



## **Background**

The Women's Centres' Regional Partnership (WCRP) is a partnership of four lead regional women's organisations linking with fourteen frontline women's organisations across Northern Ireland to provide support and services to women living in disadvantaged areas.

The four key lead partners of the Partnership are the Women's Resource and Development Agency (WRDA), Women's Support Network (WSN), Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network (NIRWN) and The Women's Centre, Derry. The fourteen Women's Centres are spread across Northern Ireland with seven from the Greater Belfast and Lisburn area, four in the North West and three in Dungannon, Magherafelt and Craigavon. Together the WCRP seeks to develop and strengthen a regional infrastructure which will support community based women's organisations across Northern Ireland.

The WCRP tackles women's inequality and disadvantage and supports community development in the most marginalised and disadvantaged communities and works for policy change. Given our remit and our grass roots links, the WCRP welcomes the opportunity to respond to Northern Ireland Inquiry call for written evidence regarding UNSCR 1325 and the importance of its implementation within Northern Ireland.

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## ***Should UN Security Council Resolution 1325 be directly implemented in Northern Ireland?***

WCRP believes strongly that UNSCR 1325 should be implemented in Northern Ireland without further delay. There is global recognition that the implementation of UNSCR 1325 is important in highlighting the critical role of women and girls in conflict prevention, peace negotiations, peace building and post-conflict reconstruction. As an infrastructure support organization for women's centres working in disadvantaged communities across Northern Ireland, we have firsthand knowledge of the important contribution that women make to the wellbeing of their communities and also of the barriers that often exist to prevent greater participation, particularly at the most important strategic level.<sup>1</sup>

The contribution the women's sector has made in building and promoting social, economic and political change in Northern Ireland was acknowledged in a 2001 Review of the Women's Sector, carried out by the Department of Social Development, which highlighted its valuable contribution to promoting equality, social and economic inclusion, peace-building and the development of the voluntary sector.

While women have experienced the effects of conflict in Northern Ireland there is little recognition or value of the role played by women during the 'troubles' in maintaining communities. WCRP were involved in a significant piece of research which enabled ten groups of women from a wide range of communities to detail their experiences of living through conflict, and to recount the important role played by women's groups in terms of developing communities and encouraging cross-community collaboration.<sup>2</sup> It was also women from community groups and women's organizations that stimulated the development of the N.I. Women's Coalition, which demonstrated the key role women can play in peace negotiations and post-conflict rebuilding.

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<sup>1</sup> *Working in the Community: the Contribution of Women's Centres to their Local Communities*, WCRP, (March 2009), <http://www.wcrp.org.uk/publications.php>

<sup>2</sup> *Women and the Conflict: talking about the Troubles and Planning for the Future*, WRDA/WCRP, (Sept 2008)

### ***What actions need to be taken to implement resolution 1325?***

We call on the UK Government to include Northern Ireland in the National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security. We strongly urge the Government to produce a separate comprehensive Action Plan specifically for Northern Ireland with clear actions and measurable outcomes. Government needs to give a clear lead to politicians and policy makers, emphasizing the fact that implementation of UNSCR 1325 is not optional but mandatory.

### ***Are women disadvantaged in participating in peace building and governance in Northern Ireland? If so, how?***

Yes. Women continue to be poorly represented in Northern Ireland's post conflict society, yet women continue to contribute in many ways to conflict resolution. If the UK Government are serious about sustaining peace then women's full and equal participation is essential. Research by the WCRP on the contribution made by workers within women's centres to their wider community revealed a high degree of participation in external bodies, with the women's centres in effect supporting those contributions from their own resources, as little additional resources were attached to participation in these external organizations.

The two examples given below illustrate the range of work undertaken by women in local communities:

A full-time centre manager with an additional childcare facility attached to the centre:  
Sits on a Neighbourhood Partnership Board (6 weekly evening meetings of 3 hours duration with 2 hours preparation time); is treasurer of a Community Empowerment Partnership (monthly meetings with 2/3 hours preparation); sits on two other strategic boards that meet monthly and that require 3-4 hours preparation time between meetings.

A full time co-ordinator of a network outside Belfast:  
Chairs her Local Strategy Partnership; represents the Community and Voluntary Sector on the local council's Peace III committee; is Vice-Chair of her District Policing Partnership; chairs a district development group; is a

member of a development board; is vice chair of a support services group and vice chair of a women's voluntary group. In total, the preparation time is calculated at 13 hours a month with additional attendance and travel time.

Despite such participation, many women have provided evidence that indicates that there is a lack of respect accorded to women and a tendency to shout over them and for their opinion to be disregarded. At a Network meeting of the WCRP one Women's Centre manager raised the question of male attitudes and behaviour within Partnership Boards as an issue which has been a source of great concern. The hostility experienced by women has resulted in many leaving one particular Board. While UNSCR 1325 is not a panacea for male aggression, greater efforts to achieve gender balance on boards would help to support women and to challenge the factors that cause them to leave.

### **Participation: Women in Decision Making**

The evidence is that while women are eager to participate at all levels of decision making, considerable obstacles remain in terms of achieving gender balance in representation.

Statistics from the 2011 Northern Ireland Assembly Elections revealed 20 out of 108 elected members were women, which is only a very slight increase of 2% on the 2007 Assembly elections. The Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Act 2002 allows political parties to take special measures to tackle the deficit in women's representation within their parties, yet parties refuse to take advantage of this measure. Positive action measures must be included in the National Action Plan to ensure political parties increase selection of women candidates.

There has been a disturbing trend of gender equality issues being ignored as politicians maintain a focus solely on political and community background. One recent example has been the Transition Committees set up to advance the Review of Public Administration, where the percentage of women represented was only 15% and protests from women's organizations were not taken seriously by the Minister responsible.

## **Protection: Women's Physical Security**

In seeking evidence on this issue, there was difficulty in collecting data to support 'women and girl's physical security' due to the risk many women face in coming forward to express their concerns.

Examples of issues raised during conversations ranged from ex-combatant organisations attempting to restrict the services offered by women's groups in certain areas, and the most serious concern, police encouraging women to 'let the boys' sort it out' when faced with issues of domestic violence. WCRP research from 2008 on women's safety found that women from all groups reported fear for their own safety had increased since the end of the conflict. Across groups of all backgrounds, women reported feeling 'more safe in our own communities at the beginning of the Troubles' and there was a perception that there were more incidences of domestic violence, but also a recognition that this was now easier to report.<sup>3</sup>

## **Prevention: Strengthening Women's Rights and Equality**

Despite obvious developments seen, for example, in the development of a Gender Equality Strategy<sup>4</sup>, there is not enough impact on securing equality for women. Women remain grossly under-represented in structures and inequality against women continues unabated. There needs to be a systematic inclusion of gender in all policies. The implementation of UNSCR 1325 will ensure those working for gender equality have an additional tool to call for gender-related structural changes.

### **Are women's needs, experiences, realities and gender perspectives being taken into account in peace building and governance in Northern Ireland?**

No. It is common practice for many policies to be written in gender neutral language. As noted by Dr Margaret Ward in Gender Neutrality "policy makers must distinguish between the differing needs of women and men."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> *Women and the Conflict: talking about the Troubles and Planning for the Future*, WRDA/WCRP, (Sept 2008), p.60.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.ofmdfmi.gov.uk/index/equality/gender-equality/our-strategy.htm>

<sup>5</sup> *Some notes on 'Gender Neutral' Policy Making*, Margaret Ward, WRDA, 2007.

## **Does the Northern Ireland Executive demonstrate adequate understanding of UNSCR 1325 and its requirements?**

No. An example of this inadequate understanding was evident in the exclusion of women from the draft Cohesion, Sharing and Integration policy issued in 2010. The government failed to recognise the contribution women have played throughout the conflict and peace building within Northern Ireland. Women's organisations across Northern Ireland came together to respond to the consultation, emphasising the following recommendations:

- that a long and violent conflict took place and is still in some aspects ongoing;
- the differential impact of the conflict on women and address the needs of women which result;
- that those effects are ongoing – for example in respect of dependency upon alcohol, prescription drugs, mental health problems etc;
- that dependency upon drugs and alcohol also feed into hate-based crimes and a health strategy needs to address that;
- that the conflict was both driven by and impacted upon inequalities in education, housing and employment;
- those involved in making and drafting policy should undergo gender awareness training. This must include MLAs and civil servants at all levels.<sup>6</sup>

Any structure for funding work around cohesion, sharing and integration must enable, empower and support women's organisations in undertaking that work.

## **Should the Northern Ireland Executive, groups and organisations in Northern Ireland have an input into the development of a UK UNSCR 1325 National Action Plan?**

Without doubt, women should be active participants in the developing of any Action Plan impacting on their lives. A good example of including women was noted in the

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<sup>6</sup> *A Gender Critique of the Draft Consultation Documents, Programme for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration*, written by Angela Hegarty on behalf of an ad hoc group led by the Women's Resource and Development Agency. Consultation events were facilitated by Brid Ruddy. 2010. See <http://www.wrda.net/policy-consultations.aspx>.

Irish National Action Plan, where women's organisations took part in events to feed into the NAP.

**Does the NIO and the NI Executive demonstrate adequate understanding of UNSCR1325 and its requirements?**

No. In terms of the NI Executive, the consistent failure to consider the importance of women's contribution to peace building as evidenced in the draft CSI policy is evidence enough. Civil servant reluctance to accept that UNSCR1325 could be inapplicable to Northern Ireland on the grounds that the conflict does not qualify as an "armed conflict" within the meaning of the Geneva Conventions and the Additional Protocols ignores the Concluding Observations of the 2008 CEDAW Report, "The Committee also calls for the full implementation of Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000) in Northern Ireland." For that reason we believe that there must be an education programme directed at politicians and policy makers regarding the requirements of UNSCR 1325. We are pleased that there is an all-party working group on 1325 in the Northern Ireland Assembly, supported by the N.I. Women's European Platform, and suggest that NIWEP has the necessary expertise to undertake this work, if resourced to do so.

**Conclusion:**

On gender justice grounds it is not acceptable for women's needs to be marginalised or their participation excluded. For a healthy society, women's equal participation is essential. As an organisation providing infrastructural support to community-based women we find disturbing evidence that patriarchal control is being imposed in some communities in a more all-encompassing and brutal fashion than existed prior to the outbreak of conflict. Northern Ireland is a society still emerging from conflict and for that reason special measures like UNSCR 1325 are important.