



Women: Dealing with the Past Workshop

Summary of roundtable discussions

**8th October 2013,
Europa Hotel, Belfast**

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Introduction of Overall Project

The Women's Resource and Development Agency (WRDA), the National Women's Council of Ireland (NWCi) and the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland (CFNI) are partners in a Peace 3 project that aims to capture the experiences of women living through conflict and through the subsequent period of conflict resolution and peace building.

The aim is to learn from the experience of women who have lived through these processes and to try to identify ways in which to make a positive impact. Over two years this project will bring women together on a cross community and a cross border basis and they will have an opportunity to exchange learning with women from other conflict areas through the Foundations for Peace Network.

Key issues will be highlighted in different workshops which will take place throughout Northern Ireland and in border county areas. These are:

- Violence, safety and security
- Decision making and representation
- Women's rights are human rights – women and social justice
- Women and the legacies of the past
- Women and institutional change

The final part of the project is aimed at placing on an international stage on all that has been learned through the discussions between women from different communities and regions. The project will have two important outcomes:

- The learning gathered will be used for the design of policy recommendations that will be disseminated through the production of a Policy Report on Gender and Peace Building, which will be primarily focused on influencing institutional change in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.
- A Tool Kit on Women and Peace Building: Developing Practical Approaches will be produced. This will be circulated internationally with the intention of influencing governments and agencies responsible for providing grants and assistance to war-torn societies.

Format:

Over 170 women attended a workshop to explore their experiences of Peace and how the legacies of the past can unite and divide us as women. The workshop aimed to engage women in sharing their views on living in a community still emerging from conflict and to get them discussing key issues such as divided communities and safety; victims and survivors; parades and flags; and how women and families are affected now by the legacy of The Troubles (e.g. mental health).

The morning began with the guest speakers providing a contextual presentation to the audience. The speakers included Dawn Purvis and Claire Hackett. Dawn, a former MLA, is the Chair of Healing Through Remembering, a cross-community organisation working on a common goal of how to deal with the legacy of the past. Claire is a community worker at Falls Community Council, who has been involved in the oral history archive, Dúchas, and is a board member of Hanna's House, an all-Ireland women's peace building project.

Facilitated discussions took place around eighteen tables with a scribe noting the issues that were raised. Participants were asked to focus their discussions around the following questions:

1. Please share any relevant issues facing NI today and how they affect you and your family.
2. Please share your views on the positives post-conflict, and how they affect you and your family.
3. Do you feel it is better or worse for women now than 15 years ago? What would you like to see changed?

At the end of each table discussion, the women were asked to prioritise one issue per question and note these on a flipchart. These priorities were summarised as verbal feedback to the wider audience.

A short plenary discussion ensued after this.

Synopsis of issues raised in relation to the above questions:

Q1) Please share any relevant issues facing NI today and how they affect you and your family.

Paramilitarism

Paramilitary organisations remain active in many communities across NI. As they are still actively recruiting, a key concern for many mothers is that their sons could be enticed to become involved in these groups.

Jobs are few or non-existent in these communities and this adds to the allure of paramilitary activity. One woman said, "Children are growing up too fast, they aren't allowed to be children and the boys want to be like their Dads." For many, this means becoming involved in paramilitarism and criminal activity.

Paramilitaries have significant control of these communities and have a huge influence in organised crime e.g. drugs. This provides additional worries for mothers working hard to keep children on a path of non-criminality that avoids conflict with the police.

Women spoke of how they were effectively silenced in communities where paramilitaries were in control. If they speak out there is threat to their personal safety but more frighteningly, speaking out places their children in danger. Consequently many women live in fear and they remain silent in order to protect their children.

There is a distinct lack of legitimate political leadership in many of these communities

Antisocial Behaviour

An increased level of antisocial behaviour was also cited as a major issue affecting some communities. This ranged for rioting, drug and alcohol abuse, drug dealing, car theft (and joy riding) burglaries and general low level criminality. Women spoke of how parental control on young people has weakened. Schools have also lost control. Other causal factors include parents affected during the years of the conflict and now addicted to alcohol and/or prescription drugs.

Some of the women lamented that there was no consequences for young people perpetrating anti-social behaviour. Often the police don't respond. One participant commented, "The police don't trust the community and the community don't trust the police."

In some areas, there is a noticeable increase in the dealing and taking of illegal drugs. It is impossible to know where young people are and what they are doing 24/7. Social media has made this situation even more difficult to manage. Recreational rioting was the norm in some communities.

Another group of young people discussed in this context was students living in the 'Holy Lands' area of Belfast. Ongoing anti-social behaviour and intimidation was leading to women becoming apathetic about their homes. They claimed they were becoming depressed because nothing was being done that was actually changing the situation and there was no opportunity to be re-housed.

All in all, such anti-social behaviour and intimidation led to people, particularly those who are elderly and/or live alone, to live in constant fear.

The Position of Women

There was a lot of discussion about the position of women in Northern Ireland society.

Some of the women said their voices were effectively silenced and that communities were essentially controlled by men. The lack of acknowledgement of this only serves to exacerbate the enforced silence of women.

Women have been there to pick up the pieces over the forty years of violence and conflict. They suffered the loss of loved ones and nursed the injured and dying, but have never been given an equal position or voice in our society.

Even now women come together (within their communities) in times of crisis but links to paramilitarism and money have led to a lack of trust amongst women in some communities. A view was expressed, "If the women stuck together, they would change everything."

There was also a discussion around men's role in their communities and how they do not always work for the benefit of the whole community, but are more likely to benefit themselves. Yet men are more likely to get the money in communities. There is a focus on ex-combatant projects and in many communities this excludes women. Some of the women believed that male leaders in their communities were responsible for passing on negativity and sectarian attitudes to younger generations. Segregated communities suited some groups in society.

The issue of women and their multiple responsibilities was also raised. Women are now expected to work outside of the home, provide for their families as well as carry the bulk of caring responsibility for young and elder care. Women's lives were becoming ever more pressured.

Some women said that there were some issues that remain too sensitive for women to discuss openly. Safe environments, possibly women only spaces, would be necessary to deal with many of these legacy issues.

Dealing With the Past – Flags, Parades and Commemorations

Ongoing contested matters of flags, emblems, painted kerbstones and parades formed a significant part of many table discussions. Some participants felt very strongly that unionist/loyalist culture and identity was being eroded.

Some women claimed that they, along with other women, were the main organisers of the 'flag protests'. Women said they were also present at the protests in order to keep a close eye on the kids. In relation to band parades, they stated that this was one of the only ways to keep their young male children out of trouble as alcohol, drugs and paramilitary involvement were not compatible with (most) band membership.

Other women said that the women organisers of the street protests were 'sucked in' by their partners and many are not in a position to speak out or contradict the real community leaders (who are male). Some women felt that they were not organised by people in local communities but people in power.

In relation to cultural expression there was a strong 'them & us' mentality. PUL women felt that people from a republican/nationalist background were blowing issues all out of proportion.

For others not involved in organising or supporting the street protests, these demonstrations had quite a negative impact on their daily routines leading to disrupted journeys to school and missed hospital appointments. Many felt they couldn't leave their homes at times. There were raised levels of anxiety in communities, particularly among children.

There was also concern expressed at the impact on local businesses and the economy. There was a fear of voicing your opinion in some communities. The control of paramilitaries was reiterated as an overarching and negative reality in some communities.

Women were also the ones who were left to clear up after the protests. July was cited as a particularly difficult month. Summer time can be contentious for mixed/divided communities. Some women said that the money used to police the street protests and clear up after them, could be put to better use in the communities.

There was a strong view that the flag protests have seriously damaged relations between communities and there is a real fear that problems could escalate. It has also resulted in a reduction in cross-community work between community groups and women's groups. People are reluctant to travel to 'other' communities when tensions are high. The negative impact on the local and regional economy was also discussed.

Commemorations (mostly republican events) were also discussed and were viewed by PUL women as provocative and 'in your face'.

In general it was noted that often commemorations e.g. those relating to centenary events have very little input from or have little to do with women.

There was some concern about what little exists for victims and survivors particularly in rural and border areas. As one woman said, "Victimhood takes over your life and prolongs the conflict and the pain."

While some women felt strongly that it was time to deal with the controversial issues of the past – 'the killing and trauma', others who had lost loved ones in the conflict had mixed feelings about examining the past in any further detail. Rather than dragging up the past, they wanted to focus on the future.

Some of the women believed that civil unrest was being used to demand extra resources in areas.

Contested Histories, Spaces and Places; Fear / Personal and Community Safety

Many women spoke of the fear that overshadowed their everyday lives in their communities. Often the ongoing protests made them fear for their personal safety and also for the safety of their neighbours and children. People feel vulnerable and family life can become very stressful. Some women talked of how, in the past they moved homes, to distance themselves from these problems.

There was also a real sense that if you didn't agree with the 'protests' and associated unrest, people were unable to speak up. There was a real fear of intimidation or reprisal. Women said it was more difficult now to move through the town than during the height of the troubles.

Some women said that while there was a sense of community during the conflict, that sense of community was now gone. During the troubles people looked out for each other; this was no longer the case.

Many of the women spoke directly of the ongoing protest happening at Twadell. Those who lived close to it felt intimidated and afraid particularly during the weekend. They feared being watched and their movements noted and believed that ultimately their safety was in danger. There has been serious disruption to their daily lives. Many women concentrated on trying to keep their kids away from the protest. There was also disquiet expressed about people from outside the area, coming into the area to participate in protests and unrest.

Other women spoke of how nothing had changed citing the Thomas Begley memorial event as evidence of this.

The women spoke of the violence that happened frequently during the conflict and how the bombs and intimidation affected their lives. Some women spoke of intimidation and violence by State actors – RUC and UDR personnel - and others spoke of the violence meted out by paramilitaries.

Some PUL women spoke of their dislike of flags and bunting hanging outside their homes but they were unable to voice this openly. In some communities there was very real pressure to fly flags from houses.

There were some positive aspects of post conflict life discussed. There is more cross-community interaction and less fear of intercommunity relations. Community work in many communities has led to greater cohesion in communities and the projection of a better image. In some areas, previously deemed undesirable, there are now housing waiting lists. Some women believed more and better integrated education was the way forward.

The other issue that came across strongly during these discussions was the further detrimental impact on deprived communities and people living in poverty.

Contested Spaces

A further legacy of the past was clearly identified as 'contested spaces'. Peace Walls for some were viewed as a necessary safety measure; they provided protection. For others they were the manifestation of our inability to effectively deal with the past and maintained a 'them and us' mentality. They are both mental and physical barriers. One woman said, "All over the world walls are coming down – but not here."

What could be viewed as a positive spin on the existence of the peace walls is their significant and contribution in terms of tourism.

Interface violence remains a issue for many communities, often flaring up during periods of heightened tension (eg. the marching season)

What can be perceived as neutral areas for some are viewed as 'no-go' areas for others. This can mean a reduced access to public service for some people.

Generally women felt that while there may be notably less physical conflict, there are more no-go areas and contested spaces. Things might look peaceful, but under the surface, they're not as good as they should be.

A particular issue was raised by women living in rural areas. The perception can often be that there are no interfaces in rural areas. Women said that while these interface areas might be 'hidden' or 'silent' they were nonetheless very real for rural residents. Some women spoke of being afraid going to certain shops or certain parts of the town where they felt they would not be welcomed.

Segregation remains the reality for many people living in both rural and urban areas of NI, and flags still mark out the different territories. It was felt by some women that government in some ways endorses and encourages the segregation and that violence pays in the end.

Recession

The recent financial crisis and ensuing recession was also raised during the discussions as an issue that was impacting significantly on their families and communities.

Social problems were noticeably exacerbated in communities. High levels of unemployment, increased incidents of mental ill-health and general lack of employment opportunities were all cited as occurring since the recession hit. This has led to a lack of ambition and/or aspiration amongst many young people. Austerity measures are leading to the closure of public services and this is having a detrimental impact on many communities.

Anti-social behaviour is prevalent and difficult to tackle.

The lack of jobs coupled with a lack of affordable childcare provision makes the situation very difficult for women seeking paid work. The lack of any and/or affordable childcare was cited by many participants as a major barrier for women in seeking work and providing for their families.

The women noticed a real rise in the cost of living and all of this happening in the face of austerity measures being implemented. Some older women spoke of how they were contributing financially to their grown up children and grandchildren. Grandparents were also finding themselves more often in the role of the main childcare provider to enable their children go out to work.

Some of the women spoke of how women and mothers are finding themselves under more pressure to work outside of the home. There is more pressure on mothers to provide for families. The recession has also lead many employers to shed jobs and in many cases, reduce full-time hours to part-time hours and it was often the case that it just didn't pay to work when childcare costs were added to the mix. Some women talked about maternity discrimination being alive and well in the workplace. Women said that employers were not flexible enough for women. Many workplaces just don't want to accommodate mothers or parents. Some of the women said that they believed more should be done to allow mothers to stay at home to care for young children.

Welfare Reform and the cuts and alterations to the social security system were also discussed. There was a lot of fear in communities about how exactly this would impact on families who are already struggling to make ends meet. Cuts to tax credits, changes to

disability benefits, the introduction of Universal Credit and the Bedroom Tax were all viewed as potentially having a devastating impact on already vulnerable people.

The women strongly believed that welfare reform would have a disproportionate impact on women and that it would be the women who would be left to pick up the pieces. Concern and anger was expressed about the proposal to pay the new payment of Universal Credit to one person in the house and how women's purses would be affected. Women also said that there weren't enough high quality houses and not enough one bedroom properties for people to move into to avoid the Bedroom Tax. Impacts on lone parents (the vast majority of whom are women) was also raised as particularly concerning. The view was also expressed that the ongoing civil unrest in NI suited government as it allowed punitive policies such as welfare reform and the growth zero hour contracts come in through the back door.

Community development has also reduced in many communities because of the decrease in grants and resources to fund this work. There are too few resources to address the real needs in communities.

Mental Health

A growing legacy issue evident in many communities is that of increased levels of mental ill health. Intergenerational trauma, increasing suicide levels (affecting all ages), drug and alcohol abuse, depression and anxiety are all evident in a climate of reduced funding for mental health services. In many communities services are overburdened and inadequate.

It was strongly contended that these issues needed to be dealt with as a matter of urgency.

Domestic and Sexual Violence

The prevalence of domestic and sexual violence was also discussed by the women and cited as an ongoing scourge in their communities. Some of the women believed that the men couldn't handle the press when they came out of prison. Alcohol and resentment has led to increased incidents of domestic violence.

Sexual abuse was cited as a huge issue by some of the women. Some of the women spoke of the illegal drinking dens where young women were effectively wooed and sexually abused.

Community Cohesion

There was a view expressed by many of the women that communities were less cohesive than before. Economic deprivation was endemic, leading to vicious cycles of debt, alcohol abuse, depression etc. Some communities suffer from intergenerational poor parenting and there is an evident lack of engagement when support is offered.

Older people are feeling isolated in their communities. A community spirit that may have been evident during the conflict no longer exists.

Education

The need for quality and lifelong education was raised during the discussions.

There is a need to tackle sectarianism and change attitudes. There is a generation of young people who have not had direct experience of the conflict, yet they are still feeling the negative impacts. Many of the women strongly believed that integrated education was the way forward. It is imperative that cultural difference and respect is part of the curriculum.

It was also suggested that there was a lot of community education and cross-community work happening but it was impossible to find information on this. This information should be centralised and easily accessible.

Lack of Political Leadership

Some of the discussions centred on the lack of political leadership, particularly at local community level. There is a leadership vacuum. Sticking plasters are being used to address contentious issues and these must be properly dealt with.

Some of the women believed there was a yawning gap between MLAs and the electorate. Common issues such as poverty, unemployment and mental ill-health affect people equally in all communities and our politicians are failing to tackle these social issues effectively. Diverting resources from education and health to managing public disorder was also lamented.

Some of the women wanted to see the realisation and protection of greater rights across all communities.

Other

While most of the women identified with either of the two main communities in NI, there are many women who do not identify as protestant/unionist/loyalist or nationalist/republican.

Some of the women had moved to the North from the South spoke about how difficult it was to sit on the fence. One commented that people were always trying to put her in a Catholic/Nationalist/Republican box because of her accent. Other women who moved from Scotland and England had the same experience. People in NI were insistent on pigeon-holing those from outside NI. One woman lamented, "We can celebrate Indian and Chinese culture but not each others."

Q2) Please share your views on the positives post-conflict, and how they affect you and your family.

Reduced Levels / Fear of Violence

The women spoke of a general and pervasive sense of relief. The reduction in levels of violence was matched with reduced levels of fear. People were less likely to be shot or blown up and there was a feeling that we have survived the troubles.

A lot of women spoke of how they felt it was safer to move around Belfast. Movement through the City is safer – there is more freedom. People are generally more relaxed and Belfast was much more alive that it had been during the dark times.

It was also mentioned that although levels of domestic violence have not reduced, it was easier for women to report domestic abuse.

Issues such as the higher levels of acceptance of the Police Service NI in nationalist areas and the removal of the army from the streets also led some women to feeling safer in their communities.

Women also spoke of their relief in terms of the reduction of potential harm on their children. Although a certain level of threat persists, they felt that boys (in particular) were less likely to join paramilitary organisations and go to prison. This was hugely welcomed.

Urban Renewal

There was a lot of discussion about how the cities of Belfast and Derry have transformed over the past 15 years. Derry-Londonderry recently reaped the benefits of being the UK City of Culture and while there are still problems, there has also been a huge amount of positive change.

Events such as those that happened as part of the City of Culture celebrations, the World Police and Fire Games, the MTV awards and various festivals have made NI less insular and resulted in a welcome increase in tourism. There has been a lot of regeneration and this has been good for local businesses and tourism. People are engaging more and in some areas there is renewed sense of community spirit.

Some women also lauded the recent opening of the Tate Building at Windsor Women's Centre, saying it was an oasis of calm for women in the community.

Our Children have a Better Life

For many of the women, the safety of and opportunities available to their children was of paramount concern. As one woman said, "Our lives are lived, we live for the kids." The women were glad that their children had a better life experience than them. They could be kids, had many more opportunities and did not have to live in fear, locked inside their own community. They could also have a better and wider social life.

The introduction of 'Sure Start' children's centres was a positive and welcome development in some communities. Some women were very supportive of the marching bands as an alternative to paramilitary involvement in PUL communities.

Cross-community and Cross-border Work

The women placed a lot of positive emphasis on the increased levels of cross community and cross-border work. There were far more opportunities to meet and work with women and people across communities. Cross-community work made people realise that the different communities and much more in common than there were differences. The women who participated in cross-community visits spoke about visiting places that they thought they never would visit e.g. Masonic halls, catholic churches etc. It was admitted that there were some in communities who did not want cross-community work happening and that small mindedness still exists. Some women insisted that cross-community contact eroded fear and nurtured respect.

It was also recognised that the availability of resources allowed cross-community work and visits to happen. Women have had very positive experiences and greatly benefited from this work over the last 15 years. European funded projects have brought people together across divides. For many women the churches have also helped with this work. The work of Joyce McCartan in the Lower Ormeau Road area was also praised.

Children were also benefiting from integrated education and participating in a wider variety of sports – rugby, Gaelic etc. Some women felt there was great cross-community work happening within schools.

Less Segregation / Integrated Education

A further 'positive' identified by the women was the rise in levels of integrated education. This is becoming a real choice for parents across Belfast and other parts of NI. A significant number of women identified integrated education as a positive development over the last number of years. Integrated Education, while not a panacea, was leading to less segregation generally and more mixed housing provision in some areas. Many of the women expressed the desire to have more integrated education opportunities available for children.

Some women also believed there is a welcome increase in interfaith marriage. There was some discussion about how deeply segregated communities were during the times of the troubles. Now there were teachers with other faiths teaching in state and maintained schools.

Community Development

Some participants spoke about the positive trend in terms of community development work and particularly the work of women's groups supporting and lobbying for women in their local communities. The consolidation and expansion in the work and services offered by women's centres across the City and Northern Ireland was also viewed as very positive. Services offered through the Women's Centres and other community organisations were being developed to meet the needs of new vulnerable groups e.g. young women and ethnic minorities.

The increase in the number of groups working to support victims of the troubles was also viewed as a positive development.

The involvement of young people in cross-community sports and arts projects is also going very well in many communities. Other work included the WOMEN'S TEC Extending Positive Relations programme and the events organised by Women's Resource and Development Agency.

Many participants said that EU PEACE funding had really helped to establish the women's sector and its work on a cross-community basis. It had resourced many educational programmes, brought women out of their homes and encouraged them to become active in their communities.

It was also noted that 'social media' is a relatively new platform offering new possibilities for women everywhere.

Social Benefits / Equality Issues

Some of the participants spoke of how there is a greater sense of equality in society in terms of sexual orientation, multi-culturalism etc. There may be a long way to go but some progress has been made. An example given was the growth in popularity of the Belfast Pride march. There was also a perspective that women's equality here has progressed well when compared with some other countries.

Better Political Leadership as Perceived Internationally

Northern Ireland is now held up as the role model post conflict society in societies affected by conflict across the world. For many of the participants it was miraculous that the two political parties on the extremes during the conflict were now working together in a government department and that they could stand together on international platforms.

Women and Political Representation

Female politicians have had a tough time in NI because of sexism, sectarianism and because there are not enough of them. Participants wanted to praise the women who were in politics but they wanted to see more of them.

Dealing with the Past

Some of the participants welcomed events/spaces where they could discuss issues of dealing with the past (like this event). They said it was important to do this in order to avoid making the same mistakes again. They said they wanted more opportunities to discuss these issues.

There is Nothing Positive in My Community

There were also some women who said there was little positive in their communities. Essentially since the beginning of the Peace Process things have become worse. They feel that their lives are controlled and they are dictated to.

The 'Other Side' are Benefiting more From Peace:

There were also negative comments such as, "Everything seems to be going to Republicans", and, "We got nothing – other areas got more".

Q3) Do you feel it is better or worse for women now than 15 years ago? What would you like to see changed?

Things are worse now than 15 years ago:

In some of the discussions it was suggested that all the benefits were one-sided, e.g. "It is better for Catholics but not for Protestants – especially young protestant men." Some of the women were resentful because of this.

Some women living in PUL areas said that they were now unable to approach the police from their communities. The PSNI were viewed as perpetrators of harassment.

Others spoke of how more women were more likely to be involved in the criminal justice now and often for lesser crimes than men. This has huge impacts on family life.

The issue of marching and parading was also discussed. Some of the participants thought that there seems to be many more marches now than before. Some women believed that the people who parade/march should pay for the policing of them. One said, "Organisations hosting should pay for the costs associated with the event." There was some scepticism about the Peace talks and inquiries. Many of the women suggested that all the money used for this should be used on schools and housing.

The issue of social workers being prevented from undertaking casework was also raised. This appears to be a growing issue.

Social Problems

Many of the participants believed social problems such as drug and alcohol misuse/abuse and mental health problems have gotten worse over the period of the Peace Process. Young girls are more likely to experience abuse. Mothers have a much tougher time raising families. In many communities, women have been left to pick up the pieces post-conflict.

Domestic and Sexual Violence

Many of the women believed that sexual assault and domestic violence has increased but there is less reporting. Child protection issues are more difficult to deal with due to threats of violence. There was also a view expressed that young people are more likely to put up with domestic violence now than 15 years ago. Also women now are perpetrators as well as men.

Increased Pressure on Young People

Participants believed that many young people today were under more pressure than young people 15 years ago. Bullying, drug abuse and other harmful factors are leading to increasing mental health issues and suicide risk. Women spoke of how there are problems with general '21st century culture' and that it often has a negative impact on young people and particularly young women.

Paramilitary Control

There may be no bombs but there is still fear and internal community divisions are part and parcel of life in many communities. In some communities, paramilitaries are still in control. They intimidate and threaten women and keep them silent, ensuring they cannot participate openly in their communities.

Lack of Political Leadership

There was a strongly held view that women have become displaced within communities. In 1998, women were visibly represented in the Peace Talks and discussions leading to the Good Friday Agreement. Since then they have been pushed to the background.

There is a dearth in terms of grass roots political leadership. Party politics drives decision-making and 'green and orange' contentious issues dominate. Women are always picking up the pieces.

Many participants suggested 'politicians are still letting us down'. The women powerfully advocated that there should be more women in political decision-making roles. There were not enough women running for elected office and political parties must do more to push women forward. It was strongly suggested that women need to lead rather than follow.

Recession

The recession was having a huge impact on families and communities. Women spoke of how there was not enough money to spend on their children. There is more pressure now for women to work outside the home. For some this means that they have had to stop any community work they were involved in.

Many of the participants believed that the recession had a disproportionate impact on women – with more women losing jobs etc. Some also believed there was notable decrease in public service provision.

A discussion also addressed the issue of the 'brain drain' – the high levels of emigration of young people.

Community Development

During the conflict women were leaders in their communities – they took the lead when men were away. All of this changed when they came home.

Some participants believed that it is becoming more difficult to become involved in community work. This is due to a reduction in resources to fund community development projects. There are also more and diverse groups competing for funding. Rural women can be more isolated and it can be very difficult to get projects off the ground in some rural areas. It was also suggested that there is not enough information available of projects that are already there.

Others said that it can be difficult to get women out of single identity communities to participate in cross-community projects – threat and logistics are both issues pertaining to this.

Huge amounts of bureaucracy prevent small groups applying for funding so some felt that the larger groups get disproportionate levels of funding.

Some participants said that community education projects should now tackle racism and xenophobia rather than sectarianism and they thought that this was a bigger problem in areas that are economically deprived.

Some participants also suggested that a higher value was traditionally attached to education and community development in Catholic / Nationalist communities but that this was changing in Protestant / Loyalist communities – and was to be welcomed.

Women Are Ignored

It was widely held that women were ignored and that their opinions did not matter e.g. “It depends on who you are, where you are from and who you know.” Participants also said that politicians only listen to women when they want votes.

There was some discussion on how the Haass - O’Sullivan talks clearly focused on men and their views and that they needed to listen to the people who were most affected by the ongoing unrest.

Childcare

It was suggested that childcare provision was becoming more expensive and therefore impossible to use for the average family. This was likely to place greater restrictions on young women than young men as women still carry the responsibility for ‘caring’ generally. It was suggested that we need more free childcare places and better provision should be made for younger children.

Things are better now than 15 years ago:

Some participants believed that although it was not totally perfect, women were more visible in society generally. They have more opportunity to be economically independent and less dependent on men. Women are more visible in non-traditional roles eg. bus/taxi drivers. They are also more likely to perform well in education. They have more control over their own lives. Women today are stronger now than ever. For many, however, they may be strong in their own but less so in their community where male control prevails.

There is less violence and Belfast has opened up for women. Some of the participants from the Omagh area said that the trauma of the Omagh bomb had brought the community closer together.

Some participants believed that more PUL women were now involved in community development work – extending their involvement through church groups and this is a positive change. Women are generally more outward looking.

Although still not at an adequate level, there are more women visible in political life and this was a very welcome development. Women are also reaping the benefits of education. There is a more positive attitude towards education and much more parental involvement in children's education.

Participants thought childcare provision is of higher quality now than years ago.

There are many more women involved in cross-community activities. Women are the driving force of cross-community work and exchanges. Women's centres have been pivotal in educating women in their local communities. They provide safe places for people to discuss issues and options around domestic violence experiences.

It was also suggested that Church attitudes towards women have also changed. They have become more inclusive of women.

A further welcome development is that there is more and better sex education in schools (although there is room for further improvement). Family planning advice for young people is also much better today than 15 years ago.

Northern Ireland society is more multicultural now than in the past.

Suggestions for Positive Change:

More Women in Political Decision-Making

At the end of the table discussions this was a key issue that many of the participants prioritised.

There was a strong view coming from most table discussions that women need to be in decision-making and leadership positions to make change happen. Without better gender balance in these roles the status quo will persist.

The British government need to lead and implement UNSCR 1325 (peace & security) in Northern Ireland. Implementing this resolution would ensure attention is paid to women's inclusion in political decision making.

Many participants proposed the introduction of gender quotas, arguing that quotas are the only mechanism to ensure a greater representation of women in politics.

Participants also strongly advocated that the NI consultative Civic Forum should be re-established providing a voice for women across different sectors. The Civic Forum should be fully inclusive and ordinary women should be represented on it.

A proposal that received almost unanimous support was that there should be a government department dedicated to promoting Women's Rights and Equality.

Dealing with Contentious Legacy Issues

It was suggested that initiatives are needed to bring people together from across the interfaces. There was a desire for more cross-community events and information on these events to be widely and better advertised. The women also wanted to see more cross-religion integration.

Many participants also wanted to make progress towards more and better integrated communities. This requires more and higher quality integrated education provision and shared high quality public services in local areas. There was also a proposal that there must be less segregated housing. Some participants believed the peace walls must come down and mixed housing areas should be encouraged.

Suggestions in relation to flags and parades include:

- Alcohol should be banned at parades and marches
- There should be a zero tolerance approach taken in relation to flags, emblems and marches
- There should be more respect for bodies such as the Parades Commission

Education

It was also suggested that we need to abolish the current 'two-tiered' education system. Furthermore women should have greater access to education throughout their lives and such provision must be better advertised. High quality education is crucial in promoting self esteem and confidence in young women. Furthermore, it is crucial that mothers are educated so that they can educate their children.

Domestic Violence

Many of the participants wanted to see tougher sentencing in relation to perpetrators of domestic violence. It is still the case that the innocent party is often made to feel guilty. Stigma persists and we need to work harder to change attitudes.

Jobs and Employment

Much more work needs to happen in relation to job creation. There is very little in terms of job security today. Young people in particular have very difficult employment prospects and this has a huge and detrimental impact on their lives and their ability to move out of the parental home. It was also suggested that the least employers could do is respond to job applicants, even if just to acknowledge them. This often does not happen.