



Women and Peacebuilding: Sharing the Learning Cross Border Workshop

Summary of roundtable discussions

**20th March 2014
Titanic, Belfast**

**Written by:
Sinéad Lynch (Project Coordinator for southern border counties)**



European Union
European Regional
Development Fund
Investing in your future

**Women and Peacebuilding: Sharing the Learning
Cross Border Workshop
Titanic, Belfast
20th March 2014**

Introduction of Overall Project

Format

A total of 270 women from across Northern Ireland and the southern border counties attended the concluding cross-border conference of the Women and Peacebuilding project in the Titanic Quarter Belfast. The conference provided an opportunity to hear from a range of key women speakers on issues and concerns relating to the implementation of the UNSCR1325 in both jurisdictions. They were also updated on progress with the development of a Gender and Peacebuilding Toolkit which would be launched in June 2014 as the overall project nears completion. Many of the women had participated in previous workshops that had been held since May 2012 and the afternoon workshops provided an opportunity to provide feedback about the project to date and how they viewed the way forward.

The morning began with an introduction by chair Monica McWilliams, followed by guest speakers to provide a contextual presentation to the audience which was followed by a panel discussion and question and answer session. The speaker's names and biographies, as well as their inputs for the seminar are provided in this section.

In the afternoon, facilitated discussions took place around twenty-five roundtables with a scribe noting the issues that were raised. Participants were asked to focus their discussions around the following questions:

1. From the our speakers today, (a) what are your thoughts on what the speakers said? and (b) what was positive or interesting for you?
2. How could the toolkit be used by individual women / women's groups and others? Provide specific examples where possible.
3. What are your final suggestions / comments in relation to this Peace 3 funded project? Please agree on one key point / final suggestion or recommendation for the way forward for this Peace 3 funded project

At the end of the table discussions, each table was asked to prioritise 1 issue which was then fed back to all of the participants present.

Speaker Biographies

Monica McWilliams is professor of Women's Studies at the Transitional Justice Institute at the University of Ulster, former Chief Commissioner of the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission (2005-2011) and co-founder of the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition political party and was elected to a seat at the Multi-Party Peace Negotiations, which led to the Good Friday Peace Agreement in 1998. She served as a member of the Northern Ireland Legislative Assembly from 1998-2003 and the Northern Ireland Forum for Dialogue and Understanding from 1996-1998.

Kathryn Stone is Commissioner for Victims and Survivors in NI since 2012 has extensive experience in supporting victims of crime and abuse with learning difficulties as well as working with various criminal justice agencies to improve their responses to victims of crime with learning difficulties. She has successfully investigated high profile complaints for large public sector agencies.

Bronagh Hinds is Chair of the Institute of British Irish Studies at University College Dublin and a Senior Associate with DemocraShe. She is an Honorary Senior Research Practitioner in Queen's University School of Law, a member of the Gender Advisory Panel of the Office of the First and deputy First Minister and on the Board of the Glencree Centre for Peace and Reconciliation. Bronagh was a co-founder of the Women's Coalition.

Liz McManus who is currently chair for the monitoring group on UNSCR1325 is a former Irish politician (1992-2011) for the republic of Ireland. She was minister of state for Housing and Urban Renewal from 1994-1997, deputy leader of the Labour Party and spokesperson for Health (2002-2007) and spokesperson on Communications, Energy and Natural Resources from 2007-2011. Liz is also an accomplished writer of fiction.

Irene Miskimmon is a committee member of the Northern Ireland Women's European Platform (NIWEP) which has been doing a lot of work on women, peace and security issues including working closely with the All Party Group on 1325 in Northern Ireland. She is also regional President of Soroptimist International Northern Ireland.

Baroness May Blood is a Labour member of the British House of Lords. She was involved in creating the women's committee in the Trade Union and promoting equality for women at work. Since 1994, she has been an Information Officer of the Greater Shankill Partnership and is a founding member of the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition. In 1998, she was awarded an honorary degree from the University of Ulster and was awarded a life peerage as Baroness Blood, of Blackwatertown, Armagh in 1999 as the first woman in Northern Ireland to be given a life peerage.

Avila Kilmurray is Director of the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland (CFNI) which is the funding partner on the Women and Peacebuilding project. She has worked extensively in community development in Northern Ireland since 1975 and is a founding member of Women's Aid. In 1990, she was appointed the first Women's Officer for the Transport & General Workers' Union (Ireland), and has also served on the Northern Ireland Committee and on the Executive Councils of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions. Avila was a founding member of the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition, and was a member of the Coalition's negotiating team for the Good Friday Agreement.

Speakers Inputs

Chair for the day, **Monica McWilliams** opened the morning by praising the 800+ women who had used their voices over the two years of the Women and Peacebuilding workshops. She commended in particular the voices that had brought new insights and had not spoken about their experiences and views before the project.

She gave a brief outline of the five pillar of UNSCR1325 which the themed workshops of the project had been centred around and announced that a good baseline study completed and that the project had already raised awareness amongst stakeholders of 1325.

She highlighted the fact that while no conflict is "unique" that the context of each conflict is important and that as such sharing lessons internationally is equally important and concluded

by warmly welcoming the Foundations for Peace representatives from Israel, New York, Columbia, Georgia, Serbia, Indonesia, India, Palestine, Bangladesh and Northern Ireland who were present.

The next speaker, **Kathryn Stone** who described her role of Victims and Survivors Commissioner for Northern Ireland as a “painful privilege,” talked about the contentious topic of defining what constitutes a victim or a survivor. She explained that the lack of agreement around a definition creates hierarchies in suffering and that for some people even listening to an alternative definition would entail “contamination.”

She went on to say that the instance of post traumatic stress disorder is higher in Northern Ireland than anywhere else in the world and that unless we deal with the past in a strategic way that the past will keep coming back to haunt us and prevent us from moving on. She further suggested that the past is what victims and survivors face in the present everyday as it is experiences that define us as people.

Achieving justice in a place like Northern Ireland is, she said very difficult as contemporary standards of investigation simply cannot be applied to what happened during the troubles. However, on point that was very clear for her was that it was the women of Northern Ireland that had sacrificed and suffered the most.

She concluded her presentation by urging participants to support each other as women with Madeline Albright’s quotation that “there is a special place in hell for women who don’t help other women” and her own more gentle advice to “support young girls and women, start small, where we are and don’t stop.”

Bronagh Hinds, co-author of the proposed Gender and Peacebuilding Toolkit for the project outlined some of the topics that the workshop participants had discussed over the last two years as well as giving a summary of outcomes of interviews that had been held with key stakeholders of UNSCR1325 in the North and South of Ireland. She explained that while the feedback from the south centred mainly on airing the frustrations of attempting to apply the principles of the resolution that in the North of Ireland that this was not even an option due to the absence of a National Action Plan. As such there was no parallel process taking place north and south. However what was common to both was a distinct lack of awareness of 1325 – even in the south where there is a National Action Plan.

She talked about there being a lack of understanding of a gender perspective in the north and in the south, while 1325 was being addressed to some extent, the subject of the women in the north who had suffered in the conflict was remote in people’s minds.

There was a need, to either adopt 1325 in the north or to start applying its principles in relation to women, peace and security. She also highlighted the need for the development of skills for “gendering” policies and to improve on baseline data which was the function of the women and peacebuilding project.

She concluded by pointing out that the toolkit is merely a start and that it would require an “engine” behind it in order to be effective.

MEP Diane Dodds stated that Northern Ireland was “moving forward” and women were a pivotal part of that movement. She noted that while many people complain about Europe, that there was no doubt that European funding had helped a lot with civic development in Northern Ireland.

She complimented the CSOs who applied directly to Europe for funding and she encouraged women's groups to do that for the sake not just of women but of the whole community. Regarding political participation she said that every political group in Northern Ireland "knows in their hearts" that they need to be reflective of society however in the panel discussion later she clearly stated her disagreement with gender quotas.

In terms of the European parliament, she said that gender balance is good with 37% women but that those women not in influential positions where high level decisions are taken. She concluded with the message that we need to "aspire to positions of authority within politics" as women.

Chair of the monitoring group for the implementation of UNSCR1325 in the south of Ireland, **Liz McManus** described the national action plan for 1325 in the south of Ireland as a "living document" and that everyone involved is on a "learning curve," including the UN staff. She mentioned that the Defence Forces and Irish Aid have their own action plans and that it would be necessary to "sell our message" in the political arena also. She highlighted the fact that both the UK and the republic of Ireland have a national action plan but that the "elephant in the room" was the fact that Northern Ireland did not have its own which should be a cause for concern for all of us.

Irene Miskimmons from the Northern Ireland Women's European Platform (NIWEP) talked about her organisation's work in keeping an eye on how women are treated and that in this regard 1325 is extremely important. She pointed out the importance of reminding governments what they have signed up to. The work that is done in the women's sector should be, she said, "like a jigsaw," – it must work together. She also outlined some of the work that had already been done in the north of Ireland on 1325 by the All Party Group on 1325.

Stella Burnside from the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland said that there everyone has a role to play in upholding equality and that there should be year on year reporting to avoid any gap in the analysis. She explained that the equality commission is very conscious of the role of women in the public life as well as the defining of budgets so that women are not discriminated against.

She emphasised that equality needs to cut across all sectors and that the women and peacebuilding project and the toolkit will offer practical advice for ensuring gender equality and for women to "take up their rightful place."

Baroness May Blood talked about what it means to be a woman in public life and politics. Women she said are often ill prepared for politics in that they are not willing to put in the long days or to push themselves forward. She said it is about "learning the rules and sticking to the rules," as well as being inclusive – talking to everyone and using your contacts. She highlighted the tendency that women have to stick to their own small groups and to be reluctant to push themselves forward. Her statement "I believe in me, do you believe in you? Because if you don't, how do you expect others to?" struck a chord with many women as the roundtable discussions later showed.

To conclude the seminar **Avila Kilmurray** outlined how in Northern Ireland's post conflict climate that gender- no longer an urgent matter- had "fallen beneath the parapet," and that far from being dealt with - it needed to be put back into the equation. Part of the difficulty, she explained is the fact that the gender dimension had been sidelined by the Good Friday Agreement due to it not fitting into the Catholic / Protestant debate. As such the lack of appropriate framework entails carrying on with the interim work in a "virtual reality" but that this work must go on. She said that ownership of the 1325 process must stay with women in the

communities and she suggested a “nutcracker” approach where pressure is applied locally from beneath and internationally, from above. She finished by echoing Baroness May Blood’s encouragement that women must believe in themselves.

Below is a summary of the roundtable facilitated discussions –

1. From the our speakers today, (a) what are your thoughts on what the speakers said? and (b) what was positive or interesting for you?

There was feedback that the speaker input was pitched at a level that the majority of local grass-roots women could not understand or relate to. There were also too many speakers and not enough time for workshops. Use of acronyms and jargon was excluding, given the “different voices and levels of understanding” of those attending. Some women couldn’t relate to the explanations of UNSCR1325 in the introduction to the event and proposed that a brief and user-friendly hand-out on 1325 would have been more useful. Rather than producing a complex tool-kit, it was suggested that developing a hand-out explaining how women can work together to advocate for change on the key pillars would have a better impact at local grass-roots level.

Believe in Yourself and Get on with It!

There was an overwhelmingly positive response to Baroness May Blood’s rousing encouragement to the women to believe in themselves. The women were very struck by the lessons she shared from her experience in the House of Lords: learn the rules and use them, be inclusive - talk to everyone and use your contacts and be willing to put in the hours. There was also a powerful response to Baroness Blood’s statement that it is “time to seize opportunities and not squander them,” and that “women need to stop complaining and be prepared for a job in politics.” Participants described her presentation “down to earth, easy to understand, positive, passionate, warm, inspiring. They talked about how her role modelling as an independent and positive woman had left a huge impression on them and one participant described her comments as “dead on” in relation to women taking the initiative and not waiting. Several women said that May Blood’s contribution made them feel “they can do it.”

Victims and Survivors

Several women were struck by the statistics that Kathryn Stone shared regarding Northern Ireland having the highest instance of post-traumatic stress disorder in the world and also by how problematic the issue of defining victims and survivors can be. Some participants noted that it was useful to get a perspective from someone outside of Northern Ireland.

The Place of UNSCR1325 in Politics

Several women picked up on the fact that politicians north and south are either unaware of 1325 or have difficulty understanding its significance.

However many other of the women had difficulty themselves understanding 1325 based on the speakers inputs.

It was also a matter of interest to several participants that both the Republic of Ireland and the UK have national action plans but Northern Ireland does not.

**2. How could the toolkit be used by individual women / women's groups and others?
Provide specific examples where possible.**

Taking Women & Peacebuilding to the Next Step

It was suggested that a forum be set up in order for women across the north and south of Ireland to see how the toolkit is being advanced and to follow the trajectory of dialogue with the stakeholders that are responsible for applying the principles of 1325.

Women Supporting Each other

It was felt by many participants that some women's community groups in Northern Ireland work in "opposition" to each other and that a key element in the dissemination of the toolkit would be to bring women's centres together to learn about it.

It was also suggested that encouraging more women of high social standing would help to gain attention for the aims of the toolkit.

Dialogue Between Politicians and Civil Society

A number of women felt that it was of utmost importance to use the toolkit to create a dialogue between women's community groups and politicians. The toolkit is important for women's groups so that they can challenge politicians and it was in particular highlighted that it should be used to lobby stakeholders towards facing their responsibilities.

Reaching as Many different People as Possible

In terms of the toolkits dissemination many women commented that it should be launched and promoted in a "user-friendly, jargon free way" at local, regional and international level which facilitates a positive two-way discussion on implementation. Emphasis was placed on using various modes of transmission in diverse contexts. For example the women suggested providing the toolkit as an online resource, running workshops, using its lessons in schools, universities and community centres and moreover, delivering it to both women and men. It was also suggested that the toolkit should include a directory of community groups.

Strategy for Women in all Different Organisations

A number of participants commented that such was the importance of implementing the principles of 1325 that it would be of utmost importance that organisations such as trade unions, political parties and community groups would develop their own strategy for making 1325 a reality in the way appropriate to their capacity. This process should not, however, stop at more developed organisations but include smaller devolved groups.

3. What are your final suggestions / comments in relation to this Peace 3 funded project? Please agree on one key point / final suggestion or recommendation for the way forward for this Peace 3 funded project

Build on the Foundations Created by "Women & Peacebuilding"

There were many positive comments from the participants about the women and peacebuilding project. They talked about what a great platform it had been for women to use

their voices and be heard. However, nearly all of the participants also framed the project as a “groundwork” or a “first step” to a longer process.

Peace 4, the women said, should be used to follow up on the lessons of the toolkit and to progress the issues that “women and peacebuilding” has identified. In this (as in many previous seminars) participants expressed their frustration that peace projects “open up” issues but do not create continuity in follow up action or in the learning experience of the participants. Participants talked about the need to keep women informed on progress – some suggestions included holding an annual conference (actual or virtual), creating a calendar of forthcoming events that are 1325 relevant and creating update reports that the women have access to.

Let’s Focus on Young Women as our Future Leaders

There was overwhelming enthusiasm from participants about the urgency of fostering youth and in particular young women. It was acknowledged that the only way that 1325 will become a reality in the future is through the active participation of young women in public life. The women talked about the need for intergenerational projects that focus on educating and empowering young women. This education should take place from an early age and be part of the mainstream education curriculum. The women also highlighted the importance of involving younger women in community groups and creating dialogue between schools and community groups, focusing on decision making through “jargon free talks.”

Women’s Participation

A number of the women highlighted the need to focus on participation effective strategies to incorporate women at all levels. These strategies, they said, must be monitored. The quota system in the republic of Ireland was praised as a model for Northern Ireland to follow.

The Peace Projects

There were several comments from participants about the complicated process of applying for peace funding and it was suggested that this process either be simplified or that assistance be provided in applying for funding.