

Addressing the Legacies
of the Past



The Women and Peacebuilding – Sharing the Learning project is funded under the EU PEACE III programme for Northern Ireland and the six southern Border Counties. It recognises the fact that the European Union has defined equality between women and men as a fundamental right and builds on this to examine equality in the context of the centrality of conflict transformation in Northern Ireland/Ireland. As such the project draws on the global commitment to women's rights in contested societies as epitomised in the UN Security Council Resolutions 1325 and 1820, on Women, Peace and Security.



WOMEN AND PEACEBUILDING: SHARING THE LEARNING

Drawing on the main provisions of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 the Women and Peacebuilding: Sharing the Learning project focuses on –

PREVENTION: Strengthen the efforts to prevent violence against women, including various forms of gender based violence.

PARTICIPATION and REPRESENTATION: Promote and support women's active and meaningful participation in all peace processes as well as their representation in formal and informal decision-making at all levels.

PROTECTION and SECURITY: Strengthen efforts to secure the safety, physical and mental health, well-being, economic security and/or dignity of women and girls; promote and safeguard the human rights of women and mainstream a gender perspective into legal and institutional reforms.

RECOVERY, RELIEF and REHABILITATION: Promote women's equal access to aid distribution measures, including those dealing with the specific needs of women and girls in all relief and reconstruction programmes.

The material and recommendations contained in this Women and Peacebuilding Briefing Note are based on the views expressed by 700 plus women, from across Northern Ireland and the six northern Border Counties of Ireland, at a series of seminars over the period 2012/2014.

The partnership that designed the Women and Peacebuilding: Sharing the Learning initiative includes:

Community Foundation for Northern Ireland

An independent grant-making Community Foundation that has been active in Northern Ireland since 1979 and has a long commitment to supporting a more just, equal and peaceful society.



Foundations for Peace Network

A peer Network of in-country based independent Funds and Foundations working in contested societies – Bangladesh; Colombia; Georgia; India; Indonesia; Israel; Mexico; Northern Ireland; Palestine; Serbia; Sri Lanka – that are united by a commitment to social justice and conflict transformation.

National Women's Council of Ireland

The national women's membership organisation of Ireland committed to equality and the recognition of the positive contribution of women to society.

Women's Resource & Development Agency

The support organisation for Women's Groups and Networks across Northern Ireland which works to advance equality and participation of women in society.





ADDRESSING THE LEGACIES OF THE PAST

The Women and Peacebuilding: Sharing the Learning Project was impressed by the high level of interest shown by the women participating in the project discussions about issues relating to the legacy of the recent past. Three seminars were held in both Belfast and Clones (Co. Monaghan) as well as an additional one-day conference in Belfast over the period October 2013-March 2014. Participants were asked to consider –

- i) **The issues currently affecting them and their families in terms of the legacies of the past.**
- ii) **What changes they had experienced over the 15 years since the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement.**
- iii) **Whether they felt that the situation is worse now than it was 15 years ago and what women would like to see changed.**

The views expressed with regard to the first question include the following –

- i) **Please share any relevant issues that you feel are current today with regard to the legacies of the past – and how do they affect you and your family members?**
 - Women have been there to pick up the pieces over 40 years of violence and conflict. There has been a lack of acknowledgement of this and they still lack an equal voice in society.
 - A number of women said that there were some issues that remain too sensitive for women to discuss openly within their communities. Safe environments – possibly women-only spaces – are necessary to allow them to deal with legacy issues.
 - Ongoing contested issues such as flags, emblems, painted curbstones and parades formed a significant part of many discussions. Some participants felt very strongly that the Unionist/Loyalist culture and identity were being eroded. Women who were involved in the ‘flag protest’ pointed out that they were present at the protests in part to keep an eye on their children. Young men in particular were being encouraged to become involved in bands in order to keep them away from drug use, alcohol and/or paramilitary involvement. There was a divergence of opinion as to whether women have leadership roles in the flag protests or whether they are being ‘sucked in’ by male community activists.
 - There was a strong view that the flag protests, and the events that led up to them, have seriously damaged relations between communities and a real fear that the problems could escalate further. 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.



- In relation to cultural expression there was a strong ‘them and us’ mentality. Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist women felt that people from a Republican/Nationalist background were escalating issues out of all proportion to their importance. Commemorations (mostly Republican) were also discussed and tended to be viewed by PUL women as being provocative in nature.
- Some of the women felt that increased civil unrest and street protests were used as a deliberate tactic to demand extra resources for specific areas and/or organisations.
- In general it was noted that the current decade of commemorations/centenaries has had very little input from, or impact on, women.
- Where women disagreed with protests, commemorations, flags or other legacy related demonstrations in their communities they feel intimidated and are afraid to speak out or offer a contrary point of view.
- A further legacy of the past was clearly identified as contested spaces. Peace Walls for some were viewed as a necessary safety measure – they provide protection. For others they were the manifestation of an inability to deal with the past, acting as both mental and physical barriers. On a positive note the ability of the Peace Walls to draw in tourists was recognised.
- Segregation remains the reality for many women living in both rural and urban areas, although it tends to be more cloaked in rural areas. Many felt that political parties are not doing enough to address issues of segregation, and indeed can actually benefit from representing divided electorates.
- A growing legacy issue evident in many communities is the increasing 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.
- It was felt that there is a need to proactively tackle sectarianism and change attitudes. There is a generation of young people who have not had direct experience of the violent conflict but are still feeling the negative impacts. It was suggested by some that integrated education is the way forward with a greater emphasis on respect and acceptance of cultural differences as part of the curriculum.
- Women in the southern Border area spoke about the divisions and isolation experienced due to the existence of a militarised border; mention was also made of the relative isolation of those families that were displaced from the North to the South as a result of the conflict.
- Equally, some of the women who had more recently moved to Northern Ireland from the South spoke about how they were immediately labelled due to their accent/backgrounds. Other women who had moved from England or Scotland had the same experience of being pigeon-holed. One woman lamented – ‘We can celebrate Indian and Chinese culture but not each other’s’.



ii) **Please share your views on the changes that you have experienced since the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement and how these changes affect you and your family.**

- Women spoke of a general and pervasive sense of relief. The reduction in levels of violence was matched by reduced levels of fear. People were less likely to be shot or caught in an explosion and there was a feeling – we have survived the Troubles.
- For many women the safety and opportunities available to their children was of paramount concern. They were glad that their children had a better life experience than they had themselves, notwithstanding the fact that a certain level of threat persists in some communities.
- It was felt that cities such as Belfast and Derry/Londonderry have been transformed for the better over the past 15 years, and women spoke about how they feel safer travelling to the city centres than in previous years.
- Despite current difficulties women spoke about the importance of cross-community and cross-Border work which make people realise what they have in common as well as their differences. The women who participated in cross-community programmes spoke about visiting places that they thought they would never visit, eg. Masonic Halls, Catholic Churches, etc. It was also recognised that the availability of resources (very often from EU Peace funds) allowed cross-community work and visits to happen.
- Women in the Border areas felt that the removal of the physical barriers at the Border between North and South had made a significant impact on their lives. They spoke about how the sense of threat had lessened now that the military presence had been removed from their surrounding areas, allied with a new sense of freedom to come and go since the roads had been opened up.
- Reference was made to the fact that the element of secrecy that was always a strong current in Border town life during the conflict is no longer an issue. There is a lot more communication and no more ‘secret societies’.
- A number of comments were made about the welcome increase in inter-faith marriages – both North and South – and a more open attitude shown by many churches.
- There were some women who saw few positive developments in their communities over the period of the peace process. They felt that their lives were controlled and they had limited options in making their voices heard. There were also a range of negative comments along the lines that ‘Everything seems to be going to Republicans’, and ‘We get nothing – other areas get more’, reflecting the continuing influence of negative, and often distorted, perceptions.



iii) Do you feel conditions are better or worse now for women than they were 15 years ago? What would you like to see changed?

- A positive aspect identified was the increased opportunities to learn about different cultures and traditions as a result of community-based projects. This can help with an understanding of difference which is healthy.
- Some of the participants thought that the number of marches and parades seems to have increased in recent years. There was discussion about who should be responsible for meeting the costs of policing such occasions.
- Concerns were expressed that fear and internal community divisions are still part and parcel of life in many communities which both puts young people at risk as well as also restricting the active participation of women.
- A number of women expressed the view that it was now more difficult for women to become involved in community action in marked contrast to the years of conflict. There has been a reduction in resources to fund community development projects alongside an increase in the number of diverse groups competing for funding. Rural women can be even more isolated and it can be very difficult to get initiatives off the ground in some rural areas. High levels of bureaucracy increasingly prevent smaller groups from applying for – and receiving – funding.
- There was some discussion on how the Haass-O’Sullivan Review appeared to disproportionately focus on interviews with men, and their views.
- There was no specific agreement on how to deal with the Truth, Justice and Legacy issues of the past as views expressed raised the need for victims/survivors of violence to have access to truth, justice and appropriate reparations, but also acknowledged that all the various organisations and forces actively involved in the conflict would need to have a buy-in to any agreed process.
- On a positive note it was felt that many more women have been exposed to cross-community activities. Indeed, arguably, women are the ‘driving force’ of cross-community work and exchanges. Women’s Centres have been pivotal in supporting this development at community level, being able to provide safe spaces for people to discuss issues and options.



RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The British Government needs to break with its official narrative that the conflict in Northern Ireland was not a politically motivated conflict and to accept the applicability of UNSCR 1325 (Women, Peace and Security) to Northern Ireland. Implementing the provisions of this resolution would help to ensure that attention is paid to women’s inclusion in decision-making.
2. Initiatives are still needed to bring people together across the interfaces and community divides. There needs to be more cross-community programmes and information on what is available.

3. Many participants wished to see greater progress towards more and better integrated communities. This requires more quality integrated education and shared high quality public services in local areas. There was also a recommendation that there should be less segregated housing and that the issue of the Peace Walls should remain high on the official agenda.
4. Suggestions in relation to flags and parades included (i) a ban on alcohol; (ii) greater respect for regulatory bodies such as the Parades Commission (or whichever agency is appointed to make decisions); (iii) zero tolerance for violence or intimidatory behaviour.
5. Participants were strongly supportive of a Northern Ireland Civic Forum that should be re-established and modelled in such a way to give a voice to civic society and women.
6. Resources should be made available to ensure safe spaces for women to hold honest discussions on sensitive issues without fear of control or intimidation.
7. Attention should be paid to support for women who are caring for victims and survivors of violence, particularly in rural and/or Border areas. As one participant explained “Victimhood takes over your life and prolongs the conflict and pain.”
8. Provision should be available to help people cope with trauma, depression and mental health issues without simply relying on prescription drugs.
9. Outstanding commitments made in the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement – such as support for the active participation of women in public life and the introduction of a Bill of Rights (Northern Ireland) and a Charter of Rights (Ireland) must be actioned.
10. There was a certain frustration expressed with the way peacebuilding projects ‘open up’ discussions and then there is little or no follow up. It was recommended that initiatives need to be put in place that maintain channels of communication between women from different communities, whether by holding an annual conference (actual or virtual), creating a calendar of forthcoming events that are relevant and creating update reports that women can access.

