

**Presentation to Women's Committee of the European Parliament by the  
National Federation of Women's Institutes-Wales  
Monday 5 November 2007**

**Women Living in Rural Areas in Wales**

I would like to thank you for the opportunity of presenting this paper to you today, which is on women living in rural Wales. Wales has a population of 2.9 million of which 1,521,000 are women. Wales covers an area of 2.078m hectares of which 1.706m hectares are rural with a population of around 960,000.

To give you a brief background of the organisation that I am representing, which is the National Federation Women's Institutes (NFWI)-Wales, it is the largest women's voluntary organisation in the UK. It aims to offer women the best opportunity to make an impact in their communities, to influence local, national and world issues affecting the social, economic and environmental life of families and communities and to learn new and traditional skills. In Wales, NFWI has a membership of 16,000 women based in 500 WIs within 13 Federations (counties). The NFWI is almost unique in that it is very active on issues such as food and farming, has deep roots in rural communities, has a firm commitment to sustainable development both at home and abroad and is fully independent of government and industry.

Women are the backbone of many rural communities in Wales and assume many roles. Traditionally they have played a large part in supporting rural areas and family farms through diversification, there is also a very strong expectation on women to perform ad hoc tasks around the rural villages and communities, and they also adopt caring roles relating to the elderly and children, roles that are often regarded as an extension of the domestic role.

Women's roles are not always recognised or respected. There is a need for recognition of women's unpaid contribution to the economy. Women, through their involvement in the life of their communities, play a key part in regenerating communities and improving quality of life. NFWI's Wealth of the Countryside survey shows that its members contribute almost £35m worth of time in a year through voluntary work. Activities include assisting local schools and helping young people with learning disabilities. Members also care for their community with often unnoticed activities such as driving neighbours to hospital appointments and checking up on older people living alone. All these activities contribute towards a vibrant economy.

Rural women are disadvantaged in society and encounter poverty of opportunity in all areas of life – labour market exclusion, low pay, lack of affordable quality childcare, poor pension entitlements and limited access to services. Women's poverty is also closely linked to their family status and caring roles. Since the majority of caring remains unpaid, women's caring roles have a major impact on women's economic status. All these factors contribute to women's social exclusion and their inability to participate in the running of their communities.

The rural idyll presents an image of the woman at home caring for her family but this traditional image removes women from the jobs market which has contemporary links with poverty, disempowerment and isolation. In rural Wales 45% of men work full time as opposed to 29% of females, where as 17% females work part time as opposed

to 4% of men. The percentage of women who are economically active in rural Wales be it in full time or part time employment or self employed is 52% which is less than the Welsh average of 67.8% and 69.9% for the UK. Much of the work that women do is in farming or in shops, hotels and restaurants and overall earnings are lower than in urban areas.

There are many issues facing women in rural Wales however, and the following issues come up time and time again:

### **Childcare**

Lack of access to affordable high quality childcare acts as a barrier to both learning and employment. The Survey of Rural Services in Wales (2005) demonstrated that a large proportion of councils in rural Wales with a population below 4000 had no nursery provision.

There is a desperate need for adequate, affordable and good quality care provision or women will continue to find it difficult to enter into and retain employment.

Once in employment, employers do not always practice flexible working policies or give consideration to caring issues which enable women to remain happy in their jobs and to progress in their chosen career.

### **Care of the elderly**

In Wales 340,000 people are providing unpaid care and the majority of these are women. The Survey of Rural Services in Wales (2005) highlights the lack of care provision for the elderly and disabled with 74% of Councils without day care facilities for the elderly and 89% without day care provision for the disabled.

With the provision of these services posing such a problem for women, it is not easy to gain employment as often the only option available to women is part time work, and there is not enough part time work to fit in with childcare and other responsibilities. Because of this shortage of childcare and care provision generally, it is worth noting that in these circumstances family and friends undertake the role of caring, but this does not always provide the security that more formal arrangements can give. Therefore it is important to recognise that often this family support facilitates work.

### **Transport**

Getting to work or to places with work impedes women more than men with women in rural areas finding transport more of a problem than those living in towns and cities. The provision of public transport in Wales is related to the size of the population; as the population of an area grows so does the public transport. Linking this to employment, the need for people to travel to work is also related to population size, the smaller the population the greater the need for people to travel to suitable employment. Bus services that run at peak hours are fairly limited in large parts of rural Wales with less than 50% of communities having such services in population bands of less than a 1,000 people

In 2005 NFWI undertook research for its 90@90 report which represents women's reflections on how consumer habits had changed over the last 90 years and how these

changes affect our physical and social environment. In the report WI members highlight the impractical nature of public transport at the present time which is most apparent to those living in rural areas. It is evident that poor public transport provision gives rise to social exclusion. In many areas of rural Wales public transport is expensive and infrequent which results in isolation from social, health and welfare, and employment facilities and at times compromises personal safety.

A Briefing paper 'Gender and Bus Travel' in Wales produced by the Welsh Consumer Council in December 2005 highlights how women's and men's transport needs differ. For example, 56% of women are frequent or occasional users of buses, compared to just 39% of men; the pay gap between men and women means that women are less likely to be able to afford private transport; women are more likely to travel with bags and pushchairs and women are more likely to work irregular shifts and need to commute outside normal working hours. The Monitoring Poverty and Social Exclusion Report (2005) also reported that public transport links did not connect with places of employment at times which support labour market participation.

The NFWI-Wales has maintained that appropriate local transport provision is essential for the well-being of rural communities, especially for women, who are often at greater risk of feeling isolated.

### **Access to Services**

Access to services is increasingly becoming problematic in rural areas. The closure of banks, post offices, schools and hospitals all impact on the vibrancy of a community and its population's health and well being. In 2004 the Wales Rural Observatory undertook a detailed survey of local service in rural Wales using Community Councils (or Town Councils) as the unit of analysis, over 70% of the councils responded and the survey identified that 68% did not have shops selling food, 67% did not have shops selling non food items and 38% did not have a general store. With regard to post offices 72% of councils did not have a post office and as for banks and building societies 85% did not have a bank and 90% were without a building society.

The NFWI-Wales is concerned about the impact that the loss of local businesses is having on communities across the UK. Small shops are closing at a rate of 50 a week and many farmers are being forced out of business by the supermarkets' buying processes. Local shops are often the lifeblood of communities. Many WI members have been directly affected by such closures and have seen their communities suffer as a result. In NFWI's 90@90 report, WI members frequently expressed resistance to the perceived threat of big supermarkets to smaller retailers and local businesses which are being driven out of business by the price strategies of the large supermarkets. The average £40 per household that is perceived as being saved on our food bills pales into insignificance against the impact of the loss of newsagents, grocers, pharmacies and other small shops to local economies, and the communities that they sustain.

NFWI-Wales is also concerned that it is the most vulnerable who are directly affected by the loss of local shops and post offices, such as older people and low-income families who may rely on such smaller local shops because they do not have

accessible transport to get to the out of town supermarkets, and often this can lead to poor nutritional habits as access to fresh food becomes limited.

Access to health services is also problematic in rural Wales. Rural Communities are concerned about the lack of dental surgeries as there is a chronic shortage of dentists and other dental team members in parts of Wales, with 84% without a dental practice. Access to Doctors surgeries and out of hours provision, which often only includes a telephone service, long delays for a Doctor at night or an ambulance and the distance of having to travel to hospitals also give cause for concern.

It is also estimated that 1 in 4 people will have a mental health problem at some time during their life and farming has been identified as one of the occupations most at risk of suicide. With regard to women, statistics are very hard to come by on this issue, since it is a condition that is both hard to define and hard to admit to. The only statistics that are routinely kept that might provide a barometer of rural stress are the suicide statistics, which are obviously at the extreme end of ungovernable stress conditions, therefore most of the evidence is anecdotal. Research by the Rural Stress and Wellbeing Network suggests that women suffering from rural stress are an even more invisible group than male sufferers. The culture of making-do and coping may prevent them asking for help for themselves. One doctor reported that while a wife might bring her husband to the doctor if he is stressed or depressed, husbands will rarely bring their wives. There is also evidence that women in the farming community are subject to increasing and unrecognised stress in that they are continuing to fulfil their traditional role in supporting the farming business and also having to take additional outside work to boost farming income.

To address some of these issues and empower women to take make a difference in their communities, NFWI-Wales has a number of campaigns which seek to support and protect services in rural areas. They are:

**Farmgate Milk Prices** – In 2005 WI members passed a resolution calling on members to *“do all in their power to raise public awareness of the unfair difference between the retail price of milk and the price paid to the farmer”*. WI members know that dairy farmers contribute in a positive way to the environment and their communities and want to ensure that dairy farmers do not continue to go out of business as this will have a colossal effect on the environment and rural communities. In April 2007 over a 100 Great Milk Debates were held in England and Wales to highlight the disproportionate share of revenues received by dairy farmers for their milk. The debates identified several recommendations which included:

- Educating consumers on the importance of buying locally produced food and illustrating how this benefits the local economy.
- Ensuring that farmers are knowledgeable and empowered to work with supermarkets
- Promoting safe locally produced food and educating consumers on food miles “Fair Trade Starts at Home”

**Closure of Rural Schools** – The WI is a member of the Association of Small Schools in Wales (ACWSS). The Association believes that the closure of rural schools undermines the social fabric that exists within small communities, affecting language, community spirit and social fabric; currently 3.4 schools close every year in Wales.

In 2006, 5,000 WI members signed a petition calling on the Minister for Education to acknowledge the crisis facing rural village schools and publish new guidelines for Local Authorities. ACWSS also has an ambition to develop small schools as a community resource and has looked at the lessons learnt in Poland where there are 200 not for profit community run schools.

**Closure of Post Offices** – NFWI-Wales has expressed its concern on several occasions about changes within the post office service. In 2006 WI members wrote to their MPs to express their concern about the withdrawal and forced migration from the Post Office Card Account (POCA) as this will force thousands of post offices to close. The current Network Change Programme is giving grave cause for concern amongst WI members, given that 75% of rural post offices are run alongside another retail business and many are only likely to remain viable if both businesses are able to continue, post offices can easily be defined as services which contribute to the ‘continued viability of rural communities and provide access to employment opportunities’. Rural post offices have great value (including social value) attached to them by residents, particularly by older people or customers with disabilities. This is because the post offices remain an important source of documentary forms, information and advice on public services. They also provide access to cash and basic banking facilities and process social benefits and license applications. Post offices therefore ‘provide key services to local communities and stepping stones to increased economic activity’. More broadly, the continued existence of post offices sustains ‘rural quality of life’ and enhances opportunity in rural areas for those who are disadvantaged’. WI members are being encouraged to respond to the current consultation on the closures of 31 post offices in Cardiff and the Vale of Glamorgan.

**Closure of Community Hospitals** – in June 2007, WI members passed a resolution ‘urging Her Majesty’s Government to stop the closure of Community Hospitals, which provide essential services to local people’. Also in June the Welsh Assembly Government announced a moratorium on change to community hospitals which means no changes to community and district hospitals until alternative community services are in place. As these changes will ultimately have an effect on services in rural areas, NFWI-Wales will be keeping a watchful eye on developments and encouraging WI members to respond when necessary.

In addition NFWI-Wales also sits on the Campaign for the Protection of Rural Wales and the Rural Stress and Wellbeing Network.

Women are central to families and communities, yet all over the world they are a marginalised social group who are disadvantaged in society and under represented in decision making. Women make up 53% of the population of Wales, but they continue to be disadvantaged compared to men and persistent gender inequalities continue to leave women without an equal voice in the decision making processes that impact on their lives and their environment.

Recent research by The Carnegie Commission for Rural Community Development stated that for rural communities to thrive in the future, they need to be given a greater say in their own affairs and the means to secure successful futures for themselves. This means strengthening local democracy and investing in local communities to enable them to manage and own important local assets and enterprises. NFWI-Wales

believes that women have a vital role to play in the future development of their communities and the organisation is uniquely placed to encourage and empower women to undertake these roles. NFWI-Wales has long recognised this vital role as the following quote from the book 'A Grain of Mustard Seed' which gives an account of the founding of the first Women's Institutes in Great Britain states:

“Of all the groups of women, countrywomen may truly be said to be endowed with a considerable share of practical wisdom. Without it they would assuredly come quickly to grief, for when one is in close contact with natural forces, as all country folk are, to fail to be practical is to fail to survive.”