



Northern Ireland
Women's European Platform

Submission to the Human Rights Council's Report on promoting and protecting the human rights of women and girls in conflict and post-conflict situations on the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of Security Council resolution 1325 (2000)

April 2021

Introduction

Northern Ireland Women's European Platform works to represent and amplify the voice of women in Northern Ireland at the national and international level, and also coordinates the civil society response to international human rights treaties and mechanisms, in particular Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and UN Security Council Resolution 1325. NIWEP welcomes the opportunity to contribute evidence to the forthcoming report.

NIWEP is a membership organisation of women's NGOs in Northern Ireland. Established as the Northern Ireland link to the European Women's Lobby, the EU's expert body on women's rights and gender equality, NIWEP also has special consultative status with the UN. A key role for NIWEP promoting gender responsive policy and decision making at local, regional and national level taking account of the state's international obligations. NIWEP also works to share information and good practice at international level with local members and stakeholders, and highlight local learning and good practice internationally.

NIWEP's core objectives involve raising awareness and promoting implementation of key international human rights treaties and initiatives, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security. NIWEP coordinates the Northern Ireland civil society response to CEDAW, and provides the secretariat to an All Party Group on UNSCR 1325, Women, Peace and Security in the Northern Ireland Assembly. NIWEP views implementing the recommendations of CEDAW and the principles of UNSCR 1325 as a clear roadmap and mechanism to ensuring women's human rights are fully met and upheld in Northern Ireland and worldwide. The comments in this submission are made within this context.

Summary

The Human Rights Council and its mechanisms have demonstrated a growing interest in these issues, which is to be welcomed. However, as noted throughout this submission, focused attention is necessary to ensure consistent progress. NIWEP would refer to the report of Global Network of Women Peacebuilders on a project with women peacebuilders in Colombia, Northern Ireland, South Africa and Uganda, which makes a series of recommendations on how to strengthen this.¹ In particular, NIWEP would recommend for gender equality and women's human rights to be made a cross cutting priority in all of the Council's work, and for a gender lens to be implemented in all Council initiatives. This is in line with the Agenda 2030 and the interlinked Sustainable Development Goals, in particular SDG5 Gender Equality and SDG 16 Peace and Strong Institutions². It is also in line with the Agreed Conclusions of the recently concluded CSW 65 conference³, and the blueprint for a new Compact on women, peace and security and humanitarian action being developed as part of the UN Generation Equality Forum initiative⁴.

¹ Global Network of Women Peacebuilders (2020) [Building peace from the grassroots: Learning from women peacebuilders to advance the WPS agenda](#)

² UN [Sustainable Development Goals](#) website, last accessed 1 April 2021

³ See UN Women press release 26 March 2021: '[UN's largest gathering on women's rights delivers robust blueprint on strengthening women's leadership and participation in public life](#)',

⁴ Generation Equality Forum blueprint for [Compact on women, peace and security and humanitarian action](#)

Comments on the questions

1. Work of the Human Rights Council and its mechanisms in mainstreaming gender equality and the human rights of women and girls in displacement, conflict, and post conflict situations

1a. Legal and normative frameworks, policies and programmes

Mainstreaming gender equality and the human rights of women and girls in displacement, conflict and post conflict situations is critical to ensuring the development of peaceful societies that view women and girls as integral to its future and prioritise gender parity and human rights. However, a recent overview of experiences in four post conflict societies – Colombia, Northern Ireland, South Africa and Uganda – shows that there is a long way to go in this regard, and that women’s leadership is critical to achieve this.⁵ This research, undertaken by the Global Network of Women Peacebuilders, in partnership with UN Women and the Government of Ireland, also highlights important shared themes across societies, which indicates the potential of international initiatives to strengthen action on a global scale. The Human Rights Council is ideally placed to support this work, through making gender equality and the human rights of women and girls a central priority across its work and the resolutions and guidance issued to Member States.

Northern Ireland is a post conflict society, still emerging from the conflict formally concluded through the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement in 1998. This agreement is an example of a process women were involved in, through the political party the Women’s Coalition, set up for the purpose by local activists. However, despite this there has been little progress on increasing women’s participation in securing peace or in post conflict reconstruction. Extensive consultation with women^{6,7} has found that many feel disempowered, have difficulty circumnavigating community gate-keepers (including paramilitary groups) and fear harm if they were to speak out. This was confirmed in a Westminster Inquiry (2014) reviewing the implementation of UNSCR 1325 in NI, which concluded that regression was inevitable without robust intervention⁸.

A Report⁹ (2016) following the Fresh Start Agreement in NI (agreement between NI political parties and Westminster and Irish governments to identify ways to deal with the impact of paramilitary activity) noted concerns that women’s role in community development and public decision making is undermined by paramilitary influence^{10,11}. The response to this was a ‘support programme’ for women involved in community transformation engaging 500 women, but this has yet to be evaluated¹². Funding to women’s organisations in the community and voluntary sector has also consistently reduced over the past decade. The women’s sector is increasingly reliant on funding from private trusts and funds, while funding for reconciliation work is also sought through the Irish government’s Reconciliation Fund, which includes work on gender equality and women’s rights as a priority¹³. The European Union was a funder for the sector in the past, through the PEACE funding scheme, but it is likely this funding source will become unavailable beyond 2027 following the exit of the UK from the EU¹⁴. Recent PEACE schemes have also not prioritised women and girls.

It can be noted that the UK’s National Action Plan on women, peace and security does not have a domestic component; an issue highlighted by women’s organisations and also CEDAW, which in its most recent Concluding Observations recommended that ‘the State party take concrete measures to

⁵ Global Network of Women Peacebuilders (2020) [Building peace from the grassroots: Learning from women peacebuilders to advance the WPS agenda](#)

⁶ Women and Peacebuilding: Sharing the Learning

⁷ Hinds, B and Donnelly D (2014) [Women, Peace and Security: Women’s Rights and Gender Equality - Strategic Guide and Toolkit](#) CFNI

⁸ Law, E and Gray, AM (2014) [The politics of defining armed conflict in Northern Ireland](#) Open Democracy

⁹ [The Fresh Start Panel report on the disbandment of paramilitary groups](#) (2016)

¹⁰ Ibid, para 3.20

¹¹ Independent Reporting Commission (2019). [Second Report](#)

¹² Independent Reporting Commission (2018). [First Report](#)

¹³ See information on this fund at [Reconciliation Fund - Department of Foreign Affairs \(dfa.ie\)](#)

¹⁴ See information on PEACE funding programme through the [Special EU Programmes Body](#)

ensure the effective participation of women in post-conflict reconstruction and peacebuilding processes in Northern Ireland, in line with Security Council resolution 1325 (2000)¹⁵. Meanwhile, Ireland takes an all of Ireland approach in its most recent National Action Plan on women, peace and security¹⁶. The plan has resulted in the establishment of a Northern Ireland consultative group on the NAP, which reports to the NAP steering group. Locally, there is a Northern Ireland Assembly All Party Group on UNSCR 1325, Women, Peace and Security; however, this is a cross party group focused on raising awareness, and has no formal powers.¹⁷

The only reference to international human rights obligations in recent public policy making has focused on the Inquiry into abortion legislation in Northern Ireland under Article 8 of the Optional Protocol to CEDAW¹⁸, which was utilised extensively to secure the decriminalisation of abortion through an amendment to the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation etc) Act 2019¹⁹ passed by the Westminster Parliament in July 2019. As a result of this law change, abortion was decriminalised in Northern Ireland in October 2019 and the Abortion (Northern Ireland) Regulations 2020²⁰ came into force in March 2020. However, provisions have not been implemented by the Northern Ireland Executive and as a result, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland intervened in March 2021 and introduced Regulations at Westminster²¹, that require services to be commissioned.

1b. Role of women's groups, women human rights defenders, women humanitarian, women peacebuilders and girls; and, their meaningful participation in the prevention and resolution of conflicts and in peace building, confidence building, and economic recovery

As noted in the report of Global Network of Women Peacebuilders, UN Women and the Government of Ireland²², the role of women peacebuilders and women human rights defenders is central to sustainable and gender sensitive peace building, and requires investment in women's networks and civil society coordination networks to ensure more effective implementation and accountability. However, this has been a limited priority, further squeezed by the COVID-19 pandemic, and in many areas women peacebuilders face concrete threats. The Human Rights Council can significantly strengthen this by emphasising the importance of sustainable resourcing and protecting women human rights defenders. This is in line with the Agreed Conclusions of the recently concluded CSW 65 conference²³, and the blueprint for a new Compact on women, peace and security and humanitarian action being developed as part of the UN Generation Equality Forum initiative²⁴.

In Northern Ireland, a UNSCR Toolkit²⁵ (2014) was developed by civil society to assist public authorities in engaging women in work on peace and security, but to date appears to have had little impact. One example is the fact that in 2016, only one woman was appointed to a government established, 15-member Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition²⁶. The work undertaken to inform the Global Network of Women Peacebuilders project outlined above confirms that in Northern Ireland, there has been little change in the intervening years, and that women feel a focus on women's political participation and leadership is critical to ensuring women can fully engage in shaping the future Northern Ireland.²⁷

¹⁵ CEDAW Committee (March 2019) [Concluding Observations on the 8th periodic report of the UK, recommendation 39](#)

¹⁶ Irish Government (2019) [Ireland's Third National Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security](#)

¹⁷ See information on the [Northern Ireland Assembly website](#)

¹⁸ CEDAW Committee (2018) [Inquiry into abortion legislation in Northern Ireland under Article 8 of the Optional Protocol to CEDAW](#)

¹⁹ [Northern Ireland \(Executive Formation etc\) Act 2019](#)

²⁰ [Abortion \(Northern Ireland\) Regulations 2020](#)

²¹ [The Abortion \(Northern Ireland\) Regulations 2021](#)

²² Global Network of Women Peacebuilders (2020) [Building peace from the grassroots: Learning from women peacebuilders to advance the WPS agenda](#)

²³ See UN Women press release 26 March 2021: ['UN's largest gathering on women's rights delivers robust blueprint on strengthening women's leadership and participation in public life'](#),

²⁴ Generation Equality Forum blueprint for [Compact on women, peace and security and humanitarian action](#)

²⁵ Hinds, B and Donnelly D (2014) [Women, Peace and Security: Women's Rights and Gender Equality - Strategic Guide and Toolkit](#) CFNI

²⁶ www.fictcommission.org

²⁷ Global Network of Women Peacebuilders (2020) [Building peace from the grassroots: Learning from women peacebuilders to advance the WPS agenda](#)

1c. Prevention measures in place, guided by lessons learned to alert on crises, which might have a negative impact on the rights of women and girls?

There are currently no specific measures in place in Northern Ireland. However, the Human Rights Council can influence work in this area by prioritising and recommending a gender lens to all conflict and post conflict related work.

1d. Measures of accountability implemented or planned to protect and provide remedies to women and girls victims and survivors of human rights violations, including gender-based violence, during and after conflicts by State and non-state actors

This is an area with many shortcomings, in Northern Ireland and globally. The Human Rights Council can significantly support strengthened action, through making this an explicit priority in all its work.

Violence against women and girls continues to be a prolific issue in Northern Ireland. This has only been heightened as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic and ensuing lockdown. Since the beginning of lockdown, eight women in NI have been murdered by a male partner or relative.²⁸ This is double the number of women who were murdered with a domestic motivation in the entirety of 2019-20. According to police statistics, there were 31,817 domestic abuse incidents recorded in 2019-20, the highest recorded figure since records began in 2004-05. There were 18,640 domestic abuse crimes recorded in the same year, this is the highest figure recorded since records began and accounted for 17% of all recorded crime in that financial year. 69% of victims of domestic abuse crimes were female, and 86% of perpetrators were male.²⁹ In 2019-20, the PSNI recorded 3,558 sexual offences, with 1,013 of these offences being recorded as rape. However, issues around prosecuting crimes involving violence against women still persist in Northern Ireland. Statistics from the Public Prosecution Service identify that prosecutors handled over 700 cases involving rape and only 20 cases secured a conviction, which accounts for less than 3%.³⁰

Northern Ireland passed new legislation on domestic abuse in early 2021³¹. However, Northern Ireland remains the only part of the UK and Ireland without such a VAWG strategy, which is a contributing factor to the failure of the UK to ratify the Istanbul Convention to date, and a recommendation from CEDAW³² to ensure protections for women are put on an equal footing with those elsewhere in the UK. After persistent lobbying from the women's sector and arguably as a result of the increase in femicide statistics during the Covid-19 lockdown, the Northern Ireland Executive has only in the last two weeks agreed to produce a violence against women and girls strategy^{33,34}; no concrete action has been taken at the time of writing.

1e. Remedies and lifesaving services available to victims of conflict-related violence, measures taken to ensure accessibility to those remedies and services by all women and girls

Violence against women and girls is a systemic and structural phenomenon, and the women's sector in Northern Ireland have consistently highlighted the need for action at all levels, both with regard to peace building and post conflict reconstruction and addressing violence against women and girls as a key manifestation of patriarchal culture and systems. However, Northern Ireland has no operational mechanism for identifying the historical discrimination experienced by women and addressing it through special measures in order to secure substantive equality. The austerity agenda of recent UK governments, in addition to exacerbating poverty, has also reduced funding for

²⁸ *Belfast Telegraph* 22 March 2021 '[Call for action as number of female victims in Northern Ireland doubles](#)'

²⁹ Police Service of Northern Ireland (November 2020) '[Trends in Domestic Abuse Incidents and Crimes Recorded by the Police in Northern Ireland 2004/05 to 2019/20](#)'

³⁰ Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (November 2020) '[Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland: Statistical Bulletin: Cases Involving Sexual Offences 2019/20](#)'

³¹ '[Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings \(Northern Ireland\) Act \(2021\)](#)'

³² CEDAW Committee (March 2019) '[Concluding Observations on the 8th periodic report of the UK](#),'

³³ BBC News 18 March 2021 '[Naomi Long: Executive 'must act on violence against women'](#)'

³⁴ Northern Ireland Assembly '[motion](#)' Tuesday 23 March 2021

the women's sector, leading to reduced capacity for NGO advocacy and policy workstreams^{35,36}. This highlights the crucial role of the Human Rights Council in prioritising action on this area, in particular through country visits, but also through making gender equality a cross cutting priority.

Current approaches to exploring the history and impact of the conflict remain focused on active participants in the conflict, and to a lesser extent on victims, but without any specific reference to gender or the trauma experienced by women as family members, carers, community leaders and breadwinners. Recent research indicates that women experiencing domestic abuse have greater confidence in the police than in the past, while the reduced circulation of firearms has reduced this specific form of violence and threat frequently used against women by intimate partners during the conflict³⁷, but there has been no systematic attempt at addressing the trauma of violence experienced by women and girls during the conflict, including sexual violence that typically was covered up. The issue of gatekeepers in some communities also remains an issue.³⁸

Northern Ireland has a Commission for Victims and Survivors, whose principal function is to promote the interests of victims and survivors of the Northern Ireland conflict.³⁹ However, there is limited agreement on services for victims of conflict related violence. Legislation enabling payments to individuals severely injured during the conflict was enacted on 31 January 2020⁴⁰ and guidance on eligibility published in August 2020⁴¹. However, development of the scheme continues with a Victims' Payment Board that will be responsible for adjudicating on applications. There is currently no clear timescale for scheme opening.

2. What are the promising practices, achievements, and challenges in ensuring the promotion and protection of women and girls in conflict and post-conflict settings that have been highlighted in the work of the Human Rights Council and its mechanisms (resolutions, UPR, Special procedures, and investigative bodies)?

3. What measures would you recommend to help ensure sustainable, comprehensive, and consistent attention to gender equality and the human rights of women in conflict and post conflict settings in the work of the Human Rights Council and its mechanisms, such as resolutions, UPR recommendations, Special procedures country visit reports, and the work of investigative bodies?

The Human Rights Council and its mechanisms have demonstrated a growing interest in these issues, which is to be welcomed. However, as noted throughout this submission, focused attention is necessary to ensure consistent progress. NIWEP would refer to the report of Global Network of Women Peacebuilders on the project with women peacebuilders in Colombia, Northern Ireland, South Africa and Uganda, which makes a series of recommendations on how to strengthen this.⁴²

Given that women and girls in Northern Ireland have not been afforded the opportunity to equally participate in the transition from conflict to a post-conflict society, their social and economic development has been negatively impacted, particularly for women who were already marginalised.⁴³ The Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated these social and economic inequalities.

³⁵ Women's Resource and Development Agency (2016). [Women on the Cutting Edge](#).

³⁶ The *Women on the Cutting Edge* report (2016) indicates that 30% of organisations surveyed had had to reduce policy and campaigning, while 40% had to make redundancies or cut staff hours and 30% had to close services. All organisations had lost funding, and over two thirds had lost 25% or more in the previous 12 months.

³⁷ Doyle, J & McWilliams, M (2018). *Intimate partner violence in conflict and post conflict societies*. Transitional Justice Institute, Ulster University as part of the Political Settlements Programme Consortium.

³⁸ Northern Ireland Women's European Platform (2019) [Shadow report to CEDAW](#)

³⁹ <https://www.cvsni.org/about-us/the-commissioner/>

⁴⁰ UK Government (31 January 2020) [Northern Ireland Troubles-related incident victims payments scheme](#)

⁴¹ [Guidance on decision-making for the Victims' Payments Scheme](#): Issued by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland on 14 August 2020

⁴² Global Network of Women Peacebuilders (2020) [Building peace from the grassroots: Learning from women peacebuilders to advance the WPS agenda](#)

⁴³ Women's Policy Group (July 2020) [Covid-19 Feminist Recovery Plan](#)

The impact of Covid-19 has been extremely gendered, with sectors who employ women in the majority, such as hospitality and retail, being hardest hit by the lockdown in the aftermath of the pandemic.⁴⁴ Moving forward, a rights-based and gendered approach is essential to ensuring women are centred in the Covid-19 recovery. The Women, Peace and Security agenda provides a framework for ensuring that women can participate on an equal footing as we move through the pandemic.⁴⁵

The continued support from the Human Rights Council and its supporting frameworks in highlighting issues faced by women in conflict and post-conflict societies, the compounding of gendered inequalities as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic is essential. The promotion of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda is imperative to ensuring that women in conflict and post-conflict settings are part of decision-making processes now more than ever as societies recover from the effects of the pandemic. The Human Rights Council and be essential to promoting a rights-based, gender focused recovery.

⁴⁴ UN Women (March 2021) [COVID-19 and women's rights organizations: bridging response gaps and demanding a more just future](#)

⁴⁵ Women's Policy Group (July 2020) [Covid-19 Feminist Recovery Plan](#)