

The Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

Inquiry into Building a United Community

The purpose of the inquiry is to inform the Executive's approach in the actions it takes to tackle sectarianism, racism and other forms of intolerance; and to make recommendations in order to support and enhance policy in uniting communities and community integration, including how communities are involved in decision making. The Inquiry will also seek to make recommendations based on the evidence gathered.

This response by Northern Ireland Women's European Platform to the OFMDFM Committee is aimed to:

- Demonstrate the lack of commitment and actions in the peace process to address gender inequalities including the *Together: Building a United Community (T:BUC) strategy*
- Promote the need for women in delivering peace in Northern Ireland
- Make recommendations to the Committee on how women can be contributors and implementers of the peace process

About Northern Ireland Women's European Platform

- Provides women in Northern Ireland with a platform to make their voices heard on domestic, European and international social, economic, cultural and political affairs
- Enables women to understand United Nations, European and domestic legislation, conventions and policies that focus or impact on women and to use them to advocate for equality
- Consults with women in preparing recommendations for discussion with government and institutions at domestic, European and international level
- Represents Northern Ireland women at European and international levels
- Jointly represents the UK on the European Women's Lobby with partners in England, Scotland and Wales, and works with sister organisations in Ireland and across Europe
- Secures opportunities for women's organisations to attend European and international events through its EWL and UN membership.

Summary

1. Northern Ireland's peace process which has historically failed to include women or represent women and girls' interests meaningfully. The resistance to this situation can be related to a number of factors such as:
 - the lack of political will to acknowledge and respond to the need to address gender inequalities during the peace negotiations where the focus was predominantly on the 'religious' divide;

- the lack of understanding of international conventions, treaties and resolutions such as UN Security Council Resolution 1325¹ and its principles among policy makers, officials and political representatives;
 - an absence of leadership in ensuring that women's equality was a key factor in the establishment of new post conflict institutions
2. Mechanisms previously set up to deal with the legacy of the conflict, such as *Healing Through Remembering* and the *Consultative Group on the Past*, continue to be composed mainly of men with no recognition that women should be equally represented if peace is to be sustained.
 3. Furthermore, new policies structures and legislation post conflict Northern Ireland have not drawn on the skills and expertise of the women who at a local community level have been the peace builders. The substantive inequalities which women in Northern Ireland continue to experience clearly demonstrates the need for it increasing women in politics and decision making roles. The top priorities of areas of inequalities are:
 - the risk of poverty
 - participation in politics
 - participation in decision making
 - participation in public life
 - equality and the overarching issue of caring
 4. The evidence points to a failure of the peace process to acknowledge the full impact of the conflict on women and to ensure that women play an equal part in moving Northern Ireland from a post conflict to a peaceful society. The continuing failure to take significant and effective measures to ensure women's equal inclusion has major implications for social and economic development and for a sustainable peace.
 5. There is a need both to protect women's rights and support the work of women's organisations in peace-building efforts. It is essential that post-conflict reconstruction is seen through a gendered analysis if peace building is to be maintained.

¹ <http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDO.../0/720/18/PDF/N0072018.pdf?OpenElement>

Together: Building a United Community

6. Like so many successive policies the T:BUC Strategy has ignored the relationship between gender and conflict. While the Strategy at **para. 1.26** makes reference to a new Gender Equality Strategy for Northern Ireland it gives no indication of what should be included in this Strategy in order to address the inequalities for women to building peace in Northern Ireland. This is a missed opportunity to include women and to address their interests.
7. While **para. 1.27** recognises EU Funding for women, this is not sustainable. What are the plans by governments to ensure future funding of women's groups and organisations in order to maintain and develop peacebuilding. The 'invisibility' of women is also apparent in the distribution of resources since the peace process for example £110m which had been ear-marked for a Northern Ireland stadium went to three sporting bodies – football, Gaelic football and rugby – all dominated by men. This represented a careful sharing out of resources between the religious groupings but no thought was given to the decision from a gender impact perspective.
8. The impact of the conflict on women's lives has not been adequately addressed or indeed sufficiently researched and understood. But research on the psychological impact of the conflict suggests a relationship between higher levels of mental illness in Northern Ireland and the conflict. For some time Northern Ireland has had high per head anti-depressant prescription items.² Those being prescribed include for children and adolescents.
9. The T:BUC strategy also suggests changes to the Equality Impact Assessments (EQUIAs) required under "section 75 statutory equality duty. These proposals as they stand undefined and contentious, both in the document and in law, risk undermining the gender equality duty.
10. **Key Priority 1: Children and Young People:** This is a 'catch all' action plan which does not make reference to the different needs between young girls/women and boys/men.
11. In the work of NIWEP and other agencies such as Youth Action NI the pessimism about women's representation and ability to influence decisions in peacebuilding is reinforced by the increasing disengagement of young women from politics, and the danger that young women will increasingly see this lack of participation as the norm.
12. Research has shown that the conflict had a profound effect on the lives of young women in Northern Ireland. However, the policy and resource focus continues to be predominantly on young men who are more likely to become engaged in violence. Young women saw politics in Northern Ireland as tribal

² Gray, AM and Horgan, G (2009) Figuring it Out: Looking Behind the Social Statistics in Northern Ireland. Belfast: ARK

and sectarian and saw little value even in voting. An in-depth study of 16-25 year old young women reported they were very disaffected by Northern Ireland politics and felt disengaged from the peace building process.³

13. **Priority 2: Our Shared Community:** In addition to the lack of women in electoral politics and the low numbers of women appointed to public bodies (only one woman in twelve members was appointed to the Maze Long Kesh Development Corporation Board, established in 2011 to oversee the development of a peace centre at the former paramilitary prison), it has been argued that women are being increasingly marginalised within community organisations. This is endorsed by our partners in Womens Information Northern Ireland (WINI)
14. Ensuring women are part of the peace building 'space' through negotiations has also failed. The Haass / O'Sullivan talks, which began in the autumn of 2013, was tasked to deal with the legacy of the past and ongoing issues such as flags and parades. The draft report, published following the failure of the talks to reach agreement in December 2013, mentions gender only once, as one of a list of possible themes for consideration through a Commission on Identity, Culture and Tradition.
15. In a recent inquiry on the impact of the peace process on women held by the All Party Group on UN Security Council Resolution 1325 at the Northern Ireland Assembly the mood was deeply pessimistic amongst women in local communities, representatives from expert NGOs and representatives of statutory bodies working on gender issues. Time and again it was argued that without appropriate and robust intervention nothing will change with regard to women's representation and that, in fact, the picture will regress further.
16. While the commitment in the T:BUC Strategy identifies **Community Safety (para. 3.22)** as an issue it does not recognise any long term commitment in addressing the issue in post-conflict societies where domestic and sexual violence against women often increases or intensifies and there is anecdotal evidence that there has been an increase in incidences of domestic and sexual violence in Northern Ireland since the signing of the Good Friday/Belfast agreement. While the gathering of informal testimonies from organisations, including the Women's Resource and Development Agency indicates this is linked to the conflict, no research has been carried out to properly assess this and there is no commitment within the T:BUC strategy to implement this assessment.
17. In the **Community Safety** section of the strategy there is a long term commitment to better parenting (para. 3.31). **NIWEP** wish to focus

³G ray, AM and Neill, G (2011) Creating a Shared Society in Northern Ireland: Why we need to focus on gender equality, Youth and Society, 43,2, 466-485

specifically on the **lack of childcare policy** and infrastructure as an overarching issue restricting women's participation, their ability to gain economic independence and contributing to persistently high levels of family poverty. While the NI Executive has produced a Brightstart Programme for affordable and integrated childcare Northern Ireland is unique in the UK in not having a childcare strategy.

Recommendations:

1. The efforts of women in peace building should be recognized and resourced to enable the commitments of the Good Friday Agreement in relationship to women to be met.
2. There should be a clear definition of Good relations. Good relations should be defined in law as it is in Great Britain as - "tackling prejudice and promoting understanding." This would facilitate the use of international instruments such as the Convention on all forms of Discrimination against Women to assist with the interpretation of the statutory duty towards women. This would include the duty to have due regard to Violence against Women including the trafficking of women and children.
3. Good relations criteria should not be included in EQIAS in a way that undermines the gender equality legislation.
4. The childcare strategy and Gender Equality Strategy, which are referenced in the T:BUC strategy should be underpinned by the principles of UNSCR 1325 on Women Peace and Security.
5. The strategy should have mechanisms to monitor the implementation of the principles across the strategy and to develop ways in which to make change to address gender inequalities.
6. To commit to ensuring gender issues are a priority and there is gender balance in those attending any future strategy discussions.
7. To ensure sustainable funding for the infrastructure of support organisations and high level policy and provision to address violence against women.
8. To develop an overarching strategy to adequately resource women's groups and organisations in order to ensure the wealth of knowledge and expertise is supported to make a greater contribution to building and sustaining peace in Northern Ireland and elsewhere.