Women: Knowledge is Power

Women and Education

National Women's Council of Ireland

Comhairle Náisiúnta na mBan in Éirinn

REPORT FROM THE NWCI MILLENNIUM PROJECT

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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

1.1 OVERVIEW

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 education, poverty, health, work, violence against women and local development. 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 education in Ireland.

1.2 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 education component of the study, 24 facilitators engaged in research with 107 women across 6 counties, urban and rural.

1.3 EDUCATION BRIEF

In the Education component of the Millennium Project, participants were invited to describe the ways in which their lives, circumstances and experiences influenced how they needed to be educated; how the practice of women's education could be improved upon and what supports would be required for that improvement.

1.4 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following conclusions and recommendations from the education component of the Millennium Project are relevant to this concern.

1.4.1 Conclusions

- Perhaps the primary conclusion that can be reached from our discussion of the findings is that *women know – through critical reflection on experience, remembering the past and imagining the future – how to design educational programmes that effectively respond to the ways that women learn*.

- **Gender impacts the ways we learn**
  There are numerous ways in which women's needs, circumstances and social position affect what they require to learn. Women learn best in relational and relaxed environments, where the challenge comes from a setting that affirms and honours their experience and nurtures their desire to know and to use that knowledge in a diversity of ways. If a woman has caring responsibilities – especially the young single mother – *she will not be able to return to and stay in education unless those caring responsibilities are shared by the State*. The diversity of need and circumstance in women's lives often

means that additional supports are required for women to have genuine and fair access to successful educational outcomes.

- **Women's Community Education: Creating Solutions to Educational Disadvantage**
  Educational disadvantage is a reality for women (and men) primarily because the circumstances of their lives – including their experiences of the traditional educational system – inhibit them from achieving a successful educational outcome. Women's Community Education has provided a participatory woman-focused and women-friendly context which has attracted many women, especially low-income working class women, back to education. Johnston (1998) estimates that 80% of the 14,000 people participating in community-based education are women. To develop the women's community education model in order to be more effective in this regard, clear progression routes within community education, between community and third-level and between community and employment must continue to be designed because this supports the staying power of women in education. Clear progression routes are also absolutely necessary for valued educational outcomes. Allied to this, a greater diversity of courses needs to be available within communities, delivery styles and times must be flexible and more forms and types of accreditation must be part of this system of education. Again, childcare is an absolute requirement and many women recommended that on-site childcare facilities would provide the most supportive way for them to choose and stay with their education.

- **Women's Ideal Learning Environment**
  - The *place* of education, for example in the home and in the community, is critical for effective learning.
  - The *relationships* within the educational process are paramount for ease of knowing and developing one's full potential as a learner.
  - *Literacy in information and communication technology* should be a fundamental component of the curriculum and a tool for diverse ways of learning and diverse settings of learning.
  - *Women's ways of learning* hold valuable insights that should inform broader educational policy and systems in this State.

1.4.2 Recommendations

We will cluster our recommendations around three major headings.

The Development of Women's Community Education

- Core and multi-annual **funding** should be granted to all women's community education groups, who meet an established set of criteria. This funding should be based on each group's ability to demonstrate good practice. Formal evaluations should be built into the granting of all funding. One government department, namely Education and Science, should take the overall responsibility for co-ordinating the funding of this sector.

- A **framework** for the principles, curriculum, methodologies, educational philosophies and pedagogies should be developed in a systematic manner for the practice of women's community education. This framework should be formulated as a result of an extensive consultative process throughout the country, in a partnership between participants, facilitators and the Department of Education and Science.

- At this point in the history of its development, the system of women's community education should be acknowledged by developing and implementing appropriate modes of **accreditation** that genuinely assist women's progression. This should be done in a partnership between the National Qualifications

Authority in Ireland (NQAI), other accrediting bodies, third-level colleges and representatives of women's community education.

- The necessary **supports**, which should be tailored to meet women's needs to enable them to participate in community education, should be put in place. While these have been named as childcare, eldercare, time flexibility, adult education guidance counsellors, grant-aided funding and assistance for people with disabilities, no comprehensive and systematic response has yet been put in place by government to meet these needs. There is, therefore, an urgent need to demonstrate genuine commitment by government to this system of education.

Women's Ways of Learning

- A national **accredited training programme** should be developed for tutors and facilitators in women's community education. Such a training would focus on the centrality of mutual relationship in the learning process, the specific needs and circumstances of a diversity of women and the variety of ways to sustain women to achieve their chosen educational goals. Existing models of good practice should be used in the design of such a programme.

- The principles of **feminist pedagogies and critical pedagogies** should be developed and sustained in women's community education. Such principles maintain an attentive focus on a **holistic** approach to learning, that is, programmes and courses that attend to the emotional, intellectual, bodily and creative needs of women. These will be more likely to meet the needs of women and allow them to sustain their commitment to learning.

The Place of Women's Education

- There should be an **education house** in every community designated as disadvantaged, as well as other communities who demonstrate an interest and need.

- The education house should be designed from a **holistic perspective**, incorporating on-site childcare, study/library facilities, an ICT open learning centre, training rooms, conference rooms and kitchen/ eating areas.

- **Outreach programmes** from third-level settings should be conducted in every education house. Accredited programmes can be chosen according to local demand. This will necessitate the development of outreach programmes in the third-level settings, so that there will be an adequate number of lecturers, tutors and facilitators of learning who can teach within the communities as well as on third-level sites. These professionals should be trained in methods and approaches to women's community education.

- **Employment-training programmes** should be developed in partnership with local employers and community educators, to be offered in the education house, and to link that curriculum with work-experience in local employment settings.

- The **'home'** should be acknowledged as a genuine location of learning for women, especially in disadvantaged communities. Therefore, all homes in these areas should be fully equipped with ICT, and education houses should offer advice in and supports for 'distance learning' programmes.

2. INTRODUCTION

The National Women's Council of Ireland is a non-governmental organisation (NGO) currently operating as an agent of change[1] 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, 1998). It is a capacity-building programme that goes beyond the traditional notion of 'consultation' towards 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, education, 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 and for a number of reasons for instance, lack of time or lack of 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

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[1] 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.

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 toward sustainable local action by the women involved. It represents the beginning of a developmental process. It illustrates the need for women to receive information, financial and training supports to pursue further projects which would enable them to investigate and challenge their environments.[2]

2.2 RESEARCH AREAS

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

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

2.3 WOMEN AND EDUCATION

The title, *Women and Education*, covers a broad range of topics. Several lenses could be selected to survey the research on this issue. For example, we could choose the lens – 'women in universities' – and bemoan the fact that only one in five university lecturers in Ireland are women and even fewer are represented in the hierarchies of power within these institutions.

Another lens for this survey could be the gender issue surrounding girl children at school. On a positive note only 25% of early school leavers are girls; however, the gender imbalance has actually increased in quite a few Leaving Certificate subjects (Hannan et al, 1996), and the economic outcome of early school leaving is more negative for girls (NESF, 1997).

Both of these lenses indicate that gender impacts how we experience the educational system and what we get from it. Another lens – perhaps one that is most pertinent to the majority of women who participated in the Millennium Project – indicates that attentiveness to gender can influence how educational systems are structured, so that the specific needs of a diversity of women are met. For this reason, we are choosing the lens of *women's community education* to interpret our data and findings from this component of the research. *Women's community education* is being developed in large part by women and for women. It is demonstrating how an attentiveness to gender influences the design of educational programmes, creates new meanings of 'knowledge' and challenges traditional understandings of the purpose and function of education in society.

2.4 PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH APPROACH

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

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[2] This issue is explored in more depth in, O'Reilly-de Brún et al. (2001). The Mullennium Project: Women Mapping the New Millennium Executive Summary. Dublin: National Women's Council of Ireland.

Project utilised an emic[3] 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.

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 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 progressive 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.

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[3] 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.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 WOMEN'S COMMUNITY EDUCATION

In examining the literature relating to this lens, two angles in particular stand out for consideration. Firstly, women's community education as a model of education and secondly, women's educational disadvantage in Ireland today.

The model of women's community education is of immediate direct relevance. A fairly extensive literature exists in this area, especially since the 1980s, which has often concentrated on the similarities and differences between community education and more traditional forms of adult education as models for education.

Looking at research on women's educational disadvantage in the world of the Celtic Tiger is of corresponding importance. It is in this context that women's community education is practised. More importantly, women's community education, by definition, aims to respond to educational disadvantage and ultimately address its causes to create a fairer society for all.

At a local level, these two angles often come together for analysis in the practice of community education. However, there is a gap in research bringing together these two angles at national and regional levels. Answers are needed to the questions: "Is women's community education (capable of) addressing the educational disadvantage of women at regional and national levels? If so, why?" And, "how can this model be developed in order to respond effectively to the educational needs of all women who experience one or multiple forms of disadvantage?"

In the last few years, there have been initiatives and policy statements that are beginning to address this gap. For example:

- The *White Paper on Adult Education* (Department of Education and Science, 2000) marked a new departure in the recognition of women's community education in national policy.

- National level initiatives including EMPLOYMENT NOW (New Opportunities for Women), the WEI (Women's Education Initiative) and its successor, the Education Equality Initiative. The NWCI and ZONTA have together embarked on ZEST (Zonta Empowering Self-Development and Transformation), an initiative which is providing some support and funding for women's community education provision in Ireland.

- The development of the Women's Networks (WENDI/ AONTAS) has provided a strategic focus at regional level for women's community education groups.

- The development of outreach programmes on 'Women's Studies' as access programmes into third-level education for women (WERRC, 1999) have provided innovative models of feminist education in community settings.

The Millennium Project's PLA research methods for 'women and education' were designed with an awareness of the activities and insights that are emerging within the context of these educational and policy initiatives.

3.2 THE MODEL OF WOMEN'S COMMUNITY EDUCATION

While the term women's community education may have a relatively short history, the eruption and success of this grass-roots movement over the last 15 years has drawn much positive comment. There are now approximately 1,000 women's education groups in Ireland (McMinn, 1996) and approximately 1,500 women's community groups between the North and South of Ireland (McMinn, 2000). The Government White Paper on Adult Education, *Learning for Life,* states that "the community-based sector is amongst the most dynamic, creative and relevant components of Adult Education provision in Ireland" (Department of Education and Science, 2000).

3.2.1 Pedagogy and Curriculum Issues

There are no definitive conclusions in the literature as to which of the various pedagogies used in women's education best promotes women's learning. The dangers of methodocracy and the models of teaching/ learning espoused by writings on feminist and critical pedagogy point us in the direction of a plurality of pedagogical approaches rather than commitment to a unitary approach. Gore (1993) argues that 'Despite the differences within and between discources of critical and feminist pedagogy, an examination of their central claims, in terms of the pedagogy argued for, reveals a great number of commonalities'. Gilligan (1999) proposes that, whatever process is chosen, the theory and practice of a feminist pedagogy should be guided by certain principles. These include:

- an understanding of the importance of the learning space as a welcoming and beautiful environment where women can give voice to their identity;
- a method and practice of education which seeks to reverse the reversals within patriarchal society and name women's experience as 'knowledge';
- a curriculum which is co-intended by the participants and facilitator alike and has no pretensions about its neutrality;
- a content that calls for a rigorous critique of women's exclusion both in the texts and events of history and a heightened awareness of women's oppression in present time;
- a constant weaving of critique with creative action for transformation.[4]

Byrne and Lyons (2000) concur with these principles and state that they should also form part of the Women's Studies classroom within the university. However, the challenge here is greater given the patriarchal environs of these institutions. Reflecting on and evaluating the process of group work, Connelly (1999) names it as a vital constituent part of a feminist pedagogy in transformative adult and community education.

The process and the content of women's community education are profoundly interwoven; therefore, no clear separation can be made between the pedagogy and the curriculum. In other words, there is a clear correlation between the process of teaching/learning and the content taught. A relational climate of nurturing and caring can open a woman to a new sense of her identity just as effectively as a taught module on 'female subjectivity'. One participant, when interviewed about her experience of returning to education, spoke of the empowerment she felt when the Centre leader called her by name, cared about her, encouraged her: 'I mean it was a recognition that you actually existed. You were made very, very, welcome…and you were a person in your own right' (Tara O'Farrell as cited in Rath, 1999).

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[4] See also the listing of 'distinctive principles within feminist pedagogy' as outlined in WERRC, A study of feminist education as an empowerment strategy for community-based women's groups in Ireland, (WERRC, 1999:39-40).

Several observers of women's groups have commented on the content or curriculum studied by these locally-based groups (Crawley,1996; Costello,1996; Dolphin & Mulvey, 1997; Gilligan, 1999). The various courses could be roughly categorised under four headings:

- *Personal Development Courses:* Confidence Building/ Assertiveness Training, Literacy and Numeracy Skills, Parenting, Health Education, Basic Computer Skills and Crafts.

- *Leadership Courses for Community Development:* Social Studies Diplomas, Women's Studies Diplomas, Women and Politics, Counselling Skills Courses, Drugs Awareness Training Programmes.

- *Return to Formal Education Courses:* Junior Cert., Leaving Cert., Pre University/Access Courses, Study Skills.

- Return To Work Courses: Computer Courses, Secretarial and Administration Skills Training, Childcare Certification and Diploma Courses, Start Your Own Business.

As Costello (2000) observes, "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."

Women's community education seeks to address equality issues as they relate to economic employment for women but it is also, and perhaps more fundamentally, committed to offering a holistic approach to adult education. There is an awareness that educational disadvantage, usually born of poverty, frequently strips women of a positive self-image, leaving in its wake low self-esteem and little confidence. These personal difficulties often inhibit women from availing of opportunities even when they are offered in their local community.

The model of education that has grown up around women's community education stands in sharp contrast to the competition and individualism that is endemic in the formal sectors of education today. Within women's community education, the focus is on the whole person and the pedagogy or teaching style is relational.

In recent years much debate has ensued as to whether women's community education is truly transformative, and indeed feminist in its objectives, or whether it is simply a taming of women in areas of disadvantage to tolerate the status quo. It is to this debate that we now turn.

3.2.2 Women's Community Education: A Feminist Activity?

A number of theorists, researchers and practitioners in the area of women's community education would see this whole movement as feminist in its concern and method. For example, in their study on the sustainability of community women's groups in the six Southern border counties, McMinn and O'Meara utilise feminist consciousness-raising techniques in their research methodology, as a way of supporting the empowerment of the women and the sustainability of the sector they are developing (McMinn and O'Meara, 2000).

While there are many definitions of feminism and a rich variety of viewpoints among feminists, there is a common thread that unites this ideological stance. Feminism is committed to the empowerment of women. It encourages critical reflection on the historical and present oppression of women. Integral to the analysis of structures of domination is a clear commitment to act for personal and social change. There, feminism

has a clear political agenda to bring about gender justice. Brid Connelly, (1999) in her writing on group work as a key process in women's community education, claims that this process if "underpinned by a radical agenda… can advance women's struggle for equality… women have made adult education the channel for the women's movement." Linda Connelly (1996) sees a clear link between the women's community education groups and earlier radical feminist groups: "In terms of structures and methods of organisation, such organisations resemble the small-group, consciousness-raising, radical women's sector which emerged in the 1970s."

However, in studies by Dolphin and Mulvey (1997) they disagree and claim that locally-based women's groups are only marginally pursuing a feminist project. O'Donovan and Ward offer an analysis of two Women's Networks in the West of Ireland and they question any facile claim that a 'woman's only' activity is necessarily feminist. The feminist agenda is both a politicisation of consciousness, but also involves action for change. They conclude that women's community education is not always feminist in outcome. Marie Crawley (1996), working in Fermanagh, found that women in rural areas were very interested in courses related to 'Return to Learning' or 'Women and Health', but they showed little interest in topics related to Politics and Public Life. Her concerns resonate with Ryan (2000), who believes that personal development education needs a theory of how gender differences are produced, reproduced and subverted. She concludes, "seeing how the personal is political is crucial, but it is not enough."

3.3 EDUCATIONAL DISADVANTAGE AND WOMEN

'More than ever, underachievement at school begets social difficulties which lead to a life of uncertainty, marginalisation and dependence on structures of social welfare assistance' (NAPS, 1997).

We now look at women's experience of disadvantage and poverty linked with the education system in Ireland. Present mainstream education does not meet the variety of needs of the majority of women living in poverty, or of women marginalised in other ways (such as through the experience of disability, membership of the Traveller community, of women refugees and women prisoners). Women's community education is one of the ways in which women themselves have attempted to address this situation.

3.3.1 Women's Poverty and Educational Disadvantage

A recent report from the Combat Poverty Agency (CPA) concludes that one third of Irish women live in poverty (CPA, 1999). Women living in poverty are much more likely to have left school early or have left with fewer educational qualifications than women who are better off. Furthermore, women with the least formal education are the least likely to participate in adult education.

Lack of educational qualifications is both a cause and effect of poverty. It is well documented that women (and men) living in lower-income households are significantly less likely to participate in, and achieve from, education and training than those from higher-income households[5]. The experience of people who have lost out due to the persistent inequalities in the education system is called educational disadvantage.

Educational disadvantage of women is the cause of other types of poverty and disadvantage. For example, research indicates that women who are better educated have better health and better health-related lifestyles than the less well educated. Education levels were in fact found to be a stronger indicator of health levels than socio–economic group (Wiley and Merriman, 1996). Links between education and employment, lone parenthood, motherhood and multiple forms of disadvantage are explored below.

Action to overcome educational disadvantage has become a national policy issue in recent years, and is a priority in the National Anti-Poverty Strategy (NAPS).

Most literature, however, on educational disadvantage does not consider the influence of gender on educational needs and outcomes. There is a gap in research about whether women and men experience education differently, and what this means in relation to addressing educational disadvantage. This may be a result of the dominance of what Kathleen Lynch has called 'consensualism' in Irish education. Lynch suggests that "consensualist thinking defines the individual (woman) student as having a given and fixed nature which, in turn, determines her educational needs" (as quoted in WERRC, 1999). Thus, the position of an individual woman in society is not considered to be central in the assessment of her educational needs. Women's community education reverses this assumption. McMinn and O'Meara in their recent study outline how the economic disadvantage of women inhibits the development of educational strategies to tackle that same disadvantage and they make policy recommendations to break through this vicious circle (2000).

3.3.2 Education and Employment

Gender differences in employment are linked to educational attainment. The figures show that:

- There are over 6 times more educationally disadvantaged women classified as economically inactive than are in full-time employment.

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[5] For example, 52.9% of students from a higher professional background gained 5 or more Honours at Leaving Certificate, compared to 4.1% of those from an unskilled background (Department of Education and Science, Green Paper on Adult Education, 1998, p.27).

- Women with the least formal education are the most likely to interrupt their labour market activity.

- The gender gap is widest for those with less than upper second level education (Dept. of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, 1999).

In the White Paper on Adult Education it is stated that, "large numbers of Irish adults (1.1m aged 15-64) have not completed upper second-level education, of whom 529,600 have not completed lower second level" (Department of Education and Science, 2000).

It is important to note that lower levels of education do not
have the same negative impact on males seeking full-time employment. More than half of the women who are unemployed (53%) have less than upper level education, as compared to 39% of unemployed men (P2000 Working Group on Women's Access to Labour Market Opportunities, 1999). In other words, for women there is a very distinct link between education levels and participation in the labour force.

3.3.3 Lone Parenthood

In the last twenty years there has been a constant growth in the numbers of women who are parenting on their own. Many lone parents state that this is a positive choice in their lives. There are an estimated 128,000 lone parent-headed households in Ireland; 85% of these households are headed by a woman (OPEN, 1997).

Shortage of money is named as the biggest problem by lone mothers participating in McCashin's study (1996), with over half of them living below the 60 per cent poverty line. Lone mothers (and older women) face the highest risk of poverty in Ireland (CPA, 1999) and poverty among this category of women is named as the worst in Europe.

Single mothers come from all walks of life. A number of them have left school early, as shown by Hannan and O'Riain's (1993) study, which also found that many young single mothers come from families where the mother has low levels of education and the father is unemployed. O'Connor (1998) offers the observation: "single motherhood for them appeared to be a way of asserting an adult identity, within a very constrained situation."

A very small proportion of lone parents become young mothers while still in, or having just left, formal education[6]. Young single mothers were reported by the NESF[7] to have the following levels of education:

- 50% had no educational qualifications;
- 41% had Intermediate educational qualifications;
- 1% had Leaving Certificate or third level qualifications.

Many lone parents who are dependent on social welfare want further education and training, so they can get a job that pays enough for their family to become economically independent. However, there are significant barriers to be overcome in accessing education and training, including lack of money, lack of available childcare, lack of flexibility in education and training provision and ineligibility for certain government employment schemes.

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6 There were 2474 births outside marriage to 15-19 year olds in 1997. CSO Vital Statistics.

7 Analysis of 1987 ESRI School Leavers Survey and five-year follow-up, in 'Early School Leaving and Youth Unemployment', January 1997, NESF Report

Breen's (1991) research highlighted that, if there is no education or training intervention within five years of leaving formal education, young single mothers are unlikely ever to return to education.

3.3.4 Women's Education and Multiple Forms of Disadvantage

The experience of educational disadvantage varies between different women, reflecting the diversity of their situations. Discrimination is particularly severe for women who live with more than one type of disadvantage. For example, Fitzgerald (1992) states that education currently provided in many Irish schools neither affirms nor addresses the distinct identity of Travellers, nor does it challenge the racism that Travellers experience. Women with disabilities also face additional serious barriers where their needs are not met, for example in terms of accessible buildings, availability of interpreters or special equipment. Women living in low income households in rural areas may be isolated by physical distance from centres of learning without adequate, affordable transport.

The specific education and training needs of women experiencing multiple forms of disadvantage are the least likely to be met by mainstream provision. As a model of education, women's community education is an approach that can develop and deliver courses that are clearly and directly relevant to their specific needs.

3.3.5 Mothers and Education

Two themes are raised here in looking at women as mothers. Firstly, no review of educational disadvantage and women would be complete without mentioning an issue that keeps recurring in the literature, and that is the importance of a mother's level of education.

The Combat Poverty Agency's Report on Educational Disadvantage in Ireland (1995) states clearly that the quality of a mother's education influences the educational environment of a home. It finds that the most accurate predictor of a child's level of educational attainment is the mother's level of education. The White Paper on Adult Education agrees with this assessment and states that "there is substantial evidence concerning the influence of the mother's education on the educational development of the child" (Department of Education and Science, 2000). Children of poorly educated mothers do not do as well at school, and are more likely to leave school early than children of better educated mothers.

Secondly, a brief look at the history of education shows that, traditionally, girls and women were trained to be wives and mothers, while boys and men were trained for the world of paid work and authority. This reproduced the dominant values of society at that time (WERRC, 1999). In the Celtic Tiger, the same reproduction of values is going on, but the values have changed. It can be argued that mainstream education aims to direct both women and men into paid employment. While gender equality in employment is now recognised as an important goal by society, the value placed on education in preparing people for unpaid work in the home and community – caring and domestic roles – has been reduced. This reflects the singular focus on economic wealth, in the context of the Celtic Tiger, to the detriment of social wealth. It also reflects the utilitarian orientation of the education system to servicing the needs of the paid economy, to the neglect of the domestic economy and the skills and knowledge required therein.

3.4 CONCLUSION

This selected review of the literature outlines the most pertinent and critical themes related to the distinctive practice of the education of women, especially in a community-based setting. This practice of education – being developed in large part by women and for women – is demonstrating how an attentiveness to gender influences the design of educational programmes, creates new meanings of 'knowledge' and challenges traditional understandings of the purpose and function of education

in society. In effect, it is a revolutionary movement that is developing ways of compensating for the deficits in women's experience of traditional education and the site of new educational practices that may have the potential to eradicate the reality of women's educational disadvantage in Irish society today.

The design of this portion of the Millennium Project intended to uncover in a very explicit manner the ways in which women's needs, circumstances and experiences were influencing how they wanted to be educated, and in many cases how they were educating themselves and others in their communities. We wanted to go to (extra)ordinary women themselves, in different parts of Ireland, to hear from them about this explicit link between gender and education. We also wanted to hear from them about how the practice of women's education could be improved upon, and what supports would be required for that improvement. In the process of this research in 11 different geographical settings with 107 women, we hoped to discover some clues to two live questions in the research currently: (1) How is it that women's experiences, circumstances and needs impact on the ways in which they learn? And (2), how can the model of women's community education be developed to address effectively the educational disadvantage of women?

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1 INTRODUCTION: THE DEVELOPING RELATONSHIP 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, 173; 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 education - directly in the process of research, analysis and action-planning.

4.2 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 #3) 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 effect 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 adopted. PLA techniques are capable of accessing both qualitative and quantitative data 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, for example, in this study where exploring women's education needs is essential to a visioning of the ideal educational setting for women. 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), 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[8] 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 education, therefore, includes 8 'national' and 4 'local' issues.

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 education 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 7 teams from urban-based affiliates carried out research on education. Counties Galway, Louth, Kerry, Tipperary and Wicklow were represented, as was Dublin City and County. In all, 12 teams conducted research on the education component, with a total of 107 participants nation-wide[9].

Research Participants: Intensive qualitative study of a small number of cases can lead to valuable understandings about women's education. The sample of 107 participants involved in this study, therefore, is a nonprobability purposeful sample[10]. The principle of selection is the researcher's judgement as to

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[8] As the women involved were called after completion of the first phase of training.

[9] 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 womentaking part in the research did not, especially in small urban centres. Therefore, we cannot give a precise urban/rural split.

[10] Types of purposeful sampling include: extreme or deviant case sampling, typical case sampling, critical case sampling and confirming and disconfirming cases (Kane, 1995).

applicability (Robson 1993). The value of nonprobability sampling lies in the depth and quality of information generated in the research encounter.[11]

Facilitation teams gathered their research participants from within affiliate groups, mainly via network sampling[12]. A basic criterion for selection was that participants needed to be able to speak from personal experiences of education-related issues.

4.5.2 Research Outlines and Selection ofData-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 education 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 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 and analysis in which the group engages.

4.5.2.1 'Women and Education' – range of techniques and sequence:

- **Card Sort 1** was designed to enable participants to study a series of pre-prepared cards covering different aspects of education and decide whether all of these cards would be necessary for an ideal learning environment into the year 2020 or whether some should be discarded.

- The Imagination Exercise was designed to help participants to generate a common vision of the ideal learning environment for women into the year 2020 to prepare for the Time Line Exercise. This was done by asking participants to first recall a positive learning experience in their lives. Then they were asked to imagine (through either journalling or drawing) an ideal learning environment according to 8 headings:
  - Location
  - Learning Relationships
  - Resources
  - Accreditation
  - Systems/processes
  - Flexibility
  - Time availability
  - Childcare

At this point, the women could create a collage to represent their learning environment in visual form.

- Participants then proceeded to the **Time Line**. In this exercise, the women were asked to move from imagining what their ideal learning environment would be like, to devising an action plan to achieve their goal. The twenty years from 2000 to 2020 were divided into blocks of 5 years, and a series of

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[11] As our study sample is not a probability one, we are not making claims for statistical representativeness or significance of our findings.

[12] Network sampling is, again, a type of non-probability sampling.

steps towards the final goal was worked out, working backwards from the year 2020 to the year 2000 (it has been found that working backwards in this manner helps to keep participants positively focused on the end goal).

- The final technique to be completed was an **Educational Goal Profile.** Participants were requested to complete a mini-questionnaire in order to learn about their current educational aims, their reasons for holding these aims, and to establish if a better learning environment might make a difference to participants' educational aspirations.
  Four questions were asked:
  - What is your current educational goal (if any)?
  - Can you name the reason(s) for having that educational goal?
  - If the learning environment you have just imagined was available to you, would you change your educational goal (YES/NO)?
  - If so, to what?

4.5.3 Data Analysis

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 creating seasonal calendars, 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, imagination exercise, timeline and educational goal profile) were utilised for the 'Women and Education' component.

Multiple analytic tools were used to deal with the different forms of data. An outline of the different methods used to analyse the techniques employed in 'Women and Education' follows below:

RESEARCH TECHNIQUE	ANALYTIC TOOL EMPLOYED
Background questionnaires	SPSS
Facilitator evaluation forms	SPSS
Card Sort #1	Microsoft Access
Brainstorming	Microsoft Access
Notes from Imagination Exercise	QSR NUD*IST
Time Line	Microsoft Word
Educational Goal Profile	Microsoft Access
Accompanying observation 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 MONITORINGAND 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 on-going 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).

4.7 ETHICAL ISSUES

For the education 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

12 groups completed research on 'Women and Education', 8 as their national topic and 4 as their local topic. One group was excluded from the cross-analysis of results, as they completed the research in a manner that did not conform to the standardised outline. Therefore, it was not amenable to cross-analysis.

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: 4 groups
County Galway: 2 groups
County Louth: 2 groups
County Kerry: 1 group
County Tipperary: 1 group
County Wicklow: 1 group

5.2 SAMPLE PROFILE

- The average age of the women who completed background questionnaires (respondents) was 40 years.

- 53.4% of respondents described their economic situation as 'comfortable' and 24.7% 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.

- 49% of respondents said they worked inside the home.

- 65.8% of the women said they worked outside the home and 64.4% of these said that their work was paid.

- 15.7% of the respondents said they left education after the Junior or Intermediate certificate, 12.9% after the Leaving Certificate, and 14.3% either during or after a Bachelor's degree at a post secondary institution.

5.3 CARD SORT

In consultation with the National Women's Council of Ireland, a list of pre-prepared cards was drawn up, which reflected current opinion on priorities in education for women in Ireland. Participants were requested to decide how many, if any, of these cards should be discarded and to give any reasons they may have had for their decision.

These priorities or needs included:

- Clear progression routes.
- Flexible delivery models.
- Time flexibility.
- Accreditation.
- Modular courses (take courses in sections).
- Mutual respect for the roles of facilitator and participants.
- Variety of courses.

- Honouring women's experience.
- Affordable childcare.
- Relaxed atmosphere.[13]

Of the 11 groups who were included in this exercise, 9 retained all of the pre-prepared cards.

Group E5 discarded 2 cards, 'flexible delivery models' and 'modular courses'. Unfortunately, the accompanying observation notes did not give a reason for this decision.

Group E9 assimilated and renamed all the pre-prepared cards, but did not include observation notes to explain their reasons for doing so. The renamed cards read as follows:

- Freedom within the structure.
- Resources and finance.
- Accreditation.
- Education and the workplace.
- Self-development and self-empowerment – knowledge is power.

These cards were treated as extra cards added by the group during the brainstorming session for the purposes of this cross-analysis.

Nine of the eleven groups included in this analysis discussed the relevance of each of the pre-prepared cards to their educational needs. In their observation notes, most groups indicated in some way which of the pre-prepared cards were most important to them.

- **Clear Progression Routes**

Four groups discussed the implications of this card. Group E2 felt that clear progression routes could act as a motivating force:

'It was agreed we need clear progression as some people may need a push to get back into education.'

Group E10 said that it was essential that progression routes would be tailored to meet the needs of women. Interestingly, they felt that the issues outlined on the pre-prepared cards did not fully address women's needs:

'Variety of courses and progression very important in adult education…Progression routes must be tailored to meet women's needs…Some of the issues included in a few of the cards are tuned into women's needs, but not broad enough or ignoring the real problems women face.'

While group E7 did not view this issue as being of special importance, they did point out the need for 'adult education counsellors' to support women throughout their progression through the educational system:

'…we need adult education counsellors. If it is the first step back in, it is great to have someone to talk to when you come back…if you haven't got the education and the sensation you feel when you come back you need help. It is support you need.'

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[13] See Appendix A for a full explanation of these cards.

Finally, group E11 saw a number of factors which could render achieving clear, uncomplicated progression routes problematic:

Childcare:
'…choices are limited for women while children are small.'

Fear:
'[women] need to go back to what they really want, fear of change, help needed here.'

Skills for the workplace:
'[There] should be a clear route for women to get back into work they were trained to do if they wish… need for programme to update skills, women cannot afford to stay out of the workplace as skills will be out-dated.'

- **Flexible Delivery Models**

Three groups covered this issue in their observation notes, groups E7, E10 and E11. Group E10 mentioned this issue only briefly, as did group E11, who linked it with the needs of people from different ethnic groups:

'Flexible delivery models are important and [they] need to facilitate different ethnic groups.'

Group E7, however, discussed this topic in more detail and stressed the importance of good facilitation and the use of different media in presentations:

'It is important how it is presented…the facilitator [should] speak one-to-one, not down to you… It shouldn't be just the written word. Collage, clay, video, etc., should be used.'

- **Time Flexibility**

Four groups discussed this issue (groups E1, E6, E7 and E11), all of whom regarded 'time flexibility' as very important. Group E11 saw it as important for both educators and employers:

'Time flexibility [is] very important for both education and work.'

However, the other two groups saw caring for children as the major reason why time flexibility is an issue for women trying to access adult education:

'…because of children and other daily responsibilities [time flexibility] is a must' (Group E6).

'This is an important card. Some women have just dropped their kids to the crèche, they are hassled enough without more pressure on them' (Group E7).

- **Accreditation**

Again, four groups discussed this issue (groups E2, E7, E10 and E11). Group E2's response to this card was critical, but the observation notes do not reveal the reasons behind this, devoting only one line to the topic:

'Accreditation came under the line of fire with a lot of laughter!'

Group E20 went into more detail about the potential problems they saw as being associated with accreditation, saying that it could act to exclude some women from accessing education. They linked this problem with the issue of clear progression routes, emphasising how increased flexibility of progression routes could ameliorate the exclusive potential of accreditation:

'Accreditation [is]…a barrier to some women coming into education. While it is necessary to have it, to give women choice, it should be flexible in the area of the progression route system.'

Groups E7 and E11 both felt that accreditation was a positive and useful thing. E7 felt that it was especially useful for young people and to add to one's resume when seeking employment:

'…you need to have this on [your] CV at the end of the day…it would be good for young people.'

Group E11 felt very strongly that accreditation was fundamentally important:

'Accreditation…is essential, modular courses to be automatically accredited.'

- **Modular Courses**

Only two groups discussed this card, groups E7 and E11. E7 did not regard modular courses as being of significance, while E11 did feel that the provision of modular courses could allow for the recognition of the multiple roles that women play in society, which take up so much of their time:

'Very important to have modular courses, women need to be able to focus on one course at a time, as they tend to have so many commitments.'

- **Mutual Respect for the Roles of Facilitator and Participant**

Four groups covered this card in their observation notes, groups E6, E7, E10 and E11. All 4 regarded mutual respect as essential for a positive experience of education. Group E10 noted:

'if the tutor is domineering it creates a block from learning, this can bring back many of the bad memories of childhood experiences from school.'

Two participants from group E6 felt strongly that mutual respect was a determining factor in their decision to attend an adult education course:

'[They]…made a vital point that if the respect was not there, they would not go.'

Group E7 linked mutual respect with the issue of honouring women's experience. One participant felt that desks and/or chairs were not appropriate and that it was important for lecturers to be more understanding of students' needs:

'One male lecturer just talked for two-and-a-half hours non-stop…They expect you to be academic just like them.'

Group E11 did not go into detail in their observation notes, but did see mutual respect as being of fundamental importance.

- **Variety of Courses**

Groups E7, E10 and E11 talked about issues related to this card. Group E10 regarded the provision of a wide variety of courses as very important. They felt that this should be implemented in conjunction with clear progression routes through education. Group E7 noted briefly that a variety of courses would boost women's confidence. Group E11 felt that there was a need for 'self-esteem courses' to encourage women to 'take on' academic courses. They argued that adult education in the community was not effective at present:

'Adult education in communities [is] not working, hard to motivate people. Need for self-esteem courses to give courage to take on academic courses.'

- **Honouring Women's Experience**

Only two groups referred to this issue. A specific link was made between honouring women's experience and the multiple roles played by women in society in group E10. Recognition of the value of the experience gained by women throughout their lives was stressed by the participants:

'I was married for 37 years. I have no formal skills to go out looking for work, I could do housework or child-minding, but tired of doing those chores. I have gained valuable skills from my role as wife and mother and could do many jobs very well, the problem I face is to convince my employer of this. Pieces of paper…is all that counts when it comes to impressing someone of your capabilities.'

- **Affordable Childcare**

This emerged as the most important of the pre-prepared cards, with six groups (E1, E3, E7, E8, E10 and E11) discussing it in their observation notes. All, apart from one group, regarded childcare as essential to facilitate women's access to adult education.

Group E1 stated that ***'childcare was the single biggest issue in relation to women and education.'*** Group E3 thought that both childcare and care for the elderly were ***'major issues for many…women.'*** Group E8 also believed that childcare was a fundamental issue which had to be addressed before any other change in the education system could be implemented:
'If there was going to be any change for women and opportunities in education, childcare facilities had to be addressed and subsidised.'

E10 linked childcare with peace of mind for women attending courses:

'…affordable childcare [linked] with a relaxed feeling. All present agreed with this and courses were more enjoyable when you could afford childare.'

The group also recommended that free or heavily subsidised on-site facilities should be provided:

'Childcare is important, a mother needs to be able to make convenient and affordable childcare arrangements. On-site facilities would be ideal and also free, if not free, then heavily subsidised.'

Group E7 was the only group to have mixed feelings about the issue of childcare. Some of the participants felt that childcare was positive and necessary:

'This is an issue right now, we can't even provide childcare in [centre][14] for the people we have using it'

While others talked about the possible negative consequences of placing children in day care:

'…the guilt you carry in your head when you are leaving them…it is traumatic for kids when they go into childcare…we are creating a society where it is the only way to go, we have to think about that!'

In the end, however, the group decided that childcare was an important issue, and so decided to retain the card.

- **Relaxed Atmosphere**

Four groups (E6, E7, E8, and E11) referred to this card in their observation notes. Group E7 went into some detail and focused on the word 'relaxed', which encourages women to attend courses in the first place, or to 'continue in the course they are currently following':

'…a lot of forms involved…would annoy me. You need to be relaxed…not hyper and feel inferior.'

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[14] Name of centre withheld for reasons of confidentiality.

E11 felt that women in particular require a relaxed atmosphere and that the décor of certain learning institutions could be improved:

'Relaxed atmosphere, women need this. Universities are anti-learning, rigid, hard, difficult for women. Rooms are cold and grey, no need for that.'

.4 BRAINSTORMING – EXTRA CARDS ADDED

Six of the 11 groups who completed this technique added extra cards. A low number of groups discarded any of the pre-prepared cards, indicating that the cards mentioned above targeted relevant areas of importance for women in education. Below, we can see what cards were added by some of the groups:

	REFERENCES	GROUPS
Finance/affordability	6	6
Accessibility (including public transport and outreach education sites)	5	3
Eligibility and accreditation	3	3
Material resourcing (non-monetary)	2	2
Issues specific to deaf women	4	1
Support for women as carers	3	1

Rank order of cards added in brainstorming session coded and categorised.

The table above shows the list of additional needs cards added by participants, by group and reference. They have been grouped together under 6 main headings for ease of analysis. As some groups created several different cards dealing with a common issue, these have been counted and the ranking of the headings is based on both the number of references and the number of groups who made those references. Topic number one, 'Finance/affordability', is ranked number one.

Four groups provided observation notes to accompany their brainstorming exercises and, of these, comments from group E4 are particularly noteworthy, as they highlight the extension of educational needs required to respond to groups with special needs, and a culture that diverges from the 'norm'. Group E4 members are from an affiliate for women with hearing disabilities. This group added five new cards which looked at different services that must be provided before deaf women can achieve equality and quality of educational provision in the Irish Education system:

- Interpreter – the group felt that this should be paid for by the Government. ISL interpreters should be provided in colleges/universities and in public service.

- Deaf Colleges – if colleges specifically geared to meet the needs of deaf people are provided, then the need to hire interpreters will be reduced.

- Deaf Awareness – the group felt very strongly that hearing people, especially those in education, should be made aware of what it is like to be deaf. In addition, they should be educated in the history and culture of deaf people:

  'Hearing must act like deaf for one day to see how they feel about [being] deaf…All students in college/university should be more aware of deaf cultures and history.'

- Finance – the group recommended that specific grants should be allocated to deaf students, with a special focus on older people:

'…grant for deaf students. Widowers/Widows/Pensioners for deaf even 60s-80s i.e. educational games, keep their minds young.'

- Deaf Programmes on Television – the participants in this group pointed out that although deaf people pay the same licence fee as hearing people, they only have four-and-a-half hours tailored programs per month. The group argued for a reduced licence fee:

  'We pay the same price for TV license as hearing persons. We have only…41/2 hours special programmes for deaf once in a month…'

5.5 IMAGINATION EXERCISE – STEP 1

In this exercise, participants were asked to imagine the 'ideal formal/informal learning environment for women in Ireland, into the year 2020'. The first step in the process was to ask women to remember a time in their lives when they learned or discovered something and it was a wonderful (or positive) experience. There was no specific recording form provided for this part of the exercise, as confidentiality was very important. However, four groups did provide some examples of the memories their participants shared with the group.

Although the focus was on positive educational experiences, two of the four groups recorded negative experiences, mainly related to feelings of inferiority due to lack of respect for the student and negative feelings about the role of the Church in education.

Groups E9 and E10 both recorded positive learning experiences shared by participants. Some of the main themes which emerged included:

Independence: One participant in group E9 said that discovering she could 'survive independently when she first went to live and work abroad' was 'very liberating'.

A woman from group E10 shared her experience of being taught independence by her father. He taught her practical skills like how to wire a plug, and so on. In this way, she ***'learned at a very young age that the important things she needed to learn [were] skills that would make life easier, and this didn't come from books.'***

Learning to drive: emerged as a common positive learning experience in both groups.

'[I] was positive about learning to drive…learning to drive was positive' (Group E9).

'The memory that was her greatest achievement came just over 20 years ago, when she did her driving test. She was 6 months pregnant, and passed her test. She felt wonderful' (Group E10).

Qualifying and/or graduating: two participants described qualifying or graduating as a positive experience; one woman noted that:

'[She] got a qualification in a scientific field, having previously considered herself non-scientific.'

Learning from family and/or friends: This area emerged as being of particular significance to four participants in group E10. One said that ***'learning to do what she [had] seen her parents, family or friends doing gave her the most positive memories.'***

Another described the experience of learning to bake bread with her mother:

'She learned from her mother how to bake bread on a griddle on the outside fire [she lived in a caravan at the time]…She always enjoyed cooking and understood very young that she would never go hungry because she could cook. Because of this, she felt that it was important for her to teach her children to bake and cook.'

A third woman described being taught to ride a bicycle by her father, an experience she found much safer than when her friends had attempted to teach her:

'…when she was about 10, her father took her to the park to teach her to ride a bike. It meant a lot to her that he took the time to teach her. She was very afraid, some of her friends had tried to teach her, but she fell. It was the embarrassment that hurt most. But this time, she wasn't afraid, she trusted her father to take care of her. There was a sense of security and achievement in the experience.'

Finally, a woman shared her experience of her mother teaching her to tie a bow. This powerful memory brought back some of the sensations she felt at the time:

'She can vividly remember the smells from the drying clothes in the room, the fire, and her mother teaching her to tie a bow on the back of a chair. It felt great to be able to do it.'

This was one of the most powerful themes emerging from this section of the exercise. However, it should be remembered that they are only from 1 group and therefore cannot be taken as representative of the sample as a whole.

5.6 IMAGINATION EXERCISE – STEP 2

In this section of the exercise, participants were invited to move on from remembering past experiences to begin to imagine the ideal learning environment in the year 2020 under a series of headings:

- **Places, Physical Location where Education should take place**

A detailed picture emerged of the ideal physical location for education, as 9 groups discussed this issue in their observation notes. The overwhelming consensus was that education should not occur in one centralised, urban location such as the traditional college or university. Rather, the concept of 'place' should be opened up to include the community and the home.

Community education: Five groups stated clearly that their ideal place or location for education in 2020 would be the community. Group E1 felt that this would facilitate a relaxing environment for women returning to education. Group E10 recommended the provision of education centres in rural areas. In order to help provide facilities and suitable premises at low cost, group E3 suggested '…using facilities in National Schools to run education courses for women.'

Groups E6, E7, E10 and E11 all regarded the ideal education centre as a 'one-stop-shop' for women's education, with all the necessary facilities and services located in the same building in the local community. E6, for example, gave a good illustration of what this centre should contain:

'… a building in every large town or city which will have everything a woman needs for education, like a library, gym, crèche, cafeteria, conference/meeting rooms, nurse station, etc…'

However, E11 felt it was important that these 'one-stop-shops' were located not in major urban centres, but in the local community. This, they felt, would help to deal with the problem of isolation. This 'education house' could be used for a number of things, a ***'…crèche in the mornings and a social area for [the] elderly.'*** They also predicted that ***'people coming from work could go to the centre and eat/socialise before classes.'*** The 'education house' should have a library and a canteen which would help ***'lessen the problem of transportation.'***

Education in the home: E11 did not feel that education should only take place in centres such as the one that they outlined above. They also felt it was important for women to be able to access education at home alongside community education:

'Education should take place in the home and local communities.'

This parallel process of home and community education was also preferred by groups E8, E5, and E10. Group E5 felt that this would be especially beneficial for women with young children, who should be supplied with appropriate technology to enable them to access education:

'Women at home with young children should be able to access education like an open university, and [be] supplied with computers'

- **Ideal Learning Relationship between Facilitators and Participants**

Two main areas where learning relationships could be improved emerged in the observation notes of five groups.

The need for improved relationship between facilitators and participants, the form this relationship should take and how to achieve this: It was agreed by all the groups who referred to this issue that there was a need to improve the existing relationship between facilitators and participants. The ideal relationship that should exist by 2020 was generally felt to be supportive, respectful and egalitarian:

'…guidance and support in relation to your subject…People need to be supportive of women learning. Be able to question with mutual respect, not being limited. Equal rights on both sides' (Group E9).

Group E7 saw one way to achieve this by removing the physical and psychological barriers that currently exist between facilitators and participants:

'…a round-table situation in the classroom, with the tutor and pupils all on an equal footing… no top desks/no barriers/facilitator there, to support rather than a tutor/pupil scenario.'

Another suggestion came from E6, who recommended that screening of teaching staff should take place:

'Teachers/trainers/facilitators should all be highly qualified not just on paper but by experience, they should be screened by law…'

The need to share experiences with other participants: Group E9 put forward an alternative model to the traditional facilitator/participant relationship, one in which the value of women learning from each other by sharing their experiences is recognised and appreciated:

'Sharing real experience, learn from someone who has been there…learning from each other in terms of [the] practical, emotional and financial.'

- **Resources Necessary for this Learning Environment**

This was referred to by 8 groups. Resources include:

- materials such as books, stationery and so on essential to education and
- equipment and hardware such as televisions, videos and computers.

By far the biggest focus was on the need to provide adequate IT resources to women in education. Group E2 envisaged a future where ***'school bags [would be] a thing of the past, lap-tops [would be] used instead.'*** However, they were concerned that an over-reliance on technology ***'may lead people to lose their communication skills.'***

Women were very conscious of the benefits of computer networking for women, in that it would provide more flexibility and adaptability in education. A woman from group E3 said she ***'would like to see computers in every home so women would be able to access courses at home if they were unable to go to a class.'*** Similarly, group E9 saw the internet as a *'learning medium'* which could be used to support ***'interactive discussion groups'***.

However, not every group was enthusiastic about the increasing role of information technology in modern education. Group E11 highlighted the fear and anxiety that some feel concerning the rapid expansion of global networking:

'Fear – the internet could be the making or breaking of us.'

- **Accreditation of Courses**

Only three groups referred to accreditation. Group E9 felt that accreditation should be based on ***'clear and easily assessable information.'*** Group E7 recommended the use of a smart card system to store and keep track of credits attained. Group E11 linked the issue of accreditation with holistic education, believing that ***'points [should]…be given for holistic development.'***

- **Flexibility**

Five groups discussed this issue. However, each constructed the concept of flexibility in a different way. One inference that could be drawn from this is that flexibility should extend throughout the entire educational system and that more decision-making power needs to be placed in the hands of women rather than in the hands of the educators. Group E1 linked flexibility with the physical location where education should take place, and argued for ***'more flexibility for women to have [education] in and out of home.'*** Group E3 took a more holistic view, arguing for ***'less rigid educational conditions'*** for all adults. Group E9 also felt that there should be freedom within the overall educational structure:

'Freedom within the structure, you need to be free, opinion counts…freedom to spend different lengths of time on different things.'

Group E7 echoed this sentiment, arguing for the freedom for women to learn at their own pace. Group E10 linked the idea of flexibility with the ability to choose and/or change courses.

- **Time Availability**

No groups referred to this issue in their observation notes.

- **Childcare**

Although childcare arose as an important issue in previous exercises, only three groups referred to it as being of importance in the imagination exercise. However, another two groups (E10 and E11) referred to the need for crèches as part of a 'one-stop-shop' for women's education.

Group E8 reiterated the point made earlier that ***'…the first issue women needed to solve before they could even enter into education was childcare, not only pre-school, but after-school care.'*** Group E2 did not go into detail but did say that there should be more access to childcare in the year 2020. Group E3 stated that ***'state-funded crèches'*** should be provided for children.

5.6.1 Emergent Emic Categories

Three other areas of significance arose, which were not categorisable under any of the above headings but were of sufficient significance to merit separate listing and analysis.

1. Finance

Four groups discussed this issue, mainly in terms of increasing government funding for education, either by providing free education (groups E6, E7, and E11) or by providing additional funding for services such as FÁS (group E9).

2. Practical skills for the workplace

Three groups felt that this was an important part of education, and made a distinction between 'academic' education and learning skills which would be useful for employment such as building and catering (E3), IT (E9), carpentry, electrical and plumbing (E6). Group E9 also pointed out the need for more integration between the workplace and education:

'Workplace and education should be complementary and overlapping: both should be integrated.'

3. Women's input into education

Three groups (E1, E3 and E7) would like to see increased input by women into education and/or course design. E1 envisaged this as operating on a community level:

'Women must get involved in the planning of housing estates, which must include a community centre for further education for women.'

A participant from group E3 felt that women should have a role in designing courses geared towards women. In addition, women should have more representation in positions of power:

'…women should have input into [the] design of courses for women… we need more women in positions of power in organisational circles.'

5.7 TIMELINE

The time line exercises carried out by research groups were too group-specific and therefore diverse to be amenable to meaningful cross-analysis. It was therefore decided to analyse only the observation notes arising from the imagination and time-line exercises to pin-point and describe the main emergent themes. See above.

5.8 EDUCATIONAL GOAL PROFILE

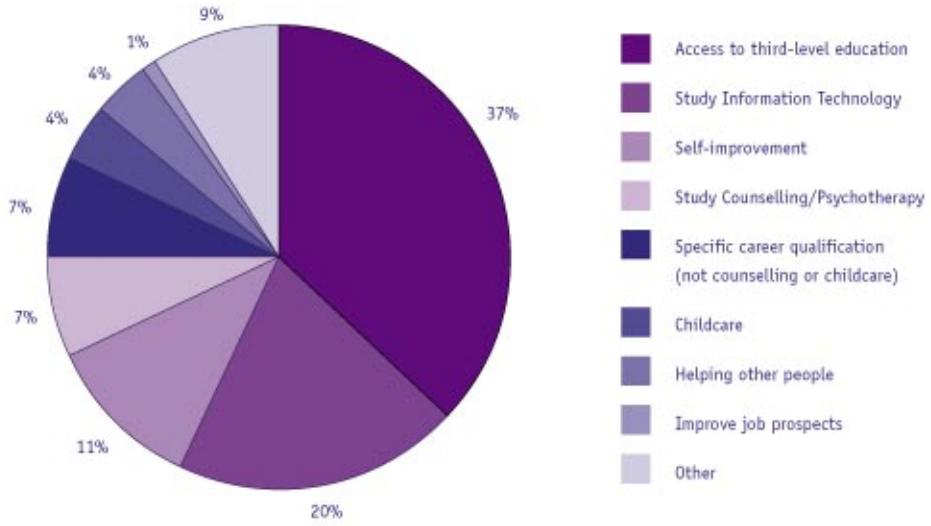
Participants were requested to complete a mini-questionnaire in order to learn about their current educational aims, their reasons for holding these aims, and to establish if a better learning environment might make a difference to participants' educational aspirations.

Four questions were asked:

1. What is your current educational goal (if any)?
2. Can you name the reason(s) for having that educational goal?
3. If the learning environment you have just imagined were available to you, would you change your educational goal (YES/NO)?
4. If so, to what?

10 groups completed this section, comprising 70 participants. Responses were coded and bunched under a number of common categories for each question.

5.8.1 Question 1: Current Educational Goals



Six main categories emerged from the responses to this question. By far the most common educational goal stated was to access third level education, with 37% of responses being grouped under this category. Another popular option was the goal of studying information technology (20%).

A significant gap between the first two ranked categories and subsequent goals was evident, with 'Self-improvement' ranking third at 11% of responses.

From this point on there is a stepped decline with two options ('Study counselling and/or psychotherapy', and 'Specific career qualification other than counselling or childcare' ranking fourth at 7% and two ('Childcare' and 'Helping other people') ranking fifth at 4%. Only one woman referred to improving her job prospects as a current educational goal (approximately 1%).

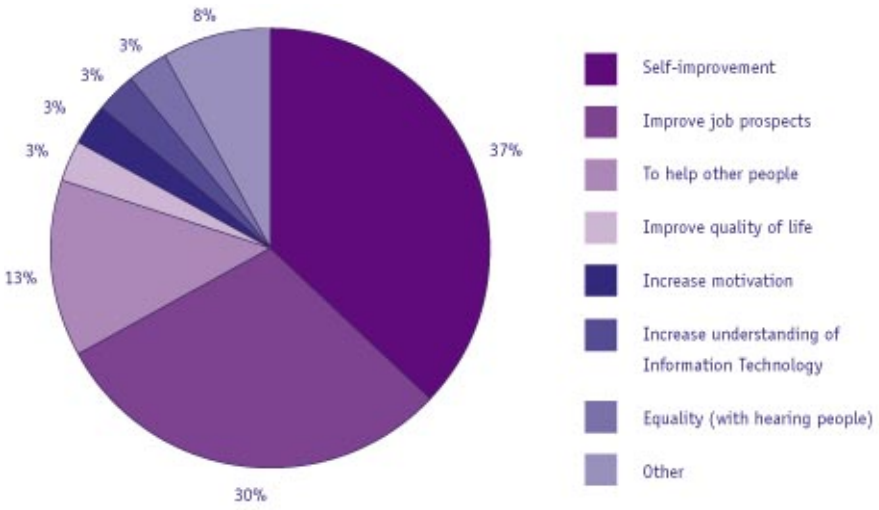
It is interesting that 'Studying counselling and/or psychotherapy' emerged as a specific category in this profile.

Those current educational goals that were specific to one woman and therefore classified as 'other' consisted of the following:

1. To learn Spanish
2. To take further art classes

3. Leaving Certificate
4. Equal opportunity for everyone
5. General evening courses in my retirement
6. To learn more about politics and how they work for or against me as a woman.

5.8.2 Reasons for Current Educational Goal



Seven main categories emerged from the responses to this question. The top two ranked reasons, 'Self-improvement' and 'Improve job prospects' obtained roughly equal response numbers, at 37% and 30% respectively. There was a sharp drop to the category ranked third, 'To help other people' at 13%.
The remaining four categories did not emerge as being of major significance to participants. Each of these only represented 3% of the overall responses to this question. However, it is worthwhile noting that the issue of 'Equality with hearing people', represents responses from a special interest group which can give us an insight into the specific needs and gaps faced by deaf women when trying to access education.

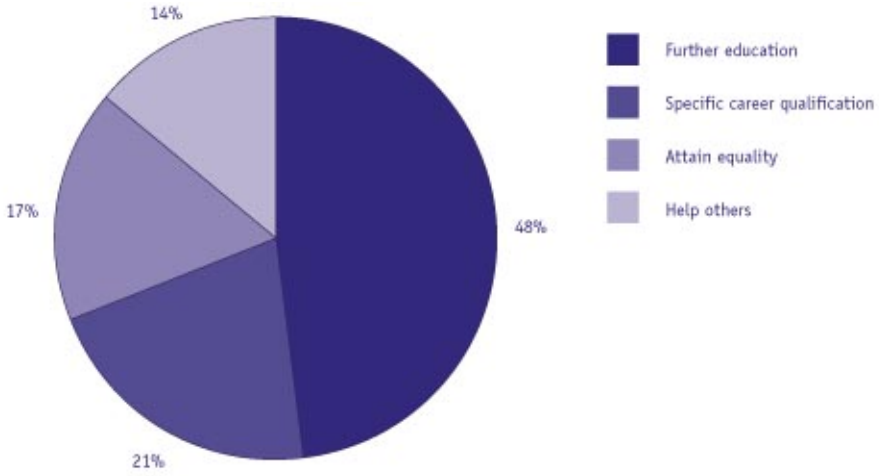
Those reasons given that were specific to one woman and therefore classified as 'other' consisted of the following:

1. I am tired in my job and am interested in holistic education.
2. Love sign language
3. To work in Latin America
4. To write a book or two
5. To become a counsellor
6. Language teaching.

5.8. Question 3: Would/Would not change Educational Goal if Learning Environment Changed

The results from responses to this question are somewhat equivocal, giving an approximate 50/50 split, with 51% of participants answering 'No' to this question, and 49% answering 'Yes'. On these results a firm conclusion cannot be drawn as to whether a better learning environment is perceived as likely to make a difference to a participant's educational aspiration. However, it can be stated that a better learning environment is perceived as likely to make a difference to 49% of participants.

.4 Question 4: If yes to question 3, please specify your changed educational goal



Only 29 of those who answered 'yes' to question 3 specified their changed educational goal. A significant majority (48%) said they would engage in further education once they had achieved their current goal. 21% said they would now attempt to secure a qualification related to a career choice. The 17% of participants who said they would work to 'Attain equality' represent those members of the group with a specific interest in educational issues for deaf women. Finally, 14% said they would now hope to use their educational skills to help other people.

6. DISCUSSION

6.1 FINDINGS 'FROM THE INSIDE OUT'

As women state their educational priorities, they name models of education that have been developed *by themselves*, and that have grown organically in local community and university settings. Their interpretations of priorities are also a call to allow the forms and educational models that are rooted in the needs and circumstances of women's lives to receive recognition as successful education systems. Women's groups in the community and women in third-level settings are creating programmes that are educating themselves and that are creating learning contexts and learning supports for women learners.

The initial part of our discussion of the findings is organised according to the two questions (noted above) that frame a lively debate within the current literature. These findings emerge from the first two research techniques: card sorts and brainstorming. We suggest that the data produced by these methods offer contemporary and persuasive answers to the critical questions that have surfaced within the literature.

.2 HOW IS IT THAT WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES, CIRCUMSTANCES AND NEEDS IMPACT THE WAYS THAT THEY LEARN?

By clustering a number of responses to the first two research techniques, we hear the women voice clearly their priorities as participants engaged in their own learning. Implicit in their naming and interpretation of priorities are statements that demonstrate the links between experience, needs and potent ways of learning.

A *relational environment* is essential in order that the exchange of knowledge rooted in female experience becomes a mutual act between facilitator and participant. *Mutual respect* is fundamental for a positive experience of education: ***'If the tutor is domineering, it creates a block from learning. This can bring back many of the bad memories of childhood experiences from school.'*** This issue is so important that it was the hinge upon which many hung their decision whether or not to return to further education.

These reflections confirm other research outlined in the literature review showing that principles have emerged from the practice of women's community education, and these in turn have become the hallmarks of a feminist pedagogy. Reflecting on their experience of adult education as a relational model allowed some participants to analyse critically some of the negative aspects of the formal system of second-level schooling that their children are still enduring. They concluded that together they should confront these situations. ***'Parents should get together and go to [the] teacher.'***

This is a clear example of those who live on the margins of society having the insight and analytic capacity to offer an essential critique to the centre. As bell hooks reminds us, "marginality is much more than a site of deprivation; in fact, it is the site of radical possibility, a space of resistance. It was this marginality that I was naming as a central location for the production of a counter-hegemonic discourse that is not just found in words but in habits of being and the way one lives" (1990). Much has been written over the past fifteen years about women's ways of knowing.[15] This research confirms that mutual respect is of fundamental importance in any exchange of knowledge.

Honouring women's experience can be named as a primary category in feminist pedagogy. Within this research the women concurred with this view and indicated how the failure to recognise women's work – in all its multiple expressions – negates women's experience and leads to a loss of self-esteem and self-confidence.

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[15] See for example Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule, Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice and Mind (New York: Basic Books, 1986).

Women returning to education discover, especially in personal development courses, that their stories are shared. This exchange breaks a sense of isolation and powerlessness and can lead to the terror of discovery that her life matters. Taking this first step, choosing to opt for herself, can lead to a life of fuller participation in community and society. As the literature review demonstrates, honouring women and their experience can be a transformative act. This type of self-development and self-empowerment was summarised by an additional card devised by a group which simply stated 'knowledge is power.' Within the web of relationship, which becomes the context of learning, women trust the truth of their own experience, the knowledge spoken by their own bodies, memories, sexualities and imaginations.

A *relaxed atmosphere* further impacts on the ways women learn. A welcoming environment embraces women who may otherwise 'feel inferior' as they return to learning. This ease of place can be a determining factor as to whether women continue on the education course they are currently following. ***'Universities are anti-learning, rigid, hard, difficult for women. Rooms are cold and grey. There is no need for that.'*** Beauty and warmth have not always been priorities in places of learning. Because of the fact that 'community education is a very poorly funded sector of education in comparative terms' (Lynch 1999) provision of appropriate premises has been a constant struggle for voluntary and community providers. This fact has significant resource implications for the proper funding of community education. The fact that some providers have managed to create situations which are physically and emotionally comforting and supportive is a tribute to their vision and commitment. Attention to the voices of women , as they find expression in this research, alerts us to the profound significance that the emotional and physical contexts in which learning occurs, hold for them.

Women's needs must be addressed if they are to return to education. One such expressed need is *affordable childcare*. This emerged as the most important requirement in this part of the research. If access to education is to be made available to women, then childcare must be provided. How many more studies, research projects, or policy statements need to be written before government meets this educational need of women? In addition, it is not simply an adequate provision of places that is needed, but childcare must be affordable and if possible, on-site.

Some of the women in this research insisted that the issue of ***childcare 'be broadened to embrace all the caring responsibilities of women – care of the elderly, for example – this is a major issue for many women.'*** Some respondents expressed their concerns about the culture of childcare that is growing in our society. Another respondent talked of "the guilt you carry in your head when you are leaving them." Guilt is a negative emotion. While choice must always be honoured, it is important that women do not fail to avail of educational opportunities in their own lives, as they buy into a guilt fed from oppressive gender stereotypes. Parents must always have a choice and it is important that it is an informed choice. It would seem an opportune time for our society to systematically educate all adults to the values of early childhood education and care, which can contribute positively to the developmental needs of children.

Women's freedom to participate in their own ongoing education, training and development is therefore clearly dependent on the provision and financing of their caring responsibilities. It should be noted that the mean age of the participants in this research was 40 years. Women in their middle years continue to hold sole responsibility for all those in their lives who need care—children, people with certain disabilities and the elderly. If women, especially those living in areas of disadvantage, are to avail of opportunities for their own lives—to return to education, to retrain for employment, - then the findings of this research are clear and loud. Childcare and eldercare must be systematically developed, provided and financed by the State.

The final needs expressed by the women were *accessibility* of educational opportunity and *financial support* to take it up. The broad geographical spread of those participating in the research allows a strong and vibrant rural perspective to be heard. It is time for the universities and third level colleges to go to remote rural areas in Ireland so that equal opportunity for all can become a reality. The call for 'outreach' accredited programmes is clear. Transport to allow people to travel to the local setting must also be provided. Further, the women recommended that grant aid for re-training should be provided by the State, to cover hidden costs: lunch, materials, textbooks and out of pocket expenses. And, once again, personal finance was coupled with the call to finance the caring responsibilities of women. If this happened, women would have the ***'space and time for study'*** as well as the opportunity to attend the courses and training. This was viewed as a critical ingredient on the path towards a successful educational outcome.

These, then, are the priorities expressed by 107 women throughout Ireland regarding their efforts to educate and be educated in a way that responds to their identity, diversity and circumstances as women.

.3 HOW CAN THE MODEL OF WOMEN'S COMMUNITY EDUCATION BE DEVELOPED TO EFFECTIVELY ADDRESS THE EDUCATIONAL DISADVANTAGE OF WOMEN?

In the literature review, we outlined several of the characteristics of women's educational disadvantage, the circumstances that contribute to it and how it inhibits women's full participation in the society and the economy. The data of this research, especially that which emerged within the context of women's community education groups, confirms that traditional educational responses have failed women in disadvantaged communities. The deficits in their experiences of education both contribute to their economic disadvantage and block significantly their efforts to break the generational cycle of poverty. As noted already, women may have begun to create their own solutions to the reality of educational disadvantage. They have begun to structure courses and programmes of education in ways that recognise their social, cultural, physical and economic needs. However, in order for these programmes to make a significant impact on eradicating educational disadvantage, there are several components of community education that could be developed and several supports that still need to be put in place. The findings from this research identify some of the most pertinent ones for women today.

To begin with, there must be sufficient motivation for women to break through the cycle of disadvantage and take steps towards a different future. The data indicates that *clear progression routes* are a key requirement for women to make the initial choice to return to education. Adult education counsellors who understand the needs and circumstances of women's lives could provide the necessary clarity of information and guidance as to progression routes where they exist, and/or support in choosing the most beneficial options available, thus enhancing the motivation of women to return to education. This must be supported by actions which successfully remove the blocks to progression that many participants immediately saw: lack of childcare, fear and lack of confidence to take the first step to return to learning.

Progression routes will vary for different women. While many see progression in terms of further education, others identify the need for clear links between women's community education and re-training for employment. Differences among women must also influence the shape of the delivery of courses and the educational supports required for successful outcomes. Some participants saw a need to learn skills ***'such as building, catering, carpentry, electrical and plumbing.'*** It was also recommended that the workplace itself would be a site for women's education: "workplace and education should be complementary and overlapping; both should be integrated."

The differences between and among women in this research were highlighted by the participation of women from the deaf community, who clearly highlighted the lack of equality and quality of education for the deaf. They present a strong challenge to hearing people to develop 'deaf awareness': ***'Hearing must act***

like deaf for one day to see how they feel about [being] deaf . . . . All students in college/university should be more aware of deaf cultures and history.' Participants proposed that actions towards a different future for deaf women must include: the provision of State-funded interpreters, the establishing of deaf colleges designed specifically to meet the needs of deaf people and additional financial supports for deaf people – especially older deaf people – who return to education.

Given the diversity of need, there is a challenge to women's community education to develop clear, systematic and inclusive progression routes. In its origins, this form of education grew by responding to the needs and circumstances of women's lives. This original dynamism, however, must be met with an equal attentiveness to clarifying the kinds of quality educational paths and outcomes that will bring women out of the 'disadvantaged' lifestyle. Women themselves are now calling for progression routes that will both meet their needs and bring them to their desired outcomes. Such progression should be designed and delivered *within community settings*, as well as between community and the formal settings. Then, as some women seek to move into third level education, it is ***'very important to have modular courses, women need to be able to focus on one course at a time, as they tend to have so many commitments.'*** Flexible delivery models are important if this group is to achieve their aspired goals.

The issue of *accreditation* is closely allied to clear progression routes and flexibility of delivery. In this research the women note accreditation as both crucial and complex. It is named as vital if the model of women's community education is to develop effectively in a manner which addresses the educational disadvantage of women. '***You need to have this on [your] C.V. at the end of the day.' 'Accreditation . . . is essential, modular courses should be automatically accredited.'*** However, concern was expressed that the accredited progression route would not be an exclusive option within the community setting. While some women want the opportunity to take accredited courses, others may prefer a progression route through non-accredited courses. ***'While it is necessary to have [accreditation], to give women choice, it should be flexible in the area of the progression system.'*** It is also important to note that the data indicates an ambivalence surrounding the issue of accreditation for some women. As one woman said, ***'pieces of paper . . . are all that count when it comes to impressing someone of your capabilities.'*** It is as if a woman has to deny her identity, her working class background and assume the standards set by the middle classes in order to receive honour and recognition. To buy into accreditation in some senses means to buy out of your class. Such decisions are often fraught with contradiction. The development of women's community education must take account of these reflections and, in so doing, presents a challenge to provide forms of accreditation which are meaningful , appropriate and valuing to and of working class women's, and ethnic and minority women's, educational attainment.

All of the above ingredients are deemed essential for the development of a model of education that can break the patterns of educational disadvantage. Whether the progression route is towards professionally qualified positions in the local community, whether women aspire to third-level qualification, whether they wish to re-train for employment, or again whether their aspiration is towards self-improvement, women's community education holds the potential to affect these outcomes for a diverse group of women if the identified components are adequately resourced and effectively cultivated.

6.4 INTO THE FUTURE: IMAGING THE IDEAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENT FOR WOMEN

The next research technique used to explore women's views on education was designed to complement critical reflection on experience with creative imaging of an ideal future. The 'views from the ground' certainly include visions into the future, and we wanted to design a way to invite women to open the windows of what could be. The data 'captured' in such a method provides guidelines for the development of educational systems and models that are genuinely constructed through a gender lens. Facilitators began by asking participants to recall a positive educational experience from the past. It is interesting to note that

in at least two groups, negative memories surfaced strongly, in terms of feelings of inferiority related to having ***'gone through the older educational system.'*** This is important as it allows us to observe that women's loss of self-esteem and self-confidence, especially those who are young mothers at home, may have roots in an earlier educational experience at school. Even more interesting is the fact that none of the groups who did recall positive educational experiences included a 'school' experience in this; rather, the positive memories involved learning from friends and family, being taught independence by a father, skills by a mother, or experiences of achievement such as graduating or obtaining a qualification.

Our memories shape our sense of history. These memories show the power and the influence of family as a prime educational location. This is well known, and as we have highlighted in the literature review, the education of mothers has a major influence on the value children place on their own education. When one considers this fact with the entitlement of women, especially marginalised women, to educational opportunities then it seems logical to conclude that funding investment in adult women's education is one of the wisest expenditures any state could incur.

The research finally encouraged women to use their faculties of imagination to image the possible and to shape the future by such imagery. While most research is dependent on the critical and analytic faculty of reason, it was agreed in the design of this research to call on the equally rich resource of the female imagination. Imagination allows us to think of the possible rather than the actual. Furthermore, images of the possible allow the possible to be created. There is a clear link between imagination and emotion; those who feel deeply usually can image vividly. In research, that intends to avoid the dualisms that have marked positivism, where reason holds primacy over imagination and rationality over emotion, it was decided that the inclusion of this final technique would allow an integrated and holistic response to the question of gender and education. It is also important to note that identifying imagination as the capacity to think of the possible does not suggest any conflict with rationality. On the contrary, imagination allows us to hold the differences, the ambiguities and the contradictions in a manner that can allow the new to emerge, and so advance understanding.

In the imaginings of the ideal learning environment in the year 2020, *place* emerged as a prominent category. It was suggested that the concept of the education 'place' should be opened up to include community and home. As we recall in the memories of many of these women, the traditional place of education – the school – was filled with negative images. Here the imagination calls for a radical reversal of the narrow focus on school as the place of education, and broadens the horizon of possibility to include community and home as mutually beneficial sites for learning. In this future time there would be ***'an education house' which would be 'a building in every large town or city which will have everything a woman needs for education, like a library, gym, crèche, cafeteria, conference/meeting rooms, nurse station, etc.'*** Such a 'house' would allow people coming from work to go to there and eat/socialise before classes. This 'relaxing environment' would meet so many of the expressed needs as stated in the earlier part of the research such as 'flexibility' and 'one-stop-shop' for all educational needs.

The home as a locus for learning was also proposed for this future time. ***"Women at home with young children should be able to access education like an open university, and should be supplied with computers."*** There is a clear challenge in these images to revisit and critically evaluate the primacy that formal schools hold as places of education. Over the past fifteen years women's education groups have been meeting, some in their own centres, yet, to date, there is no sense of a mutual partnership in communities between what happens in the "formal" sector and what is happening in the "informal" sector. Indeed, that very language unveils a dichotomy that breeds a hierarchy. Over the past fifteen years there have been some initiatives which are models of good collaborative practice between education providers and accrediting bodies and community and voluntary providers. Three examples indicate the type of collaboration that has been happening. Women's studies courses have been offered in local communities in

conjuction with local women's based groups and WERRC (UCD), outreach programmes have been offered by NUI Maynooth through its Centre for Adult and Continuing Education and a variety of courses on an outreach or access basis have developed through the NCEA ACCS system, through the IT colleges. The success of these initiatives supports the assertion that working class women, and others who have experienced educational disadvantage, find locally provided courses, close to or within home, school or community the appropriate places to start and perhaps to continue educational journeys. These images of 'place' open up a possible relationship of mutual partnership between home, community and school where no one locus holds dominance but each speaks with a different voice towards achieving a more holistic vision of what knowing and learning is all about.

The ideal learning environment would also be marked by a new form of relationship between the facilitators of learning and the participants. The ideal relationship that should exist by 2020 was generally felt to be supportive, respectful and egalitarian.

The primacy of relationship to enable learning is something many educationalists have deemed primary. Paulo Freire, the noted Brazilian philosopher of education, argued that true dialogue, which is the foundation of all learning, is rooted in love. The various writings on 'women's ways of learning' further highlight the centrality of mutually respectful relationship. In this research the strength of imagery calls us to re-examine the systems of power and domination that are promoted by our failure to attend to a relational pedagogy. The ideal relational setting would have: ***'a round-table situation in the classroom, with tutor and pupils all on an equal footing. No top desks, no barriers, and the facilitators would be there to support rather than a tutor/pupil scenario.'*** This model of learning is consistent with feminist pedagogy which rejects the teacher expert/student novice dichotomy and proposes a shared community of learners.

By the year 2020, ***'school bags [would be] a thing of the past, lap-tops [would be] used instead.'*** While expressing some fear and anxiety that technology would lead people to 'lose their communication skills', most groups involved in the research felt that there was a need to provide adequate information technology resources to women in education. As stated above, computers would allow women ***'to access courses in their own home', and they would use the internet as a 'learning medium' which could support 'interactive discussion groups.'***

Finally, in the imagery of the future that emerged from this research there is a clear anticipation of increased freedom and greater creativity. Women will have ***'more flexibility to have [education] in and out of home.'*** One group projects that there will be ***'less rigid educational conditions',*** another that there will be ***'freedom within the structure.'*** There are also images that indicate a greater empowerment and confidence – ***'Women should have input into design of courses for women.'*** Rooted in the authority of their present experience of community education, women are projecting that they will have greater decision-making power in education, in general ,and greater influence in shaping future educational policy. They state, ***'we need more women in positions of power in organisational circles.'***

One way of interpreting these desires for the future is to name them as an affirmation of the present. Women's community education, a system of education grown and developed by women themselves to meet their educational needs, has given a new confidence, a clear insight that this model of education has indeed a voice. This voice must be heard by the wider educational community and must be listened to, and learnt from, if the necessary systemic change in our education system in Ireland is to happen. To assure that this confidence is well-founded and to allow this hope to be realised, we now turn to the conclusions and recommendations for action that have emerged from this research.

7. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

7.1 CONCLUSIONS

Several conclusions can be drawn from this component which was intended to uncover the elements and dynamics of educational processes and systems that are being shaped by attentiveness to gender. The 107 women who participated in this education component are involved in the process of educating other women, or are themselves returners to education. Perhaps the primary conclusion that can be reached from our discussion on the findings is that women know – *through critical reflection on experience, remembering the past and imagining the future – how to design educational programmes that effectively respond to the ways that women learn*. It is this women's knowing that we sought through our research techniques, based on the conviction that it ought to shape educational policy at local, regional and national level.

7.1.1 Gender impacts the ways we learn

Our findings demonstrate that there are numerous ways in which women's needs, circumstances and social position affect what they require to learn. Women learn best in relational and relaxed environments where the challenge comes not so much from an intense competitive climate as from a setting that affirms and honours their experience, and nurtures their desire to know and to use that knowledge in a diversity of ways. Women learn significant lessons even as they walk the path of choice to 'return to education', especially those who have no educational qualifications. This fundamental 'choice for herself' lays the foundations for developing the necessary habit of 'choosing herself' even amidst the ongoing responsibilities of being the primary carer of family. She has to learn this habit if she is to achieve a successful educational outcome. This habit cannot be developed, however, if there are few caring supports available to her. If a woman has caring responsibilities – especially the young single mother – *she will not be able to return to and stay in education unless those caring responsibilities are shared by the State*. We also saw clearly how there is a diversity of need and circumstance, and often this diversity will mean that additional supports are required for women to have genuine and fair access to successful educational outcomes.

7.1.2 Women's Community Education: Creating Solutions to Educational Disadvantage

Educational disadvantage is a reality for women (and men) primarily because the circumstances of their lives – including their experiences of the traditional educational system – inhibit them from achieving a successful educational outcome. Women's community education has provided a participatory woman-focused and women-friendly context which has attracted many women, especially low-income working class women, back to education. Johnston (1998) estimates that 80% of the 14,000 people participating in community-based education are women. Women's community education, because it is rooted in an educational philosophy of designing educational programmes that respond positively to women's needs and circumstances, is supporting the development of skills and knowledge to empower women to challenge circumstances of disadvantage. To develop this model in order to be more effective in this regard, the women who participated in this research know what is needed. Clear progression routes, both within community education and between community and third-level, and between community and employment, must continue to be designed because this supports the staying-power of women in education and because it is absolutely necessary for valued educational outcomes. Allied to this, a greater diversity of courses needs to be available within communities, the delivery styles and times must be flexible and more forms and types of accreditation must be part of this system of education. Again, childcare is an absolute requirement and many women recommended that on-site childcare facilities would provide the most supportive way for them to choose and stay with their education.

7.1.3 Women's Ideal Learning Environment

This was a powerful portion of the research. Women imagining the possible is surely the first step in allowing the possible to be created. Several important and fundamental categories emerged within these findings:

- The *place* of education is critical for effective learning. Why can't the home and the community be as fully recognised and as financially supported locations for learning as are third-level settings?
- The *relationships* within the educational process are paramount for ease of knowing and developing one's full potential as a learner. Why can't the educational dialogue between tutor/facilitator and learner be rooted in mutual respect, equality and love?

- *Literacy in information and communication technology* should be a fundamental component of the curriculum, and a tool for diverse ways of learning and diverse settings of learning. Why can't every home have ICT?

- *Women's ways of learning* hold valuable insights that should inform broader educational policy and systems in this State. Why can't all partners in education engage in a dialogue of mutual learning?

7.2 RECOMMENDATIONS

We will cluster our recommendations around three major headings.

7.2.1 The Development of Women's Community Education

From the results, it is clear that a potentially effective model for the education of women at local level has already been developed, which if properly resourced, supported and evaluated could provide a system of effective Women's community-based education. We view the following recommendations as vital ingredients for the systematic maturation of women's community education.

- That core and multi-annual **funding** should be granted to all women's community education groups, who meet an established set of criteria. This funding should not be granted on a competitive basis between the groups. Rather, it should be based on each group's ability to demonstrate good practice. Formal evaluations should be built into the granting of all funding. One government department, namely Education and Science, should take the overall responsibility for co-ordinating the funding of this sector.

- That a **framework** for the principles, curriculum, methodologies, educational philosophies and pedagogies be developed in a systematic manner for the practice of women's community education. This framework should be formulated as a result of an extensive consultative process throughout the country, in a partnership between participants, facilitators and the Department of Education and Science.

- At this point in the history of its development, this system of education should be recognised by developing and implementing appropriate modes of **accreditation** that genuinely assist women's progression. This work should be done in a partnership between the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI) and other accrediting bodies, third-level colleges and representatives of women's community education.

- That the necessary supports tailored to meet women's needs for them to return to education be put in place. While these have been named as childcare, eldercare, time flexibility, adult education guidance counsellors, grant-aided funding and assistance for people with disabilities, no systematic response has yet been put in place by Government to meet these needs. There is, therefore, an urgent need to demonstrate genuine commitment by government to this system of education.

7.2.2 Women's Ways of Learning

It is evident from the research that women deem relationship to be at the heart of how they learn. Therefore, we recommend the following:

- That a national **accredited training programme** is developed for tutors and facilitators in women's community education. Such a training would focus on the centrality of mutual relationship in the learning process, the specific needs and circumstances of a diversity of women and the variety of ways to sustain women to achieve their chosen educational goals. Existing models of good practice should be used in the design of such a programme.

- That the principles of a **feminist pedagogies and critical pedagogies** be developed and sustained in women's community education. Such principles hold an attentiveness to a **holistic** approach to learning, that is, programmes and courses that attend to the emotional, intellectual, bodily and creative needs of women. These will be more likely to meet the needs of women and allow them to sustain their commitment to learning.

7.2.3 The Place of Women's Education

From the results, we can see that the place of women's education was deemed significant, and women challenged traditional understandings of learning locations that are acknowledged as valuable by society and employers. In light of this, we make the following recommendations:

- That there is an **education house** in every community designated as disadvantaged, as well as other communities who demonstrate an interest and a need.

- That the education house is designed from an **holistic perspective**, incorporating on-site childcare, study/library facilities, an ICT open learning centre, training rooms, conference rooms and kitchen/ eating areas.

- That **outreach programmes** from third-level settings are conducted in every education house and that education houses offer advice in and supports for 'distance learning' programmes. Accredited programmes can be chosen according to local demand. This will necessitate the development of outreach programmes in the third-level settings, so that there will be an adequate number of lecturers, tutors and facilitators of learning who can teach within the communities as well as third-level sites. These professionals should be trained in methods and approaches of women's community education.

- That **employment-training programmes** be developed in partnership with local employers and community educators, to be offered in the education house, and to link that curriculum with work-experience in local employment settings.

- That the **home** is acknowledged as a genuine location of learning for women, especially in disadvantaged communities. Therefore, all homes in these areas should be fully equipped with ICT. An integrated, intergenerational plan to educate women and their children to enhance their home environment as a learning centre could be planned and implemented. An investment in ICT education in schools which neglects a parallel investment in communities and homes is lopsided and will further disenfranchise adults especially in areas of disadvantage.

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APPENDIX 1. WOMEN AND EDUCATION BACK-UP SHEET

Clear Progression Routes:
Women returning to education should be able to avail of educational guidance and counselling. This will allow them to clarify their educational goals and to choose courses in an informed way.

Flexible Delivery Models:
Those who teach and facilitate women's learning should be very flexible in the way they present material. They should model a variety of teaching styles and be creative in the way they impart knowledge.

Time Flexibility:
In order to take up educational opportunities, women need flexibility. They need courses to be available at times that suit their timetables.

Accreditation:
A system needs to be put in place that allows a woman to get credit for every course she takes. Credits would accumulate and allow job promotion for women in the workplace, or be taken into account if a woman wants to return to College. A 'smart card' system could be developed – every course taken would build up credit.

Modular Courses:
All Colleges and Universities should allow students to take their certificate, diploma and degree courses in modules that do not have to follow each other. This would allow the candidate to break down the task of getting a degree into different modules and to take each module at a pace that is acceptable to the student.

Mutual Respect for the roles of Facilitator and Participants:
The facilitator of learning should create an atmosphere of mutual respect. While student and teacher hold different roles and responsibilities, each should learn from the other.

Variety of Courses:
In any centre of Adult Learning for women a wide variety of courses should be made available. Some women who left school early prefer to return to Adult Education by taking courses that they are comfortable with, such as hand crafts, flower arranging etc. As confidence is restored and self-esteem builds, women may then wish to move on to more challenging courses. As there are at least eight different kinds of intelligence, e.g. mathematical, interpersonal…. courses should reflect this diversity. The curriculum on offer for women in any centre of women's education should also allow women to map a path through various types and standards of courses, so that they are progressing on a route that will allow each one to achieve her educational goal.

Honouring Women's Experience:
All learning is rooted in experience. Facilitators of learning must value the experience of each woman in any class and build new learning on that experience. Women must learn the value of their own experience and must believe that the knowledge they have is real knowledge and needs to be honoured.

Affordable Childcare:
Many women postpone their return to education because of their childcare responsibilities. Affordable childcare must be an integral service for all women's education.

Relaxed Atmosphere:

Research in recent years claims that women learn best in a relaxed, warm environment. An informal atmosphere with group interaction is more conducive to women's education.