The Feminist Aesthetic and Climate Action: A Case Study on Roscommon Women's Network

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Feminist community education groups are at the forefront of consciousness-raising around climate change in Ireland, bringing global ideas and concepts of change to local communities through peer learning and collective action. Through feminist artistic practices, in particular, these groups have become "powerful catalysts to stimulate imaginative thought, critical dialogue, community mobilization, personal transformation, and socio-environment" (Clover, 2004, p. 59). This article is a case study of how one community education group, Roscommon Women's Network, uses a feminist aesthetic practice to promote climate action. Roscommon Women's Network is part of a national community education movement in Ireland that harnesses the power of education as a means of social change through a critical pedagogical approach to education. The work of its CycleUp group, in particular, challenges neoliberal consumer culture through feminist artistic expression, by refashioning used textiles from the group's charity shop into purposeful and decorative objects. Each object features a label with their call to action, which explains the importance of waste reduction and sustainability. The items created as part of the CycleUp process are therefore not only powerful representations of the feminist aesthetic, but also physical representations of the need for urgent discourse around how resources are used and reused. Though their act of rethinking and reorganising the world and its materials, Roscommon Women's Network manifest the possibility of new "ways of doing and making" (Rancière, 2004, p. 13), as well as creating new forms of cognition for themselves and their community. As Jacques Rancière (2004) asserts in *The Aesthetic of Politics: The Distribution of the Sensible*:

> It is on the basis of this primary aesthetics that it is possible to raise the question of 'aesthetic practices' as I understand them, that is forms of visibility that disclose artistic practices, the place they occupy, what they 'do' or 'make' from the standpoint of what is common to the community. Artistic practices are 'ways of doing and making' that intervene in the general distribution of ways of doing and making as well as in the relationships they maintain to modes of being and forms of visibility (p. 13).

Indeed, the work of Roscommon Women's Network makes visible (and voluble) various forms of inequality within their local community, and on a global scale.

Following a series of interviews with participants (Mary and Laura) in CycleUp and staff (Lisa and John) at Roscommon Women Network, this article explores how the organisation uses a feminist aesthetic to promote climate-conscious action through empowering local women learners. To protect the anonymity of these participants, names have been replaced by pseudonyms throughout. By reviewing the organisation's key mission and strategic framework, this chapter will explore how these concepts – feminism and climate consciousness – are interlinked and enacted on a practical level. While Roscommon Women's Network serves as a strong example of the ways in which community education organisations are leading the way on climate action through feminist aesthetic activities, their innovation in this area has not been financially rewarded. Moreover, as a community education group in rural Ireland the group have faced their own climate challenges in terms of flooding. As such, the chapter will also explore some of the challenges that grassroots groups like Roscommon Women's Network face in terms of sustainability, in spite of being an example of innovative climate action.

Feminism and Climate Action in CycleUp

Roscommon Women's Network provides both accredited and non-accredited learning options to learners from a variety of backgrounds, with both male and female learners supported through their courses. With four full-time staff members and one part-time staff member, as well as 18 volunteers, in the 2018/19 academic year, the Network supported 45 learners from the local community (Roscommon Women's Network Strategic Plan, 2019). While an independent centre, the Network is also part of a broader, community education movement in Ireland. It serves as a strong example of Irish community education's feminist orientation and its rootedness in feminist practices. Walking into the centre itself, one can see various notices scattered across the walls for a variety of support services that are offered at the centre and beyond to ensure women entering receive access to the wrap-around support services they need to succeed. This is, of course, not an uncommon site in many of the community education centres across Ireland, which share a similar ethos and aim.

Community education as it exists in Ireland today owes a debt to the feminist (and aesthetic) practices that call into question prevailing, and often delimiting, discourses and modes of being. These centres see their role as providing a space for both men and women to come together to question and challenge social structures of inequality. As Roscommon Women's Network's Manager, Lisa explains in her interview:

> We believe feminism is about equality. We work through a family model to achieve this. It is not uncommon to see young men, in particular, referred onto our training programmes through their mothers who come into the centre for support. We have one woman who came into our centre and from there her two sons started coming. They love it here. One of the sons is now volunteering in the charity shop.

Women's groups in Ireland have led the way in making various forms of oppression – particularly gendered social and educational inequality – manifest through their collective projects, calling for a radical redistribution of power and resources. The Network's CycleUp Group is a key example of some of these practices, and tackles a global issue like climate change directly through small-scale feminist collective action.

By making "something else [out of] what was to be thrown away" the work of the CycleUp group considers alternative realities that run counter to what has been 'taken for granted' (Greene, 1995, p. 3). Indeed, the group's departure from consumerist modes of production and thinking emerged as a key theme in discussion, with the creative practice taking on a political quality – or becoming what Rancière (2010) might call 'dissensual' – with the capacity to disrupt and give voice to different forms of domination. Not only the act of making (as a community), but the products of this process – fabric owls, toy donkeys, Christmas stockings and, more recently, COVID-19 masks – give rise to new forms of consciousness. The objects are problem-posing, like the critical learning that takes place within CycleUp; they ask the beholder to think about their own practices around consumption.

For Laura, however, this act of revision undertaken in the upcycling process is also about seeing what is already there (returning to and refashioning rather than discarding), articulating the 'common sense' dimension of sustainability and returning to practices that have been modelled by women in the community for many years:

> When I was a child my grandmother was a seamstress and she would get people's clothes and nothing was wasted, every button was reused, every bit of fabric was reused, my grandmother had cigarette boxes, she made us dolls houses from them. I tend to have that attitude, that everything should be used, nothing should be thrown

away. I just hate waste. And I think that's mothers, we want the world to be better and we want to get the best out of what we have.

The care with which these productive activities are performed both by Roscommon Women's Network and previous generations of women *makers* gesture to and embody an alternative mode of production, demonstrating how an obsessive preoccupation with material economic growth and overproduction (not seeing the value of *what we have* at hand) undermines the sustainability of the planet and accelerates the climate crisis (Floro, 2012). For the women engaging in the CycleUp group these challenges are not abstract or high-minded but located in everyday experience and everywhere in evidence.

For one of the participants, women were seen as leaders in this regard, in a large part because of their outsized role in social, reproductive and care-oriented activities (Bhattacharya, 2017; Ferguson, 2019). As Mary noted, "if you're looking at environmental projects and awareness of global warming and the planet it will be the females that change how they buy things and make lifestyle choices and, you know, how the family reacts around climate change." In addition, Mary felt she had an important role to play in "encourag[ing] [her family] not to be consumers". She outlined how the Network played a key role in empowering not only women in the local community – "who are more inclined to come in and get the help if they need it" – but also their families. In Mary's view this had a direct impact on the "males in their family who don't necessarily want to go and get any help." Supporting women was therefore key to supporting the wider community: "if the women come out feeling better about themselves they'll be able to support the people that need their support as well, you know."

At the same time, Roscommon Women's Network provides a holistic learning space, rooted in a feminist praxis of care, for all members of the community, and it was also felt to be a transformative space for men who attended courses there. "We had a young chap" noted Lisa, "there was some support he needed holistically that he got here. He got something that he needed that he wasn't getting somewhere else ... he would consider himself a feminist and I think that's a great thing!". Discussing the psychosocial challenges within the community at large, the women were keen to point out the intersectional nature of feminism that their practice interrogates. As Laura summarised, "discrimination isn't just a gender thing; if you fall into a certain economic bracket you're also discriminated against ... we want equal rights for everybody ... a level playing field". Male learners, however, remain largely on the training side of Roscommon Women's Network's provision. The community education programmes and courses the Network offers, such as CycleUp remain largely female spaces.

The way in which Roscommon Women's Network responds to the needs of the community is also evidenced by the flexibility within the group and participants' ability to quickly react to the changing needs of the times. For instance, even before the Irish government had mandated the wearing of facemasks in public settings, the CycleUp group had refocused their energies on producing cloth face masks made from recycled materials. The decision to do this came from learners themselves who saw a need and quickly responded to it intuitively.

Interestingly, participants in the CycleUp group noted that they did not make environmentalism a key focus of every meeting, but rather preferred to allow these conversations to happen organically. Laura, who said she did not see herself as a climate activist, described instead enjoying a return to what she described as a traditional outlook on material goods – an appreciation of everything having a use and therefore a rethinking about waste. While concern for an environmental agenda may not have been a motive for joining the programme, or even a focus in the meetings, participants did agree that one outcome was a greater appreciation for climate conscious action. As Susan noted, "my participation in this

course has helped transform my thinking into broader healthy life choices on things like food and consumer purchasing. I am learning to make small changes every day." While not driving the discourse of each meeting, therefore, the sheer act of doing led to a deeper inner questioning about personal practices and global challenges of the modern day. This reflective practice did not end with participants on the course. Indeed, for many, involvement in the programme led to conversations with family and friends about current environmental challenges and female empowerment. For instance, Laura described chatting with her granddaughter about climate action. In some instances, however, the ideas and changes set in motion by participating in the group were felt to pose a challenge for a number of women. Lisa noted how one woman in particular came to her to share that a participant in CycleUp "had very difficult conversations with her family. She said she'd learned so much on the course it had caused trouble in her family". These conversations, in response to understanding gained through participating in the CycleUp group – whether positive or challenging – opened an important space for critical discourse.

It is clear that raising awareness about climate action is at the heart of the CycleUp Programme's mission, yet for learners, this aspect of the programme is not the only or indeed the foremost reason for participation. The social aspect of the group's work was incredibly important to the continued investment of participants, with Laura further emphasising, "if I didn't have a great group of women to come into every Friday, I wouldn't have been able to do it." Women entered the group, bringing with them sometimes painful past experiences, ranging from personal challenges to health issues. For one participant, who had left her husband and was recovering from serious ill-health, the course brought a renewed sense of purpose, belonging, and self-confidence. The profile of women in the group ranges, with women spanning different age groups and backgrounds, yet in the group operate as a collective. The women are learning together and experiencing individual growth through collective action. In a rural community, where distance breeds isolation, this social aspect of the course was seen as an equally important, if not a more important, benefit to the group's overall mission.

CycleUp as an Example of Transformative, Aesthetic Feminist Learning

Like many Irish community education courses, CycleUp takes a Freirean pedagogical approach to education, meaning the group employs a critical approach as outlined in Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970). In practice this means that learners are encouraged to learn from each other by raising questions and engaging in critical dialogue. This method of learning gives way to a process of conscientization (conscientização) that is marked by a deepened or more acute understanding of the world, existing power structures and our relationship to one another. While this process underpins all of the programmes that Roscommon Women's Network offers, the CycleUp group does this by focusing on the key issues of feminism and environmentalism through collective action, allowing a Freirean critical dialogue to emerge organically through the consciousness-raising work they are doing. The very act of creating art through repurposed materials, as such, becomes a catalyst for critical conversations about individual and collective responsibility for social and environmental change (Slevin et al., 2021).

The interest in CycleUp is in part connected to the growing interest around sustainable environmental action, but it is also undoubtedly connected to the group's holistic approach to learner development – one that has earned the group and the Network more broadly a glowing reputation in the local community. Throughout discussions with learners and tutors, "trust" emerged as a value underpinning all of Roscommon Women Network's work. As manager Lisa stated, it is

that holistic support ... it's knowing if [participants] offload that it's confidential. It might only be listening, there might be nothing we can do but it's someone to rant to and you might get a steer or a signpost. We know services out there that's part of our role.

Similar themes emerged in conversation with Laura and Mary who pointed to the relationships they had built with staff and tutors as reasons for continued participation and, more importantly, a reason for referring others to the Network.

The benefits that learners experienced through participating in the CycleUp group were described as transformative by both Mary and Laura. While the programme is non-accredited, participants learn a variety of practical skills such as design, sewing, marketing, and promotion. Crucially, participants also bring a lot of pre-existing knowledge and experience to the programme, making peer learning a key facet of the group. In their interview, the women engaging in CycleUp emphasised the unique contribution that each woman brings to the group, and how it has paved the way for personal and collective growth. The women who take part in CycleUp come from a variety of different backgrounds, with some bringing sewing or arts and craft skills and others an interest in environmental issues and activism. Whatever their prior experience, learners note their initial encounter with upcycling as something that put them in unfamiliar territory and into a space of learning. As manager, Lisa, further described:

Walking into a fabric shop and buying a yard of material is nothing like having to go into a stuffy room with bags of clothes, going through them, washing them, sorting them. They [the women on the CycleUp programme] said to me it's a lot easier to walk into a shop. They're complete converts now. It's really changing attitudes and really changing awareness.

Explaining the sorting process involved in their upcycling projects, Laura described it as an act of "see[ing] potential." "It's amazing to look at the stuff and see what you can do with it, like an artist looking at a piece of stone to make a sculpture, you have to see the potential there". The capacity to see "potential" could be said to extend to all activities of the group, whether it be the potential to effect change within the self, the community, or in response to the climate crisis. As such, the imaginative process involved in this sorting and making creates the conditions for other kinds of imagining. As Maxine Greene (1995) notes:

Imagination is what, above all, makes empathy possible. It is what enables us to cross the empty spaces between ourselves and those we teachers have called 'other' ... imagination ... permits us to give credence to alternative realities. It allows us to break with the taken for granted, to set aside familiar distinctions and definitions (p. 3).

The programme combines elements of artistic production, collective action, and critical discourse in a way that allows learners to experience greater personal benefits beyond the hard objectives of the course. As Laura describes in her personal reflection on becoming engaged with Roscommon Women's Network:

I was at a very low ebb of my life; my marriage had broken down and I was very sick. They couldn't find anything wrong with me and my doctor suggested I come over to RWN ... I gradually started taking control of my life. I split up from my husband and then I had a very serious heart attack and I joined the Women's Group here – I was coming in in my wheelchair. I used to help out doing arts and crafts. I got involved

with the WINDOW project [Women Initiating Development Opportunities for Women] and there were 10 of us. Most of the women would have been through bad experiences, with low self-esteem. We started doing the training and most of the women got jobs. I went to college and I got a degree in Fine Art and I thought I'd never do it. It has changed who I am because to me my lack of education had held me back my entire life.

The feeling of social belonging plays a powerful role in the success of the group in bringing people along and providing a safe space for critical discourse around the large-scale global issues which they are tackling.

Challenges Faced: Rural Learning, Climate Change and Funding

Access to education, particularly full-time education, remains a challenge for Irish women, and community education groups like Roscommon Women's Network and its CycleUp programme play a critical role in enabling lifelong learning opportunities for women at a local level. This is important because on a national scale, these types of learning opportunities remain underdeveloped and under resourced. The 2017 Adult Education Survey (Central Statistics Office) on adult learning in Ireland found that females are more likely to report some form of unmet demand for lifelong learning. This survey found that 36 per cent of females reported a gap in available learning options compared with 29 per cent of males (CSO 2018). Concern surrounding female participation in education has only increased in recent times as a result of COVID-19, with international studies showing that women are facing even greater levels of disadvantage as a result of the crisis (OECD 2020). Roscommon Women's Network has confirmed this impact at the local level, with John, Local Training Initiative Coordinator at Roscommon Women's Network explaining that "the distance to the centre, the lack of childcare options available, and the limited access to necessary broadband requirements for remote learning" remain a challenge for learners, particularly women, with these issues posing a significant risk of decrease in learner participation over time. While the Network has tried to address these challenges head on, financial limitations have been a continuous barrier.

Financial challenges arose a number of times in interview with staff and learners, who were particularly frustrated that programmes such as the CycleUp were not held in equal regard to that of more traditional learning options. Of course, community education in Ireland has consistently struggled for parity of esteem with the formal educational sector and has been significantly under-funded, while facing increased financial cuts during years of austerity (Harvey, 2012). In 2018, the difference in investment between a community education learner (€221.89) and a more traditional further education and training learner (€1052.77) stood at €830.88 (SOLAS, 2018). Tutors working at community centres like Roscommon Women's Network, who receive salaries via external funding from government support structures, have not had a pay increase since 2011, despite pay raises being awarded to teachers and tutors in other educational sectors (AONTAS, 2020). These differences are notable when considering that the majority of community education learners are indeed women, meaning that these policies are serving as further structural barriers denying equal educational access to women – an impact that groups like Roscommon Women's Network are forced to deal with in spite of receiving public praise for their innovation in the areas of gender equality.

Like many other community education groups, Roscommon Women's Network has faced this challenge by transforming itself partially into a social enterprise, using revenues from its charity shop and the art it produces from its CycleUp programme to cover the deficit. There are, however, limits to even what this can achieve. As Lisa reported, the demand for

the CycleUp products "far exceeds our capacity as a small provider". She described having to turn away a large-scale order from a local business who was looking to make a large and sizable purchase of products due to the lack of space and industrial equipment. Creative potential is instead curtailed by the limited investment on the part of funders who favour courses on employment activation over climate action, rural development, and gender equality.

Being located in the west of Ireland, in the small rural community of Castlerea also poses a great deal of challenges not only in the group's ability to sell products, but in their ability to support learners. CycleUp can only run one group out of the centre and it is currently full, with 18 learners on a waitlist to participate. While admitting more people to the group would be ideal, the group pace significant structural challenges including access to equipment, classroom space, and available tutor support. These challenges stifle the group's true potential for success in a community they feel would benefit from greater access to lifelong learning opportunities and stronger awareness of the global challenges we face. LTI Coordinator John describes the community in which Castlerea operates as characterised by "economic, social, or educational disadvantaged', noting that those who engage with their programmes are also 'geographically disadvantaged.". By virtue of its location, therefore, Roscommon Women's Network offers many opportunities for learning that would not otherwise be available to the local community. Importantly, through its CycleUp group, it is facilitating conversations and learning in a very practical way while also challenging larger global issues such as climate change.

Despite being at the forefront of climate conscious action, ironically climate change has had a significant impact on the group's development. The beginning of 2020 in Castlerea, along with much of Western Ireland, was marked by unprecedented levels of flooding. Rural communities felt that the challenges of flooding were only compounded by the lack of a national response (*Irish Times*, 22 Feb 2020). For smaller centres like Roscommon Women's Network, flooding meant a complete shutdown of services. These challenges only add further strain to an already under-resourced community education centre, struggling to meet current financial demands. As Lisa described:

> All our flooring had to be taken up. We are suffering severely from ongoing flooding since before Christmas. Funders are great and its absolutely brilliant to have but when you are in your wellies and on the ground, you are depending on volunteers and people working here late at night trying to keep the water out.

Seeking support from the larger education sector, and hoping that its recent national success may help in this endeavour, instead the group was left to find a solution to the crisis independently or face a temporary cut in funding. As Lisa further described, "we had to worry about our learners. They each receive a payment from the local education and training body to come here and complete their courses. If we did not open, they were not going to get that payment". The challenge was left to volunteers and the local community to fix. The response from the state funders appeared to be in complete contrast to the praise the organisation was receiving for its climate action, with CycleUp's products being hailed by educational funders as example of innovation within the sector. Interestingly, the lack of support around the legitimate environmental challenges posed by the flooding stood in stark contrast to the support the Network later received in response to COVID-19 – a clear, nationally shared experience of disadvantage. As Lisa explained, during the shutdown of the centre during COVID-19, there was no question about the learners receiving their payments. The response was so different than it was for the flooding. It is the difference between a local and global challenge."

Despite climate change being a global issue, the fact that the impacts of it are not experienced equally and simultaneously meant that, unlike COVID-19, the flooding was a challenge that funders could simply ignore. This lack of response captures some of the challenges that rural providers like Roscommon Women's Network face, even when they are seen as at the forefront of climate conscious action.

Conclusion

CycleUp shows us how feminism and climate action can come together, through aesthetic processes, into a powerful programme for change. The group is leading the way in social change through art by challenging modern consumer culture and traditional gendered power structures. It is also opening a dialogue around potential solutions to large-scale global crises at a local level. Nevertheless, this cutting-edge work remains stifled by external challenges which largely stem from being a small, under-funded, rural community education provider. Unfortunately, the challenges outlined above, including financial precarity and a struggle for recognition, are not unique to Roscommon Women's Network; there are many more Irish community education groups who share similar experiences. Rather than harnessing the powerful solutions being crafted at the local level, national public policy tends to favour large-scale neoliberal 'solutions' that continually fall short of making any meaningful, tangible or sustainable change. One of the most important lessons gleaned from the example of CycleUp is that despite all of the gendered barriers and structural setbacks faced by small under-funded community-based organisations, there is more than a glimmer of hope that sleeping giants lie within local communities, ever ready to envision and enact viable solutions for change.

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