

Northern Ireland Women's European Platform

Response to the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade's invitation on the consultation on Ireland's Second National Action Plan

Northern Ireland Women's European Platform (NIWEP) was awarded UN Consultative Status in 1999. It has been involved in training and raising awareness of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 since 2000 and is the Secretariat to the All Party Group on UN Security Council Women, Peace and Security at the Northern Ireland Assembly.

The main aims of NIWEP are:

- To capture the position of women in Northern Ireland and to ensure it is represented in international standards and mechanisms.
- To hold government accountable for working towards equality through meeting international standards.

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How should the National Action Plan approach actions relating to Northern Ireland?

Background

1. Northern Ireland is emerging from 40 years of conflict. Nearly 20 years after the peace process commenced - Northern Ireland is not yet at peace as the legacy of the past continues to overshadow the present. In a report by the **Northern Ireland Community Relations Council** and supported by the **Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust**, the year **2013 is described as ‘being one of the worst years in a decade’¹**
2. Northern Ireland is a society in transition from conflict rather than a peaceful society. Violence continues to be a feature of Northern Ireland society and there are deep rooted sectarian divisions. The impact of the conflict on women lives has not been adequately addressed or indeed sufficiently researched and understood.
3. UN Security Council Resolution 1325 has been the focus of Northern Ireland Women’s European Platform (NIWEP) for the last 11 years in raising awareness of how it should be used as a mechanism to benchmark and promote positive action to ensure that during this time of developing and constructing structures, post-conflict in Northern Ireland, women would have the opportunity to participate equally in creating the future as well as dealing with the past.
4. Recently new evidence of the incomplete peace and continuing conflict can be seen in reports from workshops held with women from across Northern Ireland by a project, *Women and Peacebuilding: Sharing the Learning* which aims to capture the experience of women during the conflict and the period of conflict resolution². Women from some areas have reported:
 - ***‘high levels of control (through fear and intimidation)***
 - ***local women unable to speak up due to threat to property and personal security***
 - ***women (and men) and their families living in fear and silence due to the threat of reprisals***

¹ Northern Ireland Peace Monitoring Report 2013

http://www.google.co.uk/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&frm=1&source=web&cd=5&ved=0CEkQFiAE&url=http%3A%2F%2Fcain.ulst.ac.uk%2Fevents%2Fpeace%2Fdocs%2Fnipmr_2013-04_sum.pdf&ei=mDRmU-SOFoKyPOqIgLgD&usg=AFQjCNH_qSFDq3uDRZK3HCUswECQC9zRgw

² The Women’s Resource and Development Agency, the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland and the National Women’s Council of Ireland are partners in the PEACE III funded project.

- ***high levels of criminality (some of it drug related). Criminality and money emanating from criminal activity has resulted in divided and mistrustful communities***
 - ***women do not have 'safe spaces' to discuss issues'***.³
5. This evidence is being echoed by what evidence is being gathered through the present inquiry into what positive actions have been implemented for women in Northern Ireland since the Good Friday Agreement (ongoing)⁴.
 6. It is well documented that peace processes in conflict-affected states have historically failed to include women or represent women and girls' interests meaningfully. This has been the experience of Northern Ireland women in the post conflict processes and structures since the peace agreements of 1999 and 2007.
 7. While women in Northern Ireland are confident they have been active peace builders at local, national and international levels, the participation and perspectives of these women have not been included in the development and implementation of the post conflict structures and mechanisms. The focus on equality in Northern Ireland is at a cross community level rather than a gender focus and women in Northern Ireland have not seen the realisation of the right to participate in these processes.
 8. Consequently women in Northern Ireland have little or no opportunity to influence and implement the decisions that are made about rebuilding their country and shaping their lives and those of their communities. This reflects the position of women in Northern Ireland.
 9. Only 19% of the elected Assembly representatives are women and just 23% of councillors are women. Women are underrepresented in the senior civil service and absent from the higher levels of the judiciary. The delegation of 33 members which discussed parading in Cardiff in Spring 2013 had only three women participants and the Board of the Maze Long Kesh Development Corporation had only one woman in ten members with a man occupying the chair.
 10. Decades of civil and political conflict has impacted on and escalated the violence that women and children experience in their homes. There

³ <http://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/margaret-ward/excluded-and-silenced-women-in-northern-ireland-after-peace-process>

⁴ <http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/Your-MLAs/All-Party-Groups/All-Party-Group-on-UNSCR-1325-Women-Peace--Security/>

has been a failure to acknowledge the link between the conflict and domestic violence, a link identified in research internationally.

11. Research highlights that without the 52% of the population being represented at the table, peace will not last.⁵ The overwhelming evidence is that women in Northern Ireland are under-represented in every avenue of life and that the peace process had paid little or no attention to gender equality in moving forward and developing the new post conflict structures.
12. Based on evidence we must clearly recognise that if Northern Ireland's post conflict society does not recognise the contribution of women to peace-building and the inclusion of women in political and decision making roles, the peace process may begin to fracture. If the Northern Ireland, UK and Irish governments want to ensure the peace process continues, then setting a benchmark using UNSCR 1325, they should set actions which will have a positive impact on equal access to power for women and men.
13. Under devolution most social policy matters were devolved to the Northern Ireland Assembly. However EU and UN matters are Reserved Matters and thus responsibility for the implementation of international treaties and obligations rests with the Westminster Government.
14. NIWEP is extremely concerned that devolution has been used as an excuse by the Westminster government to attempt to justify its failure to ensure equal application of the International Convention across the UK.

Conclusion

15. The overwhelming evidence since the peace process commenced points to a failure of government to use measures under UNSCR 1325 to address the historical and continuing under-representation of women in decision making and in key institutions including the judiciary and the Police.
16. Evidence points to the failure of the peace process to acknowledge the full impact of the conflict on women and to ensure that women play an equal part in moving Northern Ireland from a post conflict to a peaceful society. The continuing failure to take significant and effective measures to ensure women's equal inclusion has major implications for social and economic development and for a sustainable peace.

⁵ Women's Participation in Peace Negotiations: Connections between Presence and Influence – UN Women – October 2012

Recommendations

- To demonstrate leadership and high level commitment to the principles of UN SCR 1325 and the actions necessary to deliver its outcomes in meeting the commitments of the Good Friday Agreement, including through the work of the North South Ministerial Council and its constituent bodies such as InterTrade Ireland.
- To commit to work with the UK government including in the Council of the Isles, as the peace negotiators in the Northern Ireland peace process to ensure the principles of UNSCR 1325 – prevention, protection, promotion and participation - are adopted by the Northern Ireland Executive in all its policies and legislation.
- To commit to work in partnership with the UK government to encourage the Northern Ireland Executive to adopt temporary positive measures to increase women's participation in decision-making roles.
- To commit to work with the UK government to ensure mechanisms to monitor the implementation of the principles across the public sector in Northern Ireland and to develop ways in which to make change to address gender inequalities.
- To commit to ensuring gender issues are a priority and there is gender balance in those attending any future peace building discussions.
- To ensure sustainable funding for the infrastructure of support organisations and high level policy and provision to address violence against women.
- To work in partnership with the NI government in developing an overarching strategy to adequately resource women's groups and organisations in order to ensure the wealth of knowledge and expertise is supported to make a greater contribution to building and sustaining peace in Northern Ireland and elsewhere.