



# **Women: Violence, Community Safety and Feelings of Security A Cross Border Shared Learning Workshop**

***Summary of roundtable  
discussions***

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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 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 30 women from the Derry, Newry and Dundalk areas attended a cross-border, shared learning workshop to further discuss the topic of how women have made a difference on the level of institutional change.

## Guest Speakers

Monina O'Prey from the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland welcomed everyone to the event and introduced the Women and Peace Building – Sharing the Learning Project. She made the point that the Women's Sector had long held an ethos of campaigning for social change. There was a need for the activist perspective to be presented more visibly so that the issues experienced as problematic by women could be raised.

Monina outlined the membership and work of the Foundations for Peace Network, highlighting the fact that the members were all indigenous independent Trusts working in areas of often violent conflict. The members are currently located in Serbia, Georgia, Israel, Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Colombia and Northern Ireland, but are soon to include Mexico, Indonesia and Palestine. All of these Trusts have an interest in work with women, as in areas of conflict, women are a key resource in peace building and conflict transformation.

Monina introduced the keynote international speaker, **Ambika Satkunanathan**, from the Neelan Tiruchelvam Trust in Sri Lanka to share her experience of the challenges facing women in Sri Lanka.

Ambika addressed the issue of Women, Violence and Security in the context of the role of law, justice and peace in Sri Lanka.

- 1) She noted that in May 2009, thirty years of violent conflict between the Tamil LTTE and the Sri Lanka government had come to an end, but on the basis of military supremacy and the imposition of majoritarianism. However, the root causes of the conflict over contested national identities remained in place. Peace had been won but at the expense of human rights and through the militarisation of the Tamil areas, as well as a rejection of any acceptance of a multi-ethnic nature of the country. Alongside this there had been increased difficulties experienced by community and voluntary organisations to operate as they have to obtain Army permission to hold meetings. The situation has led to the breakdown of social networks at community level and the continued marginalisation of the Tamil minority population.
- 2) The position of women in these circumstances has rarely been discussed, however they still bear the impact of the operation of illegal detention facilities and the fact that very many people disappeared, and are still missing, as a result of armed actions during the final years of the war. They are also affected by the fact that the State presents the ethnic identity of the Tamils through a security lens, i.e. they are all seen as suspects unless proven otherwise. The holding of ex-combatants in Rehabilitation Centres, with no judicial review of this process has resulted in a large number of families headed by women in Tamil areas. This means that women are in positions of economic insecurity, which can have consequences of a sexual exploitative nature. They can be open to sex trafficking or prostitution. There has also been an increase in the reported cases of domestic violence and the abandonment of women who were coerced into youth marriages. There is little coordinated response through voluntary organisations.
- 3) There has also been an internal fragmentation of the Tamil community, with the Army requisitioning houses and people being suspected by their own communities of acting as informers. There is also a heritage of women's issues not being taken seriously when LTTE was operating as well, with traditional attitudes to women continuing to influence how they were perceived. Post 2009, women combatants who have been held at Rehabilitation Centres continue to suffer stigma and discrimination. There is also concern about sexual abuse that has been rumoured to occur.

- 4) Finally, Ambika suggested that while women often played an active role in the Tamil nationalist struggle they were not always successful in translating this activism into enhancing the position of women more generally. Indeed women's issues were often submerged into other issues. Equally the impact of the violent conflict served to divide women in Sri Lanka as a whole. Where women have been portrayed within society, it is often as victims, and there continues to be a silence in telling their stories or asserting demands.

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

- 1.) General comments/thoughts on the presentations this morning, particularly in relation to other workshops**
  
- 2.) What policy areas do we need to examine in relation to**
  - a. Community Safety and Security?**
  - b. Domestic and Sexual Violence?**
  
- 3.) Who in government/public services do we need to lobby in relation to**
  - a. Community safety?**
  - b. Domestic and Sexual Violence?**

At the end of each table discussion, the women were asked to prioritise the main issue or area of importance they felt strongest about. Participants were given dots to place on the flipchart in order to stress what they felt was most important to them overall. The table facilitator was then able to feedback the key points to the wider group.

A short plenary discussion ensued after the facilitated workshops.

Below is a synopsis of the discussions.

**2) What policy areas do we need to examine in relation to**  
**a. Community Safety and Security?**  
**b. Domestic and Sexual Violence?**

**Education**

Education is hugely important, particularly for young people. It is important that gender discrimination be challenged through the education system. Cultural attitudes must change. The active participation of young people in society must be supported and stereotypical gender biased views challenged.

We need to make our education system more inclusive for boys and girls. Society must accept differences – ability, creed, colour, sexual orientation, age and nationality. People must be educated as citizens and educated from birth through the family, education system and community groups.

**Women's Representation in Decision-Making**

The overall representation of women in decision-making remains too low. In addition to making changes to the education system (as stated above), we need to change social and political structures to enable women to become more active in civil and political participation.

Equally, there is a need to increase networking between women and policymakers. There is also a need for gender quotas for all public appointments, at all levels, with the enforcement of these quotas.

It is imperative that there are more women on boards – both public and private. It was further suggested that Gender Quotas should be employed for all public appointments at all levels and that penalties should be incurred by political parties who do not abide by quota rules.

**Rebuilding Cohesion in Local Communities**

There was a consensus that there are still feelings of fear at local community level, in some cases related to the ongoing sense of political dynamics. There was also a fear of groups of young people. We need to work hard to challenge both of these issues.

**The Media**

A huge amount of work needs to happen in terms of how women are portrayed in the media.

**Criminal Justice**

There was also concern about the attitude of a range of statutory agencies with regard to issues related to women. There needed to be more training of the judiciary with regard to the impact of crime on women.

**Mental Health**

There was also concern expressed about the continued issuing of prescription drugs to cope with stress.

**Welfare State Safety Net**

Welfare Reform would have a major impact on women's access to money and therefore might also affect how they responded to domestic violence situations.

**Resources for services and advocacy**

Finally, it was felt that there is a need for increased lobbying and advocacy around issues of poverty and welfare benefit cuts, as well as the need for increased resources for Women's Aid, both North and South.

**3) Who in government/public services do we need to lobby in relation to**  
**a. Community Safety?**  
**b. Domestic and Sexual Violence?**

Key women's organisations must be at the forefront of lobbying government. Welfare Reform is the issue du jour and women's organisations need to be highlighting the disproportionate impacts on women. We all must take responsibility to do this.

There are more women on Policing and Community Safety Partnerships (PCSP) and they are bringing attention to key issues and making their voices be heard. This is to be welcomed.

It was further suggested that we must increase networking between the women's sector and policy makers, trade unions, politicians, the judiciary, non-governmental organisation (NGOs), social and community groups, civil society organisations, academics, parents, people of all ages and backgrounds, researchers, etc.

In particular, more needs to happen within our education provision to address gender discrimination and challenge harmful attitudes and stereotyping. This places a particular burden on the Minister of Education.

There was consensus around the view that we are all responsible for making change happen.

## **Concluding Remarks:**

In feedback from the roundtables it was agreed there were a number of themes that needed to be addressed:

- (i) Education – particularly in relation to how young people might be challenged concerning their attitudes to the role of women.
- (ii) The overall representation of women in decision-making, which remains low.
- (iii) The importance of rebuilding cohesion within local communities.
- (iv) The need to support the more active participation of young people alongside challenging the stereotypes that young men may still hold concerning women.
- (v) The media and its portrayal of women.

It was also agreed that there were still feelings of fear at local community level, in some cases related to the ongoing sense of political dynamics. Likewise, there was also concern about the attitude of a range of statutory agencies with regard to issues related to women. There needed to be more training of the judiciary with regard to the impact of crime on women. There was also concern expressed about the continued issuing of prescription drugs to cope with stress.

Concerning issues of the representation of women in decision-making, it was felt that people must be educated as citizens and that society should be educated to accept differences. Furthermore, we need to change social and political structures to enable women to become more active in civil and political participation. Equally, there is a need to increase networking between women and policymakers. There is also a need for gender quotas for all public appointments, at all levels, with the enforcement of these quotas.

Finally, it was felt that there is a need for increased lobbying and advocacy around issues of poverty and welfare benefit cuts, as well as the need for increased resources for Women's Aid, both North and South.