

AN-OTHER SPACE FOR WORKING-CLASS WOMEN

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Introduction to reading *An-Other Space For Working-Class Women*

Further study presents opportunities and challenges. The opportunity is created for research in and on practice, and allows for the practice to be explained and examined. Such examination and explanation helps practitioners name and claim features that are important but not identified. They become part of the tacit knowledge a community of practice creates, making a distinct organisation with benefits to its participants. But the very deep and unspoken nature of the practice creates the risk of these aspects being lost. Breda Murphy's study is unique in two ways: creating the means by which people involved in the Women's Centre could participate as researchers; and generating new theory from the practice. It illustrates the capacity for an organisation to generate its own knowledge and reflect on.

This community of practice has been created by people, and has generated knowledge about practice and has generated its own theory-from-practice. The word 'community' indicates that the practice has developed from *praxis*, the combination of action and reflection carried out in dialogue with others. So, while the research that is described is the responsibility of one person to initiate and complete, the knowledge within it is reflecting the collective nature of the work, and the discussions that theorise from practice.

There are four sources of good information that guide people in any field of practice: the first is themselves, and this research shows the reflection on the difficulties a practitioner experiences in 'twisting to fit' an academic framework. The second source of information is peers – the volunteers and staff that steer or monitor the practice; a third source is participants, those who use the organisation for their own purposes, but whose needs form the basis for the practice; and the fourth source of information is theory – the explanations provided by others that name our world and help us deepen our understanding. It is the combination of using many sources that enable recognition and reflection to happen, which is the basis for good decision-making. Not using all these sources of information means that theory written by others, with different agendas and different contexts, is applied uncritically, and the knowledge generated by and through practice is lost.

This work can be read in different sections. The Opening Statement identifies the context for the work and the struggle with the demands of presenting knowledge in an academic style for an academic purpose which feels very far removed from the way knowledge is presented in practice.

The second section introduces the women's centre through using an analogy and offers it as a way of understanding it. The third section identifies the issues affecting the centre and the field of practice generally in 2010 as the state changed its support structure for community development and the new Local Community Development Programme was implemented that reflects a 'service-delivery' emphasis for organisations to meet state policy priorities.

The fourth section describes the origins of the women's centre, arising from the 1970s feminist equality project being taken up by working-class and disadvantaged women's groups through the growth of locally based women's groups in the 1980s. The role of the now-defunct Community Development Programme is described, showing how it enabled informal groups to become established and work with an anti-poverty ethos. The story of how Waterford Women's Centre grew from a coalition of diverse women's groups is told, and how the work developed, starting from partnerships with state agencies, to standing alone, and then allying on a national basis with women's groups working to fight disadvantage in different ways, but mainly through an emphasis on development, and the learning that is needed to make development and change happen.

Research may appear to be an abstract academic activity, remote from real life and the realities of everyday practice. Section 5 shows how there are research approaches that fit into everyday practice, that reflect the values and ethos of those involved, and that provide a rewarding forum for reflection. The findings of the research in Section 6 are what most people look for in any research report. They reflect the vibrancy, creativity and energy that happens when people get a chance to build a type of practice that reflects what is important to them. This is theory generated from the facts generated in the research. It is regarded as valid because all of those who participated agree that it reflects their truth.

This work allows what is complex to be available to us for further reflection. It provides an example of how to research practice in a way that fits in with important values, and it makes available to the wider field of practice those theories and theorists which explain and inspire us in our work. It deserves a wider audience.

Dr Maeve O'Grady, March 2013

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1. Opening statement

In writing this piece I have aimed to make it accessible to everyone. It represents a complicated journey and is incoherent at times, which reflects the actual journey. The question was far bigger than I realised and each section that emerged deserved a much broader enquiry than was possible. This was difficult therefore as I constantly felt I had not done justice to the work.

I am trying to fit into an academic space that working class people have often been excluded from. It is awkward and raw mirroring the process. While I strive to be objective throughout, I realise that my anger at working class people's position in academia and society, as a whole, that of exclusion and inaccessibility comes through the work. I have struggled to go against prescribed formats to express my work and have worked blindly on occasions coming up with no more than what was already there. I did this in order remain authentic, to find my own way, to find my own voice. I have not quite found it however but I am still in the process. This resulted in departing from the more typical thesis chapter structure. I wanted to adapt the thesis presentation format to an alternative style that fitted the work it was telling. Due to time constraints this was not possible. Therefore I am using a more traditional written format and chapter structure. I have however tried to adapt the structures to suit the content: through my approach in engaging with the literature and theories; through the participative approach to methodology and; in that the findings permeate all sections rather than being solely contained in one chapter. The research has an auto and ethnography flavour in the opening statement and maybe in parts throughout. I was reluctant to use recognised formal theory as I failed at times to understand the relevance or feel included in theory, which led to confusion.

I present this work, therefore in a raw and unfinished state, representing the journey in its bare state not tidied up, in order to let it live in its incoherence of which this struggle represents. I struggle to write objectively about a subject that I am deeply embedded in, from the position of both researcher and participant, and in attempting to write this in a collective way, I have resisted the necessity to write myself in, to the detriment at times.

Throughout the work, the aim is to keep the voices of those who engaged in the research central. To support this, I have highlighted the voices through the use of bold style text. The use of 'I' and 'we' at different stages represents where I move from being a participant in the collective voice to being the writer.

While attending the MA CEESA course, I was situated in a learning environment which was collective and engaging. However, when the course attendance ended I found the solitary process of writing alone both lonely and debilitating. Due to the physical distance from Maynooth I was unable to meet with other students. I was therefore alone with the complicated and often confusing task of writing the thesis. This plunged me into despair, on many occasions, as I doubted my own ability to complete and also doubted the validity of the work. It was only through the continuation of the research group in the women's centre that I managed to maintain some connections to a collective process.

2. Introduction to the women's centre



In this section, the women's centre is introduced through the use of the analogy of a shop to give a picture of the underlying concepts to the work. I have used a narrative research method of telling a story to attempt to evoke the atmosphere of the project. The complex nature and the subtleties of the work are not easy to capture and it is hoped that, through the following, the reader will be better equipped to put what follows in context. I also aimed to make the introduction of theory accessible through a conversation style, by presenting theorists as real people engaging within the work.

2.1 If the women's centre was a shop



There is a butcher's shop in Waterford that has not sold meat for the past 20 years, yet it opens every day. The large shop front displays the empty meat trays, hooks and knives, the tools of the butcher's trade. The shop door remains wide open as an unspoken invitation. The butcher sits inside the marble counter reading his paper and waits for people to come. Passersby wonder what he sells or why he remains open. He has nothing to sell but he is open for business as usual, his business now being that of conversation.

If the women's centre was a shop it would be a bit like the butcher's shop with its history visible on the walls inside. Nothing obvious advertises its business but it is not hidden from public view either. An air of mystery surrounds it as those who pass by wonder what it does. There is lots of coming and going, talking, laughing and crying. When a woman calls to ask what's on offer, she is welcomed in for a cup of tea to talk about what she needs. She may wonder how she can know what she

wants until she knows what on offer, until she sees the menu, but there is no menu. Women are talking together, laughing, gardening, talking about themselves, about the world, making baskets. Women are going swimming or doing yoga, encouraging other women to give it a go.



If Paulo Freire (1970) came in, he would notice from the conversations and interactions that this was praxis: action and reflection occurring as women work together and learn. If he joined a conversation, he would be aware that the women had a critical understanding that the barriers they faced in their lives were not their fault, but due to oppressive systems. He would undoubtedly



be impressed with the cooperation present and how women were naming what they experienced in the world; that learning was based on their experience and was both empowering and transformative. Freire's theories underpin the work by starting from where people are at and enabling them to name their world. His theories are evident through the question posing nature of the

community education programmes as the women themselves define what they want to learn. It is also visible in the flattening of hierarchal structures that excluded and divided people, to create a more participative structure. (Hope and Timmel, 1984) Freire believed that education had the potential to be transformative. When it is relevant and defined by the community, and where dialogue is central to the process, therein lays its potential for liberation. These principles support and underpin the work of the women's centre.

To be a good liberating educator, you need above all to have faith in human beings. You need to love. You must be convinced that the fundamental effort of education is to help with the liberation of people, never their domestication. You must be convinced

that when people reflect on their domination they begin a first step in changing their relationship to the world. (Freire in Shor, 1993, p. 25)

bell hooks (1994) would immediately see that the work challenged 'white supremacist capitalist patriarchy' through the use of feminist democratic processes in facilitating education (p. 71). 'Making the classroom a democratic setting where everyone feels a responsibility to contribute is a central goal of transformative pedagogy' (hooks, 1994, p. 39). She may point out the many flaws but would understand that most of the learning has come from those very flaws. She would go on to assure us, through an example of the absence of a feminist perspective in Freire's work, that as long as it is about liberation, when we are dying of thirst we don't throw out all the water because it has some dirt in it. (hooks, 1994).

Women are seen with babies and children are playing, other women saying what they think, what they want, what is wrong, changing their minds, women sleeping and women waking, women learning, women teaching, women meeting. Women could be seen making mistakes, making decisions, making friends, making tea. bell hooks (1994) would go on to confirm her beliefs that the environment was indeed conducive to democratic education and agree with Freire (1970) that conversation was centrally placed here. In noticing groups of women painting walls and painting pictures, having fun, dancing and singing, feeling happy, feeling sad, being comforted, being challenged, being quiet and being loud, John Baker (2009) would recognise that equality of condition, where the conditions necessary for the promotion of human attachment and love, care and solidarity, was a core principle of the work in the centre. In recognising the need for democratic practices within community development, where everyone has a real say says: 'It is, of course, a struggle to ensure that one's practice conforms to one's ideal' (Baker, 2009. p. 61). Through collective leadership and shared decision making, the women's centre manages to keep the ideals of equality of condition central to the work.



Those who come into the centre cannot immediately tell who is a participant and who is a facilitator. When women first come to the centre they are welcomed to sit and



chat, or paint, or garden, or swim with the other women. They often find out that they want something they did not know they could have. If the women's centre was a shop, it would sell nothing but trade everything. Carol Gilligan (1982) would recognise the feminist culture in operation where women's voices are valued and are telling of women's lives through the

process of collective learning, building relationships, attachments and empathy.

Brid Connolly (1999) would want to check if the basic assumptions of the project and those facilitating the learning were underpinned by a critical social analysis and collective action, through which only true liberation would result. 'When individuals acting independently, change their personal worlds, systematic and structural issues remain unchallenged' (Connolly, 1999, p. 121).

2.2 The way we see it

‘When sleeping women wake, mountains move’ (Ancient Chinese proverb)

The facilitators in the women’s centre themselves are women who have participated in the women’s groups and engage in ongoing reflective practice. They are conscious that working class women are excluded from participating at numerous levels in society, due to both the systemic and internalised barriers operating through oppression, where inequality is maintained through existing neo liberal patriarchal, capitalist systems.

In the women’s centre we have a deep belief in the women’s movement’s rallying cry of the 1960s/70s; ‘the personal is political’. Women’s needs are kept central to the



work, keeping a feminist analysis to the fore, where power is shared and reflective practice is extended beyond the daily work of the project to all areas including the organisational culture. While working from a feminist perspective, there is a tension for working class women who have been largely excluded from the feminist movement. bell hooks (2000)

raises the issue of exclusion of working class women in reformist feminism in seeking equal rights for women within the existing class structures. Radical feminism has always contained a class analysis and demands change in the structures which exclude and oppress. It was not gender or class oppression that stopped privileged women from accessing work outside the home, but cultural norms where they did not want to take low paid unskilled work, which was the only work available to them, or that their peers and family may look down on them for working outside the home. As gains were made in accessing equal status with men of privilege, it was seen as positive move towards gender equality for all women. However, these gains rarely changed anything for disadvantaged women, because the gains made were inaccessible to working class women. This intersection of class and gender often

disguised continuing class inequality and, in fact, made it seem like gender equality had been gained.

Significantly, a visionary movement would root its work first and foremost in the concrete conditions of working-class and poor women. That means creating a movement wherein education for critical consciousness begins where people are. (hooks, 2000, p. 109)

This was identified in the research as:

The space is for women experiencing barriers, in particular financial barriers. This is our priority group. While women who don't have financial needs come in, we assess how these women will impact on the rest of the women. Middle class women can be dominant, act superior or pitying, feel sorry for, can doubt the women's capabilities or intelligence and innate power, which can have a disempowering impact and set up a dependency.

There is a strong belief in collective learning and the creation of conditions which enable working class women reclaim confidence, belief in themselves and find their voice. We also believe that which is fostered at a micro level can be transferred to a macro level, that once working class women have the space to find and use their voice, they can replicate this outside. Providing such a space for women is in itself a political action.

Internalised oppression can promote acceptance of inequality through lack of confidence, low self esteem and makes participation difficult if not impossible. It silences, divides and excludes people. The egalitarian culture of an organisation working towards equality of condition is important to the outcome of the work. Facilitative processes enable voices normally silent to be heard and the underpinning community development principle (which values the process equal to the task) supports and maintains the dynamic participative ethos that underlines the learning.

3. An-other space for working class women

3.1 Why this, why now?

As working class women's perspectives are rarely heard in the dominant public domain, particularly in academic feminist discourse, this research is seen as an

opportunity to have some of those voices heard. It is also a way to recognise the rich culture and practices existing in the women's centre and their role as useful tools in developing egalitarian organisations that are essential in the struggle for equality. These practices therefore deserve examination, documentation and development. It also provides an opportunity to document how the women centre's history links into the broader development of women's groups, the community development movement and to the present context facing the community sector. The research is relevant to the project at this moment in time due to the establishment of a new funding stream for Community Development Projects (CDPs) in the Local and Community Development Programme (LCDP) in 2010 necessitating the re-examining of the women's centre 'bottom line'. Finally there is a desire to test the practice against relevant theory, to use it to develop the work and to bring it outside its alternative space.

3.2 Relevance of the past

It is important that the history is acknowledged in order to honour those who have gone before, the work they achieved and the foundations they built. Knowing where it began allowed us to continue from that point and not start at the beginning again. It is important to remember the foundations that were built so as not to lose ground and to give a basis from which to spring board ourselves. History gives us evidence of gains made and therefore the power of possibilities, in particular, when those gains that refer directly to current struggles in the movement. The history of a movement can easily get lost and with it much of the learning, setting us on a cycle of making the same mistakes repeatedly, reinventing the wheel or losing the power which is available to us from the past. In *The Making of the English Working Class* Thompson (1964) shows how working class people are written out of history because they are seen as passive victims and history obscures their contributions as only successes are remembered.

There is the Fabian orthodoxy, in which the great majority of working people are seen as passive victims of laissez faire, with the exceptions of a handful of farsighted organisers. (Thompson, 1964, p. 12)

concerned them, to make friends, to have a laugh, to learn together and change something. These groups provided a space to meet and talk, to combat isolation and loneliness, particularly in rural areas, and to think about their own needs, often for the first time ever. Some met to discuss and look for ways to address issues in their own communities through direct action and many were the sites where CDPs were later established. There were seven such groups in Waterford in 1990 and in 1993 the Waterford Women's Network was set up, with two representatives from each women's groups making up the committee. The network provided opportunities for the local groups to meet together, to broaden their horizons and learn from other groups through seminars and networking days. The Waterford network was also part of a national women's network with representatives from; Dublin, Galway and Clare. Many of these networks also went on to become CDPs. At a Women's Network Seminar in Galway (1994) Catherine Drea drew attention to the extended role women were now being asked to play in society:

To extend our house-keeping role to take care of the entire community and to clean up the messes of even more people. We have taken on more responsibility on top of the conditioning which makes it so hard for us to take care of ourselves. (Drea, 1994)

Dolphin and Mulvey (1997) saw the increased participation of women in the 1980s in communities as a 'key force for social change' (p. 7). It was estimated that there were 300-400 women's groups in the country by 1989 and up to 1000 at the end of the 1990s. While acknowledging the positive changes in equality legislation which impacted on women, brought about by Ireland's membership of the European Union (EU) - it also points out how economic recession resulted in persistent poverty throughout the eighties and nineties impacted most significantly on 'disadvantaged and socially excluded women in Ireland' (Dolphin and Mulvey, 1997, p. 13). Not only are more women affected by poverty than men, the effects of poverty is more acutely felt by women because of their assigned caring role in the family. It also highlights that, in 1997 women made up only thirteen percent of elected representatives at a national level. In 2011, this figure has still only marginally increased at fifteen percent.

Thus disadvantage experienced by women who are poor and socially excluded occurs in the context of a society which has not yet succeeded in realising equality throughout its structures and institutions. (Dolphin & Mulvey, 1997, p. 15)

It is acknowledged that working class women are one of the groups experiencing multiple disadvantages 'which interact with poverty to reinforce it and to intensify the social exclusion resulting from it' (Dolphin and Mulvey, 1997, p. 16). Local women's groups started in disadvantaged communities by women who themselves were experiencing disadvantage and social exclusion and who recognised the benefits of working together to combat isolation and address needs.

Collins (1997) acknowledges that in the 1980s processes that were developed by women to address inequality went largely undocumented and unseen.

The emergence of the community sector in Ireland is potentially the most significant social development of post-modern Ireland...much of the energy of this movement arises from the fact that it is the first such movement led by women (Collins in Dolphin & Mulvey, 1997, p. 16)

4.2 Community Development Programme

It is within this context that the Community Development Programme was established in 1990. Brian Motherway's review for the CPA (2006) states that the 'current community development sector in Ireland is rooted in the growth in direct action movements focused on unemployment and poverty in the 1970s and 1980s' (p. 7) He goes on to add that these movements were strengthened by the women's movement of the 1970s. However, he fails to highlight the gendered and class significance of working class women's groups in this development. Dolphin & Mulvey (1995) reporting on a conference *Women's Leadership and Change* quotes a community development participant at the conference;

It is the women who have been and still are doing the work, especially on the ground. It is women who have set up the services, brought people together, found the funding and who are keeping it all going. (Dolphin & Mulvey, 1995, p. 16)

The Community Development Programme (CDP) was established in 1990 and was the first nationally-funded programme of community development (National

Handbook, 1999). It was set up through recognising the role that community development could play in addressing poverty and disadvantage. While the projects were diverse in their aims and activities they all had core similarities; an anti poverty focus, working from similar community development principles and methods, being catalysts for local community activity, providing support for and resources to communities, enabling co-operation between community, voluntary and statutory groups and those who experienced poverty and social exclusion who were represented on the management committees. Community Development was understood as a means through which the causes of poverty and disadvantage could be addressed through 'influencing change in structures, policies and processes which contribute to poverty and exclusion' (National Handbook, 1999, p. 4).

While the official line in the *National Handbook* (1999) appears to recognise that community development needs to work at eliminating the structures that cause poverty and inequality Motherway (2006) questions this definition and shows how, much national partnership discourse does not have an analysis that recognised the systemic and power related causes of poverty. He goes on to reference Powell and Geoghegan (2005) who also found the same tension within community development discourse.

The question here is why the Irish Government in 1990 decided to develop a funding programme to bring in established community groups engaged in direct action, consciousness raising and protest and why in 2010 was the decision made to discontinue this funding or to change it in such a way that neutralises its radicalism?

Geoghegan and Powell (2004) shed some light on this issue in questioning whether the funding of community development is a real attempt to combat poverty and social exclusion or a way of silencing and bringing to order possible dissent. Flynn (2005) suggests that it was the success of the CDP in bringing about change within local communities, which were previously neglected and ignored, that heralded a visible change in support for the programme from the mid 1990s.

Naples (1998) describes a similar experience in the US in the 1960s, when a government initiative provided funding to disadvantaged communities in a *War on Poverty* recognised the need to directly involve the poor in decision making. She

describes how local women activists were engaged as community workers noting the success of the initiative and how the women activists' facilitated a political analysis at local level which resulted in social change. The success so worried the government that they cut back on funding and imposed crippling criteria which neutralised the women activists and forced them to become agents of the state, service providers.

4.3 Where we began

The Access 2000 project started in 1995 through the coming together of umbrella women's organisations from Waterford and Wexford to identify their development needs. Locally based women's groups which had emerged from the 1980s onwards were members of this forum. These consultations provided access to qualifications for disadvantaged women who were working on a voluntary basis with local women's groups. While these women had engaged in much informal learning they were not able to access paid work because they had no qualifications. *At the Forefront* (AONTAS, 2001) aimed to identify the contributions of women's community-based education to women's development and to identify the developments that have empowered women collectively and individually to challenge inequality and highlight the impacts of their work.

Lack of formal recognition for learning achieved in community and non-formal learning presented a barrier to progression routes for further education and training. Not all women wanted to progress to higher and further education but for those who did, it presented a major barrier. Other outcomes for women included paid work..... (AONTAS, 2001)

A successful application was made by the Waterford Women's Federation on behalf of their affiliated women's groups to the New Opportunities for Women EU Programme (NOW). NOW was an EU employment programme which ran from 1990 to 1999 and provided funding to develop initiatives which would support women gaining opportunities to access education and employment. The development of a partnership with women's groups; FAS and the Department of Social Welfare who match funded the project, with the Waterford Institute of Technology to advise on the design and delivery of the course and the Ferns Diocesan Youth Service who

supported the project in Wexford and provided a learning space. (New Beginnings, 2001)

Nineteen women community activists from across the region were recruited and consulted by the project in order to design and deliver a relevant programme. Delivery of the course began in September 1996 by the Waterford Institute of Technology. Practice, through continuing to work with women's groups in their local community, was seen as paramount to the course and was overseen by the Framework Regional Support Agency (Framework) which was also instrumental in facilitating the initial formation of the project and the submission of the funding application to NOW. Framework supported the women's groups through the problematic academic and funding related negotiations at that time, the tensions in relationship to ownership of the course and the acknowledgement of the importance of accreditation, supervision and assessment of the community work practice. At the time, the women activists on the management board were not experienced in issues relating to academia and WIT were not experienced in issues relating to community work. There were, therefore, struggles to understand from both sides as new ground was being broken. There was a tension between the academic requirements, funders' requirements and the needs of the women on the ground. (Access 2000 Management reports, 1995-2000)

These issues continued to be problematic throughout the history of the partnership through which has emerged the current arrangement where the women's centre delivers the course to ordinary degree level through a memorandum of understanding with WIT.

Framework facilitated the initial setting up of the learning group through a residential workshop before the course began in WIT, negotiations on starting times, place of delivery and the setting up of work place practice supervision took place. The timing and location of the course were identified as being as important as the course content (AONTAS, 2001). Individual academic and practice mentoring was provided whereby the learners identified a mentor who was paid by the project. FAS provided training and travel allowance and the project paid the care costs for participants. In

addition to attending the course two days each week, alternatively delivered in the Ferns Diocesan Youth Service (FDYS) in Wexford Town and in WIT in Waterford City, the acknowledgement of the work practice with the local women's groups recognised it as a full time course.

The course aimed to provide participants with the skills necessary to work as reflective educators and development practitioners. Accreditation for prior certified and experiential learning was facilitated, and community education processes used in the delivery of the programme. The modules offered included the following: groupwork and facilitation skills, personal effectiveness, community arts, information technology, social analysis, community and adult education, community development, social policy and community management practice (WIT Student Handbook, 2003).

After the first two years, the Access 2000 project was essentially managed by the women representatives from Wexford and Waterford but, in name, the wider partnership still existed. The women's groups in Waterford who had been part of the initial consultation and from whom the representation came: the Women's Federation, the Women's Action Group and the Women's Network were no longer in existence.

A follow on diploma (now ordinary degree) was designed and delivered, in consultation again with the women, by WIT in 1997/98. In 1999, Access 2000 Waterford purchased a premises at 74 Manor Street to set up a women's centre with funding received from the European Regional Development Fund. The Wexford and Waterford Access 2000 projects became CDP's and were funded separately under the Community Development Programme (CDP) in January 2000. It took a further six years to finalise the BA programme and in 2006, nine women graduated, including four of the original 19 who began in 1996, with a BA in Community Education and Development from WIT. The finalisation of the accreditation for the honours degree proved difficult along with the agreement that the practice placement module would not be assessed by WIT but by community practitioners. Both these demands were realised.

The challenge faced by women's community education groups in securing appropriate access to accreditation and the removal of the barrier that excluded in particular working class women should not be underestimated and is highlighted by AONTAS (2001) 'a continuing prejudice towards, lack of understanding and willingness or ability to provide support for, the needs of particular disadvantaged groups' (Skilbeck & Connell in AONTAS, 2001, p. 29).

The Waterford Access 2000 project, now the women's centre, continued to outreach and engage women from marginalised communities in Waterford and adjoining counties building collective capacity and women's leadership through community education processes. The first Higher Certificate in Community Education and Development was delivered in the women's centre in 2005 to nine women who had come through community education groups in the centre. In 2008, the Higher Certificate was delivered to a further ten women. The project is currently delivering the Degree to 14 women activists from within the project and from other community projects across the region. All the facilitators of the degree are women activists many of whom were participants or management members on the initial deliveries of the programme. Addressing barriers to participation is seen as an integral part of the delivery (Women's Centre annual report 2000 – 2005).

What is particularly unique is that this course has made the full circle in being delivered by the project from where it initiated. Also interesting is that while Access 2000 WWC initiated, secured and managed the funding for the development and delivery of this course, WIT held ownership of the course and delivered the course throughout the country on an outreach basis and continues to do so. The supports that were put in place however, which were recognised as essential for the inclusion of working class women, identified by the women themselves, were not included as an integral part of the programme. These supports included training and travel allowance, care costs and individual mentoring.

While it is recognised that further exploration, in relation to the power dynamic in the struggle for resources and recognition between community groups and academic institutions is a class dynamic which Lynch and O'Neill (1999) also explore in terms of the colonisation of social class, it is not within the scope of this research to explore it here.

4.4 The end of an era

The women's centre was funded in 2000 through the Community Development Programme (CDP) as were other women's projects who had secured NOW funding up to 1999. This supported the smooth continuation of the work previously established and facilitated the project to build on it.

Positive outcomes were identified through evaluation reports like the Nexus



Research (2001) commissioned by the Department of Social and Family Affairs which positively highlighted the outcomes of the CDP and the value for money it represented. Despite this, the programme was undermined and discredited as, there being no positive impacts. Local voluntary boards were

disempowered by constantly changing bureaucracy and requirements to participate in social partnership processes. A continuous series of reviews began in 2001 and ended in 2010 with the Centre for Effective Services review (2010) *Effective community development programmes*. CDPs participated endlessly in consultation and reviews since 2001 as the programmes were under constant change. Our participation in the consultation made no difference. The review uses such language as; robust, mature, orthodox and scientific to justify, give clout and authority to its findings and sources, in keeping with their government remit. What we said was not noted. The review examines international evidence on government/publicly funded community development programmes with its main focus on service delivery. The differences between the CDP and the Local Development Social Inclusion Programme (LDSIP) are not acknowledged in the publication. Assumptions are made instead that the function of the CDP is also one of service delivery and

completely ignores the key role of developing local collective ownership and challenging systemic inequality plays in the process and outcomes of the CDPs.

‘Both (CDP and LDSIP) were run by locally based not for profit companies or groups that work within their communities that identify needs and link people to local services’ (Bamber et al, 2010, p. 1).

It is relevant that this publication references 73 documents; 20 of them Irish out of which four relate to the Community Development Programme (2010, p. 111-117). This review is now used to justify, implement and measure the new programme.

The Community Workers Co-op (CWC) (2009) in responding to the report highlights that it does not acknowledge the existence of community development in Ireland before government funding was provided. Disadvantaged communities identified issues and actions themselves through needs analysis and approached government and other funders to support the implementation of these actions rather than the result of national policy as the report suggest.

Commenting on the mis-recognition of the difference between the CDP and the LDSIP, the CWC report (2009) identifies the difference as the CDPs being part of civil society through the inclusion of those most disadvantaged in all part of the projects as a key part of their work. The LDSIP are not part of civil society or representative of the disadvantaged due to the domination of representatives from the state on their boards. They suggest that theory and literature on civil society highlights the need for it to remain independent from the state and that it not appropriate to merge these two programmes for this reason. The report goes on to outline that the CES were failing in their job as international experts by not examining essential literature relating to this topic and were instead facilitating and overseeing the destruction of key parts of civil society in Ireland.

Changing Ireland (issue 29, 2009) the editorial aptly uses the following analogy to describe the state of play for the CDP during summer 2009: ‘There’s a Tsunami wave coming our way. The surprising thing is that some people remain on the beach building sandcastles as the Tsunami clearly comes into view’ (2009, p2). When the dismantling of the programme was well under way, the women’s centre along with

other CDPs were busy justifying our existence, writing reports, applying for funding, participating in consultation processes and resisting. While the decision to 'merge' two programmes, the LDSIP and the CDP, was made during the economic boom, the final announcement of intent was not delivered until after Ireland was officially in recession. It was then justified as an economic necessity and thus presented as the only alternative to ensure the survival of the programme, instead of a strategy to silent and neutralise disadvantaged communities once more.

Flynn (2004) draws attention to the fact that Punchestown Equestrian Centre received €14.8million in 2003 while the CDP received just €29million to support 170 projects and support agencies across some of the most disadvantaged communities in the country. Yet the cutting of support agencies was being justified as an economic necessity.

4.5 The cracks begin to show

The funding of support agencies, which supported the CDPs was cut in 2005. Funding was being withdrawn from the dissenting voices and other civil society organisation such as the Community Workers Co-op and Pavee Point were also cut. Niall Crowley resigned from his position as Director of the Equality Authority after their budget was cut by 43% in 2008, rendering it impossible to carry out its core functions. He publicly suggested that 'the Equality Authority was being silenced for being an awkward witness to the inequality and discrimination' (Crowley, 2010, p. 160).

While recognising that other sectors, - overseas aid for example, has also been subjected to rationalisation which subsumed many of its programmes under one umbrella, it begs the question if this is an overall strategy of the Irish government in 21st century Ireland. However, this is an issue that is beyond the scope of this current research.

The Community Workers Co-op issued a position paper in relation to the proposed cuts to the community sector (2009) outlining the important role in ensuring accountability that civil society plays in a healthy democracy. They go on to highlight

the Irish Government's statement in the White Paper on Irish Aid that 'An empowered local civil society can, over time, be the most effective driver of political reform and accountability in developing democracies' (CWC, 2009, p. 3). The paper goes on to draw attention to the fact that funding for civil society, in this case the community sector, in Ireland comes mostly from the state. It is essential that these oppositional relationships exist to ensure that critical voices, particularly those not heard elsewhere, are included in a political discourse which values all its citizens equally. This need for oppositional relationships is acknowledged as the paper goes on to say through the 'resourcing of oppositional political parties....In this context it is perfectly appropriate that civil society, of which the community sector is an important and vibrant part, should be resourced to a sustainably effective level.' (2010, CWC¹)

The dilemma facing the community sector in 2010 was whether or not to go into the new Local and Community Development Programme (LCDP). This would mean disbanding the voluntary boards and limited companies and handing over assets built up over the past 20 years to the partnership companies. The constraints, ideological and structural, that were being placed on the community sector by accepting government funding were evident in the lack of real consultation in relation to the development or implementation of this new programme. Freire (1970) recognised dependency as a strategy of the oppressor and the result of domination. Ironically, 2010 was the *European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion* and the Irish Government marked it by this attempt to dismantle the community development programme 20 years after its establishment in 1990.

4.6 What we learned

The women's centre's management committee decided to include everyone in the decision on whether to go forward into the LCDP or to go it alone. It was too big a decision and placed a burden of responsibility on a small group of volunteers who did not know the answer. At an open meeting, involving the women's groups, management members and employees, the dilemma was presented and open conversation was held, everyone participated. It was acknowledged the vulnerable position of the three employees who would be affected if the decision was made to

¹ No page number available

go it alone because they would lose their jobs within a year. These staff members got a chance to say how they felt as equal participants in the discussion and were assured by the management committee that they would be involved in every stage of the process, that information would be shared as soon as it was received, and decisions would be made together. Together, we agreed to aim for consensus where all voices were heard equally. We agreed to put aside our personal vested interests and to think collectively as to how we could best secure the future of the women's centre, using the agreed mission statement as the bottom line which recognises the exclusion and marginalisation experienced by working class women and works towards supporting women to create and participate in a more equal and inclusive society. We started from the position where no one knew the answer. Using a facilitated process which ensured the meeting stayed focused and simple conversations strategies, (Wheatley, 2002) where everyone's opinion was listened to and respected equally. Using thinking environment processes (Kline, 1993) up to date information was shared, feelings were taken into consideration and listened to with respect, we eventually reached a unanimous decision to resist the take over and pull out of the programme.

This could be viewed that the ability to consider the needs of the organisation was put before the needs of individuals. Individuals were able to put aside their own concerns in order to focus on the needs of all. This could also be viewed as 'Groupthink' (Bryman, 2004) at its worst, but another view could be that Rawls' (1999) fairness principle was at play. Rawls' (1999) states that for the decisions to be democratic and fair, what is required is that each person's interest be put aside during the decision-making process. It also illustrates the preference visible in women's groups that decisions are made by consensus rather than majority. It was a movement from the personal to the political, a political statement of intent and conscientisation (Freire, 1970) in learning to see oppression and take action. Shor and Freire (1993) described critical transivity as the development of critical thought and critical action. Critical thinkers can think and act on issues that affect them and see them reflected in a wider context.

The 'dynamism between critical thought and critical action. Here, the individual sees herself or himself making the changes needed. A critically transitive thinker feels empowered to think and act on the conditions around her or him, and relates those conditions to the larger contexts of power in society' (Shor, 1993, p. 32).

The sense of power and freedom was palpable once the agreement was made. One of the volunteers compared it to childbirth and the euphoria once the baby was born. Freire (1979) used a similar analogy to describe the struggle involved in discovering that the oppressed play 'host' to the oppression. It is only through this discovery 'can they contribute to the midwifery of their liberating pedagogy' (Freire, 1970, p. 30). Similar to the labour of our physical birth, liberation demands painful struggles which enable us to see the world from a different position, not as oppressed or oppressor but as free people... Liberation is thus like childbirth a painful one.' (Freire, 1970, p. 31).

What was particularly interesting was the evident return of creative thinking within the group as we discussed how to keep going without the CDP funding. We discovered that there was an alternative and that the project and the women were more important than the funding location, which the CDP essentially is.

A similar experience of ten years of radical community building by Sista Il Sista (2007), an all voluntary grassroots organisation, which was set up to enable young women of colour to develop their personal and collective power. Having received funding for the first time four years after they set up, they came to the conclusion that it restricted them when their funders disagreed with their actions. This caused them in 1999, six years later, to go back to being an all voluntary organisation when they realised 'the revolution would not be funded'.

Three voluntary members from the women's centre went to Dublin in 2010 to meet with the CEO and officials from the Department of Community, Equality and Gaeltacht Affairs who currently fund the programme. The decision to do this in person was a strategic decision. They were there to deliver a message in person from the whole project that this move was undermining and disrespectful of their position as volunteers and if we accepted, it would destroy the elements of the work with women that made it successful. It is very easy to make and implement

decisions when you do not have to see or hear what the effects are on the ground so they were determined that they would be heard. The meeting lasted two hours and was very much led by the women and they felt that their voices had been heard.

4.7 Keeping our options open

While standing firm the women's centre also kept our options open. We participated in the development of a proposal with the National Collective of Community Women's Networks (NCCWN) of which we were members. This proposed that the NCCWN become the LCDP for the women sector and manage the funding instead of the partnership companies which was accepted. The women's centre collectively agreed to enter into the new programme under the NCCWN in October 2010 in a partial transfer along with seventeen women's CDPs throughout the country. This allowed us to keep the limited company, board of directors and assets while transferring only three CDP employees into the new women's sector LCDP. Again the project had come full circle and, through resistance, returned to its beginnings in women's groups.

4.8 Useful learning

The dismantling of the Community Development Programme and the decision that was arrived at by the women's centre necessitated the re-examining of our ethos and vision and re-establishing our 'bottom line' in an effort to deal with the 'only alternative' presented to us at that time. The bottom line reached was that the independent management committee where the voices of the women in the centre led and directed its work was essential to the work and that ownership of the building would not be handed over. In arriving at this decision, lessons were learned about the project's ability to work collectively and rise above vested interests and focus on the greater good through the processes which had evolved over 15 years of praxis. It is therefore in this light this research takes place. This re-examining afforded us the opportunity to look closely at the processes used in the project to arrive at decisions and the ownership felt by all.

The crucial question now facing the women's CDPs (Cox 2010) is how can we use the current dilemma to recreate our future?'. How can we turn this dilemma into an opportunity to reorganise and gather strength? How can we use it to build solidarity and a collective vision within the sector? How can build alliances across sectors?

4.9 The work continues

In the belief that providing a space for working class women is a political action in itself and that (Freire,1970) solidarity is a radical posture, that the women's centre provides a community education programmes from early engagement to community leadership programmes at degree level. The women already in the centre are astute outreach workers themselves and bring in friends, neighbours, sisters, mothers and daughters. Outreach is focused on women experiencing multiple barriers to participation.

Participation is seen as an outcome and it can take a long time for a woman to build enough confidence to participate even in the early engagement programme, which is an informal facilitated space to meet other women. Once attending consistently, confidence quickly builds and women self select into other groups in the centre. There are a variety of needs-based community education programmes which use creative facilitative process of delivery. The groups are facilitated by women who have been participants themselves and are currently attending the degree in community leadership also delivered in the centre. This is a very important aspect of the work as the facilitators provide ideal role models with a firsthand understanding of what the women are struggling with. This perspective enables them to give specific support along with specific challenge.

It is important that the facilitators and outreach workers are women who the groups can identify with. We engage with the women from the beginning and so relationships and equality is built from the start (Waterford Women's Centre, 2004 p. 10).

Freire (1970) acknowledges that the pedagogy of the oppressed cannot come from the oppressor and that some oppressors who work on the side of the oppressed can bring with them prejudice and pity.

The centre is managed by a voluntary management committee made up of women who were part of the original founders and those representing the current groups. A feminist model of participatory democracy has developed which enables the groups to be part of the decision-making through working groups and have a say in the overall direction of the centre (see organisation structure section p. 60). This is also recognised as building capacity for external representation at local, regional and national level on relevant structures which voluntary members attend. The financial guidelines and procedures which are in place together with best practice in relation to employment and company law was identified as that which keeps the project safe and allows freedom and autonomy. This is discussed further in the findings chapter.

A childcare centre provides onsite care for up to 25 children supporting women's participation in the centre and progression externally. Lack of childcare was identified during the initial phase of the project as a major stumbling block for women in accessing education, training and employment. The project applied for funding through the Equal Opportunity Childcare Programme (EOCP) capital and staffing, to establish the childcare centre in 2001 and expand it in 2004.

The systems currently in place have developed during the 15 years of the project through trial and error. They are, however, always imperfect and at least one aspect of the project is experiencing tension, not working or, in need of tweaking at any given time. We recognise that this is part of the flexible nature of the structures in a space where care is taken to ensure the greatest number of voices is heard and facilitates collective leadership, which is discussed further in the findings chapter.

5. Why and how this research was conducted?

In March 2010, a management member from the women's centre sent an email with the details of the MA in Community Education, Equality and Social Activism at Maynooth (MA CEESA) due to start in September 2010 commenting 'this hits the spot'. I was supported and encouraged to apply for, and later take up, the offer of a place on the programme. The first formal discussion took place at a management core group meeting in June 2010 to get formal agreement to take time off work, two days each week, from September 2010 to May 2011 to attend the course. The first formal discussion in relation to the design of the research took place in October 2010 to discuss and decide on the research question and who should be involved. However, informal discussions about the course content and how the research could support the development of the project had taken place from March 2010.

A desire had been expressed by the members to document different aspects of the work of the women's centre during the last number of years, however there were always other priorities which made this difficult to achieve. Lynch and O'Neill (1994) identify how the ability to take time out for such work requires not only intellectual capital but also other resources for that time. Engaging in this programme was therefore seen as an opportunity. Other members of the project were also doing degrees, master's degrees and one a doctorate, therefore it would be possible to have sizeable parts of the work studied and documented through insider research during the next few years. One study is already underway and looks at the impact of the work of the organisation on participants.

5.1 First ad hoc meeting

In October 2010, I called the first meeting of an ad hoc research group, two staff members, including myself and three voluntary management members. The purpose of this meeting was to identify a broad research question, one which would be useful to the project, and to discuss who would be best placed to direct and inform the study and be part of the focus group. Due to my role in the organisation as project coordinator, with responsibility for overseeing all areas of the work

including, the development and maintenance of the management committee and structural processes which supports and informs the culture of the organisation, it was decided that it would be most appropriate to focus the question within this area. The focus group was identified: six voluntary management members and five staff members. This group has the greatest knowledge of the processes in operation and together had in-depth experience covering all aspects of the project. All have been part of the project for at least six years and three were founder members.

I facilitated the group discussion to decide on the most beneficial research question and, in so doing, explained the time frame of the research, the academic requirements and ownership of material. There is uncertainty in defining the question in this way - for example, they may have come up with a question I did not want to study - I am familiar with working with uncertainty and realised through the process that I had complete trust in the group to ensure that I, as a member, would also be in agreement with the final collective decision. I knew that they would look out for my interests so I did not need to. This is described later in the findings as something that is evident in the work as 'loss of self interest' which 'leads to the ability to work collectively'. This way of working allows us to put aside our self interest and instead focus on wider work issues.

A proposal was later brought from this meeting to the other staff and voluntary management members, who would make up the focus group, for ratification. All agreed to participate in the process when time allowed, however only eight attended in total due to time constraints.

The fact that six of the eight focus group participants are currently third level students deserves a mention. The project is a community education project and therefore has a history and strong ethos of continuous learning. Community education programmes from early engagement to degree level are delivered in the centre. The project was originally set up to support working class community activists to get third level qualification and recognition for prior certified and experiential learning. Kelly (1994) highlighted the need identified by community education groups for accredited learning to gain access to paid work for women. The ethos of

the project supports and encourages personal and professional development for all involved. Members of the voluntary management committee are typically those studying community development / community education, as elected representatives from their women's groups and are already engaged in the representative democratic process both within the centre and outside. AONTAS (2001) characterises the features of community education as embedded in emancipatory pedagogy, supporting personal and community empowerment. The process of Community Education 'is a political activity, which challenges "the traditional, the patriarchal, the privileged and the academic view of things" (Thompson in AONTAS, 2001, p.15).

Individual education progression is seen as an opportunity to develop the thinking in the project. The nature of the work in training community women activists means there is constant movement of facilitators out of the project into positions within the community sector regionally. This necessitates the continuous cycle of training and education in order to ensure those facilitating the programmes are women who themselves have come through the groups and have been found to be most effective in this work as they can identify with the women in the early programmes.

While there was already awareness within the project that a unique organisational culture has developed, it is mostly through recognising when it is not done 'the way we do it': which is how it is described. The following possible gains for the organisation in engaging in this research were identified by the group: it will bring into consciousness and name that which is currently not named and enable the group to claim it; documenting will enable the data to be used in a conscious and intentional way; it will provide a reason to engage in conversations about practice; it will enhance practice and build confidence through recognising and describing what we do and acknowledging achievements; by providing an opportunity to construct knowledge; by recognising the theoretical underpinning will give strength and power to the work by connecting the work to a wider context; by naming and ensuring the process does not get lost.

5.2 focus group

The first focus group was held in January 2011. Eight members including myself attended. One staff member only briefly attended and due to work commitments was called away and three members of management committee could not attend.

The question had changed and narrowed by then, through informal discussion with the group which clarified and refined the thinking on the most appropriate use of the research.

While a broad question had been identified by the ad hoc group, it was further developed through informal meetings with the focus group. Originally the question sought to describe the processes and use it to inform the development of a national women's programme. The decision to narrow the question was due to the short time frame and scope of the research. It would have been impossible to complete the research using the original question because it had a much broader and national focus. The aim of the research therefore is to identify and describe the culture which has developed in the project in order to capture the current processes in the organisation which have evolved organically during the 16 years of its existence. While investigating this question, the research also aims to set out the broader context currently within the community development movement.

The first focus group was filmed, with the permission of the group, to attempt to capture more than what was just said (such as visual and body expressions) and to aid the identification of the complexities of the group process. In conducting the focus group, a facilitated process which is common to the work was used

Facilitation is a developmental educational method which encourages people to share ideas, resources, opinions and to think critically in order to identify needs and find effective ways of satisfying those needs. (Prendiville, 2009, p.13)

Connolly (2003) says that in starting where people are at, the use of facilitation skills are key methods to enable groups to meet needs, create knowledge and support them to critically examine their experiences. Using a facilitated process allows the group to identify their needs and have power over the process.

Group work is a democratic process, which fosters the equality of facilitators and participants. This is a radical departure from mainstream models of education, in which the distribution of power is uneven and teachers have the

authority to exercise power over students in various ways. (Connolly, 2003, p. 13)

Following Prendiville's model (2009), I used a participative style of facilitation which allowed me to share my own personal experiences of the work and encourage others to do likewise, while checking how perspectives on the same issue differed or were similar. At times, I used a more directive style to assist someone to explore how they felt about something and express it.

I outlined and gained agreement on the aims of the meeting, which had been identified through informal discussion previously. The aims were: to identify and describe the management processes which have evolved organically in the organisation and agree how this material could be strategically used to strengthen the project. The reasons for engaging in the research process were recapped in order to ensure that those who had not been included in these discussions were in agreement. They were: to describe what we do, link it to theory and put it into a wider work context while also acknowledging the work was required for the achievement of my master's degree.

I outlined my role in this process as: facilitator, researcher and participant. I acknowledged my other roles in the organisation, in particular, my role as 'boss' to some of the group and equally the role of the management committee as my 'boss' (never referred to as this in the work, but only used here to draw attention to the possible impact the roles might have on the research). I then asked how we could ensure that these roles did not restrict what we said. I urged everyone to speak honestly even if some comments were negative in order to make the results reliable. The group assured me humorously that they would have no difficulty with this. By way of introduction, even though everyone in the group was very familiar with each other, I invited each member to identify their roles in the organisation, the role or roles they were speaking from today, how might these roles interfere with the process and how we could neutralise the negative affects if they arose.

In order to promote group development, the facilitator must be aware of both her own and others behaviour (Prendiville, 2008). Amongst the needs of the group, a balance between getting the task done and attending to the maintenance of the group, as identified by Adair are: the need to feel comfortable, feel involved, recognised and valued (Prendiville, 2008). The facilitator should be aware of the assumed roles within the group and of their interactions with individuals in the group and the group in general.

The multiple roles in the group were acknowledge and explored including my own to assess the impact it might have on the research. It was agreed that by bringing attention to the possible difficulties that could arise and having them in conscious focus we would be more aware and therefore issues would be less likely to arise. Throughout the focus group I answered the questions posed and engaged fully in the conversation as is the practice of the project and one which supports equality within the group.

5.3 Take a snap shot

We began the work of identifying the culture of the project through presenting a photograph we had taken earlier. All were invited to take a 'snap shot' of what they considered to be the most important elements of the management process in the project, asking themselves, what allowed them to do their work while recognising also if there was anything that stopped or hindered them by its absence or inclusion. The use of photography was decided upon to give each person a chance to examine and capture their own individual position before being subsumed into the collective one. It also supports individual voices, especially those not always heard, to have a different way of expressing themselves in the study. 'in contact with art, people could see and feel more that they could say' (Ellis and Bochner, 2003, p. 507-8). This is explored further in the finding section.

Each photograph was presented to the group and talked about at length for the rest of the focus group. Hidden aspects of the work emerged as participants discovered aspects of the photograph they had not intentionally captured but which added depth to their analysis.

The focus group lasted for four hours and ended with each person saying what they found useful and anything they had learned or enjoyed about the group. The predominant feedback was one of enjoyment and fun. There was lots of laughter throughout the process. The conversation wandered away from the subject and back again. I facilitated but allowed the process to happen in a relaxed and easy way, as all present were used to working together, have engaged in groupwork for many years and have participated and facilitated the development of group agreements which include confidentiality, respect, equality and taking personal responsibility. (Prendiville, 2008). Staying neutral is often seen as the task of the facilitators. This is not the case however. It is in fact to work with all the opinions in the group, encourage respect for others opinions, encourage open honest conversation and to create a space where all can contribute. The facilitator and the group work together to listen and express different opinions, while aiming to reach understanding. This was clearly evident in the group and supported the discussion of complicated issues honestly and from different perspectives, while remaining respectful at all times even when challenging each other. No one blocked or undermined the process in any way.

Connolly (1999) in discussing humanist groupwork within a feminist perspective describes how it attempts to deconstruct power relationships within the group and supports people to modify their behaviour if it is negatively affecting the progress of the group, suggesting that this point is one of transformation and where the personal becomes political. All the members of this group clearly demonstrated through their active participation in the focus group and how they also facilitated the process, assumed responsibility for the outcome and supported everyone in the group to contribute that the personal had indeed become political. From November to March, weekly research meetings took place with four members of the focus group who were all engaged in post graduate study and one completing a research project at doctorate level within the organisation. This research was discussed therefore as one of the projects at these meetings.

I transcribed the data from the film which was time consuming and required careful listening to ensure all that was said was recorded. I was required to listen at a much deeper level than I usually do in order to hear comments that were behind the main conversation on occasions. I feel that this was well worth the effort as it gave me a visual view of the body language present which added to my understanding of the subtleties of what was being said. The predominant atmosphere that came across from the film was humorous and relaxed. The conversation was relaxed and flowed with ease.

Having transcribed the data I proceeded to categorise it into dominant themes from reading and rereading the data using a grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 1990). This allowed me to identify the core themes from the data itself and stay true to what the participants were saying. The second focus group held in March 2011 brought back the key themes emerging from the first meeting and further explored some questions arising from the thematic analysis which was written up from the video recording. Four staff members and three management members attended this session. Instead of using film to record this group I used a flipchart, a familiar method used for recording and presenting information in community women's education. By writing the feedback on a flip chart, it allowed everyone to see what was said and to ensure it was accurately recorded. Questions were presented that had emerged through the analysis in order to facilitate a deeper discussion in particular areas which included: what is missing from the research? What made particular processes possible? How do we deal with issues of class? Is this a women only space? What's not in the space? What does the space make possible and why?

I used these open ended question to provoke critical reflection and to support a deep understanding of the themes previously identified.

The process used to facilitate this discussion in-keeping with the accepted processes in the project was informal, comfortable and ensured that everyone felt included by checking if anyone who had not already spoken on a particular issue had anything to add.

5.4 Positioning myself in the work and research process

Central to feminist participative action research is the active involvement of the researcher and acknowledging my role as the coordinator of the project is essential to describing the research process. This is something that I resisted as I wished to present the work as a collective piece and give full expression to the group's collective voice. I feared that by drawing attention to my individual role it would shift the focus from the collective and not capture the collective ethos of the research or the collective nature of the work. In beginning to write up the research and through discussion with the research group, I now realised that my position is in fact laced throughout the study which resulted unintentionally through the research process. In order to present a transparent study and in recognising the power of the researcher and issues of bias even within this collective participatory research process must be acknowledged. My goal is to present a collective voice: but I am part of this study and part of the process. I have particular responsibilities and have made particular decisions. I am telling the story of these decisions and actions in an attempt to make the process engaged in conducting the research as transparent as possible.

Ethnographic accounts are usually those of outsiders immersing themselves in a particular culture, however, I am already part of this culture. I have been involved in this project since its inception, as participant, voluntary management member and paid worker and involved with women's groups for 25 years. The closeness can however make it difficult to see what is in front of you. I did find this difficult and at times it led to great confusion as I tried to gain some distance from the work in order to see it. Brannick and Coghlan (2007) comment that the insights available to those from within an organisation because they are 'native to the setting' are the same reasons why insiders are perceived as being too close to the subject and unable to get the distance necessary in order to be considered valid research (p. 59-60). They go on to say that through using 'reflexive awareness', insider researchers can in fact uncover tacit knowledge deeply 'segmented because of socialisation in an organisational system and reframe it as theoretical knowledge' (2007, p. 59-60). As

they acknowledge, this closeness and involvement gives an ideal position to research and, in fact, adds richness to the data uncovered.

5.5 What was the process like?

The focus group remarked in evaluating the research process:

'I love doing this' which was a common feeling expressed by the group, myself included.



I have been required to think more around this table than I have been anywhere else in my life. I love being challenged to think. I really enjoyed that.

The research process enabled people to feel relaxed and comfortable in order to deeply think through intricate subjects which often required focused discussion.

The focus groups were great fun and provided an opportunity to sit around the table and discuss important issues 'the way we do it'.

We are conceptualising the work, theorising from practice. This is hard and needs to be led by questions, needs to be facilitated and questions need to be identified in order to provoke discussion.

These comments which came at the end of the research process, reflect the positive feelings members had from engaging in the focus group, and also demonstrate the critical understanding of what the research question and process was aiming to do.

Throughout the research process I was in constant touch with all members of the focus group as they were with each other. Informally, questions that arose within the focus group were discussed and deepened and there were many conversations that begun with **'I was thinking about what we/you/I said in the focus group about.....'** or in pointing out a practical example of a concept discussed. This was a constant feature of the research and one I captured when possible but one which was also a back and forth motion of **'what did you say the other day about..... or remember when we were doing.....you said.....'**. This is a common feature of the organisation also, this back and forth motion with no beginning and definitely no end. Daly (2000) in outlining the difference between feminist research and conventional positivist orientated methodologies, states that any situation that produces knowledge is seen by feminist methods as research. This focus on the process is also one of the challenges with this research as it feels like we are only at the beginning and the thesis is difficult to complete as the process is still unfinished and definitely a work in progress.

The decision was made to use the processes already existing in the work in conducting the research. Therefore the aim was to conduct the research through using a collective process, from collectively deciding on the question to how it would be conducted and presented. My aim was to come to the fieldwork using a process of enquiry which would suspend my views on the culture of the project and how it had formed, one which began with a broad open question, in which I participated in forming but take a back seat in this discussion so as to not over-influence its direction and to ensure the research began with a process which was organic in its foundations. Through the focus groups I asked participants for their own experience and my own were also included through this process.

I did not do any specific related reading to this field of study prior to conducting the field work so as not to influence the outcome and did not therefore create a preliminary literature review. Charmaz (1990) describes how grounded theory delays the literature review to minimise the possibility of the researcher being 'locked into preconceived conceptual blinders upon entering the field and in interpreting the data'

(p. 1163). When categories have developed from the data, they can then be compared and placed within the appropriate literature.

I do however acknowledge the theories that have undoubtedly influenced my own thinking and the development of this culture. The experiences and study that each of us as individuals have undertaken and shared with each other in particular my current study: MA in Community Education, Equality and Social Activism have been important. The influence of Freire's thinking brought back to Ireland by Roman Catholic educators involved in working with the poor in Latin America (Connolly, 2006) was disseminated through *Training for Transformation* manuals (Hope & Timmel, 1984), while others have to be acknowledged as having informed and influenced how we work and what we believe in our daily lives.

An aim of the research was to ensure that the final written work is accessible to everyone in the organisation and written in a language that does not exclude, dilute or silence the voices of the women involved. The aim of the research is, therefore, to keep the voices of those involved central in the finished work and to let the research direct its own route through using grounded theory to allow the data and process of the research emerge. It is hoped that this will, in some small way, contribute working class women's perspectives within academic feminist discourse.

I use 'I' and 'we' at different times throughout the research which identifies the different voices used for the different roles. The 'I' refers to me as the researcher, facilitator and writer in places where I have wandered from the collective, where I could not find another way to do it. The 'we' refers to my inclusion in the group as a participant or a member of the women's centre or a working class women and part of the collective 'we'. I am not entirely sure that I managed this change very well and was often confused about my position. The 'we' is my preferred position and its inclusion sometimes in where it maybe should have been 'I' represents my own confusion and reluctance to leave the collective and wander into loneliness of the 'I'.

While I was a participant in the process of the research, I was also the facilitator and therefore had to keep my awareness on that task at all times. This was not always

easy but became easier as I got further into the process and had to concentrate on particular themes emerging which only I could see clearly. While in the beginning it was seen as my masters, this became less visible as time went on and the writing and feedback began; a collective ownership began to take place which was, I think, constructed by the consultative and highly participative nature of the study.

The personal struggles throughout were the tensions between having enough time to do the work and write about it. Lynch, Baker, & Lyons (2009) speak about this and relate it to how care work can be ignored in the academy because academic work demands lots of free time to think, read and write. Those who do the caring work do not have the time for it and are therefore excluded (2009). The social relations of research production and exchange operate on the premise that one had sufficient personally-controlled and care-free time to think, to write and rewrite; one needs freedom from necessity to be an academic (Bourdieu, 1993 in Lynch, Baker & Lyons, 2009). I was concerned that the work would fall apart while it was being researched which was due partly to the current dilemmas facing the community development movement in Ireland and the limited time I had to focus on my work as coordinator while studying and participating fully in the development of the new national women's community structure. While achieving the balance between being the coordinator and researcher was stressful at times, it also brought an added dimension to the work not often heard in academia because the effort involved in doing both discourage many. Engaging in this study has enabled me to stand back slightly, not fully, from the day to day work of the organisation and see it from a distance, a slightly removed and off centre position which is a view seldom seen by practitioners.

While this did facilitate a distancing from the day to day work and allowed me to take a closer look at what was underneath, it has to be acknowledged that it also necessitated an additional burden on those who did my work in my absence. I was concerned with the academic requirement to cite the practice in theory and this formed part of many research group discussions throughout the past number of months. I still have not reached a conclusion on it, but have tried to introduce only theory as a tool for furthering, enhancing and developing the work, that which

inspired and is truly significant to the process through linking the theory to the practice.

Another concern I had during the process was that it would change my relationship with the staff and management members of the focus group, that I would become the researcher and that they would become the researched. Brannick and Coghlan (2007) identifies Morse's position on undertaking qualitative research inside an organisation in which one works as being 'unwise' as the 'dual roles of investigator and employee are incompatible' and may jeopardise the position of the employee (p. 59). This was I quickly discovered not applicable because I was not researching the individuals in the group but the culture of the organisation and their collective relationship to, and with, the culture and along with it, my own. I also continued to work in the project throughout which added to the development of a very equal research process.

5.6 On wandering into enemy territory

The morning after writing the first draft of the methodologies section for this research I woke up thinking 'I have wandered into enemy territory'. Luke and Gore (1992, p. 4) describe feminists in academia struggling to position themselves in a theoretical framework not of their making as; 'wandering into foreign territory' (p. 4). If this is the position of feminist intellectuals, I then retain my original position of 'enemy territory' as a working class women wandering into a place where I have no position or identity. The language alone excludes working class voices from the conversation and its processes and structures are where the status quo is maintained and perpetuated.

Negotiating theory is like navigating enemy territory where caution is required so as not to put a foot wrong in case you are discovered as being an outsider, a subordinate without the skills to read the map, who will be excluded and punished for attempting to enter.

The aim of this research is to use interpretive and social constructivist approaches that are grounded in, and emerge from, the natural setting of the research. A post

positivist approach is used in order to uncover the unique deep experiential knowledge that underpins the projects processes (Antonesa et al, 2008).

It therefore aims to capture without disturbing what is, while understanding that change is a constant part of the process. It aims to take a 'snap shot' through engaging in conversations led by, but not necessarily only, including the research team from design to completion.

5.7 Feminist participatory action research and social justice

Harmony exists between feminist participatory action research methodologies and the processes already engaged in the work of the project which supports the underpinning ideology of social change. Byrne and Lentin (2000) name feminist research methodologies as driven by a social justice agenda highlights the gender bias, through focusing on and including women's stories and presenting them 'in their own voice.' (p. 7). It is not the methods used in the research which makes it feminist, but rather the equality of the relationship established in the process. The congruence between the methodologies and methods already in use in the project ensured that established equal relationships were nurtured and developed throughout the research. Naples (2003) states that feminist methodologies were developed in the struggle for social justice. Their aim was to challenge sexist bias and all forms of inequality in research, the distance between theory and practice and the researcher and the researched.

Reid (2004) describes feminist action research as a way to uncover and place value on the knowledge of those normally excluded from social discourse and through collaboration to develop action strategies while using power in a responsible way.

I defined feminist action research as a conceptual and methodological framework that enables a critical understanding of women's multiple perspectives and works toward inclusion, participation, action, and social change while confronting the underlying assumptions the researcher brings into the research process (Reid, 2004²)

² No page number available

In keeping with the organic and participant defined nature of this research (Langan & Morton, 2009, p.166-167) a feminist participatory action research (FPAR) methodological stance seemed to fit best to strengthen the standpoints already existing in the project. (2009) FPAR combines critical feminist theory and key elements of participatory action. Critical feminist theory is described as enabling a critical understanding of women's multiple perspectives in a society which supports patriarchal power. Participatory action research (PAR) is defined as engaging those whose lives are impacted by the research directly in all stages of the process.

As political research, feminist research strives to create social change while at the same time representing human diversity, including the researcher as a person, developing social relationships with the people studied. (Byran and Lentin, 2000, p. 9)

However, while the emancipatory processes of feminist research and those used in this study have the same theoretical basis; in practice however, much feminist research (Lynch, 2000) still ignores the issue of class. Even academics who view themselves as radical are members of the elite which give them privilege over those they are researching.

Freire (1970) recognises how difficult it can be for members of the dominant class to move into a position of equality, without the baggage of their conditioning. Their prejudice which shows itself in lack of trust in people's ability 'to think, to want and to know', (p.42). He goes on to point out the dangers of 'falling into a type of generosity as harmful as that of the oppressors' (p.42). Research is constantly conducted by those from outside marginalised communities on those inside. Without the experience and insight of the effects of oppression, research can further oppress already marginalised groups.

there is a view that only 'insiders' or those who have direct experience of a topic should research that topic (see Spivak, 1988 and hooks, 1990): any other relation between researcher and topic is regarded as an act of oppression, continuing to displace the voices of those at the margins.
(Byrne 2000 p. 143)

The argument is that nobody outside of a situation should research that situation. This argument has some validity. People without experience of a particular situation

can impose research questions, processes and conclusions on marginalised groups. Lynch and O'Neill (1994) show that the most marginalised people are usually the subjects, or objects in Freire's terms, of someone else's research agenda.

How do we judge whether research is good or not, reliable or not, valid or not? The post-positivist research approach developed as a result of feminist criticism of 'objective' standards of rigour, validity and reliability (Byrne and Lentin, 2000). However, because this is a collective process, the best standard for validity in PAR is acceptance and agreement by the members involved in the research process. Triangulation is widely regarded as a good check that the conclusions are reliable (Kane and O'Reilly De Brun, 2001). Triangulation can be using different methods to gain different insights on an issue, checking what the theory says with what the research results say, it can be going to a different group of informants to check their reading of the accuracy of the results. In this case, because of the small scale of the research, the findings were taken back to a final focus group of members for checking (Bryman, 2001)

5.8 Challenging research methods and grounded theory

Primary research was conducted using informal interviews with members and focus groups and critical reflection through journaling, memo writing and documentary analysis.

Conversations are used as the main method to unpick beliefs in order to look at issues in a new way. The use and process of how these conversations are discussed further through the findings. Conversations in this sense are critical, because they help us to uncover and develop our thinking. When we hear each other's ideas and when ideas are bounced back and forth our collective thinking develops. Mezirow's description is that this process leads to perspective transformation (Mezirow, 2000). But what makes such conversations critical is the agreement to challenge each other, to call attention to areas where thinking is being limited, where limits are obvious and accepted. Assumptions can then be overturned.

The main aim is to capture, not change, but realise that it may change in the process because it is always changing. Through clearly describing, clarifying and agreeing

definitions of the process, it will promote greater ownership and understanding which will generate power within and raise awareness of what works and why, and therefore it will become a useful tool for the organisation. It is important that the final product is understandable and not written in a language that excludes anyone in the organisation. It is also important that the voices of the women are predominantly heard in the final product. The research methodologies will emerge from the research and will form part of the findings.

In conducting this study, the aim was to make it a collective process without imposing a theoretical framework. Instead the intention was to allow the themes and concerns to emerge in a grounded way while building on a long tradition of feminist, participative and grounded research theory. In order to facilitate collective participation, discussions were facilitated on all aspects of the research from identifying the question through gathering the data, identifying theories and writing it up. In attempting to keep the voice and experience of the group central to the research, grounded theory and participatory research emerged as theories that best matched the already established practice in the project. Grounded theory (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007) allowed for the research process to direct the formation and identification of the theory emerging from the data rather than being fixed and forced to fit into a predetermined set of rules. In recognising that theories are implicit in the data, we must acknowledge that they emerge through the analysis and we must not force data into theory. The theory is therefore rooted in and emerging from the data (2007). This requires patience, the ability to sit with confusion and the slow emergence of theories. It requires a willingness to engage in the process of theory generation rather than theory testing. It is an experiential methodology which best fitted the flexible approach used in this research.

Participatory action methods best matched those already in practice in the project and would not impose unfamiliar processes on the study which could have had a negative effect on the project. The study itself therefore arrived at its own standpoint which was only identified through the emerging data and related to existing methodologies at the latter stages of the research. The difficulties that arose were the individual nature of writing up the material and while there was constant

movement to and fro it was never the less a solitary experience and one that I am not familiar with.

6. Findings

6.1 Introduction

The key findings from the research conversations, arts activities and documentary evidence about the women's centre are discussed in this section. Relevant theory is introduced in order to draw attention to existing evidence that highlight aspects of the findings. Commentary and analysis of the data are made with the aim of enabling the voices of the enquiry lead the discussion. The voices of the members of the focus group are highlighted through the use of bold style text in order to bring their voices to the fore. Collective and individual voices are used to highlight the collective experience and present the conversation close to its organic state.

The themes outlined describe an overview of the work of community building and developing a safe space. The importance of the physical space in terms of being welcoming and relaxing together with the sense of ownership is discussed. Collective democratic processes are at the heart of the project, where structures are in place to ensure maximum participation in decision making. Equality underpins the work and is discussed in terms of creating equality of condition and love and care work enabling solidarity. Collective facilitative leadership is described as key to the work, as is fun and laughter, and value on the emotional dimension of learning.

6.2 Community building - A safe space is defined

The most important elements of the culture of the project were identified through taking and presenting photographs in order to get a "snap shot" of the present. Freire (1970) uses the term 'decoding' to describe a process to bring the abstract to concrete through imagery and dialogue. Through decoding the photograph, each member of the group described 'the present' by identifying the elements evident. This allowed the gradual emergence of the whole picture. It also enabled different aspects, sometimes hidden, to be discovered through discussion and looking closely at the photographs. Throughout the first focus group, members continually referred

to their photos to point out something new they had just thought of or to strengthen what they were saying. We also referred to each other's photos in the same way.

The processes used in conducting the research replicated those already in practice in the project. The focus group met in the women's centre around the kitchen table where the group was comfortable and familiar. The tea was made, the chat started, a space where we could talk freely and think deeply was under construction



through informal talking and checking in as to how everyone was. A 'check in' is an integral part of process in the centre whether formally, as part of the session, called an opening round or informally as was the focus group check in. Indeed this is the first part of the daily routine for the workers in the project also. This allows a space to say what might stop you being fully present, and highlight any worries or concerns, in an informal way, which allows us to be more understanding with each other.

Someone's child was sick and so may need to take a phone call during the focus group or leave early, one member of the group could not come and concern was expressed on how her thinking would be missed. While there was little visible structure I, as facilitator, had a loose plan for which agreement was gained at each stage with the group. This is important in the development of the group process as it allows the members to developed ownership and trust. It also supports the development of equality within the group ensuring that all the voices are heard. The process was organic in so far as there were only very broad open questions to guide the discussion and no notion of what we would find, there was therefore an agreement to trust the process and let it happen.

6.3 Fun and laughter

The video camera was introduced, as permission had previously been gained to record the session. The possible scenarios that could be inadvertently recorded and

the opportunities to embarrass each other this would allow, gave the group a reason to have a good laugh together before we began. This helped to settle and rid us to some extent of the embarrassment at being filmed and resulted in forgetting that the camera was there. Fun and laughter is important to ensure a relaxed atmosphere is achieved and is constantly present in the project, between staff, management and women's groups which adds greatly to the positive atmosphere and makes it: **'a place where women want to be'**.

Jean Bridgeman (2007) explores how working class people, with a critical understanding of class issues, can use humour to cope with situations where they come into contact with class power..... 'humour among working-class people acts as a 'hidden transcript' in the background of these exchanges.' (p. 20). Humour is a necessary tool in order to engage working class women, as humour figures highly in working class culture. In the context of the work, it is often used informally to call attention to and interrupt internalised oppression and conditioned ways of operating, and to undermine and dismantle fear associated with patriarchal class power holders and structures.

6.4 Emotional dimension

Tears as well as laughter are welcomed and often overlap. The emotional dimension of the work is very important and it enables the shift from the personal to the political take place, as **'the personal is emotional' is 'a meeting of the personal and the political.'** The emotional dimension allows us to face our fears and bridge the gap between the personal and political.

Much education has tried to ignore human feelings and concentrated only on reason and actions. But Freire recognises that emotions play a crucial role in transformation. Feelings are facts. Only by starting with the issues on which the community have strong feelings – hope, fear, worry, anger, joy, sorrow – and bringing these to the surface, will we break through the deadening sense of apathy and powerlessness which paralyses the poor in many places. (Hope and Timmel, 1984, p. 17)

'This is tough work and brings in a spiritual dimension as it enables movement from individual to collectiveness.' It heals our personal hurts and isolation and

enables the uncovering of our interconnectedness. It enables personal growth and challenges us to lose our sense of **'the self, the ego'** and tap into the **'higher self'**.

To transform society we need to tap into much deeper values of cooperation, justice and "concern for the common good". Catholic and other Christian social teachings, and the social teachings of other faiths such as Judaism, Buddhism and Islam, constantly challenge us to live according to these values, which are essential aspects of love. This is why transformative education is essentially a spiritual process. (Hope and Timmel, 1984, p. 16)

This explanation does not get at the reason why the practice is full of care. Lynch et al. (in Affective Equality, 2009) identify the human need for love and care. 'Solidarity work', working with others together in solidarity, is only possible when we get enough love and care. Wheatley (1999) says that through new sciences such as quantum physics 'we can now see the web of interconnections that weave the world together' and that there is recognition of these relationships across a variety of disciplines (Wheatley, 1999, p. 158).

Being open to emotions sometimes requires hard discussions and you **'can feel like you won't survive, like you won't be able to do what's needed to move forward'**. There is room for conflict and disagreement in open communication styles because safety has been build through group agreements.

Peck (1987) acknowledges that genuine community is not easy and while consensus can be easy to achieve, sometimes it often involves great struggle. 'A safe place does not mean community is a place without conflict....A community is a group that can fight gracefully' (p. 71).

The emotional dimension of the work is welcomed in the project and its recognition plays as key part in facilitating learning. This was highlighted as an **'effective, essential and valuable part of the work, not just rhetoric but an active part of practice'**. Also recognised were the consequences of ignoring the emotional dimension in the work as it **'can be unsafe to be emotional where this is not understood or it is not known how to deal with it'**.

The participants felt safe and part of a community, part of something bigger. Peck (1987) defines a safe place as one where people are 'valued and appreciated' and where we can be vulnerable, where '....wounds are healed, old resentments forgiven, old resistance overcome. Fear is replaced by hope.' (Peck, 1987, p. 68). He goes on to say that a community becomes safe when there is no one is trying to fix you but where you are accepted as you are. When we are free to be ourselves we can let go of our defensiveness and become ourselves fully.

Described as an '**inspirational space**' where people worked closely, it '**contained mess and chaos, a women's space**' which was also described as a '**democratic matriarchy.**' (See participatory democracy section 6.9).

Listening and open conversations take place with equality and respect. It is a space where we have trust and belief in each other and where we are both challenged and supported. Conflict is not ignored but bravely tackled. Creativity is valued and we speak a common language. There is an agreement to engage in personal development from the early engagement programmes throughout the project and modelling the culture of the organisation is visibly practiced through women supporting and challenging each other to reach beyond their personal limits. Safety has been created over time by learning from what did and did not work.

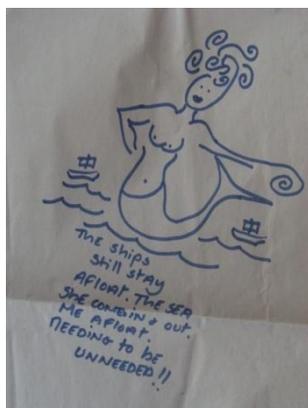
In defining what was meant by a safe space we also identified **what was missing from the space as**: negative images of women, violence and fear, women looking after men were all named as not being here. Magda Lewis (in Luke and Gore, 1992) points out that the absence of men (in the classroom) does not diminish the responsibility women feel for their emotional wellbeing. While the centre is a space for women it is not a 'women only' space. Men come in to support the work as maintenance workers (husbands, sons of the women in the centre often on a voluntary basis) external facilitators or members of other community groups or statutory agencies attending meetings in the centre. There is an understanding that the men who come in are there to support women. While the patterns of looking after men may exist there is no reason to overtly focus on them as the emphasis is

instead put on the needs of women and challenging the negative conditioned norms. This happens throughout the project through the processes engaged in.

It was identified that present in the space is a belief in the innate goodness and capabilities of women. Women are responsible for everything here: it was set up by women, for women, and is managed by women. It was suggested that the space felt like a **'home from home'**.

6.6 How a safe space is created

A **'solid collective vision'** is key to the establishing a safe space. A collective vision provides a solid foundation and underpins the work we do. When the vision is rooted deep in the philosophy of **'in the hearts of everybody'**, it gives a strong sense of purpose to the organisation and holds everything together. Cox (2007) comments 'that a movement will not be successful unless it is speaking what is in many people's hearts' this is what 'enables them to say it powerfully and to do something about it.' (p.13). Moyer (2001) also recognises that it is people who have the power and will either change the way things are or not, therefore 'The key task of social movements is to win the hearts, minds and support of the majority of the populace' (p. 2). This is essentially humanised as opposed to Freire's (1970) definition of oppression as de-humanisation. It is also a feminised space.



The vision of the women's centre was compared to nature and the earth, like the roots of a tree or an anchor of a ship.

'when anchored it can drift, it can up anchor and move with freedom and can weather storms'.

It enables the organisation to be held strong and supports the development of a common ethos through drawing out the vision. Wheatley (1996) points out the dangers of 'institutionalizing' the



vision of an organisation through imposing rules and policies; 'we impose constraints that squeeze the life out of us.' (p. 57)

There is however, a sense that this vision is also open as there is '**space within the vision for challenge, this is sometimes one person talking out and saying, we need to do this a different way, not settling for what is**'. This is an important aspect of the vision in challenging our conditioning, which teaches us to accept limited resources and settle for less than we should. Through this we expand the possibilities and open a space to imagine, a space to dream. Gilligan (1999) concurs with the need for imagination in finding new ways to 'understanding our world' as a way of moving feminist insights from 'theory to practice'. She highlights the acknowledged importance of 'critical consciousness in liberating educational practice' and proposes that it 'must be coupled with creative consciousness, imagination must accompany critique' (Gilligan in Connolly and Ryan, 1999, p. 201).

There is power in the written word and collective intention described in the research as '**the power of yes and following the energy**'. We can see opportunity in a crisis and make the imposed only alternative presented seem ridiculous and recognise that resisting is preferable to being forced to change what we do. When there is unanimous agreement with no dissenting voice collective intention can create great energy and power. '**When the process is right the task is easy**' how we do something is as important as what we do.

6.7 Dialogue and conversation

Freire (1970) says when the structures in place do not allow for dialogue they must be changed. Dialogue and conversation were cited as '**how it happens**' how a safe space is developed and maintained and what holds the organisation together. Belenky (1997) differentiates between didactic talk in which the speaker relates experiences 'but there is no attempt to join together to arrive at some new understanding.' and 'really talking' which requires the group to listen carefully to each other 'It implies a mutually shared agreement that together you are creating the optimum setting so that half-baked or emergent ideas can grow' (Belenky et al. 1997

p. 144) This they suggest allows for analysis by each member of the group to be heard and taken on board. Real talk definitely takes place in the project but is almost taken for granted and therefore not noticed. Belenky (1997) comments on women's belief at an early stage of development that they had to be either listeners or speakers in a conversations and when they wanted to speak, their attention shifted and were unable to listen., Through development, this shifts to having the ability to listen and talk simultaneously

Listening to others no longer diminishes women's capacity to hear their own voices. The capacity for speaking with and listening to others while simultaneously speaking with and listening to the self is an achievement that allows a conversation to open between constructivists and the world. (Belenky et al, 1997, p. 145)

How knowledge is constructed through dialogue in the organisation is crucial to the process and values women's ways of knowing, instinctive knowledge and critical reflection which enables deep knowledge to develop.

Radical education processes can play a crucial part in social movement to bring about social economic and political change, through facilitating critical thinking and challenging dominant ways of thinking (Ryan, McCormack and Ryan, 2004). The importance of transformative, experiential and collective learning is recognised and education that is emotional as well as intellectual.

The conversations we have should not be underestimated, should be held on to, as they help us to generate and hold the collective vision.

Brookfield (2005) describes critical reflection as the process of questioning and changing previously held assumptions, taking other perspectives into consideration and, through this, developing an understanding that thinking can represent the dominant discourse which supports elitist thinking and not in our own interest.

'Collective knowledge is developed through great discussions from the ground up'.

6.8 Equality of condition

Creating greater equality of condition is a core aim of the participative ethos, democratic structures and collective vision of the women's centre that is evident in several contexts. One example of equality was identified as **'not knowing whose who'** in relation to staff, management and the women in the group. Examples were given on many occasions where this has been remarked on by people new to the centre. Recently a woman came to the 'drop in' for the first time (in an early engagement outreach programme, informally facilitated which provides a space for women to meet and chat to other women over a cup of tea) asked the facilitator when leaving if she would be there tomorrow. The facilitator replied that she might not be facilitating, but someone else would. The woman replied in surprise **'I didn't know you were the facilitator, I thought you were one of the group'**. The facilitator felt that this was a confirmation of her job well done in providing an equal space where hierarchical roles were not evident and power relations were reduced.

The meeting room used by the management group, the kitchen where there is constant movement in and out, was also named as a component in the neutralising hierarchy and establishing equality. In identifying roles at the beginning of the focus group, **'friend'** was the consistent role that everyone named. Relationships are nurtured and maintained and this equality in relationships is central to the process. Lynch (2009) outlines the importance of love, care and solidarity in ensuring we have decent lives. (Lynch 2009) 'Bonds of friendship or kinship are frequently what bring meaning, warmth and joy to life' (p. 37). While not always producing measurable outcomes; love, care and solidarity are visible within our interpersonal relationships and our ability to work collectively. The importance of 'love, care and solidarity is often most visible in their absence' (Lynch, 2009, p. 38). In identifying nurturing capital as our ability to care for others, Lynch draws attention to the fact that our ability to care for others is directly related to the amount of care we have received both through personal intimate ways and what we receive through work, social and cultural spaces. The deficit of nurturing capital affects our ability to relate to each other but also to work in external areas of life and community (Lynch, 2009).

The women's centre is a space where women receive love and care. Recognising the gendered nature of care work, mainly done by women, this space is often the

only space where women are the receivers of care instead of the givers. **‘it’s like having a whole bunch of sisters.’** This work allows care to be part of the culture, not something that one person does or is burdensome but is shared around. There are supports structures in place to ensure those giving unequal amounts of care receive support and supervision which they can access both inside the project and outside. Feeling cared for allows us to connect with each other on a very deep level. When people matter, bonds form and it is possible to work in harmony and solidarity. Lynch (2009) asserts it is love and care that enables people to work in solidarity.

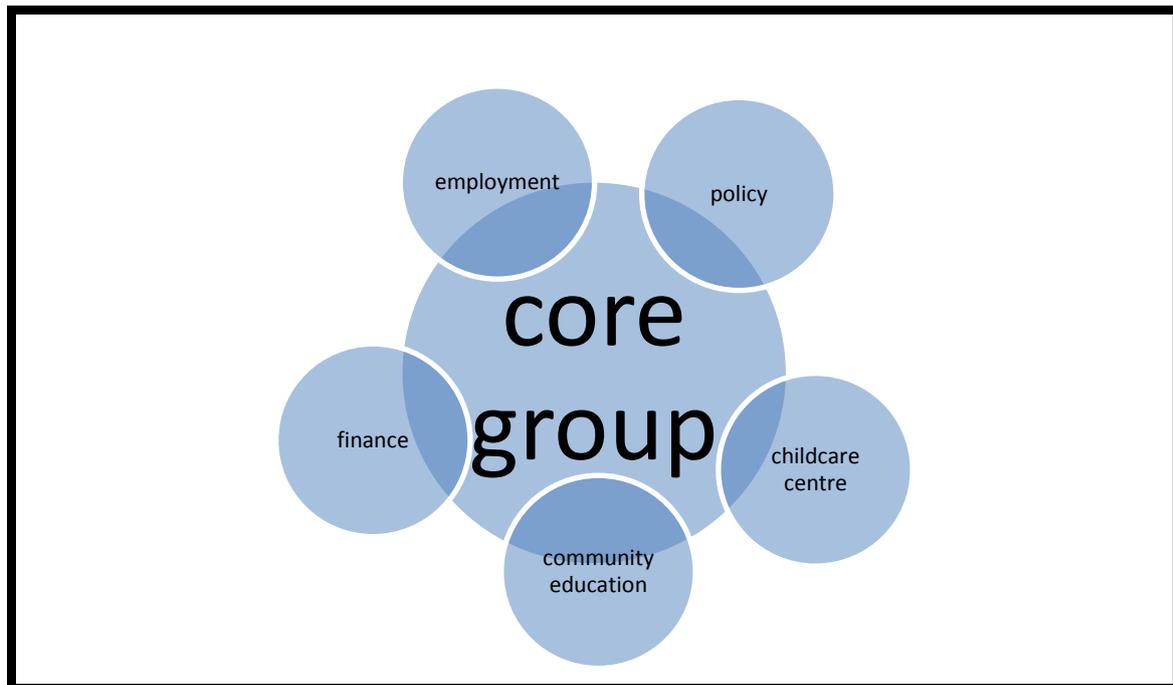
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Lynch (2009) highlights the importance of love, care and solidarity and asks how well can institutions operate across the entire dimension to provide egalitarian organisations (2009). How they distribute wealth resources, how equal opportunities are provided, how diversity is welcomed, how power is reduced, and how love, care and solidarity are included. Across all areas of the project, attention is paid to creating equality of condition as it is recognised as the mainstay of the work. Decision making is shared and spread out in the project through working groups who are responsible for decisions relating to their own area of work. (See table 1 Organisational Structures page 60)

Table 1

Organisational Structures

Elected working groups oversee and direct identified areas of work and representatives from each group attend the core group where decisions are ratified



Trust is built through the processes previously mentioned but cemented through the freedom to identify own needs and the responsibility to ensure they are achieved. This is very evident in the work with women's groups as they are free to direct their own learning and responsible for it achieving it also. There is an ongoing joke in the centre about being careful about suggesting we should do something as you will find yourself responsible for it. An example was given where recently one of the groups decided that a second hand shop would be a good way to generate some funds for the centre. After only a tentative discussion with a facilitator the group set up the shop and took responsibility for maintaining and promoting it. No one in the organisation interfered, 'no one said you cannot do that'. This generated a sense of ownership and trust in the women as they felt they were trusted to develop and maintain this project. There is **freedom to make a mistake** and no blame attached

if you do. There, is therefore, freedom to try out something new which allows creativity develop. Freire (1970) says that through open dialogue, when everyone involved in dialogue and decision making on issues that affect them, and through critical reflection mistakes can be accepted and overcome. On reflection, when I have made mistakes in my work I have been able to berate myself in confidence that I will be cared for, that my side will be taken even though I may argue how badly I screwed up. There is always a sense that whoever I tell will be on my side, highlighting the collective acceptance of decisions - even the wrong ones - and there is a commitment to always thinking well of each other through working in solidarity.

Group agreements are established throughout the organisation, through open discussion, which ensures everyone has a say on what will make it possible for them to participate in the environment and what might block participation. Time is taken to thorough open conversations where all voices are heard and creative group processes to ensure that collective agreement is reached.

Wheatley (1996) brings attention to how organisations spend resources on training people in behaviour, but how agreements on how we will be together are what really matter even if they are unspoken, 'behaviours are rooted in our agreements. 'So many of us want to be more. So many of us hunger to discover who we might become together.' (p. 63)

6.9 Participatory democratic management

The management of the organisation was described as **participatory democracy**, where decisions are made collectively and power is shared, as opposite to traditional hierarchical management where power and decisions are made by a few. Members of the organisation work across management and staff take on multiple roles. Consequently, it is sometimes hard to separate those roles. This management structure is made possible through the support structures in place throughout the project. Moyer (2001) in outlining the eight stages of social movements highlights the importance of a participatory democracy model in managing social movement organisations during critical active stages because it 'maximizes the advantages and minimizes the disadvantages of both the oppressive hierarchical and the spontaneous anarchistic models' (p. 67). He goes on to highlight that, in fact, social

movements need more structure and effective processes than traditional organisations in order to be 'efficient, flexible and enduring' (Moyer, 2001, p. 67).

While the focus of this research is on the organisational culture, this participatory democracy model was named as happening throughout the organisation. In fact, throughout the research this was echoed in all areas identified. It suggests that the ethos of the organisation is taken on board by all who come in. It was particularly mentioned in relation to the recent decision to stand firm and not go into the new Local and Community Development Programme. Decisions were only made with everyone present, information was shared as soon as it was received and everyone was consulted at all stages of the processes and asked 'what do you want'? This was further explored in section 4.6.

Freeman (1970) in examining the early years of the women's liberation movement's reaction to the 'overstructured society' by adopting 'structureless' organisations, concludes that 'structurelessness' does not work and in order to 'move beyond these elementary stages of development' we need to develop democratic organisations while keeping certain principles in mind. These principles include; democratic delegation of authority for specific tasks, rather than self appointed roles, and an acknowledgement that, where authority is delegated, responsibility is to those who select them. This is how power is kept with the group, authority and power is spread among as many as possible; preventing monopoly of power and supports others to gain skills. There is a continual rotation of skills and allocation of tasks based on ability and interest, and through apprenticeship programmes. This enables the sharing and development of skills, the sharing of information and the equal access to resources. When these types of processes are applied, the power will rest with the group and authority will be diffused (Freeman, 1970³).

Levine (1997) on the other hand promotes structurelessness and disagrees with Freeman's notion that consciousness raising was only necessary as part of the early women's movement. She states that it is a vital ongoing part in order to eliminate women's conditioning and is in fact a 'strategy for revolution' which opens access to the movement to all women. She goes on to outline how a feminist friend

³ No page number available

apportioned her time in the movement as: 25% spent in group activities and 75% developing herself and suggests that it is through these processes we will develop a visible feminist culture. It is through these processes that we can define ourselves outside 'patriarchal standards.' This is highlighted as being in stark contrast to male movements in which people are expected to 'devote 24 hours a day to the Cause' which feeds into women's conditioning of self-sacrifice. Culture is cited as 'essential part of a revolutionary movement and must remain revolutionary' (1997, ⁴). She says what is needed instead of Freeman's call for structures, is the continuation of small unstructured group which value individuals, which values friendship on which our revolutions should be built on.

In introducing Levine my aim was to introduce a critical voice, however the research does not contest the element of the paper named above but in fact draws attention to the fact that the project has managed to maintain the small group ethos of friendship and consciousness raising while incorporating structures, not quite anarchistic but that work with and not against the culture. The findings are in fact more challenging of Freeman's call for more rigid structures than are necessary.

The way we work has evolved over the years and creates a space where women can thrive, a women's utopia. It builds foundations and women who come in become part of the management structure through representing their own groups, training to be facilitators and community activists. The work develops layers of women coming through. It is a gentle way of development, the facilitator's work is gentle but firm; a feminist model which supports women helping them to overcome the effects of oppression. It encourages and develops ownership, but not taking over. It operates on a system of 'power with' not 'power over' (Walters and Manicom, 1996). It is much gentler than other models which promote women's development in a masculine way. Radical feminism can be modelled on a male way of working towards equality, while liberal feminism is a middle class model of trying to fit women into existing structures but fails see that working class women do not fit in anyway and are excluded. Rights for women will not change this (Giddens, 2006).

⁴ No page number available

While the organisation is structured, there is also freedom to develop individual roles and projects. This was described as '**autonomy with connection**' where there is trust and freedom to do the job right but with support when needed. Wheatley (1999) says autonomy is seen by some managers as one step away from anarchy but suggests that it results in arrangements that support all its members.

There is freedom to have ideas and try them out which builds a desire to see that it goes well. There was a lengthy discussion in relation to the concept, first coined by Eleanor Roosevelt; '**with freedom comes responsibility**' as to what it meant in the context of the project and what freedom without responsibility would mean. There is freedom to take a risk and no blame if it does not work, freedom to fail, to have a go, to challenge ourselves to take responsibility which encouraged creativity within the work. Wheatley reminds us that:

with coherence, comes the capacity to create organizations that are both free and effective. They are effective because they support people's ability to self-organize. They are free because they know who they are. (Wheatley, 1996, p. 60)

Voluntary work provides opportunity to take risks through representing the organisation externally and again with the freedom to do this comes the responsibility for it. With freedom and responsibility come regulations in the form of policies, procedures and financial regulations. In discussing the need for the vision of an organisation to connect with all involved in it, Wheatley (1996) suggests when we are focused on policies and procedures we are not focused on connecting with each other. She goes on to highlight the benefits of not having policies as it allows individuals to self-organise.

The research does not concur with Wheatley in relation to policies, procedures and regulations however. Policies were identified as representing the learning from mistakes throughout the years and ways of protecting the organisation from making the same mistakes again. These constitute the '**bottom line**' the '**anchor**' of the organisation and allows the freedom while it is kept safe. Policies are not static however and are changed as the need arises.

6.10 Challenges limits and conditioning

The way we manage the organisation as women was discussed in terms of how we challenge internalised oppression which has women settling for less than we want. Ruth (2006, p. 138-154) outlines patterns of internalised oppression such as low self esteem which results in us feeling bad about ourselves and others from our group, feelings of shame that devalue ours and others' thinking and intelligence, feeling insignificant and having low expectations. Feeling powerless pushes us to focus on the negative, we feel defeated and worthless. Divisiveness explained as being unable to pull together, being disrespectful to each other, backbiting, gossiping and critical of each other and of those in leadership positions. Ruth says oppressed groups use alcohol or drugs to numb the pain and develop survival behaviour to cope with oppression which manifests in acting in particular negative ways that confirm the stereotype images of the oppression.

As women, we can develop mechanisms to cope with the effects of oppression and poverty which do not always serve us well. We become passive and feel powerless to challenge unfair treatment in our lives and accept aggressive and violent behaviour. We accept dependency and learn to live limited lives. Internalised oppression is believing what the oppression says and acting from it. The project challenges low expectations and limited thinking on an organisational level through challenging decisions, thinking and behaviour which are based on negative gender and class conditioning. This forms part of the ethos at all levels. In the representation work where the voluntary members represent the project on relevant local, regional and national decision-making fora there is also commitment to challenge. The example of resisting entry into the new programme was also used to explore how conditioning was recently challenged; while we maintained our freedom, it comes with the responsibility for financially sustaining the project. Facilitative leadership and collective power enables us to collectively challenge limits internally and externally. Challenge is a place of growth, a painful place where change comes through discomfort and was likened to an earthquake where there is a shift or disturbance before change happens. There is therefore an agreement to be disturbed and disturbance forms part of the vision. Moyer (2001) acknowledges that in order to challenge the victim and powerless roles many activists play and be

effective in movements, they need to be open to engage in 'self-development and self-empowerment' (p. 95).

'We don't say, you're broken, oppressed, we'll fix you'. The women themselves say what they want. An example was given of a woman who came into the centre for the first time and said **'what do you do here'?** and she was asked **'what do you need?'** Women are supported to identify what their immediate needs and to address any barriers they might face: information, childcare, or access to supports we do not provide.

This kind of challenge and change is possible only when coupled with support, safety and trust. Without it, it is only disturbance and does not lead to change or resolution. When disturbance is initiated without support and safety, it is not conducive to positive change. There is agreement throughout the organisation to deal with issues and directly challenge and go against our negative conditioning. Conditioned negative behaviour is challenged. We do this through checking with each other about what we believe about ourselves and women. We interrupt put downs on women leaders. Challenging negative destructive conditioned behaviour against other women is seen as key to ensuring it is a safe space for women by recognising when this is not challenged and how destructive it can be. It is an implicit policy in the organisation that we challenging women's negative behaviour throughout, and is also discussed at management and staff meetings. **'Meetings are not just about money, the nuts and bolts, but about process also'**. The importance of process is verified by its inclusion as a part of the work in the strategic plan.

6.11 Representation and support - working collectively

Making decisions through consultation with those most affected and by using open systems of communication supports working collectively. Through the establishment of working groups, those best placed to inform particular issues come together to discuss and present different perspectives until an agreement or consensus is reached. When people are part of the decision making, and have a chance to have their perspective heard, they are more likely to be open to compromising, be less defensive, put aside self interests and aim for the greater good. Collective

celebration has also developed commitment, and has helped to bond the project as a whole. While the importance of collective celebration is acknowledged in the project it was only briefly mentioned in the research, calling attention to its low priority in favour of more pressing commitments currently. Celebration is seen as a key element of community women's education (AONTAS, 2009).

Women are thoughtfully encouraged to work to their strengths through caring and trust. **'We can change the world around the kitchen table'**. Attention was drawn to Margaret Mead's quote 'Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has' which hangs on the wall in the kitchen. Aristotle was also quoted 'The whole is greater than the sum of the parts' as being inspirational sayings that encourage us to continue.

Collective action and speaking on behalf of the organisation gives power to individuals. While this work pushes them out of their comfort zone it is made possible because they are not talking for themselves but for the whole organisation. There was a strong need identified for those representing the organisation externally to do so in an informed way which is developed through conversation and support. **'It's uncomfortable at first but loses that awful feeling'**. Lynch (2010) acknowledges the need to support community development and community education programmes as 'sites of change and resistance', spaces where critical thinking and learning can take place to support the shift to an egalitarian state. She goes on to say that they are 'political platforms' where the voices of the most marginalised can be accessed and where the private and the public can intersect (Lynch, 2010, p. 15). Acknowledging (Lynch 2010) the vital part this plays in democracy as identified by Geoghegan and Power (2009).

There can be a feeling of being disconnected from the organisation when representing at a national level which is very time consuming.

'Being outside a lot I miss it and feel lonely, I come here to moan about what's not working, it is a space to moan and complain so as not to do it elsewhere'.

This was named as the need for a place to say uncensored what we need to say so as not talk from our feelings outside. **'I don't take, what is said personally and**

recognise it as women's conditioning. When you see clearly conditioned behaviour you don't need to take offence'. This was also highlighted in relation to the facilitators who work with the women's groups. They meet every Monday morning around the kitchen table. There is agreement that discussion does not take place outside this space; which supports them to work with the women and to **'keep the groups free from contamination'**. This refers to the need to have an uncensored space to work through any difficulties getting in their way of thinking well about the women so as not to act inappropriately.

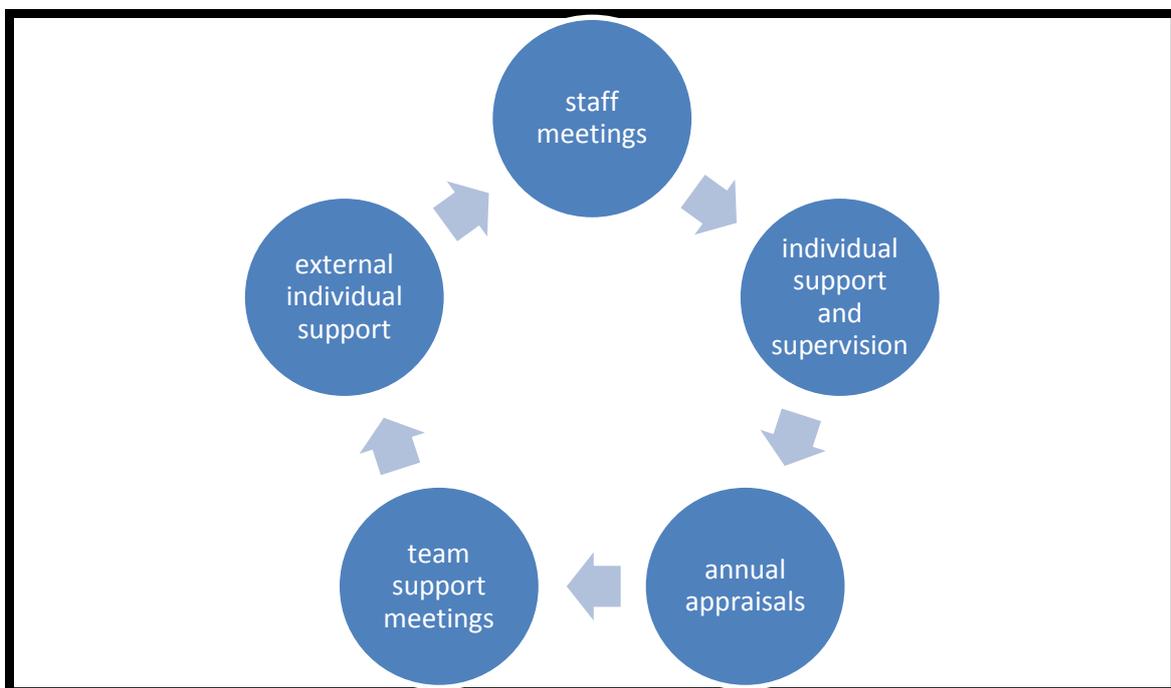
Support is received from management and staff for volunteers and it was identified that this is the reason why volunteers stay with the project. The women's centre has had many voluntary management members since it began and some of the original voluntary management committee are still involved. Conflict is addressed and there is space and time given to relationship building which also supports and maintains volunteers. This method of support was named as **'being listened to so that you can go back out and back again'**. **'Mothering support'** was named as that which is caring, listens and encourages you to go back out and try again. Kline (1993) recognises the skills that women have developed, as mothers and carers, which she describes as interactive, structural and promotional thinking are the skills of high-level leadership. Promotional thinking promotes others; structural thinking involves thinking about the organisation of activities at once and interactive thinking as thinking about others and reacting to their needs.

Leadership in the organisation is facilitated, shared and interchangeable. The type of leadership evident was described as **'collective leadership'**. Where everyone is involved in leading and power is spread out, and facilitative leadership is encouraged where input from everyone is included. This was described as that which enables balance and equality to take place and power to be shared. This way of working allows for greater autonomy in the work where staff and management members can take responsibility and lead particular aspects of the work but can check in for support when needed. While there is an awareness of each other's area of work there is independence in carrying it out. Ruth (2006) in describing the functions of effective leaders presents Kanter's classification of three 'sources of power' which

enables people to develop leadership as; access to resources, access to information and access to support; defined as 'being allowed to exercise initiative or discretion and getting encouragement and backup....' (p. 30). Ruth (2006) continues to underline the role of encouraging others in an organisation to lead as central to the role of leader. Leadership being defined as 'a decision we make to see that the things around us work well...' (p 34).

In recognising the need to use liberating processes in the struggle against oppression, Freire (1970) says leaders cannot use means whereby the people are the passive receptors even as an interim measure in order to get things done quickly; saying that they will revert to problem posing later. 'They (the processes) must be revolutionary - that is to say, dialogical - from the beginning.' (p. 66)

Table 2 Support and supervision structures



6.12 Ownership

The importance of owning the space is highlighted in the research as key to the sustainability of the project. Ownership for women who do not own anything except the women's centre is pivotal to the work. The fact that the women's centre is owned by the women is also named as very significant by an exchange visitor from Tanzania, Maimoona Guatamala. Property ownership is important in a society that values materialism and excludes those who do not own. Without their own premises, community women's groups are at the mercy of landlords and cannot create the ideal learning environments (AONTAS 2001).

A voluntary management member told the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs in response to being asked to dissolve and hand over the assets, namely the buildings to the partnership company: **'I don't own anything but I own the women's centre'**. The question of collective ownership is important to the culture of the organisation because it suggests constancy and stability in a neoliberal society where ownership equals power.

The Waterford Women's Centre building is an example of impact at community level.....This physical structure is a symbol of opportunity for local women and there is a real sense of community ownership (AONTAS, 2001, p. 66).

Ownership of the physical space (and the maintenance of the management committee) was one of the basics which necessitated taking a stand to stay outside of the proposed LCDP (see section 4.6). The physical space is also identified as playing a key role in the development of the culture of the project. AONTAS (2001) makes a recommendation for the resourcing of spaces to support sustainability of women's community education.

Physical resources, buildings and equipment are crucial to the sustainability of women's community education in combating poverty and disadvantage in the republic of Ireland. (AONTAS, 2001, p. 86)

Independent ownership of the physical space is seen as key to the culture. In exploring the wider implications of ownership Inglis (1994) says:

'sexist attitudes such as 'a women's place is in the home', a little bit of learning (for women) does an awful lot of harm, and a notion that, despite their many virtues, women are inferior to men.' (Inglis 1994, p. 61 in Clancy, 1995, p. 10)

Clancy (1995) comments on the fact that the two main patriarchal power holders, the Catholic Church and the State house the majority of women's day time education programmes and that these attitudes and lack of resources inhibit the true potential of women's group.

Having our own space was identified in the research as key to the development of ownership throughout the groups and was evidenced through the women's groups taking initiative in the development of the second hand shop, the garden and how they think of it as their space as do the staff and management.

7. Conclusion

This thesis provided an opportunity for members of the women's centre to explore and interrogate the culture of project. It can, however, offer no more than a snapshot of the organisation. While it aimed to explore all the elements of the organisational culture, the scope and time frame of the research proved too limiting to do more than list and briefly comment on each aspect.

The women's centre is presented through photographs, narrative and storytelling in order to bring in a flavour of the atmosphere into the introduction of the work. The underlying principles of community development and community education in using a Freiran approach are established.

The work is positioned in the underlying concepts and beliefs of the project. Facilitators who themselves are women who have participated in the women's groups. They have a deep understanding that working class women are excluded and silenced at all levels in society due to both the systemic and internalised barriers operating through oppression, where inequality is maintained through existing neo liberal patriarchal capitalist systems. A feminist epistemology ensures that women's needs are kept central to the work. Power is shared and reflective practice is practiced throughout. The tension between feminism and working class culture is highlighted in the thesis but was not examined in any great depth which it deserves.

Collective learning and the creation of conditions where working class women can learn and reclaim confidence and find their voice is central to the work. The belief is that the personal is political and that this work leads to social change. Providing a space for women is, in itself, seen as a political action. Internalised oppression, which can promote the acceptance of inequality, is challenged throughout the project and facilitative processes enable the voices of women that are normally silent to be heard.

This research is relevant to the work of the women's centre currently and its completion was seen as offering several opportunities: for working class women's voices to be heard in academic feminist discourse, to examine recognise and document the rich culture and practices that have developed in the centre, to document and acknowledge the work with the broader development of women's groups and the community development movement, and to link it to the present context facing the community sector. Finally, there is a desire to test the practice against relevant theory, to use it to develop the work and to bring it outside its alternative space.

The importance of documenting and acknowledging the history is outlined as movement history is often lost. The historical context of the work is traced from the phenomenal growth of the predominantly working class women's groups and networks all over Ireland in the 1980s and 1990s and is linked to the current community development movement in Ireland. *Access 2000* was established in 1995 and supported 19 community women activists to gain a third level qualification in community education and development. The tensions in relation to gaining third level accreditation for community practice are identified briefly. In 2000, the women's centre became a CDP and purchased its first building which opened in 2001 and included a childcare centre to support working class women's participation. The current dilemma facing the community sector in Ireland and the ending of the CDP is discussed.

The project outreaches and engages working class women through community education programmes, from early engagement to degree level for community

activists, the provision of a childcare centre and engagement in policy work through the development of a participatory democratic management committee.

The project has recently become part of the NCCWN and the reasons that necessitated this move, the dismantling of the CDP, is critically examined.

The process of arriving at the decision which allowed the women's centre's to stay outside the main stream LCDP programme and enter an amalgamation of the women's CDPs under the umbrella of the NCCWN is detailed. The learning from this is outlined as it led to working in solidarity and going it alone.

Primary research was conducted using informal interviews with members and focus groups and critical reflection through journaling, memo writing and documentary analysis.

The research methodologies emerged through a grounded approach that best matched the processes of the organisation. Harmony exists between feminist participatory action research methodologies and the processes already existing in the project which supports the underpinning ideology of social change. My intention was to come to the fieldwork using a process of enquiry which would suspend my own views on the culture of the project and how it had formed. No specific related reading to this field of study therefore was done prior to conducting the field work so as not to influence the outcome and did not therefore create a preliminary literature review.

Conversations were used as the main method to unpick beliefs in order to look at issues in a new way. The main aim of the research was to capture and name the culture of the organisation. It was important that the final product was understandable and not written in a language that excludes anyone in the organisation. It was also important that the voices of the women were predominantly heard in thesis.

The focus groups were great fun and provided an opportunity to sit around the table and discuss important issues 'the way we do it'.

I struggled throughout the research to position myself and the work in a theoretical framework and found much of the academic language exclusionary. Therefore, commentary and analysis of the data are made with the aim of enabling the voices of the enquiry lead the discussion. The themes are outlined as they emerged from the data. Fun and laughter is an important aspect of the work as it supports a relaxed atmosphere where learning can happen **'a place where women want to be'**. Tears as well as laughter are welcomed as the emotional dimension of the work is important in supporting us to face our fears and bridge the gap between the personal and political. Providing a space where women feel safe relaxed and can learn with ease is key to the work. The importance of the physical space was clearly highlighted in the research. The kitchen table was used to symbolise the importance of our physical environment, a place that is comfortable and relaxed and where we are **'fed and watered'**

A collective, round and multipurpose space, a space where we can change the world through democratic discussion on important issues.

A **'solid collective vision'** is key to the establishing a safe space and when it is **'in the hearts of everybody'** gives a strong sense of purpose to the organisation and holds everything together. Dialogue and conversation were identified as **'how it happens'** are central to all aspects of the work in the centre. Equality of condition for working class women is a core aim of the project. There is **freedom to make a mistake** and no blame attached if you do which facilitates us in working in solidarity. Group agreements are seen as a way to enable participation and help to create equality of condition.

The management of the organisation was described as **participatory democracy**, where decisions are made collectively and power is shared. This management structure is made possible through the support structures in place throughout the project. Shared decision making enables a space where women's voices are heard and therefore participate in the development of culture. It builds foundations and women who come in become part of the management structure through representing their own groups, training to be facilitators and community activists.

While the organisation is structured, there is also freedom to develop individual roles and projects. Described as **'autonomy with connection'** where there is trust and



freedom to do the job right, but with support when needed is also named as **'with freedom comes responsibility'**

Policies were identified as representing the learning from mistakes throughout the years and ways of protecting the organisation from making the same mistakes

again. These constitute the **'bottom line'**, the **'anchor'** of the organisation and allows the freedom while it is kept safe.

Internalised oppression which presents itself as passivity and helplessness is challenged throughout the organisation. Low expectations and limited thinking are also challenged on an organisational level through challenging decisions, thinking and behaviour which are based on negative gender and class conditioning.

'We can change the world around the kitchen table'.

Collective action and speaking on behalf of the organisation gives power to individuals. While this work pushes them out of their comfort zone it is made possible because they are not talking for themselves but for the whole organisation.

'It's uncomfortable at first but loses that awful feeling'.

Those representing the organisation externally where clear that this is done in an informed way which is developed through conversation and support. **'Mothering support'** is described as that which allows us to move outside the project and return again for reassurance and support.

The women's centre provides a space to say uncensored what we need to say, a space to talk about how we feel so as not to act from our feelings inappropriately. Support again is named as one of the reasons why volunteers stay with the project. Conflict is addressed and there is space and time given to relationship building which also supports and maintains volunteers.

Leadership in the organisation is facilitated, shared and interchangeable. Collective leadership is described as everyone is involved in leading and power is spread out.

Due to the time frame of the research there was not enough time to explore leadership in any depth but this collective form of leadership is acknowledged as a vital part of the organisational structure and democratic culture. The question of collective ownership is important to the culture of the organisation because it suggests constancy and stability in a neoliberal society where ownership equals power. **'I don't own anything but I own the women's centre'**.

The scope of this research was inadequate to deal with all the element of this rich culture. It is, therefore, presented only as an introduction to the women's centre, a snap shot and nothing more. My working class culture has taught me that I might only get 'one shot at it' so I decided to 'go for it' and fit in as much as possible. I definitely bit off more than I could chew but I did manage to include almost everything even if it was only a mention.

Working class feminism, mothering support, collective leadership, democratic matriarchy were all identified by the group as crucial elements of the culture of the women's centre but they are only mentioned in the thesis and therefore deserve further sturdy.

If a system appears that works well, our dilemmas in understanding it through traditional analysis only intensify. The success of this system results from conditions and relations that are unique and entangled. How can we ever learn enough about them to recreate such success? Emergent phenomena cannot be recreated. They cannot be transferred. We live in a world that we cannot plan for, control, or replicate. But such an obdurate need for originality is a gift. It frees us to discover what we can become. It welcomes us into the discovery of our own uniqueness (Wheatley, 1996 p.72).

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