

**PROJECT REPORT
JANUARY 2023**

**WE WOMEN:
TOWARDS A
ROADMAP FOR
DELIVERING ON
UNSCR 1325
PRINCIPLES IN
NORTHERN IRELAND**

womensplatform.org



Foreword

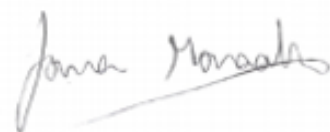
Women and girls in Northern Ireland want to see a sustainable, peaceful society. They want a society that works for them, but above all, they want a society that supports them and their families, and allows young people and future generations to lead lives they are free to choose and shape as they wish. Crucial to this is a society that listens to women and girls, supports gender equality, and welcomes women's leadership at all levels.

This project was designed to give women and girls in Northern Ireland a space to explore their ideas and priorities for a region that genuinely supports women and girls. It is intended to contribute an updated understanding of women's priorities based on lived expertise and experience, as part of an evidence base for policy and decision making processes, and also to support discussion and identification of what gender responsive policy making looks like. It also aims to shape development of gender responsive peace-building initiatives. Primarily, however, the project aimed to create a basis for women to engage in these discussions, and identify how this can be done on a larger scale.

While the project did include discussion of women's experiences of living in Northern Ireland, it was not specifically designed to collate evidence on women's lives, as many women feel the practice is unhelpful, as 'women tell the same stories over and over again, and nothing changes'. The project was specifically designed to avoid contributing to such potentially extractive practice and engagement fatigue, and focus on building women's voices and identifying areas for future development.

The core priorities identified were, significantly, similar across groups, which highlights important shared messages for women and girls across Northern Ireland. This also shows central gaps in current policy making, and the vital need to listen to women to achieve sustainable solutions that work for everyone in Northern Ireland. The project therefore provides a basis for developing further mechanisms to support dialogue between women and girls and decision makers in Northern Ireland. Women's Platform is delighted to act as the lead partner of Women's Spaces, a three year project focused on strengthening women's voices in peacebuilding and decision making. This project, a consortium with Women's Resource and Development Agency, Northern Ireland Women's Regional Consortium and Women's Support Network is designed to support women build their capacity in engaging with these issues, and also to engage with policy making to identify new mechanisms and formats for women's voices to be heard in decision making. This offers an exciting next step for developing further platforms to create a future that works for women in Northern Ireland. I would like to thank all project participants for their commitment and honesty in engaging with us. I'd also like to thank Kellie Turtle as the project facilitator for her invaluable support and expertise in developing and delivering a successful project. Finally, I would like to thank the Reconciliation Fund managed by the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs for supporting the project

Jonna Monaghan
Director



1. Context: UN Security Council Resolution 1325 in Northern Ireland

Prior to the adoption of UNSCR 1325, women played a role in negotiating the Good Friday Agreement through the Women's Coalition, established to ensure women's voice was heard. This led to the inclusion of language on victims' rights and the proposal for a Civic Forum, which was established but not maintained through the period of direct rule in the early 2000s. The involvement of the Women's Coalition in negotiations for the Agreement also contributed to securing equality and human rights provisions within the Agreement, which subsequently led to the establishment of the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland and Human Rights Commission for Northern Ireland through the Northern Ireland Act 1998. No single equality legislation has been passed since then, and the Good Friday Agreement remains an important pillar of gender equality provisions, although many provisions, including the Equal Pay Act (Northern Ireland) 1970 and the Sex Discrimination Order (Northern Ireland) 1976 predate the Agreement.

The negotiators of the Women's Coalition remain among the few women who have been involved as negotiators in peace accords the period since 1990. Currently available data from the UN show that 13% of negotiators, on average, were women in the period 1992-2019. Where women are engaged in peace talks, peace agreements have also been found to be longer lasting and more wide ranging.

UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325) was introduced to Northern Ireland civil society in the early 2000s, through channels including the Commission on the Status of Women. Its relevance was immediately recognised by the women's sector, as a potential mechanism for securing a role for women in decision making, as well as protecting women from further violence and integrating a gender lens in post conflict recovery and redevelopment. Organisations including Women's Platform contributed to raising awareness of UNSCR 1325 within the women's sector as well as among policy and decision makers, and advocated for integration of the principles in the resolution as core principles of policy making. In 2007, confirmation was received from the UK government that while the UK government does not believe that the resolution in itself applies to Northern Ireland, the principles embodied within the resolution are relevant and work on these is appropriate.

However, challenges in implementation were also clear from the outset. In 2005, the women's sector held an event entitled 'UNSCR 1325 on trial', where challenges were highlighted and women's perspective emphasised. A core finding was that women did not have opportunities to participate in policy and decision making, as women found it difficult to gain leading positions at community level while political parties prioritised men as candidates, particularly in winnable seats. Evidence from the most recent election in spring 2022 indicates that while women's participation in political decision making has increased - 36 per cent of both candidates and MLAs elected in 2022 are women - these trends have not changed. The APG on UNSCR 1325, Women, Peace and Security has also developed as a mechanism for highlighting the full range of issues underpinning sustainable, gender responsive peace-building in Northern Ireland at the Assembly level. Women's Platform was instrumental in establishing the APG and has provided the secretariat for it since it was established. In the most recent mandate, the APG took an active role in engaging with the Feminist Recovery Plan and seeking to ensure that it was highlighted at Executive and senior official level

1.2 The NI Assembly All Party Group on UNSCR 1325, Women, Peace and Security

To address this gap, the Northern Ireland Assembly All Party Group on UNSCR 1325, Women, Peace and Security (APG on UNSCR 1325, Women, Peace and Security) was established in 2011, with the core purpose to raise awareness of the lack of women's participation in public life. The early focus of the APG was to build capacity and raise awareness of the issues women face in relation to peace building, and work also involved a number of study visits to other jurisdictions. The APG also developed relationships with the All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Women, Peace and Security in the House of Commons. The secretariat for the APG has been provided by Women's Platform since the APG was established.

The APG has provided a mechanism for raising awareness, sharing a gender lens and women's lived experience with decision makers, and developing relationships between decision makers and civil society. This was underlined in particular during the Covid-19 pandemic, as the APG played a key role in amplifying messages of the impact of the pandemic on women and priorities for action at Assembly level.

In 2013, the APPG and APG jointly undertook a formal Inquiry into the implementation of the principles of UNSCR 1325 in Northern Ireland. The inquiry included a call for written evidence, as well as oral evidence sessions with local women, women's groups and organisations, as well as trade unions and academics. It found that implementation fell short of women's needs and expectations, and identified a number of areas for action from health and wellbeing and violence against women to economic empowerment and participation in public life. The core recommendation of the Inquiry was to establish structures and mechanisms that enable women and women's organisation to engage meaningfully in policy making and public life to engage fully and effectively with women to ensure progress.

The Inquiry led to the development of a Strategic Guide and Toolkit to Developing and Applying Women, Peace and Security Practice in Northern Ireland/Ireland. The toolkit was based on engagement with over 800 women from across the island, who shared their views and priorities for engaging women in policy and decision making. This toolkit, which was aimed in particular at statutory sector decision makers, aimed to support the implementation of UNSCR 1325 principles and Good Friday Agreement commitments in Northern Ireland as well as Ireland, and sets out outcomes, recommendations and actions that if put in place would strengthen gender equality and women's rights. However, the toolkit has had limited use within policy making in Northern Ireland so far, and a renewed focus on this has been introduced for example through the women's sector Feminist Recovery Plan, which emphasises meaningful engagement with women and civil society as a basis for gender responsive policy and decision making.

This included securing a cross Departmental response to the Plan and a series of Assembly questions, which in both cases highlighted gaps in understanding of equality duties, and low priority given to gender equality in policy making. This engagement highlights a continued and developing interest in the women, peace and security agenda among policy and decision makers. It has also been confirmed through reconstitution of the APG for the 2022-26 mandate, for which the APG has indicated commitment to build on this work and explore with civil society ways address gender gaps across a number of policy areas, notably action on violence against women and girls.

2. Marking UNSCR 1325 at 20: The Women Can't Wait! conference

The Women Can't Wait! event was the first part of the project, organised to mark the 20th anniversary of UNSCR 1325 in October 2020 and highlight the contribution and strong grassroots work of women in peace building in Northern Ireland. It was based on the recognition that progress in policy terms has been very limited, while women's contribution to peace building often has been ignored, but was intended to provide a platform for exploring how this neglected agenda can be revitalised and reawakened from the local, grassroots level to international action. The event was organised as a virtual conference, in light of the Covid-19 restrictions at the time.

This webinar featured Mrs Mary Robinson, former President of Ireland, as keynote speaker. It also highlighted women's experiences of peace-building in Northern Ireland, hearing women working at all levels from international peace-building to local grassroots level in Northern Ireland. Local speakers included Bronagh Hinds of Democrashe, Emma Johnston from YouthAction, Karen Sweeney, Director of Women's Support Network and Eileen Weir from Shankill Women's Centre. The UN Women Deputy Chief of Women, Peace and Security, Sarah Douglas, also contributed to the event and explored the future agenda of UN Women in relation to the women, peace and security agenda.

Over 80 people from across the world attended this event, which provided a first opportunity to explore a future vision of a peaceful Northern Ireland, as well as the potential of sharing learning across post conflict regions. The event received very positive feedback, including notes that the "event was inspiring" and a positive overview of the contribution of the women's sector to peace-building in Northern Ireland. Participants from outside Northern Ireland noted that they gained a new insight into the issues women in Northern Ireland face.

Participants also noted that the virtual format of the event was a positive development, as it enabled participation of such high level speakers as Mrs Robinson, and also enabled a wide range of participants to join the event. Participants joined from Ireland, Britain and from institutions across the world, as well as from across Northern Ireland. This was also found in internal review following the event, where it was felt that a physical event of this level would have been very difficult to achieve, even in a context without COVID-19. This analysis has subsequently been integrated into the strategic plan of Women's Platform 2022-25, and virtual events will be retained to ensure the organisation's work is accessible to all women and girls. This will particularly be the case for events focused on sharing learning and information.

3.1 Key messages

The event identified four core messages, which have been developed further in a separate event report, which is available on the Women's Platform website[1]. The key messages are:

- **Engage women fully and meaningfully in decision making**
- **Empower and resource women to lead**
- **Enable women to be economically independent**
- **Strengthen collaboration on all levels**

Mrs Robinson focused her keynote address on these four themes, and noted that political buy-in and engagement is critical to achieve change. In her role as UN Special Envoy for the Great Lakes region of Africa, Mrs Robinson established a women's platform involving representatives from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, Uganda and Burundi as part of an initiative to move towards peace in the region. The aim of the platform was to enable women to share their stories, explore and develop solutions, and it was felt that a women only space was necessary to achieve this. She emphasised that multilateralism at a global level is an essential model for sustainable and gender sensitive recovery from COVID-19. Mrs Robinson underlined that multilateralism is rules based, and is about protecting all national countries equitably.

The overarching key message from speakers, and the discussion, was that women need to be fully and meaningfully engaged in decision making at all levels. Emma Johnston stressed that young women's experience remains that leadership roles are not for them, and female role models at all levels are critical to demonstrate the role women can play and build young women's confidence to participate in their communities.

Bronagh Hinds stressed that the experience of the Women's Coalition in Northern Ireland showed that women are not afraid to step up, and women continue to work at the hard edge of security for example through District Policing Partnerships. She emphasised that the depth and breadth of the women's grassroots movement in Northern Ireland was critical in achieving representation in the peace negotiations, as women had built the experience and skills, as well as the determination to keep making their voice heard. Anne Carr noted that many women's organisations involved in peace building and cross community work in Northern Ireland trace their origins to the 1980s and some to the 1970s, and there is a lot to be learnt from women's leadership throughout the conflict.

Karen Sweeney emphasised that the women only element of community education, which was funded in the early phases of the PEACE programme, was vital and made a significant difference, not only to individual women, but also their communities, in particular by changing the narrative and highlighting new possibilities in disadvantaged communities. Both Karen Sweeney and Eileen Weir underlined, however, that funding for community education and in particular women's education has been cut dramatically over the last 10-15 years, so that virtually no provision through local women's groups remains. This has a direct impact on women and their life opportunities; many are trapped in poverty with limited options for themselves or their families. Short term, often year to year funding also discourages women from becoming engaged in grassroots women's groups. This, as Eileen Weir emphasised, serves to hold women back as organisations cannot plan long term, cannot attract staff and are forced to focus on financial survival rather than service provision and advocacy.

Sarah Douglas echoed this and highlighted an increase in overseas development aid (ODA) directed to gender initiatives and women's organisations as one of the priorities of the women, peace and security agenda of UN Women. The aim is for 15% of ODA to be aimed at gender initiatives, and to increase the current 0.2% of aid going directly to women's organisations fivefold[1]. However, as current concrete implementation of UNSCR 1325 falls far short of the rhetoric invoked, the challenge is significant; currently only Sweden surpasses these targets, while Canada is close.

Resourcing the sector, and resourcing education at all levels adequately, is essential to enable women to fully realise their potential, ideas and ambitions, not only on peace building which goes on as in the past, but on a wider range of priorities for women and gender equality. In the words of Karen Sweeney and Eileen Weir, women can do it themselves, but need support to get underway. Anne Carr stressed it is essential that no one turns the light off on women; women's role is central to delivering a sustainable future for everyone.

3.2 Conclusion

This event provided a unique and important platform for women involved in peace-building in Northern Ireland through different mechanisms and in different roles to share experiences and identify key learning points to inform future practice. It provided an opportunity for women from diverse backgrounds to come together, thus also contributing to the priorities of the Irish government's Reconciliation Fund as funder of this project. As such, the event provided a basis for both shaping this project, and informing work on women, peace and security in Northern Ireland more widely.

The findings from this event were used to inform and shape the engagement element of the project. The key messages will also continue to inform development of Women's Platform work on women, peace and security.

4. Adapting to context of COVID-19

The engagement element of the project was designed to begin in late 2020, to coincide with the 20th anniversary of UNSCR 1325. However, as the Covid-19 pandemic deepened and lockdown conditions were re-introduced, it was not feasible to organise engagement sessions within local communities, as originally anticipated. Following engagement with grassroots women's organisations, it also became clear that online delivery was not possible, as the issue of peace-building is sensitive and requires an appropriate space, safeguarding participants and supporting safe conversations, which cannot be adequately achieved in a virtual environment. Further to engagement with the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs as the funder, it was agreed to focus on preparation and deliver in person workshops when it became safe to do so.

4.1 Pilot project phase

A pilot project phase was undertaken in May-June 2021 to shape the main project phase. This phase focused on engagement with groups of women and girls who have previous experience of engaging with discussing issues of community relations, peace and reconciliation, to gain an insight into key issues and identify what a meaningful project would look like. The core aim of the pilot phase was to listen to women's perspectives, with a view to ensuring the project contributes to building the capacity and confidence of women to engage in discussion and dialogue on issues around peace and developing a future Northern Ireland, while building in a participatory approach that values the experiences and views of women involved

4.2 Format of pilots

The pilots were undertaken with three cross community groups of adult women facilitated by Shankill Women's Centre, Women's Information Northern Ireland (WINI) and Women of Clonduff, a rural women's group. Two of these sessions were delivered online, and one as a socially distanced pilot face to face session, with a controlled number of women. These sessions took the format of conversations about women, peace and security, the concept of women's rights and the most meaningful format of a project exploring this in further detail.

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In addition, a pilot session with young women was undertaken, in collaboration with YouthAction Northern Ireland. This was a small, socially distanced face to face event, which focused on introducing the concept of women, peace and security and exploring young women's perceptions of issues related to the agenda, using a board game focused on peace and security developed by a senior YouthAction team member designed to generate discussion on relevant issues. Broad ideas for a meaningful project were also explored.

4.3 Findings of pilots

The pilots were received positively and highlighted the need for opportunities for women and girls to share their views and experiences of living in Northern Ireland, as well as their ideas and priorities for shaping a peaceful and inclusive future Northern Ireland. There was overwhelming agreement that a project to give women space to explore and express views is both needed and welcome, as women and girls have had limited opportunities to share their views and experiences.

The pilots focused on seeking participants' views on what a meaningful project would look like. Key factors identified included:

- engaging and listening to women and girls from all backgrounds
- recognising that personal experiences are valid, although interpretations of events and circumstances will differ between people
- providing opportunities for sharing and dialogue between women and girls of different ages and backgrounds
- giving participants opportunities to shape the final product, report or outcome.

Participants began to share stories of their experiences of living in a divided society during the pilots, including experiences of growing up during the conflict as well as in a post conflict setting. There was strong support for intergenerational engagement, either as part of the project or as a follow up, as participants felt mutual sharing and learning is vital to shape a stable, peaceful and sustainable future Northern Ireland.

Participants stressed that women and girls are in very different places with regard to talking about this; some are happy to do so and speak publicly, while others prefer to focus on other issues and/or private reflection, and yet others are unsure about how and where to begin. It was emphasised that the project must respect this, and offer opportunities to participate and contribute on a level women feel comfortable with. Participants underlined that the delivery format must ensure a safe and supportive context, and offer each participant control over how and when they engage in discussions. Some groups also expressed a wish for an extended project based on a flexible structure that can develop as themes emerge in discussion.

The pilot sessions did not include any specific training or information sharing element, as the focus was on listening to women and girls. Pilot participants stressed that capacity building should be optional or secondary, as this creates a barrier for many women, but expressed a wish for including a capacity building element as an underlying theme or ongoing thread. It was noted that this could take many forms, and would not necessarily need to be limited to capacity on UN Security Council Resolution 1325.

The findings of the pilot report were shared with the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs and were used to shape the full engagement element of the project.

4.4 Project methodology

The engagement element was designed to take account of the priorities identified in the pilot process and build on inclusive, accessible approaches. A facilitator was engaged to support Women's Platform with delivery of the project, with Kellie Turtle appointed following a tender competition.

An engagement methodology was agreed with the facilitator, based on the findings from the pilot sessions. It was agreed to emphasise an interactive format, which enables each participant to choose their level of engagement. In addition, it was agreed that taking an intersectional approach, and introducing the concept of intersectionality to participants, is important both to provide an element of learning, and encourage participants to take a wide perspective on the needs and priorities of women in Northern Ireland. Finally, it was agreed that activities within the workshops would utilise both creative and discussion based approaches, to support participation and encourage reflection.

The final engagement element design consisted of two workshops, each lasting around two hours, which was intended to support participation and enable accessible, inclusive discussion. The first session focused on exploring participants' experiences of living in Northern Ireland, and utilised discussion around associations made to words including 'woman' and 'Northern Ireland' to initiate this. The session centred around participants designing, drawing and/or sketching an 'identity shield', as an exercise designed to help and enable participants to define themselves as individuals with their own personal priorities. The exercise yielded considerable conversation, and contributed to introducing reflection around individual variation as well as shared priorities. This session also included a brief introduction into the international human rights framework, as a context for the work as a whole. As noted above, the concept of peace-building was not introduced as a specific focus, to enable the widest and fullest conversation highlighting participants' own understandings of a peaceful society and key elements of such a society.

The second session focused on exploring intersectional understandings of gender equality, and women's priorities for a future Northern Ireland. The concept of intersectionality was introduced through fictional stories of five women and girls with a number of intersecting identities and characteristics, and participants were asked to assess the needs and issue of these characters in an informal, supported conversation.

The characters, which were based on compiling experiences of a number of real individuals, included:

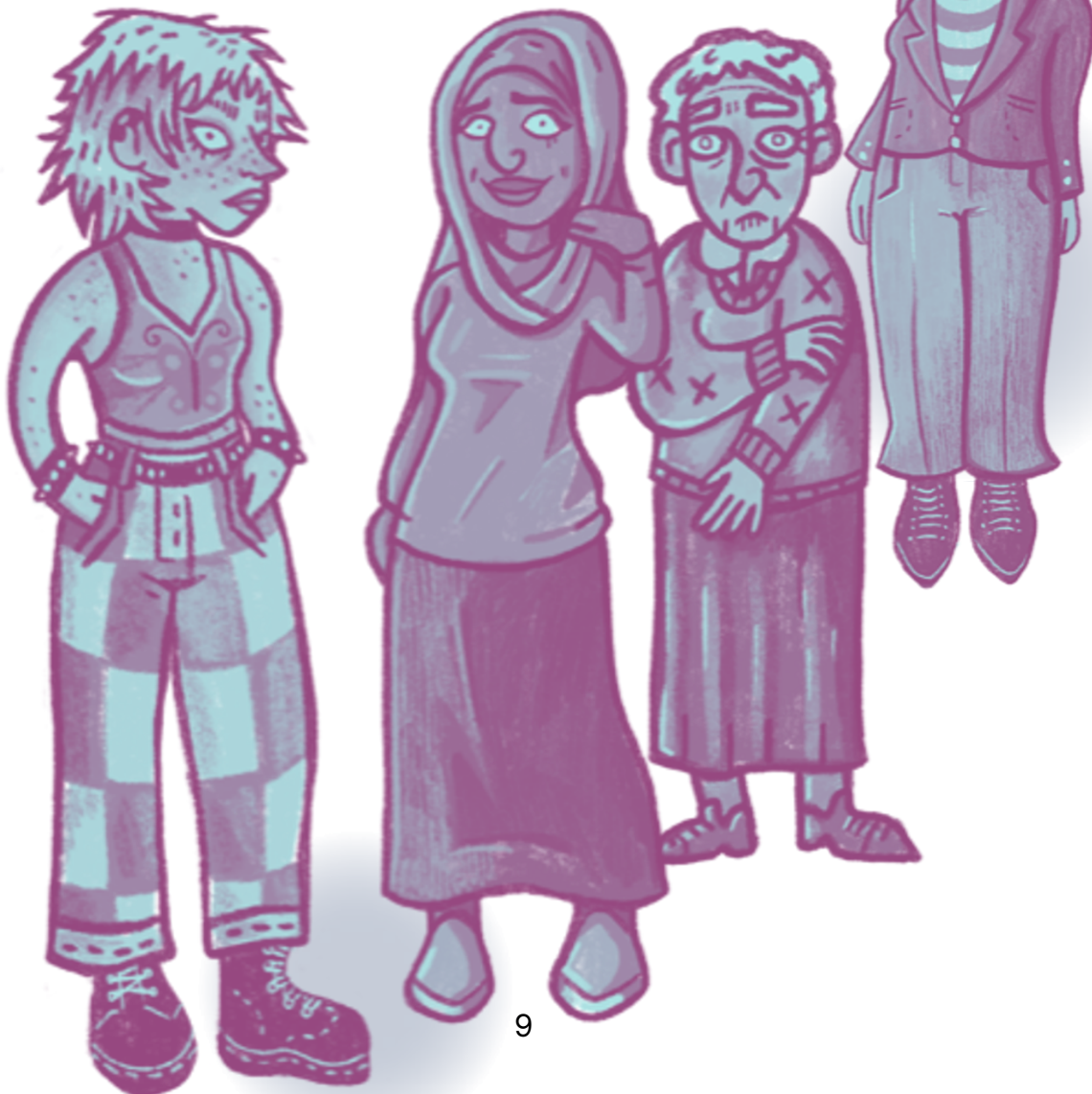
Jay – an 18 year old Traveller who identifies as lesbian and has experienced suicide in the family

Fiona – a young trans woman whose family moved from Poland to Belfast when Fiona was a child

Sarah – a mother of two, who moved from Iraq to England to seek care for a disabled son and subsequently came to Northern Ireland to leave an abusive relationship, now working for better special educational needs support

Charlotte – a woman in her early 50s from a Protestant background who is facing unexpected economic hardship; her husband was an army officer but was forced to retire on health grounds and has not been awarded an Armed Forces Pension

Agnes – a woman in her late 70s who lives rurally, has a lot of health problems but no transport to access care or social support as her focus was on caring for her father; her family was involved with the IRA and this has left its traces



The second element of this session focused on developing a vision for a Northern Ireland that works for women, and invited participants to share their views and ideas for a Northern Ireland that works for women. Values and principles were identified as a first stage of this discussion, which concluded with identification of key actions to achieve the changes identified.

Discussion during the workshops was recorded for note taking accuracy, with the explicit consent of participants confirmed in writing. Recordings were used to review and confirm evidence for this report and other project products and were subsequently destroyed. No identifying information was recorded for any participant, as an additional layer of safeguarding designed to support participation in the project.

5.1 Recruiting participants

The methodology for choosing participants utilised a snowballing method, building on engaging with members and partners of Women's Platform, who in turn reached out to member groups, in order to reach grassroots women and communities. Women's Platform made contact directly with all interested groups, and provided a detailed overview of the project to ensure each group was able to make an informed decision regarding participation. A flyer was also shared with each group, to ensure all participants also had a clear idea of the focus and aim of the workshops.

The final participant groups included

Three rural women's groups:

Co Down

Co Armagh

Co Antrim

Five urban women's groups:

Derry – an adult women's group involved in campaigning for reproductive rights, and a group of young women engaged through YouthAction

Belfast – focus on women in areas less often engaged in this type of work, including a young women's group

Online:

Disabled women's group; agreement for this was initially secured with the group facilitator, who also consulted the group to secure informed consent.

In total, the project reached around 80 women in nine separate groups. All of the groups included women of different ages and backgrounds, although the majority of participants were aged over 18, in order to ensure appropriate safeguarding provisions. An effort was made to engage a group of women from migrant, refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds, but no such group was able to participate, due to a number of factors including significant other priorities. However, women from these backgrounds were represented in other groups and contributed to discussion across issues. Disabled women and LGBTQI+ people were also represented across groups.

5.2 Findings

The project received positive feedback and participants as well as group leaders indicated that the sessions were enjoyable, engaging and well facilitated. Evaluative feedback highlighted that the sessions provided a constructive and respectful opportunity to engage with the issues, share views and perspectives, and gain an insight into new and different perspectives. It was emphasised, however, that the project must lead to action, as women are tired of being asked about the same things with no change achieved. Action was defined as increased or new opportunities to engage with policy and decision making, as well as concrete policy change. It was also stressed that women from all backgrounds must have equitable opportunities and must be taken seriously, as experts in their own circumstances and actions that would make a difference. Several participants and groups urged elected representatives to engage more with constituents, both to provide practical support effectively and strengthen their understanding of constituents' experiences, priorities and proposed solutions.

6.1 Impact of language

The first session included an ice breaker exercise that asked participants to identify different words meaning 'woman' and references to 'Northern Ireland', respectively. This exercise highlighted the high frequency and common use of words with negative connotations used to refer to women, and facilitated reflection of how such negative language mirrors gender inequality and impacts on women's confidence, self image and in some cases behaviour. The impact on girls and young women raised particular concern across groups, and addressing gender stereotypes in language was identified as a cross cutting priority, which everyone in Northern Ireland can contribute to. It was underlined that this is a societal priority, since stereotyping can be seen as a harmful practice that perpetuates inequality, and women should not be responsible for fighting their own oppression.

The exercise exploring terms for Northern Ireland reflected the wide range of understandings and experiences of Northern Ireland. It enabled, where participants introduced it, reflection of the divisions in Northern Ireland, and a common theme was a wish and personal commitment to a shared future. This included raising children to normalise diversity, tackling stereotypes through meeting people as individuals, and welcoming diversity in groups as well as public debate. However, the pervasive impact of conflict on mental and social wellbeing was recognised as an area for long term action.

6.2 Reflecting on identity

The session focused on participants creating a personal 'identity shield', designed to enable each participant to reflect on themselves as an individual, their own values and relationships, issues and things important to them. Participants had an opportunity to volunteer to share their stories, and a majority took this opportunity, which enabled celebration of individuality, but also highlighting shared interests and passions, as well as creating new understanding and insight into individual priorities and experiences that shape identities throughout people's lives. As a general conclusion, groups noted that reflecting on a personal identity was valuable and important, since women are typically identified primarily in relation to others, as mothers, daughters, sisters and so on, rather than as individuals.

6.3 Taking an intersectional view

Session two began with a brief introduction of the concept of intersectionality, which is a concept describing how race, class, gender, and other individual characteristics “intersect” with one another and overlap to create different individual experiences, as well as intersecting and overlapping forms of inequality and discrimination relating to those characteristics. The fictional characters were then introduced to participants, who were asked to choose one character and explore her situation and potential priorities.

Intersectionality as a concept was new to many groups, and participants took some time to consider and explore its meaning, sometimes querying whether intersectional practice means prioritising some groups over others. The exercise, however, supported practical engagement with intersecting issues and inequalities, and participants commented that it helped clarify what such concepts mean.

There was particular empathy with and a wide range of support ideas for the character of Agnes, as many participants had personal insight into the challenges older people are facing, including through working in the care sector. The character of Sarah contributed to discussion of racism, and how prejudice compounds other challenges such as lack of access to effective services and support. Managing limited income was familiar to many participants, which contributed to both empathy with and solutions on an individual as well as policy level for the character of Charlotte. Meanwhile, the issues affecting the characters of Jay and Fiona were newer to most participants. However, a number of groups identified human rights for LGBTQI+ groups as an important priority, and reflected experiences of young people, noting that attitudes and approaches for example in schools vary widely and a standardised, rights based approach is needed.

6.4 Engaging young women

The project specifically aimed to create opportunities for young women to engage in discussions around peace-building, recognising that young women often are left out of such conversations, or are unsure of how to engage. Young adult women were represented in a number of the groups, and welcomed this focus, noting that a supportive environment is vital to enable young women to engage in such conversations with confidence. They also emphasised that young women’s voices need to be better heard, and in particular stressed that young women have competence that needs to be respected, including by health and education professionals engaging with young mothers.

This lack of respect for young women was also highlighted in a group of older teenagers, which was convened specifically to explore younger women’s voices and perspectives. Virtually all participants reflected that young women are not taken seriously, and that this for example means that discrimination and harassment is commonplace in everyday life. In this group, the core methodology was ‘postcards to power’, and participants highlighted their key messages to decision makers on postcards displayed in the room. Key messages focused on the need to enable young women to take control of their own lives, respecting people of all ages, and protecting the rights of everyone, including LGBTQI+ young people.

Feedback on the session was positive, and participants welcomed the positive environment as an enabler for honest conversations. Participants also stressed these discussions need to happen more regularly and in more places, to ensure that young women have models for engaging in these conversations and feel more able to participate in discussions around public life and public decision making.

6.4 Values for a Northern Ireland that works for women

Issues and experiences affecting women were raised throughout the two sessions, and noted by the facilitators. The second session focused attention on these, and culminated in identifying the key values and principles that should underpin a policy and governance system that works for women, as well as key actions to begin implementing such changes.

The same broad themes emerged in all groups, and the majority of issues identified related to these themes. Perhaps the most important finding from the project, therefore, is that there is broadly shared agreement on the principles and values that need to be put in place to create a Northern Ireland that works for women. This is important in itself, as it corroborates previous work seeking to highlight priorities of women in Northern Ireland. It also underlines the common threads that weave together the experiences of women across Northern Ireland, and provides a clear mandate and direction for change.

Values for a Northern Ireland that works for women

A society of freedom, equality and respect: Women and girls must be respected as equal members of society with men and boys, with genuine agency and freedom to make choices in their own lives, as well as within their families. Equality must mean equality of outcome, and not just opportunity, as the starting points are different.

This was universally agreed as the most important and basic requirement for a sustainable Northern Ireland that works for women. In all groups, participants agreed that women are treated differently not just within society, but within families, and have less freedom to make choices about their own lives, and identified this as a core mechanism of inequality. However, it was noted and stressed that it cannot be separated from the other principles, since society cannot be fully gender equal until those requirements have been met as core elements of equality.

An inclusive and gender responsive, women centred society: Women need to have an equal and meaningful role in all policy and decision making, and women's priorities must be integrated as a prerequisite for effective policy making. Accountability for decision making needs to be made a central priority.

This includes ensuring gender parity, or equal representation of women, in all decision making bodies, and infrastructure that supports women to participate in society, from access to transport, to childcare and appropriate training and mentoring. Gender stereotypes, including designing services based on male needs as the norm, need to be eliminated as part of achieving this. Accountability mechanisms must also be strengthened.

A caring, just, connected and supportive society: Care should be a core value in all policy and decision making. This involves valuing connectedness and community above individual achievement and competition, and developing a society that is open, accepting and inclusive of all. Leadership should also build on empathy, understood as a consideration of different experiences and an interest in walking another's shoes.

This means refocusing decisions on the supportive benefit decisions provide to society as a whole, and includes action on climate, energy and social and economic equity and justice. It focuses on removing barriers for disabled people and enabling full participation in society, without stigma and additional cost. It also includes recognising the unpaid care work predominantly provided by women, and improving women's agency by investing in childcare and adult social care, to enable all women to make genuinely informed and independent choices with regard to caring, working and engaging in society and public life.

A safe society: Women have the right to be safe, and feel safe, in their own homes as well as in public and private spaces outside the home. Safety means feeling comfortable and accepted, and not just free from discrimination, violence and threat of violence.

This means recognising that misogynistic attitudes and practices are normalised in Northern Ireland society, leading to violence, discrimination and harassment against women and girls that directly harms and curtails their lives: one group described this as 'telling better stories', instead of repeating jokes, narratives and motivations based on misogynistic tropes, beliefs and practices. It is based on effective action on misogyny, and in particular violence against women and girls, including sexual violence, as a violation of human rights. It can also involve addressing the legacy of the conflict.

A learning society: Education is prioritised, resourced and available to all, with investment made in community education and lifelong learning for women and girls.

Several groups highlighted the cuts to community education in the last decade, which has all but eliminated women's access to women's community education services, which were a key driver of the women's movement until the late 2000s. This has cut women off not only from identifying new job opportunities, but from learning about their rights and campaigning, and refocusing funding on this is vital to ensure women of all backgrounds can effectively participate in society. A gender equal learning society also affords all young people full agency in choosing subjects and fields to study and work in, free from gender stereotyping, as well as addressing chronic low pay in jobs and fields seen as traditionally 'women's work'.

6.5 Delivering a Northern Ireland that works for women

The final stage of the engagement sessions sought participants' priorities for action to deliver a society that meets the principles and values identified. This encouraged very rich, wide ranging discussion, which reflected the specific issues in different areas, and also the experiences of women from different backgrounds. Crucially, however, actions aligned with the principles identified in the previous session, and the same broad themes emerged across groups. This further emphasises the common priorities of women across Northern Ireland and underlines the need for action to create a more equitable, rights based and gender responsive society, as a core prerequisite for a sustainable and peaceful place.

The core areas for action that emerged were:

Priority for gender equality: Greater priority and will to deliver gender equality is needed in Northern Ireland. This requires action across all policy areas, but a fundamental area for action is gender stereotyping and discriminatory language, as it normalises gendered roles in society, violence against women and girls and intersectional discrimination, including hate speech and dehumanising language used against disabled people from migrant, minority ethnic, refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds. Public campaigns are needed, but this also includes ensuring policies actively counteract stereotypes. Individuals also have a role to play, especially men calling out unacceptable behaviour by other men.

Voices and spaces for women: Women need spaces and services to come together, learn and build capacity to participate in public life. Resourcing the women's sector is critical to support this, particularly in rural areas where there are very few funded women's groups.

This area of work links closely to prioritising gender equality, and is essential to ensure women are able to share their voices and have the confidence to engage in public life, which in turn is essential to enable women to choose to take up public roles, whether in their local community or in public and elected office. Addressing misogynistic abuse and violence against women is also closely related to this, as a key enabling measure.

Care: Investment in care and a caring society is urgently needed, as a basis for an inclusive and supportive society.

Childcare should be prioritised, as an essential service that not only assists women and families, but supports children's healthy development and life opportunities. Adult social care needs significant overhaul, to ensure the dignity and wellbeing of people needing care is protected and families can make genuine choices about caring for a loved one. The economic role and contribution of carers need to be recognised, and carers need to be better supported both financially and practically. Involving carers in shaping care services is vital to achieve better outcomes for all.

Safety: Ensuring women, children and all people can be and feel safe at home and in their communities should be an aim in all policy making. It is also a basis for dealing with the legacy of conflict for women, which requires commitment to listening and addressing needs.

Ensuring women experiencing violence and abuse, whether by an intimate partner or a stranger, have access to refuge, care and support is an urgent priority in Northern Ireland. Women also need to be able to access support in their communities, and resourcing the women's sector is critical for this. Safety also involves a supportive built environment including street lighting and public transport accessible for disabled people; many disabled people rarely leave home, or experience significant stress and worry every time they do, as they can't be sure about the circumstances they will face.

Health: Investment in healthcare in all its forms is needed, including a women's health strategy based on local evidence of women's needs. Mental health is a particular emergency, which is linked to other policy areas but requires urgent investment to save lives and protect the wellbeing of both individuals and families.

It was stressed that primary healthcare, and access to services and support for disabled people, should be prioritised within this. Young women emphasised that healthcare professionals must respect mothers of all ages and support mothers of all backgrounds, and training in this area is badly needed. One participant commented that “we know our children best, so professionals need to listen to us instead of undermining us”. The practice of routinely collecting information about child protection during hospital visits was highlighted in one group as a barrier to trust and creating reluctance to seek care, and participants suggested developing more sensitive approaches as a means of achieving better outcomes for all, including children.

Education: Education should be free at all levels, with specific investment in community education to enable women and young people to engage in their communities, learn about rights and rights based systems, and build skills to access jobs. Investment in schools is also needed, in particular in provision for children with special educational needs, which is essential to enable all children to get a good start in life, and also to help families support all children meaningfully. Education in all its forms needs to be supported and resourced; vocational routes are equally valuable and important as higher university level education.

Housing: Good quality, affordable housing needs to be available to all. More social housing needs to be built; no one should be at risk of homelessness.

Housing provision should take account of the diversity of needs among people in Northern Ireland, and ensure access to different sizes of houses, as well as homes suitable for disabled people. Specific provision needs to be made for victims and survivors of domestic abuse; refuge places need to be increased, and access to long term affordable housing improved, to make sure victims are not forced to remain in abusive relationships for fear of becoming homeless. Migrants, refugees and asylum seekers need access to quality housing, and security against destitution, not just a roof over their head. Homeless services need to be safeguarded, and women only services secured long term.

Economic justice: Women need to have full economic independence and agency, and barriers to this need to be removed. Effective action on poverty is also essential, along with action to stop concentration of wealth in the hands of a few at the cost of others.

This includes fair pay for decent work, closing gender pay gaps, addressing gender discrimination and stereotyping in the labour market and ensuring access to support, including childcare and adult social care to give women meaningful control over their own lives. It also includes ensuring a humane social protection system, which includes adequate support for all families and fair pension systems, including action to compensate women who were not informed about changes in pension age and have experienced substantial financial loss. Recognising these dynamics as drivers of women’s poverty is vital as a basis for effective action on poverty. Improved monitoring of employers is needed to ensure employees are paid properly and working conditions meet legal requirements and good practice.

Rural infrastructure: Improved access to services and resources in rural areas is vital, especially for women, most of whom have caring responsibilities in often very traditional communities. This includes in particular improved care infrastructure and connectivity, both in terms of public transport and digital technology, which is limited in most rural areas and reduces opportunities to access jobs and services, as well as engage in society and socialise. This, in turn, compounds poverty and loneliness, which affect in particular disabled people or other mobility limitations. Greater investment in rural women is also needed to ensure women across Northern Ireland have access to the same resources, services and engagement opportunities.

6.6 Recommendations

The vision and aims set out by women participating in this project set out a clear agenda for action. As outlined above, participants were also very clear that women have given their time, shared their stories and made suggestions many times before, and it is now time to see change as a result. This highlights a clear set of recommendations for a way forward.

Government and public institutions need to engage more effectively with women and women's organisations at all stages of policy making, building on available good practice in consultation, engagement and co design. This also includes showing how this engagement has contributed to shaping policy and decisions, and engaging women in shaping and advising on delivery of services. Consideration should be given to using quotas or other mechanisms to progress towards gender parity particularly in public appointments.

Government and public institutions need to improve data collection, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes to enable a sufficiently detailed evidence base for decision making. This includes routinely providing gender breakdowns of data and integrating gender budgeting in budget and financial processes, as a mechanism for demonstrating how funding decisions impact on different demographic groups.

Funders, including Departments and statutory bodies, need to integrate a gender lens in their work. Funders also need to engage with women and women's organisations to identify needs and priorities, and where possible develop co design models for developing grant programmes and criteria. Funders must also show how community level engagement has informed priorities.

The voluntary sector and women's organisations need to create opportunities for women across Northern Ireland, of all ages and backgrounds, to participate, learn and contribute to advocacy for gender equality. This is linked to resourcing, but also includes developing information sharing and communication to ensure women and girls can access information and join initiatives that interest them. Specifically, emphasis needs to be on equal access to events, services and training across Northern Ireland.

7. Conclusion

This project provided a platform for women in Northern Ireland to begin exploring a Northern Ireland that works for women, and a policy framework that would support this. The engagement with women's groups across Northern Ireland highlighted a wealth of ideas and views based on women's experiences of life in Northern Ireland, and demonstrated significant and broad agreement on key values and priority actions across groups. This provides a strong basis for further action and advocacy for gender responsive policy in Northern Ireland.

The findings from the project will inform a new, three year project focused on both building women's capacity on peace-building and strengthening advocacy on gender responsive peace-building, entitled Women's Spaces and led by a consortium involving Women's Platform, Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network, Women's Resource and Development Agency and Women's Support Network. This project is one of the Reconciliation Fund Strategic Partnerships, funded by the Irish Government, and securing the project further demonstrates the importance of this agenda and the need to work towards gender parity in decision making in Northern Ireland. Development of the project and opportunities for women across Northern Ireland to engage with decision makers will also be a priority for Women's Platform over the next year. Women and girls constitute more than half of the population in Northern Ireland, and bring invaluable expertise, experience and solutions for a sustainable, inclusive and peaceful future Northern Ireland. It is time for women to lead us into this future.

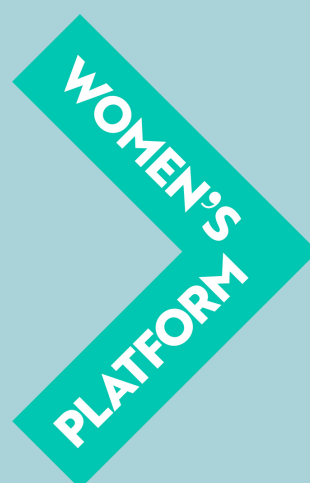
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