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## ***The Opportunity of Equality***

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### **FOREWORD**

The word 'equality' may invoke thoughts of well-being and social justice, based on ideals of political and civic freedom, mutual respect for and recognition of persons, identifying the conditions for a democratic society in which to live, love, work, rest and play. Or we may understand 'equality' as the outcome of a legal instrument designed for equal treatment, equal rights, equal status and equal opportunities of all peoples, regardless of gender, race, class, health or disability, sexual orientation, age, civil or family status, membership of the Travelling community and religion. The persistence of stigma, prejudice and discrimination indicates that equality of opportunity and treatment remains in some aspects aspirational. State bodies promote an equality ethos in the public sphere through the provision of information and legal instruments to actively contest discrimination and unequal treatment. Nonetheless the everyday consequences of inequality in people's experiences of early educational failure or restricted employment opportunities or lack of choice in career progression, point to the pervasiveness and invasiveness of inequality, particularly evident in women's lives.

The employment target for 2020 is for three quarters of women to be in paid work. With more than half of women in employment, the profile of women in Ireland is similar to women in employment in Europe but the Irish gender pay gap across all sectors is significant. Three times as many women as men are in part-time employment in Ireland; the risk of poverty is greater for women, partly as a result of shorter working lives, part-time and seasonal employment, less well paid work and limited access to pension benefits in older age. Women continue to be the main family carers of children, of the elderly and those with disabilities. The revaluing of nurturance, care work and dependency relations is crucial for the advancement of equality in public and private life. Women are

underrepresented in regional and national politics, in decision-making structures and in current affairs media for example. The ratio of women to men in politics have largely remained the same since the foundation of the Irish state; improving women's representation through quotas legislation is an important support mechanism for including women in the political life of the country. Working for equality involves a commitment to recognizing and challenging inequality in our social, political, cultural, economic institutions, values and practices.

An extraordinary effort is required to bring about a value and behavioural change in thinking and in our practices. Transformation requires a time and resource commitment from European and national state institutions in partnership with civil society organisations. Targeted equality policies such as those recommended by the *National Women's Strategy* (2007-2016) and specific European measures such as the *Equality for Women Measure* (2008-2013) are important mechanisms for advancing change. An awareness for those spaces in which equality initiatives are possible, despite financial constraints, combined with a shift towards and respect for egalitarian, democratic, solidary power relations is also required for change. Invigorated by a belief in optimistic, emancipatory collective action, while recognizing diverse criteria for 'success' is another element in the social and political force for transformation. But at the heart of this process is a recognition that locally based support systems, responsive to needs, informed by community development values and principles (social inclusion, collaboration, collective action) are mediating entities in the translation of equality policy into equality actions for women.

Since the 1980s and earlier, participation in locally based, adult education and training courses, combined with the 1990 EC *New Opportunities for Women* programme, enabled women to progress from unaccredited to accredited education, attain much needed training and qualifications and expand job opportunities. Personal development, assertiveness and technical skills training with local access to education courses were signatures of these programmes. These elements are continued in the current projects funded by the *Equality for Women Measure* (2008-2013). Projects in *Equality for Women Measure Strand 1* (Access to Employment) are women-centered and founded on positive action support for sometimes 'vulnerable' women, to facilitate access to education, training and employment. Housed in the premises of the

*Roscommon Women's Network*, the W.I.N.D.O.W project (women initiating development opportunities for women) is an outstanding example of an equality action that has transformed women's lives. Of the 159 women participants in the W.I.N.D.O.W project, 128 women became involved in education and 31 women successfully gained paid employment. This report presents empirical and narrative evidence, not only of the impressive achievements and accomplishments of project workers and participants, but also allows us to reflect on the working ethos, relations and actions that support women's empowerment. A combination of personal, communal and social factors enable us to change the conditions of our lives; to some extent we have to free ourselves of inner restraints, impediments, 'hindrances' or fear of change and develop the trust and confidence to work in solidarity with others to overcome external, structural constraints. The capacity to act, the power to make choices, despite restrictions, comes close to an understanding of empowerment that is clearly evident in the working ethos of the W.I.N.D.O.W project. The project was designed in partnership with women who were isolated, unemployed, who lacked confidence, skills and training but who on their own initiative or following the recommendation of a doctor, social worker, counselor or friend, took the first step, and contacted the *Roscommon Women's Network*. The importance of creating an inclusive, 'non-judgmental safe space' where women can work at their own pace in a friendly environment allowed a sense of belonging and friendships to emerge. Care and nurture are not often explicitly associated with equality actions in the public sphere of paid work; this project is a testament to the importance of actively nurturing women participants, giving space to women's voices, facilitating peer encouragement, one-to-one mentoring, matching ambitions to opportunities, providing sustained group support from those with the skills and resources to encourage others in the process of change, while instilling high levels of motivation 'to keep going', despite set backs. Care work is implicated in the successful delivery of equality actions, as outlined in this report.

The W.I.N.D.O.W project gains from the excellent reputation of *Roscommon Women's Network* as a highly proficient and competent community development organization, with extensive network relations with other NGOs and state agencies. This enabled a sustained and stepped approach to informing, directing and orienting participants to relevant courses and opportunities, firstly provided from within the

drop-in center and gradually extended to the local and wider geographical area. The systematic and informed approach of the project coordinator and out reach worker acted to affirm women's talents and ambitions; importantly women's progression was attentively monitored and support offered at every stage of the transition into education, training and employment. The quality of working relationships in the W.I.N.D.O.W project is impressive, as is how women speak about the effect of the project on their lives and the lives of others. Threaded through the conversations about the project is a note of joy, a sense of achievement, of affirmation and pleasure. The impact of the project can be understood through women's words as they relay stories of dignity, courage, respect, a new sense of self-worth, confidence, initiative and hope. This report gathers together the many strands of what is needed in order for change to happen; I encourage you to read it. In documenting the processes, practices and actions of the W.I.N.D.O.W project, the history of what has been done is carefully recounted. Convincing evidence for a practice model for future work in which inclusion, care and a nurturing space are core to equality actions, are also outlined in this report. It is clear that much more can be achieved with the appointment of a fulltime development worker post for this gender specific initiative and by giving your support for the continuation of the W.I.N.D.O.W project via further *Equality for Women* or similar measures. This project demonstrates unequivocally what is possible; the continuation of this project with expanded resources is essential to achieve the EU measures for *Equality for Women*.