



Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network (NIRWN) is a regional network established in 2006 to articulate the voices of women in rural areas. It is funded by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD)

NIRWN has six key objectives:

- Increasing the voice of rural women through giving them a voice at Policy level
- Playing an advocacy and lobbying role on behalf of rural women
- Capacity Building and Group Development for rural women
- Encouraging women in decision-making and providing representation for rural women
- Information and networking opportunities for rural women
- Working within the Women's Centres Regional Partnership to give a voice to rural women's centres

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Further information on the work of NIRWN can be found on [www.nirwn.org.uk](http://www.nirwn.org.uk)

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

NIRWN is very clear that the UNSCR 1325 should be directly implemented in Northern Ireland. It is our view that it should be used as a benchmark in Northern Ireland to ensure that, post conflict; women are provided the opportunity to work towards creating a peaceful Northern Ireland with policies and positive actions which ensure the recognition and participation of women.

The following are a few examples of what could have been achieved in Northern Ireland if UNSCR 1325 was fully adopted:

- more women at the negotiation tables (including St.Andrew's)
- more women elected representatives to the Northern Ireland Assembly, local Councils and members of public bodies such as the Policing Board for NI
- setting timescales and actions to ensure gender equality reaches 50/40 in all decision-making roles
- gender budgeting in department and women's needs addressed in post-conflict policy-making such as the victims strategy and cohesion, sharing and integration
- government funding stream for women's groups and organisations to ensure their continued support of the peace process in local communities

## **Are women disadvantaged in participating in peace building and governance in Northern Ireland?**

Women's representation in the Northern Ireland Assembly is currently 19%. This has changed little since the first elections to the Assembly in 1998. At local government level they hold 23.7% of 582 seats. Political parties in Northern Ireland have refused to use the tool of the Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Order 2002.

While women's representation on public bodies is higher at 34% this has remained fairly static since 1995.<sup>1</sup> This is particularly important in Northern Ireland where, appointed public bodies rather than local authorities, are responsible for health, social care, housing, education and policing.

There are examples of positive impacts of the use of special mechanisms such as the recruitment of women to the District Policing Partnerships. The Patten Commission recommended that these be broadly representative of local districts in terms of religion, gender, age and cultural background. As a consequence, the selection panels used census data to ensure that the independent D.P.P. member appointments were representative and in the first round of appointments, 61% of independent members were women. The issue is clearly not a sufficient quantity or, quality of women candidates available as the D.P.Ps fulfilled their quotas without difficulty. The Policing Board actively engaged directly with NIRWN to assist them to raise awareness of the vacancies with rural women across the region.

More women in decision making in Northern Ireland would be beneficial for all citizens. It would bring a broader range of skills, experience and talent to policy making, would ensure a greater focus on addressing gender equality issues and on how social policy or the absence of policy impacts on women (which has been very absent from policy making in Northern Ireland) and would contribute to changing the culture of politics in Northern Ireland. In the devolved institutions of Wales and Scotland the proportion of women has been substantially greater.

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

No. There are many examples to evidence a lack of gender understanding in terms of policy initiatives directed at peace building and governance.

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<sup>1</sup> DETI (2010) Women in Northern Ireland

The Good Friday Agreement did contain broad provisions for equality and human rights legislation. The 1998 Northern Ireland Act made provision for Section 75 which imposes a statutory duty on public authorities to promote equality of opportunity across nine groups, including between men and women.

There has however been a failure to capture the potential of Section 75 which is due in part to a lack of understanding about equality, which has led to a gender neutral approach to policy making – the notion that equality is about treating all groups the same.

Women in rural areas have suffered disproportionately in that funding has been necessarily addressed to security issues in major towns and cities whilst their plight and particular circumstances has been ignored. It is imperative that women in rural areas are listened to and responded to appropriately so that their historic invisibility is not mirrored in a post-conflict society.

Women's participation in the paid labour market in Northern Ireland has traditionally been lower than other regions of the UK. This is in part due to poor infrastructure (including transport and childcare) and the lack of focus on social and economic policy over decades of conflict. Northern Ireland did experience economic growth between 1997 and 2007 and, in fact, saw a faster rate of growth in jobs than any other UK region. This did have an impact on women's employment in terms of numbers – but most of that increase was in the service sector, in wholesale, retail and health and social care. So, in essence women were gaining employment but in predominantly low value, low wage jobs occupied by women and in sectors hardest hit by the economic downturn.<sup>2</sup> Economic growth was not spread equally across regions of Northern Ireland or groups. The areas most affected by violent conflict are also areas of high economic and social deprivation and these areas benefitted little from the improving economic situation over that decade.

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<sup>2</sup> Women's Resource and Development Agency (2011) The Northern Ireland Economy: Women on the Edge? Belfast: WRDA

NIRWN would like to raise the issue of the lack of childcare policy and infrastructure as an overarching issue restricting; women's participation, their ability to gain economic independence and contributing to persistently high levels of family poverty. Northern Ireland is unique in the UK in not having a childcare strategy. It has no equivalent of the 2004 national strategy on childcare or the Childcare Act 2006.

The number of day-care places has been falling and the cost of childcare is prohibitive for many parents. Despite lobbying by women's groups, NGOs and despite the research identifying the lack of childcare as an economic problem, it has not been a priority issue for the NI Executive. £12m over a four year period for childcare was announced by the Northern Ireland Executive in March 2011 but this has yet to be allocated. What is required is an overarching strategy, a department to lead on policy in this area and adequate resourcing.

It is clear to NIRWN that while some existing activities embrace specific issues relevant to women; they tend to be *subject* specific (e.g. prisoners' families) rather than *gender* specific. Unless a gender specific approach is taken, it will not be possible to properly address issues relating to women.

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

No. A prime example with regards to a flawed policy on dealing with the past is the draft Cohesion, Sharing and Integration (CSI) policy, issued by the Executive in 2010. This failed to consider the government's own Gender Equality Strategy, the impact of the conflict on women or the contribution of women to peace-building, conflict resolution and cohesion, sharing and integration. NIRWN, together with WRDA and an ad hoc group of women's organisations and with funding from the Community Relations Council, participated in a women's sector consultation on the draft CSI strategy. Events were held in Belfast, Derry, Newry and Dungannon and almost 100 women responded. As one participant stated:

*“They’re talking about promoting fairness, equality, rights responsibilities and respect - how can this be done when women, half of the population, are missing from the policy? There can be no cohesion in society when 50% of the population are not named in a CSI strategy. And this is in the year 2010! “*

Amongst the recommendations are the following. A redrafted strategy must acknowledge:

- 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.
- Any structure for funding work around cohesion, sharing and integration must enable, empower and support women’s organisations in undertaking that work.<sup>3</sup>

**Should the UK Government include provisions relating directly to women in Northern Ireland in its UNSCR 1325 National Action Plan?**

Yes. Women in Northern Ireland have been consulted over many years by women’s groups in many different parts of the world, all interested in learning

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<sup>3</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>.

more about the experiences of women in Northern Ireland and the valuable contribution they have made to peace making. They have not however, been consulted on their experiences by either the NIO or the NI Executive. A participant in the women's sector consultation on the CSI strategy made the following point regarding the inclusion of women in post-conflict reconstruction:

*“Women built the peace by our work in networks, in making relationships, in being aware of multiple identities and multiple roles. Male politicians built the conflict resolution of the Agreement on the back of this work. The Agreement might have been the end of conflict but it was just the beginning of building the peace. Women's groups must be involved in this as of right, because without us there would be no security and no peace. <sup>4</sup>”*

**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?**

Yes. Good practice would suggest that the experiences of those in Northern Ireland must inform the development of a UK UNSCR 1325 National Action Plan. Women's organisations in the north took part in cross-learning events organised by the Department of Foreign Affairs in the Irish Republic and also travelled to Timor Leste and Liberia as part of the same learning initiative. All of this fed into the development of the Irish NAP.

There is no consultation or discussion with the government or women's groups in Northern Ireland on National Action Plans. With 40 years experience of living in conflict both government, women's groups and organisations can offer creative and innovative plans; furthermore this would be a way to raise awareness of international mechanisms as well as ensure commitment from the Northern Ireland government. There is no mention of women in Northern Ireland in the National Action Plan for the UK.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid. pp.33-34.

## **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. In addition, we have been told by officials within the Gender Equality Unit that UNSCR1325 is 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. This of course ignores the 2008 CEDAW Report, "The Committee also calls for the full implementation of Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000) in Northern Ireland."<sup>5</sup>

WRDA<sup>6</sup>, a sister women's organisation, took legal advice on this issue, as it was having a detrimental impact on the sector's work in terms of lobbying for implementation of UNSCR1325. Part of this advice is reproduced below:

- UN SCR 1325 is legally binding on all UN Member states - Article 25 of the United Nations Charter requires Member States to carry out all decisions of the Security Council;
- The UK is both a permanent member of the Security Council and a Member State of the UN. UN SCR1325 therefore legally binds the UK.
- There has long been a technical legal argument about the status of the conflict in NI – whether it qualifies as an "armed conflict" within the meaning of the Geneva Conventions and the Additional Protocols thereto.
- The argument from some quarters appears to be that because NI may not qualify in a technical legal definition as an "armed conflict", UNSCR 1325 doesn't apply to NI. However, this is a spurious argument.
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<sup>5</sup> (Concluding Observations of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, 10 July 2008, at para 285. )

<sup>6</sup> The Women's Resource and Development Agency (WRDA) [www.wrda.net](http://www.wrda.net)

- UN SCR 1325 does not apply only to situations of “armed conflict”. It applies to far broader definitions of conflict. UNSCR 1325 applies to all “conflict situations” - which includes “armed conflicts” but also embraces many other types of situation.<sup>7</sup>

NIRWN would regard it as extremely helpful if GAPS could brief officials on the legal status of UNSCR 1325 and its implementation in Northern Ireland.

## **Conclusion**

It is very clear that government have failed to utilise and implement measures under UN Security Council Resolution 1325 to:

- Increase the participation of women in conflict resolution, peace-building, post conflict reconstruction and governance or to;
- Incorporate gender perspectives into peacekeeping and policy making

Women in Northern Ireland have not been afforded the opportunity to participate equally in progressing Northern Ireland from a post conflict society to a peaceful society. This is having a negative impact on the social and economic development of women in Northern Ireland particularly those already experiencing disadvantage such as, rural women. Women comprise 51%<sup>8</sup> of Northern Ireland’s population and government policies and organising structures should reflect this. NIRWN holds the view that the lack of gender parity that exists throughout Northern Irish society is a key factor in hindering the development of a new, shared future which our Government should be working towards helping achieve. It is imperative that Northern Ireland has ‘visible’ women at decision-making level if sustainable peace is to be achieved.

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<sup>7</sup> Angela Hegarty, Briefing on the Status of UNSCR 1325, see <http://www.wrda.net/International%20Equality%20Standards.aspx>

<sup>8</sup> Census (2001)