

**WOMEN IN NORTHERN IRELAND, PEACEBUILDING AND
INTERNATIONAL NETWORKS:
COLLATING A HISTORY OF WOMEN'S ENGAGEMENT WITH
INTERNATIONAL PEACEBUILDING AND NETWORKS- 1995-2025**



**SOCIAL
CHANGE
INITIATIVE**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report was produced by Dr Avila Kilmurray for this project, and builds on document analysis, desk research and interviews with key stakeholders.

This Paper gathers together a history of how the Women's Sector in Northern Ireland, and individual women connected with it, both learned from their active engagement in peacebuilding locally and shared that learning with activists from other conflict-affected regions. It reflects on developments related to women and peacebuilding in Northern Ireland but also the importance of international developments, such as the Commission on the Status of Women, UNSCR 1325 and CEDAW in providing a framing for reflection and demands.

Much of the history to date has been fragmentary in nature, preserved in women's memories and filing cabinets. There are undoubtedly other stories to be told but it is hoped that this short document captures some of the many points of involvement. For ease of reading the material is presented in four time periods: (i) 1995-1998; (ii) 1999-2007; (iii) 2008-2017; (iv) 2028-2024.

However, activists in the Women's Sector in Northern Ireland had long been influenced by, and engaged with, international developments elsewhere, particularly in contested societies. They were acutely aware that in situations of protracted violent conflict, 'women's issues' are often treated as secondary considerations and/or remain invisible in terms of policy. Thus, voice and presence are important.

Reflecting on aspects of international engagement there are a number of suggestions contained in the concluding recommendations. These include –

SUGGESTED DEVELOPMENTS WITHIN THE WOMEN'S SECTOR IN NORTHERN IRELAND:

If information and insights on peacebuilding, drawn from the Northern Ireland peace process, are to be shared effectively this requires a mix of knowledge and skills – including knowledge of aspects of peacebuilding; facilitation skills and the ability to relate appropriately to activists in other situations of conflict and post-conflict developments.

- Some of the most effective peacebuilding sharing occurs when women come together from a range of perspectives and experiences. Academics, community-based activists and issue-based organisations (such as those focusing on victims/survivors; ex-combatants; mediation, etc.) should work collaboratively in developing programmes for external use.
- Due attention needs to be paid to a gender analysis of aspects of peacebuilding in Northern Ireland, while these do exist, they are rarely brought together in an accessible format or as an easily identifiable resource.

- Peacebuilding is ongoing in Northern Ireland and any sharing of information and approaches should be seen as an iterative process, particularly when supporting the participation of younger women and responding to inter-generational trauma and legacy issues.
- It is important that there are adequate on-going resources to enable women from Northern Ireland to participate and input into international forums, such as the annual Commission on the Status of Women meetings, to ensure that relationships can be built and information shared in a consistent manner. Measures must be in place to ensure that representatives of the Women's Sector in Northern Ireland remain abreast of international resolutions and debates.

INCREASED EFFECTIVENESS IN SHARING LEARNING INTERNATIONALLY:

- Offering information sharing, capacity-building and input into Study Visits requires time, preparation and resourcing. While a small number of individuals and peace organisations have developed paid consultancies, in most cases activists in the Women's Sector provide their time free and on-call, making it difficult to undertake the necessary research and preparatory work. A small hub could be identified and resourced to support essential preparatory and follow-up work.
- Linking the sharing of peacebuilding insights with international instruments such as CEDAW and UNSCR 1325 offers a framing that is very effective. Experience has shown, however, that translating these instruments into commonplace language is essential to develop inclusive approaches. These could usefully be made available in a range of languages.
- Information about points of contact within both the Irish and British government departments and embassies, as well as within relevant INGOs and other agencies should be shared to allow a broader networking approach.
- There should be greater reflection and understanding of which are the most appropriate approaches for sharing insights with international audiences – (i) Analytical-Technical approach whereby insights from the peace process are used to enhance understanding of peacemaking processes; (ii) Political-strategic approach which draws on the political/policy aspects of conflict transformation; or (iii) Educative-psychological approaches which seek to influence stakeholders from other conflict environments.ⁱ While sometimes programmes can contain a mix of these elements, it helps if there is a clarity about what is being shared, why and how.
- Information about sources of information and networking should be easily accessible and available to the broader women's peacebuilding sectors. Linkages with Women, Peace and Security and broader peacebuilding hubs in university settings should be factored into this networking.

- The potential impact of an international exchange of insights from a women's perspective and experience of peacebuilding in Northern Ireland could be augmented by being developed in a strategic manner – allowing for consistent work, that might draw on different strands within the Women's Sector, over an extended period. While one-off interventions can be useful in sharing lessons learnt, systemic engagement is undoubtedly more effective.

INTRODUCTION

This paper will focus on:

1. Providing an overview of how women in Northern Ireland have engaged with peacebuilding at an international level over the last three decades.
2. Outlining how women's roles in the peacebuilding process in Northern Ireland, and specifically the process that led to the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement, have been documented and shared internationally to date; and
3. How women peacebuilders in Northern Ireland currently engage internationally – both relating to international instruments such as UNSCR1325 and CEDAW, as well as sharing their insights with activists from other conflict environments.

It will conclude with setting out recommendations as to how information sharing could evolve to maximise benefits.

The context for the paper includes both developments relating to women and peacebuilding internationally, as well as developments within Northern Ireland. These developments will be considered over a timeline consisting of four phases: (i) Phase 1 – 1995-1998; Phase 2 – 1999-2007; Phase 3 – 2008-2017; and Phase 4 – 2018- 2024.

While the main emphasis will be on the Women's Sector, which consists of a variety of local groups and regional organisations, it is recognised that women are not a homogeneous category when it comes to personal views, experiences and allegiances. Women are found in all socio-economic classes, political parties and occupations. However, notwithstanding this there are issues that relate primarily to women's experience that are important when considering peacebuilding and post-conflict reconstruction. The Northern Ireland Women's Rights Movement, established in 1975, had long held an internationalist perspective, hosting women from conflict contexts such as South Africa and Central America, to contribute to discussion and organising regular 'unity meetings' to bring women holding different political positions together to engage in often combative discussion. For more local community-based women's groups the experience was somewhat different. Rooney & Ward noted in their report on 'Women, Community and Politics in Northern Ireland: A Research Project with an Action Outcome' as early as 1992 – *'There is a confusion around what politics is and what women's issues are and there is general agreement that the latter is somehow excluded from the former.'*ⁱⁱ While times have changed, there was an echo of this conclusion in a comment from a community-based woman peacebuilder in December 2024 – *'We all launder what we say!'* Arguably this sense of tentativeness is a legacy of a post-conflict society.

An early focus of organisations in the Women's Sector was on Europe. The Northern Ireland European Women's Platform (NIWEP) was actively involved in negotiating UK representation in the European Women's Lobby (EWL) in the late 1980's, ensuring the adoption of a four nations approach – England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland – through the then UK Joint

Committee on Women. The Northern Ireland representation was drawn from Women's Aid, Women's Forum and Women's Education Project (now Women's Resource & Development Agency – WRDA). Europe was to remain an important dimension both in terms of policy exchange and influence.

WOMEN AND PEACEBUILDING IN THE 1990'S

The UN 4th World Conference on Women was held in Beijing in September 1995. The biggest global policy-making body for women – Commission on the Status of Women – served as the preparatory body for the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women. A delegation of women, marshalled by Bronagh Hinds from NIWEP, travelled from Northern Ireland to China to participate in the NGO Forum. One of the delegation, Margaret Logue from the Derry Women's Centre, later spoke about the links between what she experienced in Beijing and the demand for a women's presence in the Northern Ireland peace process that followed on the 1994 Republican and Loyalist paramilitary ceasefires. She had seen the global women's movement in action and found it inspiring.ⁱⁱⁱ For women emerging from the horrendous violence in Bosnia, there was a different experience as there was no woman involved in negotiating the Dayton Agreement in 1995.

The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action focused on 12 inter-related areas that included an emphasis on the empowerment and advancement of women on the basis of equality (para 12). A clear statement that women's rights are human rights (para 14), and the assertion that '*Local, national, regional and global peace is attainable and is inextricably linked with the advancement of women, who are a fundamental force for leadership, conflict resolution and the promotion of lasting peace at all levels.*'^{iv} The Beijing document made specific reference to CEDAW – Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women – an international convention adopted by the United Nations in 1979, and legally implemented in 1981. An earlier Convention on the Political Rights of Women had been drafted by the Commission on the Status of Women in 1947, but CEDAW was legally binding. The Commission on the Status of Women also had an important role in advising the UN Economic Social Council (ECOSOC).

The women from Northern Ireland who attended the UN 4th World Conference on Women issued a report that noted that: "*Women in Northern Ireland have been successful in working for development within their own communities and in solidarity with women from other communities throughout the conflict. They have campaigned on issues of equality, rights and justice. They have led peace movements springing from a concern for and affinity with victims of violence, and peace movements springing from a strong commitment to justice. They have created a space for dialogue and have successfully networked across the religious and political divide. In doing this, women have not seen themselves as pacifiers, but as agents for change.*" The majority of women making up the delegation were activists that worked within local communities and trade unions. Many of them had direct experience of the impact of the conflict in Northern Ireland.

The participation in the Beijing gathering came on a rich tapestry of women's involvement in international lesson-sharing that often focused on women with specific peace objectives (Peace People, Women Together, etc.) and the combination of a peace and women's rights agenda, as evidenced by the Northern Ireland Women's Rights Movement. Representatives of Women Together were invited participants in the Caux Initiatives of Change Foundation, which held annual meetings in Switzerland and involved participation by women from many different countries. Ann McCann and Perry Lambert, from Women Together, participated in a women's gathering entitled Creators for Peace, which offered space for dialogue and exchange for women from countries facing challenges.

THE FORMATION OF THE NORTHERN IRELAND WOMEN'S COALITION (NIWC)

The mid 1990's – 1996 – saw the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition (NIWC) established to contest the election that was being held for all-party peace talks. The decision to set up the Coalition was born out of frustration at the lack of women's representation in electoral politics in the region.^v It drew on discussion at a Women and Politics conference that had been held the year before (1995) and the failure of political parties to respond to lobbying by the Northern Ireland Women's European Platform for a greater representation of women in political party decision-making.^{vi}

In the May 1996 election, the NIWC secured sufficient votes to become the ninth party out of the total of ten entitled to attend the peace talks held in Belfast. It was entitled to send two delegates to the multi-party talks as well as to the Northern Ireland Forum for Political Dialogue and Understanding that ran in parallel with the talks. A local newspaper printed the headline 'Hen Party comes Home to Roost'. However, the journalist who wrote the article did note the shock that the new women's political party had outpolled several parties that had been in existence for decades. The NIWC Manifesto declared: *'a vote for the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition is a vote for the equal right of women to be involved in that political discussion'*. Its declared position on a range of issues was underpinned by a call for the maintenance and re-instatement of ceasefires that had initially been called in Autumn 1994, but that was fractured by a breakdown in the IRA ceasefire in February 1996. The formation and election of the NIWC attracted considerable international interest, although it was treated with more than a smidgeon of scepticism and ridicule by many locally based traditional parties. In a conference paper in 1998, Carmel Roulston posed an interesting proposition: *'While women's development is regarded as essential for community development in general, it appears often to be seen as a means of allowing women to be seen as a "resource", an influence for stability, rather than to encourage women to participate on equal terms in the formulation of goals and strategies for the community'*.^{vii}

WOMEN AND PEACEBUILDING WITHIN THE COMMUNITY

As indicated in the statement prepared by the women attending the 1995 Beijing gathering from Northern Ireland, women had long been active in various aspects of peacebuilding, working both within and between communities. There was, however, a tendency to distinguish between politics with a small ‘p’ and politics with a capital ‘P’ – the former being focused on socio-economic issues at a local level in comparison to the capital ‘P’ of electoral politics. For those working at local community level, such as the Women’s Information Day organisation which brought women together on a regular basis across the community divide, there was an intentional emphasis on issues that women held in common, rather than the constitutional issues that were likely to divide them along traditional communal lines.

It was representatives from a number of community-based Women’s Centres that participated in an international project, coordinated by British feminist, Cynthia Cockburn in the mid 1990’s. Women were brought together from Northern Ireland, Israel, Palestine and Bosnia Hercegovina to meet, as part of a Women Building Bridges project in 1996, in order to share their experience of working in conflict situations and to examine methods for building democratic practice out of difference. Follow up exchange visits were organised between Bosnia and Belfast and Israel and Belfast. Activists from the Women’s Support Network, Windsor Women’s Centre, Shankill Women’s Centre, Ballybeen Women’s Centre and Footprints Women’s Centres were involved. One participant (Gillian Gibson, Footprint Women’s Centre) recalled it as: *‘One of the most significant things to happen to me in my lifetime was to visit and travel though the beautiful and terrible landscape of Bosnia-Herzegovina (formally Yugoslavia) in July of last year. Just three years after the Dayton Agreement, Bosnia remains traumatised and numbed by a “hellish” war, the depths of which neither you nor I could ever fully understand, despite our experience of the last 30 years. . . For the four of us who travelled there, it has changed us completely.’*^{viii} Gillian was referring to learning drawn from her visit to the Medica Project working with female victims of torture and sexual violence in Zenica. Cockburn concluded that the participants in the Women Building Bridges project were engaged in ‘transversal politics’ – the notion that each participant in dialogue across difference brings with her a rooting in her own group identification, but at the same time tries to shift by putting herself in a situation of exchange with women who have a different group membership and identity.^{ix} The international exchange clearly helped the participants to look outwards rather than investing energy in the often internecine tensions experienced in the 1980s when conflicting nationalist/republican and unionist/loyalist narratives often proved divisive.

The community-based women’s movement – and the sector that it morphed into – received considerable financial support under the Special EU Support Programme for Peace & Reconciliation (PEACE 1), introduced in 1995 in direct response to the Northern Ireland peace process. Women were specifically mentioned under a PEACE 1 programme measure on labour

market participation, but the bulk of funding for women's projects was distributed under measure 4.1. (Developing Grassroots Capacities), managed by the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland (then Northern Ireland Voluntary Trust), over the period 1996-1999. This measure recognised the key role of women in community development both as a source of new leadership in communities, and more widely, in shaping social and economic regeneration. What this source of funding offered was space for project development and broader reflection. In addition to a cross-Border emphasis with the six border counties in the Republic of Ireland, there was also encouragement to engage with new ideas and inter-community networking. Although there was limited financial support for international networking, there was an enhanced awareness of the importance of European developments and learning gleaned from conferences and convenings that featured speakers from a range of post-conflict countries.

BUILDING INTERNATIONAL LINKS

Investment of time and effort in the European dimension had been maintained largely by the Northern Ireland Women's European Platform over the 1990's. The Platform build a relationship with the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) and applied for consultative status with the ECOSOC (UN Economic Social Council) which was approved in 1999. This afforded the organisation access to the annual CSW sessions which were held at the United Nations in New York for two weeks each March. The sessions monitored the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. When Kate McCullough went to New York to attend the annual CSW gathering, she recalled '*I learned so much. It was like opening the door to look out into the world instead of always looking inwards*'. The Platform would bring small numbers of women from Northern Ireland to attend future meetings, who were expert in the specific theme under discussion. Experience of organising fringe meetings to the main sessions enabled them to share the prepared statement of concerns from the Sector with representatives from some 191 countries.

Alongside this, organisations in the Women's Sector developed strong links with US representatives, including the then US Ambassador to Ireland, Jean Kennedy-Smith. Kennedy-Smith hosted a number of receptions for women involved in peacebuilding at her residence in Dublin during the early days of the peace process and maintained a strong connection with developments in the North. Women leaders in the Trade Union Movement, such as Inez McCormack, and those active in community-based work were regular points of contact.

The US dimension was strengthened when US First Lady, Hillary Rodham Clinton, made a point of recognising community-level work during her visit to Northern Ireland in 1995 with President Bill Clinton. Recalling her visit to meet Joyce McCartan, and women involved in the Women's Information Day group, she pointed out: '*When the work of peace permeates down to the kitchen table, the backyard, to the neighbourhood, around cups of tea, there's a much greater chance the agreement will hold. You cannot bring*

peace and security to people just by signing an agreement.^x Experience of the work of women involved in peacebuilding and civic life in Northern Ireland was to inform the programme of the US Vital Voices initiative established with the support of Hillary Clinton in 1997. This brought women from different conflict and post-conflict regions together for shared learning. A Northern Ireland Chapter of Vital Voices was set up, chaired by veteran trade unionist, Inez McCormack, and included local women from the NGO, community and business sectors, as well as from politics.

The US First Lady also became a champion of the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition, meeting the co-leaders, Monica McWilliams and Pearl Sagar, in the White House when they had been inadvertently overlooked in the lineup of Northern Ireland political party leaders meeting the President in 1997. Returning to Belfast to address a Women in Democracy conference in 1998, Hillary Clinton was forthright in her comments: *'If you listen you can hear the voices of women who withstood jeers and threats to make themselves heard in a political world once reserved primarily for men.'* Like the UK Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Mo Mowlam (appointed in 1997), both Hillary Clinton, and her Chief of Staff, Melanne Verveer, became champions for women engaged in various aspects of peacebuilding in Northern Ireland, opening doors for international networking and training. Both continued their involvement over the following decades.

Meanwhile, within the ongoing peace talks, chaired by Senator George Mitchell, the two co-leaders of the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition were the only two women who sat at the negotiating table as of right. Like the Coalition, several of the other elected parties had women in their negotiating teams but were led by men. The Coalition representatives argued strongly for the inclusion of civil society activists wherever possible and drew on regular meetings with Women's Groups and other civil society organisations for strategic issues and policy points to be included in the peace agreement.

The Good Friday (Belfast) Agreement concluded in April 1998 and ratified by referenda a month later, referred to the role of women at the insistence of the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition. A paragraph under the section on Rights, Safeguards and Equality of Opportunity stated the commitment to promote social inclusion, including, community development, and the advancement of women in public life.^{xi} The right of women to full and equal political participation was also specified under the section covering human rights. Although arguably honoured more in breach than in observation, this commitment pre-dated the 2000 United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security. It may have been prescient in that it led those negotiating the UN Resolution to draw on the experience of women activists in Northern Ireland and their role in negotiating the Good Friday Agreement.

WOMEN AND PEACEBUILDING – 1999-2007

Following the Good Friday Agreement in April 1998, the NIWC successfully contested the election to the NI Legislative Assembly that followed in June of that same year having worked hard to secure a 'yes' vote in the referendum that was held on the Agreement. The Coalition

stood 18 candidates and successfully returned two to the Assembly (Monica McWilliams and Jane Morrice). The manifesto focused on two main themes – that of women’s participation and socio-economic issues, fusing them with the core values of human rights, inclusion and equality. It also championed the concept of a Civic Forum that it had effectively argued into the Agreement to promote more participative politics. In all, 49 party candidates out of 296 were women, with 14 being elected to the 108-member Assembly (5 Sinn Féin, 3 SDLP, 2 NIWC, 2 UUP, and 1 each for the Alliance Party and the DUP). This constituted 12% of the legislature in 1998, but it is suggested that the contagion affect from that year onwards made other political parties consider putting more women candidates forward for seats in which they stood a chance of getting elected.’ Northern Ireland operated a constituency only based election system instead of the system in some countries, including Scotland, that adds on a list system in which women do better. The NIWC had advocated such a system at the peace talks but were defeated in this proposal by the traditional parties. International attention continued to focus on the Northern Ireland Women’s Coalition as a political anomaly, while an independent UK-based funder, the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust, maintained grant award support to Women into Politics – an initiative within the Women’s Sector working on a cross-party basis to get more women represented in political decision-making. Having contested a second Assembly election in 2003, the Coalition lost its two seats and took the decision to stand down three years later (2006), in the context of the dominant hegemony of the Republican/Nationalist and Unionist/Loyalist political divide. A reflection in 2015 suggested: *‘The journey of women peacebuilders in Northern Ireland highlights the success and struggle of securing women’s representation and advocating for gender-sensitive approaches to conflict resolution. . .The NIWC emerged as a beacon of hope. . .(but) Women must resort to grassroots and community-building efforts when left out of the formal processes. . .’*^{xii} There were 18 women elected to the Northern Ireland Assembly in 2003 (17%) with 25 women from the main five political parties standing as candidates compared with 142 men. In the 2007 election, 47 women contested seats out of a total of 257 candidates. This election returned the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and Sinn Féin as the largest parties – a situation that was to remain over subsequent years where the divide over the constitutional issue continued to dominate politics.

Meanwhile, the Civic Forum that had been called for by the Northern Ireland Women’s Coalition was established and operated as a consultative mechanism on social, economic and cultural issues from October 2000 to October 2002. It was stood down when the cross-community power-sharing government collapsed and was never re-established despite a promise from the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to review it in 2007. Of the 60 representatives on the Forum, drawn from ten different civic sectors, some 22 were women – mainly from the community and voluntary sector. There was no specific provision for representation from the Women’s Sector, despite the introduction of UNSCR 1325 in 2000. The concept of participative democracy was less than welcome

amongst DUP elected politicians, with Jim Wells, a DUP MLA, posing the question to the then First Minister, David Trimble, in February 2001: *'Will the First Minister accept that this is a scandalous waste of money, that this residential home for yes-men, place-women and failed politicians is a drain on the public purse?'*^{xiii} The NIWC had scanned other societies for models of participative democracy, but was less successful in convincing many traditional politicians of this model closer to home.

RELATING TO THE GLOBAL AND UNSCR 1325

Looking externally, the Northern Ireland Women's European Platform was represented by its staff member, Kate McCullough, at the Beijing + 5 meeting in New York in 2000. That same year changed the international context for women and peacebuilding, with the introduction of UNSCR 1325 on Women, Peace and Security. UNSCR 1325 was the first of several reinforcing resolutions that provided a framework to guide work on the promotion and protection of women in conflict and post-conflict situations. The UN Security Council adopted these to address its concern about: *'persistent obstacles to women's full involvement in the prevention and resolution of conflicts and their participation in post-conflict public life. It acknowledged that the marginalisation of women can delay or undermine the achievement of sustainable peace, security and reconciliation.'*^{xiv} The Resolution called for UN member states (and the UN itself) to (i) increase the number of women in decision making and their participation in conflict resolution and peacebuilding; (ii) protect women and girls in conflict and post-conflict situations, especially from gender-based violence; and (iii) adopt a gender perspective on peace-making, peace keeping and peacebuilding. Interestingly in an edited compilation of 15 chapters on *The Long Road to Peace in Northern Ireland: Peace Lectures from the Institute of Irish Studies in Liverpool University (Liverpool University 2002)*, apart from the editor, Marianne Elliott, there was no invited contribution from a woman, although a chapter by Senator Maurice Hayes did acknowledge the *'important contribution'* made by the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition.^{xv}

The early years of the new century, nevertheless, reflected a growing awareness amongst activists in Northern Ireland of women and peacebuilding initiatives on a global basis. A paper presented by Potter in 2004 referenced examples of women's organisations engaged in peacebuilding – the International Women's Peace Service (Palestine), Bat Shalom (Israel), Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (Geneva-based), Journee de la Femme et Paix (France), Iene za Mir (former Yugoslavia), Frauen fur den Frieden (Switzerland), Le Tre Ghinee (Italy), Kvinna till Kvinna (Sweden) Osterreichische Frauenfederation fur Weltfrieden (Austria), Follow the Women (Basque Country) and Association des Femmes pour les Initiatives de Paix (Mali).^{xvi} There had been ongoing links between individuals associated with the Women's Sector in Northern Ireland with WILPF and Kvinna till Kvinna, in addition to links with the USA-based Women Waging Peace, established in 1999 by Swanee Hunt to connect women in conflict areas to one another as *'policy shapers'*.^{xvii} A number of community-based women activists attended

gatherings of women from different countries brought together by Women Waging Peace (later to be known as Inclusive Security) in the United States and representatives of the Northern Ireland Women's European Platform continued to raise issues of peace, security and rights from Northern Ireland at meetings of the European Women's Lobby.

The Platform took the initiative in 2004/2005 to hold a '1325 On Trial' event in the Parliament Buildings in Stormont. The jury – activists from the community and voluntary sectors, political and academic life and trade unions – voted on the resolution: *'Have the United Kingdom Government, the Northern Ireland Executive and Northern Ireland Assembly (when in being) and Northern Ireland's political parties, demonstrated sufficient commitment to the implementation of Resolution 1325 in Northern Ireland, and in particular to those elements of the Resolution that have been highlighted here today?'* The verdict was a unanimous 'No'. The aspects that were examined included (i) participation of women in peace processes; (ii) gender training in peacekeeping operations; (iii) protection of women and girls and respect for their rights; and (iv) gender mainstreaming in the reporting and implementation systems of the UN relating to conflict, peace and security. Under peacebuilding it was argued that the lessons of past decades clearly demonstrated women's contribution to community development, to peace, to social justice and the necessity of securing gender parity in the political process, both in negotiations and in implementation.^{xviii}

Prior to this, women activists involved with Community Dialogue were part of a group of peacebuilding activists who engaged with the Stanford Centre on Conflict and Negotiation, sharing experience from Northern Ireland. Stanford was an established learning partner with Community Dialogue over several years, supporting development of approaches to dialogue and negotiation.

In Northern Ireland itself, arguably the roll-out of the European Union PEACE II programme (2000-2006) had more relevance to women's groups, organisations and initiatives than the fractured and intermittent operation of the Northern Ireland Assembly over the early years of the new decade. With a greater emphasis on training and employability given the focus of the European Structural Funds, the empowerment of women under Priority 1, Measure 5, of the PEACE II programme supported activities to improve women's access to the labour market. There was also a horizontal principle that spoke to the mainstreaming of equality of women and men which enabled the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland (as an Intermediary Funding Mechanism) to allocate PEACE II funds to grassroots women's work. Increasingly the focus of activists within the Women's Sector was on the 'bread and butter' issues closer to home rather than relating to international developments. Where women from Northern Ireland did engage with international contexts it was in response to invitations coming from other conflict regions to compare experiences on transitional justice and political decision-making. Monica McWilliams, then co-leader of the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition,

visited Israel and Palestine under the auspices of the US-based Project for Justice in Times of Transition in 2000 and acted as monitor for the Palestinian Presidential election for NDI (National Democratic Institute) and the Carter Center in 2005, as well as elections to the Palestinian Legislative Council in 2006. In 2001 she had travelled to Colombia to share her experience of the negotiation of the Good Friday Agreement.

Bronagh Hinds established DemocraShe in 2000. This was set up – again drawing on her experiences as both a strategist with the NIWC and a civil society activist – to promote the advancement of women in public and political life, offering skills in public speaking, campaign building and electoral strategies. It was launched in Stormont and was to see 80 women from Northern Ireland travelling for training to the USA where DemocraShe was championed by two women – Maureen Murray, a Democratic Party supporter (and founder of Emily’s List) and Alexandra Lange, associated with the Republican Party. An US-based Northern Ireland Women’s Initiative (NIWI) was set up to underpin the work. Reflecting on the barriers to women’s political participation in Northern Ireland, Hinds noted: *‘The problem wasn’t just about sexism, it was around power. Greater female representation meant that power would have to be shared out and that meant people having to relinquish power.’*^{xix} A sizable proportion of women elected to the Northern Ireland Assembly availed of the training on offer, including the links to the US experience.

The St. Andrew’s Agreement, concluded in 2006, proposed that the NIA be re-established in 2007 following a period of dissolution from 2003. This Agreement made no reference to women, although it did provide for the establishment of an independent North/South Consultative Forum to be representative of civil society. To date this has not been established.

APPLYING UNSCR 1325: 2008-2017

Devolved governance in Northern Ireland settled over the period 2008-2017, in a form of power-sharing premised on the inclusion of all significant communal groups in government – comprising proportional representation with a mutual veto on matters of perceived critical importance. This period saw the first woman to be appointed as First Minister, Arlene Foster, MLA, (DUP) in 2016. It was also marked by the United Kingdom Brexit vote that year, which had major consequences of an unsettling nature for the region.

Internationally, the period saw the tenth (2010) and the fifteenth (2015) review of UNSCR 1325. Speaking in 2010, the UN Secretary General recognised *‘The ability of women to contribute to sustainable peace and the obstacles they face in attempting to do so requires an approach to peacebuilding that goes beyond restoring the status quo ante.’*^{xx} Two years later (2012) Ban-Ki Moon reported: *‘I remain concerned about the continued slow progress in women’s participation and representation in peace talks, in the inclusion of provisions for promoting women’s and girls’ rights in peace agreements and in increasing women’s representation in elected and appointed posts; the persistence of*

serious protection gaps, obstacles to women’s and girls’ access to justice and signs of the weakening of women’s rights in some contexts; and the slow change in the share of budgets allocated to women’s empowerment and gender equality in post conflict contexts.^{xxi} A study carried out in 2008 highlighted, following a review of 33 peace negotiations, that only 4% benefited from the participation of women – with 11 out of 280 individuals involved being women.^{xxii} Six common obstacles were identified, which arguably still pertained in Northern Ireland – (i) Domestic responsibilities; (ii) Prevailing cultural attitudes; (iii) Lack of support from family; (iv) Lack of confidence; (v) Lack of finance; and (vi) Lack of support from political parties. In contrast to this, qualitative analysis of 181 Peace Agreements signed between 1989 and 2011 showed that those peace agreements that had included women as signatories, witnesses, mediators and/or negotiators demonstrated a 20% increase in probability of lasting at least for two years and a 35% probability of lasting fifteen years.^{xxiii}

UNSCR 1325 had been strengthened by a slew of additional resolutions over the fifteen-year period 2000-2015:

Resolution	Year	Focus
1325	2000	International Participation, Protection, Prevention, Relief & Recovery
1820	2008	Sexual Violence
1888	2009	Sexual Violence
1889	2009	Participation
1960	2010	Sexual Violence
2106	2013	Sexual Violence & Victims
2122	2013	Participation and Women’s Leadership
2422	2015	Women’s Role in Countering Violent Extremism

The emphasis on women as victims was pointed out in comparison to women as agents of change. In addition to this, UN Women argued in 2015 (fifteenth anniversary of UNSCR 1325): *‘There remains a crippling gap between the ambition of our commitments and actual political and financial support.’*^{xxiv} Two years earlier (2013) CEDAW had adopted General Resolution 30 on women in conflict prevention, conflict and post-conflict situations, providing state parties with guidance on compliance with CEDAW obligations.

IRISH GOVERNMENT AND UK ATTENTION TO WOMEN, PEACE AND SECURITY

Closer to home, the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs (DFAT) established a Conflict Resolution Unit in 2007, with an important remit of lesson sharing. It was recognised that Northern Ireland was a leading site of experiential, interactive study trips related to conflict and peace: *‘It is clear from our own experience that international involvement and example can play a useful role. . .in bolstering the will to change and take risks.’*^{xxv} In

May 2012, then Táiniste, Eamon Gilmore, welcomed delegates from regions covered by the OSCE to Dublin Castle to examine the Northern Ireland peace process as a case study for possible relevance to conflict resolution efforts elsewhere. In practice, however, the emphasis was largely on exchanges with political party representatives from Northern Ireland. David Mitchell noted that Sinn Féin speakers had been in the Basque Country, Colombia, Israel, Palestine, Philippines, Sri Lanka and Turkey; although the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition: *'still attracted widespread global interest.'* Some years earlier (2008) the Irish Minister for Foreign Affairs had appointed Baroness Nuala O'Loan (previous Northern Ireland Police Ombudsman – 1999-2007) as Ireland's Special Envoy on UNSCR 1325. She visited Timor-Leste on several occasions, whilst a supportive trans-learning initiative was put in place between Ireland, Timor-Leste and Liberia. The implementation of this was facilitated by Bronagh Hinds (Northern Ireland) Aisling Swaine and Caroline McCamley (Republic of Ireland) under a contract with DemocraShe. Three learning conferences were organised - in Belfast (2009), Liberia and Timor-Leste.

In Northern Ireland there was some official policy interest shown in CEDAW after a report from that Commission in 2008. Bronagh Hinds, Ann-Marie Gray and Liz Law were asked to provide training to policymakers about the implications of CEDAW reporting processes. Activists from various organisations within the Women's Sector were able to relate to officials in the various government departments that they related to, resulting in the involvement of officials from the Department of Agriculture, Department of Justice, The Executive Office and the then Department of Employment & Learning. However, the UK 8th Periodic Report (2011-2017) to CEDAW made scant reference to Northern Ireland, given that the devolved Assembly had recently collapsed. Under para 70 on Women, Peace & Security National Action Plan – Northern Ireland – it was stated: *'There are no plans to integrate provisions relating to the implementation of UNSCR 1325 in Northern Ireland into the UK NAP. Nevertheless, some aspects of UNSCR 1325, such as women's participation in peacebuilding and political processes are relevant to all states. UK Government will continue to work with all devolved governments towards increasing the representation of women, not only in Northern Ireland, but across the whole of the UK, in public and political life.'*^{xxvi} In short, there was a failure to either recognise or act on Northern Ireland's conflict and post-conflict experience despite the fact that the UK Government had confirmed in 2007 that it was committed to implementing 'the principles' of UNSCR1325 in Northern Ireland.

Representatives of the Northern Ireland Women's European Platform continued to lobby for specific attention to the position of women in Northern Ireland (including the relevance of UNSCR 1325) raising this through the UK Women's National Commission in 2009, the year before funding for the Commission itself was discontinued by government. The idea of a specific inquiry into Northern Ireland was taken up by the Westminster All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG), working with the Northern Ireland Assembly All-Party Group. This resulted in submissions and a hearing in 2014. The Northern Ireland Women's European Platform had

taken on the role as secretariat to the Northern Ireland All-Party Group on UNSCR 1325, Women, Peace and Security, under the Chairpersonship of DUP MLA, Paula Bradley, in 2011. Hosting the Westminster APPG, a report was compiled and published which focused on Gender Equality; Women and Electoral Politics; Women's Contribution to Local Communities; Women and Decision-Making; and Violence against Women.^{xxvii} A list of organisations from the Women's Sector that provided evidence was included, with a note that there was no representation from the OFMDFM (Office of First Minister/Deputy First Minister) Equality Unit available. The Northern Ireland All Party Group also made a submission to the Irish NAP that was being developed.

The first Irish Women, Peace & Security National Action Plan was drafted for 2011-2014, with a second NAP covering the period 2015-2018. The plan was described as a 'living document' that encompassed developments in Northern Ireland. The Department of Foreign Affairs contracted Bronagh Hinds and Karen McMinn (both from the Women's Sector in Northern Ireland) to undertake consultation and review. The Irish NAP reflected on the four UNSCR 1325 themes – (a) Prevention; (b) Participation; (c) Protection; and (d) Relief and Recovery – while adding a fifth theme (e) Promotion of UNSCR 1325 in international, regional and national arenas. Hinds & McMinn undertook a Mid-Term Progress Report and suggested: *'Uniquely Ireland's NAP has inward and outward looking dimensions. Overseas and in international arenas is where the NAP has been most useful in taking action to bring about concrete changes to the lives of women and girls. . . There is room to develop Ireland-Northern Ireland dimensions across pillars, which can be done while taking account of jurisdictional focus.'*^{xxviii} Reference was made to the DFA Fund for Reconciliation support for Women's Sector initiatives (13 projects) in Northern Ireland which included a conference organised in 2012 by Hanna's House on 'Delivering Women, Peace and Security', as well as the DFA Anglo-Irish Division hosting a meeting in Dublin where representatives of the Northern Ireland Women's European Platform met with Michelle Bachelet, then Executive Director of UN Women.

USING EU PEACE FUNDS TO APPLY A UNSCR 1325 FRAMING

The Irish NAP also noted its influence on the development of the EU PEACE III (2007-2013) programme (stated aim to reinforce progress towards a peaceful and stable society and promote reconciliation). One aspect of PEACE III funding, managed by the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland, supported a number of initiatives dealing with the legacy of the past. The Women's Resource & Development Agency (WRDA) developed a Women in Conflict project which was based on the understanding that women have distinctive and diverse experiences of conflict, including those associated with organising and sustaining family life. Another funded project – Towards Understanding and Healing 'Journeys Out' project – linked in with the International Leadership Institute in Jordan and visited the Holocaust Museum on Israel, meeting with activists from South Africa, Sri Lanka and the Middle East. One of the recommendations from a commissioned evaluation of the work undertaken, concluded: *'Whilst acknowledging key differences, the use of international examples and experiences of other societies' efforts to deal with*

the past is often a key resource in the management of controversial and sensitive subjects. South Africa is not the only example of such efforts.^{xxix}

Alongside this, the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland drew together a partnership of WRDA, the National Women's Council of Ireland and the Foundations for Peace Network to submit a project on 'Developing and Applying Women, Peace and Security in Northern Ireland'. This was funded under PEACE III over the period 2013/2014. A Strategic Guide and Toolkit was drafted informed by consultations with some 800 community-based women, meeting on a cross-border basis. Discussions were conducted around the four pillars of UNSCR 1325 – Prevention; Participation and Representation; Protection and Security; and Recovery, Relief and Rehabilitation – with the terminology being shared in everyday language. The women came forward with a set of recommendations under each pillar. The Strategic Guide and Toolkit was drafted by Bronagh Hinds and Debbie Donnelly on the basis of what the women said but also interviews with officials from the Northern Ireland Government departments and non-departmental public bodies. The international exchange dimension was provided by the members of the Foundations for Peace Network, comprised of locally-grounded foundations in a range of contested societies - India, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Colombia, Indonesia, Mexico, Israel, Palestine, Serbia, Bangladesh and Georgia, in addition to Northern Ireland.^{xxx} The project pack was launched at a 'No Peace without Women' conference in Belfast in 2014, when learning was shared by Kate McCullough (NIWEP) on the value of UNSCR 1325 for women's representation in post-conflict Rwanda.

DRAWING LEARNING FROM NORTHERN IRELAND

Several women from Northern Ireland, including those involved with Community Dialogue and Women into Politics, were involved in international convenings hosted by Women Without Borders in 2009. The organisation, based in Austria, had themselves visited Northern Ireland and held the objective of empowering women from conflict areas to take leadership in peacebuilding. Exchange concerning the power of storytelling and dialogue was shared with women from Israel/Palestine, Pakistan, India, Yemen and Indonesia. This was followed up by Ann Carr (Community Dialogue) being invited to lead a storytelling/relationship workshop in Mumbai, India, with women that had survived violence locally.

Women from Northern Ireland also participated in a Women Waging Peace Colloquium organised by Swanee Hunt in Harvard University (USA) in 2013. They exchanged strategies and issues with women from Afghanistan, Iraq, Colombia, South Africa, Rwanda and Kosovo. Belfast mediator, Mary Montague, was a founding member of the Women Waging Peace Network, having been a co-founder locally of the mediation organisation, Tides. As a mediator, Montague travelled extensively, including to the Balkans, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Sudan. She was a proponent of 'quiet conversations' and recalled: *'When speaking to people abroad I assure them that we haven't necessarily*

done everything right, but this is what we have learned . . . This was described as the mediative technique of showing rather than telling. Mary was a member of Mediation Beyond Borders – being one of a number of women who came through Mediation NI, which itself had an early international calling card.^{xxxix} Other women from Northern Ireland became members of the Commonwealth Women Mediators' Network.

The international contacts and role of individual women from Northern Ireland continued to be important, most often connected to previous profile with the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition. Monica McWilliams was invited by the INGO, Inclusive Security (directed by Swanee Hunt and previously known as Women Waging Peace) to address the first ever hearing on the role of women in peace and security at the US House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs in 2016, while the same years attending meetings with Colombian government and FARC representatives in Bogota who were working to get a Gender Sub-Committee established at the peace talks on Havana. Victoria Sandino (FARC) told her: *'We saw how you have made your voices heard and we wanted to do the same.'*^{xxxix} Monica then joined a delegation from Northern Ireland visiting Mujeres Tejedoras de Vida (Women Weavers of Life) in Putumayo, on the Colombian/Ecuadorian border – a visit supported by the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs. She was also engaged in peacebuilding work with Syrian women supported through NDI and IRI based in Washington DC, working alongside locally based NGO's, including Civil Society for Justice and Democracy in Syria and Tastakel, a grass-roots women's organisation of Syrian women activists over a twelve-year period. Alongside this she visited women in Gulu (Northern Uganda) and Southern Sudan, working with the Irish aid agencies, Trocaire and Concern. Other women activists from Northern Ireland also combined knowledge of peacebuilding and the humanitarian sector; one such activist, Eithne McNulty, had previous involvement in the NIWC negotiation team for the Good Friday Agreement.

Bronagh Hinds developed a consultancy that saw her working with women in Ukraine (with WILPF), South Korea (with the Northeast Asian Women's Peace Forum), Iraq (with the Westminster Foundation for Democracy and UN Women), in Uganda (on a Gender Justice Initiative) and in Liberia, on a cross-national learning project drawing from Northern Ireland and Timor Leste (supported by the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs). She was also involved, over an extended period, in facilitating capacity-building with Syrian women, working to support a Syrian Women's Initiative for Peace & Democracy (with women from both the diaspora and still living in Syria) from 2013, and taking on the role of Special Advisor to the UN Special Envoy to Syria and UN Women to support the development of the Syrian Women's Advisory Board, which included Syrian women from a range of different political perspectives, meeting in Geneva. Bronagh's work on women, peace and security in relation to Syria, involved sessions in Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon, as well as Geneva, over the period 2013-2019. Meanwhile, another NIWC advisor, Kate Fearon, followed a career path which included work for the Office of the High

Representative in Bosnia & Herzegovina, for the International Civilian Representative in Kosovo, for the Provincial Reconstruction Team in Helmand Province, Afghanistan, for the EU Monitoring Mission in Georgia, as well as working on the rule of law and elections in Sudan. She currently directs work for OSCE on conflict prevention, overseeing the South-Eastern Europe, South Caucasus, Central Asia and Eastern European desks.

Individual women with direct experience of the negotiation of the Good Friday Agreement continued to share their insights with activists in other conflict areas. A previous leader of the Progressive Unionist Party (Dawn Purvis) contributed to work with women in Southern Ukraine in 2014, hosted by WILPF. Other individual NIWC veterans contributed to discussions with women activists in Southern Thailand, Mexico, Colombia and Ukraine, whilst Bronagh Hinds's consultancy work involved her in working in Yemen, Afghanistan and Colombia alongside her ongoing commitment to continuing to work with Syrian women.

The other career path that was noticeable in relation to women and peacebuilding was academia. Aisling Swaine published a paper in the Washington DC Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security (2011) '*Transition or Transformation? An Analysis of Before, During and Post-Conflict Violence against Women in Northern Ireland, Liberia and Timor Leste*'. Fionnuala Ní Aolain, Christine Bell, Catherine O'Rourke, Louise Mallender, Carmel Roulston, Margaret Ward and many others drew on Northern Ireland to explore gender and women's rights in the context of war and peace. Eilish Rooney and Joanna McMinn (Ulster University) focused on a series of initiatives engendering Transitional Justice and peacebuilding from a community perspective. Monica McWilliams and Avila Kilmurray also co-authored papers on the role of women and peacebuilding for several academic outlets. The literature that shared learning from Northern Ireland with an international audience was an expanding field, accompanied by academic exchanges.

APPLYING THE GLOBAL TO THE LOCAL

In 2015 a report was published in Belfast by the Legacy Gender Integration Group^{xxxiii} in response to the '*sustained exclusion of women from dealing with the legacy of the past*'. Specific reference was made to the Stormont House Agreement (2014) which had recently been concluded. The 10 principles outlined brought together women academics and local peacebuilding practitioners. The final recommendation called for the crafting of bottom-up local responses that draw on international good practice. Both CEDAW General Recommendation Number 30 and the Women, Peace and Security resolutions were referenced, as was the Nairobi Declaration on Women's and Girls' Right to a Remedy and Reparation. Reference was also made to a report issued by victim/survivor organisation, Relatives for Justice – '*Dealing with the Past: Where are the Women?*' which cited the importance of international conventions. The failure of the UK National Action Plan on UNSCR 1325 to apply the resolution to women's experience in Northern Ireland was noted as a matter of concern.

In November 2015, the Fresh Start Agreement was published, building on the previous Stormont House Agreement (2014). There was one mention of women in para 69, echoing the Good Friday Agreement commitment for the representation of women in public life. There was also provision for a ‘Compact Civic Advisory Panel’, but unlike issues of ending paramilitarism; making provisions for public expenditure; and addressing Flags, Identity, Culture & traditions (FICT), there were no action plans attached for these commitments. The Agreement also reduced the members of the legislature from 108 to 90, thus making it difficult for smaller parties to achieve representation in the Stormont Assembly. The Fresh Start Panel report addressed the issue of the disbandment of paramilitary organisations and the establishment of a subsequent Independent Reporting Commission (IRC) which recommended that a programme entitled Women in Communities in Transition be established by the Department of Communities which has worked through various iterations from 2016 on (with one woman, Monica McWilliams being appointed to the Commission Panel).

A report on Women in Politics, published after hearings and study visits by the Stormont Assembly and Executive Review Committee in February 2015, contained a number of recommendations to enhance the participation and representation of women in politics in Northern Ireland. It did not, however, overly consider the implications of a post-conflict society. Whether this report prompted government departments in Northern Ireland to be mindful of these issues, 2015/2016 saw several departments providing funding to allow individual women from the Women’s Sector to attend the annual Commission on the Status of Women meetings in New York. This three-year investment petered out with the collapse of the Assembly in 2017.

There was little indication of a Northern Ireland input into global developments such as the Informal Expert Group on Women, Peace and Security that had been established in February 2016, following recommendations in the 2015 Global Study on Women, Peace and Security and commitments made in UN Resolution 2242 (2015), nor in the Women, Peace & Security Focal Point Network launched in September 2016 by Spain, Canada, Chile, Japan, Namibia and UAE, with the aim of meeting biannually to strengthen the Women, Peace & Security learning exchanges. Reference was made, however, to the impact of women in the Northern Ireland peace process in a research paper prepared for Inclusive Peace & Transition/UN Women in April 2016 – Making Women Count:- Not Just Counting Women: Assessing Women’s Inclusion and Influence on Peace Negotiations’^{xxxiv}

DEVELOPMENTS OVER RECENT YEARS: 2018-2024

Two Irish strategies were important for the Women’s Sector in Northern Ireland – the 3rd Irish National Action Plan (2019-24) and the Ireland Fund for Reconciliation 2021-24. Three representatives from Northern Ireland (Emma Johnson, Mary Montague and Ruth Taillon) were included on the working group for the NAP, which identified Northern

Ireland, Israel/Palestine, Liberia. Sierra Leone, South Africa and Zimbabwe as key geographical areas for humanitarian, peacebuilding and development aid priorities. The vision was set out for the NAP as gender equality, empowerment and the guarantee of rights for all women and girls in and from conflict-affected contexts. An accompanying Action Plan (Outcome 2.3) specified that the empowerment and meaningful participation in decision-making of women on the island of Ireland, including those affected by conflict, should be demonstrably improved. Reference was made to the Irish Fund for Reconciliation which contained a commitment to developing the role of women in peacebuilding, civic and political life, in line with UNSCR 1325, as one of its fourteen areas of priority. The Northern Ireland Women's European Platform was designated as one of several key strategic partners for 2022-25.

The 3rd Irish National Action Plan provided for the establishment of a Northern Ireland consultative group that would be organised by the Irish Secretariat in Belfast. This, it was stated, would hold quarterly meetings and engage in outreach to cross-community women's organisations and civil society actors focused on Women, Peace and Security across Northern Ireland (Section 41.4). It further recognised the importance of supporting grassroots peacebuilding and mediation approaches, in addition to supporting youth participation and inter-generational dialogue. There had been increasing attention given to the promotion and support of women mediators, with a cradle of regional networks, drawn together in the Global Alliance of Women Mediators. The Women Mediators across the Commonwealth Network included representation from Northern Ireland (Sara Cook and Beibhinn McKinley), supported by Dr. Catherine Turner (Durham Global Security Institute, Durham University) and with a secretariat provided by Conciliation Resources (UK).^{xxxv} One of the Northern Ireland-based Network mediators has worked in over fifty country contexts, offering long-term support to women activists in Afghanistan, Ukraine and with Syrian women on the Turkish/Syrian border. The work also involved her in South Sudan, Zimbabwe, DRC and Myanmar where she found an increasing emphasis on trauma informed facilitation. The case study of peacebuilding in Northern Ireland is still held up as being relevant and informative.^{xxxvi} Professor Catherine Turner remains involved in Northern Ireland and is a member of the Board of the Brussels based MediatEUr (European Platform for International Mediation and Dialogue).

Speaking at the UN Security Council in March 2023 on the 25th Anniversary of Resolution 1325, H.E. Stella Ronner, the EU Ambassador for Gender and Diversity, re-stated the EU commitment to Women, Peace and Security. Amongst other issues her speech focused on the prevalence of sexual and gender-based violence, including conflict-related sexual violence.^{xxxvii} Fidelma Ashe noted in 2018 the danger that statist interpretations of security can limit understandings of the sources of insecurity in conflict-affected states.^{xxxviii} Some years earlier Monica McWilliams and Jessica Doyle had completed a study on 'Intimate Partner Violence in Conflict and Post Conflict Societies (2016) that considered this aspect of potential transnational learning. This followed on published work by

McWilliams and Ní Aolain in 2013^{xxxix} and McWilliams & Doyle's study was published by the Political Settlements Research Programme of University of Edinburgh in 2018. While the high incidence of domestic violence has been consistently noted by Northern Ireland Women's Aid Federation, and the challenge of 'coercive control' of women in areas of continuing paramilitary influence, has been raised in reports of the Independent Reporting Commission^{xl}, amongst others, there has been limited transnational shared learning amongst practitioners from Northern Ireland on this specific theme, despite this being an area of potential overlap with trauma-informed approaches.

The UK Government National Action Plan 2023-2027 on Women, Peace and Security drew on input from the Northern Ireland Office, recognising for the first time: *'We can better champion and highlight UK expertise, from women peacebuilders in Northern Ireland to our Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict Initiative Team of Experts.'*^{xli} With a global focus on Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Ukraine, DCR, Iraq, Libya, Myanmar, Nigeria, South Sudan, Somalia, Syria and Yemen, one of the seven commitments included: *'Recognize and promote the crucial work of Northern Ireland women in peacebuilding, especially for the 25th Anniversary of the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement in 2023.'* The co-design model underpinning the Northern Ireland strategy on the Ending of Violence against Women and Girls was cited as good practice. This had benefited from extensive input from the Women's Sector in Northern Ireland.

The Northern Ireland Women's Platform (re-named from NIWEP) continued to use the framing of the Commission on the Status of Women and UNSCR1325 to raise awareness and promote participation in global developments. An on-line (due to Covid regulations) discussion under the title 'Women Can't Wait: Towards a Roadmap for delivering the Principles of UNSCR1325 in Northern Ireland' was held in 2020, with 800 women hearing from President Mary Robinson (Chairperson The Elders) and Sarah Douglas, Deputy Chief of Peace & Security, UN Women, in addition to speakers from the Women's Sector locally. Attendance at annual CSW meetings also saw the circulation of reports – 'Leading Us into the Future: Young Women's Ideas for Climate, Gender, Justice and Peace & Security' (2022) that featured Northern Ireland, Uganda, Rwanda and Lebanon. The following year – 'Looking Back to Move Forward: Equality from Rural Women' (2023), drawing on Northern Ireland and New Zealand; and 'Gender Budgeting: A Solution to Women's Poverty' (2024), with shared learning from Malaysia and Britain, as well as Northern Ireland. In each case representatives of organisations in the Women's Sector joined the coordinators from the Northern Ireland Women's Platform both at the CSW meetings and disseminating findings from the side meetings. The Irish Fund for Reconciliation provided funding for the development of a Women's Spaces initiative that spun out of the meetings and consultations held under the title 'A Women's Vision for Northern Ireland' (January 2023). This project is continuing with the involvement of local women's groups, under the strategic direction of the Northern Ireland Women's Platform, WRDA, Women's Support Network and the Northern Ireland Women's Regional Consortium.

THE RE-ESTABLISHMENT OF ASSEMBLY STRUCTURES

In Northern Ireland itself, the re-establishment of the power-sharing Executive in February 2024, after a prolonged period of absence, saw the appointment of female First Minister (Sinn Féin) and Deputy First Minister (DUP). It also enabled the re-establishment of the All-Party Group on UNSCR 1325, Women, Peace & Security, with the stated purpose of raising awareness of the lack of participation of women in political and public life in areas outlined in UNSCR 1325. The previous New Decade, New Approach agreement, concluded to re-establish the Stormont Assembly in 2020, failed to make any reference to women, potentially contributing to the conclusion by academic Fionnuala Ní Aoláin that *'In general the history of self-determination has not served women well'*, given that what is often presented as theoretically gender-neutral can in practice be highly patriarchal, given the *'nested institutionalism of masculinities'* in political culture.^{xlii}

Notwithstanding the ongoing challenges within Northern Ireland, there was recognition of the learning that was on offer for other countries both dealing with, and emerging from, conflict. The Irish Aid 2019-2024 Action Plan noted – *'The Women, Peace and Security agenda has a powerful resonance in Ireland. We have seen the transformative impact women have had on the Northern Ireland peace process. This has been both in negotiating the Good Friday Agreement and continuing the essential work of peacebuilding today. . . We work with the international community to promote conflict resolution around the world. Our efforts focus on peace-making, peacebuilding and sharing our experience of the Northern Ireland peace process.'*^{xliii} The Northern Ireland Women's Manifesto, issued by the Northern Ireland Women's Regional Consortium in 2019, did include Politics, Public Life, Peacebuilding and Decision-making as one of its demands, calling for the implementation of specific measures related to UNSCR 1325 and under CEDAW Recommendation 30 on women in conflict prevention and post conflict situations.^{xliiv} However there was still limited opportunities for organisations in the Women's Sector to share its learning on a global basis. Much depended on either individual networking or being known from either academia or the political spheres. There was also the pressure of either Irish or British administrations being seen to be even-handed between representatives perceived as being from either the Nationalist/Catholic/Republican or the Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist communal identities in the North.

SHARING INSIGHTS ON A TRANS-NATIONAL BASIS

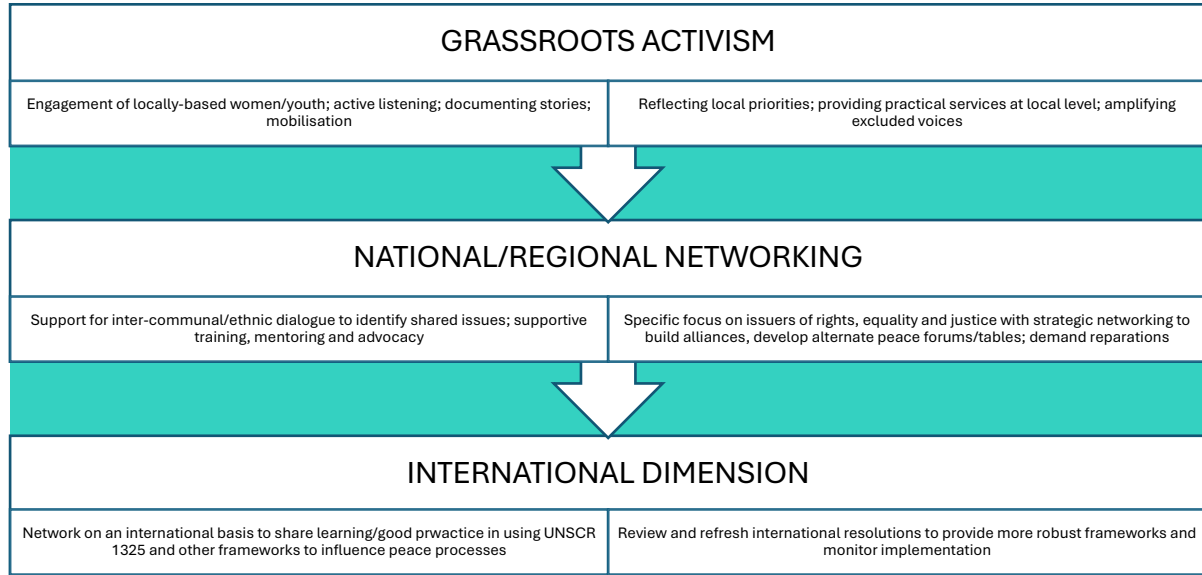
Broader Irish involvement in the Colombian peace process resulted in several women from Northern Ireland being invited to visit Colombia to share their experiences of peacebuilding. Denise Hughes – involved in mediation – describes the impact of bringing a number of community-based women to Putumayo, recalling a mutual sharing of experience – *'There is so much learning there – those Colombian women inspired us'*. She

maintained the relationship, hosting a return visit of the Colombian women activists to Northern Ireland. Denise had cut her teeth in international work through partnerships with the Institute of Conflict Research^{xlv}, offering mediation support in Kosovo. Monica McWilliams maintained her contacts with women in Colombia and Syria, as well as speaking to women on the divided island of Cyprus (alongside Avila Kilmurray), at the request of the Irish Ambassador who had the documentary film ‘Say Goodbye to Dinosaurs’ on the Women’s Coalition story translated into both Greek and Turkish. McWilliams also meet community-based women in the Eastern Congo at the request of Irish Aid organisation, Trocaire. Charmain Jones, currently supporting peacebuilding work with NIRWN (Northern Ireland Rural Women’s Network) spoke about the importance of being able to look wider than Northern Ireland, and share experience, by visits to the USA, Israel, Palestine and Belgium.^{xlvi} Again, there was an emphasis on the mutuality of lesson sharing and learning. The Centre for Democracy and Peacebuilding (CEO – Eva Grossman) – also reported engagement with women from Mampuján (Colombia) in October 2023 and work on the Middle East and Belarus. Much of the programming of the latter involved an emphasis on sharing formal political learning. The Democratic Progress Institute continued to draw on both specific women’s experience in the Northern Ireland peace process as well as political party insights, to implement a programme of comparative learning for Turkish and Kurdish activists and influencers. Whilst the NDI (National Democratic Institute), IRI (International Republican Institute) and the Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security, in Georgetown University, Washington DC also maintained strong links with women from Northern Ireland, facilitating exchange of insights with women from other conflict situations – most recently with women councillors and mayors from Ukraine who visited Belfast in 2023, and again with Ukrainian senior women politicians and civil society activists in Warsaw in February 2025. Georgetown University also published a report on the role of women active in peacebuilding in Northern Ireland.

An approach by the Commonwealth Foundation, in 2019, to SCI (Social Change Initiative) resulted in two exchanges between women in conflict regions. Based in Belfast, SCI supports activism and advocacy in human rights, equality, peacebuilding and migrant rights.^{xlvii} The Commonwealth Charter draws on values that include commitments to peace and security, democracy, human rights and the rule of law – underpinned by gender equality, the participation of young people and of civil society. A 3-day dialogue on ‘Women and Peace’ was held in Belfast in May 2019, facilitated by SCI. It built on discussion initiated during the 2018 Commonwealth People’s Forum. Women attended the Belfast gathering from 11 countries, including the Philippines, Pakistan, Colombia, Kenya, Afghanistan, Sierra Leone, Sri Lanka, Cyprus and Uganda, meeting with women from the Women’s Sector in Northern Ireland. One participant summed up the task in hand as – *‘Enabling women to originate ideas and solutions and to use women’s way of knowing to build the peace-making process. There is a need to sustain formal peace talks*

on the ground and to support women’s alternate processes/peace initiatives to work with conflicting groups.’ Conclusions were clustered as follows:

(From *Shifting Paradigms: Voice, Power & Intersectionality* 2019).



The Belfast Dialogue was followed by a 3-Day conference hosted by the Commonwealth Foundation, and facilitated by SCI, in Penang, Malaysia, in February 2020, with the objective of designing an advocacy roadmap. Women from Cyprus, South Africa, Pakistan, Bougainville, Uganda, Sri Lanka, Kenya, Britain and Northern Ireland attended. Transformative change was seen as charting, analyzing and proactively addressing the structural/root causes of conflict requiring a new narrative that prioritizes meeting essential needs for food, shelter, health, income, the protection of human rights and sense of security under a rule of law as a means of realizing inclusive human security. These conclusions echoed an ongoing academic approach which emphasizes ‘everyday peace indicators.’^{xlviii} A representative of GAPS UK (Gender Action for Peace & Security) was also in attendance at the Commonwealth convening. As an organization committed to monitoring and holding accountable the UK Government’s commitment to Women, Peace and Security both at home and abroad, the group has one Northern Ireland based member – Northern Ireland Women’s Platform (previously named Northern Ireland Women’s European Platform).

The 25th anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement in 2024, together with the declared Irish Department of Foreign Affairs priority in promoting the women, peace and security agenda brought renewed attention on the importance of sharing the learning from the peace process in Northern Ireland. Again, women who had been involved in the negotiations of the 1998 Agreement were in demand. Bronagh Hinds worked in Mexico – supporting the development of the initial Mexican 1325 National Action Plan (NAP) and addressing convenings that were working to establish a Pan Latin American Network on Women, Peace and Security. She also contributed to meetings in The Netherlands,

Finland and London, as well as in areas of the USA, that included a Vital Voices Global conference in Washington DC, that year. Monica McWilliams also spoke of her experience in a wide range of global contexts, as did Kate Fearon. Insights were also on call when the Irish Government hosted a meeting of the UN Peacebuilding Fund in Dublin that year.

BRINGING PEACEBUILDING HOME

Within Northern Ireland work was invested in engaging with community-based women's groups and activists in capturing learning in relation to peacebuilding. A Research and Practice Guide – Positive Peacebuilding in Northern Ireland: Overcoming the Challenges to the participation of grassroots women in peacebuilding (Monina O'Prey for the St. Stephen's Green Trust^{xlix}) was published in November 2023. This brought together the insights of 12 groups that had been funded under a Positive Peacebuilding grants programme supported by Porticus – an independent funder. The following year, a Talk4Peace Toolkit for Transformative Mediation in Peacebuilding^l involved community-based women in three focus groups to identify priorities for inclusive peacebuilding. Three themes were identified – (i) Inclusion and intersectionality; (ii) Broadening spaces and approaches for Dialogue; and (iii) Creativity and grounded approaches. While both these toolkits spoke mainly to issues and approaches to peacebuilding prioritized within Northern Ireland, they were usefully shared with women that were members of Study Visits to the region. These included Social Change Initiative (SCI) hosted visits for delegations from Bougainville and Philippines/Bangsamoro, sponsored by Conciliation Resources (UK), and a visit of women activists from Palestine, supported by the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs, building on work undertaken by the Folke Bernadotte Academy in Palestine.

A mix of academic and community-based work was also evident in a report that focused on peacebuilding and constitutional change. Twenty workshops, involving the participation of 15 women's groups contributed to 'Gendering Constitutional Conversations: A Report on Women's Inclusion through Constitutional Discussions' (Fidelma Ashe)^{li} – which focused on local issues, but with an approach that was more broadly applicable in conflict-affected environments.

While a number of women activists in Northern Ireland lamented the decline in resources available for effective networking both internally and externally, the All-Island Women's Forum Report (2021-2022) produced by the National Women's Council of Ireland, recommended the need to expand the role of women in peacebuilding in line with UNSCR 1325 and to improve North-South links. It noted that Tara Grace Connolly was the first Northern Ireland born UN Youth delegate from Ireland. In addition, to Tara Grace, two women from Northern Ireland (from Women's Support Network and Northern Ireland Women's Platform) attended the Commission on the Status of Women in New York in 2023. Training for Women's Network had raised funding to take 30 women from Northern

Ireland to the Commission meeting in 2019. Where such visits were planned with a view to linking the local and the global, they could also have the dual purpose of creating conditions for a sharing of views between women from different community perspectives in Northern Ireland. A study visit to Boston University, in Autumn 2023, organized by Northern Ireland Alternatives and Professor Sandra McEvoy (Boston University), delivered on both these objectives. Indeed, a mining of insights from the Northern Ireland peace process through US and – to a lesser extent – European university connections was another important path for reflection, analysis and sharing, as was the interest of INGOs, such as the Bertelsmann Foundation (Germany), Conciliation Resources (UK), the Carter Center (USA) and others.

A Programme Manager from Conciliation Resources (UK) summed up the potential of study visits to Northern Ireland (among other post-conflict areas) – *‘Comparative learning, in particular learning visits to other conflict affected parts of the world, can temporarily take these leaders (in particular combatant leaders) out of this restraining and isolating environment and place them into an environment that is different yet familiar, with familiar post-conflict legacies and challenges. Visiting a context that is “ahead” in its journey towards a longer-term peace and political settlement, can also enable these leaders to envision, even experience a future; garner and develop ideas; and over time and ongoing engagement receive technical input. . . Ireland (in particular Northern Ireland) provides an excellent environment for such comparative learning. . . A testament to the relevance and success of comparative learning from Ireland is how it is frequently referred to as providing inspiration and technical examples into contexts in the midst of peace processes. . .’*^{lii}

REFLECTIONS ON DEVELOPMENTS TO DATE: 2025

It is appropriate to consider the implications of experience to date given that 2025 is the 25th anniversary of UNSCR 1325 and falls two years after the 25th anniversary of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement. In summary the story of how women in Northern Ireland have engaged with peacebuilding internationally over the past three decades include –

Typology	Interventions	Methodologies	Actors
Peace Agreement Negotiators/Participant	Requested to meet with stakeholders in other conflict areas	Individual input Input delivered on a consultancy basis Input into on-line discussions	NIWC activists Women active in other parties Retired public servants Ex-combatant
Academic Analysis	Research studies and papers on aspects of Women, Peace & Security	Papers on specific aspects of the Good Friday Agreement Analysis of specific aspects of Women, Peace & Security Hosting conferences	Academics based in Northern Ireland universities and also working through universities from outside Northern Ireland
Peace Activists (not solely a focus on	Requested to meet with stakeholders	Asked to host Study Visits	Tides Training etc. Peace Centres

Typology	Interventions	Methodologies	Actors
women's perspective although individual women may be involved)	in other conflict areas	Acting as Facilitators Acting as Mediators Sharing creative approaches to dialogue	Mediation NI Creatives - eg PlayHouse Community Dialogue
UNSCR1325/CEDAW Advocates	Promoting awareness of international agreements and relevance to Northern Ireland as well as sharing insights drawn from Northern Ireland	Acting as secretariat of NI Assembly All Party Committee Supporting drafting of NAPS Preparing specific materials on UNSCR 1325	NI Women Platform Women activists working in support of Ireland & UK NAPs
Women's Sector activists	Requested to meet delegations from conflict areas and to outline issues & challenges with the peace process in Northern Ireland	Joining Panels of speakers to share experience and insights Give time to providing information for the drafting of Peacebuilding Toolkits	Women's Sector Networks Locally based Women's Groups Academics working with local groups Women's Sector specific peace initiatives

There is clearly often an overlap between the categories and interventions listed above, as there is between the points of contact that seek the sharing of information and insights drawn from the Northern Ireland peace process. The latter range from peacebuilding INGOs (as noted above) to individual stakeholders in other conflict circumstances (such as Colombia, the Basque Country, the Balkans, etc.), and from international agencies (such as the UN) to feminist INGOs (such as WILPF, Kvinna till Kvinna, etc.). There are also the points of contact through governmental organisations (Department of Foreign Affairs, Ireland, the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, UK, etc.) as well as through universities and agencies such as NDI and IRI in the USA. Much depends on who knows who, with shared interest and respect, as well as what networks individuals are part of. While this can work – and has operated to date – there is a concern that the sources of perceived expertise can be somewhat limited.

The other consideration relates to the approaches necessary to ensure the trans-national shared learning is relevant and effective. There is a world of disparity between participating in a panel discussion with a visiting Study Group in Northern Ireland as distinct from being prepared to facilitate a capacity-building workshop with women in situ in another conflict environment. It is also essential to have clarity about the purpose of any intervention and what level and/or interest the potential participants may have.

Similarly, when women activists with experience of peacebuilding in Northern Ireland are approached to participate in international dialogues at governmental or UN level, it is

important that there is the necessary time and attention given to ensuring an effective contribution, potentially drawing on the support and insights of broader Women's Sector Networks and initiatives rather than relying solely on individual perspectives.

The following recommendations are drawn together based on two considerations – (i) Developments that could collate peacebuilding experience within the Women's Sector in Northern Ireland; and (ii) Support for the sharing of insights on peacebuilding drawn from Northern Ireland internationally.

SUGGESTED DEVELOPMENTS WITHIN THE WOMEN'S SECTOR IN NORTHERN IRELAND:

- If information and insights on peacebuilding, drawn from the Northern Ireland peace process, are to be shared effectively this requires a mix of knowledge and skills – including knowledge of aspects of peacebuilding; facilitation skills and the ability to relate appropriately to activists in other situations of conflict and post-conflict developments.
- Some of the most effective peacebuilding sharing occurs when women come together from a range of perspectives and experiences. Academics, community-based activists and issue-based organisations (such as those focusing on victims/survivors; ex-combatants; mediation, etc.) should work collaboratively in developing programmes for external use.
- Due attention needs to be paid to a gender analysis of aspects of peacebuilding in Northern Ireland, while these do exist, they are rarely brought together in an accessible format or as an easily identifiable resource.
- Peacebuilding is ongoing in Northern Ireland and any sharing of information and approaches should be seen as an iterative process, particularly when supporting the participation of younger women and responding to inter-generational trauma and legacy issues.
- It is important that there are adequate on-going resources to enable women from Northern Ireland to participate and input into international forums, such as the annual Commission on the Status of Women meetings, to ensure that relationships can be built and information shared in a consistent manner. Measures must be in place to ensure that representatives of the Women's Sector in Northern Ireland remain abreast of international resolutions and debate

INCREASED EFFECTIVENESS IN SHARING LEARNING INTERNATIONALLY:

- Offering information sharing, capacity-building and input into Study Visits requires time, preparation and resourcing. While a small number of individuals and peace organisations have developed paid consultancies, in most cases activists in the Women's Sector provide their time free and on-call, making it difficult to undertake the necessary research and preparatory work. A small hub

could be identified and resourced to support essential preparatory and follow-up work.

- Linking the sharing of peacebuilding insights with international instruments such as CEDAW and UNSCR 1325 offers a framing that is very effective. Experience has shown, however, that translating these instruments into commonplace language is essential to develop inclusive approaches. These could usefully be made available in a range of languages.
- Information about points of contact within both the Irish and British government departments and embassies, as well as within relevant INGOs and other agencies should be shared to allow a broader networking approach.
- There should be greater reflection and understanding of which are the most appropriate approaches for sharing insights with international audiences – (i) Analytical-Technical approach whereby insights from the peace process are used to enhance understanding of peacemaking processes; (ii) Political-strategic approach which draws on the political/policy aspects of conflict transformation; or (iii) Educative-psychological approaches which seek to influence stakeholders from other conflict environments.^{liii} While sometimes programmes can contain a mix of these elements, it helps if there is a clarity about what is being shared, why and how.
- Information about sources of information and networking should be easily accessible and available to the broader women’s peacebuilding sectors. Linkages with Women, Peace and Security and broader peacebuilding hubs in university settings should be factored into this networking.
- The potential impact of an international exchange of insights from a women’s perspective and experience of peacebuilding in Northern Ireland could be augmented by being developed in a strategic manner – allowing for consistent work, that might draw on different strands within the Women’s Sector, over an extended period. While one-off interventions can be useful in sharing lessons learnt, systemic engagement is undoubtedly more effective.

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