

Issues of Prevention



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.

ISSUES OF PREVENTION

UN Security Council Resolution 1325 demands protection of women and girls in conflict and post conflict societies and respect for their rights. Where necessary it calls for the implementation of special measures to ensure such protection and it argues that increased attention should be given to the needs of women and girls in situations of conflict, conflict transformation and peacebuilding. There is an understanding that women's multiple and diverse roles in conflict are often hidden, poorly understood and, at times, consciously or unconsciously dismissed. Where there is a focus of attention it tends to be on women and girls as victims of violence.

While there is reference to women in the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement (1998) there is no indication of acceptance of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 to Northern Ireland due to the refusal of the UK Government in this regard given its official narrative of the conflict as being criminal in nature. Hence there has been no recognition of a 'war of national liberation (Protocol 1 of the Geneva Conventions); a 'civil war' (Protocol 2 of the Geneva Conventions; nor an 'internal armed conflict' (under standards of Common Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions). Notwithstanding this, Ireland's National Action Plan for the Implementation of UNSCR 1325 (2011-2014) does contain a commitment to engage with appropriate Northern Ireland authorities to encourage the development of policies and measures consistent with the aims of UNSCR 1325, in consultation with civil society organisations.





WHAT WOMEN SAID ABOUT ISSUES OF PREVENTION AND PEACEBUILDING

The Workshops held asked a range of questions about the prevention of conflict and priorities for peacebuilding and conflict transformation. This was felt to be particularly timely in Northern Ireland given on-going concerns over issues of identity and emblems, alongside tensions related to the challenge of Dealing with the Past. The strains that these issues place on the politics of peacebuilding was recognised.

- i) **In terms of peacebuilding, what steps or actions could be taken to get more women involved at community level?**
- ii) **What steps or actions could be taken to get more women involved at political level and/or with political issues?**
- iii) **Who should be responsible for taking action?**

The issues raised in the Workshops included –

- i) **In terms of peacebuilding, what steps or actions could be taken to get women more involved at community level?**
 - It is important to focus on the continued empowerment of women with ongoing personal development courses and support in order to enable women to build a sense of confidence that can then develop into community leadership. Work needs to be undertaken to challenge dismissive attitudes to women's groups and Women's Centres.
 - Concerns were expressed about the perceived instability of the peace process, particularly in the context of the serial crises at the macro political level which served to exacerbate fears within local communities.
 - While the peace process has created conditions for greater cross-community contact there are still sharp divisions between the two main community traditions (Protestant/ Unionist/Loyalist and Catholic/Nationalist/Republican) resulting in concerns about becoming involved in cross-community work. There was a strong contention that sectarian attitudes and divisions are still divisive and where there is segregation there is fear. Despite the evolving peace process the issue of sectarianism has not been adequately addressed and young people who did not experience the conflict are still strongly influenced by sectarian attitudes – this also affects girls at community level.
 - Personal contact and relationships with women in local communities must be fostered through the outreach work of Women's Groups and/or Community Groups. The emphasis of this work must be on inclusion in order to challenge the exclusionary role of some gatekeepers in local communities.
 - Women should not be left carrying a disproportionate burden of care which often isolates them in the home. This is particularly true with regard to the care of victims/ survivors of the conflict.



- There must be a recognition of the fact that proactive outreach needs to take place in order to ensure that women from minority ethnic communities are involved at community level and to challenge the negative stereotypes about communities such as Travellers, the Roma, etc.
- While the reduction in levels of violence was noted concern was expressed about the fact that there is still a fear of community-level violence. Particular reference was made to the dangers of young people being drawn into violence which exists beneath the surface within communities and can be easily sparked off.
- Historical commemorations seem to write women out of the script; women are often portrayed as secondary or passive. This has implications for attitudes to current gender roles and should be addressed.

ii) What steps or actions should be taken to get women more involved at a political level and/or with political issues?

- A number of participants spoke about the positive contribution of cross-border projects in the past 15 years both in terms of challenging attitudes but also in addressing fears. Greater ease of travel was noted given that there were no longer military patrols along the border.
- There is an urgent need to deal with the legacy of the Troubles in order to move on and normalise politics. Concerns were expressed about the manner in which the victims/survivors of the conflict were either set in opposition to each other due to political allegiances or else positioned to be arbiters about how the difficult issue of dealing with the past should be addressed.
- Women must have a voice in formulating strategies to Deal with the Past – they should not be relegated to the sphere of care or victimhood, but should also have a role in terms of rights and accountability.
- The diversity of women’s political perspectives should be acknowledged; particular issues were raised around the feeling of powerlessness, lack of identity and alienation within the Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist communities. In this context there was also a feeling of marginalisation from the political process and, often, from political representation.
- Mixed feelings were expressed over the operation of HET (Historical Enquiries Team). Evidence was cited where the offer of an enquiry into a murder had divided families, or where it was felt that the cases being opened had a disproportionate effect on one side of the community. Equally issues were raised about the difficulty of getting information on incidences of state violence, where high legal costs were caused in part by the unwillingness of governments to release documentation.

iii) Who should be responsible for taking action?

- Any structures and/or Commissions that are set up to consider issues relating to Dealing with the Past must have representation from women both in terms of composition and receipt of submissions.



- Women in both Northern Ireland and Ireland need to be more proactive in lobbying the United Nations to ensure that local voices are heard during the periodic reviews of international agreements such as CEDAW (Committee on the Elimination of All Discrimination against Women). It was noted that a UK input into the UN Universal Periodic Review, which reviews the human rights records of Member States, was submitted without an input from Northern Ireland.
- The Irish Government should lobby the UK Government to accept the applicability of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 to Northern Ireland, and to address the divisive official narrative of the conflict.
- Women at community level should use community petition websites to advocate around issues of concern.
- There needs to be continued resources made available for cross-community engagement and activities. In some areas this is still at a very early stage and there needs to be specific support measures to ensure that women in Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist areas can relate to this work.
- Attention needs to be focused on the continued use of prescription drugs in response to mental and physical problems that are often related to stress and poverty. This is also a legacy of the Troubles.
- There needs to be resources set aside for Women's Groups in both urban and rural areas, but it was recognised that women in rural areas need particular measures to facilitate participation and their voice being heard.
- Decision-makers and funders should seek gender parity in community organisations and structures. It is particularly important that resources are not allocated solely on the basis of which groups within communities can create the most disruption or violence.



WHAT OTHERS SAY

“The tragedies of the past have left a deep and profoundly regrettable legacy of suffering. We must never forget those who have died or been injured, and their families. But we can best honour them through a fresh start, in which we firmly dedicate ourselves to the achievement of reconciliation, tolerance, and mutual trust, and to the protection and vindication of the human rights of all”.
Belfast/Good Friday Agreement (1998).

Peace agreements often provide a new Human Rights framework – this is still an unfinished issue within Northern Ireland, and the all-island rights provision remains unrealised. When rights frameworks are considered the question of how to specifically protect women's rights in the new dispensation should



be addressed. One way to approach this is to consider the applicability of CEDAW and UN SCR 1325 provisions. Similarly, when taking forward measures for Dealing with the Past it is important to consider how these might cater for the gender-specific needs of women as well as any gender-specific impacts of the conflict. In order to ensure this any new policies and processes should include sectoral meetings with women and civil society actors in order to ensure a broader base of participation in peacebuilding initiatives.

The specific stories, care needs and rights of women that experienced the impact of the Troubles should be established and addressed. This particularly relates to women who are victims/survivors, as well as ex-combatants (state forces and paramilitaries) and politically motivated ex-prisoners, as well as those women who had family members involved at whatever level. Needs should be considered in a rights rather than a welfare framework.

Work should continue within local community settings to both challenge any exclusion of woman and/or minority ethnic groups from community structures, but also to ensure that resources are made available to activities that promote the self-confidence of women. While investment in single identity initiatives continues to be important where women are still at a relatively low level of empowerment, support for cross-community and cross-border programmes of engagement and joint working remains important.



RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Resources should continue to be made available for support work with women in disadvantaged communities in both Northern Ireland and Ireland in order to enhance both self-confidence and community voice.
2. The role and contribution of women to peacebuilding and conflict transformation throughout the Troubles and into the post conflict period should be recorded, recognised and built on.
3. Support should be available for women at community level who have concerns over family members at risk of becoming involved in paramilitarism, anti-social activities, drugs or related issues.
4. The First and Deputy First Ministers in Northern Ireland should make a clear statement of commitment to (i) address the needs, concerns and aspirations of women in transition from and post conflict; (ii) the vision and principles underpinning UN SCR1325; and (iii) effective delivery on, and monitoring and evaluation of progress against the key 1325 elements of representation and participation, violence against women and the inclusion of gendered perspectives.



5. The vision, principles and key elements of UNSCR 1325 and a clear commitment to women's comprehensive inclusion in transition/post conflict transformation, should be incorporated in the Gender Equality Strategy in Northern Ireland. This should be supported in departmental Gender Action Plans with annual reporting to Ministers.
6. The North South Ministerial Council should consider the issue of women in transition from and post conflict to progress both governments' respective work plans in fulfilment of the provisions of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement. Symmetry could be developed between a Northern Ireland Action Plan/Gender Equality Strategy and Ireland's 1325 National Action Plan and equivalent gender equality plans, and between relevant departments North and South.
7. There should be conflict mapping undertaken to demonstrate the experiences of women affected by the conflict in both Northern Ireland and Ireland. The plan should recommend actions to reveal and address specific direct and indirect gender harms and abuses that resulted from the conflict.
8. Funding made available for support and re-integration measures for politically motivated ex-prisoners should include a focus on women ex-prisoners who are often virtually invisible in policy discussions in this area.
9. There should be a specific focus on the needs and rights of women in all strategies and measures put in place with regard to victims/survivors of the conflict. It is critical that women-led organisations in this sector are not excluded from debates around justice, truth, reparations and prioritisation of measures to be adopted, which to date have tended to be male dominated.
10. Further work on a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland should continue to focus on protections around the rights of women.
11. The need to proactively support and mentor young women at all levels of society should be acknowledged as important and should be reflected in educational and youth policies. Educational policies should introduce politics and citizenship in the curriculum at an earlier stage and should examine the teaching of a shared (not an agreed) history of the recent past.
12. There should be raised awareness of the relationship between national and international equality and human rights obligations and UNSCR 1325 by senior decision-makers and senior executives in Non Departmental Public Bodies (NDPBs).

