

The National Collective of Community-based Women's Network- Donegal

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At some stage in our lives we meet people who have a profound influence on us. I was 20 years old and a student midwife when I experienced one of these 'light bulb' moments – the person responsible, Ms Reynolds our Midwifery Tutor. The question she repeatedly posed to her students was 'WHY?'

WHY- is a very simple word, but it informs WHAT we do, HOW we do it and ultimately WHY we do it.

If you think about toddlers the first question they ask is -WHY? - they can pack so many why's into one day they nearly drive you to distraction!

well..... WHY.... is the question I would like you to 'hold' this morning.

The Irish Government has made many commitments, drawn up many strategies and signed many obligations towards achieving women's equality. Without a doubt some progress has been made but when you listen to women experiencing disadvantage and who are marginalised, we know why the vital work of the National Collective of Community Based Women's Networks is needed – as this is a long title I will be referring to it as The Collective.

The Collective is made up of 17 local women's networks working with and advocating for women experiencing disadvantage and marginalisation. The Collective is managed nationally by a voluntary board made up of women from the local Women's Networks. This national board manage funding to the Networks and are responsible for the direct employment of 44 staff and indirect employment of 156. To date, funding to the Collective has been cut by 41%

Across the country, the 17 networks outreach and engage disadvantaged women in their local communities to support their participation by providing needs based services and supports. Through women centred community development, these women are empowered to have their voices heard. What we all have in common in the Collective is a shared set of values that informs WHAT we do, HOW we do it and WHY we do it.

My work has been based in Donegal a very beautiful place but alongside that beauty and ruggedness is the reality of isolation and economic deprivation which impacts hugely on the everyday lives of ordinary women.

Donegal is:

- Predominately rural
- The majority of lone-parents, homemakers and carers are women
- It has the highest level of unemployment of all constituencies
- Highs level of emigration
- And has a very high age dependency ratio

Everyone wants to do the best for their children and their loved ones but for women who are living in poverty, who are on a low income, who have a disability, are from the Traveller community, are full-time carers, or who for whatever reason have no economic independence these women know the reality of poverty and the effect this has on their health and the quality of their lives and that of their families.

Once employment gave security and a quality of life but we now have 16% of those working, living in poverty. Women in particular are vulnerable to low wages and precarious employment, with 50% of women earning €20,000 or less.

It is a fact that one parent families tend to have the lowest disposable income out of all the households in the state. In Donegal 93.5% of lone parents are women. So what is their reality?

For women living only on social welfare benefits, the week in week out drudge of living on such a low income greatly adds to their stress levels and ultimately impacts negatively on their physical and mental health. For some women managing means no heat while the children are at school, buying everything second hand for themselves and their children, including the school uniforms. I know a number of women who cut their own hair as going to the hair dresser is a luxury they cannot afford and the word holiday is not even in their vocabulary. In rural areas it maybe the monthly trip to do the essential shopping that is their day out.

Incorporate into this picture childhood illnesses, or having a child with a disability and the consequences are unimaginable. The extra costs of attending the GP when a taxi is the only option of transport, or having to attend the hospital which could be over 40 miles away, very often means the woman having to get into debt. For those women on social welfare and in receipt of a medical card, the €2.50 prescription charge on each item can often be a barrier to them accessing health care.

Lack of accessible affordable childcare especially in rural area compounds the poverty trap for lone parents with many women unable to access training or to find work.

Some women with no family support, no money for social occasions or interaction develop low self – esteem which compounds their struggle to stay healthy, for their greatest fear is, *‘What happens to my children, if I am sick?’*

For women who find themselves in an abusive domestic relationship, lack of economic independence can often be the main reason why she stays. When a woman leaves the home and we know that this is the most dangerous time for women, in rural areas where transport is so difficult, it increases their risk of danger. Ironically, it is the woman experiencing an abusive relationship that becomes homeless and dependent on the support of the frontline services as a safe haven.

Legal support and advice is available through legal aid for women who cannot afford independent advice but there is an initial consultation fee of €130.00. Where does a woman with no income find this?

Cuts to home help and services to people with disabilities is having a particular harrowing effect on the most vulnerable in our society. Many women find themselves alone and afraid in their homes, especially in rural areas where you may not even see the light of your neighbour’s house.

Because of cutbacks community based support services are becoming a time managed operation the objective being to get in and out as quickly as possible. There is little time to chat about what is important to them, to listen to their concerns, to ease their isolation and loneliness.

Women with disabilities or older women who rely on state support cannot afford to pay the transport costs for ‘getting out’. The money is kept for the trip to the Doctor or Chiropodist. In cases where wheelchair accessible transport is required this may have to come from the nearest town and will be more expensive because of this.

So what about the women who are at the heart of the family and the back bone of our communities? The women whose daily life is focused on someone else's needs before their own while possibly caring for a family as well. They have little if any economic independence to improve the quality of their lives or to take the breaks they need to maintain their own health. The only time away maybe a weekend with the Carer's or through another NGO support. I know a woman who cares for 4 adults 24 x 7, her husband has Parkinson's and she has 3 adult children with intellectual disabilities and serious mental health issues, this woman gets only two weekends away in a year. Listening to women more state supports are required for all Carer's.

Lack of accessible affordable childcare is huge barrier for women seeking some economic independence. According to a major economic report commissioned by the Donegal County Childcare Committee, the annual cost of full-time childcare for a two-child family is €16, 500. Among lower income groups 56% indicated that the cost of childcare prevented them from looking for a job. While childcare costs are extremely high, the childcare sector is low paid with over 25,000 workers receive less than € 11 an hour – for one of the most important jobs, caring for our children. It is just another example of the value given to caring roles which predominately are women. The home helps, personal assistants, the childcare workers and carer's are well entitled to ask the question WHY?

This was just a 'snapshot' of some of the issues for women experiencing disadvantage and it is impossible to do justice to covering all in 8 minutes.