



Response to
Commission for Victims and Survivors 2013-2106 Corporate Plan and
2013/14 Work Programme

Women's Resource and Development Agency

The Women's Resource and Development Agency (WRDA) is a regional organization operating throughout Northern Ireland, with a mission to 'advance women's equality and participation in society by working to transform political, economic, social and cultural conditions'. The organisation was established in 1983 and continues to focus its efforts on working with women and community organisations located within disadvantaged communities. WRDA is a membership organisation with over 190 members comprised of women's groups, organisations, and individual members.

Gender Neutrality

The values underpinning the work of the Commission for Victims and Survivors includes 'Equality and Diversity' and the pledge to treat everyone 'equally'. It is our experience, in considering the implications of 'gender neutral' policy making, that equal treatment can in fact perpetuate inequality. What is key is an understanding of what structural inequalities may exist, and what policies will be required in order to ensure an outcome of substantive equality. In terms of gender, this means that policy makers must distinguish between the differing needs of women and men.

UNSCR 1325

We would draw the attention of the Commission for Victims and Survivors to the existence of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on 'Women, Peace and Security', adopted in 2000. This highlights the different experiences that women and men have of conflict and therefore the gender perspectives that need to be incorporated into peace building, peace keeping and post-conflict reconstruction. For example, women are more likely to experience economic hardship and increased caring responsibilities within the home and the community, and are more likely to be excluded from post-conflict institutions.

There are many examples in Northern Ireland to evidence a lack of gender understanding in term of policy initiatives directed at peace building and governance.

Women's Views

WRDA has been involved in initiatives concerned with the legacy of the conflict for a number of years. During 2007-8 WRDA enabled 116 women from 10 groups, from Protestant and Catholic and rural and urban areas across Northern Ireland to discuss how their lives and communities had been affected by the conflict. There is little understanding of conflict-related trauma and the specific impact this has on women, contributing to increased levels of mental illness and increased levels of violence. It is arguable that women have suffered disproportionately as a result of the conflict. Many were left without partners and were required to maintain families in very difficult circumstances.

WRDA (in conjunction with the all-Ireland women's peace project 'Hanna's House') held a seminar on 'Feminist Truth Recovery' in February 2011. A panel of speakers from the Pat Finucane Centre, Healing through Remembering, WAVE and the Falls Community Council provided vivid accounts of the traumas experienced by women from across all communities as they struggle to cope with bereavement, injury and poverty, with the passing of time often exacerbating rather than alleviating their hurt and despair. The gender-specific nature of these experiences has not been reflected in discourses around the conflict or in policies aimed at improving the welfare of survivors of the conflict.

In December 2010, as part of the Irish government's consultation on UN Resolution 1325, Relatives for Justice and WAVE brought together a group of women directly affected by the conflict to discuss what impact the resolution may have on their needs. It was clear that these women, all directly bereaved, injured, carers of those injured or ex-political prisoners had never had the space to consider how they experienced conflict as women. It was also clear that the women felt they had no voice in either securing or developing appropriate services that would meet their long-term needs as women affected by conflict.

Dealing with the Past

The composition of the Consultative Group on the Past, its analysis and its recommendations do not comply with UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on 'Women's Peace and Security'. In our response to the consultation on the report of the Consultative Group, WRDA made the following points:

- There has been a failure to properly consider or address the role of women and the impact of the conflict on women. Women represent the wives, daughters and mothers of those killed, injured and imprisoned as well as being ex-prisoners and ex-combatants themselves. Women have suffered in conflict in specific ways that have been unexplored and unacknowledged - one example is as victims of domestic violence: unable to deal with the matter if the perpetrator is a paramilitary and unable to report the matter if their community forbids communication and interaction with the police.
- Women in rural areas have also suffered disproportionately in that funding has been necessarily addressed to security issues in major towns and cities whilst their plight and particular circumstances has been ignored. It is imperative that women in rural areas are listened to and responded to appropriately so that their historic invisibility is not mirrored in a post-conflict society.

- The underrepresentation of women on public bodies and at political level is deeply worrying and problematic.
- We argued that there should be a thematic strand that would enable women to be considered as a separate group. A theme dealing specifically with women would send out a strong message that the specific role and disadvantage experienced by women is acknowledged and is to be faced in a robust and positive manner.
- While some existing activities embrace specific issues relevant to women, they tend to be *subject* specific (e.g. prisoners' families) rather than *gender* specific. Unless a gender specific approach is taken, it will not be possible to properly address issues relating to women.

Given this evidence, and the moral and political imperative of UNSCR 1325, we would urge the Commission in its work for Victims and Survivors to take cognizance of the gendered needs of victims and survivors and institute mechanisms within its work to ensure that women have the opportunity to talk specifically about their needs and that the appropriate services are developed in response.

Furthermore, given the under-representation of women in all institutions concerned with post conflict reconstruction, we would ask the Commission to ensure that there is parity of representation on all its working groups.

We welcome the fact that the Commission will engage with the Maze Long Kesh Site and would like to make the point that a significant aspect of the experience of those who were involved in the MLK in the past were those relatives, mainly women, who visited their menfolk, and who kept families and communities together in times of great difficulty and hardship. Their experiences should also be incorporated.

We are happy to discuss these issues further and wish the Commission well in its work.

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