

# **The NWCI Millennium Project**

Women Mapping the New Millennium



National Women's  
Council of Ireland

Comhairle Náisiúnta  
na mBan in Éirinn

# **REPORT FROM THE NWCI MILLENNIUM PROJECT**

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

**THE NWCi MILLENNIUM PROJECT TEAM WOULD LIKE TO THANK**

**THE FOLLOWING:**

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Miriam Reddin-Beegan

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

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## **PREFACE**

*Gráinne Healy, NWCI Chairwoman*

Since January 1999, the Millennium Project Team has been working on behalf of the National Women's Council of Ireland on a national research, analysis and action study – *Women Mapping the New Millennium*. The project represents for NWCI the largest financial investment ever in ascertaining women's views on priority issues (almost £400,000 of private & state funds). It has led to the six individual reports on Health, Local Development, Violence, Work, Education and Poverty, plus this Executive Summary.

The Millennium Project also, just as importantly, has contributed to the building of the capacity of Irish women activists and their groups by upskilling 118 women as facilitators in participatory learning and research skills and data collection. Thus, when the Project finished, it left behind a legacy of skills which can be used and built upon by women in their own local community. The investment has led to the support of women activists and women's activism: it represents a firm contribution from NWCI to the sustainability of the women's sector.

The Millennium Project has supported women involved in the training and research to identify actions which they/their group might carry out to effect social change for women in Ireland. Thus the Project has essentially modelled a way of working with women for social change, which seeks to empower and amplify the voices of women, while also supporting women to develop data gathering and analytical skills which make their findings, in policy terms, relevant at local, regional and national policy-making levels.

It has therefore truly been an action project – 492 women participated in the research - action in the data gathering, action in the reporting of findings, action in the activity the project generated at local level. The challenge now for NWCI is to ensure that the findings make their way into national policy arenas and fora . Already, NWCI has found ways to integrate the voices of the Millennium Project women into policy NWCI documents – the Out of Sight (women and poverty) publication, 2000, benefited hugely and was greatly informed by Millennium Project findings. To find ways to continue this integration and creation of space for women's authentic voices is the challenge for the whole women's movement, including the NWCI.

This has been a huge investment in our affiliates, in women. A huge investment and commitment to hearing the voices of women from where we live our lives on issues which we identify as priorities. It has strengthened the grassroots and national policy- making links of NWCI. It has contributed to the building of the capacity of women locally and in our women's groups and organisations. It has supported the development of an analysis of women's experience, firmly rooted in that experience. It has strengthened the commitment of NWCI that policy development must be about social change, change that is supported at every level of activity in women's lives, personal, family, community, local, regional and national.

I want to thank the Millennium Project team for their work, I want to thank the Facilitators and I want to thank the women who came together as the research groups. I also want to thank the other staff of NWCI, the expert readers and copy editors – the whole team effort which reflects the commitment to this work. The dedication to the project was great, a big thank you to all!

There have been lessons for the team and the NWCI in carrying out this work – the need to ensure that childcare costs are included in any proposal for such an endeavour in the future have long been acknowledged; the need to plan for inclusion of greater diversity of background and experience, especially for any follow-up to this model; and also the lesson that as always, the training provided to women was just a starting point and will need to be built upon and developed in the future, if the approach is to become embedded in the work of the women's sector generally and the NWCI specifically.

The feminist approach of the Millennium Project, the approach which sets women and women's voices and experiences central to the research process and the research outputs, is a model to be promoted by the women's sector, the statutory sector and the NWCI, in the future. This approach and process serves to strengthen the voices of women which, in turn, strengthens the validity of research findings and for NWCI as a representative voice of the Irish women, this has crucial significance. The Project outputs come at the end of this innovative project, but the Millennium Project itself is really the continuation of a women's

development process, using a feminist approach. It will need further sustenance and support – this is the beginning of the Millennium Project experience for Irish women, not the end!

**June 2001**



# 1. INTRODUCTION

## 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 project. The research focused on six key areas of enquiry: women and local development, health, work, education, violence against women and poverty. The aim of the project 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 Executive Summary presents:

- the story of the Millennium Project;
- a brief look at the Participatory Learning and Action (PLA) methodology employed;
- the research facilitators and their responses to the project;
- the research participants;
- the research briefs for each of the areas of enquiry;
- recommendations and conclusions from each of the six key areas;
- a short discussion of the common themes that arose across all six areas of research.

## 1.2 THE STORY OF THE MILLENNIUM PROJECT

The National Women's Council of Ireland is a non-governmental organisation (NGO) currently operating as an agent of change<sup>1</sup> with, and on behalf of, women in Ireland facing a complex and rapidly changing society and culture. Over the past years, the work of the Council, coupled with that of other agencies and organisations, has achieved significant and life-enhancing change in ordinary women's lives. In 1998, approaching the third Millennium, and cognisant of significant shifts in the political, economic and social landscape in Ireland, the Council recognised that new models of partnership were rapidly emerging. This indicated the need in turn for new models of communication and information flow between people at local 'grassroots' level, policy makers and the NWCI as a social partner.

In seeking to develop and explore such a model, the Council conceived its Millennium Project: *Women Mapping the New Millennium*. As Katherine Zappone, former CEO of the NWCI, noted:

***'The NWCI - like all social partners in the Irish policy-making process – was intent on ensuring that its analysis of social and economic problems was rooted in the struggles and the actions of its members. How could we link the creativity and the struggles on 'the ground' to what we were doing at the national policy making tables? How could we tap into the 'women-energy' of groups all over the country so that we could learn about the policy directions we should be moving in, and, on the other hand, we could be creating the invisible links of mobilisation for radical change?'***

It seemed clear that a participatory method of research might best address these questions and desires. Katherine Zappone called upon the skills of anthropologist and PLA (Participatory Learning and Action) research practitioner and trainer, Mary O'Reilly-de Brun; together, they produced the design for the Millennium Project.

Adopting a PLA approach and method means that participants in the research process share and analyse information and knowledge, identify constraints and possibilities related to the topic in question, and, where possible and appropriate, plan positive action. The methodology acknowledges that local people possess valuable knowledge; sharing and analysing this knowledge can lead to practical action and positive

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<sup>1</sup> Agents of change or 'change-agents' is a term commonly used in majority-world development planning to denote organisations (governmental and non-governmental), institutions (public and private), community activists and communities themselves, policy-makers and advisors, individuals and professionals (e.g., researchers, technical experts, etc.) who seek to foster positive change in people's lives at community, national and/or international level.

change. Such change tends to be sustainable because it emerges from the participant's own experiences and has been chosen, tested and owned by that person. Seeing participants as experts in their own right and as key stakeholders in the research process is what distinguishes PLA from traditional research approaches.

Ideally, PLA process should be seen as useful tools in the development of long-term research, analysis and action relationships between NGOs, policy-makers and local communities. As part of these relationships, challenges and supports will be offered by stakeholders in a reciprocal manner. For example, PLA processes often generate information about local perceptions of local needs; this is part of rather than the whole story and can usefully be placed in dialogue with policy planning directed towards those same needs at local and national level. Local expertise gleaned via a PLA process in a community may challenge current policy and practice. Similarly, experts in policy development might offer challenges to the local community. In this way, the PLA dialogue deepens and becomes refined over time, enabling local experts to become key participants in shaping the future of their communities.

The Millennium Project ran from January 1999 to January 2001 and was divided into two phases. In Phase 1 women from around the country facilitated and participated in cutting edge research. Phase 2 involved women in their research groups devising action plans on foot of that research. During these two years, women from NWCI affiliate groups attended two intensive training programmes where they learned a range of core PLA techniques. They also learned about:

- the ethos informing PLA;
- some basic facilitation and note-taking skills;
- how to put together a research process;
- how to do interviews;
- content analysis;
- philosophical underpinnings informing different types of research, e.g., qualitative and quantitative;
- systemic analysis;
- action planning.

It is important to note that the training was designed to provide women with the skills and capacity-building necessary to conduct a guided PLA research process while giving them a flavour of the other topics listed above. It was not possible to provide in-depth training in all of these areas.

118 women attended the first set of training programmes, which took place in 13 centres around the country. Participants organised themselves into PLA facilitation teams of two and three people. At the close of each training programme, teams were invited to negotiate and choose one of the six topics listed above 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.

Each PLA facilitation team returned to its affiliate group or community to invite groups of up to 14 women to engage in the research. Research groups varied in size from 6 to 14 participants, depending on the availability of local women to participate in the research and circumstances related to the nature of the research topic. 492 women from 11 counties became involved as research participants in the Millennium Project. When the 118 facilitators attending Phase 1 training programmes are added, the final total of participants engaged in this important NWCI initiative rises to 610 women.

The majority of women who attended the first phase of training went 'into the field' and completed their research. However, for a small number, continued participation was dependent on the circumstances of their lives. Issues such as lack of time, caring responsibilities and work needing to be done inside and outside the home were present as ever for women. While attempts were made to cover participation costs, limited resources meant that some costs incurred by research participants, for example, childcare, could not be covered. While many facilitators devised creative ways to deal with this issue<sup>2</sup>, future NWCI projects should seek to ensure the provision of such resources.

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<sup>2</sup> For instance, one group raised funds to employ a crèche worker who looked after the children of the women who participated in their research.

In all, 91 facilitators devoted an enormous amount of ‘woman-hours’, effort and expertise to complete a total of 65 research sessions with their groups. Their motivation and tireless energy was remarkable. Each group’s research was sent into the Millennium Project Office in Maynooth, Co. Kildare for cross-analysis, the results of which are included in individual reports on each of the six key topics and this Executive Summary.

67 women returned in Phase 2 to attend 8 training programmes around the country. Facilitators and their groups then had to consider if they could take up the option to bring their research, or future research that they might do, to the next step – that of action-planning. Many groups used the skills gained in this phase to initiate action at local level. For example, one group used the results of their research in the development of a centre to help women experiencing domestic violence. Another group initiated further research on the contribution of women’s groups to local development in their area over the past ten years. Still others found confidence from participating in the research to feed their views into the Equality Authority’s Advisory Committee’s consultation on older people in their local area. The benefit of the project training and research has extended beyond its two-year remit. Mary O’Reilly-de Brún, Project Manager, reflects:

*‘We have only seen the beginning here – a potential for the future of women’s active participation in community and policy development. Perhaps we should think of the cloth we have woven together through the Millennium Project as a sampler – showing us how a much larger cloth might look as willing and able hands continue the weaving process.’*

### **1.3 THE METHODOLOGY EMPLOYED: PARTICIPATORY LEARNING AND ACTION**

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 with which most people are familiar, might be described as doing research ‘from the outside in’. This is called the ‘etic’<sup>3</sup> 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, placing it as equal to other expert opinions. 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. Participatory Learning and Action (PLA) falls squarely into this latter approach and was the approach and methodology employed in the Millennium Project.

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

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<sup>3</sup> To distinguish between the terms ‘emic’ and ‘etic’: etic research is conducted from the outsider’s perspective, while emic research takes the insider’s perspective on board as the framework from which to explore and understand the issue in question. The terms are drawn from anthropology (Goodenough, 1956) and were borrowed from linguistics. Emic research is also known as ethnoscience, the New Ethnography, ethnomethodology and componential analysis.

PLA techniques are capable of accessing both qualitative and quantitative data,<sup>4</sup> and can be described as “a growing family of approaches and methods [that] enable local people to share, enhance and analyse their knowledge of life and conditions, to plan and to act” (Chambers, 1994). PLA techniques also possess the necessary flexibility to explore issues of a sensitive nature, for example, in this study where ‘drawing close’ to women’s actual lived experiences is essential to making visible the complex realities of their lives.

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 & O’Reilly-de Brún, 2001), and
- ‘handing over the stick’, meaning to actively encourage local participation and development of positive action planning.

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

#### **1.4 RESEARCHING AND LEARNING WITH PASSION – THE PLA FACILITATORS**

The Millennium Project mobilised women from 41 NWCI affiliate groups to participate in the project. They were from a wide range of groups which had varied remits. The geographical distribution for the research groups was as follows:

Dublin city and county: 21 groups

County Galway: 4 groups

County Cork: 3 groups

County Kerry: 3 groups

County Monaghan: 2 groups

County Donegal: 2 groups

County Roscommon: 2 groups

County Wicklow: 2 groups

County Louth: 2 groups

County Leitrim: 1 group

County Tipperary: 1 group

County Limerick: 1 group

Interest and enthusiasm for the project were the core criteria for involvement. Women joined the adventure for personal, political and work-related reasons. As one woman said in her application, *‘it will provide me with the capacity and skills to conduct social analysis and the confidence to challenge local government on unacceptable issues.’* Another woman talked about her personal motivations for becoming involved, *‘as women we do not credit or document our achievements, we sometimes do not even see value in the things we do. I would like to redress some of these issues through deepening my knowledge and skills in these [research and facilitation] areas.’* A number of women were particularly committed to enhancing their organisation’s capacity to answer to their target groups, *‘we are committed to responding at local level to women’s needs and involving local women in the process’.*

While some women had previous experience of doing research and facilitation, the majority of participants were new to participatory research. Through careful facilitation by the Millennium Team during the training, differing levels of experience were catered for and learning and sharing amongst the members of each training group was encouraged.

##### **1.4.1 Facilitators’ evaluation of training and research**

Facilitators were asked to evaluate the training both at the end of each training programme and when they completed their first round of research. Results of the quantitative aspects of the facilitator evaluation

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<sup>4</sup> As a research approach, PLA remains open to the integration of conventional research methods and approaches. This allows PLA to inform other research strategies, for example, a tightly-focused qualitative PLA research project is capable of usefully informing larger-scale quantitative studies.

questionnaire showed that the majority of the facilitators considered all the aspects of the training to be effective. They generally found their experience of the training programmes to be empowering and the majority agreed that the training programme provided them with the capacity and/or necessary skills to facilitate future PLA groups. One team of facilitators said, *'We have both used the skills with other groups... PLA brought out the best in them [or] so they said.'*

Many facilitators indicated that they would welcome future training in PLA, facilitation skills and note-taking. In fact, while many expected to use the skills gained in the Project at some point in the future, they suggested that they would be better able to do so if they had further training and support such as that offered through the Millennium Project.

The Millennium Project team also gleaned feedback from the facilitators about their reactions to PLA as a research methodology. One facilitator said, *'An innovative way of mainstreaming voices, who wouldn't normally be heard.'* Generally it was acknowledged that the use of PLA is a successful strategy for giving voice to people on the margins of society, a central aspect of the ethos of PLA. Facilitators also acknowledged that the methods allowed for participatory democracy within each research group, *'the different techniques used kept it interesting and gave everybody an opportunity to participate,'* said one facilitator. Many came back to the team with comments about the enthusiasm that the women in their groups had shown for the research. Another facilitator *'reported that one of her participants said that it was the best thing that she had done since she got married'.<sup>5</sup>*

### 1.5 RAISED VOICES: THE RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

Who are the women from around the country who participated in the Millennium Project? To provide us with a general profile, participants were offered a 'Background Questionnaire' to complete while they were involved in the research. Because of the sensitive nature of some of the research topics, completing the questionnaire was, of necessity, optional. Of the 492 women who participated in the research, 337 filled out background questionnaires.<sup>6</sup>

According to the results from the questionnaires, the youngest participant in the Millennium Project was 17 years old while the oldest was 75 years old. The average age of the participants was 42 years of age. Using a five-point scale, 45.4% of them described their economic situation as 'comfortable' while 24% described themselves as being 'not so comfortable'. 8.8% described their situation as 'extremely comfortable' or 'very comfortable'. 11.6% described their economic situation as 'barely comfortable', and 8.2% responded that they were 'not comfortable at all'.

Participants were also asked to indicate whether they worked inside the home, outside the home or both. Of those who answered this question, 74.9% said that they worked outside the home. Respondents could answer 'yes' to both questions. This was to validate the work that women do inside the home. Participants were also asked to indicate if their work outside the home was paid or voluntary. 19.7% of those who answered the question said that they were volunteers.

Women from a wide variety of educational backgrounds participated in the Millennium Project. Although it is recognised that learning is a life-long process, each woman was asked when she was last in school. As an indication of the results from this question, the table below shows the most common categories of educational attainment for the participants (therefore the total will be less than 100%).

| CATEGORY (LAST IN SCHOOL)                             | PERCENT |
|---|---------|
| During primary school                                 | 11      |
| During secondary school                               | 12.5    |
| After the Junior / Inter certificate                  | 13.4    |
| After a certificate from a post-secondary institution | 15.6    |

<sup>5</sup> From Gathering Day feedback notes – This was a day of storytelling and workshops which took place in February of 2000. The day was organised for Facilitators, participants and NWC staff in order to discuss how the project was progressing up to that date and to reflect on the positive and negative aspects of using PLA.

<sup>6</sup> A detailed sample profile of participants is available in the large reference report about the Millennium Project available from the NWC.

The Background Questionnaire also sought information about ability and/or special needs. One respondent answered that she was hard of hearing – we are aware that a group of deaf women participated in the Millennium Project. While the questionnaire did not ask women to identify ethnic or cultural background, we are also aware that a group of Traveller women participated in the Millennium Project. Furthermore, we know that a group of older women were participants in the Project.

Overall, it appears that the Millennium Project accessed women from a wide variety of backgrounds with a broad diversity of life experiences. Attention to diversity is an integral requirement of research that is meant to inform the development of social policy. A summary of the sample profile of the women who participated in the research by key issue is available in the ‘Results’ section of the individual reports. The particularities of each of the sample profiles are explored briefly in the specific report.

## **1.6 RESEARCH BRIEFS**

Women around the Republic participated in research on six key areas: poverty, health, education, work, violence against women and local development. How were these chosen and by whom? From the outset of the Millennium Project, it was considered important to be in tune with issues which NWCI affiliate groups themselves identified as needing further research. The project team gathered information from affiliate groups through mail-outs and at NWCI panel meetings. Analysis of the incoming information and further discussion with the NWCI Policy Team shaped the brief and rationale for each of the six key issues which emerged. These are outlined below:

### **1.6.1 *Poverty Brief***

The brief for the poverty component was to explore and document the reality of the diverse experiences of women who are living, or who have lived, in poverty in Ireland. Participants were encouraged to describe the experience of poverty in their own terms, using their own language and categories of meaning and understanding, providing a useful lens through which the multi-dimensional nature of women’s experiences of poverty could be viewed.

### **1.6.2 *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.

### **1.6.3 *Health Brief***

It is recognised that there are many different understandings of health, well-being and illness which vary according to different socio-cultural factors. In order to understand the assumptions underlying health care planning and provision in Ireland, this study analysed the policy orientation outlined by the Department of Health and Children. The focus of the health discussion was to explore whether or not research participants believed that the aims and objectives of the *Plan for Women’s Health 1997-99* (Department of Health and Children, 1997) were having an impact on their own health care needs and concerns.

### **1.6.4 *Work Brief***

It is recognised that there has been a dramatic increase in the number of women participating in the labour market. However, certain factors still affect women’s access to work. The ‘work’ component of the Millennium Project aimed to elicit what the participants perceived as an ‘ideal’ working environment for women and how the workplace would need to change in order to respond sensitively and effectively to the needs of women in work.

### **1.6.5 *Local Development Brief***

The local development component of the Millennium Project sought to elicit the following views from the participants:

- Levels of knowledge about groups that are involved in local development in Ireland, described as pre-identified ‘power groups’;
- Descriptions of other groups that women see as ‘power groups’ in terms of local development in their local areas;

- Actions from power groups that were considered to be empowering and/or disempowering to the research groups involved in this component of the Millennium Project;
- Descriptions of local development processes considered enabling for women in Ireland.

This report presents a cross-analysis of the results from the research involving participants from 8 women's community groups. The cross-analysis is framed by a review of barriers to women's participation in local development in Ireland identified in recent literature on this subject as well as some of the challenges that are threatening the sustainability of women's groups in Ireland.

#### **1.6.6 *Violence Against Women Brief***

The brief for this component of the Millennium Project was to work closely with a number of women in order to elicit their perspectives on, and recommendations for, dealing with violence against women in close adult relationships. Participants were encouraged to speak from personal experience, in their own terms, using their own language and categories of meaning. Four research groups took up this sensitive issue and a case-study approach was taken to data analysis and representation of results, enabling distinctive voices and common threads to emerge from the four groups.

## 2. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations and conclusions for all six key issues have direct implications for social policy research and arise from a combination of data generated by participants and an overview analysis completed by the Millennium Project Team and the NWCi Policy Team.

### 2.1 POVERTY CONCLUSIONS

Overall, the findings from this study present a picture of women's poverty as an experience in which they are totally immersed and which affects every aspect of their lives. This experience of poverty is diverse, multi-faceted, encompassing financial distress, emotional distress, powerlessness and educational disadvantage, and (to a lesser extent) other forms of material deprivation, such as lack of housing and lack of transport.

- The aspect of poverty identified as most devastating to women's lives was **economic** or **financial** poverty.
- Economic poverty was closely followed by **emotional poverty**, the effects of which were described in terms of 'lack of power'.
- While lack of money and power combined was acknowledged as the basic problem, it was the impact of powerlessness – the emotional fallout – that was described as the hardest aspect of poverty to cope with.
- Participants identified **a range of solutions** necessary to alleviate the problems caused by economic poverty. Education and training emerged as the highest priority, followed by increased financial support and better health care. Other solutions included: improvement of State services (especially social welfare); improved support for women (especially elderly women); expanded availability of counselling and mental health care services; help to alleviate the cost of living; provision of State-funded childcare; changes in society's attitudes to women and the introduction of flexible working conditions.
- This range of solutions emphasises the interwoven or **web-like nature of the experience of poverty**: for example, poverty means lack of access to education, yet education is seen as the way out of the poverty trap.

*'... we have all got used to making ends meet, and money itself does not mean that much to us, but the emotions and feelings that the lack of it [causes] does.'*

*'[We are] slow to recognise the contribution we make, to find a sense of ourselves, to take our pride back, being beaten down: when sleeping women awake mountains will move.'*

*'...poverty of choice linked to education and society in general. [Participant] said she had always been told that she couldn't do 'that' [education], which left her feeling stupid. From others it was a sense of not being able to do what they wanted because it wouldn't have been the right thing for a woman to do.'*

*'Women last on list, sacrificed for kids, you do it all and you resent it, you lose your identity.'*

- The web-like nature of poverty also alerts us to the fact that **feedback loops**<sup>7</sup> do not exist in isolation. Rather, they are examples of particularly strong relationships within the overall network, or flexible web, of the poverty experience.
- Central government, State agencies and local government ranked as the top three **sources of help** required to activate the solutions suggested by participants, followed by local development groups and the women themselves. Other sources of help identified included: State agencies that specialise in

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<sup>7</sup> A 'feedback loop' describes the reinforcing effect of a factor which operates as both cause and consequence of poverty.



education and training, NGOs that specialise in education and national NGOs. The local community was accorded lowest priority as a resource for combating poverty.

- The low priority given to the **local community** bears investigation, as does the fact that several research groups believed that too few women were activists in their communities. Each of these factors could have serious implications for the implementation of policy at ground level.
- The notion of women as a homogenous group, all sharing a common experience of poverty is belied by the range, complexity and fluidity of experiences described by the women participating in this study. These experiences of poverty are determined by many different socio-cultural factors, by circumstances and events occurring in women's lives and by decisions they make concerning the **distribution of resources** in the household or living space.
- Distribution and prioritisation of resources: Women use a range of strategies to manage their financial resources. They are creative and resourceful but often driven to put themselves last, creating resentment and additional stress, which has implications for their physical and mental health and well-being.
- Government anti-poverty strategies and policies, particularly as outlined in the National Anti-Poverty Strategy, are blocked from full and effective implementation because of **limitations inherent in the monetary and non-monetary deprivation indicators** used to identify many categories of women (and men and children) living in poverty. This has resulted in a lack of information about gender-specific and socio-cultural-specific experiences of poverty. Such information is essential if future policy formulation, direction and implementation of anti-poverty initiatives are to target those most in need, when most in need, and in the areas of most importance to them.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### **The Eastern Regional Health Authority and the Health Boards should:**

- Standardise the assessment criteria for the Supplementary Welfare Allowance and the Exceptional Needs Payment and abolish means testing of these payments. It should be kept in mind that women are the majority of those who negotiate for such payments (O'Neill, 1992). Research that elicits women's expertise and knowledge regarding the critical events that throw their budgets into chaos could be used to support the development of the assessment criteria.
- Ensure that the officers dealing with applications for supplementary welfare payments receive sensitivity and awareness training regarding issues to do with gender, class, ability, ethnicity and sexuality. They could also be trained in how to make referrals to other services (for example, the Money Advice and Budgeting Service [MABS] and free counselling services if they are available) that would support women who are managing the burden of poverty in their households.
- Establish a close link between the Health Authorities and MABS and/or other money advice agencies.
- Rigorously assess and evaluate any enhancements to services with stakeholders, with a weighting towards actual service-users. A multi-method approach should be used in this assessment, acknowledging the efficacy of participatory and qualitative approaches in accessing women's views from the ground.

*'...difficulties in trying to get out of [poverty] affects health, stress, can lead to depression and poverty affects (low) self-esteem.'*

*'Should the washing machine break down, [your] budget [will be] in chaos.'*

- Create services to address the facets of emotional poverty brought out in the Millennium Project data. Such interventions might involve utilising inter-disciplinary approaches involving mental health care providers and GPs. For instance, free counselling services could be provided for women in disadvantaged urban and rural areas. Counsellors could be trained to provide not only care but also referrals to other forms of support such as MABS, educational opportunities in the community, support groups or free crèche facilities.

**The Department of Health should:**

- Extend the eligibility for the medical card to all dependent children under 18 years of age and provide free health care to all low-income families.

*‘...difficulties in trying to get out of [poverty] affects health, stress, can lead to depression and poverty affects (low) self-esteem.’*

*‘Should the washing machine break down, [your] budget [will be] in chaos.’*

*‘Money is power, money is life, if you had money would you stay in abuse?’*

*‘When discussing health services lots of stories about people not having enough money for medication.’*

**The Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs should:**

- Distribute information about social welfare payments and money advice services in a wide variety of contexts and locations: community centres, health clinics, supermarkets and so on. Information should be provided in a variety of different media and should take into account differentiated access on the basis of gender, literacy, ability, and geography.
- Mainstream the *Family Services Pilot Project* and acknowledge that women are the majority of individuals who are receiving such a service. Expand the range of services available to include referrals to free counselling services. Evaluate the service regularly through in-depth consultation with the relevant stakeholders with a weighting towards service-users. Adjust services locally according to these evaluations.
- Give particular attention to developing indicators in relation to women’s experiences of violence, for instance, to address the lack of refuge spaces for women in need of safety from an abusive partner. These indicators should be developed in consultation with community and voluntary organisations working in direct service-provision to women experiencing violence. This recommendation would be fulfilled as part of the commitment to a clear focus on women within the National Anti-Poverty Strategy, and would demonstrate a recognition of the fact that lack of economic resources often locks women into abusive relationships.
- Seek fulfilment of the promise made by the Minister for Health and Children to collaborate with NAPS on establishing health targets, measures and indicators. Ensure that those targets are gender-proofed and that the Working Group established has 50/50 representation from women and men.
- Oversee the gender-proofing of the National Anti-Poverty Strategy target on educational disadvantage in conjunction with the Department of Education and Science. In line with this, we would agree with the Combat Poverty Agency (2000) that tackling adult literacy should be an important target, in light of the large number of women with low level educational attainment who are living in poverty. The Department could also ensure that NAPS fulfils its promise to support lifelong learning by endorsing the new structures to be put in place for community education by the Department of Education and Science.
- Encourage the use of small-scale participatory studies to research women’s poverty. The exclusive use of pre-set deprivation indicators limits our understanding of the complex nature of poverty. To offset this, data from small-scale qualitative participatory studies carried out at regular intervals with a variety of groups experiencing poverty could usefully inform the development of more flexible or expanded indicators for use in large-scale quantitative studies.
- Disaggregate all data on poverty in Ireland by gender and a range of other socio-cultural differences. Related to the flexibility of ‘indicators’ is the issue of their gender and equality-sensitivity. The participatory research approach and methods used in this study may provide a model for developing a valuable corrective to an unbalanced and unfolding picture of poverty in Ireland. It might also prove useful to agencies and organisations concerned with men’s and children’s poverty. Further research of this nature is required to ensure that the picture of poverty in Ireland does not remain static, ignoring

gender-relations and relations of power, but unfolds over time, enabling policy-makers to target services to appropriate areas of need.

- Use emic data to inform aspects of the National Anti-Poverty Strategy. The model of research provided by the Millennium Project might be used to further explore the “dynamics of reproduction of poverty” for women (NAPS 1998).

The Government should:

- Provide free or nominal cost childcare places to low income families in disadvantaged areas (Childcare 2000, NWCI) so that women can access educational opportunities or have the time to negotiate services without worrying about their childcare responsibilities.
- Establish a benchmark (an income standard) for all adult social welfare payments to reflect increases in average incomes.
- Ensure that each spouse would receive an equal adult social welfare payment automatically in the short-term. In the long-term, the Government should implement full individualisation of the social welfare system.
- Publicly recognise the importance of women’s community education in breaking the cycle of poverty for women. Provide support to women who wish to access these types of educational opportunities through the provision of childcare.
- Establish a Task Force, including representatives from central and local government, local development groups, local agencies and the community to investigate the link between women’s involvement in community groups and involvement in formal politics. It would employ a bottom-up approach. Participants placed importance on being able to help themselves to get out of poverty. Participation in community groups, especially education initiatives, seems to foster subsequent involvement in local and national politics.
- Fund and resource groups who represent marginalised groups of women in Irish society (for example, Travellers, older women, lesbian women, refugees and asylum seekers, women with disabilities, women in institutions) and women experiencing domestic violence to conduct participatory research exploring their differentiated experiences of poverty. The resulting data (perhaps combined with that derived from participatory research with similar categories of men and children living in poverty, who are likewise excluded under traditional measurement approaches) could be used to establish indicators, measures and interventions that are sensitive to diverse communities. The research should seek to use emic and participatory approaches and methods.

## 2.2 EDUCATION CONCLUSIONS

There are several conclusions that can be drawn from this research that intended to uncover the components and dynamics of educational processes and systems that are being shaped by attentiveness to gender. The 107 women who participated in this study are women 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.

*‘Improvement in social welfare...money not enough for clothes, nappies, etc.’*

### **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.

### **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, 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. Women’s community education has provided a participatory woman-focused and woman-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 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.

‘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.’

***‘If there was going to be any change for women and opportunities in education, childcare facilities had to be addressed and subsidised.’***

***‘...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.’***

### **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?

## Recommendations

We will cluster our recommendations around three major headings.

### 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, 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.

*'...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...'*

### 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 an **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.

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

### 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 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.

### 2.3 HEALTH CONCLUSIONS

- The results of the health component of the Millennium Project suggest that the Irish health system is not sufficiently decentralised and devolved and that inadequate resources have been provided to implement enhanced services for women in their localities. In some areas services are provided and in some they are not. Childcare was an important health need across the country despite the commitment in the Plan for Women’s Health (Department of Health and Children, 1997) to address this issue.
- In devising the Plan for Women’s Health (Ibid.), the Government has created a healthy public policy for Irish women. This is one of the five principles by which health promotion should be guided in the Republic. By using the other four principles as a checklist for future successful implementation:
  - Re-orienting the health service to promotion and not just acute care;
  - Creating supportive environments in which to make healthy choices;
  - Strengthening community action - incorporating community development approaches to health promotion;
  - Developing personal skills through consultation with individuals about their needs (Department of Health and Children, 2000); the Department could make the changes to women’s health care considered necessary by women in Ireland.

*‘Take women’s health out of the cities into the rural areas.’*

*‘When I produce the medical card, there is an assumption and an attitude that I am not educated, that I know nothing.’*

*‘Is information everywhere? Should be made available rather than having to make an appointment with GP.’*

- A pluralist system of health care is not in evidence in Ireland. Women across the country felt that they could not access holistic health care, including alternative therapies, and have all their health needs attended to in a one-stop shop that was the primary ‘completely unmet’ need identified by participants. Thus, a biomedical model of care is still foremost in the Irish system, leaving women with the feeling that the wider context of their lives as Irish women is not recognised as impacting on their health. This is in opposition to the Department’s commitment to the concept of health as related to social gain.

- Linked to the use of a biomedical model in health is the overlooking of the effects of social, cultural and economic factors in health. Women in the health component of the Millennium Project gave evidence of negative experiences in their health care due to class distinctions and gender. There is also a danger that a description of women's health could be reduced to a narrow range of health difficulties such as: maternal health, heart health, smoking, mental health and infant feeding (Department of Health and Children, 2000). This would have the effect of excluding social factors as they relate to health/well-being.
- The need for health information and education was seen as the second ranking unmet health need for participants in the Millennium Project. This demonstrates that the plan's commitment to increase availability and access to health information for women has not impacted positively on the women involved in this research. Easy access to women's health/well-being information has the potential to break the cycle of paternalism in health care. That is, it has the potential to create a more equal relationship between client and provider in health care interactions.
- There is a relationship between health policy services, individual perceptions of health and well being and the normative values of a society and culture. Women throughout the country who were involved in this study clearly indicated that they had not felt the concrete effects of promises made in the *Plan for Women's Health* (Department of Health and Children, 1997). Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that a tangible improvement in the state of Irish women's health is not likely to occur until the policies put forward in the Plan are more thoroughly implemented.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

**It is recommended that the Department of Health and Children and other relevant departments and agencies such as the Eastern Regional Health Authority, the Health Boards, and the Women's Health Council:**

- Fulfil the promises made in the *Programme for Prosperity and Fairness* (2000), *The Plan for Women's Health* (Department of Health and Children, 1997), and *The National Health Promotion Strategy* (Department of Health and Children, 2000) to consult with women about health services, what and where they are needed, their ethos and models of practice. Consultations should employ a multi-method approach and qualitative methods should be acknowledged as strategies that are particularly useful in finding out about women's health issues (Brems and Griffiths, 1993).
- Commence initiatives to encourage the widespread distribution of free and accessible information about health, particularly for women's health issues. This may mean placing the information in settings where one would not normally find health information, for instance, rural post offices. Other innovative ways of disseminating health information should be employed using a variety of media. Participants in the Millennium Project described needing health information on a wide variety of topics, but in particular mentioned: holistic approaches to health; cancers; reproductive health and family planning; menopause. Information should be pertinent to women's life stages as illustrated in the results from the seasonal calendar technique.
- Incorporate research like the Millennium Project into the work of the National Health Information Strategy.
- Initiate further research to consult with women about gaps in health information provision and their preferences for style, presentation and medium. Different topics could necessitate different modes of delivery.
- Continue the decentralisation of health services, ensuring that administrative agencies and service settings are properly resourced, financially and otherwise.

*'Women need to be more at ease about their bodies in order to explain and answer children's questions.'*

*'...if women had a friendly doctor it would make all the difference.'*

*'We have our female doctor and she won't prescribe the pill, it's her religious belief.'*

***Girls go to temporary doctors when full-time doctors are off, and they can get the pill.'***

- Provide awareness and sensitivity training at regular intervals to health care providers on issues of gender, ethnicity, sexuality and economic disadvantage, and the relationship between social factors and health status.
- Ensure that health care providers are trained in effective communication skills and learn how to encourage client participation in their own health decisions.
- Provide free and accessible childcare so that women can attend to their own health needs.
- Fund and resource women's groups working with older women, Traveller women, lesbians, refugee and asylum-seeking women, women from other ethnic minority groups living in the Republic, women with disabilities and women who are living in poverty to do research about women's health issues. One of the most important areas of investigation would be the question of what 'being healthy' means to women in Ireland. This would allow for both a deeper and broader view of women's health in Ireland. Multi-method approaches should be used in any enquiry into health for women.
- Institute a wide range of reforms in services for carers in the country as advocated by the National Women's Council of Ireland (NWCI) in its work with health representatives in the regional women's health committees (NWCI unpublished, 1999), including free home help for carers, investment in respite care, co-ordination of services for carers, a non-means tested Carer's Allowance, profiling the Homemakers Scheme and instituting uniform quality standards for all aspects of the caring services.
- Regarding models of practice, expand the range of care options, particularly alternative therapies.
- Set up free and universal provision of contraceptives, fertility treatment and information around reproductive choice and STDs (particularly HIV and AIDS).
- Initiate inter-departmental and agency links with regard to women's health in the Republic in line with the above recommendations. For example, the Department of Health and Children should fulfil the promise made by the Minister of Health to collaborate with NAPS on establishing health targets, measures and indicators. Health is an issue of human rights for women and should be addressed at a broad policy level.

**2.4 WORK CONCLUSIONS**

- A dominant theme that emerged was the importance of the development and implementation of policies by the State and employers to enable women to reconcile caring responsibilities with paid employment.
- The issue of childcare was seen as a fundamental factor in determining the extent of women's access to the labour market. It was felt that a key role should be played by government, in partnership with employers and parents, to provide a comprehensive and regulated childcare service. All participants felt that some support should be given for childcare – this might take the form of subsidisation of supply or the introduction of a childcare allowance which would benefit both mothers in paid employment and mothers engaged in full-time caring work in the home.
- An issue which was raised repeatedly within research groups was the need for the more general application of flexibility in working conditions and the introduction of a more comprehensive system of family-friendly policies.
- There was general support for the introduction of paid parental leave as a right to enable women and men to make freer choices about their careers and home lives. This confirms the view of the Commission of the Family that benefits currently attached to maternity leave should extend to cover parental leave.



- Participants were strongly in favour of an improvement in conditions of pay, working conditions and pension and other entitlements. They called for equal pay for work of equal value and an increase in the Minimum Wage.
- Participants repeatedly expressed their desire for greater equality in the workplace – this would encompass recognition of women’s caring responsibilities, career promotion, recognition of the value of women’s work, protection against sexual harassment and greater access to education and vocational training.
- The women in this project concluded that a change in awareness was necessary with regard to societal perceptions of women’s roles. Traditional stereotypes regarding the type of education, training and work appropriate to women need to be challenged and education and training opportunities made available to women for all areas of work. In the workplace, new models of decision-making and communication could enable the organisation to become more flexible and sensitive not only to women’s needs, but also to the needs of all workers.

*‘it was pointed out that women can be assumed to have to leave employment at some stage for either family or low pay reasons, and so are not given responsibility for projects in case others would be left to pick up the pieces when they leave.’*

*‘Need to redefine work and remuneration for work done – de-genders work – goes beyond equal pay... huge areas seen as women’s work e.g. secretarial.’*

*‘Paid paternity leave – as for women...Both parents at the same time for the same [length of] time.’*

- Women identified the co-operation of the three principal actors – the Government, employers and employees as critical to the development of a “women-friendly” working environment by 2020.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

**Based on the findings from the ‘Women and Work’ component of the Millennium Project, it is recommended that:**

- Targeted indicators to measure equal opportunities in employment should be accurately defined and implemented in order to produce reliable data on a long-term basis.
- The recommendations of the Commission on the Family (1998) to extend the PRSI Maternity Benefit Scheme to ‘...cover parental leave and provide a weekly payment on the lines of maternity benefit to workers availing of parental leave under the EU directive’ should be implemented. In recognition of both parents’ caring responsibilities, paid parental leave should be offered to both parents on a non-transferable basis. The Government should also introduce 5 days’ paid paternity leave in recognition of a father’s caring role.
- The Government should give priority to the issue of childcare. It should provide supports for all parents through the payment of a universal childcare payment and through subsidisation of childcare provision. Support from the State should be offered in a flexible manner to enable parents to exercise choice in relation to the type of childcare selected for their children. Supports should, therefore, be provided for home-based and community-based care and for childcare provided by crèches, after-school facilities and by childminders.
- Support services within and outside the workplace for new mothers should be improved.
- Provision needs to be made to enable workers to take paid leave to engage in eldercare and in care of dependants with disabilities.
- The Government should consider the introduction of family leave to be availed of by workers in the event of family emergencies such as the sudden illness of family members – the current provisions offering 5 days’ *force majeure* leave over a 3-year period or the newly instituted carer’s leave, aimed more at situations of chronic illness, while welcome, do not provide adequate flexibility for workers acting as primary carers of children or elderly relatives.

- New models of flexible and part-time work practices should be introduced. These should be designed in consultation with policy-makers, employers and women in the workforce, together with a comprehensive framework for monitoring the numbers of people in part-time work and evaluating and improving the pay and conditions available for that work.
- A national support programme should be put in place to assist women returners. As indicated in the NESF *Alleviating Labour Shortages* (2000) report, this should include the establishment of women returners as a priority group within FÁS Employment Services and Training provision. The programme should include tracking and monitoring mechanisms, career path planning and the identification of progression routes.
- More flexible models of training targeted at women interested in returning to work should be piloted. The timing and location of training courses should be developed in such a way as to meet the needs of women, including outreach, part-time and modular courses. As indicated also in the NESF *Alleviating Labour Shortages* report, supports should also be offered to facilitate participation by women with caring responsibilities. The *Report of the P2000 Working Group on Women's Access to Labour Market Opportunities* should be implemented as a matter of urgency.
- Further strategies should be developed to enforce the principle of equal pay for work of equal value. While the Advisory Committee on Male-Female Wage Differentials should urgently devise recommendations to address the issue of wage differentials, there is a need for the Government and social partners to engage in cooperation to consider the broader issue of sectoral segregation and the concentration of women in areas of low pay and poorer working conditions.
- The Minimum Wage should be increased by 100% in recognition of the inadequacy of the current rate, given the recent increases in the average industrial wage through the Programme for Prosperity and Fairness. The Minimum Wage should then be indexed to increases in average industrial wages.
- The Government should devise an action plan to combat sexual harassment and bullying in the workplace – a more proactive Government role is necessary to encourage more proactive action by employers in protecting employees against sexual harassment.
- Government should work in partnership with employers and workers to improve the quality of the working environment both in terms of the development of a collaborative, supportive working culture and of the provision of workplace facilities.

*'working at weekends seems to be an escalating... trait at the moment. Staying back late at night is also very common. Leaving at 4pm is frowned upon or coming in at 10am, even though flexi-time is available to a large majority of the staff. Full allocation of annual leave is not taken and it is carried over.'*

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

- The Government needs to recognise the issue of diversity within the existing and potential workforce – it should urgently devise policies to ensure greater access to secure, well-paid employment for groups such as older women, minority ethnic women and women with disabilities. It should also take urgent action to protect the rights of such groups within the workplace.

## 2.5 LOCAL DEVELOPMENT CONCLUSIONS

- The research groups identified lack of information from pre-identified power groups<sup>8</sup>, and, in particular, from the local authorities as the central disempowering experience. Information and knowledge are critical to the success of participatory democracy. Participants stressed the importance

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<sup>8</sup> These groups were identified by the NWC Policy Team as being common to local development processes in Ireland. They were: Local Authority (Managers and Staff), Local Authority (Elected Councillors), Local Authority (Strategic Policy Committees), Vocational Education Committees, FÁS, County Enterprise Boards, LEADER, Area-based partnerships, Health Board and URBAN.

of models of participation in which information is readily accessible and where there is equity of participation for all groups involved. Information should be targeted at women and should take into account differing access to information for groups that are marginalised and discriminated against.

- The research groups described new local development<sup>9</sup> processes which would address women's social exclusion. These included the need for women-friendly ways of working, more education and training opportunities, the provision of childcare supports and the election of more women to local government. The research conveys the importance of women's community groups devising their own terms of reference for participation in local development and points to the transformative possibilities of those strategies.
- The inflexibility and use of the Live Register is still an impediment to women's access to education and training in their communities. Research groups perceived VECs and FÁS to be operating according to a top-down, non-woman-friendly approach. Lack of information and bureaucracy in FÁS operations result in women being unaware of the opportunities open to them and lead to misunderstandings about access to those opportunities. It also fails to honour the diversity of women and their needs which are related to socio-economic background, ethnicity, sexuality and ability.
- In general, community and voluntary groups were deemed to be more empowering to the research groups than the pre-identified power groups. Further research needs to be done on the women's community sector in order to identify (1) the supports needed by groups to secure sustainability and (2) the manner in which women's groups operate in that sector. This research would build on the research done by the Millennium Project and by *Framing the Future* (Kelleher et al., forthcoming). *Framing the Future* is the first ever national audit of women's groups, their nature, structure, activities and aspirations.
- PLA and other participatory methods of research are important opportunities for members of women's groups to gain the knowledge and confidence to participate in local development in their local areas. Through involvement in such processes, women's groups can themselves work towards gaining the information and skills needed to secure resources, recognition and representation. These three types of supports were identified by WEFT (2000) as key to the sustainability of women's community groups in the Southern Border Counties.

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

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

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

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

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

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

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

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<sup>9</sup> The term local development in this report refers to all of the groups named above and so includes statutory groups.

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

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

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

**That the political parties should:**

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

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

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

**That FÁS should:**

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

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

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

**That the Vocational Education Committees should:**

- Adopt a bottom-up approach to meeting women's needs for educational opportunities in the community, especially with regard to women who are particularly marginalised in Ireland, for instance,

older women, refugee women, women of ethnic minorities, lesbians, women with disabilities and women living in poverty. Women's community groups targeting disadvantaged women should be consulted with regard to the needs assessment and design of courses.

## 2.6 VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

The following conclusions and recommendations arise from the four case-studies which constituted the 'Violence Against Women' component of the Millennium Project and are relevant to the research brief outlined above. There is no intention to extrapolate from this small-scale study to the broader population. However, several analytical generalisations are drawn. Our main findings support fundamental tenets of the women's movement, for example, that male violence against women is about power and control, and therefore ongoing feminist analysis of existing patriarchal structures is critical to appropriate action. As will be apparent, our findings also support existing theoretical and practical frameworks currently in use by many NGOs<sup>10</sup> and other organisations supporting women who experience violence.

### CONCLUSIONS

The main finding drawn from this study is that women, although classically presented as 'the problem' in relation to the dynamics of violent power relations, are, in fact, a key part of the solution. Survivors of violence are capable of offering 'insider expertise' to assist in the development of services, supports and policies oriented towards the elimination of violence against women from our society.

- Analysis of structured gender inequality at local, national and international level is central to the philosophy of feminist organizations working on violence against women for the past 30 years in Ireland and globally. Such social/systemic analysis acts as a corrective to the pathologising of women, which constructs women experiencing violence as 'the problem' and obscures the responsibility of the perpetrator.
- Participants in this study, when invited to focus on the issue of violence against women, engaged unsolicited in this type of analysis, and indicated that they were highly aware of structured and institutionalised violence against women. Recognising the danger of being cast as 'the problem', participants re-present themselves throughout this study as survivors who are not, in any way, the problem, but a powerful part of the solution.
- From this perspective, participants' overall assessment of the current situation vis-à-vis violence against women in Ireland is that a radical transformation of patriarchal structures and systems is required, beginning with the legal and judicial systems.
- The civil and criminal justice system is the area where participants experienced the most devastating humiliation and disempowerment. This legal/judicial system requires "fundamental revision" and reconstruction from the ground up; it needs to be "infused with emotional support" for women who experience violence and it needs to invite women to consult and participate in this process of reconstruction. Participants stressed the need to provide specialised training and anti-racist education to the judiciary, the gardaí and service providers.
- The most effective action to support women's access to safety and support is awareness raising that violence against women is a crime. The silence that blankets this pervasive social problem must be broken. This cannot be safely achieved without support from the State and the community. However, regardless of the presence or absence of such support, women are taking the power to analyse, critique and reconstruct their lives where possible. Community education initiatives and programmes within refuge centres supported this process for many of the women involved in this study.
- Inter-agency co-operation and inter-departmental communication are central to effective implementation of policy. This is a key recommendation from the Government's Report of the Task Force on Violence against Women which is strongly supported by the participants in this study.
- As part of such a coherent inter-agency/inter-departmental approach, our findings, limited though they are to four case-studies, strongly suggest that women who have experienced violence and the advocates who work effectively with them have unique perspectives and valuable expertise to offer.

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<sup>10</sup> NGO: Non-Governmental Organisation.

Therefore, what we need to develop are better mechanisms to enable such expertise to lead and inform more effective and sensitive implementation of services and supports at ground level.

***“Women needed to feel not discriminated against, for example, there is no representation of Travellers in the refuge. [One] woman said she would not be bothered by lack of cultural representation at first but maybe after a couple of days would look around and start to think about it... Traveller women can feel isolated among all settled women...”***

- Sensitive implementation of services and supports is crucial. Otherwise, we run the risk of ‘missing’ or alienating entire groups or categories of women who are experiencing violence and who need assistance. Given that ‘woman’ is not a unitary category and that diverse life experiences impact the manner in which violence is experienced, the responses women require will be diverse. We need to remain alert to opportunities to learn about such diversity. For example, this study notes how lack of direct access to information, difficulties in accessing the legal system, inaccessibility of services because of cultural/literacy issues, and racism create almost insurmountable barriers to security and safety for Traveller women experiencing violence.<sup>11</sup>
- We need to be informed by women at local level about new ways in which violence erupts and is perpetrated against them. This is the only way in which international and national law, policy and strategy can keep pace with these changes in order to develop appropriate policies and provide effective supports and services. Therefore, analysis and critique of structured gender inequality must, of necessity, be an ongoing adaptive process, alert to changes in socio-cultural systems and attuned to the perspectives of women themselves.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- The Government’s *Report of the Task Force on Violence Against Women, 1997*, outlines strategies for an inter-agency co-operative approach to deal with violence against women. Participants would like to see these strategies implemented without delay.
- As a central part of this process, women in this study call for a fundamental revision of the civil and criminal justice systems. Safety and Sanctions (Kelleher and O’Connor, 1999) examined the effectiveness of the Irish civil and criminal justice systems’ response to violence against women in intimate relationships and provided a thorough range of recommendations which ought to be implemented.
- Participants recommend specialised training for the judiciary and other key personnel. A framework for an educational programme based on women’s emic<sup>12</sup> perspectives of the violence in their lives coupled with anti-racist training focused on the issue of violence against women (recognising the many ways in which women are categorised as ‘deviant’ and therefore experience racism) should be prepared. This educational programme should include information on women’s diverse life circumstances and their related service and support needs. A gender-based analysis of issues of power and control, personal testimonies regarding women’s experiences of violence and the development of their lives beyond abuse and towards safety and security might be included. This programme would be made available to the judiciary, service providers, agencies, community centres and other relevant organisations.<sup>13</sup> Women’s Aid and some other NGOs on violence against women have a series of training modules which are being delivered to the voluntary and statutory sectors at present based on all the principles outlined above.

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<sup>11</sup> Pavee Point, funded under the NOW initiative 1998-1999, will be producing a document entitled ‘*Pavee Beoirs Breaking the Silence*’, a report exploring the dynamics of violence against Traveller women and related issues of racism.

<sup>12</sup> To distinguish between the terms ‘emic’ and ‘etic’: etic research is conducted from the outsider’s perspective, while emic research takes the insider’s perspective on board as the framework from which to explore and understand the issue in question. The terms are drawn from anthropology (Goodenough: 1956) and were borrowed from linguistics. Emic research is also known as ethno-science, the New Ethnography, ethnomethodology and componential analysis.

<sup>13</sup> The Government’s Report of the Task Force on Violence against Women has recommended specialist training for all members of the judiciary (p.56).

- This educational programme could be developed in consultation with women who have experienced violence in intimate relationships along with women who represent the many minority groups who share this experience in common but manage and survive it in different ways, and advocates who work effectively with women experiencing violence.
- Participants strongly recommend education for children on violence issues.<sup>14</sup> School programmes currently in place which focus on the issue ought to be monitored, evaluated and reviewed using a stakeholder/participatory approach, so that their effectiveness as a response to violence against women in close adult relationships can be gauged. Then due consideration ought to be given to their development.

***“The [hospital] staff are not trained to recognise abuse or act on suspicions they have about presenting injuries.”***

***‘The goal for the future has to be education and self-awareness in schools, so that children are aware that violence in any form is unacceptable.’***

- *The First Report of the National Steering Committee on Violence Against Women, 1999*, outlines some key priorities for action, one of which was a public awareness campaign. A core recommendation from the participants in this study is that such a campaign should be similar in scope to the ‘Drink-Driving’ campaign.<sup>15</sup> This campaign included increased penalties for drink and driving as well as police presence/ actions/ sanctions to effect change in attitude and practice. In the event that such a campaign is funded and planned, the Government should work closely with the NGO sector and provide the parallel funding necessary to make it possible for services to deal with the fallout that would be engendered by such media coverage.
- This public awareness campaign should be sensitive to and inclusive of cultural and literacy issues in terms of design, content, and preferred dissemination processes. It should be informed by information currently available on violence against women and by any new context- or culture-specific information generated via the educational and specialised training programmes suggested above.
- Alongside such campaigns, mechanisms enabling minority groups to access information in other formats and places should be considered. For example, Traveller women might be in a position to access information via their attendance at various types of training courses.<sup>16</sup> Organisations providing these courses should be targeted with relevant information in accessible formats.
- As public awareness is raised and the silence is broken, more women experiencing violence will come forward seeking services and support. Current funding is inadequate and existing services are over-subscribed, therefore additional funding must be made available.
- Participants recommend the provision of counselling and treatment programmes for perpetrators of violence against women in intimate relationships. This recommendation is best placed within the context of the Government’s 1997 *Report of the Task Force on Violence Against Women* which

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<sup>14</sup> Women’s Aid have just completed research on this issue and have used the results to develop modules for the youth sector, see Women’s Aid. (2001). *Teenage Tolerance: the Hidden Lives of Young Irish People, a Study of Young Peoples’ Experience and Responses to Violence and Abuse*. Dublin: Women’s Aid. The “Exploring Masculinities” programme developed by the Department of Education and Science also works towards this aim. This programme aims to facilitate young males in transition year to critically explore what it means to be male in today’s society and includes modules on violence against women and male power.

<sup>15</sup> The Government’s Report of the Task Force on Violence Against Women made a series of detailed recommendations regarding the need for successive public awareness campaigns (p.112). However, to date, we have had a limited awareness-raising exercise about the work of the National Steering Committee on Violence but no large-scale public awareness campaign conducted via the major media.

<sup>16</sup> For example, Pavee Point indicates that Traveller women would be able to access this information during the separate modules incorporated in many pre-marriage courses, and via a wide range of training courses Traveller women attend.

examined intervention programmes available in Ireland for violent men and outlined the principles that should underpin them. Primary among these is that the safety and security of women and children is paramount, and that intervention programmes be linked to judicial sanctions. Participants also recommend the introduction of a register of domestic violence offenders; that repeat offenders should be given stiffer sentences, and that support should be widely and readily available in urban and rural areas after court cases.

- Communities (and the State) are called to become active responsible witnesses to the ‘event’ of violence against women in intimate relationships. Given that the formulation of the national strategy constitutes the basic response from Government Departments to this issue, in what ways might the community respond? Some key developments have taken place to date: Women’s Aid were made one of the key supporting agencies to the community development sector; St. Michael’s Estate Community Development Project developed a best practice guideline for a community development response to violence against women and the Community Worker’s Co-operative have included community-based responses to violence against women in their general remit. Documentary research on community-based initiatives in other countries could highlight additional strategies that have proved successful and might usefully be adapted to the Irish socio-cultural context.
- Supports and services need to be implemented sensitively to take account of cultural diversity and minority groups. Women who have experienced violence in intimate relationships and who represent minority groups could advise on many issues related to the sensitive and effective delivery of information, supports and services.
- Traveller women indicate that their visibility would be increased and their profile strengthened if they were to find positions as paid and voluntary workers in refuge and other caring centres.  
***‘...financial help is given reluctantly. This could result in a woman deciding to stay in an abusive relationship and remain dependent on her partner rather than go through the gruelling given by the local community welfare officer.’***
- Recognising the limited nature of current funding to provide services and supports for women experiencing violence, best practice guidelines need to be developed. Key stakeholders including representatives from the NGO sector, service-providers, service-users and relevant Government departments might be best placed to inform criteria for fair and transparent funding, given sufficient resourcing in gender analysis and other relevant information. Consideration should be given to a stakeholder/participatory approach to eliciting an agreed range of criteria.
- Although we have been able to establish some sense of the supports participants in this study felt they needed to make the journey towards security and safety, further participatory research could help to establish a more in-depth picture of this complex process. Accepting that knowledge is power, these women’s stories could serve to empower others and to alert the public to the nature of their experiences and survival of violence.
- The unattainable ‘crucial support’ identified by Group V4, ‘Time for Oneself’, is strongly linked by participants to the provision of childcare; therefore childcare should be provided as set out in the National Women’s Council of Ireland’s Childcare 2000 campaign.



### 3. COMMON THEMES AND POLICY LESSONS

There are certain themes common to the Millennium Project's six key areas of research which give rise to a number of policy lessons which now need to be addressed by the Government, the National Women's Council, other NGOs, community groups and activists and by women themselves. The continuing structural and systemic oppression of women in Ireland is confirmed by the experiences of women who took part in the Millennium Project. This oppression gives urgency to the need for the lessons highlighted by this research to be carried forward by all stakeholders in Irish society in order for women to be able to participate fully in Irish economic, societal and cultural life.

The common themes and lessons of the Millennium Project can be grouped under a number of headings:

- **Access to information** was a fundamental issue for participants in each of the six key areas of the research. Information deficits in relation to each of the research areas were identified as, for instance, in the health component, where the need for easy access to women's health / well-being information was generally perceived to be unmet throughout the country. In local development, lack of information about key players in local development processes was identified as a way of preventing women from becoming involved in the development of their local areas. Access to information was frequently identified as a potential solution to many of the problems experienced by the participants. In the area of women and poverty, for example, the provision of information to stakeholders about the gendered nature of poverty is essential to the development of policy initiatives that will meet the needs of women living in situations of disadvantage.

In general, we can conclude that the provision of timely, targeted information to stakeholders is essential in breaking the cycle of negative experiences for women with regard to each of the key areas. For policy-makers, the provision of current, gender-disaggregated data is essential to good policy formation. Participants indicated the need, where appropriate, for information to be targeted specifically at women, in a variety of media. Such information strategies should also take account of considerations related to geography, literacy levels and possible disabilities. To be effective, information strategies need to be designed in consultation with service-users.

- When research participants described their experiences with regard to each of the themes identified in the Project's research components, they tended to apply an **holistic approach** to their analysis of every theme. In other words, the interpretation of their lives and analysis of their situations could not be partitioned off into discrete sections. In the poverty component, participants characterised the experience of living in poverty as web-like. While economic poverty was the key characteristic of poverty for them, poverty was also characterised by a lack of other resources, such as educational opportunities and emotional well-being. In the violence against women and health components, women's experiences either of violence from their male partners or of health and well-being could not be separated from their position as women in Irish society, their socio-economic status, ability and ethnic background.

Thus, policy responses to women's needs must also be informed by an holistic perspective and apply a multi-departmental or multi-agency approach. The complexity of women's lives should not be ignored. The Government should not divide women's needs exclusively by reference to different departmental responsibilities but should endeavour to ascertain how departments might best work together on the issues highlighted in this research.

- The need for **education and training** within each of the six key areas was also an important theme of the Millennium Project research. Education and training are of key importance in enabling women to challenge the systems and structures that oppress them, to break out of the cycle of poverty, to be healthy and provide for the health of their families. They are also crucial in assisting women to examine relations of power in intimate relationships, to return to work, to contribute to local development and to come to know themselves and the world around them more fully. It should be recognised that women have a right to education and training provided in a gender-sensitive manner. Particular attention should be devoted to the needs of marginalised women. The research identified models of good practice in women's community education which might usefully be mainstreamed to encourage women to pursue a number of possible choices such as engaging in further education, returning to work or becoming a community activist.

One issue which was highlighted throughout this research was the need for sensitivity training to be given to service-providers so that they might become more aware of the ways in which gender oppression affects women. Such training should also explore how services could be offered to women in ways that would foster their empowerment. This recommendation regarding sensitivity training was identified in respect of health-care practitioners, social welfare officers, the judiciary, the gardaí and other personnel providing services to women who have experienced violence.

- As always for many women, **caring responsibilities** were a foremost concern of the research participants in the Millennium Project. Participants stressed the fact that caring work performed by women was not valued by the State, by policy-makers or employers. The enormous contribution made by women in terms of caring work remained invisible, with women performing caring roles being seen as a liability by certain power groups. Furthermore, participants criticised the serious lack of childcare places for women wishing to engage in employment, education, training or to attend to their own needs. Participants stressed the need for this issue to receive urgent attention by the Government.
- In some cases, the **lack of funding and other resources** for women's community-based groups was identified as a challenge to the provision of services that would combat women's subordination. Core and multi-annual funding to women's community education groups was identified as vital to the continued provision of targeted and empowering education for women in their communities. In the local development component, funding and the provision of knowledge resources were deemed necessary to foster the capacity of women's community-based groups to become involved in participatory democratic structures at local level. In the violence against women component, services for women experiencing violence were described as over-subscribed and in need of more adequate funding. Funding criteria should be based on models of good practice already in existence. Funding lines specifically for women's groups and initiatives aimed at women still need to be part of any funding programme.
- Women persistently described a **lack of choice** in their lives, be it in terms of the inadequacy of health care services, childcare provision or work practices. This lack of choice forces women to put their own needs last, causing them in some instances to suffer from ill health and disadvantage. Effective policies need to be devised by the Government if this cycle is to be broken.

The following key lessons emerging from the Millennium Project should be used to frame responses to the common themes identified above:

- Attention needs to be devoted to issues of diversity. The particular needs of those who are most marginalised such as minority ethnic women, older women, Traveller women, lesbian women, women with disabilities, women living in poverty and women experiencing domestic violence must urgently be addressed. Groups working on behalf of these women should be resourced and funded to carry out research which would form the basis of effective policy strategies. Diversity should be a key consideration in targeting participants for projects such as the Millennium Project. While the Millennium Project did engage a broad level of participation from NWCI affiliate groups, it did not prove possible to attract participation from representatives of all of the above groups. The NWCI may need to explore further how it might incorporate diversity principles more fully into future research projects.
- One of the lessons which emerged from research was that women need further supports if they are to be enabled to overcome structural discrimination, to develop critical analyses of their economic and social environments and to devise strategies which will foster their empowerment. Projects adopting a participatory approach, such as the Millennium Project, offer an important first step in assisting women to "think outside the box" in order to begin the process of challenging their situation and appropriating power for themselves.

### **3.1 CONCLUSION**

At the NWCi Millennium Project Gathering Day in February 2000, one of the PLA Facilitators described PLA research as ‘ownership from the heart’. The results of this research have truly been informed by the voices of the women who participated in the project. This is the most important aspect of the Millennium Project. While the project’s findings confirm much of the current policy knowledge in each of the six key areas, what the Millennium Project has done has been to provide women with an opportunity to have their voices heard in research carried out by their peers, thus building their capacity to undertake research and share ideas. Despite their many roles and responsibilities, sometimes in the face of poverty or violence, over 600 women chose to devote their time to the Millennium Project research. They are confident that their voices will reach policy-makers throughout Ireland. It would be a hopeful sign for the new Millennium and a fitting end to the Millennium Project if the concerns raised in this research could be listened to receptively by policy-makers and effective policies devised as a consequence.

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