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“They Pulled Me Through the Darkest Times”: Exploring the Social Benefits of a Women’s Group in Rural Ireland

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Abstract

While much has been written about the importance of women’s groups in the developing world, less is known about whether such groups have relevance in western societies. In Ireland, women’s groups played a key role in challenging inequality and bringing about positive social change for women in society and were an intrinsic part of community development activity. However, in recent years, policy support for women’s groups has reduced. In order to assess whether women’s groups continue to have relevance in contemporary Irish society, this paper explores members’ perspectives regarding their experiences of being part of a rural women’s group in the midlands of Ireland, established by a local Family Resource Centre. The study involved one-to-one qualitative interviews with group members, with emerging themes centring on mental health and well-being; increased self-confidence; community and social integration and impact on children and families. On the basis of these findings, it is argued that social support groups should be supported due to their benefits for individuals, children and families and for the wider community.

Key words: Women’s groups, rural Ireland, social change, community development.

Introduction

The Irish Constitution (1937), under strong influence from the Catholic Church, placed women predominantly in the home, responsible for domestic duties and rearing of children (Smith, 2007; O’Connor, 1998). Since the foundation of the state, many Irish women have found themselves on the outskirts of society due to poverty, mental health issues, widowhood, and desertion and, in many cases, pregnancy outside marriage. While Ireland’s membership of the European Union (EU) brought about significant advances in the enactment of legislation to promote women’s rights in Ireland (Barry, 2014; Connolly, 2003), research relating to the gender-based struggle of women in Ireland since the foundation of the state has pointed to the important role of women’s groups in developing and empowering women and their allies, particularly from the early 1970s onwards (Smith, 2007; Connolly, 2003; O’Connor, 1998; Richards, 1998). The literature points to the fact that there is no unique common factor pertaining to all women’s groups and that “there is a dearth of empirical research on women’s groups” (Leech and Kees, 2005, p. 367). Studies have found that groups are viewed by members as a source of social support and social capital; as a mechanism for skills development and capacity building and as forums for women to voice their concerns about social issues and to apply a gender analysis to those issues (O’Donovan and Ward, 1999; National Women’s Council of Ireland, 2004). The purpose of this paper is to explore the perspectives of women participating in a women’s social support group in the

midlands of Ireland, established in 2009, with a view to understanding the women’s reasons for joining and staying with the group and exploring the social benefits it brings to them, their families and communities.

The literature argues that though much has changed for women in Ireland, there is still room for improvement (Barry and Conroy, 2013). One-parent households, 86% of which are headed by females (Canavan, 2012, p. 15), have a higher risk of reduced well-being compared to families in general (Zavelata et al., 2014; McKeown, 2013; Fahey et al., 2012) and have been adversely affected by welfare reforms (Millar and Crosse, 2017). Barry and Conroy (2013) state that an increasing proportion of those living in poverty are what they describe as the working poor, the majority of whom are women. Women are the primary carers of children, but also of young people and adult children with disabilities and of elderly relatives. Recent findings show that grandmothers are increasingly juggling their own lives to assist their children with childcare and domestic support due to the high cost of childcare and work/life pressures (Jacobs, 2016). Women in the workplace tend to occupy lower paid roles in many work-based settings, but are under-represented at senior management levels and perform higher levels of domestic and caring duties in the home than their male counterparts (National Women’s Council of Ireland, 2014; Fine-Davis, 2011; Bradshaw and Hatland, 2006). In recent years, the negative impact of regressive, austerity driven policies on vulnerable populations including women in Ireland and the UK has been widely documented (Millar and Crosse, 2017; Churchill and Sen, 2016; Barry and Conroy, 2013; Featherstone et al., 2011; Fothergill, 2011).

While urban and rural-based women share more commonalities than differences, there are some unique challenges faced by Irish rural women. Farming continues to be a male domain with the result that “women slip from view, where the focus is on the voices and activities of men, their interconnectedness with landscapes and stock bred over generations” (Bennett, 2005, p. 71). The predominantly patrilineal line of inheritance not only refers to “the transfer of land but also to the transfer of social and gender relationships” (Shorthall, 2005, p. 91). Other issues highlighted in research include rural crime and the high level of fear that exists for rural women because of their perceived isolation. It is also acknowledged that while “the close knit nature of rural society” can provide security for some it “can prevent others from disclosing fear and abuse” (Little et al., 2005, p. 155).

Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, the state invested heavily in area based strategies to promote community and local development, with locally based women’s groups receiving support as part of this process (Lee, 2003). However, following the great recession and the introduction of austerity policies, funding for community development in Ireland was cut by an estimated 35% between 2007 and 2012, with over 11,000 posts abolished (Harvey, 2012). Disadvantaged women are no longer a specific target group of the national community development programme, Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP). The SICAP programme has been criticised for stifling community development processes with overly rigid programme practices and for its focus on activation into formal employment (Community Work Ireland, 2017). The group which is the focus of this study was established under funding for family support services, via Tusla, the national Child and Family Agency.

Given the shift in policy focus away from collectivist social support initiatives, such as women’s groups, it is timely to re-visit the rationale for such groups. Before moving on to describe the context, methodology and findings, the concepts of social support and social capital are explored in more detail.

Women's groups: Theoretical rationale

Social support is conceptualised as responsive acts of kindness between human beings (Harden and Whittaker, 2011). A range of academic traditions, including sociology and psychology, have emphasised the protective nature of social support. Studies in the 1970's and 80's found that those who participated in their community and the larger society were in better mental health than more isolated people (Cohen and Wills, 1985). Cassell (1976) noted from a number of epidemiologic studies the negative effects on health and wellbeing of a lack of social connectedness, particularly during periods of high stress levels, such as rapid societal change, loss of identity, illness, bereavement or changes in traditional lifestyles. The studies found that such stressors were often mitigated or buffered by the existence of close protective social support networks. He argues that it is optimal to strengthen social supports rather than to try and reduce the exposure to stressors. Social support interventions are often used to assist persons who are undergoing stressful life circumstances to cope more effectively. However, efforts to mobilise social support in a formal sense are complex and must take into account issues such as the qualities and functions of social support (Cutrona, 2000). The quality of social support is best when it is close, durable, reciprocal and constructive. The literature points to different forms of social support as concrete or practical, where doing or giving is paramount, emotional support, such as listening, acknowledging and offering empathy, information and advice, where suggestions and advice is provided, and esteem, where encouragement and belief in the recipient is reinforced (Durcan and Bell, 2015). Social support groups can be a valuable mechanism for the enactment of informal, reciprocal support between people (Pinkerton et al., 2016).

The concept of social capital is also relevant to our understanding of women's groups. Social capital can be described as the "ability of actors to secure benefits by virtue of membership of social networks or social structures" (Portes, 1998, p. 6). Putnam's definition of social capital describes it as "features of a social organisation such as networks, norms and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit" (Putnam, 1995, p. 67). He also defined two types of social capital, bonding social capital, which is gained through close reciprocal networks, and bridging social capital, which is gained through distant looser networks. Bonding social capital can be described as support which helps people get by in times of adversity, as strong ties bind groups with shared norms/values, cultural experiences, common purposes (Jack and Jordan, 1999). Such bonding social norms and cooperative spirit can provide 'social safety nets to individuals and groups to protect themselves from external invasion' (Panth, 2010, p. 1). Panth argues that it is important to maintain traditional social capital through family, kinship and community, stating that when the state is unable to provide basic services, social capital based on family relations and kinship provides "a cushion against hard times" (Panth, 2010, p. 1). Bridging social capital occurs through contacts with more distant looser networks (Panth, 2010; Putnam, 2000). The literature points to the fact that not all social networks are supportive and in fact some can be corrosive (McDonald and Marsh, 2001).

A wide body of literature attests to the benefits of social connection in terms of health and well-being. While poverty and inequality greatly undermine the well-being of parents and children, research has shown that where parents and children are embedded in strong social support networks within the community, it results in better outcomes for children and youth (Ferguson, 2006). Women who connect with community organisations have significant health advantages over those who do not engage on the basis that it "provides individuals with important social roles" (Fothergill et al., 2011, p. 293). Holt-Lunstad et al. (2010) found that

the risk of death in people who lack close connections is comparable to the risk from smoking and alcohol consumption and greater than the risk of obesity or physical inactivity. It has been found that group support is often critical in the lives of people suffering disadvantage (Nadler et al., 2009). In addition to greater health and social well-being, a person’s sense of belonging to a group or community is described by Basu (2013) as an instrument for enhancing capability and supporting economic progress. He goes on to assert that “once people are treated as marginal over a period of time, forces develop that erode their capability, productivity, and reinforce their marginalisation” (Basu, 2013, p. 324). A recent evaluation of one community development project¹ in the West of Ireland found participants gained significant life skills and raised awareness of core women’s issues for society (Byrne, 2014). As a result, women also said they themselves had higher expectations for their children, especially for their daughters, as a result of being involved in their groups. Social support benefits were also very evident in this research where women saw the group as an escape from isolation.

Context for the Study

The national Family Resource Centre (FRC) programme was initiated in Ireland in the late 1990’s to combat disadvantage and enhance the functioning of the family unit. There are currently 108 FRCs throughout Ireland, with most located in areas of significant socio-economic disadvantage. Since 2011, the FRC programme has been managed by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, where it is core funded by Tusla Child and Family Agency. The activities undertaken by Family Resource Centres can be broadly described as ‘family support’, which is referred to as “a style of work and a wide range of activities that strengthen positive informal social networks through community based programmes and services” (Tusla, 2017). Family support practice principles include working in partnership with families, strengthening informal support networks and striving towards minimum intervention (McKeown, 2013; Devaney and Smith, 2010). A key focus of family support work is on supporting parents in recognition of the significant role of the parent, particularly the mother, as a fundamental influence on the well-being of children and young people.

Granard FRC works in partnership with the local community to improve quality of life and bring about social change. Its mission is to work in partnership with children, young people, their families and individuals within the community in the provision of universal supports and early intervention services. It serves a population of approximately 13,000, comprising a small urban area and wider rural hinterland in the midlands of Ireland. Research by Pobal based on the 2016 census data found that small towns with populations between 1,000 and 5,000, such as Granard, were disproportionately hit by the recession and benefited least from the economic recovery. While Granard was classified as “marginally below average” in the deprivation indices based on the 2006 and 2011 censuses, it experienced further declines in the 2016 census and is now classified as “disadvantaged”, with unemployment at 30 per cent among men and 26 per cent for women (Holland, 2017; Haase and Prasche, 2016).

Granard FRC supported the establishment of a women’s group in 2009 in response to a need identified by local women. As well as offering mutual support and friendship, the group was seen as a conduit through which the FRC could support and encourage women to participate

¹ Roscommon Women’s Network W.I.N.D.O.W Project (2014)

in parenting programmes, mental health and wellness programmes and to build their capacity within the community. Membership of the women's group comprises thirty women, twenty-six of whom regularly attend the group's weekly meetings. The group hosts a wide range of activities, including education and training and social activities, but predominantly acts as a social support forum for members.

Methods

As stated earlier, the aim of this paper is to explore the experiences of women who are part of this peer-led social support group and to consider the social benefits associated with the group. An exploratory qualitative approach was adopted, because in the words of Cleary et al. (2014, p. 711), it allows for understanding and conveying "the sense people make of their life experiences".

Because this study took place within the lead author's workplace which was responsible for supporting the establishment of the women's group, the key ethical concern in this research study was the fact that it involved insider research. Robson (2011, p. 403) notes that insider research has a number of practical advantages which include local access to the research group and "an intimate knowledge of the context of the study, both as it is at present and in a historical perspective". However, it also brings challenges such as interviewing colleagues and dealing with confidentiality issues. In order to minimise the negative impact of insider research in this study, the Chairperson of the FRC was asked to act as a liaison between the researcher and the participants. The Chairperson of the FRC was neither a member of the group or a native of the area. The FRC chairperson outlined the confidential nature of the study and explained the ethical standards involved before obtaining agreement to the research study from the women's group. All women who had been group members for six months or more were invited to take part in the research and were given an information sheet and consent form. The first eleven women to come forward to participate were accepted. Once the participants were selected, telephone contact was made with them by the researcher who informed them about the research study and provided information regarding the nature of the interview and its purpose.

Robson (2011, p. 404) argues that the insider researcher should make notes after each interview and debrief with a colleague or supervisor afterwards so as to reflect on any "contaminating effects on the research". To this end, the lead researcher discussed the research with her supervisor on a regular basis, reflecting on her role in the process and on any possible pre-conceived beliefs she may have as a result of her involvement with the group which may impact on her interpretation of the research findings. Ethical approval for the study was secured from the author's university.

Data was gathered through one-to-one semi-structured interviews with eleven group members. The socio economic background of participants varied widely with some coming from economically secure backgrounds to others who were coping with poverty and disadvantage. All interviews were held in a local FRC. Each interview lasted on average 30 minutes. They were recorded and transcribed in full. The interviews sought to explore members' experiences of being part of the group. Names have been changed to protect the anonymity of participants.

Interview data was transcribed in full and analysed inductively using a thematic analysis approach (Braun and Clarke, 2006). A large set of codes were identified based on initial

analysis of the focus group transcripts and these codes were grouped together to form initial themes. These themes were then subjected to further analysis and grouped inductively into higher order categories. The qualitative findings are presented according to these broad headings.

Profile of research participants

While participants were not asked their age, it is estimated that they were in the range of early-twenties to mid-sixties. The majority of the participants were mothers, grandmothers or cared for a family member. The total number of children belonging to the participant cohort was 50 and the number of grandchildren was 37. Approximately half of the participants lived in the rural hinterland and the majority of those were part of rural farming families. Three of the participants stated that they were unemployed and were actively seeking work. Two participants described themselves as unemployed but unable to work due to a disability. Three participants had retired from paid employment outside the home, while two of those who identified themselves as retired cared for grandchildren part-time. Two participants had established home industries as a direct result of their involvement with the women’s group. The remainder of the participants were working in the home.

Findings and Discussion

Many of the participants saw the women’s group as providing an opportunity to become immersed in community life and enjoy companionship in an informal way. The group was viewed as a platform to share, socialise and engage with other women in a variety of contexts, including social, educational, health and well-being, gender-based, artistic and community-focused spheres. All of the participants spoke of feeling a sense of connectedness and camaraderie from being part of the group, with the weekly cup of tea and chat seen as a central feature of the group:

...sure the best part is that it’s all of us together here a group of women having the craic [laugh] the chat – don’t get me wrong we do have the serious stuff too, there can be tears.
(Roisin)

From the core structure of the weekly meetings, which centred around the cup of tea and chat, a range of social benefits can be identified from the responses. These are mental health and well-being, increased self-confidence; community and social integration and impact on children and families.

Mental health and well-being

Many of the participants referred to positive impact of group membership on their mental health and well-being. The literature points to the fact that an “uplifting conversation that introduces hope and joy...may influence a host of other positive outcomes including increased physical activity, healthy food selection, or the choice to engage further in proactive social relationships” (Honn-Qualls 2014, p. 8). Joan reflected this view in her description of the psychological boost she felt from seeing a film with the group, an opportunity that would not otherwise have been available in a small rural town:

.....even the film last week, I would never get a chance to go to the cinemaas I cannot drive...and what we had here last week was a mini cinema with nearly thirty [women] at it [film] and I went home walking on air and looking forward to the next one.....

Hannah said that family issues often left her exhausted, but that she went home feeling a “bit lighter” after receiving informal advice on a family matter from another member. Similarly, Sally saw the group as providing “a hand to get up againwhen certain situations in life hit you.” Lisa shared her belief that the group “really helped me from sinking into a depression”. Gertie also referred to the beneficial effects of friendship and belonging for her mental health, stating “loneliness is a real danger but when you make friends and get a chance to join in, you worry less”. Pamela also saw the group as helping people who felt lonely, while Muriel highlighted the therapeutic benefits of the reciprocal support accessed through the group:

It's knowing that there is someone to talk to, the feeling that there is someplace to go to, so you are not on your ownif you were feeling a bit on your own. (Pamela)

You sit down with another woman over a cup of tea and a biscuit...and you will get as much benefit out of that..... you don't feel indebted to anyone and you don't feel you have to go for therapy (Muriel)

A number of participants were motivated to join the women's group as a means of ameliorating the loss of connection and belonging caused by grief and separation. Roisin, commenting on the loss of a child said:

I felt my world was falling apart... and here came all those wonderful women [group members] and they pulled me through the darkest times.

While many spoke of bereavement, others spoke about moving into a new community and experiencing a sense of loss and a lack of connection to previous roots. A person's sense of belonging can be interrupted by life events which often cause them to consider “why so many others things no longer ‘add up’ for them” (May 2013, p. 7). Participants viewed their group membership as a coping mechanism and as a conduit through which to establish comforting connections and re-connections with others. The group was seen as a source of support while participants re-built a new life following loss and adjustment to new realities. The literature concurs that such major life events can bring added stress and complication to family life including a shrinking network of support, simply because of the increased demands on parent's time, a greater risk of poverty and social exclusion and a propensity to loneliness and poor mental health (Frost et al., 2015; Durkan and Bell, 2015; Honn-Qualls, 2014; Wigfall, 2008; House et al., 1988). One participant described how the group helped her deal with rural isolation and how her family could see the positive change in her as a result.

Increased self-confidence

Featherstone et al. (2011, p. 621) argue that inequality within communities “gets under the skin” of individuals leaving them feeling unvalued and inferior. Similarly, Basu (2013) makes the point that long standing marginalisation and inequality over time can erode capability and productivity and contribute to poor self-concept. At the heart of positive self-concept is the need or “sense that one matters’ to others” (Marigold et al., 2014, p. 60).

The majority of participants reported low self-esteem and a lack of self-confidence as the greatest initial challenge experienced on joining the group. This was interspersed in almost

equal measure with a sense of trepidation on the part of participants around socialising, communicating and engaging in a public group format. In fact, one participant marvelled at the fact that she was treated as an equal by group members, despite her disability, as if to suggest that this was something she should be grateful for: “they never see a chair and they never say ‘do you want a hand’ we are all equal” (Imelda). Again, drawing attention to her self-perception as different to the other women, Imelda commented “you come here; it is like you are one of the women – just the same as them”.

Some participants indicated that they still struggle with low self-esteem; however, the majority of participants reported that the group had a positive impact on their self-concept. The participants grew in confidence as they developed a voice and realised that what they had to say mattered to others in the group. “I found the more I got to know the women the more my confidence grew” (Lisa). One participant stated that courses aimed at building the confidence of members were very effective in providing tools and support for members to focus on their own confidence building. All of the participants related elements of the social support found within the group, such as friendships, personal reinforcement, advice, practical support and information which impacted self-concept in a hugely positive way. One participant commented:

I think it has brought a lot of people out of themselves, I think it has opened up the door for a lot of people to have the friendships they now have.... knowing it is a safe place to come to. (Pamela)

The inclusive approach of the group can be seen as a critical feature in building confidence among women. Members were seen to be very friendly and that new members were always given a warm welcome. Many of the respondents alluded to how the group showed care and appreciation for members who faced life challenges and adversity:

Intermingling with all the women and sharing. And, all the women sharing their stories, their worries and their concerns and for me not being ashamed that I suffer mental illness, that I don’t have to hide it and that everybody knows that I have been in and out of[hospital name]. (Imelda)

We all come together, like there was a lady who was a member of the group and she was also a non-national and her Dad died and we got together and went to the funeral and she was totally blown away when she saw us coming and she said we would never know how much it meant to her. (Pamela)

The ‘facilitative’ approach described here promoted commitment to the group and retention of members. The fact that the leadership style was not based on a power model, but rather on shared responsibility (Sinclair, 2013) was important for those whose psyches may still subconsciously hold the essence of the dominance of a patriarchal society (McNay, 1999).

Community and social integration

Many of the participants stated that they had increased their level of activity within the community as a direct result of being involved with the women’s group. For example, a number of participants had gone on to volunteer within the local FRC and assisted with the operation of their charity shop. The group also facilitated participants to become involved in local events such as the Christmas Festival, Easter Parade, community sports day, garden party, senior citizens party and children and youth events. Two participants went on to

establish new clubs to provide social outlets and build capacity for others within the community. For instance, one participant explained how the art club came about as a direct result of the women's group hosting a series of art classes. That club now has 15 regular members, has been running for over four years and holds two art exhibitions annually. Participants said that they felt empowered to undertake and share in other community activities as a result of developing confidence in the group:

They [women] are doing more in their community than they would have ever done..... For instance, the groupsupport the work of the [charity shop] and this has done a lot for the women and a lot for the community. (Sally)

Participants spoke of having the opportunity to network with other women's groups and to collaborate with other organisations in relation to events and campaigns, such as one encouraging greater participation by women in politics. Some participants spoke of the value of gender-based campaigns on increasing awareness around equal pay, increasing women's participation in political and civic life and in informing women about issues of domestic violence and general health and well-being.

Impact on children and families:

It has been found that social support groups provide an important arena for parents to give and receive informal reinforcement of their parenting abilities and coping skills (Featherstone et al., 2011). Many of the study participants spoke of seeking and receiving support with parenting and grand-parenting issues, which in turn helped them to feel more in control. The findings indicate that the support available through the group impacted on the participant's parenting capacity "I think my growing confidence has helped the children be more confident and outgoing" (Lisa). Moreover, participants said they were much more likely to encourage their children and grandchildren to take part in community events and clubs/groups as a direct result of their contact with the group. Many said that they were more in touch with what was going on and knew the benefits of getting engaged in the social life of the area. One participant commented "the grandchildren are now talking about the Centre (FRC) and one of them has started an art class" (Muriel). A significant body of research has found that involvement in community networks is a protective factor for children and enhances their capacity to develop their own social support networks and social capital (Ferguson, 2006). Given that this group was composed of parents and grandparents who between them were either currently parenting or had parented fifty children, the potential consequence for families was considerable.

Conclusion

Human beings have an in-built biological need to maintain close contact with others (Zavaleta et al., 2014; Cacioppo et al., 2011) and research has consistently underlined the importance of social connection. The findings of this study indicate that the women's group established by the Family Resource Centre is responsive to the needs expressed by participants for social inclusion and camaraderie and provides a forum to support women in many aspects of their lives. Cox (1995, p. 7) argues that social benefits arise when "we gossip, relate, and create the warmth that comes from trusting". In keeping with the literature, the support generated through the group was valued for its informal and genuine nature and that it was not stigmatising to receive on the basis that it could be reciprocated if needed. The

women spoke of feeling improved mental health and general well-being as a result of being part of the group. The informal group support was viewed as preventing the escalation of mental health issues, which may have necessitated formal intervention (Pinkerton et al., 2016; Marigold et al., 2014; Devaney et al., 2013; Dolan et al., 2006).

This study echoed previous findings in relation to the limiting effects of low self-confidence and poor self-concept as restrictive for women engaging in social support groups and community networks (Marigold et al., 2014). Participants in this study attributed their increased confidence to feeling welcome and safe in the group context and having the opportunity to take part in personal development and other informal education courses organised through the group. It has been previously acknowledged that community education delivered through innovative methods within forums such as women’s groups can be highly valuable (Connolly, 2003), but is receiving declining support due to focus on accredited progression and employment-oriented education among statutory service providers. The benefits of informal education can also be seen in terms of impact on children. Women taking part in the research spoke of their own children becoming more confident, as a result of their mother growing in confidence, reflecting the argument of Cheal (2005, p. 158) that education can impact generations because values and knowledge “are often passed from one generation to another”.

The study participants described how a number of other groups had flourished as a direct result of the women’s group which indicate significant growth in social capital. Bullen and Onyx (2005, p. 7) see social capital as emanating from “dense interlocking networks of relationships between individuals and groups”. The growth in personal social capital meant that participants had moved from low social agency to high social agency where they became active citizens within the wider community. Awareness and understanding of gender issues increased among the women, as did a realisation of their power to bring about change, with some members taking part in networking and campaigning in relation to social and political issues. The findings indicate, therefore, that the group facilitated women to become more visible and active in their communities and in society.

In conclusion, based on the findings of this small scale study, the theoretical and empirical rationale for supporting groups such as this women’s group is strong. We argue that social policy should focus on building close sustainable social support networks in communities for the good of its members. Social support groups should be seen as a mechanism for promoting well-being, education, personal development and citizenship across the life-course. In this context, community education, particularly for rural women where access to adult education is limited by geography and financial resources, is vital. The trend towards retraction of informal education is regressive and should be reversed.

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