

# “Throwing a pebble into the pond of peace”: Interview with Patricia Buckley and Eileen Stuttard

Researched by [Amandine Blancquaert](#)<sup>1</sup>

**Patricia Buckley** from Ballsmill, Crossmaglen, has over forty years' experience of volunteering in the community sector. In 1987 she was one of the founder members of WORD (Women on Rural Development), an organisation established to articulate the voice of rural women and to help and support community-based women's groups and individual women to achieve their goals. This was particularly important at the time, as the Conflict in Northern Ireland, resulted in few, if any, opportunities for rural women. Patricia's goal was and is still to inspire women, which she feels is especially important, because “empowering women, empowers communities.” From WORD, Patricia, amongst others created South Armagh Rural Women's Network (SARWN) in 1992 and Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network (NIRWN) in 1997, both organisations continue to offer support and guidance to woman locally. Patricia is also a trained facilitator and over the years enjoyed meeting and training women from both sides of the border.



**Eileen Stuttard** spent her adult life working as a nurse. Living in Crossmaglen, she witnessed some of the darker days of the Conflict in Northern Ireland. She too, was instrumental in the foundation of WORD (Women on Rural Development) as she observed first-hand the lack of opportunities for rural women. She was also a founder member of Ard Ross Community Association which aimed to improve the quality of life and standard of living for local people. Eileen was pivotal in providing guidance and support to other nearby communities advising them on how to establish community facilities and help themselves. Eileen participated in the formation of South Armagh Rural Women's Network in 1992 which offered support and guidance to local women. Eileen continues to work tirelessly to provide opportunities for women living in rural communities on both sides of the border.



**Amandine Blancquaert (AB): Could you tell us about life next to the border in the end of the 1960s, and how you thought about crossing it? Would you describe it as an invisible border then?**

**Eileen Stuttard (ES):** As people from South Armagh, we'd consider Dundalk as our town, more so than Newry. It's our nearest shopping town. When I was a young kid, I used to ride a tricycle to Dundalk, to shop with my mother all the time. That how it was for people living along the border.

During the conflict, you were stopped at the border. My children were going to work in Newry and they were stopped, held on the roads and kept late for their work. Danger was just constant. One day a soldier was shot right in front of us on the street. There are so many incidents that, at this stage of our lives, we just want to forget about it now. We are constantly asked about it.

**Patricia Buckley (PB):** When I left school, I went to work in Dundalk. I didn't come to work in the North, I just crossed the border every day. [...] I never even saw it as a border. Not until it was blown up. The roads were blown up, but locals were very creative and they drove into the field to go to the other side. It didn't really create much of a hassle for us.

**ES:** No. You could still get to where you wanted to go.

**PB:** Which we did. The border, we never really saw it as a border, to be honest.

**Anthony Soares (AS): So you didn't see it as a border, but it becomes a bit more visible when people or security forces start blocking them?**

**PB:** I think my biggest dread at night was coming, let's say, from Dundalk towards my home when you'd see the red lights on the road at the border.

**AS: You were talking about seeing the red lights flashing at night, without knowing whether it was security forces or not stopping you. As women, especially at night, was that hard?**

**PB:** It was hard. I'm just thinking back to the time when we came together as a women's group and we would have met at night. I actually don't know how we did that.

**ES:** We didn't have that fear in us. Well, we were much younger, of course.

**PB:** We never let it stop us doing what we wanted to do. We continued doing what we were doing.

**AS: How did you become involved and why did you think it was important then to work with women? What were you trying to do, bringing these women together?**

**ES:** I think we were trying to get them out of the house, away from domesticity, because they wouldn't have had an interest outside their homes. Many women were housebound because of the Conflict, many missed educational and social opportunities. At that time, a lot of women depended on their husbands to do everything, and we were trying to maybe just give them that bit of independence. You know, to be more active in their own minds about finding out information about themselves and doing stuff. Not being afraid to do stuff.

**PB:** It was a different time from today. We wanted to empower women more. There was so little reason to be happy, it was very doom and gloom. On reflection it was a very difficult time to be living in.

**ES:** Because we had pressure from both sides of the community in Crossmaglen. There were the hunger strikers. Horrendous time. We used to leave with our children, to go camping, to try and get away from it all.

**PB:** Yes. We all went south. We all socialised south of the border.

**ES:** We never would socialise north of the border. Always south.

**PB:** Even when I was a teenager or in my early twenties, I never went to a dance or a social event in the North. I went to Castleblaney, Blackrock or Dundalk. I met my husband there. I think a lot of people on the border married people from the South, because that was where our social circles were at that time. You wouldn't go to Newry. There was nothing on anyway in the North. Everything in our area focused on the south, which I always considered our natural hinterland. I still do, to be honest.

It's difficult to say why we stayed together as a group of women. We came together at an outreach course run by the College in Newry - 'Time for Me'. There was so much camaraderie around that course, and we all felt we were the same. When that course was over, there was a reluctance to go our separate ways. I think at that time, we became aware of the existence of the Rural Action Project which was funded by the European Union. It focused on three deprived areas in Northern Ireland, one being our area South Armagh.

**ES:** I got involved in that project through Enterprise Ulster, which had recently come to Crossmaglen and gave employment to local people. There was a

coordinator, a local girl who was very forward-thinking and linked it up. I remember I worked through the year with St Vincent de Paul, going around and visiting old people. Then, we did a programme where we started to decorate their houses, lots of things were happening. There was another project where the parks were renovated to improve the areas.

**PB:** And for most women at home, transport was an issue, healthcare was an issue. It still is. I remember distinctly being totally aware that Newry and Mourne Council's remit seemed to stop at Camlough. We were out on a limb, in no man's land in Crossmaglen. It was an awareness that, you know, we deserve better than this. That really motivated us, to stay together after the end of the Rural Action Project.

**ES:** Brain drain. They were all going to America. My son settled and then had children there. My sister's children are all there. You didn't want your children to be getting involved in the wrong groups. I had four sons and it was very hard, living in Crossmaglen, to keep them on the straight and narrow.

**PB:** It was a different time. As a group of women, I think we had one objective: to improve the lives of women. I think women were the people who actually were suffering a lot, because there was so much going on with their men and their children. Maybe it was just needed. We needed to be doing something positive.

**ES:** When the woman in the house is happy, the house is happy. But if she's not happy, there's no happiness.

**PB:** We had a positive effect, I think, on families.

**ES:** We did. We provided something different – an outlet, something to do and somewhere to go. We did reflexology with them and we had them talking about their health.

**PB:** When I think back on all we did – I wonder how did we get the time? I had four children.

**ES:** I had seven children.

**PB:** Yet I still remember the first time I went to the 'Time for Me' course in Crossmaglen. I had two young babies – Irish twins! There was a creche downstairs. That was the start of a journey for me. I haven't left community development since.

**AS:** And women that went to the Time for Me class in Crossmaglen, they came just from around the town? Were there any from across the border?

**ES:** Not initially, no. Not in the Time for Me class, but later on...

**PB:** They would have been mostly from Crossmaglen.

**ES:** Crossmaglen based and from the surrounding area. There are a lot of villages. Cullyhanna, Mullaghbawn, Culloville, all that. A radius of up to 20 miles away. But we did cooperate with other groups from the south. The Blayne Blades from Castleblayne. We would have worked with them. They're still in existence.

Their leader was a nun [...]. She started up a women's group in Castleblayne too, built the Íontas Centre. They were doing the same kind of things that we used to do. We used to meet them for social get togethers.

**PB:** My reflection is that further down the road, as you know, we did set up the network in South Armagh. There was an aspiration, I think, at one time that we would have a cross-border network, we did have a name for it: the North East Cross Border network. It never came to fruition. We eventually set up South Armagh Rural Women's Network. On reflection, it would have been good to have a cross border network. We had some association with the Western Women's Link and they were inspirational in setting up our network, we visited them in Westport and they told us their story.

**AB: Could you tell us more about how you set up this network in South Armagh?**

**ES:** We encouraged women in Forkhill to set up a wee group. In Mullaghbawn to set up a group. Belleek had a group but not Culloville. Cullyhanna Women's Group was pretty big. It's a group that's still running.

**PB:** You know, we managed to attract a bit of money and this helped the groups to get started.

**ES:** ... groups in their own area. They wouldn't have to come into Crossmaglen all the time, because of transport issues.

**PB:** Sometimes, we managed to take the groups from other villages to Crossmaglen. It rotated, so everybody got a bit of everything. To an extent, that did happen when the funding was there.

**AS: Where was the funding coming from?**

**PB:** Well, we were lucky, we were well supported. WORD began in 1987-88 and we got funding immediately through the Rural Action Project. They obviously directed us to where to get the first funding. The first funding was

for the Development Worker. That was key, we had a worker and an office space. There were times when it didn't look as though we were going to get the funding. But we always pulled through. At the last minute, you know. We do acknowledge we were lucky. We always managed to keep the office doors open. If there was nobody there, some of us would be there until we got going again. I don't know whether it was luck or was it just determination?

**ES:** Then we got funding from TWN, International Fund for Ireland and NIBT. We got some money from Europe. We got little bits of funding from the Cadbury's Trust. We became involved with the WEA, who ran many of their courses locally. We sent up a branch of the Irish Country Markets in Crossmaglen – this was very successful for many years.

**PB:** Women seemed to be flavour of the month at that time.

**ES:** We were a kind of intermediate group. If some organisation had a remit to do something for women, they used to come to us. We had a good track record. We never misappropriated anything. We were upfront. All our accounts were visible. We had project workers who were very good and kept everything right [...]. When we actually got involved over in the mountain, we had got into tourism. We were also involved with the Forestry Commission over on Slieve Gullion. Out of us prodding away at that, there was the development formed and there was accommodation and a purpose-built unit.

**PB:** We would have been quite instrumental in the development on Slieve Gullion. We knew we didn't have the resources so we managed to get a group over there of women, and they took over that. So we, sort of, let it go. We let things scale up.

**AS:** So when and why did WORD, which had started in 1987, become an umbrella organisation?

**PB:** When the Network was set up in 1997 under the name of South Armagh Rural Women's Network, we weren't in existence anymore because we had done our job. So we became one of the groups in the network. We had to go. There are four stages in the story of a group, and we were at the last stage of existence [...]. Three or four other women's groups like WORD, such as the Cullyhanna group and the Mullaghbawn group agreed to continue on the network committee, but we didn't exist as a group anymore.

**AS:** And are you part of the Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network?

**PB:** Yes. I'm a committee member of the Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network. I'm able to bring back any information that is relevant to us in South Armagh. The reason I became involved in that was I remember a meeting we had in Crossmaglen at one stage with Bairbre de Brún. I distinctly remember her saying there will be no organisation across Northern Ireland for women. I never forgot that, because I thought we needed more than just one network. Women's voices have to be heard for the future. For it to be able to have any impact going forward, it needs to be across Northern Ireland.

**AS:** You were talking a bit earlier about conversations WORD had with groups in the south. How did those conversations start? How did you start linking with women's organisations in the south?

**ES:** Mainly the Blayney Blades and Dundalk. The Kilcurry Women's Group, that was across the border, as well.

**PB:** The Kilcurry association came through Majella, our employee, because of one of her best friends.<sup>2</sup> is from Kilcurry. That's how that association came. Sister Celine from the Blayney Blades had approached us, because part of their remit was cross-border. I do remember we had a joint health day in Crossmaglen where we shared information with them. To be honest, there were so many similarities, as there always is with women.

**AB:** It came up earlier on that there were lots of similarities in terms of issues for women on either side of the border...

**PB:** Absolutely. It was the same on both sides. As a people, we were actually quite oppressed. There was oppression and there were a lot of health issues.

**ES:** Their mental health wouldn't have been good. The fear for their children if they were out at night. You know, you couldn't sleep if they were out at night. The Good Friday Agreement was such a relief.

**PB:** I remember being worried that my daughter was the age to go to college and she was hoping to go to Belfast. I would have been so worried about her.

**ES:** You wouldn't have dreamt of going to Belfast. You only went to Belfast on rare occasions if it was necessary, because Belfast was so bombed. In and out through gates, searching even through parcels. They couldn't go out at night. Couldn't talk to people.

**PB:** We can't go back to those times. I remember speaking to Michel Barnier when he came to Dungannon to talk with grass roots groups, around the time

of the Brexit talks. I begged him to endeavour not to let the dark times come again. "Please don't let the killing start again". Because I was so worried for my children.

The fear with Brexit, about the agreement. We met at Crossmaglen. We were so worried it would jeopardise peace.

**AS: What did women's organisations do around the time of Brexit?**

**ES:** We met to discuss it, we expressed our fears and concerns to many journalists and were even interviewed by the BBC.

**PB:** We were fearful that the Troubles would start again. We were very fearful, because we'd been through it all before and we just didn't want to go back. Lots of other people felt the same. Still do. It was a moment of crisis.

**AB: How were women's organisations working before the Good Friday Agreement, when things were really difficult in the '80s and the '90s? I suppose they would have worked on the ground...**

**ES:** South Armagh was constantly in the news, in the press, as being bandit country. We got such bad press, we had to do something positive.

**PB:** We probably didn't make any difference to the press, but we tried it. Well, I always believed that what women did had a ripple effect. I believe it was throwing a pebble into the pond of peace. You went out to the sisters, the children. It wasn't just that one woman was impacted positively in that respect. It was a positive impact on the community. So I suppose we do have a bit of a legacy in that respect.

**AB: Was it difficult to work with other women's organisations from the south? Were there obstacles to that?**

**PB:** We didn't really work with that many organisations from the South. The Blayney women were easy to work with, because they wanted to be with us. The smaller group in Kilcurry came to us and we went and visited them, but there were no barriers. We didn't continue working with them, because their remit changed.

And the Western Women's group was part of a funded programme of Maynooth University. There were benefits from it, to be honest, because we learned so much about working with them in Westport. It was positive, bringing that back to our own area. But we didn't keep up that connection. Although women did come to visit us, to stay in our homes.



But after the Good Friday Agreement, we didn't keep contact with Blayney Blades. We would still have women from the south come to our programmes in Crossmaglen. Quite a few of those ladies are from the border, Monaghan and Louth area. So we don't have necessarily working relations with community organisations, but we've individual women from those areas.

**AS: Do you feel that WORD worked in a way that governments couldn't or didn't want to?**

**PB:** I don't know. I don't know whether they weren't doing it or they didn't have the funding to do it or they didn't want to do it.

**ES:** It just wasn't a popular thing to do, to work with women or to empower women. It just wasn't a popular thing to do at that time. It wouldn't have been on their radar.

**PB:** Because I think if you read back on the history of the Rural Action Project, it was European funded. It was under an anti-poverty programme, that would come into areas that were deprived.

**ES:** We kind of fitted their remit. Of course we were deprived. Very much so deprived in Armagh. Roads and jobs. There were no jobs in Crossmaglen for young people.

**PB:** I mean, at that time, border counties and Antrim as well, were a wee bit off there. This Rural Action Project, European funded was really needed. These deprived areas needed support from either council or government bodies that obviously wasn't there.

**AB: Do you think that there's not been enough attention paid to the needs of communities living close to the border – on both sides of the border – and specifically women living in those areas?**

**PB:** Well, I think there's been an improvement. But, if there isn't continued support for that, a lot of the work that was achieved would have been wasted. It needs to be continued.

**ES:** Groups are generational, our generation is gone. There's young people coming up. They still need to continue working with younger women. We did have a younger women's group at one stage.

The next generation has to continue it. But they're not just as tied to the house or to domesticity as ours [...]. I think the younger generations, they're out and about and working. Transport has changed. The way of living has changed. Today they are away from home and can travel, and everyone has

their own car. So they don't feel that it is as important for them as it was for us, to get out, because they are out and about. They're not looking at it from the same perspective.

**PB:** But there's still a need for community development. I think it's key to community health. There needs to be some support for the younger people coming on.

**AS:** **Do you think there's enough awareness or acknowledgement of WORD's – then SARWN's and NIRWN's – early work?**

**PB:** No. I'd say they don't even know about it, to be honest. As Eileen said, everything changes. Time rolls by. I suppose people only see what's happening at the moment.

**ES:** People don't want to live in the past.

**PB:** Looking back on the things we did with WORD and then SARWN, I'm happy we did it. Very happy we did it. We'd good days and we'd bad days, and some very, very exciting days as well.

**AS:** **As we might be going into difficult times again, don't you think it's important for people to know how the things that we have now came about?**

**PB:** Well, I think it wasn't so much the projects, it was the process. The process was always important. It was all about being women. It was about listening to each other. It was about looking at all the options. Now, it was about knowing where we failed and it was okay to fail. It was knowing what was successful.

**ES:** Every woman who was with us had her voice. She mightn't have had her voice at home, but she had her voice with us. We did the Behind the Masks programme. It was people telling their story of what happened through the Troubles. That was both communities. There were a lot of southern women involved in that. That was the kind of project that allowed women to speak and be listened to.

**AB:** **Do you think the kind of work that you were doing helped having more women involved in public life, whether it's at local level as councillors, or at a higher level?**

**PB:** No, not as such, that was not an ambition of ours. Our work empowered women to interact more effectively with local councillors/authorities. We were never political. We were aware there were so many different shades.

Everybody was welcome. Everybody worked together, really and truly, which was nice. That was a success. All members were equally valued, which I think was important.

Even for peacebuilding, it was important. When I reflect back on it, I think we had some little role to play maybe in the Good Friday Agreement, who knows? As women, we weren't up there with the top people, but we might have rubbed shoulders with people who were.

**ES:** Like Monica McWilliams and May Blood. We met all those ladies. We brought people from across Northern Ireland and beyond into Crossmaglen, people that they never would have dreamt coming to Crossmaglen, because they thought it was a violent place. People still go to Crossmaglen and can't believe how friendly we are.

**PB:** So in a way, we have had a positive impact. I suppose we were paving the way and just doing our wee bit and building up a stronger community. At the end of the day, I mean, our story is long but it's...

**ES:** It's long and varied...

## Endnotes

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- <sup>1</sup> This interview was conducted on 19 July 2023 by Anthony Soares (Director of the Centre for Cross Border Studies) and Amandine Blancquaert (intern at the Centre for Cross Border Studies from Sciences Po Strasbourg).
- <sup>2</sup> Majella Murphy was an employee of WORD and had been involved in women's organisations in South Armagh for some time. She would become the Director of the Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network.