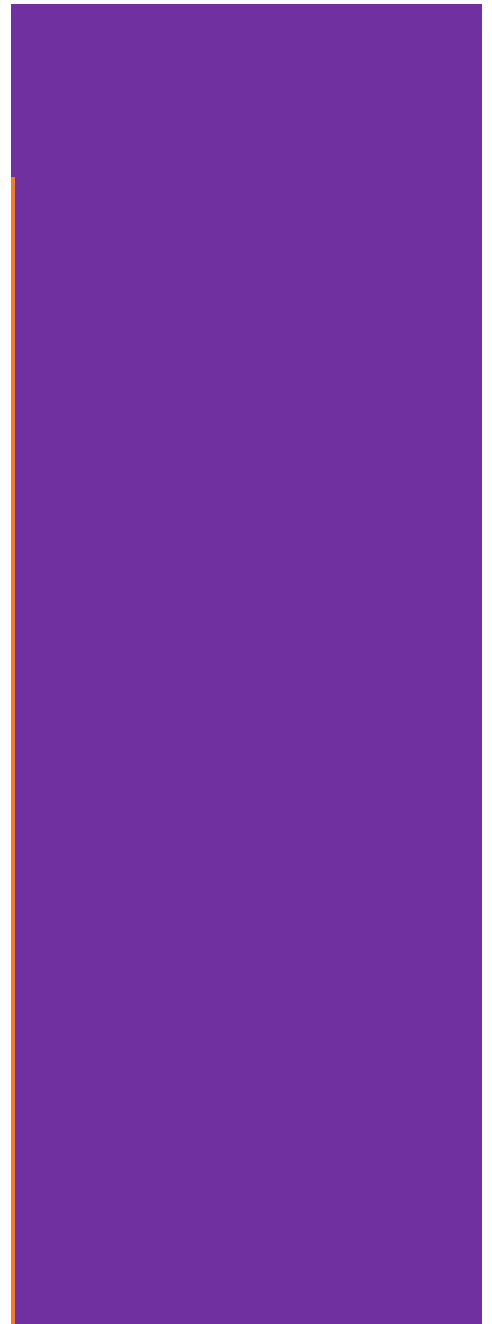




ANNUAL TRUSTEE REPORT

April 2023-March 2024



Chairperson's Report

NIRWN has had a very successful year of delivery and development; our membership has continued to grow and we have delivered strategic, infrastructure support and programming for rural women across every council area in our region. We have supported new rural women's groups to our membership and we have welcomed new funders who have chosen to invest in the work of NIRWN to help us to increase and diversify what we can deliver for rural women.

NIRWN has supported our NI Executive Ministers and Departments to take account of rural need through participation in co design processes; responding to public consultations, feeding into research reports, hosting focus groups, participating in All Party Groups, making representation to Ministers and Committees and supporting rural women to meet directly with decision makers.

Our policy and representation role on behalf of rural women extends beyond the NI Executive and this year our Director made representation to Dublin, Westminster and Brussels. We worked collectively with our civic society colleagues on a UK, four nation basis to ensure the real lived experiences of women living rurally and along our border regions is communicated to those with the power to make adjustments post EU Exit. Our Director represented rural women in Cardiff at the Four Nations Civil Society Conference 'Strengthening Civil Society Impact on Westminster in the Years Ahead: sharing insights from across the UK'. We worked with our civic society colleagues in the Republic of Ireland on projects with Women's Collective Ireland, Longford Women's Link and The National Women's Council of Ireland to support rural women in our region and ensure their voices are heard in all the decision-making spaces. Our policy and representation work reflects our unique experiences across these islands and we work North-South, East-West and beyond to develop and foster relationships and communication.

An exciting highlight for this year was a study visit to Iceland. Through a Social Change Initiative Fellowship NIRWN was able to conduct a research visit to Iceland. Iceland has consistently been number one in the OECD (The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development) for Gender Equality and as a small, rural isolated nation like our own we wanted to learn more about how they achieved this and more importantly, how they have maintained this. We were seeking to learn lessons that could be shared with the NI Executive and wider to improve our performance and accelerate our journey towards Gender Equality becoming a lived reality in our region. Our findings will be developed into a research report.

Our core delivery; responding to and providing membership support, through policy and research; representation; co-ordinating training for members, providing information and signposting; organising focus groups etc has continued. We are grateful for the core investment from The Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust and The Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs through the Department of Communities, which allows us to ensure this never wavers and permits us to be responsive to need and to look up and out to lever in additional resource and support to meet emerging need.

Collaboration is key to ensuring equitable delivery for women in rural areas and as the only regional rural women's network in Europe NIRWN has continued to lead on the rural element of a number of partnership and consortia programming to ensure access for rural women. This year saw our pilot partnership project '[Women Breaking Barriers](#)' achieve a two-year investment through the UK Shared Prosperity Fund. In real terms this was a huge investment in bespoke education, training and employment support for economically inactive women across the region. 48% of the beneficiaries will be rural women and this part of the project will be led by NIRWN and a rural team.

Our '[Women's Spaces](#)' partnership project launched last year has now developed and has delivered a variety of training and opportunities to strengthen rural women's capacity to take their rightful place as leaders in society. The programme is shaped by the women who participate and as such delivers a unique experience to develop women's role in peacebuilding in our region which is a core value of NIRWN.

NIRWN continues to work in partnership within the [Women's Regional Consortium](#) to ensure that rurally isolated women receive strategic support. We continue our partnership work on [Raise Your Voice](#) to tackle Sexual Harassment. This year has involved very intensive work by NIRWN and a co design team together with The Executive Office on a much-needed Strategic Framework to End Violence Against Women and Girls. Our role

was to ensure the experiences of rural women e.g. being so much further from service support is reflected in the Framework.

As Co Design partners with The Community Foundation for NI in '[Nothing About Us Without Us](#)', we worked with our membership and others to lobby for a Women's Health Strategy in NI through events, surveys and bringing rural women to Parliament Buildings to speak to MLAs.

We have continued to develop new work and opportunities with and for our membership. We have been piloting our 'Breathing Spaces' project with the Heritage Lottery NI; exploring how we can utilise our heritage spaces to build both community cohesion and explore the outside spaces to enhance our health and wellness.

NIRWN launched our 'Pride in Place' rural arts project through support from the Arts Council NI and The National Lottery NI REAP Project. The project aims to showcase the best of what living rurally means to our membership and supported the delivery of craft and arts skills delivered by qualified rural arts practitioners.

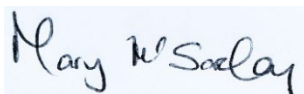
Through the PHA Clear Project NIRWN secured resources to deliver our 4 week 'Menopause and Me' Programme which covers topics such as symptoms and diagnosis, treatments including alternative and holistic therapies, nutrition and exercise and also coping techniques for managing symptoms and was developed in direct response to members expressing the need for this support and a clear gap in accessible provision rurally.

NIRWN was thrilled to receive a surprise investment on #GivingTuesday in November 2023. #GivingTuesday is a day of global giving created in 2012 as a simple idea: a day that encourages people to do good. Over the last decade, this idea has grown into a global movement that inspires millions of people to give, collaborate, and celebrate generosity. The Murlough Foundation selected NIRWN to make a donation to via Community Foundation NI. The donation was specifically to address social isolation and enhance digital skills for rural women.

This really does exemplify the success of NIRWN in ensuring rural women are visible, influential and valued that a Fund selected us as the right organisation to ensure their gift would reach the grassroots rural women they wanted it to reach and we would provide the quality delivery needed.

There have been many achievements this year and our Vision, Mission and Strategic Plan together with our annual Membership Survey provide a sound basis for ensuring we continue to grow and deliver without experiencing mission drift. As a membership organisation our activities are always informed by our members, and our performance is reflected in a membership that continues to grow year on year with a 34% increase since April 2022.

Mary Mc Sorley

A handwritten signature in black ink on a light blue rectangular background. The signature reads "Mary Mc Sorley" in a cursive script.

NIRWN Chairperson

Object 1:

To promote the efficiency and effectiveness of rural women's organisations and projects in the area by providing advice, information, education and training, and practical support to such organisations and projects for the benefit of the public

Communication

NIRWN continues to communicate with our membership via a variety of social media channels. YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, Twitter/X and Bluesky.

We maintain our website and in addition to our NIRWN Ezine, we input into and share a dedicated Women's Spaces Ezine and Women's Regional Consortium Ezine and Policy and Lobbying Ezine.

International Women's Day 2024/ Women Breaking Barriers Celebration Event

We celebrated Year one participants' achievements at our International Women's Day event in the Glenavon House Hotel, Cookstown on 7th March 2024.

NIRWN has supported over 187 women through tailored education and support to overcome barriers to employment and education. As well as celebrating, those in attendance participated in facilitated workshops and development sessions and lots of craic and learning was had by all.

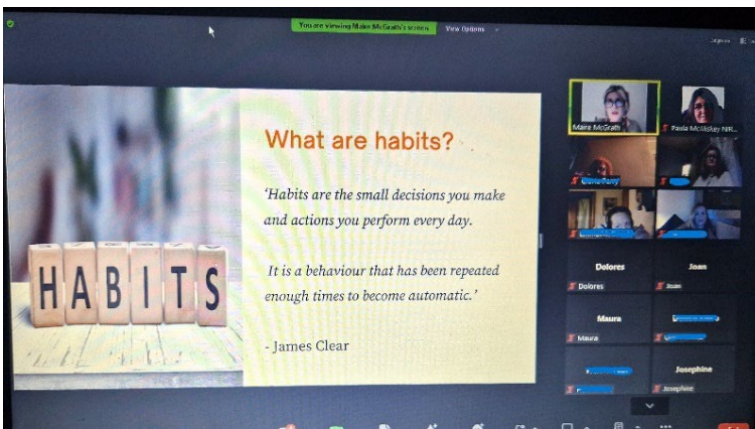
One of the key things about International Women's Day is making connections and it is a key feature of our Women Breaking Barriers NI programme.



New Beginnings Wellbeing Workshops

In January 2024 we hosted two online workshops for our members to help kick start the new year. We know from our annual survey that our membership find this time of year particularly challenging so we designed with the facilitator; Máire McGrath from Future Spark Coaching two bespoke workshops *January Blues Buster* followed by *January Jumpstart* workshop.

The workshops were brimming with positivity and peer support, together with professional tips and practical techniques on building new habits and staying focussed on what you personally want for yourself in 2024.



One participant remarked:

"I really enjoyed the session, so much appreciated. Feeling very motivated and just the boost I needed"

Digital Skills Training

It is NIRWN's role is to respond to our members' needs and we were able to source some digital skills training for some of our women's groups, particularly for our older members.

Centralisation of support services has impacted communities locally and has exacerbated social isolation. The removal of regular meeting points, the Post Office or the bank which provided both a reason to leave the house and often a structure and social occasion

Access to online services is a necessity these days and there is an assumption by decision makers that everyone is computer literate and in receipt of an internet connection....not so in rural areas.



Women Breaking Barriers: April 2023- March 2024

Women Breaking Barriers had over 150 participants registered in its first year. We had a wide variety of training opportunities on offer with over 20 choices including GOALS, Introduction to Holistic Therapies, Mental Health Awareness and Makaton.

Makaton Training

Our Level 1 in Makaton was very popular with demand remaining high throughout the year. Limavady Hen's Shed and Ausome Kids, Cookstown are some of our recipients of the Makaton Level 1. The feedback we received from this highlighted how important this was to women in their lives both personally and professionally.

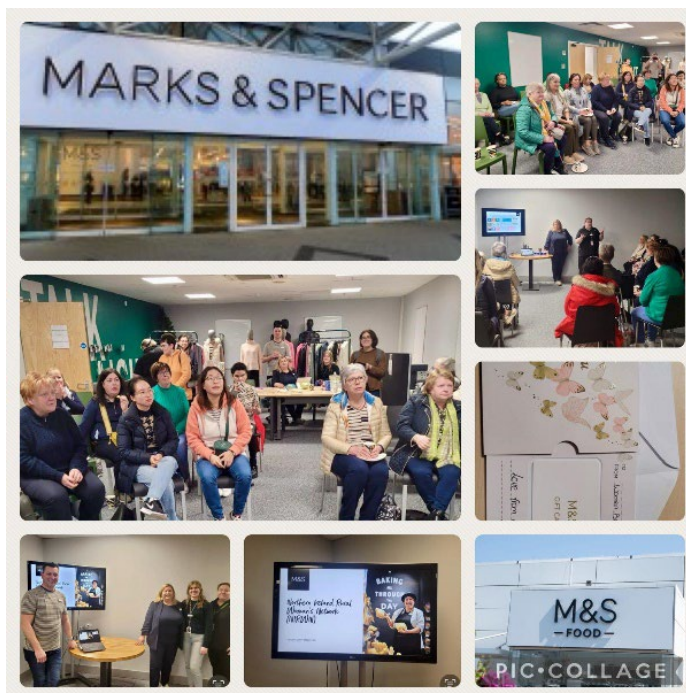


Workplace Collaborations

Women Breaking Barriers rural team worked in collaboration with Marks and Spencer to facilitate a visit to their largest store in Northern Ireland in Sprucefield.

The women were given detailed presentations by key Marks and Spencer staff, as well as opportunities to learn about the variety of flexible options for employment with the company.

The women were given a tour of the facilities and operations also. Women who attended reported increased awareness of the flexibility that employers can provide and that they were more confident about applying for jobs and talking to employers about options.



Wraparound Support

Women Breaking Barriers has provided holistic and tailored wraparound support to any participant who wanted it. This has included emergency support, employability support, help in accessing specialist supports, and one-to-one support. Over 80 women requested and accessed this wraparound support in the first year of our programme, with the majority accessing this several times rather than just once. The feedback we received about this support is that it has been crucial in the confidence building process for women and vital for their personal growth.

Menopause & Me Programme

NIRWN delivered our Menopause & Me Programme to rural women in the Western, Southern and South Eastern Trust areas in Winter 23/24, with funding received from the PHA Clear Project. Our bespoke four-week programme was delivered to women both online and in their local community based settings.

Feedback from participants included: *“The course helped me to realise why I was feeling the way I did and how to cope with it”* and *“Extremely helpful programme. Should be available to all women especially in rural areas”*



Rural Engagement Arts Programme

Sandholes Women's Group was the first beneficiary of our Rural Engagement Arts Programme.

Artist Andrea Hayes led the participants in the art of decoupage, and everyone had the opportunity to decoupage three projects; a medium and small bag and a small heated plaque.



Bauble Making Workshop

Thanks to the Arts Council Rural Arts Engagement Programme funding, NIRWN was able to offer a localised craft making class to The Village Group, Armagh in December 2023. This activity was carried out by the wonderful artist Gwen Stevenson who taught the women the art of felting. A very enjoyable activity, which many of the women found quite therapeutic.

It was great to come together during the cold winters nights to carry out this crafting activity and all of the women brought home their baubles to hang proudly on their Christmas trees.



Walks Programme

During the summer months a lot of our rural member groups don't meet so to address the gap we elected to offer a series of walks in some of our lovely forest parks to address social isolation.



We were lucky with 'mostly' great weather and company at the beautiful scenic venues of Lurgan Park, Drum Manor Forest, Portglenone Forest and finally Gosford Forest for our 'Women Lets Walk' series; showcasing the best of the DAERA Forestry Estate and wider. Over 80 women participated. Feedback has been very positive and for some women this was the first time they had made some time for themselves!

Breast, Cervical and Bowel Screening Awareness Programme

Our Engagement Officer Paula has supported several of our member groups with Breast Screening awareness training in conjunction with WRDA's Breast, Cervical and Bowel Awareness screening programme.

Saval Women's group in Co Down and Sandholes Women's group in Co Tyrone were just two of our member groups who participated in this training.



Object 2:

To raise awareness among the general public and provide representation to policymakers of the needs and experiences of rural women in the area of benefit

'The Big Quilt'

Our Big Quilt Rural Arts Project aims to showcase the best of what living rurally means to our membership. Textile artist Bridget Nugent guided members through the skills, supporting them to bring their ideas to life.

When complete the Big Quilt will be a resource for our member Groups to bring to parades and events such as; International Women's Day March and Pride so rural women can feel they are represented and an integral part of bigger movements. When not out and about it will be on display in our NIRWN HQ.



Women, Unpaid Caring and Employment Report Launched

Paula and Ciara attended the launch of the Women, Unpaid Caring and Employment report on 27th February in Belfast. NIRWN hosted a rural focus group with our members and Siobhán Harding; Policy & Research Coordinator WSN which contributed to the findings in the report. #This quote contained in the report highlights the specific barriers faced by rural women:

"In rural areas you have to travel so much further to even drop things to someone or if you have to drive them in or collect them from school. There's that extra time. I find it really difficult to balance time"



NIRWN at the Balmoral Show

We were supported by our friends at South Tyrone Empowerment Programme (STEP) to share their information tent at The Balmoral Show on Wednesday 10th May 2023.

Paula and Teresa from NIRWN and Jonna from Women's Spaces hosted an information stand and it was a great opportunity to showcase what we have to offer rural women and rural women's groups.



Object 3:

To promote or assist in promoting cooperation and networking between women's organisations in the area of benefit for information exchange and policy consultation

NAUWU Project

NIRWN partnered with CFNI (Community Foundation NI) and other women's sector organisations to work on the 'Nothing About Us without Us, events and development of a women's health survey during this period. Being part of the advisory group for this innovative programme was a privilege where we engaged with our partners on a number of planning days, ensuring we met the needs of rural women and our members. We assisted with the development of the women's health survey which was distributed regionally to our members and through all our social media channels. We actively involved ourselves in the planning and rollout of a substantial event which took place in Ballymena and had over 150 people in attendance. Two of our staff members, Louise Coyle and Charmain Jones spoke at this event and post event and both were instrumental in the proofing of the final report and its dissemination again rurally to women across the region.



Health, Wellbeing and Self-care Event

In recognition that lobbying and policy work together with sharing your personal experiences can take a toll on you personally; we hosted a health, wellbeing and self-care event for some of our NAUWU participants'.



To support women to be vocal and visible we wish to embed a holistic approach to prevent burn out.

All-Island Women's Forum

NIRWN has been a member of the All-Island Women's Forum, led by the National Women's Council of Ireland since it was set up in July 2021 and collaborative work continued through this year. Facilitated by the National Women's Council (NWC), the All-Island Women's Forum aims to address underrepresentation of women and further develop women's role in peacebuilding and civic society.

The Forum meets several times a year to support the building of sustainable North-South links, providing a space for marginalized communities and promoting better understanding and inter-community links on issues of common concern.



Weaving All Island Connections Project

The Women's Collective Ireland (WCI) Community Grassroots Weaving All Island Connections Project was delivered in partnership with NIRWN and Shankill Women's Centre, with funding from DFAT. The purpose of the Project was to engage, connect and create opportunities for grassroots women from across the Island, rural, urban and border communities and from different social, economic and cultural backgrounds to come together to share skills, life experiences, challenge their perceptions of each other and increase their knowledge and mutual understanding.



There were six online discussion and connecting workshops which resulted in zines produced for each group pairing which were displayed at a final residential event in The Carrickdale Hotel, Dundalk.

The groups connected were from South Kerry & Portglenone, North Leitrim & Women of Clonduff (Hilltown) and Ronanstown (Dublin) & Shankill Women's Centre.

The Project was a great success and long lasting friendships and connections have been made. We hope to participate in more of these projects, with opportunities for our members to engage with groups from across the border.

International Day of Rural Women 2023

We celebrated our International Day of Rural Women 2023 'Visible, Influential and Valued' at the Tullyglass Hotel, Ballymena on Wednesday 11th October with over 100 women in attendance.

Sincere thanks to those who attended, the Contributors on the day and those who hosted the Information Stands. "Alone we can do so little; together we can do so much." – Helen Keller.

The day was nothing short of inspirational and we have received great feedback from the event.



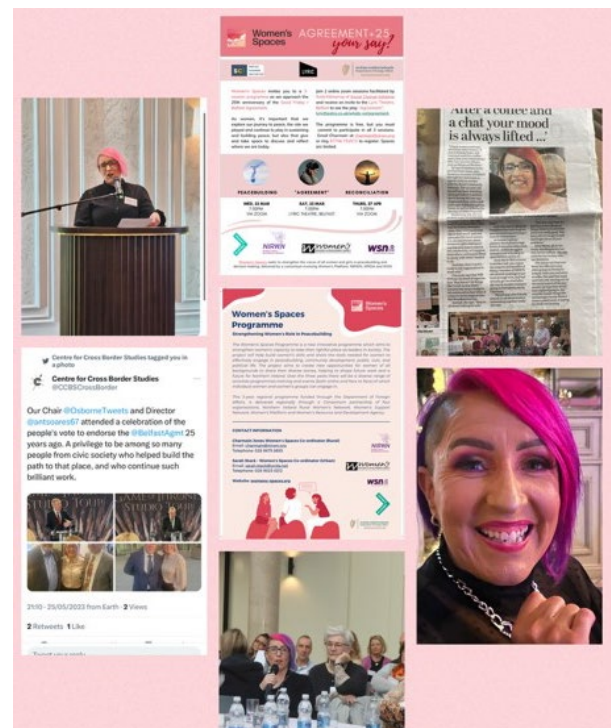
Object 4:

To promote the participation of rural women in decision making amongst public bodies in the area of benefit

Women's Spaces

Women in Northern Ireland continue to be sidelined in peace building. Women are also underrepresented in public life, with very limited increase in women's representation in recent years and women's views rarely included in policy and decision making. Women's Spaces is a three year project designed to begin changing these long standing challenges. Women's Spaces is an innovative programme strengthening women's capacity to take their rightful place as leaders in society. The project builds women's skills and shares tools needed to engage effectively in peacebuilding, community development and public life, and aims to create new opportunities for women of all backgrounds to share their stories to shape future work and a future Northern Ireland.

Delivery of the project is led by WRDA and NIRWN, building on extensive experience of working with grassroots women and communities. WSN assists with



identifying and engaging participants, and Women's Platform contributes to capacity building, while also acting as overall coordinator and focal point for the programme.

This dynamic and progressive team; led in NIRWN by our Women's Spaces Coordinator Charmain Jones has a long established successful proven track record in engaging with hard-to-reach women in divided and marginalised communities regionally and also has developed strong advocacy models and structures with policy and decision makers through collaboration, partnership and support of the existing women's sector infrastructure in NI. This is a [link](#) to a review of our first year of delivery.

Work this year included a focus on the Good Friday Agreement +25; Preparation and information on voting pre-election alongside core activities such as our bespoke 'Where are the Women?' workshops. The Project is supported by The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade Ireland.

Brussels Delegation

Supported by the UK Mission to the EU (part of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office) as part of their public diplomacy plans our Director, Louise Coyle was invited to participate in a two-day event in Brussels centred on women, peacebuilding and the NI Protocol.

The event was keen to reflect on and raise the profile of women in the NI peace process (particularly in the run-up to the anniversary of the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement) and create a forum for women to share their perspectives on the Northern Ireland Protocol with key stakeholders in Brussels.

This was coordinated in NI by our colleagues Women's Platform.



Civic Initiative

NIRWN supported rural women to engage in The Civic Initiative. The Civic Initiative is a new participatory democracy platform launched in 2023 during the 25th anniversary year of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement. The participatory democracy platform brings together a wide range of civic society groups, academics and community workers to create an inclusive space for deliberative discussions on key socio-economic and cultural rights with a focus on the principles and commitments outlined in the Section of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement covering – Rights, Safeguards and Equality of Opportunity.

The platform has actioned a four-stage community-led process to examine key issues and practical solutions:
Stage 1: Regional Forums and workshops across Northern Ireland and border areas

civic initiative

Regional People's Forum

The Civic Initiative, in partnership with Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network, and TADA Rural Support Network, invites you to a discussion on key issues impacting society, including areas such as education, healthcare, poverty, political institutions and more.

This citizen-led facilitated conversation will be guided by the framework of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement.

The event will last approximately three hours. Refreshments will be provided.

Saturday, November 11th / 9:30am
Armagh City Hotel
&
Wednesday, November 22nd / 5:30pm
Canal Court Hotel Newry

Participants in Co. Armagh, Co. Monaghan, Co. Louth, and South Down are encouraged to register.

Register via Eventbrite.

Stage 2: Submissions from experts and wider society
Stage 3: A large-scale People's Forum of 100 randomly selected citizens

Stage 4: Recommendations from citizens

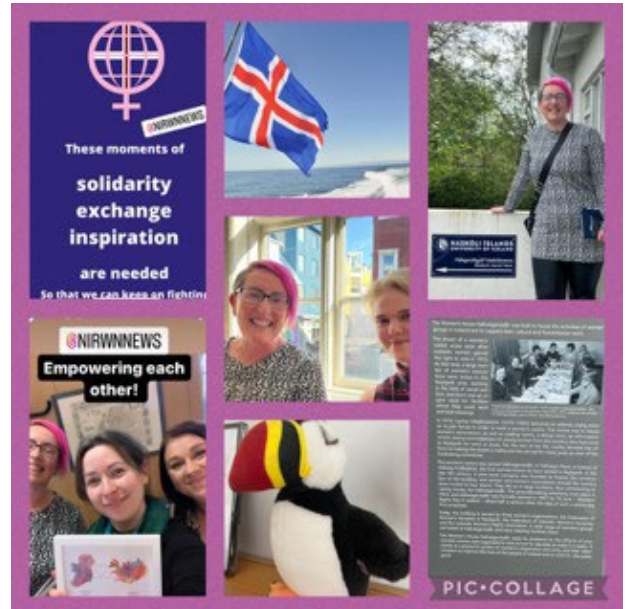
It is our view that it is vital that rural women are provided the opportunity to have their voices heard in all spaces in this post conflict environment.



Iceland Study Visit

An exciting highlight for this year was a study visit to Iceland. Through a Social Change Initiative Fellowship NIRWN was able to conduct a research visit to Iceland. Iceland has consistently been number in in the OECD for Gender Equality and as a small, rural isolated nation like our own we wanted to learn more about how they achieved this and more importantly, how have the maintained this. We were seeking to learn lessons we could learn and apply to help make the future of NI a more equal and inclusive one. We know there is a strong correlation between gender equality and sustained peace - gender equality is a better predictor of peace than GDP.

We met with women at all levels of society in Iceland from the Prime Minister and UN Women to the university feminist society and migrant womens network to learn how gender equality is experienced, supported, maintained and developed from their perspective. We will be developing a report to be shared with the NI Executive and wider to improve our performance and accelerate our journey towards Gender Equality becoming a lived reality in our region. Our findings will be developed into a research report.



Globally, Iceland leads the way as the most gender-equal country, demonstrating what is possible when structural equality is prioritised.

Gender Budgeting Workshop

Our Engagement Officer Paula co-ordinated the delivery of a Gender Budgeting Workshop with Ulster University and NI Women's Budget Group in June 2023 for our members to discuss the importance of Gender Budgeting and how it affects their lives.

Scrutinising budgets on how taxpayer's money is spent and the differential impacts on women and men was discussed with members in the NIRWN boardroom and also via zoom. This was an opportunity to upskill members on how budget decisions impact gender equality.



Ending Violence Against Women & Girls Focus Group

In addition to dedicating NIRWN staff and Trustee time to The Executive Office Co Design Group on developing a new Strategic Framework to End Violence Against Women & Girls (EVAWG), NIRWN hosted an online Focus Group in September 23 for The Executive Office on the new Strategic Framework on Ending Violence Against Women & Girls (EVAWG). This draft Strategic Framework is a long-term plan to tackle this challenging and deep-rooted issue facing our society today. The Focus Group was well attended and it was a great opportunity for rural women to express their views and opinions on this important subject which does have specific rural aspects and solutions particularly due to access poverty and proximity to resources and support.

People and Place Review

People and Place – A Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal was launched in June 2003. It was aimed at targeting those communities in Northern Ireland suffering the highest levels of deprivation by bringing together the work of all Government Departments in partnership with local people to tackle disadvantage.

NIRWN hosted a focus group in June to hear our members views on this subject. This was a hybrid event conducted both online and in our offices in Cookstown.

The image is a screenshot of a Zoom meeting. On the left, a presentation slide is displayed with the following content:

- Discussion point**
- Do you agree or disagree with our vision below?
- VISION**
- A changed society where women and girls are free from all forms of gender-based violence, abuse and harm including the attitudes, systems and structural inequalities that cause them
- Executive Office logo

On the right, a grid of video thumbnails shows participants: Geraldine Fee EVAWG, Paula McAliskey, Jane McCarthy EVAWG, Clare EVAWG, Karen Kelly, Jane, Frances Kerr, eilis devlin, Frances Kerr, Carol Smyth, and Patricia.

On the far right, a 'Meeting Chat' window is open, showing a conversation:

- you end now Patricia? If you're using a laptop or computer, the F6 button will turn the volume up
- Apologies
- Carol Smyth to Everyone 19:17
- Totally Agree.
- eilis devlin to Everyone 19:18
- agree
- Karen Kelly to Everyone 19:18
- Most definitely agree
- Jane to Everyone 19:18
- Yes I agree with that vision
- Jackie to Everyone 19:20
- Totally agree. I also agree with Paula regarding is it an achievable goal?

At the bottom of the chat window, there is a 'To:' dropdown menu set to 'Everyone' and a text input field with the placeholder 'Type message here...'.

Financial Statement as per Annual Accounts 2023-2024

Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network (NIRWN)

Company Limited by Guarantee

Statement of Financial Activities (including income and expenditure account)

Year ended 31 March 2024

		2024		2023
	Note	Restricted funds £	Total funds £	Total funds £
Income and endowments				
Donations and legacies	5	–	–	831
Charitable activities	6	289,605	289,605	203,289
Total income		289,605	289,605	204,120
Expenditure				
Expenditure on charitable activities	7,8	271,509	271,509	221,120
Total expenditure		271,509	271,509	221,120
Net income/(expenditure) and net movement in funds		18,096	18,096	(17,000)
Reconciliation of funds				
Total funds brought forward		1,903	1,903	18,904
Total funds carried forward		19,999	19,999	1,904

The statement of financial activities includes all gains and losses recognised in the year. All income and expenditure derive from continuing activities.