TOGETHER, ACROSS DIFFERENCE:
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SUPPORTING TRANSNATIONAL
MOVEMENTS FROM WOMEN PEACEBUILDERS IN NORTHERN IRELAND,
COLOMBIA AND IRAQ.

WOMEN'S PLATFORM

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GENDER ACTION FOR PEACE AND SECURITY

This report was prepared by Northern Ireland Women's Platform and Gender Action for Peace and Security.

INTRODUCTION

Women's movements are critical in driving transformative change and preventing conflict. They are made up of frontline defenders; experts of their communities; prevention actors; and deliver critical services at times of crisis and conflict. Yet, in 2020 movements received only 1% of all gender-focused aid, a number likely to have further reduced since. Recent cuts in funding globally are likely to further reduce the limited resources for movements. This briefing, resulting from conversations with women peacebuilders from Northern Ireland, Colombia and Iraq, outlines **why** feminist movements and organisations are critical actors in addressing structural gender inequality, and **how** to resource and support their life saving work.

BACKGROUND

The United Kingdom's Women Peace and Security (WPS) fifth National Action Plan (NAP) 2023-2027 details how the UK implements United Nations resolution 1325. For the first time, it includes Northern Ireland and has the Northern Ireland Office (NIO) as an implementing partner. Northern Ireland Women's Platform (NIWEP) is supporting implementation of NAP commitments in Northern Ireland, and partnered with Gender Action for Peace and Security (GAPS) on this project facilitating dialogue between women peacebuilders from Northern Ireland, Iraq and Colombia. This scoping exercise was designed to explore interest in developing networking and information sharing for women peacebuilders across regions and confirmed the desire of women peacebuilders to connect across different contexts; exchange knowledge; and to network and movement build which is essential to inclusive peace. The piloting dialogues were able to connect women across these contexts, but further resourcing will be critical to facilitate effective transnational movement building. This report, stemming from the dialogues hosted, provides concrete recommendations on how such movements can be supported.

THE VALUE-ADD OF NETWORKS AND MOVEMENTS

Women peacebuilders from Northern Ireland, Colombia and Iraq had many shared agreements about the vital role movements (which include networks and coalitions) play in furthering gender equality and ending violence against women and girls. It helps build an overall stronger and more joined-up civil society that can successfully collaborate with relevant stakeholders and participate to drive holistic policy change from the grassroots to the national and international. It makes civil society more resilient as it builds trust between actors – often across lines of difference such as identity, ways of working or thematic focus. It streamlines efforts within civil society: preventing

duplication, monitoring progress and sharing best practices. As many organisations focus on programme and service delivery within their communities, networks and movements provide essential platforms for advocacy, ensuring that priorities identified at the grassroots travel upwards to help shape national, regional and international policy. International movements permit safety: Iraqi organisations often are not able to speak publicly during processes like the Universal Periodic Review due to reprisals. Being a member of a regional or international network permits a safe and secure way to still participate. Movements provide a platform for more transformative visions and long-term perspectives, especially when cutting across different contexts. Movements have secured tremendous progress: in Iraq, the women's movement helped secure the creation of the country's National Action Plan, the first in the region. In Colombia, the movement fostered solidarity between different groups, and ensured the peace process included women in all their diversity. Regionally, transnational collaboration secured access to abortion across many countries in Latin America. In Northern Ireland, the movement secured areas in peace negotiations often left out in traditional and more patriarchal negotiations, including around education and amnesty.

CONFRONTING THE ROLLBACK OF RIGHTS

In the UK's WPS NAP, one of the key transnational challenges identified is the rising global rollback of rights. Feminist movements play are a critical bulwark against this rollback – including how to navigate contexts where the anti-gender movement has already successfully eroded civic space. A key example was the tension in the language used by international movements that may not translate into or even may be dangerous in national contexts. In Iraq, explicit LGBTQI+ inclusion can put women in all their diversity at heightened risk including as a result of anti-gender efforts. International movements can provide a platform on how to negotiate restrictions on language and activities to ensure those most marginalised are not further excluded nor that safety becomes compromised. It becomes a platform to find new narratives around a shared vision rather than enforcing narrow terminology. This means an international movement can ensure no one is left behind, and national organisations can translate collective principles in language and action that keeps communities safe while bringing about change. This can bridge cultural sensitivities with genuine intersectional contextual approaches without falling in the trap of cultural relativism. Doing so, allowed Iraqi women's rights organisations to remain inclusive in practice and successfully oppose anti-gender laws. International movements can then provide a form of accountability: if the *language* has to be adapted, is the *practice* still inclusive and intersectional? All women peacebuilders agreed these are difficult yet vital conversations, and women from Northern Ireland and Colombia were eager to share how they navigated anti-gender and exclusionary pushback, yet the space to have those types of conversations is extremely limited.

RESOURCING SUCCESSFUL FEMINIST MOVEMENTS

Most networks – national, regional or international – operate with extremely limited budgets. Most funding is for individual organisations, forcing networks to ask for membership fees that may prohibit grassroots organisations from joining. Often funding

for networks is tied to projects, and once such funding ends, so often does the network. This often includes a loss of institutional knowledge and access. If a network does continue, the lack of resources often results in underfunded members absorbing additional costs. Many women-led and women's rights organisation volunteer their time in networks and do such work on top of other work, fuelling burn-out. Women peacebuilders mentioned that many have opened up their own homes to host meetings, exposing themselves and their families to risks. Reductions in funding have made these dynamics more widespread and pressing. This contributes to further weakened national, regional and international civic space.

Colombian women peacebuilders all underscored core principles for networks, rooted in Indigenous organising and feminist practice: reciprocity and care. With modest resources, networks can develop models of reciprocity that guide its work, and through care for one another build trust necessary to unite and be able to navigate inevitable disagreements. This could reduce competition with the sector, which is critical for donors to consider amid rising aid cuts. Funding a network could resource the network itself, or resource the participation of its members. Resourcing the network would allow it to build institutional capacity and create formalised structures where appropriate. This would include staff costs, either for the network itself or by being able to support staff at member organisations to take up roles within the network. Such support would enhance communication channels, democratize leadership and create room to develop shared aims and ways of working. Networks can also channel funding in different ways to its members, providing opportunities for coordinated and streamlined projects where outcomes and best practices can immediately be shared across. Resourcing could overcome simple logistical barriers to movement building: provide translation; fund internet access; support in-person convening. It would permit more flexibility, and resourcing could be used to map out gaps within the network; locate new members; and provide mentoring and capacity building for both new and old members.

RECOMMENDATIONS

There were striking similarities in topics and priorities raised in workshops in Northern Ireland, Iraq and Colombia, which underline the value and potential of developing networking at different levels, and showcase the shared lived experiences of women across (post)conflict areas.

These recommendations reflect priorities across settings, and highlight initial steps to build networks for developing solidarity and sharing learning, which participants stressed could over time contribute to and effective international WPS agenda and movement, identified as vital for supporting and safeguarding women peacebuilders in the current context of uncertainty.

1. Provide **accessible, core, flexible and long-term funding** to women's networks and movements to support their vital role in advocacy, transformational change, and movement building; and their role in achieving women and girls' rights. Large-scale, long-term change, including to achieve gender equality, has always taken an ecosystem of organizations, networks, and people working together to dismantle the forces that maintain the status quo. A coordination function has been identified as central for this by participants across the three project countries

2. Provide support and resources for an **in-person convening** with women peacebuilders, including those from Northern Ireland, Iraq and Colombia, to exchange best practices and build new alliances, with a focus on pushing against the rollback of rights. This may effectively be built on initial online relationship building, as highlighted by many participants, which assists in managing time and resources required as well as building initial shared understanding and trust.

3. Institutionalise **collaboration with relevant national, regional and international networks** to embed a commitment to meaningful participation and consultation across the UK Government, including in the development of any strategies or frameworks to promote and protect civil society space such as a refresh of the UK's NAP. This would make concrete the NAP's commitment to work with civil society as a strategic partner. A coordination function would also assist with this.

4. Invite networks and members and resource their participation for **knowledge and capacity building and training**. Access and ability to afford training opportunities are often limited for civil society actors, and donors should consider this as an additional option to resource movements. Training named during the dialogues that would be especially helpful for WROs and WLOs is on digital security, mis- and disinformation, and safety.

Annex: Findings from engagement with women peacebuilders in Northern Ireland

1. ## CONTEXT TO THE PROJECT: WOMEN AND PEACEBUILDING IN NORTHERN IRELAND

Women in Northern Ireland have played an important role in international peacebuilding networks, sharing learning and experiences from the peace process in Northern Ireland. As a result, there is ongoing strong international interest in the Northern Ireland peace process, and demand for further sharing of learning with women peacebuilders across the globe. This interest has been built by key individuals over the last 30 years or so, and this is highlighted in the overview of women's international engagement to date, which forms a key second strand of this project. While much more can be done to fully document the contribution of women in Northern Ireland to the women, peace and security agenda and peacebuilding processes globally, the overview also highlights that much of this work has developed organically, often building on individual and key organisational relationships, and there is scope for more systematic development of international networks and partnerships to enable solidarity with women peacebuilders worldwide, as well as share learning more widely.

Within Northern Ireland, there is significant variation in women's access to international networks. This was clearly highlighted in the workshops organised as part of this project, and there was strong demand for and interest in developing further networking opportunities; however, it was stressed that in particular grassroots women are at capacity, and networking would need to be resourced and supported, to enable women working on peacebuilding in all settings to participate meaningfully. This will be developed further in the overview of views, findings and recommendations from women peacebuilders in Northern Ireland. Overall, however, there is a view in Northern Ireland that networking is valuable for both learning and building international solidarity, which participants felt is essential in the current global context of increasingly inward focused policy and reduced interest in multilateral and global networks and structures.

There is, therefore, a clear message from this initial exploration of international networks for women peacebuilders, which is that networking is welcome and can significantly support women both in local contexts and in international advocacy, but that it must be adequately supported in order to be meaningful and sustainable. Sustaining networks, in turn, is vital as building trust and relationships takes time, and effective engagement and information sharing can only take place when participants feel confident and comfortable to participate; the initial phase is particularly important to facilitate understanding of different cultural backgrounds and contexts, and to ensure that women whose first language is not English and who may work through interpreters can engage fully. The overarching message is that over time, investment in networks can significantly contribute to building mutual understanding and supporting the global women, peace and security (WPS) agenda as well as wider women's movement. In a global context of increasing backlash to equality and human rights, this can play a role in bringing women across the globe together, which can contribute to new ways of keeping the WPS agenda

alive, and strengthen women's voices in peacebuilding and decision making more widely.

2. METHODOLOGY

This project consisted of three interconnected strands:

1) Developing an overview of the engagement of women in Northern Ireland in international networks to date

2) Exploring interest in international networking in Northern Ireland

3) Exploring interest in networking in UK NAP priority countries and bringing women peacebuilders from the three participant countries together to explore the overall interest in networking, including potential priorities and relevant formats

Strand 1 was commissioned as an independent piece of research and was developed by Dr Avila Kilmurray through the Social Change Initiative. This research consisted of desk based document overview and interviews with key stakeholders in Northern Ireland in November 2024 – February 2025, and provides an overview of how women in Northern Ireland have engaged with international networks in the period 1994-2024. The research has been published separately, as a stand alone resource to inform future development of international engagement, and as a context and evidence base for this report.

Engagement with women peacebuilders in Northern Ireland was undertaken through two workshops in January 2025, one held in person in Belfast and the other online, to facilitate regional participation. In total 14 women took part in the in person workshop, while the online workshop had 27 participants. The workshops were based on invitations to women peacebuilders working across strategic, regional and grassroots settings, using a snowballing technique and engaging Women's Platform members and partners in identifying relevant individuals. The invitation only approach was identified as appropriate in order to keep workshops focused and group sizes manageable to support inclusive discussions.

The workshops in Northern Ireland focused on exploring the current context of women and women's organisations in Northern Ireland, as a basis for identifying networks participants are currently involved in, and exploring the potential of strengthened international networking. This approach informed workshops held in Iraq and Colombia, to ensure broad internal consistency. Workshops in Ir   aq and Colombia were held as virtual sessions in February, supported by translation to ensure all participants had equal opportunities to contribute to discussion.

A final shared workshop involving representatives for all three countries was held in late February as a virtual facilitated session, and focused on exploring potentially relevant formats for networking, as well as priorities for development of connections.

FINDINGS FROM WORKSHOPS IN NORTHERN IRELAND

The workshops in Northern Ireland were characterised by a strong interest in spaces for women to come together and share experiences, perspectives and learning. Participants in both the in person and online workshops described their experience of life in the current context as busy, driven and isolating; a striking finding was that virtually all participants in the in person workshop commented that they felt a strong sense of solidarity in that the experience of isolation is shared. Many participants noted they thought they were alone in feeling this way, and emphasised that networks of all kinds and at all levels are important to build connections and maintain commitment and energy in everyday life. This was reflected in the online workshop, which further highlighted that many women feel overlooked or ignored, for example in healthcare where women's perspective on their own condition is not always taken seriously, and in workplace and public space settings where catcalling and different forms of harassment remain common.

In both workshops, a conversation around women's experiences of life in Northern Ireland at present was used to build into more detailed conversations around networking, sharing experiences and learning. Feedback and evaluation of the event stressed that participants found this useful, and enabled them to connect their personal experiences with those of women in communities in Northern Ireland, as well as with the wider global context. There was extensive discussion around the specific challenges facing Northern Ireland, which include a difficult economic context leading to cuts in public services, an ongoing cost of living crisis particularly in lower income areas, and perceived low priority put on gender equality, which creates significant challenges for many women to engage in community and public life. Participants also reflected on increasing pressure in their working lives, with greater expectations coupled with increasingly stretched resources, which means that there is very little flexibility to take on new initiatives or engage with any additional activities. Many participants with long experience of engaging in community and peacebuilding noted that this is a significant development that can hold back change; in the past, investment of time engaging with people was a key mechanism for achieving change, and this has changed more than financial resourcing of women and peacebuilding work, which has always been limited.

The workshops also included an overview of networks participants are engaged in, at all levels from local neighbourhoods, towns and cities to UK and Ireland level and international level. This analysis identified a very dense and wide ranging field of local networks: most participants identified numerous local collaborative systems that they regularly engage with. These included sector or area specific working groups, sectoral networks, alliances focused on specific issues, and many others; however, very few were focused on women and peacebuilding, and most were coordinated by a specific organisation or body with a support structure in place to organise action. At UK/Ireland level, fewer networks were identified, and those highlighted were predominantly sector specific, driven or supported by bodies with a remit for all island or east-west networking. Two networks focused specifically on peacebuilding came to the fore, including the

Glencree Centre for Peace and Reconciliation, based in Ireland but working on an all island basis, and the Corrymeela Community, which is based in Northern Ireland and focuses on reconciliation and good relations at numerous level, but engages with peacebuilding on an international as well as local level. Participants stressed that strengthened networking on an all island, as well as east – west basis would be helpful, in order to create a wider perspective, share learning and build shared good practice.

Finally, the workshops identified that international networks are scarce, and most women involved in work on community and peacebuilding in its widest sense have few or no links to these networks, but would very much value an opportunity to build such links. Women's Platform was identified as an organisation acting as the link between the women's sector in Northern Ireland and the international level, and its work was commended for sharing news and good practice from international networks, but it was stressed that concrete participation in international networks is needed to meaningfully build relationships, understanding and longer term shared practice. Online networking since Covid-19, including webinars organised by organisations including Glencree and Women's Platform, has provided some access to international networks; however, participants emphasised that direct engagement and in person participation in networks remains essential for building relationships and shared understanding. This is currently very challenging in a context of limited resources particularly in the community and voluntary sector, which is made more difficult by the fact that most funders explicitly exclude travel off the island as part of grant conditions. As highlighted above, participants also stressed that workers in most organisations have no time or capacity for taking on further responsibilities, and therefore careful consideration of what strengthened networking looks like is needed, to ensure women involved in peacebuilding at all levels can participate and access the valuable learning, perspectives and relationships on offer.

Some concrete suggestions on what networking could look like included:

- *Build relationships online prior to physically meeting*
- *Fully resource future travel plus expenses – it shouldn't cost peacebuilders to attend/engage*

Needed for International networking:

- *Resources*
- *Accessibility, including tackling digital exclusion for marginalised*
- *Solidarity with common and differing experiences of women in different conflict + post conflict settings*
- *Focus + streamlining resources + efforts to where need is greatest – which communities of women are not represented, which countries have most urgent issues etc*
- *Resourcing!*
- *Childcare*
- *Funding to travel, relationship building is hard to do online!*
- *Resources for locally and globally! If doing global work, what do we drop*

- *Properly resourced, think big, outside the box, engage with community – conversation first*

In conclusion, the findings from women involved in peacebuilding in Northern Ireland stress that international networking is important and valuable, and could significantly contribute to building local good practice, as well as build participants' personal networks, skills and understanding of women's experiences in other (post)conflict regions. Participants also felt that strengthened networking could bring new perspectives that can support innovation and help women in communities in Northern Ireland build a better understanding of the experiences of women in other (post)conflict regions. This was felt to be vital in the current local and global context, as a mechanism to maintain and build solidarity, and explore ways to maintain multilateral networks and structures, in order to effectively implement the WPS agenda. However, it was repeatedly stressed that meaningful networking must be adequately supported and resourced, as this is the only way to ensure women in Northern Ireland can participate in such networks. Resourcing does not need to be significant, but it does need to be sustained, and it was proposed that supporting a specific networking focal point, for example a local organisation with close connections to the women's sector as well as grassroots groups, would be a potentially very effective mechanism to build networks and identify ways to meaningfully share and cascade learning across women's networks in Northern Ireland.
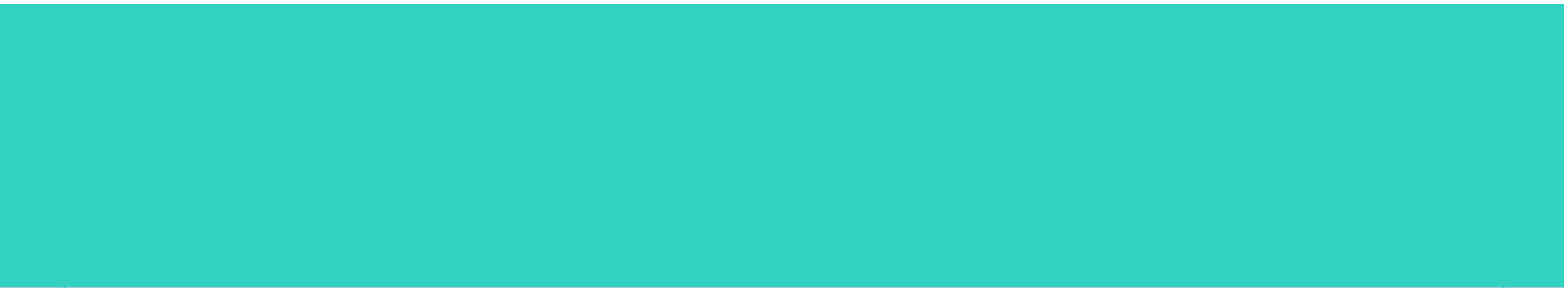
RECOMMENDATIONS FROM NORTHERN IRELAND WORKSHOPS

- Develop a clear model for what networking means and can look like; online engagement and cascading good practice through a focal point is a potentially very effective approach

- Ensure grassroots women and groups can be involved, to make sure networking is equitable and can reflect priorities of all women in Northern Ireland

- Identify a focal point for coordinating networking; the focal point must have close connections to the women's sector and grassroots groups to be inclusive

- Resource networking: women and women's organisations need financial and capacity resources to participate, and at least occasional in person engagement is vital to build mutual understanding, trust and relationships

Overall feedback from the workshops highlighted that participants welcomed the opportunity to share perspectives and ideas, and also showed that participants found the workshops well organised and facilitated; one evaluation form commented simply that the session was 'Epic!'. Analysis of participant background showed that the workshops engaged a balanced range of women from different community backgrounds and urban and rural backgrounds, but highlighted that younger women and minoritised groups are underrepresented in this area of work.

Comments from evaluation included:

- *Projects like this are important for networking, collaboration + solidarity*

- *This was just getting the discussion started. We could have spent a lot more time*

- *It was eye opening to hear of soe few cross border networks, especially that they're on the decline*

- *Very thought provoking and feels positive for the future*

- *Online post it tech would have allowed people to upload their networks to move workshop forward, I learned about new networks.*