



The Women's Centre

ACCESS EMPOWERMENT ENABLEMENT

The Voices Project at The Women's Centre

Final Report from the Pilot Project

June 2011

Research Funded by CFNI



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1. Introduction: Background to the Project

The Voices Project was set up to research and develop a human rights based approach to empowering women, using a participative methodology. The Centre wanted to build on the empowerment model it advocates and practises as a feminist project and to develop a human rights based approach based on similar principles. In essence, it wanted to fuse the best aspects of each model and test the model that emerged. In doing that it wanted to look at participation and its role in empowerment and practice.

The Centre secured a small grant from the Community Foundation Northern Ireland and used that grant to begin to look at how a human rights based approach might be developed and implemented with one specific group – immigrant women and women from minority ethnic backgrounds. However, it is the Centre's intention to use this report as a tool in working with other groups of women in the future, such as young mothers and women aged 50+ and extend the work beyond the grant.

The Centre has been working with women from minority ethnic backgrounds for several years now and through that work has become ever more aware of the marginalisation of such women. The Centre began to look at ways in which that marginalisation could be addressed. It came to the conclusion that developing and implementing a human rights approach with this group of women would begin to tackle the many problems they face – from isolation, poverty and racism, to injustice and discrimination. One significant aspect of their marginalisation is their alienation from social, community and state structures and a key aspect of this project was to determine a means whereby that alienation could be addressed.

The Centre wanted to begin to develop a methodology which was participative, based on human standards and which focused on

disadvantaged groups, such as women from minority ethnic backgrounds. It hoped that this methodology would provide a means whereby women from disadvantaged groups could engage more with service providers and in doing so have the issues which affect them addressed.

2. Methodology.

A brief was developed and agreed with The Women's Centre, using the grant application as the basis for that discussion. The grant from CFNI would be sufficient to provide for some facilitation work with women from a minority ethnic background and for some research to help inform the design of the approach. As the grant was less than had been requested, the aims of the project were trimmed to suit.

The aims were:

- To carry out research on the common ground between a feminist approach to empowerment and a rights based approach;
- To carry out facilitation work with a group of women from multicultural backgrounds to inform them about human rights;
- To undertake action research with a view to facilitating the experiences and voices of women from a multi-cultural background being heard;
- To begin to develop a model of a rights based approach that could be implemented by the Women's Centre and which would empower women from multi cultural backgrounds;
- To produce a final project report.

Two capacity building workshops were held, to inform participants about human rights. These were followed up by informal, focus group style discussions that enabled women to share their experiences and allow their voices to be heard. At the same time, desk research took place to provide a theoretical grounding for the project. A small number of other interviews with relevant stakeholders were also carried out. In addition a survey of a group of 39 women from a multicultural background was undertaken.

All these interactions were governed by an appropriate ethical framework. Data obtained was stored in a secured area and in compliance with the relevant data protection legislation and standards. All but one of the interactions and interviews were conducted on the basis that anonymity and confidentiality were preserved and that any necessary identifying information would be excised before experiences and views were presented. This was particularly important when gathering information from the group of women migrants with whom the project worked.

The Centre intends to use the research and the approach that it has begun to develop to seek further funding to enable it to fully develop and implement a rights based approach. In the longer term, the Centre would like to develop a model of good practice which can be implemented elsewhere in these islands and which might in time change the lives of many other women and their families.

3. Rights Based Approaches.

3.1. What Are Rights Based Approaches?

“A rights-based approach to development promotes justice, equality and freedom and tackles the power issues that lie at the root of poverty and exploitation. To achieve this, a rights-based approach makes use of the standards,

principles and methods of human rights, social activism and of development.”¹

Human rights based approaches (RBAs) arose from the convergence of the development and human rights agendas in the 1990s.² Influenced by works such as Amartya Sen’s *Development as Freedom* amongst others and fused with a frustration at the lack of impact of human rights on the ground, new thinking about how to use rights to tackle disadvantage developed. A number of influential reports were published by the UN³ which led to the spread of the idea in the development sector. By the middle of the last decade, RBAs were also being promoted as tools to address the issue of social exclusion in the developed world.

A rights based approach is a practical tool for applying human rights. RBAs define the relationship between citizens (and/or groups of citizens) and the state as being one characterised by rights. Individuals or groups are defined as 'rights holders' and those who are responsible for protecting those rights, usually in the public sector are defined as 'duty-bearers'. This means that the relationship between citizens the service providers who bear the duty of implementing the human rights commitments undertaken by the government is therefore one characterized by rights rather than needs.

Rights based approaches make human rights commitments into a framework for tackling issues of social justice and use them as tools

¹ Joachim Theis, *Introduction to Rights Based Programming*, in PROMOTING RIGHTS-BASED APPROACHES: EXPERIENCES AND IDEAS FROM ASIA AND THE PACIFIC, Save The Children, Sweden, 2004, at p2.

² Joanna Kerr, *International Trends In Gender Equality Work*, AWID Occasional Paper Series (No. 1, November, 2001) Toronto, 2001.

³ These included UNICEF, *APPLYING A HUMAN RIGHTS BASED APPROACH TO PROGRAMMING: EXPERIENCES OF UNICEF* UN, 2001 and UNDP, *POVERTY REDUCTION AND HUMAN RIGHTS A PRACTICE NOTE*, June 2003 They arose mainly after the UN World Summit for Social Development took place in Copenhagen in 1995, when rights were put at the heart of new development frameworks.

for benchmarking change. RBAs facilitate the poor and the marginalized to participate meaningfully in the decisions made by policy makers about housing, health care, education etc. However, in order to facilitate that capacity has to be built amongst the marginalized to engage with service providers. In doing this, self-confidence and ownership are developed in people and communities and enable them to make changes both in their own lives and in the manner in which public money is spent and services delivered.

3.2. A Feminist Perspective

The Women's Centre is a feminist project and applies a feminist analysis to the work that it undertakes. The Centre's mission is to

“enable women to access opportunities for learning and development in a flexible and supportive environment, providing childcare which is focused on the needs of the child” and it also seeks to work in partnership with others to “to influence positive change in the field of women's equality, learning and development”⁴

Despite the emergence of “post-feminism” and an increasingly academic obsession with ‘first’, ‘second’ and ‘third wave’ movements, grassroots women's organisations continue to work as practical feminist projects. For The Women's Centre, their functional brand of feminism is at the heart of everything they do – it is a means of providing practical tools for women's empowerment. This is feminism as action and praxis.

In the same way, rights based approaches emerged out of dissatisfaction with academic debates about the meaning of rights and the classification of rights into first and second generation types. RBAs developed as a means of making rights work, on the

⁴ Women's Centre Derry, ANNUAL REPORT 2010, Introduction

ground, in the fields and in the slums and shanty towns. Above all, they are about putting human rights standards into practice.

Both approaches share many things, most importantly an understanding of the unequal allocation of power, its impact on equality and life chances and a desire to redistribute it. Fundamentally both are about challenging power and changing the way in which it is exercised.

However, it is necessary to be aware that these are different approaches and to be alive in particular to the criticisms made of other attempts to frame women's experiences of inequality as exactly the same as that of every disadvantaged community. That perspective needs to inform the model developed.⁵

In addition it is important to note the enduring feminist critique of human rights that argues that "women's rights have been viewed very narrowly in terms of legal equality with men and were generally invisible or marginalized within the wider human rights machinery."⁶

The women's movement's historical distrust of the international human rights apparatus may be one reason why women's organisations in Northern Ireland have tended in the past not to articulate their claims as human rights. However, a rights framework offers the opportunity to 'clothe [women's] ideas and encode desires' and is one way of being better "heard and accepted as legitimate in the public domain."⁷ In particular, the binding nature of the international human rights framework - the fact that it is part

⁵ See Andrea Cornwall, *Making A Difference: Gender and Participatory Development* (IDS DISCUSSION PAPER 378, 2000) at pp 7-8

⁶ Niamh O'Reilly, *WOMEN'S HUMAN RIGHTS*, (Polity, 2009) at p12

⁷ David Mosse, *Authority, Gender and Knowledge: Theoretical Reflections on the Practice of Participatory Rural Appraisal*, *DEVELOPMENT AND CHANGE* Vol. 25 (1994), 497-526, at p 516

of international law makes it something that governments are supposed to implement, rather than a policy they may or may not elect to follow.

In operating this practical form of feminism, The Women's Centre is akin to many other women's projects. The Centre evolved from a very small volunteer operation based in the front room of a terraced house in the 1970s. It is now a large-scale project, occupying a three-storey landmark site in the centre of Derry and providing over 600 places each week in on-site educational and capacity building programmes. Alongside those programmes, the Centre provides crèche facilities for children, a crucial aspect of women's empowerment. The Director of the Centre describes the Centre's mission as follows:

“We provide an environment of support, a place where confidence building and self-esteem are all part of the fabric and where there are people and programmes to help you with that. The aim is to help women to empowerment and awareness by providing a supportive and non-threatening atmosphere. The Centre does this partly by being an oasis where women are valued as themselves, not for what they look like or where they come from.”⁸

The Centre runs a number of projects and programmes that are aimed at empowering women. These include the Live and Learn Programme, geared towards empowering women “through the building of greater self-confidence and self-esteem as a foundation upon which to take more control over their own lives.”⁹ Another project, Restoring Community Well-being, increased the skills capacity of women, encouraging and supporting them in participating in and contributing to their communities.

⁸ Interview with Director of the Women's Centre, May 31 2011

⁹ The Women's Centre Derry, ANNUAL REPORT 2010, at p 9

3.3. A Focus on Equality and Participation

In one of its most ambitious and successful projects, the Centre ran a programme for young mothers. The IPOD Project, which ran between 2008 and 2010, enabled young women to balance the demands of early motherhood with their own continued educational and personal development. Many of those who took part were mothers in their teens who had either been excluded from mainstream education or had been obliged to leave it as a result of personal circumstances.

Operating under the principles of participation, empowerment, equality, social justice and social change, the programme provided the 218 participants with a range of options for capacity building and development. Crucially, the young women themselves had the opportunity to shape and mould the programme in order to meet their needs. From the beginning of the programme, they were facilitated and supported in making decisions about the programme design and in creating learning plans suited to their own individual needs. The experience of those young women was that the programme transformed their lives, by teaching them to care and respect for themselves and others and, crucially, by helping them to see themselves as equal in status to those around them. This aspect of the programme is mainstreamed in the work of the Centre generally and is a core element of its approach – the equality of all women, regardless of age, class or social background. As one of the participants in the IPOD programme remarked,

“The best thing is the atmosphere in the Women’s Centre which means that you are equal no matter what age you are.”¹⁰

¹⁰ IPOD Project, FINAL EVALUATION REPORT (TWC, 2010), at p 13

For many young women in her position this was an unusual experience, but one that positively impacted on her progress. This experience and impact of being treated equally is something which arose regularly in the interviews with the group of multi cultural women who took part in this pilot project and a motif that recurs over and over again in evaluations of the Centre's work.

Whilst the IPOD programme did not invoke human rights standards nor use them in interactions with duty-bearers, there was much in this programme that resembled a rights based approach. In particular, the programme placed great importance on participation by the young women in making decisions about the programme. In this it drew not on rights standards but on evolving best practice in youth work. The learning from the Project focussed on the 'enablers' – the factors that facilitate young mothers getting on track to education and economic activity. Crucially these included 'voice and choice' - the opportunity to shape and influence the services available to them and a choice about those services. A key learning outcome from the project was that one size does not fit all when it comes to tapping the potential of disadvantaged young women.¹¹ In these respects, the project mirrored the approach of a rights based project.

3. 4. A Participative Methodology.

Both feminism and rights based approaches have at their heart a participative methodology as a means of empowerment. Both start from the principle that empowerment requires active participation in decision making.

Much of the work the Women's Centre already does is highly participative: it works in a way which "is only as structured as it needs to be. We have created a way of working which tries to

¹¹ IPOD Project END OF GRANT REPORT, (TWC), 2010, at p5

engage women by listening to them and helping them address the barriers which prevent them from living their lives to the full.”¹²

At the heart of a rights based approach is the participation and empowerment of marginalized citizens and communities in decision-making. However, it is a particular kind of participation that RBAs envisage – not participation as placation or legitimation¹³ but participation as empowerment. This means that people are fully involved in decision-making and are able to affect policies and practice.

3.5. Participation, Gender and Feminism.

The essence of a participative methodology is that, rather than professional staff or activists undertaking advocacy on behalf of a disadvantaged community, capacity building work is undertaken to support and promote members of that disadvantaged community articulating their concerns for themselves. Instead of “having it done for them”, people are empowered to “do it for themselves”. It is a core part of a feminist methodology and is a direct challenge to patriarchal attitudes that regard women as weak and in need of direction and decisions made for them. In the same way, RBAs are challenges to the notion that people from disadvantaged communities are too poor and uneducated to make decisions for themselves. This sort of approach speaks directly to the criticism sometimes levelled at human rights that they create a passivity in people – that individuals become accustomed to the notion of entitlement and as a result expect things to be done for them. With a rights-based approach, individuals are supported and encouraged to become active participants in their own lives.

¹² Note 8, above. .

¹³ See Sarah White, *Depoliticising Development: The Uses And Abuses Of Participation*, DEVELOPMENT IN PRACTICE, Volume 6, Number 1, February 1996 , pp. 6-15(10)

Both feminism and rights based approaches challenge the notion that people can only be passive observers of their own lives. Both methodologies are firmly rooted in the concept of individual agency as a means of change and are aimed at transforming people into active participants in the decisions that affect them.

A rights based approach argues that by giving people the tools to effect change, in the form of basic standards and norms and by identifying those responsible for implementing those standards, it allows them to become more assertive about the decisions which are made about their lives. As with feminism, rights based approaches are interested in the barriers that prevent people becoming involved in those decisions. They consequently place much emphasis on capacity building, on equipping people to understand and effectively challenge decisions. Full participation means that it is not enough to merely ensure that representatives of the disadvantaged are present on decision-making bodies or are consulted about what they want.

As Andrea Cornwall puts it:

“[U]nless efforts are made to enable marginal voices to be raised and heard, claims to inclusiveness made on behalf of participatory [methodologies] will continue to appear rather empty. Remedies such as requiring the representation of women on committees or making sure that women are consulted are necessary but not sufficient. The challenge of inclusion requires more than the short-term projects characteristic of much development effort... More attention must be paid to strengthening the capabilities of women – *and* men, particularly those who are more marginal – to act as ‘makers and shapers’”¹⁴

¹⁴ Cornwall, op cit, at p27

The challenge for a project such as this is to work out how to provide that capacity and facilitate that participation by marginalized women.

4. The Voices Pilot Project at the Women's Centre.

The women involved in the Voices Pilot Project were all women who had attended events and classes at the Women's Centre over the last 18 months.

The women were living in Northern Ireland for a variety of reasons.

- they were accompanying a husband or partner who was from the UK or Ireland; or
- they were accompanying a husband or partner who was taking up a job or a place on an educational course; or
- they were taking up a place on an educational course; or
- they were looking for work;

Thirty-nine women were involved to a varying extent in the Voices Project by:

- attending a workshop; and/or
- attended a focus group session; and/or
- took part in an interview session; and/or
- being part of the survey.

As part of the Pilot Project, a survey of their backgrounds and circumstances was undertaken. Details of that survey are contained in the table below.

	Number	%
Of EU Origin	6	15
Non EU Origin	33	85
Partner from EU	12	33
Here primarily for partner's career or education;	25	64
Here primarily for own career or education	4	10
Settled here (with partner/ has citizenship)	10	26
Qualified to Degree Level/ Professional Qualification	19	51
Low level English Language skills	21	54
Has dependent children	25	64
Total	39	100

ABOVE: SURVEY OF WOMEN ATTENDING MULTI-CULTURAL PROGRAMME AT THE WOMEN'S CENTRE DEC 2009-MAY 2011.

From that survey, a number of interesting facts emerge. Almost three quarters of the women were resident in Northern Ireland to support their partner's education or career, or had settled here with a partner.¹⁵ Less than one sixth were from the EU, with the vast majority being non-EU citizens, which has significant implications for their entitlement to live in the UK. For some, that entitlement depended upon their partner - one third had husbands or partners from either the UK or Ireland, whilst they were not. A small number of those women themselves held EU citizenship, but the large majority did not. This meant that when such a woman's marriage or relationship broke up, she often feared for her right to remain in the UK. The difficulty in accessing affordable, reliable immigration advice further complicates the situation for these women, who are often afraid to approach public services for help.

About two thirds of the women surveyed had children. Most of those children were enrolled in state or non-denominational schools, although a smaller number attended Catholic maintained schools. Many of the women made use of the crèche in the Women's centre to attend classes, especially those whose language skills were low. Without that support, many of them would not have been able to

¹⁵ All but one of the women who had settled here had done so because her partner was from here.

attend the classes. A little over 50% of the women surveyed had arrived in Northern Ireland with poor or non-existent English language skills and many depended upon their partners or children to interpret for them. This had the effect of isolating them even more and preventing them from going out on their own.

Over a half of the women were educated to degree levels or were professionally qualified (e.g. as a nurse). Most were either not working or working at a job that was of a status and pay scale much lower than their qualifications would ordinarily have allowed. For most of the women in this situation, this was because of the level of their language skills – they had failed to reach the very high levels of competence in the IELTS examinations required by professional bodies. This was the case even for those women who were perfectly fluent in everyday speech.

5. Voices from the Workshops & the Focus Groups.

An important precursor to participation is knowledge of the relevant rights standards and an ability to use them, the first task was to provide some basic information about human rights to the group. To that end, we decided to hold a couple of short workshops that would provide basic, simple information about human rights. These would provide a good grounding for later discussions in focus groups about rights and experiences. The first workshop focused on the idea and practice of human rights. The second workshop looked at rights in the context of equality and race. This is an area in which TWC receives a lot of requests for information and help. These workshops were held in February and March 2011.

The workshops were attended by women who regularly attend the Women's Centre's Multicultural programme. They represent a very good mix of cultures, backgrounds and language skills – in total

women from 11 different countries attended the workshops. Many of them had small children who were below school age and needed to avail of the crèche facilities in the Women's Centre for them. Without this childcare provision, attendance at these workshops would have been much more limited and this emphasises once more the barrier to participation that lack of childcare can be.

Capacity at the outset was low. Most of the women who attended the workshops had never heard even of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, let alone the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Most, however, understood the basic ideas behind human rights – equality, fair treatment, freedom from arbitrary power. There was also a broad general understanding that these sorts of things were underpinned by global standards of some sort, however little actual effect they may have in practice. Co-incidentally, the workshops took place in the middle of the so-called 'Arab Spring' of 2011 and a number of the women in the workshops were from the Middle East. This led to very interesting discussions about what role human rights played in those situations.

However, whilst most of those taking part had a vague awareness of civil and political rights, none realised that social and economic rights were part of those international global standards. This is despite the fact that it was just those sorts of rights that impacted most on their lives. In the second workshop, which looked at equality as a human right in the context of race and beliefs, the discussions moved on and allowed some women to place the concept of equality in the context of their own experiences.

Following on from the workshops, a series of informal discussions was facilitated as part of the Pilot Project, aimed at finding out what the experiences of the women have been and in providing those

experiences with a platform. We were keen to ensure that those experiences were recorded and heard, but also that they formed part of an analysis of the barriers faced by women on the margins. These sessions were held in April and May 2011 and took the form of conversations with small groups of women about their daily lives and their experiences in coming to Northern Ireland. Finally, there were a number of one-to-one interviews. These were held in May and June 2011.

From this series of exercises, the following voices and stories emerged.

5.1 Coming to Northern Ireland.

"When I first came here, I didn't speak any English and I was quite frightened."

"There is so much to get used to when you are in a strange place. It would have helped to know someone else from home who was here. I found out much later that there were many people from home here. But I didn't know any of them then."

"I didn't know anyone and my husband's family were all out working, so there was no-one to talk to all day. I felt really alone."

"When we got here from [named country] we thought we were coming to England. We did not realise Northern Ireland was a different place. I thought I would be living in London or somewhere like that, where there would be lots of people from [named country] near to us."

“There should be a welcome pack or something for people who come here from outside Northern Ireland. That would really help you settle in.”¹⁶

“People are very friendly and kind but they look at you in the street. They are interested in us, yes, but it is difficult sometimes.”

5.2 Accessing Services:

“The way the lady spoke to me, it made me feel very stupid.”

“I couldn’t go to [service providers] about anything when I first came here because I did not speak any English.”

“I found all the names of the organisations very confusing. Because you are born here, you know these names but for me, they are just letters that mean nothing.”¹⁷

“In my country you do not ask questions of the authorities. We have to be careful.”

Some of the situations experienced by women in accessing services included:

- One woman who was suffering from a chronic illness was unable to access benefits.
- One woman was struggling with her visa situation. She had difficulty in accessing affordable, competent representation to help her with her case.
- One woman had difficulties finding help in dealing with the learning difficulties faced by her child. She felt that her

¹⁶ In fact, Derry City Council do produce such a pack. But this woman (and many others) were not aware of it. As a result of this project, Derry City Council’s Equality Officer visited the MC Programme Group to give a short information session about the pack. (visit on 21 June 2011)

¹⁷ This woman meant the acronyms that organisations use.

English language skills were a barrier to her in this regard, even though she speaks very good English. She found that the technical language used in reports and assessments were difficult to understand. She also felt that the fact that she was foreign and had not been through the educational system in Northern Ireland put her at a disadvantage.

- A number of the women have had babies since coming to live in Northern Ireland and for some of them it has been a difficult, sometimes frightening experience.
- For some of the women who live here with small pre-school age children it is an isolating experience. They find it especially hard without relatives and extended family to call on for help and are reluctant to access services here.
- A number of women had difficulties in finding suitable accommodation, reporting difficulties ranging from sub-standard housing that exacerbated health problems to refusals by landlords to rent to them.

Whilst there were many problems of this nature, many women simply had no engagement with public services at all. Most of them are not entitled to any benefits, contrary to public perceptions about migrants. Their primary engagement with public services is through the health service, usually by bringing their children to the GP for minor childhood ailments. A significant problem for many of them is lack of English language skills and although interpretation services are available in some circumstances, access to those services can be patchy.

5.3 Work:

The vast majority of the women surveyed are economically dependent upon their partners and for those who are not, work is difficult to access. For example, two of the women involved in the project returned home because they could not find any

employment. One of the women had a vocational qualification and experience that should have made her an attractive option for local employers. Another was unable to find work of any sort in the north-west, despite being qualified to degree level and having competent English language skills. When asked about the experience, she said:

"I have tried everywhere to get work, but no-one even replies to my letters or emails. It seems as if you are not from here, you cannot get a job. Every day I go to the Job centre, but no luck."

Her view about the reasons for her inability to obtain work was supported by at least one other women in the group, who had similar experiences, although she had been successful in obtaining shift work. Like many of the other women in the group, it was of a nature and at a level much lower than one might expect given her qualifications. A number of women reported significant difficulties verging on prejudice when they went looking for work, even of the most menial type. Part of the difficulty in obtaining work is the generally poor state of the job market in the north-west, but for migrants generally and migrant women in particular this is not an uncommon experience.¹⁸

A factor in this may be language skills - a number of women were highly qualified professionals, but unable to work in their chosen professions. This was due to the requirement that they obtain a very high score in the IELTS examinations.

5.4 Living in Northern Ireland

¹⁸ There are a number of studies that bear this out. See for example ESRI WORKING PAPER No. 206 AUGUST 2007 THE EARNINGS OF IMMIGRANTS IN IRELAND: RESULTS FROM THE 2005 EU SURVEY OF INCOME AND LIVING CONDITIONS Alan Barrett and Yvonne McCarthy

“When I came here first, my children were very small and I didn’t drive. We didn’t have a car anyway and we live out in the country. So I couldn’t go anywhere and it made me feel really isolated.”

“I didn’t know anyone who lived here and there was no-one to talk to.”

“Most people are nice. But some people called us names and shouted at us. I was frightened.”

A number of women had poor or very limited English language skills. Many of them did not venture beyond their homes without being accompanied by their partner or an older child, upon whom they relied for translations. This had the effect of making them very isolated and in some cases, vulnerable. If such a woman found herself in an abusive relationship, for example, she had almost no way of accessing information or support.

A number of women had experienced racial abuse, but more than one failed to report it to the PSNI because of fears of drawing attention to themselves. There was a fairly widespread reluctance to engage with the authorities, for a range of reasons, primarily fear of engaging with the state. Many of those who demonstrated this reluctance are resident in Northern Ireland on limited visas and are unwilling to draw attention to themselves. A number come from countries where there is little or very limited democracy and their experiences at home colour their behaviour here. In other words, they had learned 'to keep their heads down' in their own countries and not to challenge the authorities.

For quite a number of women, the cultural void in Northern Ireland was insurmountable. The cultural norms that governed how their lives were lived at home also applied whilst they lived here and meant that many aspects of life were off limits to them. For

example, they were often wary of public places and transport. Socialising was difficult – for many of the women pubs and clubs were simply no-go areas and there were few other places that they felt were either safe and/or culturally appropriate for them. Because of that, The Women's Centre was one of the few places in which they felt comfortable.

5.5 Family Life

"I rely upon my son to translate for me. At home we only speak my language."

"My kids love living here – when I told them we might have to go home, they cried all day. My little girl kept saying 'Mama, Mama, no, we don't want to go'."

"When I left my husband, he kept phoning me up and threatening me with the authorities. He kept saying that if I didn't come back to him, he would have me sent home and never see my kids again."

"The place we were living in was terrible. It was just so damp and this was not good for my child. She has asthma, so we had to move, but the landlord would not give us back our deposit."

6. Voices Through Art and Crafts

A number of the women involved in the pilot Voices Project were also attending the Crafting English Programme at the Centre, which facilitates improvement in English language skills through arts and crafts activities. It is specifically aimed at women with limited or negligible English language skills.

Coincidentally, at the time the Voices Project was running the two human rights workshop, the Crafting English programme was putting together contributions for the 'Book of Belles'. This was a major art project commemorating International Women's Day in the north-west. Contributors were asked to memorialise a woman's life, in the form of a piece of art which would then be bound with all the other contributions into a book – 'The Book of Belles'. Some of the women taking part in the Voices Project were also participants in the Crafting English programme and an interesting crossover took place.

The group was able to talk about human rights issues and experiences in the context of preparing for the Book of Belles project. As a result, a number of women chose to memorialise a woman they regarded as important in the struggle for equality and human rights. Some chose famous women like Aung San Suu Kyi and Rosa Parkes. Others chose less well known women – such as the Chinese poet Li Quingzhao and the Korean independence campaigner Yu Gwan Sun.

The Book of Belles has been exhibited at various venues around Derry. An exhibition of more work from the multi-cultural programme, including work on the theme of human rights was held in June 2011, at the Eden Place Arts Centre.

7. Empowering Women through a Rights-Based Approach: Elements of A Methodology.

7.1. Whilst there is no agreed official definition of what constitutes a rights based approach, there is a consensus on its key elements. These are:

- **Participation** by rights holders in decision making;

- **Accountability** of duty bearers for the implementation of agreed standards;
- **Non-Discrimination** and the active inclusion of disadvantaged groups;
- **Empowerment**;
- **Links** to human rights standards in the decision making process.

These are sometimes referred to as the 'PANEL' framework and are used extensively by the UN and international and domestic NGOs.¹⁹

The Belfast based *Practice And Participation Of Rights Project* has defined a RBA as being characterised by the following hallmarks:

- Regards the participation of the marginalised as central;
- Articulates issues as rights-based rather than needs-based;
- Promotes accountability by developing systems for monitoring the implementation of international legal commitments;
- Empowers people by building capacity and capability amongst disadvantaged groups and in individuals to challenge governments on the implementation of rights commitments
- Focuses on the inclusion of historically disadvantaged groups.²⁰

7.2. Taking those approaches and also drawing upon the key hallmarks of a feminist empowerment methodology, the following emerges as the framework of a RBA that might be applied by The Women's Centre:

- **Identification and Empowerment** of an marginalized group of women

¹⁹ See André Frankovits, THE HUMAN RIGHTS BASED APPROACH AND THE UNITED NATIONS SYSTEM, A DESK STUDY (UNESCO Strategy On Human Rights) 2006, at pp55-6

²⁰ Adapted from "What is A Human Rights based Approach?", Website of the Practice and Participation of Rights (www.pprproject.org) visited 18 April 2011

- **Participation** by those women in decision-making processes and in policy formulation.
- **Building capacity** amongst those women so that participation can take place;
- **Developing knowledge** amongst those women of the relevant human rights standards so that they can articulate their concerns in those terms and thus be heard;
- **Use of those standards** by that group of women to argue for policy change, to measure performance by service providers and to improve delivery.

7.3. Empowerment is a central aspect of any feminist project and is in practice something at which women's organisations like The Women's Centre are adept. A crucial aspect of the empowerment process is the support women are given to take control over their lives – to participate in the decisions that are made about them. One of the ways in which that is done is by identifying the barriers that prevent that active participation, or empowerment and seeking ways to address those barriers.

An important means of determining those barriers is listening to the marginalized, hearing their voices and reflecting on their experiences. Merely asking a group of disempowered people to list the reasons they do not have power is unlikely to produce a result. The barriers to participation which were identified in this pilot project as a result of that listening exercise are:

- Time
- Childcare
- Fear of making waves (immigration status)
- Fear of not offending
- Poor or limited language skills
- Lack of knowledge of systems
- Traditional gender roles

In order to address those barriers, a capacity building programme needs to be developed which tackles those barriers and seeks to develop the confidence and ability of each woman undertaking the programme. That support can take many forms – from simply providing childcare for women to attend the sessions, to English language classes to workshops providing training about the public services in Northern Ireland.

8. Conclusions & Recommendations.

What we have learned to date from the pilot project can be summarised as follows:

- The common ground between a feminist approach and a rights based approach and the differences;
- The extent and nature of the barriers to participation faced by migrant women;
- The nature of the issues that face migrant women in their everyday lives;
- The importance of a participatory approach
- The extent and nature of the capacity building needed to develop and implement a empowered, participatory rights based approach with a group of migrant women;
- The essential elements of that approach.

8.1. There is no doubt that migrant women and women from a minority ethnic background face significant difficulties when they come to Northern Ireland. For many such women, they are cut off from traditional support mechanisms such as extended family and community. This vulnerability is often exacerbated by poor English language skills and limited immigration status. For many migrant women there are immense cultural differences between their lives and expectations and those of women here. Nearly every women involved in the project expressed some feelings of isolation and vulnerability, but it is the impact of those on their engagement with society which is significant. There is no doubt that an empowerment programme, based on rights principles and aimed at facilitating participation by those women would greatly benefit them. It would also help the authorities in devising and delivering a variety of services. Such an approach, if successfully implemented, could then be refined and used as a model of good practice for other women's organisations.

Recommendation: That significant capacity building work should be undertaken with this group of women in order to help them engage with policy makers and participate in decision-making processes.

Recommendation: That The Women's Centre seeks to use the learning from this project to further develop and implement a rights based approach which incorporates a feminist approach to development and seeks to apply it with a group of migrant women.

Recommendation: That The Women's Centre seeks to develop a model of good practice based upon this work and shares it with other women's organisations.

8.2. Whilst the issue of a growing diversity in the ethnic backgrounds of service users is increasing in importance to public sector managers,²¹ there is a need for better information about migrant women and the issues that impact on them. In particular, there is very little awareness either of the relevant rights standards that apply or of the binding nature of those standards. Throughout the public sector there is a basic, if patchy awareness of the relevance of the Human Rights Act 1998. There is much less awareness of CEDAW, the Convention on the Rights of the Child and other various UN Conventions and almost no awareness of the UN Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. This lack of capacity in the public sector, despite the binding nature of those human rights commitments, is common across the UK.²² The implementation of a rights based approach which equipped and empowered migrant women to participate in decision making would help embed human rights principles and standards into the public sector. It is also clear that there is a real need for capacity building amongst those who formulate policy and make decisions.²³ There is

²¹ Interview with senior manager in a public sector service provider, 8 June 2011.

²² See discussion of this in THE REPORT OF THE HUMAN RIGHTS INQUIRY (EHRC 2009) at pp89-91

²³ Note 21, above.

an opportunity to develop a RBA in partnership with a public sector organisation and the Women's Centre has years of experience working in partnership arrangements to draw upon in this regard.

Recommendation: That as part of its development of a rights based approach, The Women's Centre should consider the possibilities of partnership working with a public sector body.

8.3. In this pilot project, the process of listening was very important, for two reasons. Firstly, it allowed the voices of the women involved to inform the development of the methodology. Secondly, it also allowed individual women to be heard, something to which they are not always accustomed. In a way, that is a precondition for equality and human rights – being treated as person worth listening to. That has a powerful transformative effect, as the women's movement has discovered. It is something that women who use The Women's Centre comment on over and over again – that sense of being valued for who you are right now as well as supported in becoming who you want to be. This listening process also helped by allowing the issues that affected the women involved to emerge naturally, through structured but very informal conversations. The information the women had obtained through the two capacity building workshops helped them identify those issues and also helped to put their experiences in context. This 'listening exercise' is at the heart of a participative approach, because it obliges the 'professional' facilitator and researcher to work in a fully supportive and participative way. The opposite of such a process would be to start with a generic presentation of human rights standards and expect rights holders to respond by slotting their concerns into that framework. Instead, the approach we took was to provide basic information about human rights and then use that as a trigger for discussions and conversations about

women's experiences and lives. That information was collected and then analysed and forms the basis of this report.

Recommendation: That such a 'listening' exercise should be at the heart of any participative methodology and especially one which forms part of a rights based approach.

8.4 Conclusion

In one of the group sessions undertaken during this project, an interesting discussion took place. One woman began to talk about her isolation and the stress she felt because she was at home most of the day with her small children. Many of the other women in the group had undergone similar experiences and having themselves found external support and solutions, were able to pass on that information as well as offer comfort and reassurance. The woman left the session with offers for babysitting as well as the details of half a dozen mother and toddler groups within a mile or so of where she lived. In other sessions, similar discussions arose about breast feeding and dealing with miscarriages. In all of these sessions, the importance of the advice, reassurance and information coming from a peer group was paramount. As one woman put it:

"When someone from [Northern Ireland] tells me something, I think it might not be right for me, but when someone who is like me tells me something, I think it will be ok."

What this anecdote emphasises is the importance of a participative approach and demonstrates why the engagement of individuals in making decisions about their lives is really important. They are the best people to help inform and shape those decisions, because they know best about their own experiences. The women's movement

has placed the importance of peer support and education at the heart of what it does and it is a crucial aspect of the movement's empowerment model. This vital element of the model is one that could be utilised by human rights practitioners in other fields.

The next step in developing this rights based approach at The Women's Centre will be to deploy that peer model as part of a rights based approach. It will mean identifying the relevant human rights standards that relate to a specific set of issues and then working with the group to inform them about those standards and facilitate them in applying them to their lives. It will involve building capacity around engaging with authority and in helping them move outside of a traditional realm. It will require, in due course, engaging with public authorities.

The foundations for that engagement by The Women's Centre have been laid – there is a group of women who now have more confidence in themselves, who are better able to engage with the world around them and who have a great deal more information and awareness about their rights. Their voices are better heard, not least by the identification of the issues that matter to them and of the barriers to their participation. Through research and practice the core elements of a rights based approach have been articulated. It will need further work to develop capacity and facilitate participation, but an important start has been made through this project, to enable women to become key actors in their own lives, bringing them from the margins to the mainstream. Most of all, this project has identified that at the heart of any rights based or development project has to be the individual rights holder, supported by and working with her peers.

As Inez McCormack has said, when speaking about rights based approaches at a conference in 2007:

“How do we make the change in power relationships sustainable by the transfer of skills and resources to the people who actually need the change. It’s not that they lack expertise – they are the experts in their lives. What they lack is the sense of context which requires that expertise to be treated with respect. Then they can feel they are actually part of getting the answers, and enabling the decision makers to change their ways of doing business.”²⁴

²⁴ Opening Remarks, MAKING AND MEASURING CHANGE - A HUMAN RIGHTS BASED APPROACH TO HEALTH CONFERENCE REPORT (PPR, Belfast, 2007) at pp6-8

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