



No Peace without Women

Summary of roundtable discussions

Thursday 27th June 2014
Crumlin Road Gaol, Belfast

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Introduction of overall project:

Over the last 2 years the Women's Resource and Development Agency (WRDA), the National Women's Council of Ireland (NWCI) and the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland have been 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 has been 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. Women have been brought together on a cross community and a cross border basis and they have had an opportunity to exchange learning with women from other conflict areas through the Foundations for Peace Network.

Key issues were highlighted in different workshops which took place throughout Northern Ireland and in border county areas. These were:

- 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
- Women making a difference

At this event 'No Peace without Women', participants from previous workshops in the north of Ireland came together to hear about the gender and peacebuilding toolkit which contains inputs from all the previous workshops (north and south), as well as from stakeholders across the north of Ireland. The Tool Kit will be circulated on a national and an international basis with the intention of influencing governments and agencies responsible for providing grants and assistance to war-torn societies.

Speaker Input

WRDA Director, Anne McVicker gave an inspiring contextual introduction, recapping on the aims of the Women and Peacebuilding project. She stressed that the value of the two year project which has involved the consultation of over 1000 women would be the influence it would have on ensuring that women's voices would be heard on any future plans for reconstructing peace.

NIWEP Chair, Kate McCullough gave a clear presentation on UNSCR1325, what it means in the lives of women and what role individual women can play towards its' principles being realised. Her pictorial explanation of the pillars with examples of their various manifestations in other countries provided a solid and straightforward basis for the facilitated discussions afterwards. She also outlined the function of policy and legislation in the everyday lives of women and the importance of realising that every woman has the opportunity to influence it.

Paula Bradley, MLA spoke about her own experience of being chairperson of the Stormont All Party Group on UNSCR1325. She referred to her efforts to raise awareness amongst political parties in Northern Ireland and in Westminster on 1325 amidst a climate of disinterest and expressed her determination not to give up despite the many obstacles.

Format:

Over 120 women from across the north of Ireland attended a workshop to listen to speakers talk about UNSCR1325 and the gender and peacebuilding toolkit as well as to give their perspectives on how the WRDA could advance the agenda of UNSCR1325 in the north of Ireland in the future

Facilitated discussions took place around thirteen tables with a scribe noting the issues that were raised around 3 key questions.

These are the summaries of those discussions.

1. What do you think of the speakers and have the presentations helped you to understand UNSCR1325 and what do you think the strengths of UNSCR1325 are?

There was very positive feedback from the participants about Kate McCullough's presentation on UNSCR1325. It was felt that she spoke in an accessible manner that bypassed the unnecessary use of jargon and used relevant examples that held the participants' attention.

Women who had never heard of UNSCR1325 and those who had some knowledge of it referred to having a better understanding of it after the talk.

Participants also talked about being impressed by Paula Bradley's perseverance in raising awareness of 1325 in Stormont and her talk also helped to clarify why an action plan might not at the moment be created in the north of Ireland.

Strengths of UNSCR1325

Women in Key Roles

The women were able to identify a pivotal strength of UNSCR1325 as its demand for placing women at the centre of decision making – both in politics and in the life of the community.

They took note of the fact that women’s under-representation in this regard is due to their “massive” responsibility within the family and the lack of support which might otherwise allow them time to become involved in politics and other decision-making fora.

They highlighted the fact that women in the north of Ireland are in a minority when it comes to having positions of power and influence and this is even more so the case in rural areas.

The lack of women is in itself something they identified as “putting women off” assuming their rightful role in political and public life and it is here that UNSCR1325 could be a powerful framework to work within.

Participants were enthused by the example that Kate McCullough gave of women’s representation in post-conflict Rwanda and took this as evidence of the value of 1325.

As such, the women in Northern Ireland need to also “challenge men’s authority” rather than “asking permission, to take what is rightfully theirs.” This attitude is what is needed to cut through the justification of many male politicians that there are “more important issues to sort out first.”

Towards this end, participants talked about the need for women to increase their knowledge and awareness, to seize opportunities and to set about empowering themselves.

They outlined the ideal as politicians - male and female - working together for equality and human rights in dialogue with the community sector.

Do National Action Plans Matter?

A number of different views were expressed in relation to national action plans as a means for implementing UNSCR1325. Some women talked about the power of the resolution within countries in which it is “legally binding.”

However an example was highlighted about out the south of Ireland national action plan both focused its gaze towards foreign affairs rather than domestic. Moreover the fact that the 30% quota legislation had been passed two years ago in the south of Ireland was in fact not as a result of the 1325 national action plan but rather due to pressure from the women’s sector, many of whom would not have even been aware of 1325 at that time.

The question was also raised about what the significance of the resolution is in locations like Northern Ireland where it holds no legislative power.

A Framework for holding the Government to Account

Many of the women praised the resolution for the influence it could potentially have on putting pressuring on governments to include women in decision making. There were likewise many positive comments in this vein regarding the potential impact that the toolkit could have in holding policy makers and politicians to account.

Filtering Everything through the Lens of Gender

There was a strong sense from the discussions that bringing the gender perspective into parliamentary proceedings in addition to the “cross-community” perspective is essential. Some women expressed their surprise that women had been so under represented since the Good Friday Agreement.

In discussing the gender perspective the important point was put forward that operating through the lens of gender did not mean that only women benefit but that in fact, all of society benefits.

Protecting Women in Post Conflict

1325’s focus on the safety and protection of women within the post-conflict environment was a huge strength according to participants.

The women noted that it is a documented fact that domestic and sexual violence against women spikes, after a period of conflict but that the implementation of 1325 would help to combat this.

- 2. What can WRDA and the women’s sector do to help fill the gap since UNSCR1325 has not been implemented in NI to ensure that women are included in decision making in relation to education, welfare reform, health, childcare and housing?**

WRDA Creating a Groundswell of Support

There were some general comments about the importance of regular communication from WRDA to women within northern Irish communities.

Some of the suggestions included holding a members day in which various women’s centres could congregate. It was suggested that the WRDA should try to increase their membership, seeking to gather a wider representation of women – not just groups but individuals also.

The idea was raised about creating issue-based focus groups to drive issues forward.

Furthermore, participants thought that increased communication was necessary and to find various ways of communication in order to reach the greatest amount of women. In this way a critical mass would be created.

Recognising inequality for women in NI – addressing violence against women post conflict – control from paramilitary organisations in the communities

More participation from women at all levels in NI not just token representation

Education

Community and Adult Education

The women talked about the importance of “helping each other to change the mind-set.” This would require participative community education that facilitates empowerment at a grassroots level. It was felt that community groups and organisations that promote equality

education need to be promoted and supported and that the WRDA have a role to play in lobbying for more formal and informal education.

It was noted that women tend to be more open and receptive to attending courses and that for many women it is a matter of “starting somewhere.”

Participants were very much in favour of seminars such as those on the “Women and Peacebuilding” project being held more regularly and made accessible to individuals as well as groups.

Reaching Young People

Participants talked about the importance of educating children from primary level upwards on gender equality and respectful / safe relationships between men and women. Young people need to know for example that domestic violence is not acceptable. The women pointed out that since “we are all involved,” it would be important to include both boys and girls and from an early age.

They also mentioned that it would be essential to teach all about the issues that 1325 cover such as the benefits women’s participation and the various inequalities that currently exist between men and women in Northern Ireland.

It was felt that the path is currently very unclear for young women and that they need more education regarding gender equality, women’s participation and UNSCR1325.

There was also the suggestion that it would be a beneficial step to have more women on school and college boards.

Engagement at younger age to promote a standardised level of literacy and numeracy – more education on this for more people

Education for Politicians

It was suggested that the WRDA could play a role in taking the lead on policy positions in the women’s sector. This would include the circulation of briefing documents and identifying the “right” people in the civil service that need to be influenced. The value of learning from other jurisdictions was also noted.

Media Education

Participants suggested that one important avenue of awareness raising is through the media. For example through the work that is carried out in lobbying on the 1325 issues, it would – with good communication – be possible to keep media attention peaked.

It was also suggested that there are opportunities to raise awareness on the issues through advertising in health centres. Another suggestion was the development of a mobile phone “app” on women’s issues.

Health

The women felt that there is a need for alliances to be made between women’s groups and community groups in order to lobby on issues of women’s health services and health services in general.

They identified the need for equal representation on health trusts in order to put care at the centre of decisions on resources and budgets. The need was also highlighted for lobbying for

better wages for caring professionals as well as gender equality within the health service itself.

Welfare Reform

Participants highlighted the importance of educating women on their welfare entitlements but also on the need to have greater equality in the distribution of welfare. The women said that more financial power needs to be given to women in terms of welfare payments and not to the men.

Towards this end some progress could be made by contacting local female representatives and other women in leadership who are in a position to influence the agenda in local councils. The acknowledgement that all types of women are affected – even those in isolated rural areas – is of utmost importance.

Childcare

The women talked about the lobbying that needed to happen towards making affordable, subsidised childcare and after-school care available for working mothers. They also identified the need for work place crèche facilities to allow women to advance in their careers rather than having to choose between working or being a mother.

Participants also pointed out where work could be done on educating parents on new policies pertaining to family and children's issues.

It was again mentioned that thought needs to be given to this also within the differing needs of women living in rural areas. Moreover, the point was made that the important work of giving care to children should be properly paid.

One participant added that opportunities for training and education that considers childcare facilities are easier to find in the flexibility of community and adult education.

Housing

Participants clarified that there is a need to educate people on housing rights and responsibilities – particularly for first time buyers. They said that there needed to be a review of rents and rates in both private and public housing and that social housing should be promoted. Towards this end, they said, the council as well as the housing associates should be lobbied. Finally, it was highlighted that women must be included in any decision making relating to social, affordable and accessible housing.

- 3. WRDA is currently supporting this work through training, lobbying, networking and partnership building. What else could WRDA do to support women to participate more effectively in decisions that affect their lives?**

Education on UNSCR1325

The Women felt that while the work of 1325 is of utmost importance, people need assistance in understanding its' content and relevance. It was also pointed out that, being a very broad resolution – different parts are relevant to different organisations and that there were therefore “different messages and different audiences.”

One participant also made that point in relation to women that “we all do good work but we are not good at publishing the work we do.”

Involving Younger Women

Some of the women thought that it is imperative to build the self-confidence of young women as tomorrow's leaders. They said that these women need to be sought out, trained and educated as they would be making important decisions in the future. It was suggested that this process of empowerment could take place on a cross community and a cross border basis.

Strength in Collaboration

Participants highlighted not only the power of collaborating with other women's groups but also the power of collaborating with other events / organisations such as the Ulster Museum.

Supporting Women's Mental Health

Due to the impact of the troubles both domestic violence and mental health have become chronic problems within northern Irish society. Participants felt that it is time to really hold the health sector to account in this regard so that people can get the help and support they need.

Women and Politics

The women thought that there was a great need to make people aware of the low number of women within political life in Northern Ireland and that everything possible should be done to encourage women to become involved in politics. It was felt that in particular, young women need "sign-posting" to become involved and that more generally, training for women of all ages was called for. This training should take in lobbying, leadership and decision making

One participant spoke about creating links between women who are already in the assembly and women in the community. In this way the concerns of women at the grassroots level could be brought into the assembly via the female politicians.

Access to Information

The issue of access to information was raised both in terms of how to access services and also in terms of the other various areas relating to UNSCR1325.

In disseminating information, it is important, according to the women to make it easy to understand and jargon free. A variety of methods were mentioned including, leaflets, social networking, websites and the dialogue –based sharing of information. An example of valuable information-sharing would be the distribution of the contact details of MLAs.

WRDA and Women's Training

Participants were convinced that there are many ways in which the WRDA can provide invaluable training for women. Some of the areas mentioned were: training in lobbying, personal development training, involving women in campaigns, holding workshops on various issues, confidence training, political training, education on the realities of gender inequality in NI and the current statistic of women and decision making, training about respectful and peaceful relationships / healthy marriages and education on voting.

Furthermore, it was noted that the WRDA are ideally placed to be a hub for women's groups across Northern Ireland to interact and share information and also as an organisation that can encourage the active participation of all kinds of women at the grassroots level.

The wish was also expressed by the women that the WRDA continue to reach out to women in the community through these kinds of seminars to further develop the collective awareness and a strong voice for women in Northern Ireland.