WOMEN'S COMMUNITY EDUCATION

QUALITY ASSURANCE FRAMEWORK

PROJECT 2003 - 2005

PROJECT REPORT

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The Quality Assurance Framework Project - An Overview

This project is one of the largest-scale research projects that has been undertaken in women's community education in the twenty-five years since its emergence in urban and rural communities of women around Ireland.

Geographically, it is an all-island project involving women from Fermanagh, Tyrone, Donegal, Clondalkin, Longford and Wexford in its in-depth research and including women from a wider area, including the Greater Dublin area, Cork, Tipperary and Waterford, in its consultation processes. About one hundred women have contributed directly to the research and the development of the project since 2003.

Organisationally it is innovative. Whilst initiated, managed and resourced by AONTAS, it receives its mandate, authority and direction from women's community education groups and Networks – firstly from the National Collective of Community-based Women's Networks in 2004 and subsequently from the women's community education membership of AONTAS in 2005.

The project is unique in its methodology – a practical emancipatory methodology deeply rooted in the principles and practice of women's community education. It was applied over a three-year period across all aspects of the project including one-to-one work, small group work, large group processes and within the Steering Group. It has been proved to be as efficient as it is participative, as effective as it is inclusive.

A key achievement from this methodology is the richness, diversity and inclusivity of the Framework itself. For the first time women's community education has a shared and collective language with which to work. For the first time women's community education can collectively articulate each aspect of its philosophy and practice and as a result of this project can refer those who are unfamiliar with their practice to authoritative documentation.

The learning that has emerged from the project is radical and groundbreaking in that it identifies the contribution of women's community education to three key national policy agendas - lifelong learning, social inclusion and gender equality. It is the integration of lifelong learning with social inclusion and gender equality that distinguishes women's community education and gives it its unique character. Therefore women's community education can confidently claim the right to recognition and resourcing on the grounds of its integrated work across three important fronts.

As the project facilitator I wish to express my sincere appreciation to the project Steering Group for their invaluable guidance, to Berni Brady for her leadership in this process, to the groups and Networks whose work is at the centre of this project – ACCESS 2000, Amerge Women's Group, Clondalkin Women's Network, Donegal Women's Network, Longford Women's Link, Neighbourhood Work of the North West and Second Chance Education Project – to Maria McMullen for her organisational work, to Finola Mc Donnell for her assistance with policy themes and to Niamh O`Reilly, Lorne Patterson, Mary English and Sara Hollwey for their contributions to this report.

Eleanor McClorey
AONTAS Women's Community Education
Quality Assurance Framework Project - November 2005

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 AONTAS and the origins of the Project

AONTAS is the National Association of Adult Education, a voluntary membership organisation. It exists to promote the development of a learning society through the provision of a quality and comprehensive system of adult education which is accessible to and inclusive of all.

AONTAS established the Women's Community Education Quality Assurance Framework Project in 2003 to heighten the visibility of the important work engaged in by its women's group members, to support them to demonstrate the uniqueness of their work and to provide a quality benchmark for it. The need for such a research project emerged from the evaluation of the STANCE programme which highlighted the difficulties experienced by women's groups in making a case for women-specific education.

The project was undertaken within the context of AONTAS commitment to support and resource its women's community education membership in their strategic long-term development as an important part of adult and continuing education provision in Ireland.

1.2 Project Rationale

AONTAS was of the view that the time had come for women's community education to detail its radical and distinctive practice. Such detailing could be relevant on three strategic fronts. Firstly, the process could support the ongoing development and dissemination of quality practice across women's community education groups and Networks. Secondly, such detail of practice could provide the basis from which women's community education developed its own quality assurance process - a process that respected and reflected the uniquely women-centred practice of groups and Networks around the country. Thirdly, such detail would contribute to building a shared language for women's community education nationally and consolidate the sector in its engagement with the statutory sector and with its funders.

The rationale for establishing the AONTAS Women's Community Education Quality Assurance Framework Project was to develop the framework as a resource in the provision of quality practice, in profiling and positioning women's community education and in marking the importance of its contribution to adult and community education in Ireland.

> Community Education has evolved in Ireland in recent years as an ideologically driven, highly innovative and large-scale Adult Education provision consisting mainly of self-directed women's groups. These groups have been central in the defining character of Community Education in Ireland and merit particular recognition for their contribution to date.
> *(Learning For Life: White Paper on Adult Education, 2000)*

1.3 Women's Community Education

Women's community education is a collective education process that supports the empowerment of women and that seeks to address the socio-political aspects of women's experience through collective activism on issues that impact on women's lives.

Women's community education is the organisation by a women's group of education provision that meets group members' identified needs. It is a response, made largely by urban working class and rural women, to address women's social and educational circumstances and needs in ways that mainstream second level and further and higher education has not.

From its origins in the mid-eighties, women's community education has been part of formal and informal adult education and community development networks and alliances. These included alliances with the VEC's adult education organisers, community workers, parish workers, adult educators, community development training organisations, and with AONTAS.

There is however no dedicated funding line for women's community education within the Department of Education and Science. This omission seriously undermines the status of women's community education as a national provider of adult education.

Most women's community education groups that are in receipt of core funding access their resources from the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs in recognition of their contribution to combating social exclusion, and to supporting community development and social cohesion. Core funding has enabled groups to employ specialist women's community education coordinators, administrators and development workers.

In 2004 women's community education groups and Networks established the National Collective of Community-based Women's Networks, also through core funding from the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs, to support their organisation and representation work nationally.

The support under social inclusion whilst important and valued occludes the essential educational and gender-specific focus of women's community education organisations.

1.4 Quality Assurance Framework – defining the term

The Quality Assurance Framework Project aimed to develop a quality assurance framework that could 'quality assure' all the parts of women's community education groups and Networks range of activities and organisation.

A collective definition of the term 'quality assurance framework' was developed during the project.

The term 'quality assurance framework' in the context of women's community education means a system which supports the provision of a distinctive education process that is

confident and assured in its education provision and that is true to the defining features of women's community education.

It means providing a supportive structure for education provision built on the recognition of the positioning of women in Irish society, of the barriers women encounter in access, transfer and progression through education of their choice and of other barriers that prevent women achieving equality.

It means a resource that can be used to systematically ensure a culture of quality across all aspects of women's community education.

1.5 The Stages in the development of the Quality Assurance Framework Project

The Framework project evolved dynamically through a number of stages of activity in the pursuance of its core aim.
The first stage centered on establishing the foundations of the Quality Assurance Framework.
The second stage involved consultation with women's community education networks about the foundations and basic shape of the Framework and its usefulness as a resource.
Networks mandated AONTAS to pursue the development of the Quality Assurance Framework as a resource in the practice of radical and women-centered education.
The project moved to its third stage in which the Framework content was worked out through four case studies with women's community education groups and networks.
The fourth stage was a consultation with the women's community education membership of AONTAS regarding the structure, content and relevance of the emerging Framework.
Representatives of groups and networks confirmed the relevance of the Framework, agreed with its structure and content and mandated AONTAS to pilot the use of the Framework.
The fifth stage of the work involved piloting the use of the Framework with five women's community education groups and networks.
The project commenced mid - 2003 and the piloting of the Framework was completed in November 2005.

1.6 Project Methodology

The Quality Assurance Framework Project is rooted in the feminist and critical education traditions and analysis.

From a feminist perspective it is the systems that maintain the structured exclusion of women from the decision-making processes that militate against progress towards inclusive social frameworks.
Feminist education and training facilitates analysis of the structures and systems of society, how these systems work, how the exclusion of women is structured and how what constitutes 'knowledge' can maintain the exclusion and invisibility of women.

> Feminism embraces a plurality of definitions and viewpoints but all the different versions share two common themes. First, feminism places a high value on women … Second, feminism recognises the need for social change on behalf of women. Therefore feminist education is avowedly political. *(Connolly and Ryan, 1999, p. 2)*

The critical tradition in education positions the education system as a central mechanism in the structured maintenance of inequality and exclusion and understands critical appraisal of social systems and structures as integral to the process of education.
From feminist and critical education perspectives the long-term exclusion of women from power and decision-making in society shapes the restrictive frames of understanding and terms of reference which dominate decision-making. These are so restrictive and limiting that they are incapable of contributing adequately to the processes of participatory democracy or to addressing the crises and challenges that exclusion creates.

The project worked out of the emancipatory methodology that has derived from the critical education and feminist traditions.
Feminist methodologies emphasise the creative, intuitive and experiential as pathways to knowledge and as ways of knowing.
Emancipatory methodology in the feminist and critical education traditions is characterised by its participatory processes including one-to-one work, small group and large group processes.
It emphasises analysis, reflection, and critical engagement with and shared responsibility for the various stages of the project.
The methodology facilitates those involved in the process to bring their creativity, feelings, knowledge and expertise to the ongoing task of developing new and more participative and inclusive responses to the challenges of marginalisation, inequality and exclusion.
Each stage of the project employed a range of methods relevant to the work of that stage – literature and qualitative research, focus groups, one-to-one interviews, case studies, training workshops, large and small group consultations, creative work, emotional work, intuitive work, analytical work, and record-keeping.
The methodology as a whole was characterised by collective participation in the exploration, analysis and decision-making that resulted in the development of the Framework.

1.7 Project Report

The purpose of this report is to document the work and the learning from the AONTAS Women's Community Education Quality Assurance Framework Project. The report is divided into seven sections. The first section is the introduction to the report. This is followed with a further five sections – one on each stage in the AONTAS Women's Community Education Quality Assurance Framework Project's development.

The report concludes with a final section on the key learning from the project as a whole.

2. THE FOUNDATIONS OF THE QUALITY ASSURANCE FRAMEWORK

2.1 Project Context

Women's community education groups and Networks constitute a vibrant and active constituency within the AONTAS membership. From the early nineties AONTAS has supported the development of women's community education through a series of training and capacity building initiatives. AONTAS identified from its work across policy and practice fronts including the STANCE programme and from ongoing dialogue with women's community education groups that women's community education was being confronted simultaneously with a number of different developments occurring at national level.

Three key developments in the field of adult and community education, further and higher education and community development were impacting on women's community education.
One was the ongoing progression of the national framework of qualifications and awards and the related arena of the quality assurance processes relating to national awards.

The second was the reorganisation and the reconfiguration of the community development programme which provides the core funding for women's community education.
This revision of the community development programme was beginning to pose challenges for the future sustainability of some women's community education groups.

The third development that was also raising concerns was the evolving direction of the BTEI initiative and its relationship with women's community education.
The cumulative effects of these developments were difficult to appraise.
Education opportunities were opening up but did not fit the ethos and practice of women's community education. Initiatives in education were taking place independently of changes in community development systems. All had implications for women's community education in different ways for different groups.

It was in this context that the Quality Assurance Framework project originated and developed within AONTAS.

Within the overall aims of the project in relation to the strategic development and positioning of women's community education the project had three specific objectives which were to

- Research the content and the structure of a women's community education quality assurance framework
- Ensure that such a framework would be relevant to and owned by women's community education groups and
- Test out how such a resource could be used in practice in women's community education

2.3 The Project Steering Group

In 2003 the AONTAS Director convened the AONTAS Women's Community Education Quality Assurance Project Steering Group. Membership was drawn from the AONTAS Board and staff. Each member of the steering group had specific expertise in the policy, history, theory and practice of adult and community education and community development generally and specifically in women's community education.

The Steering Group staff members were Berni Brady, the AONTAS Director, Maureen Kavanagh, the National Coordinator of the Community Education Facilitators Training and Support programme and Finola McDonnell, the AONTAS policy officer.
In 2005 Maria McMullen from the AONTAS membership team joined the Steering Group.
The Steering Group Board members were Valerie O`Carroll, the coordinator of Clondalkin Women's Network and Chair of the National Collective of Community-based Women's Networks and Brid Connolly, Honorary Secretary of AONTAS and member of the teaching staff of the Adult and Community Education Department, NUI, Maynooth.

The Steering Group invited Eleanor McClorey, a consultant in the field of community and organisational development, to join the Steering Group and to work with them and on their behalf to research and facilitate the development of a quality assurance framework for women's community education.

The AONTAS Steering Group membership reflected a spread of expertise and experience across women's community education and radical adult education.

2.4 Literature Research

The research to identify the foundations of the Framework was organised in two strands. One strand was a literature review. The second strand was a series of in-depth interviews with Steering Group members on their understanding of women's community education.

The literature research began in 2003 and continued in stages throughout the project.
The literature review included radical adult and community education, feminist analysis of modern Irish history and feminist analysis of the systems and structures of neo-patriarchy.
The research looked at the history of the development of women's community education in the context of the issues impacting on women's lives in the Republic of Ireland.
The research found that the role of women in Irish society has been directed by public policy for many decades towards motherhood, being home-based, dependent on a male income and centred on the care and service of others (Mulvey, 1992)
The focus in women's lives on caring, nurture and service places women in a low status position in general in Irish society, that is, excluded from equal participation and representation in the decision-making systems of Irish public life.
Low status conditions generate psychological, structural and political barriers that are difficult to challenge and change (McGiveney, 1999).

The research identified that class and gender have combined to effectively silence many Irish women (Connolly, B. 2003) and that women in Ireland have experienced more rigorous restrictions on their mobility from the private to the public domain than women in other modern European democracies (Walby, 1990;Connolly, L. 2003). Restrictions included proactive prohibition including the prohibition on access to contraception and the 'marriage bar'. When such legal prohibitions were successfully challenged by feminists the strategy shifted to one of constriction of women's mobility through measures such as the continuing failure to invest in accessible quality child care services, in national pre-school and after-school education programmes, and in paid parental leave. The success of these restrictions as a method of limiting women's access to positions of public influence and decision-making is still evident (NWCI, 2002)

The ground that women in Ireland lost through the marriage bar and through enforced conception and child rearing can never be regained. It can only be compensated for by continued recognition of the lasting effects of such polices and commitment to addressing their effects.

An AONTAS paper on the history and development of women's community education and its current positioning based on the research stage of the project will be published in 2006.

The paper charts the historical context from which women's community education emerged and understands its development as a response made by women in Ireland to their legislatively-imposed confinement and constriction, the effects of which as still evident in the absence of women relative to men in senior positions in Irish public, political and economic life. The paper positions women's community education in the contexts of the radical education tradition, the community development movement and the feminist movement in Ireland. It finds that the structures of Irish society, including the organisation of further and higher education, evolved without addressing the barriers to women's participation inherent in those structures.

2.5 The Steering Group Interviews

The second strand of the research to establish the foundations of the Framework involved a series of interviews with the Steering Group members.

The interviews were loosely structured to explore what Steering Group members understood as the identifiable characteristics of women's community education and the features that distinguished women's community education from other forms of adult and continuing education.

The five semi-structured interviews were each of approximately two hours duration.

The project facilitator analysed the interview material seeking any recurring patterns in understandings of women's community education in the interview processes.

The material was grouped and structured around emerging themes and patterns.

The emerging themes and patterns and the evidence for them from the interview process was presented to the Steering Group for further dialogue and analysis.

2.6 Foundation Stage Achievements

Both strands of the project research at the foundation stage – the literature review relating to analysis of women's community education and the qualitative research interviews strongly supported the projects' thesis that women's community education has a defined and distinctive identity that is rooted in an understanding of the specific issues that impact on women's lives in Ireland. The research identified that women's community education has an analysis and understanding of the women's positioning in Irish society and the barriers to women's participation in social structures and understands education in the radical tradition as having a role in addressing that positioning.

> In adult education there is a long tradition concerned with the relationships between education and social change. The radical tradition in education has argued not simply for knowledge that is original, that helps us to get a job or brings us personal fulfillment – though these are all important – but for knowledge that assists social and political change especially in relation to those whose
> social, material and political conditions are based on oppression, inequality or exploitation. (Thompson, 1996)

The foundation stage research found that the processes that constitute women's community education can be named and framed, that it is rooted in identifiable values and commitments and that it has key features of practice as well as range and variety of practice. The emergence of identifiable patterns across the literature and the qualitative research supported the project's thesis that there are defined practices that constitute women's community education and that could provide the foundation for the development of a women's community education quality assurance framework.

2.5 Learning

The key learning from the first stage of the project was that the commitment of the Steering Group to inclusive and emancipatory practice set the foundations not only for the Framework but also for the subsequent development of the project.
Certain characteristics of the project were established during this stage summarised as follows:
* AONTAS held ownership of and authority for the delivery of the project
* The Steering Group personnel held both range and depth of expertise and knowledge about the issues the project was addressing and the project methodology
* The Steering Group were working from a clearly articulated   understanding of radical and feminist education
* The Steering Group had a shared ethos and a shared vision for the project
* The Steering Group had a collective as opposed to a hierarchical mode of working
* Decision-making processes were thought – through and there was appropriate delegation of decision-making

3. FOCUS GROUP WITH WOMEN'S COMMUNITY NETWORKS

In November 2003 a focus group with women's community education Networks, members of the National Collective of Community-based Women's Networks and members of AONTAS, was convened.

3.1 Focus Group Purpose

The focus group was convened for three purposes. The first was to present to women's community education representatives the concept of the quality assurance framework project and the emerging foundations of a potential quality assurance framework from the findings of the initial research.

Secondly, it was to engage in an exploration on the initial findings to find if representatives concurred with those and how they might further develop and extend them.

Finally, if representatives agreed with the project aims, rationale and emerging findings AONTAS was seeking a mandate from its women's community education membership to proceed to the case study stage of the project.

3.2 Focus Group Attendance

A significant spread of groups and Networks from around the country responded to the invitation to the focus group deliberations.

Representatives came from the greater Dublin area, from Wexford and Waterford, from Tipperary and from Cork, from Longford and from Donegal.

Representatives from the women's groups and Networks had very specific reasons for participating in the focus group.

They wanted more information on Quality Assurance and they wanted to differentiate between the idea of generic quality assurance and quality assured women's community education. They wanted to continue to develop their capacity to provide nationally accredited education and training opportunities for women where this is what women want. They believed that a self-directed quality assurance process would facilitate the women's sector in its negotiations with accrediting bodies.

Representatives were also motivated by certain concerns.

They felt there was a dilution of methodology and a threat to the ethos of women's community education in the current funding and accreditation / qualification environment.

The rigidity and narrow focus of what currently "counts" or can be "counted" as education achievement and what is considered relevant for "qualification" was seen by the representatives as diminishing education.

Representatives were concerned that accreditation was being made a prerequisite condition for funding, but that the women's' community education process as a whole was not being recognised in that accreditation system - only formal learning outcomes were being given recognition.

> Community Education is now an in-word and the word is
> being institutionalised without the process and the practices
> that go with it being resourced and acknowledged.
> (Focus Group Participant)

The women who attended the focus group saw this intervention led by AONTAS as timely and important and relevant to the needs of the women's community education sector.

3.3 Focus Group Programme

The programme for the day included a presentation on the initial findings from the literature review. Broadly speaking these findings established that the project was adopting an understanding of women's community education derived from the radical education, community development and feminist analyses and perspectives.
Secondly, the qualitative research found that again, broadly speaking, women's community education was holistic, nurturing and women-centred education that sought to make a difference to the structures and systems impacting on women's lives.
There were opportunities for representatives to engage in discussion on the findings and at the close of the workshop AONTAS sought a mandate to further develop the project.

3.4 Achievements from the Focus Group

There were several significant achievements from this process.

Framework Foundations: Networks were satisfied that the research phase of the project had generated a strong foundation on which to develop the Framework and that a quality assurance framework for women's community education would make a timely and relevant contribution to their work and development.
The Framework should reclaim the language of women's community education and the real meaning of that language. It should emphasise the following features of women's community education
- Process
- Strategic focus
- That it is collective and self-directed
- Rooted in women's lives and local community, class and cultures.

The framework should emphasise that women's community education is about framing women's lives, equality, nurturing, creativity and politicisation.

Framework Analysis: The focus group supported the positioning of women's community education within a gendered analysis of Irish society and within the radical tradition in adult education that was emerging from the literature and policy review strand of the project.
The focus group contributed to the research process from their work practice and expanded on the emerging principles and dimensions that would form the foundation of the framework. (See following section of this report).

They defined what a quality assurance framework means in the context of women's community education (the definition is given at the beginning of this report) and set out the procedures that the project was to follow in moving into the next phase of the research, the Case Studies.

Case Study Procedures: The Steering Group had identified key criteria for the selection of case study host projects and had presented these to the focus group.
Projects had to
- Have the capacity to engage with the Quality Assurance Framework Project and participate in four case study workshops within the time frame January – June 2004
- Be able to incorporate work on the development of a draft quality assurance framework into their current work plan
- Have full organisational ownership of the decision to be a case study host – participants, staff and management, tutors/trainers and agencies that are in partnership or close association with the group or Network
- Have as a group or organisation an interest in quality assurance and be convinced of its relevance to the women's community education sector
- Have the necessary resources (space, access to premises, telephone, email etc) to participate in the project

The focus group agreed with these and extended the criteria to include the following:

- Projects should be grass-roots community organisations that are learner-driven that listen and respond to learners
- There should be one group per case study (not women from a cross-section of groups coming together for the case-study)
- The four case studies should cover a range of work – the very grassroots work, the development of course provision and the political work and political impact of the work
- The groups selected should have different levels of relationship with funders/ agencies / statutory sector and that the case studies should reflect the battles and struggles as well as successes
- Each case study "host" should be a member of AONTAS / STANCE / National Collective
- Each one has to be a Women's Community Education organisation
- The Steering Group in making a selection should meet these criteria before looking for a range of geographical locations – it is more important that the case studies address women's community education in the full sense of that term rather than simply cover a range of practices around the country.

Framework Project Ethos: In dialogue with the focus group the Quality Assurance Framework Project committed to working in partnership with women's community education groups and Networks in developing the Quality Assurance Framework and to embody in its process and actions the ethos and principles of women's community education.

This included commitment to consultative, participatory and inclusive ways of working, to equality, and to quality emancipatory practice at all levels of the project.

Mandate: The Focus Group mandated AONTAS to continue the Quality Assurance Framework Project into the case study stage in the radical education and feminist traditions and to continue to develop the Framework around the emerging structure of principles and dimensions.

3.5 Learning from the Focus Group

The key learning from the focus group was the importance of dialogue and consultation in emancipatory education processes.

- Dialogue and consultation is important in the first instance because it is a mark of recognition of the importance and relevance of those who are being consulted with. It is a marker of equality.

- Consultation is a statement that all knowledge and expertise is not located in one person, or one organisation or one place. It makes a statement about the rich and diffuse nature of knowledge.

- Consultation is a statement about the collective nature of education. Education is not an exchange from one designated group to another. Education is a series of exchanges between people. Education is about mutuality and interconnections. Everyone is a learner and everyone is a teacher.

- Finally, consultation is political and strategic. Consultation created a space for Networks to assess the value or other wise of the project. Consultation creates a space for a wider group to inform and shape a project, gives access to a broader spread of information and knowledge and contributes to building collective ownership for such a project.

The mandate from the Networks enabled the project to move into the case study stage of its work.

4. THE CASE STUDY PHASE

The Steering Group reconvened following the focus group with the Networks. It adopted the recommendations made by the focus group in relation to the case study stage. Following this meeting the project facilitator reworked the research material in preparation for the case studies.

4.1 Steering Group Analysis of the research findings

The research material from the interviews with the Steering Group and the focus group inputs and discussions was organised around four principles and four dimensions.

The Steering Group, having considered the findings from the research stage of the project, agreed on these principles and dimensions as the core of the Framework.
The four principles and four dimensions were selected on the basis that they encompassed and included most or all the aspects of women's community education named during the foundation phase and in the focus group consultation.
The Steering Group agreed on the four-principle, four-dimension structure as forming the core of the Framework around which the case studies would be developed.

4.2 The Four Principles of Women's Community Education

The four principles that emerged from the research process were
- Women-Centred
- Quality
- Equality
- Justice

The material relating to the four principles was collated and synthesised in a very preliminary way as follows:

The principle of Women-Centred Education
- Grows out of women's lives and experiences
- Is life-long and life-wide
- Recognises the reality of women's experiences of multiple oppressions and based on that recognition
- Generates a nurturing education process that values and provides warmth, comfort, care, consistency, welcome, safety, a friendly and non-threatening environment

The principle of Quality
- Women's Community Education has distinctive qualities and properties that distinguish it from mainstream education
- Women's Community Education concerns itself with excellence and high standards in environment, nurture and care, skills development, organisation and materials in order to provide quality education and training

- Women's Community Education seeks to realise and make evident the principles of transparency, consistency and equality in its education and training provision
- Women's Community Education concerns itself with quality processes at all stages of education and training – in the development of the programme, in its delivery phase and in its evaluation phase

The principle of Equality
- All women are inherently equal
- Women's community education is inclusive of all women
- Barriers to women's ability to access women's community education are identified and addressed through the provision of appropriate systems and supports
- Women's Community Education is a celebration of difference, of culture, of language
- There is equality of relationship between women participants, organisers, leaders and trainers involved in the process of women's community education as each woman brings her own unique contribution to the education and empowerment of all

The principle of Justice
- Women's Community Education concerns itself with and seeks to address women's experiences of injustice and oppression
- Women's Community Education concerns itself with change - the empowerment and transformation process with women individually and collectively
- Women's Community Education holds a vision of education as a process of transformation and values and celebrates the full range of achievements, personal and collective, of the education process

4.3 The Four Dimensions

The four Dimensions of the practice of women's community education were identified as
- Rooted in the realities of women's lives
- Women-led
- Political
- Strategic

The research material was collated around these four dimensions as follows:

Women's Community education is rooted in the realities of women's lives and in women's experiences – it is woman-centred education as distinct from curriculum-centred education; it is holistic and women-friendly with the emphasis on hospitality, reassurance, nurture, variety, and choice. Its emphasis is on creativity and life – wide growth and development. It is a process – reflective, organic, fluid, happening over a period of time / years, about stories and voices, about claiming language and meaning, about nurturing learning, about a cycle of practice and practice development; trying,

tasting and participating are actively encouraged leading to the flexible and organic evolution of education programmes which are responsive to the needs of a group of learners; it is value-driven education which places its emphasis on oral communication and social contact as ways of teaching and learning and on non-hierarchical communications and learning processes

Women's Community Education is women-led - Women's leadership is in evidence at all levels and opportunities to become involved in the leadership and organisation of the group are integral to the education process; women's community education supports dynamic, fluid and non-hierarchical leadership with the emphasis on equality, collective ownership and collective responsibility; it is a voice for learners (with a variety of voices being that voice) and its leadership is of the community as distinct from being situated in the community; it resources capacity building and values the retention of activists within the sector

Women's Community Education is political education – it is rooted in the experiences and issues of women, community class, and culture, in the causes and experiences of isolation, and in the issues affecting neighbourhood and locality. Women's Community Education concerns itself with politicisation and with a process of change that is collective, self-directed, dynamic, proactive and responsive to women's and communities needs. The political dimension evolves organically as a way for women to frame their lives, to address their education and development needs, to bring about change for themselves, their families and communities and to give expression to the needs, responses and leadership models which best suit women. Its concern with and involvement in political and social issues makes it inherently different to other education models.

Women's Community Education is strategic –women's community education struggles to grow and evolve in a changing political, social and educational environment; women's community education recognises that it is not given appropriate status or resources by the formal and statutory sectors; issues of quality and equality are its core concerns; it engages in and builds strategic alliances with its allies and interests across the community, voluntary and statutory sectors in relation to resources, progression and development, representation and social and political activism.

This material, generated by the qualitative research through the Steering Group interviews and the focus group, provided the starting point for the case studies.

4.4 Selection of Case Study Hosts

When the basic structure of the Framework was identified the Steering Group proceeded with setting up the Case Study stage of the project.
AONTAS wrote to member women's community education groups and Networks to report to them on the work of the project. Those interested in hosting the case study phase of the project were invited to contact AONTAS.

From these the Steering Group selected a group of four that most closely matched the stated criteria.

These groups were:

- ACCESS 2000, Wexford
- Amerge Women's Group, Co. Donegal (with the participation of the Second Chance Education Project and with the case study hosted by Donegal Women's Network as set out in the selection criteria)
- Clondalkin Women's Network
- Longford Women's Link

The material collated around the four principles and the four dimensions was circulated to the case study hosts for their information.

Each host project entered into a partnership agreement with AONTAS. The agreement detailed the respective roles, responsibilities and commitments of both for the duration of the Case Study phase of the research.

4.5 Case Study Focus

The focus of the case study stage was to develop the Women's Community Education Quality Assurance Framework through analysis of the ethos and practice of four women's community education groups.

The case study stage involved a concentrated and combined focus on women's community education in order to understand it more fully and to collect information about it. The Case studies were structured opportunities to draw out information that would inform the development of the quality assurance framework.

The case studies were consultations with each group drawing out the expertise and knowledge, organisation and practice in the groups in order to develop the quality assurance framework for women's community education.

4.6 The Introductory Workshop

The case study process commenced with an introductory workshop with each host project. There was also an introductory workshop with Donegal Women's Network as it was the host Network for the Amerge Women's Group case study.

The purpose of the introductory workshop was to consult with the case study hosts on whether in their view the four principles and four dimensions provided an appropriate structure for the Quality Assurance Framework. There was informed discussion on each one and all were confirmed by the four case study hosts as together providing an appropriate and integrated structure around which to develop Framework.

Mutual expectations were clarified and the potential benefits from the case study process for both AONTAS and for the case study host were discussed and identified.

Possible challenges that might come up were anticipated and discussed.

Procedures for addressing dissatisfactions with the Case study organisation and facilitation were discussed and agreed. Such difficulties would be addressed in the first

instance with the project facilitator, in the next with the Director of AONTAS and if still unresolved with the Quality Assurance Framework Steering Group.
The membership of the host project Quality Assurance Working Group, and the dates and venues for the subsequent workshops were agreed.

Following the introductory workshops sixteen case study workshops were held between March and June 2004.

4.7 Case Study Workshop Structure

The principles and dimensions provided the basic format for the organisation of the case studies.
Each workshop lasted about three hours. One principle and one dimension were explored in each workshop.

The workshop was structured around an introductory process followed by two questions to explore the principle:
- Why is this a principle of women's community education?
- What does this principle mean to you as a group?

This was followed with a question to facilitate exploring the dimension:
- How is this dimension real and given practical expression in this women's community education group?

The questions were discussed in two's and three's and the feedback charted and discussed. Occasionally, the information was generated in the large group discussion.
Each case study was recorded in report form and returned to the case study hosts for verification of content.
The case study workshops were powerful testimonies to the practice of women's community education and to women's lives and struggles.

> Decision-makers are used to ignoring people like us, to ignoring women and their issues. In order to make them take notice we have to make ourselves heard. We can do this through believing that our lives matter and that housing, home and security matter and are really important. We can show how important issues are through our drama and creativity, through our fact –finding as in our survey on housing issues here. (Amerge Women's Group)

The content of the Quality Assurance Framework is rooted in the material on women's community education generated by the twenty-one Case Study workshops.

4.8 Drafting the Quality Assurance Framework

There were a number of stages in drafting the Quality Assurance Framework.

Following the case studies the project facilitator first of all cross-referenced all the material on each principle and dimension.

This still left much significant material outside the Framework.

The shape and structure of the Framework was expanded from principles and dimensions to vision, aspirations, goals, principles, dimensions and elements to fully reflect the material generated in the case studies. The idea for this structure came from a paper on quality assurance written by the AONTAS policy officer and Steering Group member, Finola McDonnell.

The expanded structure allowed for the inclusion and integration of the material generated by the workshops.

The process of revising, regrouping and redrafting the material involved presentations to and discussions with the Steering Group as the material was reorganized and restructured. This process continued until September 2004 when the material generated through the case studies was integrated into a draft Framework. A two-day residential workshop was organised with the four case study host projects.

The draft Framework was presented to the case study hosts.

Each section of the Framework was analysed by the case study host projects in working groups. A Steering Group member facilitated each working group.

The case study hosts agreed with the structure and layout of the Framework and considerably revised and reworked the content of each part.

Following the workshop the project facilitator met with each Steering Group member who had facilitated the working groups, and recorded the suggested wording, views and opinions expressed during the two-day workshop. The Framework was then reworked and recompiled.

4.9 Case Study Practice

The case study practice involved drawing out the knowledge and experience that exists in women's community education groups around the country. It entailed staying as close as possible to the actual terms, language and phraseology used by women's community education participants, management committees and staff.

For equality, participation and consultation to be a reality at every stage in the project participation has to be resourced through the provision of child and elder care and travel costs and through the reimbursement to projects of costs incurred in hosting the Framework processes. This is standard AONTAS practice across its work.

The practice also acknowledged the resource investment in the Framework made by the groups and Networks involved who dedicated extensive spans of time, and their knowledge and expertise to the development of the Framework.

The Framework was built on respect for the emotive and intuitive aspects of the research process as well as the intellectual and analytical aspects. It was developed from the premise that if the project was true to quality women's community education practice the inherent shape of the Framework would emerge.

> …. This project is both an opportunity and a challenge – for quality to mean anything it has to be defined by the women's community education sector, it has to be developed out of our own beliefs, experiences, practice and learning. (ACCESS 2000, Wexford)

4.10. Key Achievements

The key achievement from this stage of the work was that the emancipatory methodology with its commitment to inclusion, diversity and consensus worked efficiently in the drafting of the quality assurance framework.

Across the twenty-one workshops involving approximately forty participants the distinctive ethos and practice of women's community education was identified. At the case study seminar it was in turn possible to secure agreement on a Framework that was inclusive of the practice of a range of groups and Networks – from a locally based group without either core funding or staff through to a large urban network with a large number of affiliated groups.

4.11 Learning

The achievements from this stage of the work were possible because of commitment, congruence and knowledge and skills across the project.

There was congruence across the project with all involved coherently working from the same ethos and values and there was commitment to the process from all involved.

This meant that the process, that is the emancipatory methodology, was followed and applied rather than undermined and negated.

From the commitment and the congruence came support for the process of engaging with the material, maintaining active participation and taking up leadership.

The spread of knowledge and expertise across the Steering Group and case study hosts together meant that there was sufficient experience, fluidity and confidence in the methodology to apply it usefully and creatively.

5. WOMEN'S COMMUNITY EDUCATION CONSULTATION

In early 2005 the AONTAS Steering Group members met to explore how best to proceed with the quality assurance framework project.
They decided to consult with the women's community education membership of AONTAS on the re-drafted Framework and to seek a mandate to embark on piloting the use of the Quality Assurance Framework.

5.1 The March 2005 Seminar

AONTAS hosted a one-day seminar on 2nd March 2005 with its women's community education membership.
The seminar had four purposes - to acknowledge and celebrate the work of the case study phase of the project, to present an overview of the Women's Community Education Quality Assurance Framework, to seek a mandate to embark on piloting the use of the Quality Assurance Framework and to invite women's community education groups and networks to consider being part of the pilot phase of the project if so mandated.

The groups and Networks represented at the seminar were:
- Access 2000 Wexford
- Amerge Women's Group Co. Donegal
- Bawnogue Women's Development Group Clondalkin
- Clondalkin Women's Network
- Deansrath Women's Group Clondalkin
- Donegal Women's Network
- Dublin 12 Women's Group
- Longford Women's Link
- Ronanstown Women's Community Development Project, Clondalkin
- Rowlagh Women's Group Clondalkin
- Second Chance Education Project Co. Donegal
- Tipperary Women's Network
- Waterford Women's Centre
- Women Together Tallaght Network

Women's community education representatives received the quality assurance framework very positively. The relevance and usefulness of the quality assurance framework was celebrated.
Seminar participants' identified that the Framework had the potential to
- Inform all the work of women's community education organisations
- Provide the means for groups and Networks to share their analysis and understanding of education with other sectors
- Give direction in striving to provide quality
- Define and integrate quality processes in the work
- Emphasize the policy and practice driven work of the sector
- Support networking and sharing on quality practice

Seminar participants said:

> It is great to see acknowledgement of the empowerment and diversity of women's journeys through women's community education.

> What's good about the document is how much the political side and the social justice side is emphasised.

> We would like to acknowledge the way the document was produced. It really reflects our ethos and methods of working.

The Framework was described as:

- Grounded in the reality of women's community education
- Putting words and shape around what women's community education does
- Clearly identifying the difference between women's community education and mainstream education
- Providing groups and Networks with a way to measure practice in a holistic and integrated way
- Highlighting the value of activism and presenting activism in a positive and respectful way
- Placing women at the core of the work right from the beginning and right through the process –empowering
- Bringing solidarity to women's community education

All of the groups and Networks present supported the piloting of the quality assurance framework.

The validation by the March 2005 seminar participants was the foundation of the pilot stage of the project.

5.2 Pilot Phase Commitment

Deliberations at the seminar on the pilot phase concluded that for host projects the pilot would involve committing to
- Sending 2 project representatives to 5 2-day training workshops held in a Dublin city-centre location
- Leadership by these representatives in implementing the work of the pilot phase
- Implementing the quality assurance plans made at the training workshops back with the host project between workshops
- Bringing learning from hosting the pilot back to inform the Quality Assurance Framework project

- Hosting two visits by the project facilitator to the group or Network in order to reflect together on the piloting of the Quality Assurance Framework and the learning from the pilot phase
- Participating in an AONTAS Women's Community Education Quality Assurance Framework seminar to conclude the pilot phase of the project and to disseminate the learning from the pilot stage
- Commitment of dedicated project staff time to the process
- A focus on the Quality Assurance Framework within those groups that participate
- Collective ownership of the decision to be part of the pilot phase and commitment by the whole organisation to a focus on quality assurance

The four case study hosts – Amerge, ACCESS 2000, Clondalkin Women's Network and Longford Women's Link indicated their willingness to participate in the pilot stage on the basis outlined above as did Dublin 12 Women's Group, Waterford Women's Centre, Tipperary Resource Centre and a cross-border project Neighbourhood Work of the North West.

5.3 Stage Achievements

The number of representatives who attended and their geographic spread meant that the mandate given to AONTAS to continue with the work was solidly based.
The fact the representatives quickly grasped the structure and content of the Framework was reassuring in relation to the Framework's eventual use as a resource to the sector.
Key achievements were that women's community education representatives who had not been part of the case study stage validated the Quality Assurance Framework and that so many groups present were willing to engage with the onerous pilot stage of the work.

5.4 Learning

The learning from the consultation was simply reinforcement of the importance of the collective in women's community education and the wealth of expertise and knowledge that is available to anyone who asks for that knowledge and expertise to be shared with them.
The learning reinforced awareness that the Quality Assurance Framework project was a beneficiary of the generosity of that collective.

6. PILOTING THE QUALITY ASSURANCE FRAMEWORK

Representatives of the women's community education sector of the AONTAS membership had endorsed the Quality Assurance Framework. This collective endorsement enabled the project to move forward into the pilot stage.

The purpose of the pilot stage was to work out how best to use the Framework as a quality assurance resource and to work in stages towards developing a quality assurance process for women's community education.

6.1 Selection of Pilot Phase Hosts

The Steering Group reconvened following the March 2005 seminar. The Steering Group's initial hope was that the Quality Assurance Framework project could open its pilot phase to at least four groups who had not been part of the case study phase of the project.

However, Steering Group discussions highlighted that the pilot phase methodology was much more unknown and experimental than the earlier research stage.

The project was now very much into uncharted territory.

There was no guarantee that the workshop format envisaged by the project facilitator as the basis of the training would actually be practically applicable across a range of projects.

The pilot stage had to be designed in such a way that the project facilitator and the Steering Group could respond to the unanticipated. Increasing the spread of projects from four to eight meant that the Quality Assurance Framework could not respond in a qualitatively satisfactory manner to issues that might arise.

The pilot phase required a much more extensive commitment of resources by the host projects than the research project had – commitment of two group leaders to five Dublin-based training workshops, the facilitation of five in-project workshops, the compilation of quality assurance reports, with commitment to participation in the national seminar to conclude the pilot stage.

This was a crucial stage of the work and it was important that the project was in a position to appropriately support, document and analyse the learning process involved in piloting the Quality Assurance Framework.

The Steering Group decided that for quality provision throughout the pilot regrettably, the pilot phase could not be extended to include all the groups and Networks who were willing to contribute to the process. The Steering Group had to balance the loss of opportunity to network more broadly and deepen the learning against their commitment to providing quality engagement with the pilot stage hosts.

The Steering Group did however decide to include one new project – Neighbourhood Work of the North West - in the pilot phase. This decision was based on the fact that the lead partner in NWNW, the Second Chance Education Project in Co. Donegal, had been an integral part of case study stage. Second Chance's in-depth knowledge of the project could support the other NWNW partners, Strabane-Lifford Women's Centre and Fermanagh Women's Network engage in the pilot phase.

The pilot stage thus expanded on the case study phase and drew on perspectives from projects from North and South of the Border without compromising the projects commitment to quality work.

The pilot was set up on the basis of a partnership agreement, similar to that which underpinned the case studies, between AONTAS and each pilot stage host.

6.2 The Training Workshops

The pilot phase centred around four two-day training workshops and one one-day training workshop. The first was held on May 4th and May 5th, with the subsequent workshops on May 31st and June 1st, September 13th and September 14th and 18th October and 19th October 2005.
The final workshop was held on 22nd November.
The purpose of the training workshops was to devise a methodology that would facilitate the use of the quality assurance framework by women's community education groups.
The training set out to ask and find answers to three questions:

- Is the quality assurance framework a resource in the practice of women's community education?
- How can groups most easily apply it?
- What would constitute a quality assurance process for women's community education?

6.3 The Quality Assurance Working Groups

Each of the projects set up a quality assurance working group. The project representatives worked with the quality assurance working group in piloting the use of the Framework through a series of four quality assurance workshops.
Project facilitators prepared a report on each workshop and brought feedback from their group to the training programme.

The project facilitator met with each quality assurance working group twice in the course of the pilot stage.
The quality assurance working groups were integral to the pilot stage of the project.

6.4 The Framework as a Women's Community Education Resource

The pilot stage tested the Framework as a resource which would frame the social analysis and distinctive practice of women's community education, build a shared language for women's community education and provide a means to quality assure the practice of women's community education.
After the first set of workshops in the projects the consistent feedback was that the Framework would have to be re-drafted.
The project facilitator had three concerns and initially resisted redrafting the Framework.
The first concern was that the Framework had been collectively reworked and endorsed by the wider collective of women's organisations.

The second was a concern that the language in the Framework should not be so simplified as to lose its significance.

The third concern was to do with timescale – the pilot stage was organized on an achievable but tight timeframe and rewriting the Framework was not factored into that frame.

There was intense debate both within the training and within the Steering Group about redrafting the Framework.

The projects however, were consistent in their feedback and critique and Valerie O`Carroll, Steering Group member whose Network was hosting the pilot stage stood for that case at the Steering Group meeting.

The project facilitator's visits to the projects' and engagement in the debate confirmed that the projects evidence for the unwieldiness of the Framework in practice was clear and coherent. The Framework was too wordy and its phraseology too complex and repetitive to be a user-friendly resource.

The project facilitator re-edited the Framework.

The project feedback on the re-edited Framework was positive. However, to ensure that the final version of the Framework was an expression of women's community education as a collective a process for re-editing the Framework was worked into the training workshops. The Framework was clarified, reworded and reworked collectively keeping the structure and the key content of the earlier version but editing out all the unnecessary words and phrases that were clouding the essential clarity of the work.

6.5 Stage Achievements

The pilot stage was the most demanding stage of the project at every level.

The commitment required from the pilot phase hosts was extensive. The training was intensive, it moved at a fast pace and it had to have the capacity to deal with the unexpected. Project lives had their own demands and complexities. These included changes in premises – the loss of a premises for one project and the gain of a premises by another - staff changes, family commitments, engagement in Equal projects and the delivery of intensive training programmes alongside all the day-to-day work of women's community education.

Alongside managing the complexity of their own project' lives the five pilot stage hosts maintained their commitment to the Framework process.

This commitment was the key to the other achievements of the pilot stage - the re-edited Framework, the learning about the Framework as a resource to women's community education and the piloting of the emerging quality assurance process.

6.6. Learning

The debate about the redrafting of the Framework was the most significant area of disagreement or contention that emerged in the course of the project.

The process marked for the project facilitator the stage when the ownership of the Framework really moved from facilitator and the Steering Group to women's community education groups. Had the groups not stood up for what they knew and challenged the

facilitator the Framework project would have been unable to deliver on its vision of developing a useful and radical resource for women's community education.
The learning emphasised a central tenet of both emancipatory and feminist group work practice – the importance of listening to what people have to say from their experience. Jane Thompson differentiates between 'merely useful' and 'really useful' education. Radical and really useful education requires that we are able to 'really listen' as opposed to 'merely listen'.

7. KEY LEARNING

There three key areas of learning from the quality assurance framework project.
The first is learning about women's community education – its impact, challenges it faces and its direction and development.
 The second is learning about the Quality Assurance Framework as a resource to women's community education.
The third area of learning is in relation to establishing a quality assurance process for women's community education.

7.1 Women's Community Education

The Quality Assurance Framework Project had a concentrated and focused engagement with the theory and practice of women's community education over a two-and-a-half year period.
This process resulted in key learning about the impact of women's community education, about the challenges it encounters and about its future development and contribution to women, to community and to education in Ireland.

The Quality Assurance Framework Project identifies that women's community education has an impact at four levels.

7.1 (a) Education and Training

The first level of impact is at the level of education and training. Women's community education makes a sustained contribution to the development and spread of knowledge, skills and competences within communities of women around the country.
The education and training delivered in just the five projects involved in the pilot phase included - basic education, drama, creativity and holistic health, interior design, political lobbying, women's health, group work, social analysis, violence against women, communications, computer skills, citizenship, racism and interculturalism, community development, neighbourhood work, childcare, women's studies, and women's entrepreneurship. Much of this provision carried FETAC or HETAC accreditation and awards.
Women's community education supports women who wish to, to progress to further levels of education and training and to employment
Women's community education organisations are making a sustained contribution to curriculum development, to the promotion and accessibility of national education awards.

7.1 (b) Health and Well-being

Women's community education provides a distinctive women-centred and holistic environment for the development and delivery of education and training. The environment and the ethos of women's community education facilitate the empowerment of women. A sense of belonging, an enhanced sense of competence and confidence in

one's capacity to participate, to contribute and to take action greatly supports women's sense of well-being and mental and emotional health.

> We recognise the isolation and barriers that exist for many women. We provide a safe, accessible and nurturing environment to enable women to make life-changes by building their confidence and self-belief.
> *(Longford Women's Link)*

Women's community education facilitates women access information and support on a range of issues affecting their lives beyond access to education and training. Such issues include childcare, rights and entitlements, women's health, housing, and issues of violence and abuse.

Women's community education understands that social, cultural and economic factors impact on health and well-being. Such factors, which cannot be addressed by individuals on their own, can be addressed by groups of women acting together, acting in partnership with local health and social services providers and lobbying for enhancements in service provision. Women's community education provides a context and the training and supports for such initiatives.

7.1 (c) Social and Community Development

Women's community education is a collective process that makes a sustained contribution to social and community development. Women's community education strengthens social networks by being a place not just of contact or of education provision but a place where relationships and communications are prioritised and where providers of locally-based health and social services are accessed and networked with.

Women's community education groups and networks are active participants in locally based community development processes and in local area partnerships.

Furthermore women's community education provides a range of education and training that supports social and community development including courses in community development and leadership, communications, group work, effective management and effective participation.

7.1 (d) Political Change for Women

Through involvement in their local women's community education group women have an opportunity, if they so wish, to participate collectively in securing political change for women in Ireland.

Organisational, networking and lobbying skills are developed through taking leadership in the management and maintenance of their own groups and networks in the first instance.

Women's community education works for political change for women through its focus on women-centred gender specific education and through securing the resources for such provision.

It contributes to the wider movement for change for women in Ireland through networking and lobbying locally, regionally and nationally and through participation in national organisations such as the National Collective of Community-based Women's Networks, AONTAS and the National Women's Council.

There can be European and international dimensions to this work through EU partnerships and through work on the Beijing Platform, through CEDAW and the Women's Human Rights Project.

7.2 Challenges to women's community education

The Quality Assurance Framework Project witnessed and engaged with the challenges that women's community education encounters as it works to develop and consolidate its work.

These challenges can basically be organised into three groupings.

The first is the absence of recognition and affirmation of women's community education for its distinctive contribution to adult and community education in Ireland.

The second is the absence of a secure resource base for its work.

The third is the marginality of the gender focus of women's community education in relation to the focus and driving agendas of the statutory sector on which the women's community education is dependent for funding and for its future sustainability.

Its ethos and practice place it on the margins of the education agenda, its focus on education places it on the margins of social inclusion and community development agendas and its gender specific focus position it on the margins of the gender neutral discourses that drive the agendas of both education and social inclusion and more broadly Irish social and economic policy.

7. 2 (a) Absence of recognition and affirmation

Absence of recognition is characterised when a group or organisation continually over the years has to keep re-introducing itself, re-explaining itself and justifying the rationale for its existence.

Absence of affirmation is characterised by ignoring the existence of a group or engaging in ongoing critique of the rationale for a group or organisations activity, the questioning of its relevance and the questioning of its grounds for existence.

Women's community education organisations spend considerable time and energy explaining their methodology, the rationale for their existence and demonstrating outcomes from their work.

Transparency and accountability is important. The Quality Assurance Framework project is evidence of the commitment of women's community education groups and networks to quality practice, transparency and accountability.

However, it is equally important that the ethos, principles and practice of the work that one is accountable for is understood and valued by those to whom one is accountable.

Women's community education groups and Networks find themselves in positions where exercises in accountability and transparency become exercises in defending the principles and practices of women's community education.

An objective of the Quality Assurance Framework as a resource to women's community education is that it enhances understandings and awareness of those not involved in women's community education of exactly what this radical and innovative educational process is about and minimises the time that women's community education groups and networks expend on justifying themselves.

7. 2 (b) Absence of a secure resource base

There is no dedicated funding line for women's community education.

Those women's community education groups and networks which are in receipt of core statutory funding claim their funding from the community development programme in recognition of their role in combating poverty and supporting social cohesion.

They are not in receipt of core funding from the Department of Education and Science for their core activity – women's community education.

Groups may receive short-term funding for education programmes through Department of Education and Science initiatives such as the Back To Education Initiative but such initiatives do not address the core-funding base of women's community education organisations.

The absence of a dedicated funding line for women's community education within the Department of Education and Science reinforces its invisibility and marginality within education.

> At the moment we are being funded to exist, not to develop. The education work is not recognised and not valued. There is no understanding of the continuous cycle of women participating in our groups.
> *(Clondalkin Women's Network)*

An objective of the Quality Assurance Framework as a resource to women's community education is that it provides the basis for the recognition of women's community education as integral to adult and community education and to the field of further education provision in Ireland as stated in the White Paper on Adult Education, 2000 and that women's community education's core funding reflects this recognition.

7.2 (c) Gender Focus

Women's community education recognises that women and men have different historical, economic, political and cultural contexts in which their lives are given shape and meaning. Mainstream political, economic and cultural discourses are shaped and driven by processes that have historically marginalised and continue to marginalise women.

The gender-specific focus and discourse of women's community education contributes to its position on the periphery of adult education and community development and social inclusion agendas.

Women's community education creates a space in which women can address some of the effects of their marginalisation as a gender. Gender-specific organisation by women is one of the means employed by women to develop awareness of gender inequality and to challenge the systems and structures that impact negatively on women's lives.

However, gender-specific organisation by women has been challenged in recent years.

With changes in the equality legislation and with the increased employment opportunities for women in low-skilled, low-paid part time employment emphasis on women's inequality relative to men has diminished.

There is a shift away from recognition of the first of the grounds of inequality stipulated in the Equal Status Act 2000, that of gender, and emphasis placed on other grounds which impact on men and women equally or on multiple marginalisation i.e. where gender intersects with another ground such as poverty or ethnicity.

The gains accrued by women through the nineties are not being built on as they might and the gender status quo is being reinforced.

In worst case scenarios women are challenged that gender equality has been achieved and that the grounds for their organisation and practice are spurious and disingenuous.

> The percentage of women elected to the Dail has increased by only 1% since 1997. Ireland ranks 59th out of 120 nations in the world when it comes to women's parliamentary representation….the low percentage of women in the Seanad and in local politics means that without Government action the number of TD's will not increase in the immediate future…. The Central Bank and Bord na gCon have no women on their boards. Bord Gais has only one women member while the ESB, Bord na Mona and Bord Failte have only two members each.
> *(NWCI, 2002)*

Recent shifts in Ireland's economic position in the EU and the move from net beneficiary to net contributor may contribute to further undermining the gender equality agenda. Women in Ireland were greatly supported by the achievements of the women's movement elsewhere in Europe in securing a focus on gender in the first instance.

It is questionable whether a gender analysis has been sufficiently embedded in the ways of working and of thinking about equality and inclusion in the Irish context. The question arises when not required and reinforced by the EU funding context what emphasis will statutory systems and funders here will put on equality for women as a dedicated policy objective that has to have a dedicated and adequate resource base.

An objective of the Quality Assurance Framework as a resource to women's community education is that it assists in framing the historical and actual contexts of women's lives in Ireland, that it contributes to focusing attention on the structural and systemic barriers to equality for women and foregrounds the rationale for resourcing the gender-specific organisation of women's community education.

7.3 Women's Community Education: Direction and Development

Women's community education, despite these challenges, has a history of two decades of sustained growth and development. It is networked with a wide range of voluntary, community and statutory sector initiatives, and women's community education has built up allies and advocates across sectors.

Women's community education is a strategic resource uniquely positioned to contribute to the national policy agendas of life long learning, of social inclusion and interculturalism and of gender equality.

7.3. (a) Lifelong Learning

Rooted in and of the community women's community education brings informal and formal 'second chance' education and training into the heart of communities around Ireland, urban and rural.

Its education and training firstly provides women with opportunities to re-enter education in supportive and holistic ways and then gives women the means to progress to further education or employment in a range of areas including childcare, community education and community development, and into self-employment, thereby providing women with opportunities to widen their work and life choices.

Its uniquely innovative methodology and its social analysis contribute to the knowledge and expertise in adult, community and continuing education held here in Ireland.

Adequately resourced and appropriately networked with the wider adult and community education field, women's community education has a continuing contribution to make to positioning Ireland at the forefront of quality adult education and lifelong learning provision.

> Neighbourhood Work specifically targets the most marginalised members in the community – those who are least represented n mainstream education and training. The aim of the work is to give voice to those who are most excluded and support them to bring about social change. At a personal level it promotes involvement in second chance education and is a crucial first step on the ladder of life-long learning.
> *(Neighbourhood Work North West)*

7.3 (b) Social Inclusion and Interculturalism

Women's community education is a resource that supports progression towards social inclusion policy objectives.

Women's community education is rooted in grass-roots communities. Its ethos and experiential methodology is built on skills and knowledge in communications and group work practices and actively fosters inclusion. Women who are marginalised by mainstream educational provision find that the methodology of women's community education works for them.

Women's community education recognises the reality of the barriers to women's progression through education and addresses these barriers. The costs of travel, education materials and childcare present financial and logistical barriers for women who wish to access education and training.

There are also attitudinal and cultural barriers that prevent women's access to education. Traveller women encounter specific barriers because of the marginalisation of their culture in Irish society. Women's community education challenges such barriers and seeks to ensure that all women in Ireland can embark on and complete the education of their choice. Women's community education recognises the contribution that immigration makes to Ireland's continuing economic growth and seeks to reflect the diversity of women in Ireland and support interculturalism in its education and organisation. Women's community education is committed to securing the resources that facilitate all women who so wish to access education and training.

Inclusive and affordable education and training that addresses the economic, health and social care and diversity issues that impact on women's lives plays a key role in sustaining healthy and inclusive communities.

7. 3 (c) Gender Equality

Women's community education contributes to progressing equality for women. It does this in a number of different ways.

Firstly, women's community education makes a significant contribution to the empowerment, health and well-being of women, including women who are isolated and women who live in communities which experience marginalisation.

Secondly, participation in women's community education gives women the opportunity to access education that provides a gendered analysis of Irish history, culture and political and social development. This education and training raises awareness and provides women with the information and the analysis essential in understanding their lives and in progressing the issue of gender equality.

Thirdly, women's community education makes a significant contribution to education and training for employment. Education and training is built on the skills development needs identified by women themselves and includes group work, community development and leadership, entrepreneurship, computer skills training, childcare training, health among others. Women's community education contributes to strengthening women's economic base, thereby contributing to gender equality

7.4 Resourcing Women's Community Education

The capacity of women's community education to fulfill its role in these three important arenas – lifelong learning, social inclusion and gender equality – can only be fully realised through adequate and integrated resource and funding systems.

The work of the Quality Assurance Framework Project identifies that the resourcing of women's community education needs to be urgently addressed and responded to in ways that fully respect the unique identity and distinctive practice of women's community education as articulated in the AONTAS Women's Community Education Quality Assurance Framework.

Women's community education is first of all an adult and community education process as identified in the White Paper of 2000. It is an education process that works on the three fronts of adult and community education, social inclusion and gender equality.

Despite its recognition in the White Paper on Adult Education women's community education receives no core funding from the Department of Education and Science.

Currently women's community education is in receipt of its core funding from the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs through the community development programme funding.

This funding has allowed women's community education survive and to develop. However, ongoing reconfiguration of funding systems within the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs threatens the future of a number of established women's community education groups. These developments highlight the inadequacies in the recognition and resourcing of women's community education and the threat such inadequacies pose for the future of women's community education.

Women's community education, because of the absence of dedicated funding, has continually to search for funding across Ireland and across the EU. It has to maintain itself through whatever pockets of resources it can garner together.

The inadequacies of the funding systems for women's community education need to be addressed as a matter of urgency.

An integrated funding system that respects women's community education as a national adult education provider is required.

This funding system has to be led by the Department of Education and Science. Such funding has also to reflect the legitimacy and integrity of the other two fronts of women's community education – social inclusion and gender equality.

Each front is integral to the ethos and practice of women's community education and each one merits resourcing for its contribution to advancing national social policy agendas.

An integrated resource system must be developed which secures the provision of women's community education and harnesses its capacity to make a sustained contribution to lifelong learning, social inclusion and gender equality in Ireland.

7.4 The Quality Assurance Framework – an integrated resource

The objectives of the AONTAS Women's Community Education Quality Assurance Framework project were to
- Research the content and the structure of a women's community education quality assurance framework
- Ensure that such a framework would be relevant to and owned by women's community education groups and
- Test out how such a resource could be used in practice in women's community education.

In ' testing out how such a resource could be used in practice' through the pilot stage of the project projects discovered that the Quality Assurance Framework was more than solely a quality assurance resource.

The pilot stage host projects reported that the Framework was in fact an integrated resource that had applications as a strategic planning, communications, team development, and evaluation resource in addition to its use as a quality assurance process.

Women's community education groups are learning organisations committed to strategic planning, evaluation and team development processes. Such capacity building has been an integral feature of the development of women's community education and is one of its distinguishing features in the education sector.

These practices are by their nature time and resource intensive.

The piloting of the quality assurance framework found that the quality assurance framework process facilitates an integrated approach to planning, quality assurance and evaluation.

The content of the Framework provides a useful context for team development through dialogue and analysis of philosophy and practice.

The Framework provides an equally useful structure for grant applications and for reports to funders.

Finally, the pilot stage found that the Framework provides a unifying discourse for women's community education.

The language and structure of the Framework is a communications system, which profiles the practice of women's community education, and marks its distinctive contribution to adult and community education, social inclusion and gender equality. Importantly, the quality assurance framework is true to the radical ethos and practice of women's community education and to the phraseology and language that women's community education groups use and have themselves authored through the case studies, and the drafting and re-drafting of the Framework.

The Framework is an integrated resource for women's community education, developed by groups and networks, flexible enough to be used by all groups, small locally based women's groups and large networks as a planning, communications, team development and quality assurance and evaluation resource that is rooted in the philosophy, social analysis and practice of quality women's community education.

7.5 A Women's Community Education Quality Assurance Process

The third key area of learning from the Quality Assurance Framework Project was in relation to the development of a quality assurance process for women's community education.

The pilot stage indicates that such a process involves three stages and within each stage there are a number of distinct quality assurance steps.

During the first stage each group quality assures its work following the methodology devised by the AONTAS Women's Community Education Quality Assurance Framework Project.

The first stage marks the collective ownership by the individual group or Network of the quality assurance process and its commitment to such a process.

In the second stage each group's quality assurance process is shared with and collectively validated by a collective of women's community education groups following the methodology devised by the Quality Assurance Framework Project.

In the third stage a national women's community education quality assurance panel independently verifies the quality assurance process and the women's community education quality assurance mark is conferred on those groups that have verifiably followed all stages in the process.

Stage 1: Women's Community Education Culture of Quality as a local group or Network

The pilot stage of the project found that there is a commitment to quality provision at local level in women's community education.

The pilot stage learning about translating that commitment into a quality assurance process was that there are six steps in the first stage of such a process.

1. *Collective Ownership:* a group or Network has to take collective ownership for the culture of quality and the quality assurance process. Discussions need to span the staff and management committee and groups of participants, if participants are to be part of the quality assurance process

2. *Leadership:* Two leaders for the quality assurance process need to be willing to take responsibility for facilitating and guiding the quality assurance process, supported by the structure established by the national panel (see mainstreaming below)

3. *Preparation:* The quality assurance leadership team need to participate in a preparatory process which will enable them to facilitate the introductory workshop which introduces the Quality Assurance Framework to the group

4. *Facilitation:* The team of two co-facilitate the introductory workshop and the whole group has an opportunity to familiarise themselves with the Framework and the remainder of the quality assurance process

5. *Decision-making:* the group or Network takes a decision as to whether or not to continue with the women's community education culture of quality process and formally establish a quality assurance working group

6. *Culture of Quality:* the working group participate in the quality assurance workshops and fulfill the requirements of the quality assurance process including the collection of evidence of quality practice, developing a

quality assurance plan and participation by the team leaders in stage two of the women's community education culture of quality process representing their group

All of the steps in stage one were successfully piloted. The methodology devised for using and applying the Framework is such that with appropriate guidance and support anyone familiar with and committed to women's community education can facilitate the quality assurance workshops – no previous facilitation training or experience is necessary.

The minimum recommended number for the quality assurance working group is six. A membership of eight to ten works very well. More that twelve may be unwieldy.

Stage 2: Women's Community Education Culture of Quality as a collective:

The second stage of the process centres on women's community education as a collective.

There are four steps in Stage Two:

1. *Collective Quality Assurance:* the representatives of the group or Network meet with representatives from other groups and Networks who are also engaged in the quality assurance process. The representatives gather between each workshop to present their findings and learning from each workshop. There are opportunities for dialogue and exchange on each principle and each dimension, on evidence and on the quality assurance plan

2. *Transparency:* each group or Network is transparent in its self-appraisal and learning. The process is facilitated to support groups and Networks exchange their struggles and limitations as well as their successes and achievements. Groups learn from each other in the process of quality assuring each other's work.

3. *Quality Assurance Plan:* each group or Network develops a simple quality assurance plan as it works through the Framework. The purpose of the plan is to support the culture of continuous improvement that is at the heart of quality assurance. The plan notes the changes in relation to a principle or a dimension that the group will make to enhance its quality provision. Group members with responsibility for making or leading this change are identified. Evidence for the desired outcome from such a change is named.

4. *Peer Validation:* the other groups and Networks who are part of the process collectively validate the transparency of the quality assurance process and the culture of quality in each group or Network as they collectively progress through the Quality Assurance Framework workshops.

All of the steps in Stage Two were successfully piloted. The process recognised the core aspects of the ethos and practice that unite women's community education and respected the diversity in organisation, practice and resources.

The collective environment was very supportive of learning and the spread of experiences and practices provided a rich resource for each group to tap into.

The process worked on an all-island basis and the learning resonated equally with women's experiences north and south of the border

Stage 3: National Validation

The experience and learning from the pilot phase indicates that to complete the women's community education quality assurance process an independent national validation process needs to be established.

Such a panel would have three roles – one, to coordinate the support for the quality assurance process, two, to independently validate the quality assurance process and three, to convene the women's community education 'culture of quality' awards ceremony which would be a celebration of the expertise and quality of women's community education.

The panel would receive its mandate from women's community education groups and Networks.

Whilst the piloting of such a process nationally was not within the remit of the pilot phase the role and makeup of the project Steering Group provides a starting point for a model for a national panel of the Quality Assurance Framework project.

7.6 Conclusion: Looking Forward – The Mainstreaming Stage of the Project

The achievements and the learning from the project to date indicate that a mainstreaming stage of the Quality Assurance Framework project is required to achieve two key goals - to consolidate the quality assurance of women's community education and to ensure that a resource base to support that quality provision is secured.
The mainstreaming stage will therefore have a dual focus – to establish a national quality assurance process for women's community education and alongside that to establish a secure resource base for the sustained provision of quality assured women's community education.

Five principles will underpin the mainstreaming stage.

The first principle is recognition that women's community education is a collective.
The mainstreaming stage of the project will be conducted in collaboration with the women's community education collective and with commitment to the emancipatory methodologies that has characterised the project to date.

The second principle is recognition of the expertise within women's community education.
The knowledge and expertise required to quality assure women's community education is to be found across the women's community education groups and networks. The mainstreaming stage will focus on refining Stage Two of the women's community education quality assurance process with a much broader spread of projects. This is now possible because the Quality Assurance Framework has been developed and the methodology to use and apply it devised and refined. This spread of knowledge and expertise will shape a collective mainstreamed quality assurance process.

The third principle is quality assurance interconnections.
Women's Community Education groups and Networks have relationships with both the Further and Higher Education and Training Awards Councils. The mainstreaming stage will investigate the relationship between the women's community education quality assurance process and the quality assurance processes required by FETAC and HETAC. The mainstreaming stage will develop a national quality assurance process that examines potential linkages with established accreditation processes and the National Framework of Awards.
In relation to interconnections, the pilot stage had an all-island dimension and ideally there will be continue to be an all-island dimension and all-island linkages in the mainstreaming stage of the project.

The fourth principle is informed independence.
In relation to Stage Three of the quality assurance process the mainstreaming stage will identify the criteria and procedures for the constitution of a women's community education national quality assurance panel, which will independently and transparently coordinate and support the quality assurance process and the procedures for independent verification of quality assured practice.

The fifth principle is sustainability.

The development of women's community education is dependent on a sustained and integrated resource base, which has yet to be put in place. Establishing such a resource base will be an integral part of the mainstreaming stage. The mainstreaming stage of the project will engage firstly with the Department of Education and Science. A process will be worked out that also includes the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform in relation to the gender equality agenda and with the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs and Social and Family Affairs in relation to social inclusion. A sustainable funding programme that relates to the lifelong learning, social inclusion and gender equality fronts of women's community education will be identified and established through the work of the mainstreaming stage of the project.

The mainstreaming stage of the Quality Assurance Framework Project will develop integrated resourcing and quality assurance systems to support the contribution of women's community education to women's lives and to lifelong learning, social inclusion and gender equality in a new millennium and in a new Ireland.

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