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Women's Platform Response to DFAT's Public Consultation on development of



NEW RECONCILIATION FUND STRATEGY

WOMENSPLATFORM.ORG



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**Women's
Spaces**

**Creating platforms to strengthen women's voices
in peacebuilding, civic and political life.**



Women's Spaces seeks to strengthen the voices of all women and girls in peacebuilding and decision making, delivered by a consortium involving Women's Platform, NIRWN, WRDA and WSN.

Response to the DFAT’s Public Consultation on development of new Reconciliation Fund Strategy

Submitted by Women’s Platform

Date: 1 August 2025

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About Women’s Platform

Women’s Platform connects the women’s sector in Northern Ireland to international networks and human rights mechanisms. Our role is to amplify the voices of women and girls in Northern Ireland at the international level, including at the UN. Locally, we build capacity on international human rights standards to help women and girls in Northern Ireland achieve equality, diversity and full participation in decision making.

Women’s Platform is the lead partner in the Women’s Spaces consortium funded through the DFA Reconciliation Fund’s Strategic Partnerships.

About Women's Spaces Consortium

Women's Spaces is a collaborative programme in Northern Ireland aimed at enhancing women's participation in peacebuilding, civic engagement, and public life. The initiative is delivered by a consortium of four organisations, each contributing unique expertise and resources to empower women across urban and rural communities.

Here are the four partner organisations involved in the Women's Spaces programme:

1. Women's Platform, Lead partner

- **Purpose:** Advocates for the implementation of international human rights standards and UN resolutions in Northern Ireland, including the principles of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on women, peace, and security.
- **Role:** Acts as a liaison between the women's sector in Northern Ireland and international networks, amplifying the voices of women and girls on a global stage.

2. Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network (NIRWN)

- **Purpose:** Represents and supports rural women through services, education, campaigning, and lobbying.
- **Role:** Acts as a membership-based organisation with over 400 groups and 400 individual members, providing advocacy representation at local, regional, and international levels.
- **Rural delivery partner for Women's Spaces**

3. Women's Resource and Development Agency (WRDA)

- **Purpose:** Advances women's equality and participation in society by transforming political, economic, social, and cultural conditions.
- **Role:** Works with women's groups from all traditions in disadvantaged communities, promoting empowerment and tackling inequalities through capacity building and advocacy.
- **Urban delivery partner for Women's Spaces**

4. Women's Support Network (WSN)

- **Purpose:** Supports established women's centres across the region and hosts the Rape Crisis Service NI.

- **Role:** Participates in policy development groups, conducts research on issues impacting women, and provides community-based training and education.

Together, these organisations form a dynamic and progressive team with a proven track record in engaging with hard-to-reach women in divided and marginalised communities. They collaborate to build capacity, advocate for inclusive peacebuilding, and create platforms for women's voices in public decision-making. The programme also fosters connections with women peace-builders and networks beyond Northern Ireland to share learning and strengthen solidarity.

The [Pillars for Peace-Building](#) digital toolkit is a dynamic online resource developed by the Women's Spaces consortium in Northern Ireland. Launched in May 2025, it aims to empower women engaged in community development and peacebuilding by providing accessible tools, stories, and insights rooted in the lived experiences of women across the region.

Structured around the pillars of UNSCR 1325, it includes five key sections—an interactive timeline, tools for influencing change, a community blog, video interviews, and additional resources—the toolkit offers both practical guidance and reflective prompts. Designed to be mobile-friendly and adaptable, it serves as a flexible resource for women at various stages of their peacebuilding journeys. The toolkit also highlights the critical role of women's activism in Northern Ireland's peace process, aiming to inspire and inform both local and global audiences.

By centring women's voices and experiences, the toolkit contributes to a more inclusive and comprehensive understanding of peacebuilding, fostering a movement where women are recognized as essential architects of lasting peace.

For more information or to get involved, visit the [Women's Spaces website](#).

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1. Executive Summary

This submission commends the Reconciliation Fund's flexible, two-pillar approach and its practical support for cross-border, cross-community, and inclusive peacebuilding. It highlights the Fund's alignment with gender equality and international frameworks such as UNSCR 1325, while urging stronger commitments to sustained investment in women's peacebuilding, particularly for marginalised groups including women re-entering civic life, refugees, and trauma survivors. Recommendations include resourcing global engagement, embedding feminist and trauma-informed approaches, addressing gender-based violence, and countering the rollback of rights. The strategy should adapt to contemporary challenges such as post-COVID trauma, Brexit disruption, and rising authoritarianism, while funders should improve support through multi-year funding, flexibility, and succession planning. Reconciliation is framed as truth-telling, justice, and inclusive healing, rooted in gender justice and global solidarity.

1. What works well in the current Reconciliation Fund strategy?

- The **two-pillar model** (acknowledging the past; building relationships) remains a solid framework. The strategy has a flexible and broad approach to peacebuilding in Northern Ireland in that it allows for the ever changing political, economic and social context of this island to be taken into consideration and that with that transition, the funding and the strategy shifts with it.
 - Broad inclusion of **project, core, and capital costs** increases organisational sustainability.
 - Support for **cross-border and cross-community initiatives** builds trust and shared space.
 - Inclusion of **youth, women and UNSCR 1325, and underrepresented groups** is valued and should be strengthened.
 - Practical support from DFA staff for projects.
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2. What aspects are most relevant to your work?

- Strategic focus on **peacebuilding through gender equality**, including deeper understanding of the Good Friday Agreement, exploring North South relations, supporting the most vulnerable and hard to reach women.

- Support for **women-led organisations**, particularly in post-conflict Northern Ireland, where women's voices are often excluded from formal processes.
 - Ongoing priority to engage **young people, refugees, and new communities** in reconciliation efforts.
 - Addressing **legacy of conflict through trauma-informed and gender-responsive approaches**.
-

3. What's missing or needs stronger inclusion in the next strategy?

- **Firm commitments to invest in the women's sector in Northern Ireland**, recognising its **critical and ongoing role in peacebuilding, reconciliation, and social cohesion**. Echoing the words of former UN Secretary-General **Kofi Annan**, "*No policy for peace can succeed unless women are full partners in the decisions that shape their lives.*" He further asserted that **at least 15% of all peacebuilding funds** should be allocated to **women-specific programming** to ensure durable and inclusive peace¹.

This commitment should include **targeted investment in international collaboration and shared learning**, enabling women's organisations to engage meaningfully with **UN mechanisms (e.g. CEDAW, UNSCR 1325)** and **Council of Europe platforms** (e.g. GREVIO monitoring under the Istanbul Convention). As highlighted in *Networking for Women Peacebuilders*² (2025) and *Overview of Women Peacebuilders' International Engagement 1995–2025*³ by **Women's Platform**, Northern Ireland's women's organisations have a rich legacy of global engagement—but require sustained resources to remain active in international tables. This international work strengthens reconciliation in several key ways:

- **Brings global learning home:** Exposure to best practices from other post-conflict regions deepens local approaches to trauma, justice, and peacebuilding.
- **Amplifies marginalised voices:** Participation in UN and Council of Europe platforms ensures that the unique experiences of women in

¹ Kofi Annan, UN Peacebuilding Commission, 2005; also cited in UN Women's advocacy for gender-responsive financing

² <https://womensplatform.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Networking-for-women-peacebuilders-Findings-from-feasibility-study.pdf>

³ <https://womensplatform.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Overview-of-women-peacebuilders-international-engagement-1995-2025.pdf>

Northern Ireland—especially those from working-class, rural, or minority communities—are recognised globally.

- **Builds solidarity and resilience:** International peer networks offer critical support, skills-sharing, and moral encouragement, especially as women's rights face backlash globally and locally.
- **Influences domestic policy:** Engagement with CEDAW, UNSCR 1325, and the Istanbul Convention provides a framework for holding governments accountable to gender-equal peacebuilding commitments.
- **Connects local reconciliation with global justice:** Women's international engagement reinforces a vision of reconciliation that is not only about local relationships, but also about **challenging systems of inequality, violence, and exclusion**—from Belfast to Bogotá.

In summary, **sustaining this global engagement strengthens reconciliation by embedding it in a wider movement for inclusive, rights-based peace**, ensuring that Northern Ireland remains both a contributor to and beneficiary of international peacebuilding practice.

- **Stronger support for refugee integration**, particularly for those displaced by conflict (e.g. Ukraine, Syria, Sudan), through initiatives that foster shared community, healing, and social cohesion. In light of the rising incidence of hate crime and xenophobia—particularly in Northern Ireland—reconciliation efforts must ensure that refugees and asylum seekers are not scapegoated or subjected to the same patterns of exclusion and hostility once directed within or between indigenous communities. This priority area must also include targeted interventions to address gender-based harms disproportionately affecting refugee and asylum-seeking women, including conflict-related sexual violence, human trafficking, and systemic barriers to accessing support services.

The **Law Centre NI's submission to the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women and Girls** emphasizes increasing hate crime and xenophobia in Northern Ireland, including against refugees and asylum seekers, and specifically calls for gender-sensitive safeguarding in refugee and asylum-related programming.⁴

- **Strong investment in the prevention of Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG)** — fully aligned with the Istanbul Convention and Ireland's commitments to gender-based violence prevention — is urgently needed with Northern Ireland having the highest rate of femicide in Europe. Intimate partner violence and domestic abuse in Northern Ireland has long been linked to ongoing paramilitary

⁴ <https://www.lawcentreni.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/LCNI-submission-to-UN-SR-on-violence-against-women-and-girls-Feb-2024.pdf>

activity and the legacy of the conflict⁵. Additionally, this is especially important given the **rise in teen-perpetrated knife crime targeting women and girls**, which is increasingly linked to **online polarisation and the influence of misogynistic digital subcultures**⁶. Recent reports from across Ireland and the UK highlight growing concerns over the role of online radicalisation in youth violence against women.⁷

- **Greater focus on fighting the global rollback of women’s rights**, and building **transnational solidarity with women peacebuilders worldwide**, as emphasised in *Networking for Women Peacebuilders (2025)*⁸. This is especially vital in the context of rising **authoritarian and dictatorial regimes**, where leaders increasingly rely on **aggression, power, and militaristic rhetoric** to assert control and suppress dissent. Such regimes often treat gender equality and women’s autonomy as threats to their authority—instigating a backlash against women’s rights and democratic norms.
 - Across countries including **Hungary, India, Brazil, Turkey, and Myanmar**, some governments have deliberately constrained gender justice as part of broader anti-democratic agendas, often **instrumentalising women’s representation while undermining substantive equality**⁹.
 - These leaders use gender-related reforms as symbolic gestures—what critics term **“genderwashing”**—to enhance international legitimacy while simultaneously quashing feminist activism and closing civic space¹⁰.
 - In such contexts, **women peacebuilders face heightened risks**, including online harassment, surveillance, smear campaigns, and political repression—particularly when they challenge authoritarian orders or advocate for sexual and reproductive rights¹¹.
 - A proactive reconciliation strategy must therefore support feminist-led initiatives that resist these authoritarian narratives, cultivate global networks of support, and reinforce **rights-based, inclusive, and resilient**

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<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/66c475c740e7194ba8ee6a81/t/670e4ef2026b2340fa37ce9c/1728990964409/After-Violence-WPG-Research-Report.pdf>

⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2025/apr/12/uk-counter-terror-police-nca-misogyny-com-networks>

⁷ https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2025/apr/12/uk-counter-terror-police-nca-misogyny-com-networks?utm_source=chatgpt.com

⁸ <https://womensplatform.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Networking-for-women-peacebuilders-Findings-from-feasibility-study.pdf>

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/852745>

¹¹ <https://theloop.ecpr.eu/womens-roles-in-anti-authoritarian-resistance>

peacebuilding practices rooted in shared learning and international solidarity.

- **Stronger commitment to social inclusion**, with clear linkages to complementary national and international frameworks that promote equality, participation, and rights-based peacebuilding. The Reconciliation Fund strategy should align with and reinforce:
 - **LGBTQIA+ rights:** Recognising that LGBTQIA+ communities in Northern Ireland continue to face marginalisation and exclusion, and that genuine reconciliation must be inclusive of all identities. This includes supporting projects that challenge sectarianism and homophobia/transphobia simultaneously.
 - **Ireland's social inclusion strategies:** Including the *National Social Inclusion Programme*, *Migrant Integration Strategy*, and *National Disability Inclusion Strategy*, ensuring reconciliation efforts are joined-up with wider efforts to address poverty, marginalisation, and exclusion across the island.
 - **UNSCR 2250 – Youth, Peace and Security:** Acknowledging the central role of young people in building and sustaining peace, and providing resources for youth-led reconciliation initiatives that address intergenerational trauma, social division, and digital polarisation. **Education and youth-sector partnerships:** Women's peacebuilding organisations are increasingly invited to speak in schools, youth clubs, and educational forums. There is significant scope for more formal collaboration with the education sector, particularly around active citizenship, legacy education, and intergenerational peace dialogue. Embedding reconciliation values in educational settings ensures sustainability and reach across communities.
 - **Ireland's National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security (WPS):** Ensuring that reconciliation efforts are gender-responsive, reflect WPS principles (participation, protection, prevention, relief and recovery), and include targeted funding for women peacebuilders and survivors of gender-based violence.
 - **Support for women re-entering civic and political life:** Many women aged 30–45, particularly those returning after extended caregiving or parenting roles, face barriers to civic re-engagement. These women often experience a "lost decade" in terms of public leadership or political participation. Reconciliation strategies should offer tailored leadership development, flexible programming, and targeted outreach to ensure these voices are not left behind in peacebuilding and political life.

- **Support for non-affiliated trauma survivors:** Many women impacted by legacy violence have never engaged with formal victims' groups or spoken about their experiences. These women, especially in post-COVID contexts, often carry complex, unaddressed trauma. Reconciliation strategies should prioritise creating safe, trauma-informed spaces for these voices, recognising layered forms of suffering and the need for healing outside of formal victim frameworks.

A more integrated approach would enhance the effectiveness of reconciliation work by addressing intersectional inequalities that perpetuate division and hinder sustainable peace.

- **Addressing mental ill health as a peacebuilding and reconciliation issue.** The mental health crisis in Northern Ireland—where rates of depression and PTSD are among the highest in the UK—is closely tied to the legacy of conflict and ongoing intergenerational trauma. Studies from the *Commission for Victims and Survivors* (2021) and *Ulster University's Mental Health Impact Report* (2022) confirm that unresolved trauma, socio-economic stressors, and lack of access to culturally appropriate care continue to affect individuals and communities, particularly women and young people. A reconciliation strategy that centres long-term, trauma-informed mental health support—especially in under-resourced or rural areas—can help break cycles of harm and support sustainable peace.
- **Broaden the strategy to better respond to the changing political, social and economic landscape,** which continues to evolve in ways that directly affect community cohesion and reconciliation outcomes. This includes:
 - **COVID-related trauma:** The pandemic exacerbated existing inequalities and isolation, especially in communities already dealing with legacies of violence. There is a growing need for trauma-informed community development that addresses mental health, grief, and loss in a post-COVID context.
 - **Brexit-related disruption:** The implementation of the Northern Ireland Protocol has reignited identity-based tensions and disrupted long-standing cross-border relationships. Reconciliation funding should support dialogue, trust-building, and cultural initiatives that help navigate new political and economic realities. Furthermore, women in Northern Ireland remain disproportionately impacted by Brexit.
 - **Border communities:** People living in border regions experience unique challenges, including identity fragmentation, economic precarity, and

increased policing. Funding should prioritise initiatives that bridge these divides and support the well-being of communities often left at the margins of national narratives.

4. What's outdated or needs revision?

- Need to integrate **long-term healing, feminist perspectives**, and **transgenerational trauma**.
 - Increased currency volatility (EUR–GBP) needs **built-in flexibility for budget reallocation**, avoiding project disruption due to exchange rate changes.
 - The “peace dividend” can no longer be assumed; challenges like **Brexit, global polarisation**, and refugee crises require a more dynamic lens.
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5. What can funders do better to align with organisations?

- Provide **multi-year funding beyond Strategic Partnership level**, especially for under-resourced women's and grassroots organisations.
 - Enable **budget reallocation flexibility**, particularly around euro–pound conversion discrepancies mid-cycle, and ensure multi-year budgets reflect changes in cost of living, salary rises according to NJC scales, and changes in running costs such as employer national insurance contributions.
 - Fund **international collaboration efforts**, including travel, digital convenings, and advocacy aligned with global peacebuilding institutions.
 - Embed **trauma-informed capacity building** into application and reporting processes, reducing barriers for smaller and grassroots groups.
 - **Dedicated support for succession planning in long-term projects:** To maintain momentum and ensure legacy, funders could provide targeted support in later project years (e.g. Year 4) to enable organisations to plan for sustainability, staff transition, and future strategic direction.
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6. What are the biggest challenges facing civil society working on reconciliation?

- **Chronic underfunding of women's peacebuilding work**, despite their central role in community resilience.
 - Lack of **predictable, long-term investment** creates burnout and staff turnover.
 - Increased demand to address **global justice intersections** (climate, conflict, displacement) without sufficient resources.
 - Shrinking civic space and **pushback on gender equality**, locally and globally.
 - Limited resources and lack of support for rural or lone workers within the field of reconciliation, that limit their ability to engage in shared learning. More shared learning and networking opportunities, particularly led by women's organisations.
 - Rural engagement due to transport costs. Value for money exercises should be responsive to engagement needs of marginalised groups.
 - **Media invisibility of peacebuilding work**: Positive stories of community-led reconciliation—especially women-led initiatives—often struggle to gain media coverage. Mainstream outlets tend to prioritise conflict-driven or sensationalist events, overshadowing the sustained, solutions-focused work happening at grassroots level. Dedicated resources to amplify these stories and challenge harmful narratives would validate women's contributions and broaden public understanding of peacebuilding success.
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7. What's your organisation's biggest challenge?

- Sustaining a **feminist, rights-based approach to peacebuilding** in the face of funding precarity.
 - Keeping staff and volunteers engaged while delivering trauma-informed, community-led programmes.
 - **Navigating hostile political rhetoric and rollback of rights** affecting marginalised communities.
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8. What does reconciliation mean to you, and how can the Irish Government support it?

- Reconciliation means **truth-telling, healing, justice, and co-creating a shared future** with equality at the centre and Women, Peace and Security at the heart of the agenda.
- It must include **gender justice, inclusion of displaced persons**, and global solidarity.
- The Irish Government can:
 - Ensure **continued, visible investment in women's peacebuilding**.
 - Expand the Fund's scope to support **refugee inclusion and international partnerships**.
 - Explicitly align funding with **international legal frameworks** and **Ireland's feminist foreign policy** commitments.
 - **Strengthen East–West reconciliation efforts:** In addition to North–South collaboration, reconciliation strategies should support meaningful engagement across the islands of Britain and Ireland. Women's organisations can play a vital role in fostering dialogue and shared learning across political and cultural lines—especially due to the impact of Brexit, rising identity tensions, and evolving constitutional conversations.