



Engagement



Women's Regional
Consortium

**Quarterly Zine
July-September
2026**



INTRODUCING OUR QUARTERLY ZINE ENGAGEMENT EDITION

By Megan McClure | WRDA

Several pieces in this Zine reflect on the vitalness of engagement.

The piece from NIRWN reflects on how engagement cuts across all areas of the Network's activities. WRDA's Mas project has engaged with lived experience experts to develop a new Framework for Engaging with Lived Experience. Finally Women's Centre Derry discusses the barriers women face to having our voices heard.

We hope you find the information contained in this edition useful as we continue to ensure a voice for women from disadvantaged and rural areas.

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ENGAGING RURAL WOMEN: BUILDING PARTICIPATION, INCLUSION AND BELONGING

Paula McAliskey | NI Rural Womens Network

As a regional, membership-based organisation established in 2006 to promote and support rural women, demonstrates how engagement remains at the heart of everything NI Rural Women's Network does. Through regular contact with our 600+ members, we continue to listen to the experiences of rural women, identify emerging challenges, and create opportunities for women to connect, participate and influence decisions that affect their lives.

Programmes

Our engagement work during 2026 supported rural women right across Northern Ireland, delivering activities and programmes across a broad geographical area from Whitecross in County Armagh to Lisnakea in County Fermanagh, ensuring women in even the most rural communities could access support, learning and opportunities to participate. Through a blended approach combining online and face-to-face delivery, NIRWN has continued to reduce barriers associated with distance, transport and caring responsibilities.



Some of our bespoke training programmes in 2026 included Community Advocates for Women's Workplace Wellness equipping women with the skills and confidence to advocate for women's health and wellbeing in the workplace. We also delivered a cross-border Women's Cross Connections Programme bringing together women from Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland to build relationships, share experiences and develop greater understanding through workshops and residential activities. Our Rise & Shine Programme supported women's community empowerment and leadership development. Alongside these initiatives, we continued to provide digital skills training, networking opportunities and creative learning programmes that strengthen confidence, resilience and community participation.

Activities

Engagement activity included visits to women's groups and community organisations, information sessions, consultations, networking opportunities and wellbeing-focused events. A significant element of our work this year

centred on promoting good relations, peacebuilding and cross-community engagement, creating safe and welcoming spaces where women from different backgrounds could come together, build relationships and explore shared experiences. Cross-border collaboration similarly enabled women to broaden their networks, challenge perceptions and strengthen mutual understanding across communities and jurisdictions.

Following the riots and civil unrest experienced in June, NIRWN responded quickly to emerging needs by providing bespoke wellbeing support for rural women and for those working directly with affected citizens and communities.

Through facilitated discussions, peer support opportunities and tailored wellbeing interventions, women were equipped with practical tools and emotional support to help manage the impact of these challenging circumstances and strengthen community resilience.

Our commitment to inclusion was further demonstrated through an arts-based project with Traveller women, providing a creative and supportive environment where participants could share stories, celebrate culture and build connections. The project encourages participation from a community whose voices are often underrepresented, helping to foster greater understanding, visibility and inclusion.

Partnerships

Engagement with partner organisations remains central to increasing awareness and improving access to support for our members. NIRWN worked alongside community organisations, public bodies, women's groups and specialist providers to share information, host events and connect women with relevant services. Strong partnerships enabled us to extend our reach across rural Northern Ireland, strengthen referral pathways and ensure that rural women could access timely support and opportunities. Through collaborative working, we also helped ensure rural perspectives were reflected in wider policy discussions and community development initiatives.

Outcomes

Through our engagement work, rural women have strengthened connections with one another, expanded their networks and increased their participation in community life. The combination of online and face-to-face engagement has widened access, while targeted support has enabled women to overcome barriers to participation and develop greater confidence in sharing their experiences and perspectives.

Our focus on cross-community and cross-border engagement has helped build relationships across traditional divides and contributed to peacebuilding and good relations outcomes. Wellbeing interventions have supported women and communities in responding to challenging events, while inclusive projects have ensured that underrepresented voices are heard and valued. Collectively, these activities have improved signposting, promoted peer learning, strengthened community resilience and cultivated a stronger sense of belonging amongst rural women across Northern Ireland.

Throughout 2026, NIRWN has prioritised meaningful engagement by connecting rural women with one another, with practical support and with opportunities to help shape change. By fostering active participation, inclusion and belonging, we continue to work towards a society where rural women are visible, influential and valued.



ENGAGEMENT THAT CREATES CHANGE: LAUNCHING THE FRAMEWORK FOR ENGAGING WITH LIVED EXPERIENCE

By Megan McClure | WRDA

At the heart of meaningful engagement is a simple but powerful principle: people who are directly affected by policies, services and systems should have a voice in shaping them. For the Women's Regional Consortium (WRC), this belief underpins much of our work, and nowhere is it more evident than in the work of the Maternal Advocacy and Support (Mas) Project. Led by Consortium Partner, the Women's Resource and Development Agency (WRDA), the Mas Project supports women experiencing maternal mental health challenges through peer support and advocacy. Through this work we have been privileged to be the custodians of women's experiences of navigating pregnancy, motherhood and mental health challenges, and also their insights on how services can be improved for others.

It is from these experiences that the new *Framework for Engaging with Lived Experience* has been developed.

Moving Beyond Consultation

The Framework was co-produced by women with lived experience of maternal mental health challenges, Mas Project staff, and supported by a Clinical Psychologist. It recognises that the women on the project are not simply service users or beneficiaries. They are experts by experience, bringing knowledge, wisdom and insight that are essential to building better services and policies.

Too often, engagement can become a tick-box exercise where people are invited to share deeply personal experiences without being given adequate support or recognition. The Framework challenges this approach. Instead, it sets out clear standards for organisations seeking to involve women with lived experience in research, policy development, service design and public awareness work.

Central to the Framework is a commitment to trauma-informed practice. While sharing personal experiences can be empowering, it can also expose individuals to vulnerability and reawaken difficult emotions. Organisations therefore have a responsibility to ensure that engagement is ethical, respectful and genuinely meaningful.

“Even if you have told your story before, it can be different each time and new things can come up for you in your healing journey, it can also depend on what’s going on in your life at the time.”

Mas Project participant and lived experience expert

What Meaningful Engagement Looks Like

The Framework outlines practical guidance for organisations that seek to engage with lived experience testimony. This includes being clear about the purpose of participation, providing information in advance, offering emotional support and debriefing opportunities, and ensuring that women retain control over how their stories are shared.

Importantly, the Framework also highlights the need to remove barriers to participation. Childcare, travel expenses, accessible meeting times and adequate notice are not optional extras. They are essential components of inclusive engagement, particularly for women in the perinatal period.

Women involved in developing the Framework were clear that engagement should lead to action. They emphasised the importance of feedback and accountability from organisations. Knowing how lived experience has influenced decisions, secured funding or improved services can be deeply validating and helps ensure that participation is valued rather than tokenistic.

A Framework for the Future



As the WRDA continues to champion women's voices across Northern Ireland, the launch of the Framework for Engaging with Lived Experience represents an important contribution to how organisations think about engagement.

At its core, the Framework reminds us that genuine engagement is about more than inviting people to speak. It is about creating the conditions for people to be heard, respected and supported. It is about **recognising lived experience as expertise**, it is about ensuring that when women share their stories, those stories help shape meaningful change.

For the women who contributed to this work, engagement is not simply participation. It is a pathway to stronger services, greater understanding and a more equitable future for all. **We are grateful to all the women who made this Framework possible.** You can download the document from the WRDA website.



CREATING PATHWAYS FOR WOMEN'S VOICES

By Rayna Downey | Women's Centre Derry

For many women across Northern Ireland, meaningful engagement remains difficult. While progress has been made in recognising the importance of women's participation, many of the barriers identified through our work in previous years remain firmly in place.

Women continue to experience obstacles that affect their ability to participate in community life, education, consultations, policy processes and engagement with statutory services. These barriers are often interconnected. Caring responsibilities, financial pressures, lack of childcare, confidence, language, transport, digital exclusion, isolation and previous negative experiences of services can all influence whether a woman feels able to engage.

For some women, simply being invited to participate is not enough. Meaningful engagement requires organisations to understand what may be preventing women from taking part and to create different pathways through which they can become involved. This continues to reinforce an important message from the Women's Regional Consortium: engagement cannot be a one-size-fits-all process.

Persistent Barriers to Engagement

Although every woman's circumstances are different, our engagement continues to highlight recurring challenges. Women remain under-represented in many political, civic and community decision-making spaces. Some women tell us they lack the confidence, knowledge or connections needed to navigate formal systems, consultations and policy processes.

The legacy of conflict is still continuing to affect our communities, while poverty, caring responsibilities and geographical isolation can further restrict women's opportunities to participate. Women experiencing multiple disadvantages can face several barriers simultaneously. Refugee and asylum-seeking women may experience additional challenges including language barriers, unfamiliarity with local systems and services, social isolation, limited support networks and the challenges of establishing themselves and their families within a new community. Recognising these intersecting barriers is essential. Providing everyone with the same opportunity to engage does not necessarily provide everyone with an equal opportunity to participate.

Engagement starts with Relationships

One of the strongest lessons from our work continues to be that meaningful engagement is built through relationships and trust. Women may not initially engage with a service because they want to participate in a consultation, discuss policy or become involved in advocacy. Their first connection may instead be through a women's centre, a family programme, childcare, a wellbeing activity, practical support or simply having a safe and welcoming place where someone will listen. These first points of contact matter as informal conversations within trusted community settings can identify concerns that may never emerge through a formal consultation. Over time, as relationships develop, women can become more comfortable sharing their experiences, identifying the issues affecting them and recognising the value of their own voice. Our approach therefore recognises engagement as a journey rather than a single event.

Multi-Level Engagement with Asylum Seeking & Refugee Women

This has been particularly evident in our engagement with refugee and asylum-seeking women and their children. Our experience has demonstrated the importance of a multi-level approach, recognising that women will engage in different ways and at different stages.

Engagement can begin at a very practical level: welcoming a woman into a safe space, helping her understand what support is available, addressing language or communication barriers, providing opportunities for her children to participate, or connecting her with appropriate services. From there, engagement can develop through participation in group activities, wellbeing programmes, family activities and community events. These opportunities provide much more than an activity. They help women build relationships, reduce isolation, develop support networks and become familiar with their local community.

As trust and confidence grow, conversations can move beyond immediate needs. Women can begin to share their experiences of accessing services, identify gaps and barriers, discuss the issues affecting their families and contribute their views on what needs to change. This creates several interconnected levels of engagement: **Connection → Participation → Trust → Confidence → Voice → Influence**

Importantly, children's engagement can also provide a valuable bridge to women's engagement. Activities involving children can create a comfortable and accessible first connection with services, while also helping families develop relationships and a greater sense of belonging within their community. This approach recognises that we cannot expect women who may be navigating a new country, new systems, language barriers and significant uncertainty to immediately participate in formal structures. Engagement must meet women where they are and provide opportunities for involvement that can grow with them.

Engagement to Influence

The Women's Regional Consortium continues to work to ensure that women's experiences are not an afterthought in policy development. Through our grassroots relationships with women, women's organisations, community groups, public bodies and organisations across different sectors, we create opportunities for women's experiences to travel from local conversations into wider policy discussions. Tools such as gender-responsive budgeting remain important within this process. Decisions about public spending and service provision have different impacts on women and men, and women's lived experiences should inform how priorities are identified and resources allocated.

Meaningful engagement therefore cannot end when a consultation closes. Women should be able to see how their experiences have informed discussions, influenced priorities and contributed to decisions. Building that feedback loop is essential if organisations want women to continue engaging. Our experience this year reinforces something we have long understood: women do want to engage, but engagement must be accessible, flexible, trusted and relevant to their lives. When we invest in relationships, remove practical barriers and recognise lived experience as expertise, we create more than opportunities for participation. We create pathways through which women who may previously have felt unheard can build confidence, connect with others and have a meaningful voice in the decisions that affect them, their families and their communities.

Women are experts in their own lives. Our role is not simply to collect women's experiences but to create routes through which those experiences can inform wider conversations. This means listening to women in the places where they already feel comfortable, identifying recurring issues and ensuring those experiences are reflected in our engagement with decision-makers, statutory organisations and policy processes. It also means asking a different question. **Rather than asking, "Why aren't women engaging?", organisations need to ask, "What needs to change to make engagement possible for these women?"** That distinction is important, as it moves responsibility away from expecting women to overcome every barrier themselves and towards creating systems and engagement processes that are genuinely accessible to all.

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