



Response to

Associate Parliamentary Group on Women. Peace and Security

Northern Ireland Inquiry: Call for Written Evidence

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 bring about social, political and economic change'. 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 400 members comprised of women's groups, organisations, and individual members.

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Should UN SCR 1325 be directly implemented in Northern Ireland?

There are many reasons why UNSCR1325 should be directly implemented. The following are some of the issues that could be addressed as a result of implementation:

- Women in NI are underrepresented in political and public life. They are not sufficiently represented on bodies concerned with peace building. They are increasingly being marginalised within community organisations.
- The specific needs of female ex-prisoners are not being addressed. Ex-combatant organisations are overwhelmingly male, despite the fact that 1 in 20 prisoners during the conflict were women.

- Very little gender awareness is evident in key policies being advocated to address the legacy of the conflict, see for example the draft consultation on Cohesion, Sharing and Integration and the analysis and proposals emanating from the Eames-Bradley Inquiry.
- 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. This lack of awareness has contributed to under-funding of initiatives to address these issues.

Are women disadvantaged in participating in peace building and governance in Northern Ireland?

Yes. 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.ⁱ All expressed deep concerns regarding their under representation in community life and their fears that if funding for women's groups disappears, then one of the most important vehicles for providing grass roots women with a voice will also disappear, as will women's ability to engage in cross-community activity.

The director of WRDA was a participant in a research project 'Gender at the Interface', commissioned by the Belfast Conflict Resolution Consortium (composed of ex-combatant groups from all the different paramilitary organizations) and as yet unpublished. The 'café-style' conversations with women from a wide range of grass organizations revealed women from all sections of the community feeling increasingly marginalized within communities as men from different ex-combatant groups assumed leadership roles within their communities. Not only does this mean that the voices of women are not being heard, it also means that issues specific to women, such as domestic violence, are increasingly difficult to raise as communities become 'policed' by men, who are in a position of power and control within their communities. Women have expressed to us their belief that patriarchal control is being reinforced in this new 'post conflict' dispensation. This is a very serious situation, which must be addressed as a

matter of urgency and the implementation of UNSCR 1325 would provide a tool to do this.

At a strategic level, there is considerable evidence to indicate disadvantage with regards to women's political representation. For example, in September 2009, the Women's ad hoc Policy Group wrote to Edwin Poots, in his capacity as Minister for the Environment, to express disquiet at the under-representation of women on the proposed 'Transition Committees' then being established to forward work on the (now postponed) Review of Public Administration:

... the recent establishment of the 'voluntary' Transition Committees that are tasked with a significant programme of work to enable the new 11 councils to take full responsibility for services when they commence work. We have noted that 'inclusivity' has been ensured in terms of balanced political representation (proportionate to the representation already on councils). However we are very concerned that no consideration has been given to 'inclusivity' in relation to gender composition. Membership of the 'voluntary' transition committees currently comprises 85% men and 15% women. While conceding, there is a poor gender balance on District Councils generally (22% female); female composition of 15% on the influential voluntary Transition Committees is unacceptable.

The Minister's response was that he was '*satisfied that arrangements that will be put in place for the establishment of the Statutory Transition Committees will ensure, as far as is practicable, inclusivity across the political parties.*' This lack of any gender awareness and refusal to acknowledge the concerns expressed by a wide number of women's organisations is symptomatic of our politicians generally, resulting in a denial of adequate representation on institutions designed to further post-conflict reconstruction.

The refusal of all political parties in Northern Ireland to use the tool of the Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Order 2002 demonstrates the need for the implementation of an internationally agreed resolution aimed at increasing the participation of women.

We do, however, want to highlight the importance of the recruitment of women to the District Policing Partnerships. The Patten Commission recommended that these be broadly representative of local districts in terms of religion, gender, age and cultural

background. As a consequence, the selection panels used census data to ensure that the independent DPP member appointments were representative and in the first round of appointments, 61% of independent members were women. ⁱⁱ (The female percentage declined considerably when representatives of the political parties joined the DPPs). This example demonstrates both that women wish to make a contribution to peace building, and that mechanisms exist that can facilitate their involvement and could be used in other areas.

Are women's needs, experiences, realities and gender perspectives being taken into account in peace building and governance in Northern Ireland?

No. There are many examples to evidence a lack of gender understanding in term of policy initiatives directed at peace building and governance.

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 totally 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 deeply worrying and problematic. We feel that the plethora of legislation and policy introduced with the aim of “equalising” the status quo has resulted in an equalisation down as regards women.
- 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.

With regards to truth recovery, 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 one of the findings of a research project funded under the UK Economic and Social Research Council New Security Challenges Programme ‘Re-Imagining Women’s Security and Participation in Post-Conflict Societies’, which examined the experiences of women in South Africa, Lebanon and Northern Ireland, respondents believed that there were still ‘too many men in the room’ in post-agreement political and civic

institutions. Women believed that men would not consider policy issues that were of specific relevance to women unless women were equally involved in decision-making.ⁱⁱⁱ

Does the Northern Ireland Executive demonstrate adequate understanding of UNSCR 1325 and its requirements?

No. A prime example with regards to a flawed policy on dealing with the past is the draft Cohesion, Sharing and Integration (CSI) policy, issued by the Executive in 2010. This failed to consider the government's Gender Equality Strategy, the impact of the conflict on women or the contribution of women to peace-building, conflict resolution and cohesion, sharing and integration. WRDA, together with an ad hoc group of women's organisations and with funding from the Community Relations Council, coordinated a women's sector consultation on the draft CSI strategy. Events were held in Belfast, Derry, Newry and Dungannon and almost 100 women responded. A robust 34 page response was submitted. As one participant stated:

They're talking about promoting fairness, equality, rights responsibilities and respect - how can this be done when women, half of the population, are missing from the policy? There can be no cohesion in society when 50% of the population are not named in a CSI strategy. And this is in the year 2010!

Amongst the recommendations are the following. A redrafted strategy must acknowledge:

- that a long and violent conflict took place and is still in some aspects ongoing;
- the differential impact of the conflict on women and address the needs of women which result;
- that those effects are ongoing – for example in respect of dependency upon alcohol, prescription drugs, mental health problems etc;
- that dependency upon drugs and alcohol also feed into hate-based crimes and a health strategy needs to address that;
- that the conflict was both driven by and impacted upon inequalities in education, housing and employment;

- those involved in making and drafting policy should undergo gender awareness training. This must include MLAs and civil servants at all levels.
- Any structure for funding work around cohesion, sharing and integration must enable, empower and support women's organisations in undertaking that work.^{iv}

Should the UK Government include provisions relating directly to women in Northern Ireland in its UNSCR 1325 National Action Plan?

Yes. Women in Northern Ireland have been consulted over many years by women's groups in many different parts of the world, all interested in learning more about the experiences of women in Northern Ireland and the valuable contribution they have made to peace making. They have not been consulted on their experiences by either the NIO or the NI Executive. A participant in the women's sector consultation on the CSI strategy made the following point regarding the inclusion of women in post-conflict reconstruction:

Women built the peace by our work in networks, in making relationships, in being aware of multiple identities and multiple roles. Male politicians built the conflict resolution of the Agreement on the back of this work. The Agreement might have been the end of conflict but it was just the beginning of building the peace. Women's groups must be involved in this as of right, because without us there would be no security and no peace.^v

Should the Northern Ireland Executive, groups and organisations in Northern Ireland have an input into the development of a UK UNSCR 1325 National Action Plan?

Yes. Good practice would suggest that the experiences of those in Northern Ireland must inform the development of a UK UNSCR 1325 National Action Plan. Women's organisations in the north took part in cross-learning events organised by the

Department of Foreign Affairs in the Irish Republic and also travelled to Timor Leste and Liberia as part of the same learning initiative. All of this fed into the development of the Irish NAP.

Does the NIO and the NI Executive demonstrate adequate understanding of UNSCR1325 and its requirements?

No. In terms of the NI Executive, the consistent failure to consider the importance of women's contribution to peace building as evidenced in the draft CSI policy is evidence enough. In addition, we have been told by officials within the Gender Equality Unit that UNSCR1325 is inapplicable to Northern Ireland on the grounds that the conflict does not qualify as an "armed conflict" within the meaning of the Geneva Conventions and the Additional Protocols. This of course ignores the 2008 CEDAW Report, "The Committee also calls for the full implementation of Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000) in Northern Ireland." (*Concluding Observations of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, 10 July 2008, at para 285.*)

WRDA took legal advice on this issue, as it was having a detrimental impact on the sector's work in terms of lobbying for implementation of UNSCR135. Part of this advice is reproduced below:

- UN SCR 1325 is legally binding on all UN Member states - Article 25 of the United Nations Charter requires Member States to carry out all decisions of the Security Council;
- The UK is both a permanent member of the Security Council and a Member State of the UN. UN SCR1325 therefore legally binds the UK.
- There has long been a technical legal argument about the status of the conflict in NI – whether it qualifies as an "armed conflict" within the meaning of the Geneva Conventions and the Additional Protocols thereto.

- The argument from some quarters appears to be that because NI may not qualify in a technical legal definition as an “armed conflict”, UNSCR 1325 doesn’t apply to NI. However, this is a spurious argument.
- UN SCR 1325 does not apply only to situations of “armed conflict”. It applies to far broader definitions of conflict. UNSCR 1325 applies to all “conflict situations” – which includes “armed conflicts” but also embraces many other types of situation. ^{vi}

We would regard it as extremely helpful if GAPS could brief officials on the legal status of UNSCR 1325 and its implementation in Northern Ireland.

ⁱ *Women and the Conflict: talking about the “Troubles” and Planning for the Future*, compiled by Helen McLaughlin, WRDA/WCRP, 2008.

ⁱⁱ ‘Northern Ireland DPPs: appointment of independent members’, *Report of Impartial Assessors*, Judith Eve, John Keanie, Patricia Weir, 2003.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Re-Imagining Women’s Security and Participation in Post-Conflict Societies*, 2006. ESRC Reference Number RES-223-25-006. Dr Margaret Ward, director of WRDA, was a member of the research team.

^{iv} *A Gender Critique of the Draft Consultation Documents, Programme for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration*, written by Angela Hegarty on behalf of an ad hoc group led by the Women’s Resource and Development Agency. Consultation events were facilitated by Brid Ruddy. 2010. See <http://www.wrda.net/policy-consultations.aspx>.

^v *Ibid.* pp.33-34.

^{vi} Angela Hegarty, Briefing on the Status of UNSCR 1325, see <http://www.wrda.net/International%20Equality%20Standards.aspx>