



# **Women: Violence, Community Safety and Security**

## ***Summary of roundtable discussions***

**8<sup>th</sup> June 2012**

**Crowne Plaza Hotel, Dundalk**

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**European Union**  
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**Introduction of overall project:**

The Women's Resource and Development Agency (WRDA); the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland and the National Women's Council of Ireland 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 the next 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 first of them addressed in the project is 'Women: Violence, Safety and Security'. Workshops were held in Derry, Dundalk and Newry and a final cross-border workshop will take place on 21<sup>st</sup> June. At this event 'Women, Violence and Security: A Shared Learning Workshop', ten participants from each of the 3 previous workshops will come together to pull together the various strands of the discussions develop recommendations and decide how best we can influence policy.

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 Peacebuilding which will be primarily focused on influencing institutional change in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland
- A Tool Kit on Women and Peacebuilding: 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.

**Methodology:**

25 women from across Louth and the surrounding southern border counties were invited to attend a workshop to discuss and provide their personal perspective on issues around violence, community safety and security.

The morning began Margaret Ward giving an introduction to the overall project. This was followed by Ellen O'Malley Dunlop (director of the Rape Crisis Centre, Dublin) who provided a contextual presentation to the audience. And finally local grassroots activist, Dara Larkin (Peace & Reconciliation Worker for Communities Connect) spoke, encouraging the women to use their voices. The day's events were chaired by Senator Mary Moran.

Facilitated discussions took place around five tables with a scribe noting the issues that were raised. Participants were asked to focus their discussions around the following 4 key questions:

- In what ways do women feel unsafe in their homes and communities? In what ways?
- What needs to change in order for women to feel safer?
- Do you think women face different kinds of threats to men?
- Has violence affected women more or less over the last 15 years?

At the end of each table discussion the women were asked to prioritise 4 issues and note these on a flipchart which was then put up on the wall for all the groups to see. At this point all of women had a chance to read what other tables had discussed and prioritised.

A short plenary discussion ensued with introductory comments from Jacqueline Healy (NWCI), Dara Larkin and Senator Mary Moran.

Below is synopsis of the issues raised in response to the first question:

### **Do women feel unsafe in their homes and communities? In what ways?**

It emerged quite clearly from the discussions that women generally do not feel safe within their homes and communities. A key aspect to feeling unsafe within the home is the 'hidden' nature of domestic and sexual violence combined with lack of support from the wider community and extended family. A number of women indicated that we can never know what is going on behind the closed door of someone's home. The women highlighted the importance of relationships within the community for feeling safe both within the home and within the community but that these community relationships have been in rapid deterioration. They felt that the recession has been a key factor the increase in domestic violence and in the breakdown in community solidarity in recent years. Some of the women also noted that there is a lack of *opportunity* for developing relationships within the community. Many communities are growing in size but becoming more disordered – there is a lack of 'awareness' and 'discipline' on a community level. In urban settings the use of social media such as facebook was identified as one of the contributing factors in the weakening of community bonds. Women are afraid to be alone in their homes and often feel 'trapped' within their homes. Extra safety measures have to be taken by women who are physically more vulnerable such as those who are disabled or the elderly. It is common for these women not to leave their homes after dark or to not open the door. Some women mentioned the sense of responsibility they feel for both keeping up to date with whatever scams or attacks are happening in their local area and also for planning strategies for defending themselves should their home be broken into. It was also noted that separated women and women from different ethnic groups are especially prone to being the target of violence within the community and that more generally women are perceived as being vulnerable which means they will be more prone to attack. In relation to feelings of unsafety within the home, a few participants added that some women feel oppressed within their home culture but not necessarily unsafe. In terms of police support, it was emphasised that the gardaí tend to have a more active presence in urban areas such as certain council estates and that women who leave in the isolation of rural areas have less support and protection. It was also felt that the drink and drugs culture, particularly amongst gangs of young people, is adding to the lack of safety women feel when they are outside of the home.

Below is synopsis of the issues raised in response to the second question:

### **What needs to change in order for women to feel safer?**

The women outlined a number of measures that need to be taken for women to feel safer. Firstly many of the women identified that men's attitudes towards women need to change: men need to learn to respect women. One suggestion that was made was that there should be education for men and boys that would facilitate this. A further and widely supported suggestion was that the formal education system should look at developing programs that teach children and teenagers about how they can develop healthy and respectful relationships. A third suggestion relating to education was that women and girls should be encouraged to use their voices and to assume responsibility for shaping the future direction of society: women need to play a stronger role in creating our future. Many women highlighted the necessity of cohesive and supportive neighbourhoods and better community infrastructure. There should be more sheltered housing and more generally, there should be increased resources for women's issues. There were many suggestions in relation to women's voices and representation. There should be open decision-making forums involving women but also the *focus* of state and semi-state structures also need to change. There needs to be a women-centred perspective brought into all decision-making forums across

the state and the local communities. There was a general recognition by the women that the current structures have been set up by men for men and that there needs to be a profound change in these structures if they are to become 'woman-friendly.' The responsibility that is currently carried by women to keep themselves safe, needs to be carried by the entire community – it should not be up to women to constantly be policing their *own behaviour*, for example by limiting where they walk and when or limiting what kinds of clothes they wear. There needs to be deeper inter-generational links created between women for the sake of mentoring and guidance. It was further suggested that women need to deeply value themselves and their attitudes need to reflect their *right* to be safe. It was also suggested that women need to have a zero tolerance attitude when it comes to violence towards women. Within the domestic sphere, it was noted not only that men need to be trained in domestic tasks but also that the work women do in the home needs to be valued a lot more within the home.

Below is synopsis of the issues raised in response to the third question:

### **Do you think women face different kinds of threats than men?**

There was a strong consensus amongst the participants that women are more prone to certain threats than men. Women tend to be more insecure at an economic level – they have greater financial pressures and limitations and many women are still financially dependent on men. The recession has given rise to more extreme forms women's financial dependence on men in the form of sex trafficking and the prostitution women from Ireland and from abroad. This financial insecurity leaves women more vulnerable to abuse and intimidation. There were a number of disabled women at the workshop and they emphasised that while all women are vulnerable to the threat of physical violence, disabled women are particularly vulnerable and as such have to go to much greater lengths to ensure their own safety. One of the disabled women pointed out that disabled women already have enough to deal with in their lives without the extra stress that comes from the fear of being attacked. From the point of view of parenting, it was suggested that mothers face considerable material expectations from their children. The participants also talked about the obvious threat of physical violence in women's lives. There was no doubt amongst the participants that women are much more likely to be raped or sexually abused and that women also have to live with the fear that this could happen at any time. It was further noted that it is women who are expected to alter their behaviour in order to reduce the likelihood of being sexually attacked and not the men who carry out the abuse. Some of the women felt that women's physical weakness is a factor in their vulnerability to physical attacks. Women's tendency to care, nurture and protect was also identified as something that makes them easier to victimise and some of the women felt that these traits are commonly perceived as weaknesses. The issue of women's 'passive attitude' to life was raised while at the same time many of the women talked about how proactive women are when it comes to protecting their children and families. Quite a few participants felt that women tend to put their children and families before themselves and will often deal with threats on behalf of their children, such as paying off drug-related debt for example. The issue of how lack of support from extended family reinforces women's sense of vulnerability was raised again. Many of the participants agreed that women are more likely to have to deal with the abuse of power exercised by authority figures. For example many women feel judged by social services and have to deal with the fear of losing their children because of unstable situations in the family home. The role that women fulfil in the home in particular is assumed and any objecting to these assumptions can create conflict. It was further suggested that women from specific groups such as the travelling community, migrant women, single mothers, and women with disabilities face additional threats that are specific to their circumstances. Social media was again

highlighted as a tool that is becoming increasingly problematic in that women are being targeted for cyber-bullying.

Below is synopsis of the issues raised in response to the fourth question:

### **Has Violence Affected Women More or Less in the Last 15 Years?**

There was wide agreement amongst the participants that women have a higher level of education and awareness around the issues of violence towards women. There is more public discussion and women tend to speak more freely about it. It was suggested that the decline in the power of the Catholic church been a factor in this. Nonetheless, there have been no intensive research carried out in recent years so we do not actually know if this increased awareness equates to a decrease in violence towards women. We do know that there has been an increase in women reporting sexual violence. But this is in part due to the fact that more women know where to look for help and are more proactive in doing so. At the same time some of the women felt that there is still huge fear in regarding reporting rape for example because of the backlash women anticipate from their families and attackers. Quite a few of the women suggested that violence towards women has increased over the last few years. And yet it is *still* not on the political agenda. There was wide agreement that a pivotal factor in this perceived increase in violence towards women has been the pornification of women in popular culture: the extent to which women are sexualised by the media and entertainment industry has reached unprecedented levels. It was also noted that there is still a lack of understanding about the issues women have to face during and in the aftermath of violent abuse. The isolation that women experience in their families and their communities was again highlighted as a reinforcing factor for the keeping women in unsafe situations. It was further noted that the recession has brought a whole new set of stressful circumstances into the family home which has led to an increase in domestic violence. The women reiterated this link between the economic crisis and the increase in both domestic violence and violence within the community in a number of ways. There was also the suggestion that since the ceasefire violence has become more internalised. However one participant said she that since the peace process, she feels safe to come back to Louth again. And this feeling that things had changed was echoed by other women. Some women mentioned again that individuation within communities has become extreme over recent years and that the drink and drugs culture has become normalised over last 15 years and further intensified since the recession. Cyber-bullying and sex trafficking / prostitution were again highlighted as new forms of abuse that women have had to face in recent years.