active and participatory way throughout the research process.

Feminist research methodology is similarly focused on active participation of women and others in the research process “stemming from a concern that existing methodologies support sexist, racist and elitist attitudes and therefore negatively affect people’s lives” (Holland et al., 1995). The feminist research project proposes not a prescriptive, distinctly feminist set of methods, but a variety of methods employed with the objective of bringing women’s experiences from the margins to the centre. The objective, in terms of research outcomes, is the development of recommendations which position women’s interests centrally in policy debates and maximize their potential for implementation into policy and practice. As such, the objectives of Participatory Learning and Action as a research strategy for this project serve as an appropriate vehicle to place women and their concerns at the centre of the research process. The research strategy is outlined below.



### **4.3 RESEARCH STRATEGY: PARTICIPATORY LEARNING AND ACTION (PLA)**

The NWCI Millennium Project was designed to respond to the challenges and concerns we have noted, and a PLA (Participatory Learning and Action) research strategy was taken to data collection, sharing, analysis and action planning. PLA techniques are capable of accessing qualitative and quantitative data<sup>7</sup> and can be described as “a growing family of approaches and methods to enable local people to share, enhance and analyse their knowledge of life and conditions, to plan and to act” (Chambers, 1994c). PLA techniques also possess the necessary flexibility to explore issues of a sensitive nature, where “drawing close” to women’s actual ‘lived experience’ of local development is essential to making visible the complex realities of those processes. This research strategy provided the women involved in the project with tools to develop analytical frameworks that make sense of their experience, and articulate their vision for a more positive future.

Key features of PLA include

- giving credence to the insights and abilities of local people to share and enhance their knowledge of the issue in question;
- using emic research to elucidate the ‘insider view’ and uncover local categories of meaning and analysis;
- avoiding the kind of biases that have characterised much research done from the outsider’s point of view (Kane, 1995: 197), and
- ‘handing over the stick’, meaning to actively encourage local participation and development of positive action planning.

This research strategy is now in use world-wide in organisations as diverse as UNICEF, Save the Children, WorldVision, Ipas and The World Bank.

### **4.4 RESEARCH SCHEDULE**

#### ***4.4.1 Training Programme***

Training for the Millennium Project took place in two distinct phases: Phase One training spanned March to October 1999 and provided practical training in basic PLA principles and techniques. Phase Two training spanned March to May 2000 and covered more fundamental issues in PLA.

An enormous amount of material was covered in each of the training sessions in groups where women had differing levels of knowledge about research and group facilitation. Since an aim of the project was capacity-building, participants did not have to have prior experience of any of the above. Facilitation skills are extremely important in PLA research. Also important to the research is note-taking during research techniques. Both facilitation and note-taking were covered briefly in the training.

Feedback from the PLA facilitators<sup>8</sup> indicates that a number felt that they would like more training in facilitation and note-taking: ‘[I would suggest] more in-depth training on bettering facilitation techniques – this is vital in both encouraging and energising a group to get to their full potential’ (PLA facilitator).

#### ***4.4.2 Research Schedule***

At the close of each of the 13 training programmes nation-wide, facilitation teams were invited to negotiate and choose one of the six topics as their ‘national’ issue (meaning it was being researched by other teams across the country). They were also invited to devise a ‘local’ topic of their choice (‘local’ meaning it could be a topic unique to the locality). In many cases, teams preferred to select another of the six issues for their local topic because it matched their concerns and those of their research groups. The information generated for the study on local development, therefore, includes 6 ‘national’ and 2 ‘local’ issues.

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<sup>7</sup> As a research approach, PLA remains open to the integration of conventional research methods and approaches. This allows PLA to inform other research strategies, for example, a tightly-focused qualitative PLA research project is capable of informing larger-scale quantitative studies.

<sup>8</sup> As the women involved were called after completion of the first phase of training.

Research was conducted over the period May 1999 – May 2000. Teams were provided with back-up support from one of four Millennium Project staff.

#### **4.5 RESEARCH METHODS**

The local development component of the Millennium Project involved several processes:

- methods:
  - sampling;
  - research outlines and selection of data-collection techniques;
  - data analysis.
- putting appropriate monitoring and evaluation procedures in place;
- ethical issues.

##### **4.5.1 Sampling**

**PLA Facilitators:** The initial project design aimed to draw members from NWCI affiliate organisations to train 120 facilitators in teams of 2, giving us 60 teams nation-wide. In early 1999, the NWCI had 142 affiliates. All received information packs about the proposed Project, and invitations to nation-wide Information Sessions. Project information was also made available via NWCI Panel Meetings and affiliates were invited to consider nominating women for inclusion in training. 41 affiliates responded, and from this number, 5 teams from rural and 3 teams from urban-based affiliates carried out research on women and local development.<sup>9</sup> Counties Cork, Galway, Wicklow and Leitrim were represented, as was Dublin South-West (x2). In all, 8 teams conducted research on the local development component, with a total of 82 participants nation-wide.

**Research Participants:** Intensive qualitative study of a small number of cases can lead to valuable understandings about women's participation in local development. The sample of 82 participants involved in this study, therefore, is a non-probability purposeful sample.<sup>10</sup> The principle of selection is the researcher's judgement as to applicability (Robson 1993). The value of non-probability sampling lies in the depth and quality of information generated in the research encounter.<sup>11</sup>

Facilitation teams gathered their research participants from within affiliate groups, mainly via network sampling.<sup>12</sup>

##### **4.5.2 Research outlines and selection of data collection techniques**

The NWCI Millennium Project Team engaged in a consultative process with affiliates, policy analysts, advisors and research consultants in the process of designing the research topics. Analysis of the data generated by this process, coupled with further input from the NWCI Policy Team, resulted in the identification of key foci for the local development research component.

As one of the aims of Phase 1 was to provide data on a national scale, it was necessary to introduce some level of standardisation to the process. Therefore, a research outline comprising a range of PLA techniques and a sequence for their use was designed. Teams were asked to follow the outline closely in order to make

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<sup>9</sup> For reasons of confidentiality, participants were not asked for their address. It is therefore possible that although the facilitators may have come from an urban area, the women taking part in the research did not, especially in small urban centres. Therefore we cannot give a precise urban/rural split.

<sup>10</sup> Types of purposeful sampling include: extreme or deviant case sampling, typical case sampling, critical case sampling and confirming and disconfirming cases (Kane, 1995).

<sup>11</sup> As our study sample is not a probability one, we are not making claims for statistical representativeness or significance of our findings.

<sup>12</sup> Network sampling is, again, a type of non-probability sampling.

scaling up and a level of standardisation possible. The specific questions addressed by each technique can be found in the Results section of this report.

It is important to stress that PLA techniques function as a focus for discussion as well as an illustration of the discussion and analysis in which the group engages.

#### 4.5.2.1 *'Women and Local Development' – range of techniques and sequence*

The research process encouraged an 'emic conversation', that is, concepts such as 'local development', 'power' and 'empowering'/'disempowering' were not pre-defined for the participants. They were instead encouraged to operate from their own commonly shared understandings of what those terms meant to them. The sequence of techniques was as follows:

- Card Sort 1: In the first technique, participants were asked by facilitators about their knowledge of a list of 10 groups that are common to local development around the Republic. These groups are not local development agencies per se but are all involved in local development in their local areas. The pre-identified groups are as follows:
  1. Local Authority (Elected Councillors)
  2. Local Authority (Manager and Staff)
  3. Local Authority (Strategic Policy Committee - SPC)
  4. Vocational Education Committee (VEC)
  5. FÁS
  6. Health Board
  7. URBAN
  8. Area-based Partnership
  9. LEADER Company
  10. County Enterprise Board (CEB)

The research group was asked about each pre-identified power group and the facilitator took note of the following counts:

- How many participants recognise the power group by name?
- How many participants know the basic functions of the power group?

- In the **Brainstorming Technique** groups were asked to add groups to the pre-identified power groups which they considered to be formal or informal power groups involved in local development in their own area.
- Participants then proceeded to the Power Mapping, where they were asked as a group to rank all the power groups (pre-prepared and additional) according to which were the most powerful to least powerful. They did this by assigning each group a certain size circle (from 1- 9) to show its relative power in comparison to the other groups. They were also asked to divide the groups up into those with whom they had a relationship with as a group and those that they did not. For each power group with whom the research groups had a relationship they were also asked to assign a level of empowerment and disempowerment. The results for the latter exercise are invalid because participants did not vote for the relative levels of empowerment **and** disempowerment that they experienced for each of the groups with whom they had a relationship.
- The next technique, **Interviewing the Power Map**, was a two-part exercise, designed to access two different things:
  - a) Of the groups with which you have a relationship, why are the relationships empowering or disempowering?  
This exercise involved eliciting qualitative data from the participants which were recorded in the observation notes.
  - b) Power groups with which participants did/ did not want a relationship

In relation to groups with which participants did not have an existing relationship, participants were asked to indicate groups with which they would wish to foster connections.

- The next technique to be completed was **Matrix A**. Participants took the power groups with which they had relationships in rank order from most empowering to least empowering and identified the types of empowering actions or experiences they had had with each power group.
- In **Matrix B** Participants took the power groups with which they had relationships in rank order from most disempowering to least disempowering and generated the types of disempowering actions or experiences they had had as a group with each power group.
- The last technique was **Remapping the Local Development Process**, where groups were asked to re-map the local development process in a way that would enable or empower women.

#### ***4.5.3 Data analysis and presentation of results***

PLA was developed for use primarily at the micro or local level, the level most often ignored in policy formation. Since the Millennium Project was national in focus it required a scaling up of the research approach. While scaling up has been achieved in many countries, the literature attests to its problems, mainly, meeting the challenge to maintain the integrity of the PLA process in terms of its context-specific value, while attempting to make key connections across groups at the macro level.

PLA analysis is usually undertaken on-site, is of an organic formative nature and is a collaborative effort by facilitators and participants alike (Chambers, 1994b and c). Due to the limited resources at the disposal of the research team and the breadth of the project itself, this approach was not feasible for this project.

Analysis of the returned research data was, therefore, conducted in-house. It is important to stress that this does not mean participants were completely removed from the analytical process; because many of the techniques are, in and of themselves, analytical tools, participants were involved in preliminary analysis at the local level. For example, by completing matrices and direct ranking, by conducting card sorts and mapping, the women in this study were analysing primary data as they generated it. They made analytical decisions about proportionality; they prioritised and categorised; they showed correlation and identified bases for action planning and policy development.

The main task, therefore, facing the Project Team was to design an analytical framework appropriate for dealing with 'scaled-up' PLA, where the analysis was to take place in-house. This framework would have to meet a number of challenges – it would have to:

- be able to cope with a considerable bulk of data;
- be able to represent as accurately as possible the voices of the women who carried out the research;
- be capable of presenting themes and categories that emerged across a number of research reports, while, at the same time, preserving the depth and individuality of distinct groups' research material.

Data arising from PLA research is often a mix of textual and numerical data, each of which are interdependent on the other. Brewer and Hunter (1989) have pointed out that qualitative research in general is inherently multi-method in focus, and this use of what is known as 'methodological triangulation' (Janesick 1998) is central to the strategies employed by PLA. Four techniques (card sorts, direct ranking, mapping and matrices) were utilised for the 'Women and Local Development' component.

Multiple analytic tools were used to deal with the different forms of data:

RESEARCH TECHNIQUE	ANALYTIC TOOL EMPLOYED
Background questionnaires	SPSS
Background Information Questionnaire	QSR NUD*IST
Facilitator evaluation forms	SPSS
Card Sort #1	Microsoft Access
Brainstorming	Microsoft Access
Power Mapping	Microsoft Word
Interviewing the Map	QSR NUD*IST
Matrices	Microsoft Word
Re-mapping	QSR NUD*IST
Accompanying observation notes	QSR NUD*IST
Evaluation notes	QSR NUD*IST

Because extended co-analysis was not feasible for the project, the team became aware of questions arising from the research that could not always be answered, for instance, when observation notes from facilitators did not expand on the emic concepts being used by groups or did not clarify decisions that were made during the techniques. Research is always somewhat unpredictable and questions will arise in the research that are as important as the rich descriptions of phenomena that are present in the data. In other words, the team did not expect to present the definitive voice on each of the six issues, but to employ a way of investigating the issues that could be improved and built upon in the future. The team understood that, “no picture is ever complete... what is needed is many perspectives, many voices, before we can have deep understandings of social phenomena” (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998). Thus, where appropriate, we have identified where information was not available and have made suggestions for future research.

#### 4.6 DESIGNING APPROPRIATE MONITORING AND EVALUATION PROCEDURES

An essential aspect of any research project is an evaluation component. This is especially true where the research aims to encourage people to become ‘stakeholders’ in the study and to facilitate participants in making their voices heard. To this end, a framework for ongoing monitoring and evaluation was designed to give facilitators the opportunity to tell us what worked well and what could be improved. Multiple data sources were employed, including:

- Observation notes accompanying the returned research.
- Evaluations of training programmes.
- Facilitators’ comments at the ‘Gathering Day’ (this was an event organised by the team in February 2000 to gather facilitators together so that we could hear about their experiences of doing research).
- Facilitators’ evaluation questionnaire (this was a questionnaire designed in order to obtain facilitators’ satisfaction with the research project as a whole).

Quantitative results of the facilitators’ evaluation questionnaire are available in the full reference Millennium Project report available in the NWCI.

#### 4.7 ETHICAL ISSUES

For the local development component of the research, facilitators were encouraged to remain aware that women providing information on any aspect of their lives are vulnerable in a number of ways. Facilitators were aware that researching these issues requires complete confidentiality. During training, several safeguards were put in place. Confidentiality guidelines were provided in the training manuals and discussed with facilitators, as was the need to respect boundaries and assure participants of their rights during the research process. Names of participants and names of affiliate groups were not mentioned in released material without consent. If data from one affiliate group was used during training or to be released, explicit consent for this was sought from the facilitators involved.

## 5. RESULTS

### 5.1 RESPONSE RATE

Eight groups completed research on 'Women and Local Development', six as their national topic and two as their local topic.

The geographical distribution of groups who engaged in research on this topic were as follows (for those included in the cross-analysis):

Dublin city and county: two groups  
County Galway: two groups  
County Cork: two groups  
County Leitrim: one group  
County Wicklow: two groups

### 5.2 PROFILE OF RESEARCH GROUPS

Of the eight groups who participated in the research, five were situated in rural areas, two spanned both a county council area and a corporation and were considered to be rural and urban, and one was based in an urban area. All eight groups were broad-based women's groups trying to effect social, cultural and economic change for women in their local areas. Specific details about each are as follows:

- Group L1 is a women's resource group.
- Group L2 's aim is to *'initiate discussion at a local level with regard to issues pertaining to women's lives'* (Background Information Questionnaire).
- Group L3 is a group of women activists whose experiences of participating in local development span 3-20 years.
- Group L4 is a women's community development group.
- Group L5 is engaged particularly with issues for older women and is a local branch of a national organisation.
- Group L6 is the women's working group of a rural development Partnership working towards the provision of skills, facilities, and education and training for women in its area.
- Groups L7 and L8 are women's community groups which aim to improve quality of life for women in their local areas.

Three of the rural groups involved specified in the Background Information Questionnaire that the difficulties rural women face are exacerbated by lack of transport, geographical isolation and differing access to services.

### 5.3 SAMPLE PROFILE

- The average of the women who completed background questionnaires (respondents) was 45 years.
- 42.6% of respondents described their economic situation as 'comfortable', and 25% described their economic situation as 'not so comfortable'. Participants were asked to describe their current economic status by circling one value on a 6-point scale which consisted of:  
1) extremely comfortable; 2) very comfortable; 3) comfortable; 4) not so comfortable;  
5) barely comfortable, and 6) not comfortable at all.
- 88.2% of respondents said they worked inside the home.
- 53.7% of the women said they worked outside the home, and 42.6% of these said that their work was paid.

- 35% of the respondents said they left education at some point before sitting their Leaving Certificate and 36% said they left education after obtaining a third-level qualification.

The sample is not representative of all women and women's groups in Ireland. It may not be a particularly diverse sample and we recognise that diversity is a key issue with regard to the topic of women and local development. Generally, the observation notes from the research did not include sufficiently precise information about potential differences among members of the groups related to socio-economic and educational background, cultural and ethnic diversity and sexual orientation or ability.

The facilitators drew their research groups together on the basis of a network sample of women known to them. Therefore, we cannot be sure if disadvantaged women were targeted for participation. Future research by the NWCI could purposively sample to ensure representation of women from a variety of groups, particularly women who are most disadvantaged. The participation of a group of older women in the sample does provide an age range perspective.

#### **5.4 TECHNIQUE 1: CARD SORT 1 – KNOWLEDGE OF PRE-IDENTIFIED POWER GROUPS**

The following are the aggregate results of this technique. Please note that the results for Local Authority (Elected Councillors) are out of a total of 64 participants due to invalid counts from 2 groups. The results are presented in rank order from the highest level to lowest.

##### **How many participants recognise the power group?**

<b>POWER GROUP</b>	<b>LEVEL OF KNOWLEDGE</b>
Health Board	90%
FÁS	89%
Vocational Education Committee (VEC)	87%
Local Authority (Elected Councillors)	86%
Local Authority (Manager and Staff)	82%
Area-based Partnerships	66%
LEADER Company	57%
County Enterprise Board	52%
Local Authority (Strategic Policy Committees – SPC)	30%
URBAN	25%

##### **How many participants know the basic functions of the power group?**

<b>POWER GROUP</b>	<b>LEVEL OF KNOWLEDGE</b>
FÁS	87%
Health Board	84%
VEC	80%
Local Authority (Elected Councillors)	67%
Local Authority (Manager and Staff)	66%
LEADER Company	52%
Area-based Partnership	42%
CEB	33%
URBAN	20%
Local Authority (SPC)	19%

##### **5.4.1 Discussion**

High levels of knowledge about the Health Boards, FÁS and the VECs may relate to high levels of interaction with these pre-identified power groups because they are service providers in local areas or because of the high concentration of women in education and training initiatives in the Local Urban and Rural Development Programme (ESF Evaluation Unit, 1999).

Given the fact that the local authority managers and staff and the elected councillors are meant to be members of the core structures of civic governance in local areas, the low levels of knowledge about the basic functions of these two pre-identified power groups is notable. Low levels of knowledge about the SPCs may have resulted because, at the time of research, they were relatively new structures. Strategic Policy Committees were to be set up in January 1999 to bring together county and sectoral interests to draft policy on issues under the remit of the local authorities, including development of the local area. Each

authority has 2 to 5 committees, each of which works with different themes around local authority work. They should have two-thirds representation from the authority and not less than one-third representation from the community. They are chaired by elected councillors. The results above could confirm concerns that women's groups were not targeted for SPC membership because they are perceived to be single issue groups (CWC, Spring 1999). Concerns have also been expressed that the recruitment process of sectoral interests to the committees was not sufficiently transparent (Ibid.)

Low levels of knowledge about URBAN reflect the low number of groups from urban areas involved in the research and the fact that URBAN is only in two areas in Ireland, Dublin and Cork. Given that each of the research groups was in the catchment area of a Partnership company, the low levels of knowledge about Partnerships are significant and may refer to Walsh's (1998) critique that there is not enough transparency in the work of Partnerships. However, in two of the areas, County Wicklow and County Galway, the Partnerships are considered to be LEADER companies and are funded under this programme. It is not clear if the rural research groups knew about this distinction. Since all of the rural groups involved were in the catchment area of a LEADER Company and two of the research groups spanned an urban and rural context where there was a LEADER Company in the rural area, the low levels of knowledge about LEADER are also significant.

In future research, it might be more advantageous to ask about knowledge of with Partnership or LEADER company instead of both.

However, we might also raise the issue of the importance of processes like the local development component of the Millennium Project in educating and raising awareness among women's community groups. The observation notes from all eight groups indicate that after the original counts had been taken for levels of knowledge, the participants in the research groups educated and informed each other about the pre-identified power groups – who they were and what they did.

## 5.5 TECHNIQUE 2: BRAINSTORMING – ADDITIONAL POWER GROUPS

The additional power groups identified by the research groups were:

TYPE OF GROUP	REFERENCES	N0. OF GROUPS
Voluntary Groups, Community Groups and Networks (1)	14	6
Service Providers (2)	11	4
Schools and Youth Services (3)	10	6
Traditional Groups of Influence, i.e. GAA(4)	9	6
Business and Financial Institutions (5)	9	6
Churches and Parish Councils (6)	7	7
Women's Groups (7)	7	6
Environmental, Recreation and Tourism Groups (8)	8	4
Government Departments (9)	5	3
Health Care Service Providers (10)	4	2
Community Education and Training Groups (11)	4	1

The column entitled "references" indicates the number of power groups assigned to a specific category. The column next to it indicates the number of research groups that referred to the power group within that category.

It is notable that the highest number of groups identified was in Category #1 'Voluntary Groups, Community Groups and Networks' which suggests that community groups are considered to be integral to local development in Ireland by the research groups involved. This category also included structures for effective representation of community groups, including community development projects and community platforms, suggesting the importance of these structures in enabling community groups to be involved in local development. The high number of community groups identified as power groups also confirms the argument that successful local development is contingent upon thriving community development in a local area (ADM, 1999). Participants' perceptions of community and voluntary groups are examined below.

What is also notable is the low number of women's groups identified as power groups across the research groups. This suggests that women's groups may be sidelined in local development processes in Ireland, a question to be examined in the discussion. The observation notes did not expand on



this result.

## 5.6 TECHNIQUE 3: POWER MAPPING

### a) Most powerful and least powerful groups in local development

Participants assigned a level of power to each of the pre-identified power groups and also to the additional power groups. Cross-analysis of the results is possible for groups assigned 1st, 2nd, and 3rd rankings. After the 3rd rank, there was no commonality across research groups. One group bundled their cards including those that were pre-identified, so that distinctions cannot be made between some of the power groups. Results for this technique are given, therefore, for 7 out of the 8 research groups.

#### Most Powerful Group

RANK ASSIGNED ACROSS RESEARCH GROUPS	POWER GROUP	REFERENCES
1st	Local Authority ( <i>Manager and Staff</i> )	6*
2nd	Health Board	4
3rd	Local Authority ( <i>Elected Councillors</i> )	3
3rd	Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs	3
4th	FÁS	2

\* NB – one of the groups included in this count named a county council and a corporation as local power groups.

The references column shows how many research groups assigned ‘most powerful’ rank to the power group in question.

#### 2nd Most Powerful Group

RANK ASSIGNED ACROSS RESEARCH GROUPS	POWER GROUP	REFERENCES
1st	Local Authority ( <i>Elected Councillors</i> )	4
2nd	FÁS	2
2nd	VEC	2

#### 3rd Most Powerful Group

Two research groups assigned the 3rd most powerful rank to URBAN. Another two research groups assigned 3rd most powerful rank to the SPCs. According to the observation notes, this level of power was ascribed to SPCs on the basis of their potential to be powerful because, as yet, the committees have not begun their work or their work has not yet become visible in the local area. Group L5 said:

***‘SPC: it’s supposed to be powerful. If they are going to develop policy, we should be developing a relationship with them. They would be good to have on our side.’***

After ranking the power groups, participants were then asked to divide the power groups between those with which they had a relationship and those with which they did not have a relationship.

#### 5.6.1 Discussion

The frequency with which the manager and staff of the local authority were ranked above elected councillors as the most powerful power group in local areas is striking. This is linked in the observation notes to the inaccessibility of the local government system and is discussed in further detail below in a section about participants’ perceptions of the pre-identified power groups. The level of power ascribed to specific groups may also be related to the level of interaction with participants. If the research participants come into contact more often with service providers than with the other pre-identified power groups, then they may also be perceived to have more relevance and thus more power to affect women’s lives. The ranking of local authority elected councillors as second most powerful by four groups and most powerful by three other groups is consistent with the idea that this power group has equal power or is second in power to the managers and staff in local areas. Power was often related in the observation notes to authority to create policy. The results confirm anecdotal evidence about the lack of power of local elected representatives in the highly-centralised Irish government system.

b) Power Groups with which Research Groups did/did not have a relationship.

Results from this technique were only valid for seven of the eight research groups (Group L6's results were invalid). The table below shows checkmarks next to the pre-identified power groups with which each of the research groups have a relationship. Rural groups are marked with a star.

	RESEARCH GROUP							
	L1*	L2*	L3	L4	L5	L6*	L7*	L8*
Local Authority (Managers and Staff)		√√	√√	√√	√√			√√
Local Authority (Elected Councillors)			√√		√√			
Local Authority (SPC)								
VEC	√√		√√	√√	√√		√√	
FAS	√√	√√	√√	√√	√√			
Health Board	√√	√√		√√	√√			
URBAN			√√					
Area-based Partnership	√√		√√	√√				
LEADER Company							√√	
County Enterprise Board								

### 5.6.2 Discussion

The high level of groups who did not have a relationship with their SPC relates to the low levels of knowledge about this power group in the research, as does the number of groups who do not have a relationship with their local County Enterprise Board.

The highest scoring pre-identified groups with whom the research groups had a relationship were Local Authority Managers and Staff, VEC and FAS. This finding reflects the fact that these agencies are service providers in local areas.

The fact that four out of the seven groups presented here did not have a relationship with their local Partnership raises questions. It is evident that one of the rural groups, L7, has a relationship with their LEADER company which is a rural Partnership. Therefore, we can say that three out of the seven groups do not have a relationship with the local Partnership. Do these groups want a relationship with that structure? If they do not want a relationship, why not? If they do and have not been approached, the results may confirm Barry (1998) and Walsh's (1998) conclusion that targeting of women by these two power groups in order to address their long-term unemployment and poverty has not been sufficiently focused. The same could be suggested with regard to the County Enterprise Boards.

We can take a closer look at these findings by looking at the pre-identified power groups with which the research groups wanted relationships. We will then examine participants' perceptions about the pre-identified power groups to ascertain the reason why research groups wanted contact with each of the pre-identified power groups as well as the nature of those relationships.

## 7 TECHNIQUE 4: POWER GROUPS WITH WHICH PARTICIPANTS DID WANT A RELATIONSHIP

Only six of the eight groups completed this technique as instructed. Of the valid six results, the top three pre-identified power groups with which participants wanted a relationship are:

POWER GROUP	NO. OF RESEARCH GROUPS
Local Authority (SPCs)	6
CEBs	4

Three of the research groups involved indicated that they did not want a relationship with the GAA in their area (from category 4 in ‘additional power groups’). This was the only common result in the mapping of power groups with which participants did not want a relationship.

## 5.8 TECHNIQUE 5: MATRIX A –

### ACTIONS THAT WERE EMPOWERING TO THE RESEARCH GROUPS

In Matrix A, participants took the power groups with which they had relationships in rank order from most empowering to least empowering and identified the types of actions or experiences they had had with each power group that were considered empowering. The references column indicates the number of actual power groups belonging to each category while the column marked ‘No. of Research Groups’ shows the number of groups specifying that particular type of action. As the diagram demonstrates, some groups named more than one action that belonged in a specific category. The matrices from the eight groups were analysed and six types of empowering actions emerged:

	REFERENCES	NO. OF RESEARCH GROUPS
Resources & Support	18	8
Funding	15	7
Empowering Ethos	14	5
Education & Training	13	7
Information & Advice	10	6
Women-friendly	6	4

#### 5.8.1 Descriptions of Types of Actions that were empowering

- **Resources and Support:** Experiences coded into this category included the description of things that could help a group get started or stay up and running, such as; premises, equipment and staff. More systematic forms of support like promotion and advocacy of groups were also included in this category, but make up a small amount of the actions named.
- **Funding:** Actions were grouped into this category when they related to any kind of financial help offered to the research groups.
- **Empowering Ethos:** This type of empowering experience describes practices and atmospheres that were open, inclusive of diversity and accessible.
- **Education and Training:** Actions were grouped into this category if they described any type of education and training given by power groups. These ranged from provision of speakers from the Health Board to the courses run by FÁS and the VECs.
- **Information and Advice:** Any experience relating to the provision of information and advice to a research group was put into this category.
- **Women-friendly:** This type of empowering experience is different from the category ‘empowering ethos’ because it relates specifically to the way in which power groups addressed issues related to women’s roles and discrimination in society, for instance, the need for childcare or the fact that a power group was inclusive of women’s issues.

#### 5.8. A closer look at the Matrix A results

What do the results from the matrices tell us? First of all, because of the high number of actions identified under the category ‘resources and support’, we can reasonably assume that this type of ‘empowering’ experience is the one most frequently offered to the participants. Following closely behind the first category are ‘funding’ and ‘empowering ethos’. In other words, these results are key types of actions found by the research groups to have generated empowering experiences for them - they may also be those most essential to their work. It may or may not represent a ranking in importance of key supports. We could only indicate this to be the case if research groups were asked to rank the types in order of importance.

## 5.8 TECHNIQUE 6: MATRIX B –

### ACTIONS THAT WERE DISEMPOWERING TO THE RESEARCH GROUPS

In Matrix B, participants categorised the power groups with which they had relationships in rank order from most disempowering to least disempowering and outlined the types of disempowering actions or experiences they had had. The matrices from all 8 groups were analysed and 8 types of disempowering actions emerged:

	REFERENCES	NO. OF RESEARCH GROUPS
Exclusion/Discrimination	15	5
Not Women-Friendly	11	5
Bureaucratic/ A lot of 'red tape'	10	6
Lack of information	8	6
Own Agenda/ Abuse of power	8	3
Creating Culture of Dependency	5	3
Lack of Consultation/ Top-down	5	2
Difficulties with Funding	2	2

#### 5.9.1 Descriptions of Types of Disempowering Actions

- **Exclusion / Discrimination:** Experiences identified in this category related to actions whereby power groups were perceived to exclude certain groups in society deliberately, for instance, older people, or were inaccessible, perhaps in terms of geographical location. In other words, the power group was perceived to be discriminatory in certain ways.
- **Not Women-friendly:** This category included experiences which arose when power groups did not employ a 'women-friendly' perspective, for instance, if they did not provide childcare or did not put women's development on the agenda.
- **Bureaucratic / a lot of 'red tape':** This category includes any experience of bureaucratic and restrictive procedures employed by a power group.
- **Lack of information:** Includes experiences of not being able to access information readily about power groups. Such groups were described as 'invisible' because research groups were unaware of their functions.
- **Own agenda / Abuse of power:** Many groups used these terms verbatim. Experiences which were described as 'tunnel vision' by a power group or where a power group tried to take over other organisations were included in this category.
- **Creating culture of dependency:** Research groups identified experiences in which power groups sought to create a culture of dependency – this category also included an analysis of the negative impact of actions where power groups operated from a charitable perspective.
- **Lack of consultation / top-down:** This category includes experiences where power groups adopted a top-down approach to decision-making and where they were perceived not to consult with the community.
- **Difficulties with funding:** Two groups identified 'withholding funding' and 'control of funding' under this heading.

#### 5.9.2 A closer look at the Matrix B results

These results can be read similarly to the Matrix A results. The most frequently named type of disempowering action identified by participants were those created when power groups acted in exclusionary or discriminatory ways. This result is closely followed by disempowering experiences that were bureaucratic or were not women-friendly.

We can see connections between 'empowering' and 'disempowering' actions and the pre-identified power groups in the next section where we explore participants' perceptions of those groups.

### 5.10 PERCEPTIONS OF PRE-IDENTIFIED POWER GROUPS

The observation notes from all eight groups who participated in the local development research were analysed in order to gain a general idea of the participants' perceptions of each pre-identified power group. Given the high number of community groups identified in the brainstorming exercise, community groups are also considered here. It is to be noted that the observation notes would suggest that agencies like FÁS, VEC, Health Board and the managers and staff of the Local Authority were evaluated more as service providers than as power groups involved in local development. However, since FÁS and the VECs in particular are integral to women's development in local areas, it is important to glean women's perceptions of these providers.

- **Community and Voluntary Groups**

There was a definite sense in the observation notes that local community and voluntary groups are perceived to be more empowering to women and women's groups than the pre-identified power groups. Group L3 pointed out:

*'Local community groups - supportive, listen to people on the ground, are flexible and innovative. They have clout. If they are working with youngsters, they get them to do things for themselves. Politicians will run to them for support.'*

In other words, while other power groups and particularly the pre-identified power groups were perceived to have power over groups, or power to create policy, community and voluntary groups were considered to be empowering. In their remapping of the local development process, Group L8 remarked, *'Looking at the map, the most empowering groups for women are voluntary groups and credit unions.'* However, four groups hinted at fragmentation of the community sector in their local areas and a need for community and voluntary groups to come together to reduce their isolation and to create equitable playing fields for community participation in local development. Group L4 illustrates:

*'The group felt that if the community sector worked on common ground and issues they will have the power to challenge... power relations and structures within local development... They want to see a community participation strategy in place in collaboration with the community/ voluntary sector and statutory sector for the county development plan.'*

Four groups also identified the problem for many community and voluntary groups of a lack of resources – this concept included both a lack of finance and a perception of not having the 'clout' to get things done in the local area.

- **The Local Authority – Elected Councillors, Manager and Staff and Strategic Policy Committees (SPCs)**

The notes from the local development research generally described the local authority as a system that was either bureaucratic or geographically inaccessible for the women involved. This inaccessibility was described as contributing to an information deficit regarding what actually happens in local government. Groups reported a general problem about information flow, yet when a group tried to approach the local authority to remedy this, 'red tape' prevented them from receiving the information they actually needed. Group L5 comments:

*'Difficulty in obtaining information – sent from A to B – when you ask the right question they are good – the problem is finding the right question – what do you do when you don't know the right question?'*

Participants described how they were forced to rely on councillors to counter the information deficit pertaining to the work of the authority. However, receipt of the information needed was conditional on factors such as party politics, personalities, the councillors' own lack of power in the structure and what the councillor felt was appropriate for the electorate to know. Thus, the work of the local authorities was perceived to be invisible or only partially visible to the electorate. A participant in group L8 said:

*'Local government – what do they do? You go to your local representative, but how effective are they? I don't know. On the question of housing and planning they are bureaucratic and the people find it difficult to access the whole local government structure from the workers to the councillors. Local government is inaccessible.'*

Two groups described what they perceived to be councillors' own lack of power in the local authority: **'Local councillors don't have enough say'** (Group L8). In terms of consulting with local communities about local authority business, Group L5 described the following situation, **'They do not have the power to keep their election promises – they do not have the power to empower.'** These types of comments are consistent with the results from the power mapping where four of the eight research groups felt that elected councillors were second in power to the managers and staff of the local authority.

It is all of the above which then contributes to the sense in the notes that the "ordinary person," or a woman's group will not be heard in the local government structure. Group L7 said, **'The ordinary person is powerless.'**

One of the two groups that straddled both a county council and a corporation had positive comments to make about the corporation in their area because of the fact that it provides a free flow of information about housing and tenancy needs.

As a newer part of the local government structure, there was a very low level of knowledge about SPCs as shown above.

- **Vocational Education Committee (VEC)**

There was a general sense in the observation notes from all eight research groups that the VEC was powerful at local level because it offers training and education for women and funding for women's groups. Group L3 had the following remark about their local VEC:

**'After some discussion by group, it was realised that without VEC courses many of the women would not be there and there wouldn't be as many groups in [name of locality removed].'**

However, there were some negative aspects to the services provided by the VECs discussed in the research. Their work was sometimes described as limited, particularly in terms of choice of courses available to women and in provision of resources to women's groups, including funding. Two groups in particular noted a dissatisfaction with their local VECs. Group L7 said:

**'VEC – disempowering because they tell us what we can do in premises. Don't support the group, we are their soldiers, only do as they order. Strict rules. They decide courses – but it is our time and effort.'**

Five of the eight groups described the VEC as being selective in terms of funding, either with regard to the allocation of funding or to the criteria for funding. Three groups expressed some dissatisfaction with the way in which courses were run via the VECs. There was a general sense that the VEC in their areas needed to change the way they work to a more bottom-up approach in order to meet the need for training opportunities for women. Group L1 said:

**'As regards the VEC, well they don't consult any groups to see what they want, they determine the courses they put on themselves and we have no say in it.'**

Overall, VECs were described as a vital and sometimes empowering service for women in their local areas but that, in some cases, the service could be described as, **'VEC...limited [opportunities for] education and training'** (Group L8).

- **FÁS**

As with the VECs, FÁS was seen to have power in terms of the opportunities for training that it provided in local areas, **'the group feel that FÁS courses develop confidence and skills'** (Group L2). However, the agency was perceived to be restrictive in its practices for a number of reasons, as Group L8 described, **'You have to fit into their rules.'** Those rules had the effect of excluding women, especially in terms of lack of childcare provision and the tendency to hold courses at hours that are not women-friendly. The issue of childcare came up repeatedly. A participant from Group L1 described:

**'There was a course advertised recently and FÁS agreed that you don't have to be on the Live Register so 60 women applied but because there were no childcare facilities a big percent of women dropped out immediately.'**

Three of the groups criticised the inaccessibility of FÁS courses to married women in the home. Group L3 felt that, *'schemes create divisions among women...there is discrimination'*. Thus, members of this group described themselves and others like them as 'dead women' in the home and perceived other groups of women as having access to opportunities that they did not. This facet of the observation notes from L3 raises questions about targeting of women for FÁS opportunities. Targeting of disadvantaged women for development is important and positive. We might ask, are the group's frustrations less to do with targeting and more to do with bureaucracy and lack of transparency in FÁS' work? If FÁS offices were clearer about criteria for access to training and employment opportunities and were also clearer about the rationale behind decisions to focus on certain groups of women versus others, then perhaps women's frustrations with the agency generally would be eased. FÁS also needs to identify alternative entry routes for training opportunities.

Another interesting discussion emerged in Group L3 about the type of development offered by FÁS, compared with a community education group in their area. The group saw a difference between training for the labour market and enabling women's self development and empowerment. They described different progression routes for the former and the latter. One participant said of FÁS:

*'Fac: Where does that [FÁS] lead women to?*

*Participant M: boring jobs, job incentive schemes, no permanency, no security in CE schemes.'*

Whereas the community education group referenced in the notes from Group L3 was seen to help women to progress to third level education.

In the main, FÁS was perceived to be somewhat empowering to women's development in local areas because it helped to fulfil a need for training. However, the organisation was generally described as inflexible and bureaucratic.

- **Health Board**

One half of the research groups saw the health board as being one of the most powerful groups in their local area. This power was perceived to reside in the fact that the health board provides health services to communities, *"all agreed that the [health board] was the most powerful of all as it touched almost everyone in some way"* (Group L5). The health board was described as important because participants noted that it provides resources to them either in the form of speakers or financial support. Five of the research groups talked about the resources that their local health board had provided for them.

- **Urban**

Two out of the three urban groups involved in the research were familiar with URBAN to differing extents. One of the five rural groups knew about URBAN. One of the three urban groups knew about it in name only, but said that they would like to become more familiar with its work and establish a relationship with the initiative in their area. Group L3 had extensive notes about the role of URBAN in their local area. They said:

*'URBAN – many people wonder exactly what they do. They provide infrastructure in the community, such as... setting up a playground in the community. There have been many protests in relation to the playground because it is not where the community wants it situated but they are not listening to us... appears to be a non-inclusive organisation.'*

It is important to note that this reflects the experience of only one of the research groups.

- **LEADER Company**

While groups were aware of LEADER as a powerful structure, offering possibilities for funding, they demonstrated a lack of familiarity with what LEADER actually does in local areas. This confirms the finding of the first techniques and low levels of knowledge about this pre-identified power group. Group L2 said: *'The group felt that if they had information about what the Leader company do, it could be useful to have a relationship with them.'*

The notes were not amenable to any further analysis of the perception of LEADER by the participants.

- **Area-based Partnership**

Two groups in particular had a negative response to the work of the Partnership in their local area. Both of these groups spanned an urban and a rural area. A theme in the notes from these two groups was that representation in the work of, and funding from, area-based Partnerships was perceived to be conditional on the agenda of a specific Partnership or its personnel. Participants in Group L3 described the Partnership in the following way:

*‘Partnership – predominantly influences all other agencies in the area. There were loud groans and comments. One participant said it had too much control and influence by one person. The manager has too much say in what happens and what doesn’t happen in the area... centralised controlling influence.’*

For Group L5, the culture of their local Partnership was seen to exclude older people. Older people are now a target group in the new Local Urban and Rural Development Programme, but were not targeted in the last Programme.

However, personal agendas could work to a group’s favour as Group L4 indicates:

*‘Partnership: financially empowering - they felt women’s issues were on the agenda because of individuals.’*

Group L1 saw the local Partnership as empowering:

*‘This [the Partnership] has been very good to the research group with funding and support from Women’s Development Officer.’*

However, for two of the research groups, the Partnership was seen to be a negative influence in local development, being described as a ‘closed shop’ by Group L3.

- **County Enterprise Board (CEB)**

As indicated in the results from the card sort tracing knowledge of local power groups, there was a low level of knowledge about the work of CEBs. However, Group L1 did indicate that :

*‘..the Enterprise Board seems to have a lot of power as to what’s funded locally and what’s not funded...’*

Group L5 was the only group to detail why they did not want a relationship with the CEB in their locality: *‘Applies only to a very small group of people - older people not likely to be starting up in business - they give advice - not much good to older people.’*

## 5.11 TECHNIQUE #7: REMAPPING THE LOCAL DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

Groups were asked to re-map the local development process in a way that would enable or empower women. Six out of the eight groups completed this technique. Each of the maps is specific to the group that completed it. However, the observation notes are amenable to content analysis across groups and the common characteristics of the remapped local development processes are set out below:

CHARACTERISTIC	N0. OF GROUPS
Increased solidarity between local groups at local level, better networking and exchange of information	5
Women-friendly ways of working – flexible meeting times, provision of childcare and inclusive atmosphere	3
Removal of women’s structural oppression, i.e. more education and training opportunities, subsidised crèches, tax relief for women working outside the home	3
“Women-friendly finance” i.e. central funding office, core funding that lasts longer than one year	3



More women elected as councillors	2
Recognition for volunteer workers through payment of a nominal wage	2

### 5.11.1 Discussion

Five groups described new local development processes that had increased solidarity between groups at local level as a central characteristic. A marked feature of the observation notes is a conceptualising of local development as a holistic process including all aspects of local life – education, industry, government and so forth. The process also included women-specific development needs such as the need for childcare and representation of women in local government. In this process all groups would talk to each other and have equal value and recognition in relation to the other groups involved in the local development process. Group L8 described, ***‘we need to connect the least powerful with the most powerful. We need to establish a web of links with other power groups.’*** Group L6 described, ***‘more interaction in community groups and alleviate isolation.’***

The mapping of local development as a **web** with a central office for funding (as described by Group L7), a central committee for planning (as described by Group L8) or a centre for women (as described by Group L3), came through quite strongly in the observation notes. Thus, local development was characterised by five groups as a non-hierarchical structure with information and/or resources coming both from the centre out to other groups and back to the centre again. Research groups described this structure as one which was able to combat the isolation of groups, fragmentation of the community and inequality between groups.

Group L3’s new local development process has at its centre a place called ***‘The Haven’***. It is the base for the local women’s council that would be linked to local women’s groups and all other groups involved in local development. It includes a refuge, an education and training centre, an enterprise centre and also has core funding. The group offered their own definition of local development:

***‘Local development is cohesive networking of local government, central agencies, the community for the provision of a society in which people who have invested in it can live comfortably, having through their investment paid for the services to all intents and purposes, that constitutes local development. Local development is proper schools, meeting places, be[ing] part of decision-making, planning and being listened to.’***

There was a general sense that local development as it is currently experienced by participants in local areas is hierarchical and is not operating from a true partnership approach. Group L4 said, ***‘If community sector is strengthened they [research group] want to challenge those organisations who abuse power and to challenge partnership as a way forward on an equal footing with community sector as the experts.’*** Ultimately, this group wanted a community participation strategy for their local area as an outcome of their research.

The importance of exchanging information was highlighted by Group L8 who wanted a strategic planning committee as one of the structures in their new local development process:

***‘All power groups should be represented on the planning committee and have exchange of information and communication on an ongoing basis. Without a cohesive interchange of information and planning, there can never be a coherent plan for the area which represents all groups’ interests.’***

The fact that five out of the six research groups that completed the remapping exercise described what can only be named as the need for more democratic structures in local development in their areas is striking. Do the research groups know about opportunities to participate in participatory democratic structures in their area like the community fora or platforms that are being set up under the new County/City Development Boards (CDBs)? If they do, then the description of an alternative process may serve to highlight difficulties with those structures. Difficulties facing women participating in these structures are being reported, particularly in the gender balance on the CDBs (AONTAS, 2000). Only two of the groups mentioned such structures in their observation notes and did not go into any depth about them. It may also point to the need

for a system of supports to be put in place to facilitate the participation of community-based women's groups in existing local government structures.

Future research could ask where women's groups see themselves in current local development structures. Do they see themselves as part of the community and voluntary sector or as marginal to that sector? Given that WEFT (2000) points out that women's groups face discrimination in the sector and in general, the new local development processes described here may suggest that the research groups involved are not being treated as equal partners in community fora or platforms in comparison to other community and voluntary groups.

Some groups described the inequality experienced by women's groups and an abuse of power by pre-identified groups in their local area. Local development in Ireland is described by the research groups as a top-down process in which community groups and in particular, women's groups are closer to the bottom than the top.

The other five common characteristics set out in the table above may be seen as 'parts' of these new web-like structures described by some of the research groups and are integral to encouraging women and women's community groups to participate in local development. Since these characteristics are all correctives to the issues faced by women in local development described in the literature, we can deduce that there is still much work to be done in creating women-friendly local development in Ireland.

## 5.12 INCREASED CAPACITY TO PARTICIPATE IN LOCAL DEVELOPMENT

It is of central importance to the ethos of PLA that research participants become empowered to have their voices heard in their local areas and to take action as a consequence of the research. Were the participants in the local development component of the Millennium Project empowered to participate in local development via the research process? There were two awareness-raising and skills-building components built into the research process. First, in the exercise to glean knowledge of local power groups, participants in their research groups educated one another to the extent that it was possible for them to do so by informing each other about the pre-identified power groups. Second, the remapping exercise was meant to be action-orientated, that is, the research groups were to use them as plans for influencing local development. The research groups had the choice to continue in the second phase of the project by further developing that plan and the steps that would be needed to implement it. Only one of the groups chose to do this. Their 'action' will be described below.

Despite this, and although the participants themselves were not specifically asked about increased capacity, there are ways of investigating this question. The observation notes from the groups, for the most part, refer to ways in which the research groups were moved to action via the research. Also, facilitators of the research filled out an evaluation of their experience of the project when they finished their first phase research and two of the questions in that evaluation addressed their research group's experience of empowerment. Furthermore, a mail-out at the end of the project asked facilitators to describe any action that they and their group might have taken as a result of doing the local development component of the research. These three sources can give us some insight into the extent of capacity-building developed as a consequence of participation in the research.

- **Observation Notes**

Seven out of the eight groups described some form of increased capacity as a result of participating in the local development component of the Millennium Project. This was generally stated as the intention to access information or link with other groups. For instance, Group L1 stated:

*'Elected councillors were mentioned again and it was commented that 'we should become more aware of what they do.' The staff and manager would be quite alien to the group but \_\_ suggests 'that as a women's group if we know more it would improve our clout'*

In all, four of the research groups described being empowered to take the action of linking with other groups to 'build solidarity' (Group L4) or to increase their own knowledge. Given that increased solidarity within the community was a central characteristic of a remapped local development process, these evaluative comments speak well to PLA's potential to build capacity in women's groups to participate in local development.

In particular, some groups came to recognise their own power to affect local development. The following excerpt from Group L7 is worth noting:

*'Did not realise we had money, premises to choose from and people promoted us. More positive than negative. Surprised – think we are getting further than we thought in practicalities. Very positive regarding premises and finances. Surprised how empowered we are in theory, it's like a wheel if it could get going.'*

- **Facilitators' Evaluations**

In the Facilitator Evaluation Questionnaire, the facilitators were asked to answer two questions:

*Please tell us how empowering you felt the research process was for your group;  
and; Do you have any further comments about this?*

The first question was measured out of five – 1 being 'disempowering' and 5 being 'very empowering'. Four groups were judged by the facilitators to have found the research process 'very empowering'. Two groups responded that the process was 'empowering', one group 'somewhat empowering' and the last 'not empowering'. The group that responded 'not empowering' provided no comment as to why. Three groups included comments and they are below:

*A majority of the women didn't know about funding bodies so it made them stop and think. More awareness amongst women, sharing of knowledge' (Group L1).*

*A number of women from the research group were also involved in the \_\_\_\_\_ Integrated Services Project and the issues generated during the research have been fed by them into this process. Also some of the suggestions have found their way onto the \_\_\_\_\_ Health Board for older people and [the] strategy for carers (Group L5).*

*They [the research group] were all empowered as individuals. The sharing of information and experiences enlightened them and presented a great overview of local development in \_\_\_\_\_ (Group L3).*

Lack of knowledge, particularly about the pre-identified power groups, was a central feature of the results. Thus, the empowerment stated in these comments reflects the importance of participatory processes for: 1) learning about local development and, 2) gaining confidence to feed into local development processes.

#### • **Descriptions of Actions**

The third source for evaluating participants' experiences of empowerment and capacity-building around local development is drawn from descriptions of actions that research groups and facilitators took as a result of the research. Groups L3 and L5 described their actions:

- Group L3 undertook a research process to investigate the contribution of women's groups to local development in their area over the last ten years.
- Group L5 created a video to challenge stereotypes about older people and raise awareness about their needs. This video is for use in the local community. Some members of the research group also presented their research and talked about PLA during a training session in participatory research taking place in their local area.

### **5.13 SUMMARY**

The results give some indication of the views of particular women's groups about local development and local power structures. Although each group's research is quite specific to their local area, a number of common threads emerged across the research groups. **Lack of information and knowledge** about groups common to local development around the country (described here as pre-identified power groups) is in evidence and is quite often in the observation notes linked to a lack of transparency or invisibility of the work of pre-identified power groups such as the local authorities. These results may also indicate the need for agencies engaged in local development functions to consider how best to communicate information within local communities.

**'Resources and Support'** followed by **'Funding'** and an **'Empowering Ethos'** are named most often as types of empowering actions that enable these research groups to do their work. However, the observation notes suggest that none of the pre-identified power groups provided the research groups with these key resources, with the exception of the VEC, which provided resources that created an empowering ethos for two of the research groups. For the most part it seems that **'Education and Training'** and **'Information and Advice'** were the resources provided by the pre-identified power groups which proved empowering to the research groups.

The most often-named disempowering actions or experiences faced by the research groups from the power groups was that of **'Exclusion/ Discrimination'** and being **'Not Women-friendly'**.

FÁS was described quite often as having practices that belonged to both categories. This confirms past research and recommendations suggesting that FÁS needs to become more women-friendly (NOW, 1996). This would include gender-proofing its information strategies since some of the research participants were unaware about eligibility criteria for courses. These results reflect the persistence of barriers preventing women from accessing education and training courses offered by FÁS.

In general, the research groups stressed that they did not already have but wanted to have connections with their local Strategic Policy Committees, County Enterprise Boards and Elected Councillors. They also stressed the importance of local development processes which are holistic, address women's particular needs arising from a context of gender discrimination and embrace true partnership approaches where all

groups involved have equal status. The notion of cohesive networking and inter-group communication, where each group experienced equity in participation, was key to these new local development processes.

An important facet of the research was that, despite the difficulties faced by women and women's groups in participating in local development as outlined by the research groups, all eight demonstrated some form of increased capacity to engage with local development in their local areas. This finding stresses the importance of participatory processes in valuing women's experiences, raising their awareness and their confidence so that they can effectively engage in local development.

## 6. DISCUSSION

### 6.1 OVERVIEW

What do the results of the local development component of the Millennium Project contribute to knowledge about women and local development? On the whole, the results resonate with many of the themes about the difficulties facing women and the participation of women's groups in local development as identified in the literature, for instance, a disrespect for diversity (Braithwaite, 1998), the inflexibility of the Live Register and conflicting ideas about blueprints for participatory democracy between government, community and voluntary groups. The research also suggests the usefulness of participatory methods, as tools for enabling women to participate in local development.

### 6.2 WOMEN'S BLUEPRINTS FOR PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY

The results identified a general information deficit with regard to the following pre-identified power groups: local authorities, area-based Partnerships, LEADER Companies, County Enterprise Boards, and URBAN. While low levels of knowledge about SPCs may be due to the relative newness of the committees at the time of the research, the lack of knowledge about the other pre-identified power groups is striking. In particular, relatively low levels of knowledge about the local authorities give cause for concern, in view of the efforts which are being made to make local government more responsible, consumer-orientated and capable of dealing with issues surrounding social exclusion and poverty (Department of the Environment and Local Government, 1996; Government of Ireland, 1997). The results of the research indicate a link between low levels of knowledge on the part of the participants about local authorities, an ineffective information flow, bureaucratic procedures and the amount of power retained by the pre-identified power groups. It could be suggested that some pre-identified power groups are able to maintain power in local areas by not being transparent about their work. Power differentials also persist within the local government structures. This research on local development confirms anecdotal evidence about the standing and role of local government in Ireland as described by the Community Workers Co-operative (November 2000). This evidence is as follows:

- a lack of transparency in decision-making processes;
- people perceive that the local authorities are inaccessible and do not consult with communities;
- councillors have an inadequate allocation of power within the structure (Ibid.).

Lack of information was named most often as a type of disempowering experience in relation to the Partnerships, FÁS, VEC and managers and staff of the local authorities. In contrast, research groups' mapping of empowering local development processes stressed their desire for processes in which there would be more effective transmission of information and good communication between all local power groups. Participatory democracy is about a redistribution of power and resources (Community Workers Cooperative, 1998). Information and knowledge are resources. If these are not readily available, then participatory democracy will not succeed in including those previously excluded from decision-making processes.

The *Framework for Supporting Voluntary Activity and for Developing the Relationship between the State and the Community and Voluntary Sector* (Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs, 2000) describes participation in civil life as 'an exchange between citizens and Government, between those who make policy and people affected by policy choices.' 'Exchange' is a weak interpretation of participation and does not recognise the different power relations between policy-makers and service-users nor does it reflect the obligation of the government to listen and act on the views of its citizens. In comparison, some of the research groups talked about participation in a very different way - as an interconnected, equitable and bottom-up process. The definition from the Department is very top-down and has the potential to sideline women's groups that are trying to engage in participatory democratic structures at local level.

While local development involves targeting resources towards areas and groups that are most disadvantaged, it can lead to a competition for scarce resources amongst groups involved in that process (Abram, 1998). That competition creates divisions between groups. Differing access to participative structures compounds those divisions and results in the isolation of certain groups who do not represent mainstream issues. This was described by some of the research groups. Participants also reflected on the difficulty in gaining access to resources other than information. For instance, 'women-friendly' funding was an important facet of a remapped local development process for two of the research groups.

In effect, many of the research groups designed models for participation in local development in their areas. These models are bottom-up and have the potential to benefit all groups in a local area. The participants described local development processes that not only allowed the participation of women's groups on an equal basis as other groups but also addressed women's social exclusion at the same time. The research confirms the importance for community groups of being enabled to shape the form and nature of their participation in local development. It also highlights the transformative potential of a participative approach of this kind.

### **6.3 WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN LOCAL DEVELOPMENT**

FÁS, the Vocational Education Committees and the Health Boards ranked in the top three for levels of knowledge about their work and function, suggesting that these are the groups with which women involved in the project are most often linked. This is consistent with the finding that women were concentrated in education and training initiatives in the last Local Urban and Rural Development Programme (Barry, 1998 ; ESF Evaluation Unit, 1999). Also viewed as the softer side of local development as compared to enterprise development, the high involvement of women in this aspect of local life shows a divide between what are generally perceived as the female and male spheres of involvement in civic life. Few of the research groups had a relationship with their local County Enterprise Board. This may be indicative that the pervasive belief that women's enterprise is 'just for pin money,' is still an obstacle to their involvement in enterprise initiatives (CAN, 1997).

An important theme in the perceptions of the VEC and the Partnerships was the degree to which the adoption of a 'women-friendly' approach depended on the initiative of particular individuals in these bodies. In particular, this criticism of the Partnerships is linked to an ESF Evaluation of the Local Development Programme (1999), where it was suggested that the work of the 38 Partnerships throughout the Republic has been valuable, but there has not been enough work done on the creation of objective measures by which responses to local issues can be judged as effective across the areas in which Partnerships are located. The creation of such measures would guard against the work of the Partnerships being dependent on the initiative of individuals.

The disempowering practices named by participants in relation to the VECs and FÁS suggest that these agencies, in some localities, provide services that do not meet the education and training needs of women in their communities. This is in contrast to the way in which some women's community groups do their work, as described by group L3 in their description of a women's community education group in their local area. In particular, FÁS and the VECs still need to become more women-friendly. This situation has still not improved despite numerous criticisms, in particular, from the New Opportunities for Women Programme (1996). In areas where there have been improvements, it has been largely due to the pressure put on them via their participation in the partnership process in those areas. Again, objective measures for judging the effectiveness of partnership work in local areas could also aid in improving the operations of FÁS and the VECs.

The use of the Live Register and its inflexibility is still a barrier to women's access to education and training opportunities in the community. Given the importance for women of education and training, particularly in a context of historical discrimination, FÁS should initiate an information campaign to inform women of available opportunities for training. Furthermore, it needs to move urgently to a model of flexible provision of training throughout the country, one which is targeted to the diverse needs of women. Participation in training may lead women to continue their self-development within community-based women's groups and, in turn, encourage their active citizenship.

Costello (2000) points out that women's community activism can be used as a stepping stone by women to move from informal to more formal political involvement. Having more women involved in politics at all levels is key to achieving positive change for women, particularly if they come from a community development and/or feminist approach. Thus, when they are in more formal political spheres, they can put pressure on structures to change in order to represent women more effectively. The desire to have more women elected councillors was named by two of the research groups in their remapped local development processes.

Rose (1998) demonstrates the importance of identifying diverse groups in order to create sustainable local development. Our research echoes the literature by illustrating the ways in which the diversity of women's needs have not been addressed within existing local development structures in Ireland. The research groups described situations in which differences between groups of women were not acknowledged by the pre-identified power groups. Group L5 talked about the situation of older women and described how they felt ageism was perpetuated by groups involved in local development in their area. The rural groups talked about differing access to resources, including information, due to geographical isolation. Many of the groups stressed the inflexibility of the Live Register. Failing to honour diversity has the effect of fragmenting the women's community sector and pitting groups against each other. This is compounded by a lack of appropriate information from pre-identified power groups which may result in women being unaware of available opportunities. It is incumbent upon the pre-identified power groups and government to create more targeted initiatives to reach the most disadvantaged women in Irish society.

#### **6.4 WOMEN'S COMMUNITY GROUPS: MARGINALISATION AND LIMITED CAPACITY**

The marginalisation of women's community groups was described in a variety of ways throughout the research. The low number of women's groups identified as power groups in participants' local areas may indicate a sidelining of women's community groups in local development processes. The high rate of disempowering experiences such as 'exclusion/discrimination' and 'not women-friendly' named in the research suggests that the discrimination of women's community groups described by WEFT (2000) is still in evidence and that discrimination may be widespread throughout Ireland given the balanced geographical spread of the research groups. Because practices which could be described as both empowering and 'women-friendly' were not named frequently in the research, we could continue to assume that many community-based women's groups continue to perceive themselves as marginalised from local development structures in Ireland. 'Empowering ethos' was a type of empowering action named frequently in relation to power groups around the country. However, from the observation notes, only two of the VECs and two of the Partnerships from the areas represented in the research were deemed to possess an empowering ethos for the research groups. More often than not, it was other community and voluntary groups that were deemed to be empowering.

More research needs to be done on the breadth of the women's community sector, its contributions to civil society and the challenges that women's community groups face. For instance, the identification of the sort of empowering and disempowering actions employed by power groups gives us some idea of the type of practices that enable or disable participation of women's groups in local development and are assigned importance by virtue of their identification in this research process. However, future research could be done in which women's community groups could identify the level of importance to be assigned to each type of empowering or disempowering experience. What is more important - that a power group is 'women-friendly' or that it offers 'information and advice' to a women's group?

We can draw some tentative conclusions from the research about the importance of empowering experiences in encouraging women's participation in local development. Given the emphasis placed on information or the lack thereof in the observation notes from all eight groups, we can assume that the provision of 'information and advice' in appropriate formats and designed for diverse audiences could be a pivotal support for women's groups. This is confirmed by WEFT's (2000) finding that women's community groups in the Southern Border counties need knowledge resources for sustainability. A similar importance can be accorded to the provision of education and training – it is crucial, furthermore, for women's empowerment that women's groups receive recognition and rights of representation. We can also identify 'resources and support' and 'funding' as basic needs for women's community groups for their continued survival.

The importance that research groups placed on local development processes that were interconnected and web-like speaks to the need for support networks for women involved in local development (Barry, 1998) as well as to the desire for more information and knowledge sharing about the pre-identified power groups.

Our findings also show that there is a distinct lack of connection between women's groups and the pre-identified power groups. Since women's community groups are already responding to issues regarding women's social exclusion, this indicates a resistance to combating discrimination against women at local level, per se. We suggest that if these groups were committed to responding to women's social exclusion, they should engage more proactively in linking and consulting with women's groups such as those involved



in this research. Participants expressed a desire to connect with County Enterprise Boards, SPCs and elected councillors. These bodies should respond positively to this request.

## **6.5 SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

A number of questions arose in this research that could be addressed in future analysis of the issue of women and local development. In particular, it is important that research projects ensure the participation of a richer diversity of women than in the local development component of the Millennium Project. This would serve to aid the NWCI, local development agencies, service providers and other community and voluntary groups in their attempts to focus on disadvantaged women in their work. We also need to look at the issue of diversity within groups. Who represents groups in structures like Partnership boards or County/ City Development Boards? How can we encourage women who are least active to participate in these settings?

Emic-based research assumes a commonality of meaning in language use within a group where participants are known to one another and are sharing information on a clearly-identified topic. Participants were not asked specifically, therefore, to define the concept of local development underlying their research. The concept was defined instead by the research participants. However, it could be important in future research to examine the way in which women employ or understand the concept. As has already been identified, it would also be useful to rank in importance the actions that are empowering as well as disempowering to women's groups. It could also be useful to ask women's groups what kinds of information they would find useful to their work.

It would also be useful, given the changes taking place in the integration of local government and local development, to do timely research that would investigate women's perceptions of participative democratic structures at local level, the possible barriers encountered in interactions with such structures and the positive and negative outcomes of that involvement.

## **6.6 USING PLA TO ENABLE WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN LOCAL DEVELOPMENT**

It is evident from the research that the research process itself helped, for the most part, to build capacity within the groups. We see this quite clearly in Group L7's quote in which they described how the research process had helped them to come to a sense of having power to get things done in their local area. Use of PLA techniques is also a way of ensuring that every woman's voice in a group is heard, thereby equalising intra-group power relations.

Women's groups with members trained in PLA could use these types of processes to devise inputs into local area plans or strategies. The confidence-building capacity of PLA could simultaneously enable individual group members to feed that input into different local development structures. Members in Group L5 gained the confidence to do this by participating in the Millennium Project. Participation strategies in local areas need to be gender-proofed. They also need to be developed by community groups and not imposed upon them. Thus, research processes like the one employed in the local development component of the Millennium Project are ideal ways for women to indicate the form and nature of their desired participation in local development. However, the Millennium Project represents a first step to enable women's voices to be heard. Clearly this needs to be progressed in order to challenge all actors within local development processes to build more participation structures which result in effective outcomes for women.

However, the pressure for change cannot come from under-resourced and overworked women's groups alone. More spaces have to be created for the voices of women to be heard with regard to issues relating to local development and their communities. Research about the sector initiated by the National Committee on Volunteering might be one way of creating this space. Using the model of research outlined in this report and building on it is another way of giving women space in which to discuss local development. It is time for the pre-identified power groups to draw on the lessons of this research to change practices which are disempowering for women and women's groups and to build on empowering practices, in consultation with women's groups. In this way they might also become more responsive to the diversity of women's needs. Women should be honoured as architects of their communities and not the passive recipients of local development plans.

## 7. BIBLIOGRAPHY

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