



The Westminster Associate
Party Parliamentary Group
on UNSCR 1325 – Women,
Peace and Security

and

The Northern Ireland
Assembly All Party Group
Women, Peace and Security

*'An Inquiry into the position
of women in Northern Ireland
since the Peace Agreement*

Summary Report

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NORTHERN IRELAND
WOMEN'S EUROPEAN
PLATFORM

Introduction

The right of women to full and equal participation in Northern Ireland is an integral commitment of the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, which also bound the Northern Ireland Assembly to pursue “the advancement of women in public life”.

However, there is little evidence to show the effective implementation of these commitments for women today. Mechanisms set up to deal with the legacy of the conflict, such as *The Consultative Group on the Past*, have been composed mainly of men with no recognition that women should be equally represented. Only one woman in twelve members was appointed to the *Maze Long Kesh Development Corporation Board*, established in 2011 to oversee the development of a peace centre at the former paramilitary prison.

The *Haass / O’Sullivan* talks, which began in the autumn of 2013, were tasked to deal with the legacy of the past and ongoing issues such as flags and parades. The *draft report*, published following the failure of the talks to reach agreement in December 2013, mentions gender only once, as one of a list of possible themes for consideration through a Commission on Identity, Culture and Tradition. Photographs of the All Party Talks in December 2014 show that women continue to be under-represented.

The Inquiry into the position of women in Northern Ireland since the Peace Agreement set out to examine women’s role in post conflict reconstruction and to make recommendations for the future for an equal role in the development of a more peaceful society.

Background to the Inquiry

In 2010 the Westminster Associate Parliamentary Group (APPG) on UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325) Women, Peace and Security, agreed to undertake an inquiry into how, after 40 years of conflict, the principles of UNSCR 1325 are being implemented for Women in Northern Ireland.

The Northern Ireland Assembly All Party Group – Women, Peace and Security, has provided the resources for the inquiry process in Northern Ireland - by encouraging written evidence from women’s groups, organisations and networks across Northern Ireland by delivering a number of workshops to hear the views of young and rural women. A recorded session was also held at the Northern Ireland Assembly in which the following gave evidence:

- Equality Commission for Northern Ireland,
- Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission,
- Northern Ireland Commissioner for Public Appointments
- Northern Ireland Department of Justice Community Safety Unit
- Trade Union movement
- Police Service Northern Ireland
- Local women, women’s groups and organisations

Panel Members - Paula Bradley MLA, Chairperson of the Northern Ireland All Party Group - Women, Peace and Security, Baroness Ruth Lister, Member of the Westminster Joint Committee for Human Rights and Margaret Owen MBE, a Human Rights lawyer, who works on addressing the issues and concerns of widows at a global level. During the oral evidence session closed sessions on sensitive issues such as violence and paramilitaries in communities were heard.

Following the oral evidence session it was agreed that further evidence should be received from rural women and young women. The transcript of the Inquiry and subsequent round tables generated approximately 100 pages of evidence.

Inquiry Report

This summary report is based on many of the important issues raised during the Inquiry and is based on the four global pillars committed to the promotion of women's rights in societies of conflict:

- Prevention of Violence
- Participation and Representation
- Protection and Security
- Recovery, Relief and Rehabilitation

The Inquiry structured the gathering of evidence around the following issues:

- Gender Equality
- Women and Electoral Politics
- Women's contribution to local communities
- Women in decision making
- Violence against women

Overview of Issues Raised

Gender Equality

There was concern regarding the on-going review of the Gender Equality Strategy and the lack of any discernible outcomes from the review. It appeared that provisions around UNSCR1325 and women's inclusion in post-conflict transformation were being omitted from the revised GES. In addition, there was lack of any progress in developing departmental Gender Action Plans to accompany the GES.

- There was a plea for robust departmental Action Plans to include the development of measures to address the role of women in peace building and conflict resolution.

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- The lack of affordable, accessible and appropriate childcare was an issue that cropped up in almost all the evidence as lack of childcare has been identified as a key contributor to women's continued unequal status in political, public and economic life. The need for a strong childcare strategy remains a key issue.
- Positive action measures have to be used to address women's inequality. This can be done through the provisions of S75 so that gender equality is mainstreamed into key economic, social and public policies.
- There needs to be a proper enforcement strategy to deal with gender discrimination and women's multiple discrimination.
- The N.I. Executive must have a commitment to encouraging attitudinal change with regards social attitudes towards girls and women. The education system could play an important role in this.
- Gender analysis and gender responsive budgets to underpin the Programme for Government, demonstrating the impact of decision making on women and children.
- A Regional Action Plan under the NI Executive that recognises the pillars of UNSCR1325 so that progress can be measured with regards the inclusion of women in peace building and post conflict reconstruction in its widest form. This could be linked to the Irish National Action Plan for UNSCR1325, enabling British and Irish governments to cooperate on issues of women, peace and security. This collaboration would be particularly beneficial for women in the Border Regions who have been affected by conflict.

Women and Electoral Politics

The continued under-representation of women in political life was a source of huge concern. Witnesses believed that issues of importance to women were not included in policy making because of lack of representatives to voice their concerns. The heavily male-dominated political institutions continued to be a deterrent to women. To address these concerns a number of suggestions were made:

- Political parties should make use of legislation to enable all-women short lists to be used for candidate selection
- Political culture needs to be scrutinised so that parties can become more gender sensitive, giving particular consideration to issues that deter women from taking part such as timing of meetings, travel issues, the need for childcare support, etc.
- The lack of attention given to gender balance in the Transition Committees during the reorganisation of local government has been a concern and indicative of the fact that checks and balances in political life always focus on political and religious balance, not on gender. This needs to be recognised and addressed. There is a need for Gender Champions – this initiative had an impact when it was used in local government. The Local Government Staff Commission has a statutory role in the oversight of equality and this should be allowed to continue in this role and not be wound up in 2017, as announced by the Environment Minister.
- More support for women candidates in terms of training and building confidence would enable women to be more effective and would encourage more women to come forward.
- The All-Party Group on UNSCR1325 in Stormont needs to show the relevance of UNSCR1325 to N. Ireland. One way of doing this is to look at the benefits of countries where UNSCR1325 has been implemented and show the possibilities that could exist in N. Ireland.

Women in Local Communities

Powerful evidence from women in local communities was given in closed session to the Inquiry. Women testified on pressures that ensured their voices were silenced. In Republican areas, if women are critical, this is regarded as a critique of the peace process, which remains fragile. In Loyalist communities there is little space for women to speak out, and women feel unable to speak out while there are still concerns about paramilitary recruitment and criminality. 39% of women and 26% of men have fear of crime and personal security in terms of their lives in their communities.

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- Political representatives were not seen to be actively engaged with their communities. The Assembly is not accessible in terms of location and there needed to be more of a relationship between formal and informal politics.
- *Together: Building a United Community* is a very high level strategy. It needs to give recognition to the work of women within communities and their roles in peace building and conflict resolution and to develop specific measures to support women in that work.
- 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.
- The women's community sector must be adequately supported and recognised for the work it does. Women should be included as beneficiaries in the EU PEACE IV funding programme and the governments of Northern Ireland and Ireland should meet the UN minimum of 15% of post-conflict spending on women, which includes direct financing of women's civil society organisations.

Women in Decision Making

Public appointments cannot only look at the issue of Protestant/Catholic balance.

There is a need to have balance with women, ethnic minorities, those with disabilities etc. The use of quotas to improve the proportion of women in all areas of decision making was referred to by many witnesses. It was also suggested that more could be done to explain the business case for more women, in terms of different solutions to rebalancing the economy and better productivity.

- CEDAW recommends the use of 'temporary special measures' to improve women's representation and the Concluding Observations of the CEDAW examination of the UK government should be implemented.
- The Bill of Rights and its non-implementation should be considered in the context of improving the position of women in political and public life as these are within the scope of transitional justice mechanisms essential to ensure the legacy of the conflict is properly addressed and good community relations promoted.
- The Diversity Initiative developed by the Office of the Commissioner for Public Appointments Northern Ireland should be implemented in full.
- The arrangements to appoint independent members to the District Policing Partnerships DPPS resulted in 61% of non-political appointees being women. That mechanism could be duplicated within the public appointment system.
- The DEL 'Get on Board' initiative was a training programme that resulted in 40% of women participants successfully applying for public appointments. Funding ended in 2010 and should be reinstated, targeting also young people and ethnic minorities.
- Champion role models could highlight the role of women in the economy and an initiative could be developed to link up export markets with women who are setting up business in other countries coming out of conflict.
- A Civic Forum should be re-established with gender balance and mechanisms to ensure women are given a voice.

Violence Against Women

A number of gender-specific issues related to the conflict were highlighted. Women have been written out of issues to do with legacy of the past as their issues have been seen as secondary or personal, yet there are big issues to be dealt with:

Women as Victims of Conflict

- We need to understand conflict-related trauma and the specific impact on women, eg. continued dependence on prescription drugs and the impacts of mental illness. There is psychological impact from traumatic events – e.g. women going shopping in places like Omagh, who find it difficult to go into town centre now, yet many services are based in the town centre.
- There is a need to gather statistics about the numbers of children who have had to be brought up without a father or male role model. What have been the consequences for women? Have they received reparations and compensation for the injustices they have suffered? What have been the effects on women's mental health and the mental health of their children?
- There needs to be more consideration on how the Victims and Survivors Forum can specifically support women. People's needs become more complex as people get older. There is a need for some annuity for those who were seriously injured and those who are in advanced age now and have financial difficulties

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Women and domestic and sexual abuse

- The conflict masked the perpetration of domestic and sexual violence. Domestic and sexual violence perpetrated by paramilitaries was not dealt with appropriately during conflict. There are concerns about the silencing of women. As ex-combatants are released on licence from prison, women can be pressured by the community not to report violence because it may result in re-imprisonment.
- Women may not go to the police but instead relocate. However, with the lack of social housing this is not an option for many women, particularly those in working class communities.
- There is no research on the extent of sexual violence so we don't know how to respond and what projects to develop. This issue has now come to the fore with the Mairia Cahill case, but the inquiry was made well aware that this has been an issue for many women
- The Domestic and Sexual Violence and Abuse strategy cannot be a 'gender neutral' strategy given the evidence that women are overwhelmingly the majority of the victims of violence.

Legacy issues

- Other forms of violence during conflict had specific impacts on women - punishment beatings of those who consorted with soldiers, tarring and feathering, – were all specific forms directed at women and must be recognised as legacy issues of violence.
- Older women have specific issues. Some didn't leave abusive relationships because they were aware of what their partner was doing as an activist in the conflict. They are now living with that knowledge and some are being supported by Women's Aid Older Women's Project.

Silencing of women

- Flag protests have had an impact on communities not wanting to report other issues of anti-social behaviour because of the impact on the reputation of communities, and this means violence against women can go un-reported. There are still some communities where women can't bring police into areas, and women are going to paramilitaries for advice in situations of violence.
- It was pointed out that initial self-help groups to support both victims and ex-prisoners were initially set up by women. However, when more funding became available these groups were virtually all staffed by men.



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