

**A NATION IN CRISIS:
WOMEN'S PERSPECTIVES**
Conference held in Kilbarrack CDP
13 March 2010
Report by Anne Good

About 60 women of all ages, from community groups, women's organisations, political parties, trades unions and universities, as well as interested individuals, attended a major conference on the current national crisis on 13 March 2010.

A NATION IN CRISIS was co-organised by *Feminist Open Forum* and *Kilbarrack Community Development Project*, who hosted the conference in Kilbarrack.

The conference built on discussions held by *FOF* during and after its 2009 *Recession Session*, which critiqued the absence, indeed exclusion, of strong feminist voices in the public debates on the unprecedented crisis engulfing Irish society. Those discussions utilised a framework for developing feminist analyses proposed by Anne Good. It was decided to hold a full day's conference around International Women's Day 2010, which would hear feminist papers on the crisis as it is impacting on various aspects of Irish life and then develop a strategy for action.

The framework, which was circulated to all the conference speakers and presented at the first conference session, proposed that feminist analyses would have six characteristics as follows:

- Holistically understanding the crisis as having social, political and constitutional as well as economic dimensions;
 - Providing gendered analyses, which have so far been absent or muted;
 - Challenging the dominant orthodoxies;
 - Examining both private and public perspectives, and their inter relationships;
 - Developing global feminist ethics to inform our vision of future society;
 - Taking both historical and futuristic dimensions into account.
- (Good, 2009).

Building on these discussions the eight conference speakers addressed the challenge of developing feminist analyses of the crisis in a wide range of areas. In the morning session Ursula Barry provided a cogent feminist perspective on the economy. Rita Fagan and Cathleen O'Neill spoke with passion and anger about the devastation being inflicted on women in the community sector by the recession and the government cuts. Orla O'Connor comprehensively addressed the gendered issues emerging in the area of social welfare, poverty and caring work.

In the afternoon session, Mary Murphy gave a broad ranging analysis of the politics of the crisis and the limits of media coverage and public discourse, most especially the exclusion of feminist voices. Sarah Bourke spoke scathingly of what she termed a poverty, inequality and health nexus amounting to a form of Irish apartheid. Brid Connolly analysed changes in the education sector and its regression from a role of

empowering women and improving their lives. Nusha Yonkova described the impact of the crisis on the lives of some of the most marginalized women in Irish society: migrant women.

The papers were discussed in two workshop sessions and provided the basis for developing ideas to be included in a plan of action.

These ideas were discussed in the final plenary of the conference and it was agreed that they would be brought to a follow up planning meeting to be organized by *Feminist Open Forum*. It was also agreed that the papers would be published in a format to be decided later.

Susan McKay of the National Women's Council of Ireland delivered the final address and called for strong action by women on the issues which were identified during the conference.

Ailbhe Smyth and Therese Caherty of *Feminist Open Forum* thanked all who had attended and contributed to the conference, most especially the co-organisers and conference hosts, Kilbarrack CDP, especially Cathleen O'Neill and Lisa Dowling. Everyone expressed their strong appreciation of the warmly welcoming venue and facilities provided with great generosity by the Kilbarrack CDP.

The conference then concluded with an inspiring and deeply moving reading by poet *Paula Meehan*.

A NATION IN CRISIS: ACTION PLAN
Feedback from the Workshops
Report by Ailbhe Smyth

The papers presented at the conference were discussed in morning and afternoon workshop sessions with the aim of providing a basis for a *NATION IN CRISIS ACTION PLAN*.

The responses, ideas and proposals coming from these workshops were posted on flipchart sheets, and presented in the final plenary session. It was agreed that the conference papers would be published as soon as possible, and that the Action Plan proposals would be brought to a follow up planning meeting organized by *Feminist Open Forum*,

IMPACTS OF THE RECESSION AND OF GOVERNMENT CUTS

- While there was wide agreement that the recession cuts across all sectors and all lives, we also recognised that it produces very different and unequal impacts on people in different situations, depending on factors such as gender, social class, ethnicity, age, dis/ability, and so on.
- Widespread feelings of anger and frustration, of bewilderment, anxiety and fears for the future.
- Acute fear that many people will find themselves and their families in a ‘poverty trap’, and that the lives of so many will be blighted for a long time to come.
- Cuts to public services, including Social Welfare, Health, Education, Transport and many others, have a huge impact on women who are at the frontline as workers, carers and users of such services.
- Issues women mentioned very forcefully included: changes in the administration and cuts to the funding of CDPs; threats to Child Benefit, rent allowance, and pensions; cuts in the Higher Education grant for mature students; elimination of SNAs in primary schools; rising teacher-pupil ratios; no commitment to childcare provision; cuts to frontline services including Violence Against Women, Addiction, Disability, Old peoples’, mental health and so many other services vital to people’s health, sanity and equality
- **DEFEND AND PROTECT**
- *All Social Welfare Payments*, including Disability payments, Child Benefit, Old Age Pension
- *Health services* and Medical cards
- *All Frontline Services* (including Violence against Women, Traveller, migrant people, disability, old people, mental health and many other crucial services)

- *Education: maintain* special needs assistants, pupil-teacher ratios, higher education grant for mature students, adult and community education programmes
- *Supports for Communities*, including Community Development Programmes
- *Rural Transport* services
- *Rights and entitlements* of all those particularly at risk or already hard hit by recession including: women, migrant people, Travellers, people with disabilities, one parent families, pensioners, low-paid, hourly-paid, contract and part-time workers, the unemployed.

- **CHALLENGES**

- Break the culture of compliance
- Let go of divisions and work together, using the organisations we have, and pooling our knowledge, experiences, skills and resources.
- Create strong co-operation and alliances
- Motivate more women, including younger women, to become active and resist
- Strengthen the Women's Movement and work together to develop a new social vision.
- Work to achieve equal representation quotas in community, policy-making and political forums for woman, and for minority groups including: migrant people, people with disabilities; LGBTs, Travellers, older people.

- **KEY PRINCIPLES OF OUR RESISTANCE**

- Work from the grass-roots, from the bottom up – locally and nationally

- Solidarity: co-operate and co-ordinate
- Inform and Communicate
- *Politicise; Mobilise; Strategise; Organise*

- **ACTIONS**
- Publish the CONFERENCE PAPERS – on-line!

- Organise a DAY OF DISGUST – calling on communities, groups, organisations, and individuals to sign up to protesting against government cutbacks and attacks on services and communities. Get out on the streets and MAKE NOISE.

- Organise a DISOBEDIENCE CAMPAIGN (eg as for the Bin Tax) against the cuts

- Embrace DIRECT ACTION! Plan imaginative and creative protests

- Make ALLIANCES with community, women's and other organisations, trades unions, smaller left parties and groups including Poor Can't Pay, People Before Profit, Is Feidir Linn, Seomra Spraoi, TASC, Big Push, Right to Work, ERA (Equality and Rights Alliance), Community Platform, socialjustice.ie

- Very important to STRENGTHEN connections with WOMEN'S GROUPS and NETWORKS throughout the country – via Community Platform, NWCI, Banulacht and other networking organisations

- Make connections with ENVIRONMENTAL groups – including Climate Change organisations

- Protest against cuts to COMMUNITY SECTOR; FAS PROGRAMMES; EQUALITY AUTHORITY & HUMAN RIGHTS Commission.

- Call for a LIVING WAGE for all!

- Use SOCIAL NETWORKING to get the protest message out – Facebook Youtube, Twitter etc. And start an EMAIL CAMPAIGN
- Conference could issue a statement of SOLIDARITY with CDPs, condemning the cuts
- Encourage women to JOIN TRADES UNIONS and get active
- Identify the DECISION-MAKERS and target them with claims, demands, protests, resistance
- Go to TDs' Constituency offices, and to Councillors' Clinics and make our DEMANDS
- Say NO to 'Partnership'!
- Group together to organise and provide MEDIA TRAINING