



**Women's Regional
Consortium**

Consortium for the Regional Support for Women in Disadvantaged and Rural Areas

Response to: Ireland's Third National Action Plan Women, Peace and Security

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Women's Regional Consortium: Working to Support Women in Rural Communities and Disadvantaged Urban Areas

1. Introduction

1.1 This response has been undertaken collaboratively by the Women's Regional Consortium which is funded by the Department for Communities and the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs.

1.2 The Women's Regional Consortium consists of seven established women's sector organisations working in partnership with government, statutory organisations and women's organisations, centres and groups in disadvantaged and rural areas, to ensure women are given the best possible support in the work they do in tackling disadvantage and social exclusion.¹ The groups are as follows:

- ♀ Training for Women Network (TWN) – Project lead
- ♀ Women's Resource and Development Agency (WRDA)
- ♀ Women's Support Network (WSN)
- ♀ Northern Ireland's Rural Women's Network (NIRWN)
- ♀ Women's TEC
- ♀ Women's Centre Derry
- ♀ Foyle Women's Information Network (FWIN)

1.3 The Consortium is the established link and strategic partner between government and statutory agencies and women in disadvantaged and rural areas, including all groups, centres and organisations delivering essential frontline services, advice and support. The Consortium ascertains the views, needs and aspirations of women in disadvantaged and rural areas to influence policy development and future government planning.

¹ Sections 1.2-1.3 represent the official description of the Consortium's work, as agreed and authored by its seven partner organisation

1.4 The Women’s Regional Consortium appreciates the opportunity to respond to Ireland’s Third National Action Plan (NAP) Women, Peace and Security (WPS).

2. Submission

Northern Ireland

2.1 The Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency conducted a population survey for the Commission for Victims and Survivors and 26% of respondents said they were affected by the conflict in Northern Ireland.² This equates to one in four of the population. Around 15% or 213,000 adults in Northern Ireland have developed mental health difficulties linked to their conflict-related experiences.³ Although many younger people did not experience the conflict directly, “*young people in Northern Ireland face a real life threat of inheriting the psychological vulnerability of their parents.*”⁴ The impact of the conflict in Northern Ireland is far-reaching and has the potential to affect many people’s lives both directly and indirectly.

2.2 These statistics show the extent of the legacy of the ‘Troubles’ in Northern Ireland and the importance of Northern Ireland remaining a key area of priority within Ireland’s NAP.

2.3 We are pleased to see that the NAP has made specific reference to the fact that the WPS Agenda has “*particular relevance to the context of Ireland-Northern Ireland...*” We also strongly agree with the statement made in the midterm review of the second NAP: “*Ireland’s ongoing engagement in the legacy of the conflict and stabilising peace in Northern Ireland has a place in the NAP.*”⁵

² NISRA (2017) Commission for Victims and Survivors Module of the September 2017 Northern Ireland Omnibus Survey, Belfast: NISRA.

³ Towards A Better Future: The Trans-generational Impact of the Troubles on Mental Health, Prepared for the Commission for Victims and Survivors by Ulster University, March 2015

⁴ Addressing the psychosocial needs of young men: the case for Northern Ireland, Gallagher & Hamber, 2014

⁵ Midterm Review of Ireland’s second National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security (2015-2018), Bronagh Hinds and Debbie Donnelly

2.4 To date, the UK government has not followed the recommendations of the CEDAW Committee from 2008 to fully implement UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325) on Women, Peace and Security in Northern Ireland.⁶ The failure of the UK Government to recognise the conflict in Northern Ireland has led to a neglect of the rights of women in Northern Ireland and in the border counties.

2.5 In our response to the Legacy consultation⁷ we recommended that the UK Government should accept the application of UNSCR 1325 in Northern Ireland through provisions made within the UK NAP.

2.6 We recognise the limitations of the Irish Government in influencing full adoption of women, peace and security standards, obligations and principles in Northern Ireland including in the UK NAP on WPS. However the UK Government's failure to fully implement UNSCR 1325 places an even greater responsibility on the Irish Government to address the rights of women in Northern Ireland.

2.7 In our engagements with women there were many discussions about their experiences of the conflict in Northern Ireland. The women believed that what they lived through and experienced was a war situation and viewing it as anything else negated what they went through.

“They are not prepared to acknowledge it as a war and deal with it the way other countries have dealt with it. To me that is a real slap in the face – they are trivialising what we have been through.”
- Woman at Engagement Event

<https://www.dfa.ie/media/dfa/alldfawebsitemedia/ourrolesandpolicies/int-priorities/womenpeaceandsecurity/NAP-report-v2.pdf>

⁶ <http://www.un-documents.net/sr1325.htm>

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<http://www.womensregionalconsortiumni.org.uk/sites/default/files/Women%27s%20Regional%20Consortium%20Response%20to%20Addressing%20the%20Legacy%20of%20NI%27s%20Past.pdf>

Increasing women's participation

2.8 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.⁸

Research across the world has shown the importance of women's involvement in peace and reconciliation work. *"All key peacebuilding and reconstruction strategies - including shared-learning with other societies in conflict - should be informed by women's perspectives."*⁹

2.9 Progress has been made in increasing women's political representation in both the Assembly and in the leadership of political parties however this does not assume a more progressive focus on gender policy issues.¹⁰ This was evident in the Legacy consultation¹¹ which continued to focus on traditional religious and political grounds.

2.10 The development of legacy processes must be used as an opportunity to promote gender equality beyond a mere tick-box exercise. This would ensure the participation and involvement of women locally, nationally and internationally including migrants and asylum seekers. If gender is not integrated from the outset it will not receive the necessary attention and priority throughout the remainder of the process.

2.11 In the setting up of legacy bodies we do not wish to witness further examples of unacceptable arrangements like that which took place in the Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition. Of the 15 Commission members only one is a woman.¹²

⁸ Women, Peace and Security: Women's Rights and Gender Equality, Strategic Guide and Toolkit, Bronagh Hinds, Debbie Donnelly, June 2014

⁹ Peacebuilding and The Women's Sector in Northern Ireland, Claire Pierson and Katy Radford, Institute for Conflict Research,

¹⁰ <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/the-marginalisation-of-womens-rights-in-northern-ireland-20-years-after-the-good-friday-agreement/>

¹¹

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/709091/Consultation_Paper_Addressing_the_Legacy_of_Northern_Ireland's_Past.pdf

¹² <https://www.fictcommission.org/en/commission>

2.12 Women should be fully involved, listened to and respected and have key roles in shaping and delivering on how the legacy of the past is dealt with. Post-conflict reorganisation should be seen through a gendered analysis so that women's contribution to the peace is recognised, included and their needs met.¹³

Community Gatekeepers

2.13 The lack of women in public and community life means that the gatekeepers of power remain male and they decide on projects and funding, contributing to the continued marginalisation of women's issues and the lack of power of women within communities.¹⁴ Women feel disempowered within communities, that their voices are not heard and there is little interest in their views. They referred to the difficulty of circumnavigating the community 'gatekeepers' who prevent them from getting access to influencing decisions. This raises the imperative to challenge approaches that keep community gatekeepers in place.¹⁵

Gender Budgeting

2.14 There is a body of evidence to suggest the value of gendered budget analysis in addressing women's inequality. The lack of gendered analysis of budgets and resource allocations has led to women being disadvantaged. The UK Government's welfare reform and austerity agenda is an example of this. House of Commons library analysis shows that 86% of the savings to the Treasury through tax and benefit changes since 2010 will have come from women.¹⁶ The decisions of those in charge of policy making and associated budget allocation must be effectively audited for their impact on women.

¹³ Submission to the Consultation on Irish NAP on Women, Peace and Security, NIA APG on UNSCR 1325, August 2014

¹⁴ An Inquiry into the position of women in Northern Ireland since the Peace Agreement, Summary Report, NIWEP

¹⁵ Women, Peace and Security: Women's Rights and Gender Equality, Strategic Guide and Toolkit, Bronagh Hinds, Debbie Donnelly, June 2014

¹⁶ Estimating the gender impact of tax and benefit changes, Richard Cracknell, Richard Keen, Commons Briefing Papers SN06758, December 2017

Funding for Women's Services

2.15 We acknowledge the support provided to community organisations through the Reconciliation Fund for the promotion of peace and reconciliation and relationship building. However a more strategic approach should be adopted to the funding of WPS projects for women to engage in the full potential of Ireland's NAP.

2.16 Despite the central role played by women in securing and negotiating peace in Northern Ireland, and their role in the provision of essential services to women and communities throughout the conflict, funding for women's services is being cut. This is further compounding the marginalisation of women often those who are the most vulnerable.

“Women have held communities together yet services for women are being cut and cut and cut.”
- Participant at Consultation Event

2.17 Funding for the women's sector in Northern Ireland has been continually diminishing over the past ten years. In the last five years alone, the women's sector has faced cuts of 2 – 5% per year from budgets with more year-on-year cuts planned. Women's organisations have seen a shift from core funding to short-term project funding. This limits their ability to respond to emerging issues, retain key staff and develop any long term planning to meet the needs of women. The lack of a devolved government in Northern Ireland only serves to intensify this funding uncertainty.

2.18 The Midterm review of Ireland's second NAP states “*Ireland is a consistent advocate for civil society across all aspects of the UN.....In particular Ireland successfully proposed that funding goes to women at local level where it has supported women involved in mediation and preventing the outbreak of conflict.*”¹⁷

¹⁷ Midterm Review of Ireland's second National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security (2015-2018), Bronagh Hinds and Debbie Donnelly

2.19 We believe that this is vitally important and that Ireland’s third NAP should further advocate for this. Funding for civil society, particularly the women’s sector, is essential in ensuring that women can be empowered to participate in all aspects of the peace and security agenda as well as providing for the needs of some of the most marginalised women in our society. Women’s centres provide trusted spaces situated within local communities and are able to reach and engage those who are the most marginalised. The women’s sector must be adequately resourced to continue and strengthen its work on peace and reconciliation within and between communities.

2.20 Women in engagement sessions stressed the importance of a community-led approach to peace building and reconciliation work believing that a grass roots approach would ensure better engagement and trust.

“It needs people working at grass roots level. There needs to be a bottom-up approach so that everyone’s voices will be heard.”

- Participant at Consultation Event

“The community needs to have a bigger role in this – there’s trust at community level.”

- Participant at Consultation Event

“If they would invest this money into community groups who are already doing this work, in particular in the women’s movement, then this would work. I haven’t heard any sectarianism in any of the women’s groups we work with and we have been working together since the start of the Troubles. We have been doing this work for over 30 years even before the Good Friday Agreement.”

- Participant at Consultation Event

Dealing with Trauma

2.21 Women's groups have been and continue to deal with the effects of the past conflict in terms of addressing trauma, mental health issues, alcoholism, addictions to prescription and illegal drugs, domestic violence, parenting issues and social isolation.

2.22 In engagement sessions women talked about the central role of women/women's groups in dealing with the trauma arising from the Troubles. Women have carried the responsibility of family support and holding communities together over decades of conflict and transition. Women have been and remain the main care givers within families and communities and as such have a vital role to play in furthering peace, dealing with the past and in community cohesion.

Paramilitarism

2.23 Paramilitarism remains a very real issue in some local communities in Northern Ireland. During the troubles there was a high level of inter-community fear; now the fear is experienced most strongly within communities. The fear is of personal harm and harm to children in some communities if women speak out. A constant concern for the women participating in this project is the apparent lack of willingness (at political, policy and security levels) to deal with paramilitarism and the constraints this places on communities' ability to move forward.¹⁸ Paramilitarism is an issue which must be tackled in order to ensure that women can organise and lead in local areas to overcome the coercive paramilitary control which has resulted in the intimidation and marginalisation of women.

Rural women

2.24 Around 670,000 people live in rural communities in Northern Ireland (around 37% of the population).¹⁹ It is imperative that women in rural areas

¹⁸ Women, Peace and Security: Women's Rights and Gender Equality, Strategic Guide and Toolkit, Bronagh Hinds, Debbie Donnelly, June 2014

¹⁹ <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/dard/rural-statistics-infographic-2016-final.pdf>

are listened to and supported so that their historic invisibility is not mirrored in a post-conflict society.²⁰

2.25 Consideration must be given to the barriers that rural women face in effective participation. The accessibility of education, training, work and childcare provision and the cost and availability of public transport are factors in determining women's participation particularly in rural areas.²¹

Brexit

2.26 We are very concerned that there should be no regression from the principles, rights and standards secured to date in relation to equality for women when the UK leaves the European Union. Women's rights must be protected going forward.

3. Conclusion

Much work remains to be done to secure women's increased participation in peacebuilding and reconciliation work. This must be underpinned with adequately funded local services which help to overcome the obstacles that exist to participation and support capacity-building among women to participate in decision making.

It is essential that Ireland's third NAP recognises its responsibilities to women affected by the conflict in Northern Ireland particularly since the UK Government has failed to accept the application of UNSCR 1325 in Northern Ireland in their NAP.

²⁰ Rural Women's Manifesto, Rural Women Speak, NIRWN, June 2015

²¹ Ibid