



Women's  
Collective  
Ireland

**Grassroots Women Bonding & Bridging -  
Weaving All Island Connections**

**Funded by the**

**Department of Foreign Affairs Reconciliation Fund**



**An Roinn Gnóthaí Eachtracha**  
Department of Foreign Affairs

**RECONCILIATION FUND**

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## Background to the Programme

*“It’s important to have women from both sides of the border, from across the Island together and connecting with each other”*

The ‘Grassroots Women Bonding & Bridging – Weaving All Island Connections’ Programme set out to engage and connect grassroots women from different communities across the Island of Ireland. To create opportunities for grassroots women from diverse communities across the Island to come together to share skills, life experiences, challenge their perceptions of each other and increase their knowledge and mutual understanding.

Funded by the [Department of Foreign Affairs Reconciliation Fund](#), the project was developed and delivered by [Women’s Collective Ireland \(WCI\)](#) in partnership with [Northern Ireland Rural Women’s Network \(NIRWN\)](#) and [Shankill Women’s Centre](#).

It connected grassroots women from six communities across the Island, to better understand each other and build relationships by engaging in meaningful conversations on issues that affect their lives and their communities.

Three Women’s Collective Ireland projects in the south of Ireland were partnered with three grassroots women’s community projects from Northern Ireland. The women involved in the project took part in a [Six Week Programme of Connecting Workshops](#) (delivered via zoom) – aimed at facilitating participants to explore and share issues and challenges from their lives and build connections with each other. The programme culminated in an in-person residential event that brought all participants together.

The aim of the project was to build a sense of connection between the women and communities involved across common challenges and issues. The Programme also aimed to identify ways of supporting and working together towards positive and sustainable changes to women’s lives across the Island of Ireland.

The six groups involved in the programme were:

- WCI South Kerry & Bannside Women Together Portglenone, Co Antrim
- WCI Ronanstown, Dublin & Shankill Women’s Centre, Belfast
- WCI North Leitrim & Clonduff Women’s Group, Hilltown, Newry & Mourne

## Partners

### *“Nice to put a face on the ‘North’”*

**Women’s Collective Ireland (WCI)** formerly the National Collective of Community Based Women’s Networks – NCCWN, was established in 2002, is a national organisation that works directly with and represents the interests of women from communities in rural and urban settings throughout Ireland. WCI works nationally and locally through its 17 Women’s Community Development Projects based around the country. Their vision is ‘an Ireland where women in all our diversity are flourishing.’ Their mission is ‘to support grassroots women through collective and practical actions to achieve their full human rights and true equality.’

**Northern Ireland Rural Women’s Network (NIRWN)** was established in September 2006 ‘To promote and support rural women in rural Northern Ireland’. They are a membership-based organisation, and their Vision is ‘An equitable society where rural women are visible, influential and valued.’ Their Mission is ‘To advance the participation and recognition of rural women, Supporting, Enabling and Empowering.’

**Shankill Women’s Centre** was established in 1987 as a locally based group to provide education for women. Since that period, it has developed to its current position as a key provider for training, health awareness, childcare and young women’s activities in the Greater Shankill and beyond. Its mission is to ‘provide an accessible resource and development support for women in Greater Shankill and beyond.’



Women's  
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Speakers & Members of the Programme Advisory Group

## What are the key issues impacting women across the Island of Ireland?

*“There isn’t an issue that isn’t a women’s issue – all issues are women’s issues”*

The following is a summary of the main issues discussed and highlighted by the women who participated in the ‘Weaving All Island Connections’ Programme.

It gives a flavour of the discussions and conversations that took place between the women participating in the zoom based ‘Connecting Workshops’ over the course of the programme. It outlines the interests, concerns and issues that affect and impact on the day to day lives of women across the Island of Ireland.

### The Role & Expectations Placed on Women:

There was a lot of discussion on the expectations placed on women to do a certain thing, behave in a certain way and look a certain way. The often unrealistic expectations that family, society and we ourselves often place on ourselves as women.

Questions arose as to how we, as a society, value women and women’s contribution, in our communities, families and society – and how we want our contributions as women to be recognised and valued.

There was a call for recognition of the ‘invisible’ work that women in local communities did during COVID and beyond.



## Burden of Care/Caring Responsibilities:

The 'care burden' placed on women was identified across all groups, and how these were especially evident and felt as a result of the COVID pandemic. However it was clearly understood and emphasised that the care burden on women was there long before COVID. The burden of care was not a result of the pandemic, but it was further exacerbated and brought to the fore during the pandemic.

The following key aspects were raised:

- Burden of care during COVID, women took on the role of carers, childminders and teachers, for some whilst still working full time from home
- The burden and invisibility of unpaid caring duties
- Women felt they were often left to pick up the pieces - women tend to see what is needed and fill the void, with little or no consideration of their own needs.

***"We need to learn to put on our own oxygen mask first".***

## Rural Isolation & Exclusion

Several rural specific issues were identified. Exclusion and isolation were identified as two of the main concerns and issues facing rural women.

It was accepted that exclusion and isolation can exist in both rural and urban areas. However, it was felt that isolation and exclusion is more pronounced and often more difficult to combat in rural areas and that rural women face a particular set of issues:

- Transport was key concern (not just for women but for rural communities in general across the Island) – transport to education, training, employment, accessing services and socialising is at best limited and at worst non-existent in rural areas.
- Access to public services in rural areas is limited and difficult e.g., in South Kerry, it is over an hour and half to the nearest A&E. First responders and community First Aiders are vital.
- Rural communities, and especially rural women feel powerless and silent – women felt that rural issues are poorly understood and that urban issues get more attention and more investment. There was a call for all policies and decisions to be 'rural proofed.'
- Rural Isolation – there was a general acceptance that 'rurality' is relative to where you are and how readily you can access services. Some of the women from rural areas North of the border felt they were less isolated than their southern counterparts in parts of Kerry. *'We think we're in the middle of the country – but we're not really, most places are within an hour's journey within Northern Ireland'.*
- Fear & Vulnerability - women spoke about fears around their safety, there was a sense of vulnerability especially women living alone in isolated rural areas.
- Women felt very strongly that the voices of Rural Women are ignored and forgotten. Women participating in the programme felt that those in power and those making decisions really needed to be more proactive in listening to and responding to the needs of rural communities. There needs to be a much greater appreciation and understanding of what it is like living in a rural community and the day-to-day struggles and issues that rural communities face.

On the flipside there were also many positives identified to living in rural communities and a desire to celebrate and share the benefits of rural living.

- Participants in particular spoke of the value of living in rural areas during the COVID lockdown periods, having space to walk and enjoy the outdoors.
- Sense of Community & Sense of Place – participants from rural communities spoke of their strong sense of belonging and sense of place and pride in the areas they lived.
- Appreciation of nature and the environment

## Urban Communities:

Participants also spoke of a series of specific issues and concerns for women living in urban communities:

- Fear & Vulnerability – similarly to the rural counterparts, women spoke about their fears for personal safety especially those living alone and walking alone after dark.
- Young people – there were many concerns expressed in relation to young people and fears for their safety and future. Accessing employment and training, fears around young people getting involved in anti-social and criminal activity as well as drug use. It was felt that women in particular take on responsibility and carry the burden of worry associated with young people.
- Isolation & Exclusion – it was very evident that whilst women may not be physically isolated in an urban area, many women suffer huge isolation in urban areas and that this can go unnoticed, and it is often harder to overcome.
- Access to services – again despite living in an urban setting there is still difficulty accessing basic services such as health care for many women.
- Negative media coverage - many of the women participating felt their communities received a lot of negative coverage especially in the media and this has a significant impact on the community.

## Health & Wellbeing:

Women's health and wellbeing was a common thread running through all discussions. Many aspects of Women's Health, both physical and mental, were highlighted including:

- Mental Health – there was a very real concern expressed about the lack of mental health supports and services across the Island, and the waiting times and costs associated with accessing services. This was identified as an issue affecting society and communities.
- Access to Health Services - there were many concerns expressed about accessing health care services with issues ranging from transport difficulties, costs, waiting times and the availability of services.
- Access to G.Ps. – many of those present felt strongly that access to G.P. services had become increasingly difficult since COVID and that it was exceedingly difficult to access face to face appointments, this was equally felt in both jurisdictions.

- Menopause Health – women felt very strongly there was not enough support, information, or medical support available. They felt more training was needed for GPs on menopause and managing and understanding menopause symptoms. Participants felt that the menopause is not given the recognition or treated with the degree of seriousness it needs.
- In relation to Health Care systems across the Island, women were surprised and somewhat shocked to discover how different the systems are on both sides of the border. Whilst issues in relation to waiting lists and access were shared, the cost of accessing health care in the South was seen as a major barrier, when compared with the NHS services and system of free health care north of the border.

## Training & Employment:

In relation to training and employment some of the key issues identified were:

- Lack of access to training opportunities for women that are accessible and appropriate.
- Need for childcare support to enable women to access training and employment.
- Transport difficulties in accessing training and employment.

## Education:

Similar, to the Health Care systems, the Education System (especially at second level) was felt to be an area where there were significant differences.

- Education systems are very different across both jurisdictions – the system in Northern Ireland is confusing and complicated especially at secondary level, even women from Northern Ireland found it difficult to explain the system to their southern counterparts.
- Segregation across the education system in the North was highlighted as an ongoing concern. Women felt a more integrated Education System Model was vital in building an integrated, inclusive community based on trust and understanding.
- Lack of funding in education was highlighted as an issue across the Island.
- Linked to the cost-of-living crisis, the costs associated with education (uniforms, books etc) was a huge burden for families, with women again being the ones that often carried the responsibility of managing the family budget.



## Cost of Living Crisis:

- Cost of education - books, school uniforms etc
- Northern groups were horrified at the cost of healthcare, GP visits and medications in the South.
- Difference in benefit and welfare rates between jurisdictions
- Cost of living on both sides of the border – inflation and rising costs
- Homelessness - housing crisis
- Energy Costs

*“I realised we’re all the same”.*



## What can we do collectively to highlight issues affecting women?

The following is a summary of the suggestions and recommendations arising from discussions on what we as grassroots women could do collectively and what was needed to address the issues identified:

### Build & Support Women's Voices on an All-Island Basis

*“Important to have women from both sides of the border, from across the Island together and connecting with each other”*

- The women present stressed the value of bringing women together to share experiences, discuss concerns and work collectively to ensure a strong voice for women.
- Similarly, women felt it was important that the various women's organisations, on both sides of the border work collectively to build and support grassroots women's voices.
- Women need to be supported and empowered to learn to have and use their own voice.
- We need as women to actively look to see who is missing from discussions, name who's missing and reach out to them.
- We as women need to keep the doors open for others to be included and support each other.
- Cross Community & Cross Border Collaboration was seen as essential to ensuring a strong representative voice for women.
- We need collectively to support and create opportunities for women and women's groups to network and discuss issues - we cannot underestimate the power of women coming together (on-line and in-person)

### Women & Employment

- The need to lobby for funding to ensure the provision of accessible and appropriate training for women wishing to return/access employment (including supports to access supports such as childcare and transport)
- Development of Mentoring programmes for women returning to/entering the workforce
- The need for Confidence Building Programmes for women (especially emerging following the COVID Pandemic), including Interview Skills & Presentation Skills

*“Everyone's experience was valued”.*

## Politics, Civic Society & Decision Making

- We need to ensure the voices of women are heard and that women are encouraged and supported to engage, we need to believe and support women to appreciate that what we as women have to say is valued, valid and important.
- Politicians and candidates running for election should have an understanding of women's issues and listen to and hear women's voices – need for an 'All Island Women's Manifesto'.
- Raise awareness and understanding of the real life, day to day struggles and issues facing women and communities across the Island.
- We as women and women's groups and organisations need to hold politicians and elected representatives to account for decisions and policies.
- Education & Awareness Programmes to 'Demystify' Politics and Political Systems
- Encourage women to register and use their vote - voter education awareness programmes.

***"Real connections were made with each other through the project and the zoom meet ups"***



***"It's amazing what women achieve when put in a room together"***

***"The energy created was invaluable and should be channelled into action for greater good"***

## Celebrating the Voices of Participants

The programme also celebrated the knowledge, skills, openness, and participation of the women who took part in the 'Connecting Workshops and their experience of taking part in the 'Weaving All Island Connections' project.

### *"Positivity of bringing women together".*

As part of the programme, all the women involved worked collectively to create a 'zine' to capture their experience and the value of connecting and sharing with other women.

The 'zines' created by the women involved were launched and shared at the residential.

### *"You can see your experience through the zine"*

The women involved all engaged with and valued the creative element of the programme.

The creative pieces spoke to how "powerful" everyone found the experience.

### *"Loved creating the Zines"*



The women also shared their thoughts, experience and reflections in poetry. The following is a poem written by two of the programme participants inspired by their involvement in the programme.

## We are the Island

*A gentle breeze tosses her hair about as she presses the wooden peg onto the damp clothes on the line.*

*She is lost in her thoughts of an all-island connection*

*Surrounded by the sea*

*Atlantic to the West*

*The Celtic to the South*

*The Irish Sea to the North*

*A birdsong brings her back into the moment*

*She squints up to the skies to make out its white wings blended with the white cumulus clouds drifting by.*

*We are the women of a million moons of time*

*We are the wearers of a web of history*

*Steeped in heritage of knowledge*

*She bends to pick up a dropped wooden peg from the morning dew grass*

*She is rooted in Mother Nature and steady on her feet as she rises*

*We are the backbone of the island*

*Old ways meet new ways*

*Storytellers - history makers*

*We are the bards of a New Age*

*She's an All Black at heart and her heart should be hard but it's open*

*It's expansive and wide as the tide all around the island she resides*

*We are the grassroots of empowerment*

*We are the island*

*There is hope in the white dove*

*There is courage in her All Black heart*

*But the real beauty is in the shades in between.*

*As she hangs the last garment her eyes are drawn to the ink crown on her finger*

*She smiles as she thinks of its meaning*

*Queens see Queens.*

**By Fiona Dowd & Anna Keenan**

**WCI Ronanstown & Shankill Women's Centre**



## The Way Forward:

*“We need more connections; we shouldn’t be strangers”.*

### Continue Connecting & Sharing:

- We need to continue to connect and build on the relationships and connections established already through the project.
- Important for women and groups to keep sharing information, skills, knowledge and experiences.
- Collectively support each other, learn from each other’s groups, what has worked, project ideas etc.
- Use zoom to keep the connections and discussions going.
- Build connections with and between all 6 groups who participated in the project – widen our connections.

*“I’ve hardly been to the North.... mostly we learnt about the North from the TV”*

### Creative Connections:

- The use of creative and visual means to connect, raise awareness and highlight issues for women – create spaces and opportunities for women to be creative and to find and express their voice.

### Exchanges & Visits:

- All groups who participated expressed a desire to visit each other’s projects and communities – groups have committed to staying in contact and exploring possibilities of organising cross border visits.

*“Very little connections with groups across the Island until this project”*

### Use of Zoom/social media:

- All the groups involved felt zoom was a useful tool to facilitate ongoing engagement, explore the use of zoom and on-line technologies to continue and sustain connections.
- Explore the possibility of On-Line Theme Based/Shared Learning Opportunities - groups were interested in opportunities to engage with all the participating groups not just those with which they were initially partnered.
- Use of social media to connect and update each other.

*“Thank you, I really enjoyed the experience from the first Zoom to the final lunch. Great bunch of women and it was a pleasure to meet you all”.*

## Conclusion

***“I’ve learned no matter what divides us in miles it means nothing – women’s issues are mirrored everywhere”.***

This project successfully created the space and the opportunity for women from different communities across the Island of Ireland to come together, to connect, to explore their own lives, the lives of the other community and to share and find common ground.

The project clearly demonstrated that there is not only a huge ‘curiosity’ and ‘interest’ in exchanging learning and experiences with women from across the Island but that there is a real need to do so as way of validating and giving voice to women’s lives and the issues that impact them.

***“It was very interesting to hear the issues and interests of women in other areas.... we now have new friends and new places to visits”.***

There is a huge desire to ‘get to know’ and ‘better understand’ each other and other communities, especially to engage with women from communities we would not ordinarily have an opportunity to speak with and engage with in our daily lives.

***“Thank you for the everything for the wonderful opportunity and the lifelong memories made”.***

There is a huge appetite to work collectively and in support of each other and to collectively raise awareness of the issues facing women in communities across the Island of Ireland and make their voices heard. All 6 communities involved and the 3 partner organisations involved have committed to continuing to engage with each other and to build on the connections made as part of this project.

A **“Toolkit for First Steps and Opening Conversations”** based on the learning from this project has been developed. The Toolkit is available to other groups as a guide to support them in reaching out and making connections with other women’s groups and communities. The Toolkit is designed to ensure the impact and learning from this project continues to build and to support other grassroots women to reach out, to engage, and create ‘All Island’ connections.

We hope this project is the start of a process of building connections, solidarity, and friendship, all those involved are committed to building on the links made, working together to advance the issues identified and extending out the links into other communities and to other women to build on the momentum created by this project.

We are grateful to the Department of Foreign Affairs Reconciliation Fund for funding this innovative programme and to our partners NIRWN (Northern Ireland Rural Women’s Network) and Shankill Women’s Centre for their active participation in the development and delivery of the programme.

We would like to thank all the women who were involved in the pilot programme and the grassroots women’s organisations involved for their willingness to engage, their curiosity and their commitment to this project and each other.

## Appendices



# CONVERSATION community

Reflections

WOMEN'S COLLECTIVE IRELAND  
COMMUNITY GRASSROOTS WOMEN – WEAVING ALL ISLAND CONNECTIONS  
CONNECTING & CELEBRATING – RESIDENTIAL

16TH – 17TH MAY CARRICKDALE HOTEL, DUNDALK

## Programme Day 1

**12.30pm Arrival & Lunch**

**1.30pm Opening & Welcome**

Welcome & Opening:

Assumpta Kelly – Project Coordinator

Ailbhe Smyth – Women's Collective Ireland Patron

Connecting in Person: Small Groups

Feedback from Small Groups

**3.30pm Comfort Break – Tea/Coffee & Biscuits**

**3.45pm Afternoon Session**

Facilitated Small Group Discussion

Feedback & Discussion

**5.00pm Close**

*Check In – Time to Relax and Network before Dinner*

**7.30pm Dinner**


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WOMEN'S COLLECTIVE IRELAND  
COMMUNITY GRASSROOTS WOMEN – WEAVING ALL ISLAND CONNECTIONS  
CONNECTING & CELEBRATING – RESIDENTIAL

16TH – 17TH MAY CARRICKDALE HOTEL, DUNDALK

**Programme Day 2**

**10.00am Opening**

**Grass Roots Women Weaving All Island Connections:**

Overview of Project: Assumpta Kelly

**Meet The Partners:**

Women's Collective Ireland: Miriam Holt

Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network (NIRWN): Paula McAliskey

Shankill Women's Centre: Eileen Weir

**Guest Speakers:**

**Ailbhe Smyth**

Women's Collective Ireland Patron

**Ruth Taillon**

25 Years after the Agreement: What happened to the Peace Dividend?

**11.15am Comfort Break- Tea & Coffee & Biscuits**

**11.30pm Final Session**

Listening to the Voices of Women

Launch of Our Voices – Our Zines

Where to Next? – Small Group Discussions

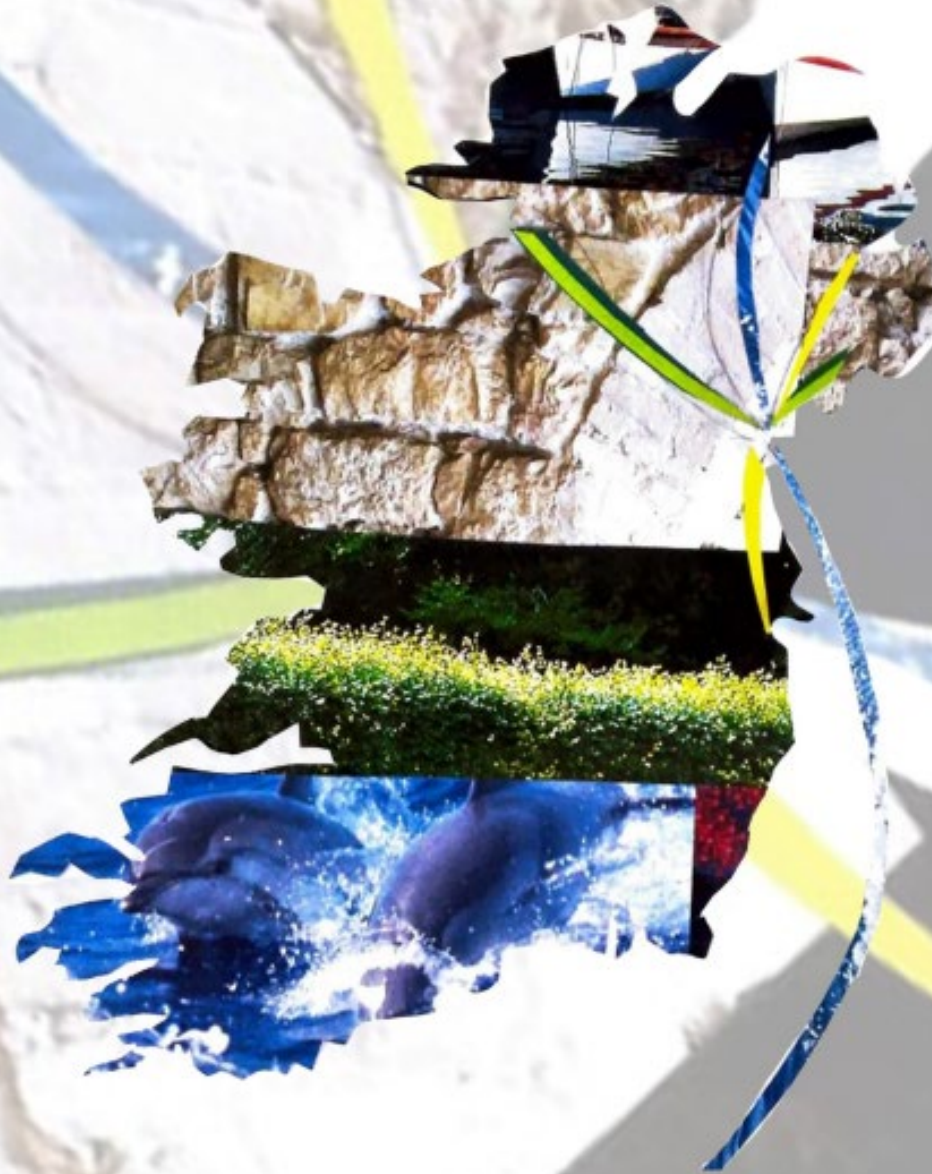
Closing – Circle Dance & Closing Words

**1.15pm Lunch**

**2.30pm Depart for Home**

# Grassroots Women Bonding & Bridging Weaving All Island Connections

Women's Collective Ireland, South Kerry  
Portglenone Women's Group, Portglenone



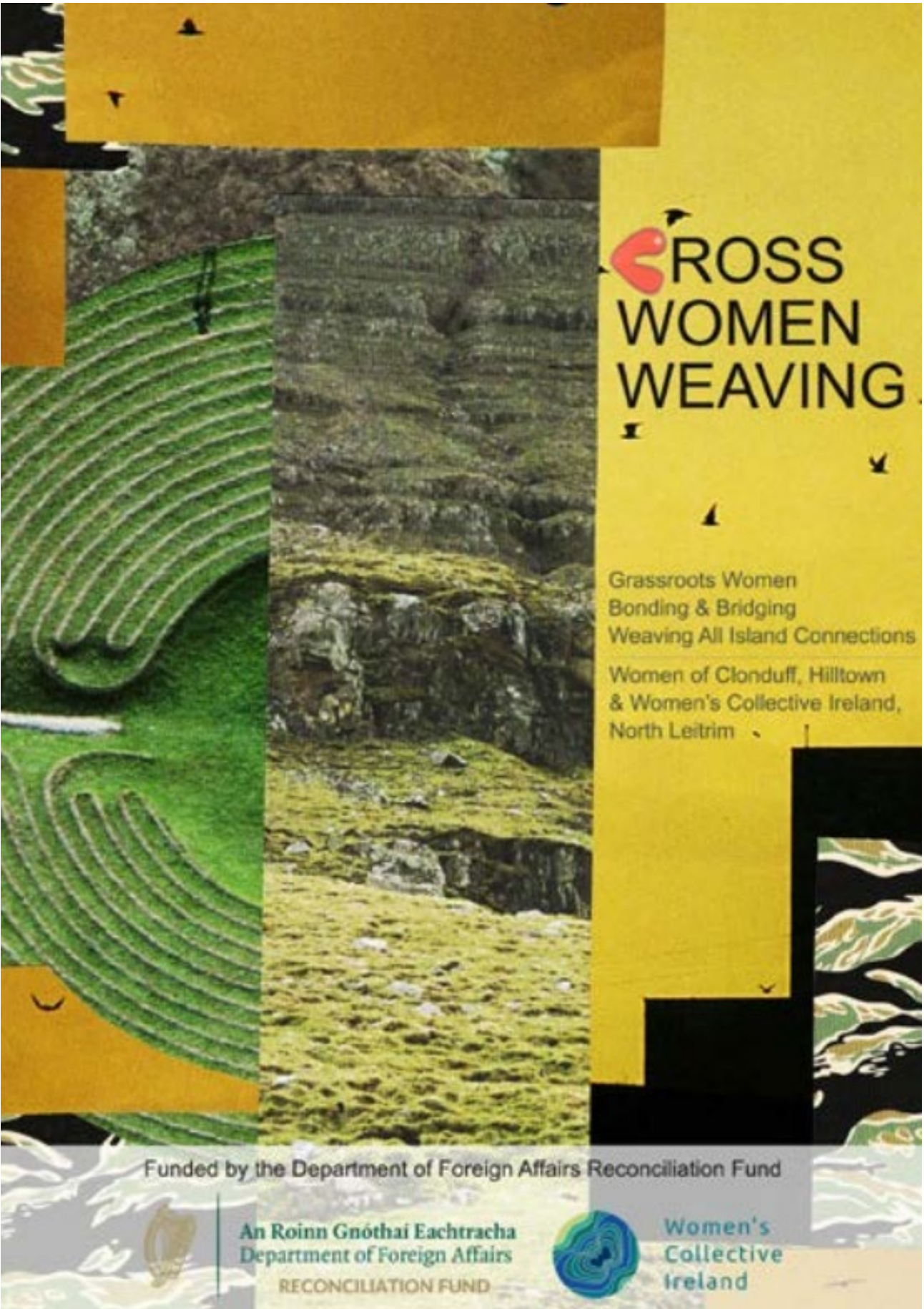
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Women's Collective Ireland – Weaving All Island Connections

Grassroots Women  
Bonding & Bridging  
Weaving All Island Connections

Shankill Women's Centre, Belfast  
Womens Collective Ireland Ronanstown, Dublin

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***Grassroots Women Bonding & Bridging –  
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