

Women-only discussion groups

There is a small, but growing, number of all-women Teagasc discussion groups

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It's late morning and having viewed the host farmer's dairy cows the Royal Tara dairy discussion group are seated and sharing their experiences with breeding technologies, bull selection, paddock management, etc.

With the universal discussion group proviso that what's said in the group, stays in the group, experiences, mistakes and solutions are shared. The only different thing about this group is that all members are women.

"Our facilitator Vincent Treacy approached me a couple of years ago and asked if there would be interest to start a technical discussion group for women in dairying," says Laura Hannon.

"Through word of mouth and Teagasc communication the group has grown to about 15 members most of whom are located in Meath but we also have members from Westmeath, Louth and Wicklow. Some are full-time, some are part-time but all are heavily involved in dairy farm businesses."

The Royal Tara group is one of a small but growing number of all-women discussion groups across the country. Teagasc also has groups in Kerry, Limerick, Carlow, Tipperary, Wexford and Kilkenny-Waterford. A number co-ops/organisations have women-only groups and there are a number of independent women's groups too. Women-only groups tend to be primarily associated with dairying but there are also drystock groups.

In a year which Teagasc has designated its 'Year of Diversity and Inclusion' it might seem slightly surprising that the organisation is encouraging women-only groups. "Our approach is that all clients are absolutely equal," says Tom Curran, head of the Teagasc advisory service.

"There are many women in our discussion groups who are more than capable of holding their own with the most experienced male farmers but where there is demand for a women-



Vincent Treacy, Teagasc; Ciara Lynch, Katie Hoey, Leyla Byrne, Tara Heaney and Laura Hannon.

only group we will support them."

According to Teagasc's Sandra Hayes, who has facilitated (with John Maguire) a women-only discussion group in Tipperary, and now facilitates one in Kilkenny-Waterford, membership can be a transition to membership of a mixed group.

“ Though it's a generalisation, it is sometimes easier to get engagement from an all-women group than a conventional group

"If you are coming into dairying, possibly from a non-farming background and with little practical experience, the idea of joining an all-male technically excellent discussion group is intimidating.

"I see women's groups as one way for women to build their knowledge and self-confidence in dairying before potentially joining a conventional group."

What's different about women's groups?

Most women-only groups are relatively new, just several years old on average, compared with conventional groups which may have been in existence for decades.

Evidence that women-only groups are different is largely anecdotal and subjective but some themes are frequently mentioned such as better engagement.

Linda Murphy, a current member of the Teagasc Kilkenny-Waterford group, farms alongside her dad and works in the banking sector. She says she has experience of predominantly male groups, her dad's, and also was a member of a mixed group when she was doing the Green Cert by distance. "When I was at my dad's group, which is very technically advanced, I would save up my questions and ask him later!

"It's certainly easier for a woman to ask questions in a women-only group and I think women generally ask more questions whatever group they are in."

Vincent Treacy of Teagasc Navan,



Catherine Colfer (second from left) with members of the south Wexford beef discussion group.

who facilitates the Royal Tara Group, has extensive experience of facilitating dairy discussion groups.

“At least in my experience, women-only groups can present a challenge for facilitators. They are generally very well prepared for a meeting and will sometimes ask you for a broader explanation of the background to technical issues than a conventional group might.

“Though it’s a generalisation, it is sometimes easier to get engagement from an all-women group than a conventional group.”

Group life cycle

“There’s a well accepted series of four psychological steps which any group of people who aim to work together goes through regardless of how the membership is made up,” says Pat Clarke, Teagasc Regional Manager for Galway/Clare.

- “Forming (the group membership meet each other for the first time).
- Storming (where there is some turbulence as the members get to know each other).
- Norming (where the group settles down and agrees how they will work together).
- Performing (where the group is working really effectively together

and making rapid progress).

A good facilitator will assist the group to get to the performing stage.

“I think the only difference with women-only groups might be that while they will go through these stages, they might get to the performing stage a bit quicker.”

Old boys’ clubs

Through personal experience many of us will have seen group situations where men’s egos have resulted in the group getting stuck in the ‘storming’ phase as hierarchies, etc, are established.

There are other issues which women mention in private, such as not being invited to join existing groups, when neighbouring male farmers of similar ability and experience are.

All-male groups may feel women will ‘limit the amount of craic’ they can have either at meetings or at social gatherings which are an important aspect of any group. Some farmers are simply uncomfortable in the presence of women in a work setting.

It’s no wonder that women feel uneasy when new to a group, particularly if they are the only female member. The result can be that women don’t have access to the benefits of membership of a good discussion group.

Male and female facilitators

“The aim is certainly not to develop a separate or parallel advisory service,” says Majella Maloney, Teagasc Regional Manager for Kerry/Limerick.

“Ideally, we will have more and more women in all discussion groups which I think will benefit everybody.

“As it happens, the women-only dairy discussion group (in collaboration with Kerry Group), the Limerick Ladies Discussion Group (facilitator Deirbhile Browne) and our women-only beef group centred on Kilmallock (facilitator Aileen Walsh) are facilitated by women but the idea is to provide good knowledge transfer not to create an exclusively female environment.”



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ABOVE:
The Kilkenny-Waterford discussion group.

LEFT: Exactly as for a conventional dairy discussion group the Limerick Ladies Discussion Group share their data with each other and Teagasc facilitator Deirbhile Browne.

Not just dairying

Teagasc's Catherine Colfer facilitates the south Wexford beef discussion group: "We see every year when clients come in for Basic Payment discussions that there is a significant percentage of holdings which are owned and managed by women.

"We texted clients and used other communications to establish if there was a demand for a women's group in the region. You would rarely expect to have a women-only group from a local area as you would for a conventional group, so you tend to have group members from a much larger area, which is the case with the south Wexford group.

"As with any other group it's the members who suggest the range of topics which they want to address to the facilitator. In our drystock women's group, the themes are 80% related to technical or production issues but we also cover things such as succession which are equally important for a farm business."

Gender equality

In a recent statement, Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine Charlie McConalogue stated that: "Gender equality is a priority for my Department, as well as being a cross-cutting objective of the current CAP."

Encouraging greater gender equality will include initiatives such as the new TAMS scheme targeted at women farmers but also encouragement for female participation in discussion groups.

A new KT discussion group scheme coming in 2024 will almost certainly prioritise groups which have a certain percentage of female participants.

A greater level of involvement of women in all discussion groups, be it in an all-women or conventional group, can only be to the benefit of everybody. So how do you initiate a Teagasc facilitated all-women group?

Well, the first step would be to approach your Teagasc Regional Manager who can tell you if a group already exists. If not, and there is sufficient demand and adequate resources you could get to name the new group.

Diversity and inclusion strategy

Teagasc has a very comprehensive diversity and inclusion strategy. The inclusion piece is very important and Teagasc has found within its own organisation that sometimes setting up ally groups, such as mentoring circles for female staff, is the way to achieve real inclusion and a voice for staff who may be in the minority.

Teagasc also has a leadership programme for female staff, and the resounding feedback from the over 100 female staff who have attended is that it has been hugely positive in giving them more confidence, clarifying their ambition and their career goals.

Female-only discussion groups are very similar to the female mentoring circles that we have set up in Teagasc. The groups should be supported while they are needed, and there will be a time in the future when the mainstream groups will suffice.

Unless you have been in a minority position yourself, you don't really know how it feels, how isolating it can be.

There is huge power and support in female-only groups: ways of tackling problems and developing new approaches are discussed in a very inclusive way. With various CAP incentives for female farmers, this is a great time for women to get together and maximise their futures.

– Valerie Farrell,
Teagasc head of human resources