

Issues of Participation
and Representation



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 long been committed 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.



ISSUES OF PARTICIPATION AND REPRESENTATION

UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security demands recognition of the role of women in conflict prevention, management and resolution and calls on the international community to take specific steps to enhance the meaningful participation of women in these processes, as well as to protect women in situations of conflict and post conflict transition. Actions to increase women's participation in both formal political decision-making and in the informal sphere of policy influence is essential if women are to be seen as more than either victims, carers or passive observers. The challenges of ensuring participation and empowerment lie at the core of UN Security Council Resolution 1325, with the additional dimension of working to ensure that such participation is inclusive rather than elitist in nature. It has long been argued that an inclusive approach requires an investment in the empowerment and confidence-building of women, alongside proactively creating space for both their voices to be heard and their ideas and priorities to be reflected.



WHAT WOMEN SAID ABOUT ISSUES OF PARTICIPATION AND REPRESENTATION

Workshops were organised to ask women about issues of Participation and Empowerment. Women attending the Workshops were asked the following questions –

- How would having more women participating and making decisions on strategic bodies/decision-making institutions make a difference?
- Do you feel women's participation on these bodies/groups is better or worse now than 15 years ago? In what way?

The issues raised through the Workshop discussions included the following –

- i) **How would having more women participating and making decisions on strategic bodies/decision-making institutions, make a difference?**
 - Women bring a different perspective in decision-making roles, often using 'empathy rather than sympathy' when analysing issues and making decisions. Women use their emotional intelligence to provide different perspectives on issues and are listeners which can often result in a greater sense of consensus with regard to outcomes.
 - Women tend to bring experience of both the domestic (private) sphere as well as the public environment, thus enabling them to apply a holistic approach to dealing with issues. Consequently women are more likely to place a priority on a range of social issues such as health and education agendas.



- While it would make a difference in having more women involved in decision-making roles it was felt that many women do not value their contribution and that there is a real imperative to build self-confidence and esteem amongst women. Many women have 'run out of energy' – they need to be empowered and supported.
- Dependence on all female decision-making forum is as undesirable as the current situation of under-representation. What many women expressed a preference for was balanced representation.
- It was noted that given that women represent half the population of Ireland it says something about the current situation that we still have to ask this question – on an individual level it was felt that it is not always easy for women to make a significant difference. There needs to be a critical mass before there is any chance of seeing a transformative impact on society.
- It was felt that there were differences between women and men when it comes to applying for, and taking up positions on, decision-making boards. Men accept the validity of their presence; women are concerned about lacking the detailed insight or knowledge in order to make a significant input.
- There was a concern that where women are involved in decision-making bodies/agencies, the level of their representation decreases with ascending hierarchy – women become less visible. Concern was also expressed about situations where effective decision-making actually takes place outside of the formal decision-making structures, with the ethics of this style of governance often going unchallenged.

ii) Do you feel women's participation on these bodies/groups is better or worse now than 15 years ago? In what way?

- The culture of politics was seen as problematic to women now – it is very male and often aggressive and adversarial. There were also concerns expressed that women who entered public life 'played the man's game' simply to survive. There was a need to educate political and public representatives about the difference between aggression and assertiveness.
- Women, in a number of cases, still expressed fears of voicing their views on political issues. There was a sense of implicit – and at times explicit – intimidation if their opinions challenged the political status quo within their communities.
- Given the experience of politics over past years it was felt that much of politics is about 'playing games' and many women simply do not like this, consequently they are more likely to get involved in community action and development rather than formal political life or related decision-making agencies.
- Participants felt that there was a lack of female role models in political life – having more women in politics would make politics more inclusive and transparent. The important contribution offered in Ireland by having two women Presidents was cited as a positive example.
- The general view was that women have become increasingly invisible in decision-making over the past 15 years notwithstanding the fact that there has been some



increase in the number of women elected to the Northern Ireland Assembly. With the exception of a very small number of high profile women they tend not to be recognised. Where there was some positive change noticed it was at Local Authority level.

- Some women expressed the view that although legislation promoting equality has been enacted attitudes have not changed in any significant manner. Gender specific assumptions prevail and mind sets have not changed. While men have a support system (usually their families) that allows them to become politically active, this can be more difficult for women.
- Over recent years in the community and voluntary sectors there was a feeling that committees and boards have tended to be increasingly dominated by men, particularly where participation is remunerated.
- For women who live at the margins of the community, such as Traveller women or asylum seekers – both North and South – participation is still significantly more difficult. Hence any strategies to achieve balanced gender participation must also be culturally aware. Whatever the challenges are that citizens face in participating in decision-making and politics, non-citizens do not even have the right to participate.
- Given difficulties experienced with the low levels of women in decision-making, it was suggested that there was a need to strengthen networks and communication in order to develop processes of mutual support for women who were prepared to engage in politics.



WHAT OTHERS SAY

In Northern Ireland concerns have been expressed by a number of women's organisations (Women's Resource & Development Agency; Northern Ireland Women's European Platform, etc.) about the apparent lack of official interest in honouring the provision within the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement concerning '*the right of women to full and equal political participation*' and '*the advancement of women in public life*' (<http://www.nio.gov.uk/agreement.pdf>). In submitting evidence to the Northern Ireland All Party Working Group on UNSCR 1325 (December 2013), the Commissioner for Public Appointments Northern Ireland concluded that in terms of public appointments there has been no improvement in the statistics concerning the representation of women since 1998. Indeed, he expanded on this statement to suggest that many women, as individuals, report that they feel excluded by the nature of the appointment process and sometimes by the nature of how boards operate. Despite this the Gender Equality Strategy for Northern Ireland (2010) states that '*government will seek to achieve a gender balance on all government-appointed committees, boards and other relevant official bodies*' (Office of the First Minister, and Deputy First Minister, 2010); in



Ireland, the Government's National Women's Strategy is also committed 'to increase the number of women in decision-making positions in Ireland', with a government target of ensuring that all state boards have at least 40% of each gender represented.

With regard to the election of women within the formal political system, women currently comprise 19% of all MLAs (Members of the Legislative Assembly) in Northern Ireland and 15% of TDs (Members of Dail Eireann) in Ireland. The Irish Government has introduced gender quota legislation (Electoral Amendment (Political Funding) Bill, 2011) which provides a requirement from all Irish political parties to put forward a minimum of 30% candidates of either gender in the next election. While it is hoped that this will go some way to address imbalances, there has been no similar proposals in Northern Ireland.



What the STATISTICS Tell Us

- only 19% of members of the Northern Ireland Assembly are women.
- Women, young people, people with disabilities and members of the minority ethnic communities are under-represented on public bodies. There are currently over 1400 public appointments, 464 of these are held by women (33%). The percentage of women holding the position of Chairperson of a public appointment Board is 19%.
- There are currently no female Permanent Secretaries in the Northern Ireland Civil Service, and very few Deputy Secretaries. There has been a growth in the proportion of women at the level of Grade 5. Overall, between 2000 and 2012, the representation of women at senior levels in the Civil Service has increased from 11.3% to 32.5%.
- Within the Police Service Northern Ireland women do now occupy 18.6% of Chief Inspector posts; 22.4% of Superintendent posts and 6.3% of Chief Superintendent posts due to assertive action and monitoring.
- 15% of the members of Dail Eireann are female.
- Women account for one in three members of State Boards (34.7%) being outnumbered by men on all national and regional decision-making structures.





RECOMMENDATIONS

1. There is a need to ensure that when considering strategies to increase the representation of women in politics and decision-making that this should apply to all women, including the representation of women from culturally diverse backgrounds and from disadvantaged communities.
2. Within five years measures should be put in place to provide for a significant increase in the numbers of women represented within political institutions and those of public life.
3. It is important that the current Diversity Initiative promoted by the Office of the Commissioner for Public Appointments Northern Ireland is formally adopted at the highest levels by the political and administrative leaders in Government, and is implemented in a cross-cutting and integrated manner.
4. All public appointments should be widely publicised and there should be a representative number of women on Selection Panels (and as Independent Assessors) when public appointments and public service appointments are being made.
5. There is a need to ensure that the next round of EU funding programmes (2014-2020), particularly INTERREG V and EU PEACE IV, will include interventions to support women's engagement in both cross-Border and equality actions.
6. The UK Government, working with the Northern Ireland Executive should put in place an Action Plan to address the concern raised by CEDAW (Committee for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women) in July 2013 over the low representation of women in post conflict processes in Northern Ireland and the failure to fully implement Security Council Resolution 1325, to 'Ensure the participation of women in the post conflict process in Northern Ireland in line with the Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000)'.
7. The Civic Forum, as provided for in the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement, should be restored with gender balanced representation.
8. Women should be fully represented in all peacebuilding strategies, peacebuilding negotiations and in the implementation of peace agreements.

