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Empowerment of rural women in Northern Ireland – impacts on poverty, development and current challenges.

1 Background and context

The empowerment of rural women within Northern Ireland has been a notable policy objective for many years. Notable milestones on the road towards equality have included the suffragette movement seeking the vote for women and the introduction of equality legislation with specific gender provisions that outlaws discrimination in areas such as employment.

In recognising these advances, there remains a need to address issues such as the pay imbalances between men and women and the under representation of women in public office to name but two.

Whilst much has been written on many of the aforementioned issues there has tended to be less emphasis on the particular issues impacting on women from and within rural communities.

This paper provides an overview of the main approaches being taken to the alleviation of rural poverty and rural development as well as exploring whether these approaches have specifically targeted or benefitted rural women. The paper also identifies some of the key issues still impacting on rural women that need to be addressed both present and future within Northern Ireland.

2 How are rural and poverty defined within Northern Ireland

By way of context it is useful to recognise that there are differing definitions of what constitutes rural and poverty across the world. Within Northern Ireland the definitions employed are set out in table 1 below.

	Rural definition employed ¹	Poverty definition employed ²
Northern Ireland	settlements of less than 4,500 people are recognised as rural in addition to the dispersed population found in single dwellings throughout the countryside	Lifetime Opportunities Report was government's attempt to categorise and define poverty whilst setting in place targets for the eradication of poverty. Makes no use of a specific definition for poverty but rather refers to types of poverty and how they are measured as follows as follows: Absolute low income - Whether the poorest are seeing their incomes rise in real terms; Relative low income - Whether the poorest are keeping pace with the growth of incomes in the economy as a whole; and Material deprivation and low income combined - A wider measure of living standards.

Table 1: Rural and Poverty definitions employed in Northern Ireland

3 Demography

Using the Northern Ireland Urban-Rural Classification of settlements (Inter-Departmental Urban-Rural Definition Group, 2005), some 36% of people live in rural areas, 64% in urban ones.

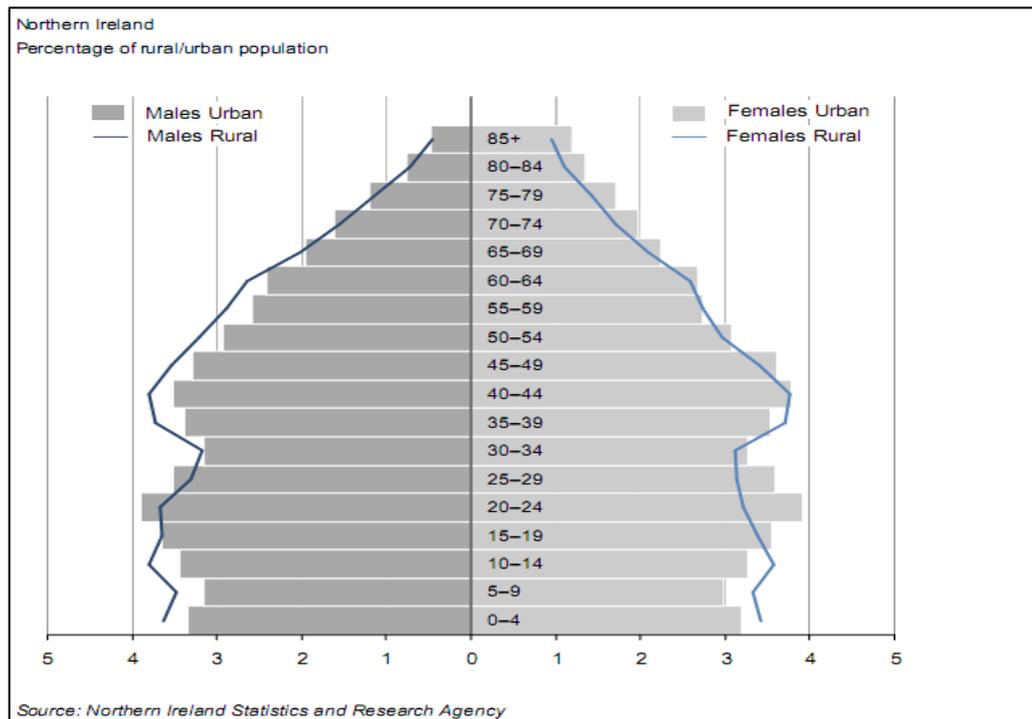
In addition 49.4% of the overall rural population were women based upon data derived from the 2001 census.

There are few noticeable differences in the age structure for both males and females between rural and urban areas in Northern Ireland, as defined in the classification of

¹ [Report of the Inter-Departmental Urban-Rural Definition Group - Statistical Classification and Delineation of Settlements, Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency \(NISRA\), February 2005](#)

² [Lifetime Opportunities, Government's Anti-Poverty and Social Inclusion Strategy for Northern Ireland, OFMDFM](#)

settlements for Output Areas. Both rural and urban areas have young age profiles, with high proportions of residents aged less than 30.



Northern Ireland's rural population is also growing. According to figures contained within NISRA's small area population statistics published in June 2010, **between 2001 and 2008 NI's rural population grew by 61,000 people compared to a growth of 25,000 for urban areas**³. NISRA are also projecting that this growth in the rural population will continue into the future.

4 Initiatives assisting rural women in addressing poverty and meeting their development needs

4.1 Rural Development Programme

Northern Ireland has benefitted from the delivery of a number of Rural Development Programmes since 1991, with the current programme running from 2007-2013 and having a budget of £500m.

Whilst none of the rural development programmes to date have contained measures exclusively aimed at women it should be noted that the overarching rural development aim has been to improve rural communities, an aim which has seen many women benefitting from the programmes both directly and indirectly.

³ [Ijpelaar J and Dignan T, New Small Area Population Estimates for Northern Ireland, 30th June 2010.](#)

It is also worth noting that the current Rural Development Programme (RDP) has sought to proactively target women and young people who “...*have historically had low representation in related activities*”⁴.

The mid-term review of the current programme completed in 2010 however highlighted the fact that “...*there is little evidence to date, from the research undertaken, of active targeting of women and young people in the current Programme. However, the existing evidence on actual participation is quite positive.*”⁵

Documentation covering Axis 3 of the current NIRD, which has an overall budget of £100m, contains the specific objective of *encouraging the entry of women into the labour market through addressing inadequate childcare and eldercare facilities*. In line with this objective a number of childcare businesses and playgroup facilities have already been developed, details of which can be reviewed in the recently published RDP in Action document⁶.

4.2 Anti-Poverty Programmes

The Office of First Minister Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) has the overall responsibility for addressing poverty and social exclusion, and was also responsible for leading the development of Northern Ireland’s still to be implemented anti-poverty and social inclusion strategy, Lifetime Opportunities⁷.

As part of the previous Programme for Government 2008-2011, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) allocated £10m for actions to address rural poverty and social exclusion across the budget years 08/09-10/11. The Rural anti-poverty and social inclusion framework 2008-2011⁸, completed to support this initiative, highlighted several barriers faced by rural women including:⁸

- Lack of access to childcare facilities;
- Poor transport infrastructure;
- Lack of access to employment possibilities;
- Rural women are a less mobile workforce compared to men, mainly reflecting childcare responsibilities;
- Those most at risk of poverty include lone parents, usually women, minority ethnic women and older women; and
- There are few job opportunities in rural areas, particularly, for women returning to work.

⁴ [Mid-term evaluation of the Northern Ireland Rural Development Programme \(NIRD\) 2007-2013, Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, November 2010.](#)

⁵ *ibid*

⁶ [RDP in Action, A showcase of projects supported by the Northern Ireland Rural Development Programme 2007-2013, Rural Network NI, January 2012](#)

⁷ [Lifetime Opportunities, Government's Anti-Poverty and Social Inclusion Strategy for Northern Ireland, OFMDFM](#)

⁸ [Rural anti-poverty and social inclusion framework 2008-2011'](#)

In response to the issues identified within the Framework DARD developed a number of programmes as follows⁹:

Warm Homes Programme - DARD provided £380,000 to the Department for Social Development (DSD) to assist over 700 rural homes avail of the Warm Homes scheme;

Free Insulation Scheme and an extension of a Hard to Heat homes pilot scheme in conjunction with DSD/Northern Ireland Electricity - DARD provided £250,000 to this Project and 303 rural homes benefitted;

Rural Transport - DARD in conjunction with DRD launched Dial a Lift (DAL) and the Assisted Rural Travel Scheme (ARTS) on the 1st December 2009. The Assisted Rural Travel Scheme allowed those rural dwellers, entitled to a Smart Pass and who are members of a Rural Community Transport Partnership (RCTP), access to free or half price fare travel between the hours of 08.00am – 6.00pm Monday to Friday on all rural community transport association vehicles. The funding enabled 36,000 passenger trips until the end of May 2010;

Community Development – financial support was given to Rural Community Network, the Rural Sub Regional Networks and the Northern Ireland Regional Women’s Network to continue with their Community Development work

Rural Childcare - 20 Letters of Offer to the value of £1.3m were issued to childcare organisations to enhance or secure childcare provision within rural communities;

Rural Challenge Programme – a small grants programme targeted at the Community and Voluntary sector and seeks to get to the heart of poverty, exclusion and disadvantage by equipping local groups with the necessary skills and funding required to address the specific issues relevant to their particular area. 90 project applicants received Letters of Offer to the value of £430k with 86 ultimately accepting their offers of funding.

Regional Project to maximise Access to Grants Benefits and Services - involving collaboration with the Public Health Agency (an agency within the Department of Health and Social Services and Public Health) targeting the top 88 most deprived rural Super Output Areas. Budget of £700k and target of 4,200 vulnerable rural households receiving a visit to identify their benefit entitlements during July, August and September 2010.

Many women undoubtedly benefitted from all of these programmes but the rural childcare programme was primarily designed to be of direct benefit to women in rural communities across Northern Ireland.

Building upon the achievements of the previous Anti-Poverty and Social Inclusion programmes the current draft Programme for Government 2011-2015 also contains a commitment to spend a further £13m to tackle rural poverty and isolation¹⁰

⁹ [UPDATE ON THE RURAL ANTI-POVERTY AND SOCIAL INCLUSION PROGRAMMES, DARD, October 2010](#)

4.2 Community Infrastructure

Within rural communities across Northern Ireland, women have organised themselves into either stand-alone women specific groups or have played a vital role within the creation, development and sustainability of more generic rural community groups or associations.

The Rural Community Network (RCN)¹¹, a representative body for community based groups and organisations across Northern Ireland, and which has existed since 1991, currently has a membership of 350 groups, the vast majority of which are engaged in work to improve their rural communities, and all of these groups will have women members. RCN's vision is for "... *vibrant, articulate, inclusive and sustainable rural communities across Northern Ireland contributing to a prosperous, equitable, peaceful and stable society.*"

In terms of women specific community organisations there has been a long history of these organisations within Northern Ireland, as revealed for example by the number of church based women's organisations here. More recent times have also seen the creation of support organisations that have no church connections, many of which have been formed in or operate within rural areas. In this regard there are currently 6 women's networks, all of which have memberships made up of individual rural women's groups, operating across rural Northern Ireland as follows:

- Fermanagh Women's Network;
- Mid-Ulster Women's Network;
- Newry & Mourne Women's Network;
- Omagh Women's Area Network;
- Roe Valley Women's Network; and
- South Armagh Rural Women's Network.

Since 2007 there has also been a connected and overarching Northern Ireland wide regional organisation in the form of the Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network (NIRWN)¹².

NIRWN's mission statement, as set out below gives a clear commitment to the empowerment of rural women.

NIRWN's mission, as the only rural regional support organisation, is to advance rural women's equality and participation in society. We will ensure rural women are recognised and supported to fully participate as equal citizens in the development of sustainable rural communities and society.

¹⁰ [Draft Programme for Government 2011-2015, Building a better future, Northern Ireland Executive 2011](#)

¹¹ [Rural Community Network, website, 13th February 2012](#)

¹² [Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network website, 23rd February 2012](#)

5 Key issues/challenges facing rural women within Northern Ireland

In reviewing the available data it is apparent that there are many issues and challenges that rural women face within Northern Ireland. Some of these include:

- The persistence of the 'pay gap' between men and women;
- Under representation of women on decision making bodies and in elected office;
- Rural land is still largely owned, managed and worked by men – what opportunities for women?;
- Single pensioner and lone parent households being two of the main household groupings that have the highest risk of poverty, both of which are predominantly female;
- The ageing rural population – people living for longer and needing care and services. Also a gender impact as women live longer and are more likely to be carers than men;
- Centralisation of services and jobs – high transport costs in accessing education, health and employment;
- Lack of access to affordable and flexible childcare – particularly difficult within dispersed rural communities;
- Benefit traps: the impact of changes in benefits (such as working families tax credit and child care tax credit within the UK) have the potential risk of reinforcing poverty
- Female poverty can often be 'hidden' as most research focuses on households rather than genders within households;
- Poor access to training opportunities and a reliance on networks to get into work, and non-unionisation of the rural workforce;
- The 'Rural Idyll' image continues to be prevalent - involves cultural assumptions and values. For example, being 'independent' is seen as a characteristic of rural dwellers; which can mean that individuals are reluctant to access welfare services and benefits. Also has the potential to restrict the roles that women play e.g. role as the mother or housewife;