



REFLECTIONS ON

**TOGETHERNESS**

a practitioner's tool for  
developing intercultural  
competence

To all Women of the World,  
thank you for walking this  
journey together. The project  
has ended, our story continues!

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**South Belfast Roundtable (SBR)** began in 2004, as a response to increasing migration, diversity and sadly, associated racist hate crime. It comprised of more than 105 partner groups and over the following 18 years delivered educational, advocacy and integration projects.

Belfast Friendship Club (BFC) was launched in 2009, under the SBR umbrella. It was designed as a space for people from all over the world and for Belfast residents to meet in a diverse, supportive and relaxed environment, get information, become involved in activities and events, make new friends and help each other.

When SBR closed its doors in the summer of 2022, BFC continued under Together NI CIC, and it goes from strength to strength. While BFC did meet the needs of many hundreds of people, it became apparent that for some, particularly women, meeting on a Thursday evening was not a good fit, either culturally or in relation to their family lives.

**Women of the World (WoW)** started as an attempt to create a similar environment for women of all backgrounds, supporting informal interactions over a cuppa and cake, in Common Grounds Café, in Belfast, the first Monday morning of each month. The aim was simply to facilitate a social space where women could gather for some 'me time', to share their interests and their skills.

A six-week pilot began in 2017 and when this proved successful, SBR were really fortunate to access the Voice of Migrant Women programme funding from the VSB Foundation, through support from the Pilgrim Trust, to continue the work. In practical terms, the WoW experience consisted of monthly gatherings, bi-annual residentials, ad hoc days-out and regular correspondence through a WhatsApp group.

On personal levels, it has been a sometimes challenging but deeply inspiring journey, especially through the COVID years, but together, as women, WoW have generated some wonderful relationships and memories which will endure for many years to come.

I remember an old conversation with my mother while cooking together... she used to say: *Do not worry, if you put good stuff in, it can only taste good. It is the same with people, you do good and everything will turn out good.*

Looking back, I can honestly say that using quality ingredients didn't necessarily make my cooking any better, and similarly with people, doing *good*, somehow wasn't enough. Over the lifespan of Women of the World, my mother's words have often sprung to mind, prompting the question: how do we do *good* intercultural work? If we put *good* stuff in, does it always turn out *good*? And who decides what *good* is?

In recent years, there has been a noticeable shift from multiculturalism to interculturalism, yet it still remains an area of work that is open to personal interpretation and the practice continues to be trial and error. My own previous experience, both as participant and facilitator, revolved around targeted workshops, to discuss on a particular topic or to learn a new skill.

While there were some benefits to working in this way, such a set-up was hardly conducive to meaningful relationships between people of different cultures. Equally intriguing was to observe that something as natural as human interactions, ended up being so laboured and predetermined!

With Women of the World, we put the previous experience and theory to the side and went back to the drawing board, to explore a different way of doing intercultural work, based on what the members told us *good* meant for *them*. We did not always get it right, but if we did one thing well, it was listening to people, with intent and with our minds wide open.

In these pages, we enclose our most cherished legacy: insights that we have gathered over the years and that guided our approach to intercultural practice: they challenged our assumptions, compelled us to reflect, kept us focused and motivated.

These reflections do not offer answers to all matters intercultural but they remain valid to any circumstances that involve working with people in a culturally sensitive manner. Ten little pieces of wisdom, nothing completely new, but collectively, they tell our story of *togetherness, as an act of bringing people of different backgrounds together in a way that is authentic and respectful of their dignity.* We share our understanding of them, in the hope that they will inspire others, in similar ways.

**Denis Long,  
WoW Facilitator**



# HOW TO USE THIS RESOURCE



This booklet features ten sections, that you can read as one piece or that you can dip in and out of, when looking for stimulating ideas.

Imagine them as post-its above your desk, capturing your attention and inviting you to pause the doing and take time to weigh up the significance of information and the consequences for action.

Each section includes a reflection on a particular issue, accompanied by additional perspectives or suggestions, to help you build on the WoW learning and develop regular reflective habits. Purposely captured in bite-size, these interpretations do not aim to elucidate meanings in their entirety, but rather give a flavour of what worked for us and leave room for your own explorations, adapted to your contexts of work.

We would like to encourage you to consider them each, and critically engage with this resource, beyond a mere passive reading.



# Reflections

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# Facilitating Spaces for Women Only

“We are coming together to be the persons we forget we are, to be ourselves, to be whoever we want to be.”

*A Woman of the World*

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Space. It's what we do with it that matters. Some use it to spread their arms out wide and embrace the world around them. Some borrow space only when they need it. And some try to take as little as possible. But when space isn't held for you, your world can feel very small.

Providing a space just for women brought its share of moral and practical dilemmas: was it right to exclude children and could this prevent participation? The lack of childcare provision did prove to be an impediment for some women and they were introduced to alternative activities, better suited to parents and children. There was general agreement that women needed spaces for themselves and while this seemed limiting, in fact, it was opening up possibilities.

Using a child-free zone, gave each woman a space that was hers, a space in which the dynamics of her interactions were not defined by being a mother and by the caring for her children. She could present herself as she chose and she could be fully present to listen, to create, to speak or just be.



**Handle with care!**

A child-friendly environment is not always female-friendly: not every woman is a mother and there are women who have had traumatic experiences of losing their children.

Striking the right balance when catering for different needs, delivers truly inclusive social places for women, regardless of their personal circumstances.



# Using Inclusive Language

**‘What do I mean by labels?  
Every label you can conceive  
of, perhaps that of human  
being. I am a human being.’**

*Anthony de Mello, Awareness*

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Words can liberate us or they can limit us. They can lock us out of the conversation or welcome us in. They can build walls or unite us. It all depends on how they are used. We spend our lives categorising ourselves and each other. It is tempting, we get a misleading sense of understanding and control. But what if better awareness is found when we break out of the label?

Many women shared discomfort with the professional jargon used to identify them. Words such as BAME are associated with people who had moved to Northern Ireland at some stage in their lives - they were perceived as a subtle way of *othering*, often used to simplify cultural difference and divide. Such labels appear to benefit the system, rather than the people attached to them.

Describing people in this way, makes it easier to forget that identities are more complex and diverse than a tick-box could ever suggest and that we all are, essentially, *people!* All-encompassing language can help everyone feel appreciated for who they are - in this particular instance, Women of the World!



# Building on Commonalities

'In our drive to celebrate diversity, we slowly forget how similar we actually are.'

*A Woman of the World*

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Swallows fly south for winter. Salmon swim upstream to ensure their young survive. And humans move around the corner or across the planet for a multitude of reasons. Whatever the motivation may be, we have one thing in common. We are all migrants.

Women who migrated to Belfast from Great Britain or the Republic of Ireland have been viewed as native. Women from Northern Ireland who moved to Belfast from other areas or who moved abroad for a few years and later returned, have been perceived as locals. But, in reality, many identified as incomers. Rather than narrowing the doorway, shouldn't we widen it by challenging what the true meaning of migrant is?

Shifting the focus from what makes us different (migrant or native) to what we have in common (experiences, challenges or interests), provided a pathway to inclusion, communication and trust for women from all walks of life. Breaking the mould for migrant women, highlighted the importance of working in a way that recognises our shared humanity!



**Food for thought!** ★

Would you consider putting together a *Policy of Similarity* to complement your company's Diversity Policy... if so, what would it look like?



# Paying Attention to Unintended Consequences

**'Vulnerability is a status we  
grant too loosely, without fully  
understanding the implications.'**

*A Woman of the World*

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Have you ever heard of kintsugi? It is the Japanese art of putting something back together with gold, so that its vulnerability is transformed into strength. It is not defined by what it lacks but it is celebrated for what it has become.

One of the reasons migrants show resistance to the name *migrant*, is the assumption of vulnerabilities and the lack of recognition of people's multiple identities and abilities. Vulnerabilities and strengths come in many shapes and forms and each person is a complex mix of both. Attempting to build someone's sense of self based on a foundation of vulnerability can be overpowering, reinforcing their exposures and ultimately, setting people up to fail.

Keeping doors open to all, regardless of perceived level of need, provided a framework that did not hold the women back, but allowed the group to build each other up. This nurtured a space where the women could exercise and share both their vulnerabilities and their capacities. It reminded us all to embrace the cracks too, for there's value and beauty in fragility!

**Changing the lenses!**



Calling someone vulnerable puts the onus on them, implying that they are vulnerable because they lack something, either knowledge, skills, abilities or resources. People are not inherently vulnerable, they are *vulnerable to* external factors, whether that is racism, poverty, abuse, structural inequalities, war...

Changing the perspective places the onus on us, as society, to address the root causes of vulnerability.



# Respecting Dignity

‘What better way to demonstrate our love than to recognize each other’s value and worth. Does this give us a clue to what dignity feels like? Does it feel like love?’

*Donna Hicks, Dignity*

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Who taught you your greatest life lessons? Maybe it was a stranger on the street teaching you the art of compassion. A 90-year-old sharing the benefit of experience. Or a toddler reminding you that curiosity is pure magic. There is no one – not one single person in this world – we can't learn something from. They don't have to be company managers or be the most educated people in the room. Learning is about being open to the lessons all around.

Bringing in external facilitators to educate a group can accidentally establish a sense of lacking in the participants themselves. It inevitably highlights the gaps in their skills, rather than valuing what is already there, in abundance.

Opening up opportunities for women to lead on activities, enabled them to showcase their skills, be it their ability to speak a different language or to express themselves artistically, their passion for cooking or for making people feel good. Working from a place of strengths, can also demonstrate organisational candour to cultivating a dignified culture, beyond verbal or policy commitments.



**Dignity as a matter of  
worth & self-worth!**

'The way people look at you and treat you is vital. But what is equally important is that programs help women see their value and their worth. Sometimes all you need is someone to believe in you, so you can start believing in yourself!'

*A Woman of the World*

# Leaving Room for Organic & Informal Developments

“You give me the space and I will fill it”

*A Woman of the World*

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Will a caterpillar transform into a delicate butterfly, unfurl its wings and learn to fly quicker if we attempt to show it how? The same applies to the natural evolution of people. After all, we each know best what we need!

All too often, facilitators can overlook the members' ability to operate in a new setting and choose to micromanage every aspect of a program. Maybe it is learnt behaviour or maybe it is reassuring to know its every element. Whatever the individual reasons may be, it leaves little room for mandate or trust in the members' capacity to co-design new spaces. Participants can end up having to compromise themselves into predetermined moulds, that often don't suit them.

Facilitating an organic environment, free from expectations, gave the women control over what they brought and took from their time in the program: leading on an activity, or simply taking part in one, getting to know someone they had never met before or quietly sipping from a cuppa, deep in their own thoughts. Sometimes people just need to be given permission to go at their own pace. It can be as simple as that!



**Taming your inner critic!**

Allowing the work to emerge naturally can be a slow process and a bit disconcerting at times, but there is value in trusting the process and trusting the people to choose what's best for them.



# Questioning the Concept of 'Empowerment'

'The reason we need to empower  
people is because we took that  
power away from them.'

*Patty McCord, Powerful*

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Power. It's the currency the world trades in. Some utilize it to build empires. Some use it to travel to the next frontier. And some... well, they just exploit it to keep other people down.

Empowerment is a well-used notion in community work, one that some people aim towards, others express discomfort with. The reality is that, even with the best of intentions, empowerment is being used and abused. The concept is built on the assumption that some people have power that they can give to others. It places the facilitator in an unequal relationship of standing over people and it raises false expectations of power-transfer.



**Try a different route!**

What other words could you use instead of empowerment? Are they better alternatives? How?

People are not powerless and empowerment is not something that can be provided from outside, it is a rather internal state of being.

Taking a back role, allowed the facilitators to engage in activities as fully fledged participants, to share, learn and be exposed, in equal measure. Walking alongside each other, established a levelled ground where every person had the freedom to act and make their own choices. Instead of *empowering*, the attention went on co-creating an environment where the women could be their best selves, supporting them to find own resources and trust the power within.

# Acknowledging the Challenge of Self-Care

‘We all need a little bit of honey, in  
a world that is so confused.’

*A Woman of the World*

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What is your idea of *me time*? For many, it's reconnecting with friends. For others, it's sneaking downstairs in the middle of the night for a guilt-free snack. While for some, it's just locking the bathroom door to have a few minutes of pure, unadulterated breathing space. That's not much to ask! So why do so many women struggle to allow themselves some much needed downtime?

In a world where women keep on *giving*, the idea of *receiving* proved to be more challenging. When offered openings, women can be tempted to negotiate and offer counterarguments as to why they don't really need them, afford them or in some instances, deserve them. Little 'treats' such as a couple of hours of 'me time', a free day out or a night-away proved to be testing endeavours.

Considering the regular pressures that women face on an individual basis, as well as the particular circumstances of the current times, it is essential that there are consistent opportunities for this type of unconditional relief and deliver spaces where women can achieve a sense of sisterhood and collective self-care.



### How much is enough?

Switching the focus from *doing* to *being*, can enable participants to have more rewarding encounters with themselves and others.

# Working in a Non-Violent Way

**‘Reward is just as coercive as punishment [...] controlling the environment in a way that tries to force people to behave in ways that we like.’**

*Marshall B. Rosenberg, Nonviolent Communication,  
A Language of Life*

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Did you do your school homework because you loved doing it? Many of us, most likely, did our homework to avoid detention or to prevent being embarrassed in front of the whole class. Or because we wanted recognition or that gift that the parents said we could have if we did well in school. But doesn't that look more like coercion than motivation?

Thankfully detention isn't on the cards in a community group setting. However, it can only feel natural for facilitators to use a positive reward system, such as access to a qualification, a highly desired activity or other incentives, to determine people to engage in a program. This threatens people's autonomy and their right to choose, free from constraints. A form of oppressive practice.

Allowing the women to do as little or as much they could, as often or as seldom they wished and still enjoy the 'rewards', ensured that the power dynamic remained balanced. It supported the women to act on genuine, inner motivations, rather than external pressures. By means of promoting anti-oppressive practice!

**Imagine beyond boundaries!\***



Is your approach based on any assumptions?  
What are the implications of continuing to work in this way?  
Who benefits? Who loses?  
How can it be thought otherwise?

*\*Critical Literacy, Open Spaces for Dialogue and Enquiry Methodology*



# Being Authentic

'In Latin, 'authentic' means 'coming from the author'. Being authentic can be understood as *being the author of your own story!*

*A Woman of the World*

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Our cultural stories could be written in a multitude of ways. Each day we write another chapter, adding richness from everything we experience along the way. Our culture is the result of a very personal blend of influences: from our family upbringing, our general environment, the education we receive, the people we look up to, the beliefs we hold dear, our experiences and passions.

Reducing someone's culture to one feature (generally race or faith) or to traditional displays (such as music or food) only introduces a superficial, mostly stereotypical idea of who people really are. It lets us experience cultural difference in a way that is far removed from people's personal realities.

The power of organic human interactions can often go deeper than any culturally engineered activity. By removing the focus from nationality, ethnicity or religion altogether, the women had the freedom to introduce their cultures in their own terms. Sometimes, a photo album spoke a million words. A treasured object carried people across the globe and back, in a matter of minutes. Spending time together in each other's homes brought intimate insights and heart-warming connections. We are all cultural beings, with a unique story to tell!



### A gentle reminder! ★

Authenticity means different things to different people. Consider ways of tapping into individual views and nurturing them, with integrity and sensitivity!

## Building Intercultural Competence Through Reflection

The thoughtful, patient work of **Women of the World** is a fascinating case study from which many can learn – whenever people and organisations are keen to be genuinely inclusive and have authentic dialogue among people of different backgrounds and cultures.

As Northern Ireland is made up of an increasingly diverse population, it is crucial we get better at having real conversations with many voices at the table and creating spaces for shared journeys, whether in education, at community level, in considering how we deliver essential services or exploring the future of our land.

Many of our intercultural interactions are acutely influenced by fragmented information and misrepresentations. We often make assumptions and take short cuts, in an attempt to make sense of the world around us and keep up with its fast pace. But the real implications to interculturalism, come when we take actions based on information that may be limited, prejudiced or overly generalised.

Reflective practice, critically checking assumptions, noticing and listening, and then feeding that in to future approaches is vital, yet it can be hard for people with a plan to deviate from it!

How can groups, leaders and funders allow space for the emergent opportunities in their plans?

How can funders support organisations to be reflective and flexible to changing priorities and context, to really hear and be founded on participants' experiences and perspectives, rather than expect specific impacts to be anticipated some years ahead?

How might services build in ways to hear the voices of those with lived experience to adapt and meet individual and community needs rather than assume a uniformity of life journeys?

This publication encourages practitioners to recognise their own strengths and weaknesses and commit to a process of continual adaptation and learning.

Women of the World was a small group, meeting over a five-year period, yet it offers learning and questions that, if engaged with, could help their reflective practice ripple out beyond this modest project.

**Kate Campbell (Coordinator) & Chris McCartney (Evaluator)**  
**Voices of Migrant Women - VSB Foundation**



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