



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Assembly and Executive Review Committee

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Briefing from All-party Group on UNSCR
1325: Women, Peace and Security

27 May 2014

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Pat Sheehan (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Roy Beggs
Mr Gregory Campbell
Mr Seán Rogers
Ms Caitríona Ruane

Witnesses:

Ms Paula Bradley MLA	All-party Group on UNSCR 1325
Dr Ann Marie Gray	Northern Ireland Women's European Platform
Ms Emma Patterson-Bennett	Northern Ireland Women's European Platform

The Deputy Chairperson: Paula Bradley MLA is the chairperson of the Assembly's all-party group on United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325: Women, Peace and Security and has agreed to provide a briefing to the Committee on its work. Paula is accompanied by Dr Ann Marie Gray, a member of the Northern Ireland Women's European Platform (NIWEP), which provides the secretariat to the all-party group. Hansard is also present to report the session. I invite Paula and Dr Gray to make their submissions. You are very welcome, Ann Marie.

Ms Paula Bradley (All-party Group on UNSCR 1325): Am I welcome too, Chair? *[Laughter.]*

The Deputy Chairperson: Yes. You are always welcome, Paula.

Ms P Bradley: I thank the Committee for inviting us to talk about UNSCR 1325. I also introduce Emma Patterson, who is sitting to my left. Emma also provides secretariat support to the all-party group on UNSCR 1325. She is not here in a talking capacity but in an advising capacity. I also thank Dr Ann Marie Gray for being here.

In the Assembly, we have the all-party group on UNSCR 1325: Women, Peace and Security. When I say that sentence, most people glaze over as they do not have a clue what it is about. That goes for a lot of the women in the Northern Ireland Assembly as well. In fact, most of the people who know what 1325 is about are from our community groups. They are the ones who seem to be most informed on 1325, not those in our political structures. The group was set up during the last mandate by Dawn Purvis and Anna Lo. In this mandate, my party selected me as the representative for the DUP.

I have to be very honest and say that if I were not the chair of the all-party group (APG) it would not have got very far, because we have little or no representation from other parties. In saying that, Megan Fearon from Sinn Féin has now come on board. I know that she will be an asset to the APG,

but it has taken some time to get people involved. I do not know whether the title or the issue puts a lot of people off, but we are getting there slowly but surely.

The themes of 1325 are participation, promotion, prevention and relief and recovery post conflict. That is what we have been working towards. We have had many witness sessions with various groups, not only from Northern Ireland but cross-border with the Republic of Ireland. Our 1325 APG in the Assembly very much feeds into Westminster and Europe in general. It is a rather important all-party group, albeit it is poorly attended and there is not a lot of publicity or anything like that around it. It is an extremely important all-party group for the participation of women.

In December, we held our Westminster inquiry in the Assembly. On the panel, we had Baroness Ruth Lister, who also sits on the Westminster all-party group on 1325, and Margaret Owen, a human rights lawyer. They came to the Assembly to hear all the witness sessions. The inquiry was also a long time in the making, and we do not yet have the results or outcomes from it.

As I said before, local communities, generally, are more involved in 1325, although we do have people in business, public bodies and, of course, politics.

The inquiry had the following five themes: gender equality; women in decision-making; women in community; women in electoral politics, which is what we are here to talk about; and violence against women. We have not discussed women in the Northern Ireland Assembly at length in the all-party group, though we have discussed women and their role in communities at length and women in local government. We very much feel that this is the ground from which we need to take our female MLAs. A lot of them start off as community activists and as a voice in their community. They go on to be voices in their local councils and then progress to the Northern Ireland Assembly. All those other components are vitally important.

At this stage, I will pass over to Dr Gray, who will give you a bit more technical information.

Dr Ann Marie Gray (Northern Ireland Women's European Platform): I think it might be useful to say something about the purpose of the United Nations resolution. Paula is right: sometimes the terminology is enough to put people off.

The resolution is about women, peace and security. It was established by the United Nations in 2000 because of recognition across the world that unless women are really involved in building peace and in addressing conflict it is really difficult to achieve stability and lasting peace in any countries involved in conflict. There is plenty of research from across the world to demonstrate that this is the case. As an NGO, we became interested in the resolution primarily because of our work with the United Nations' Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). We realised that this was a mechanism that could be used in Northern Ireland, not just to support women into politics and decision-making but to help society move forward. For that reason, we became keen supporters of it. We did a lot of work to educate, as Paula said. The people who really know about the resolution, we think, are the NGOs. An important part of the work of the all-party group is to increase awareness of the resolution, what it can do and its purpose among politicians in local government and in the Assembly.

Sometimes, there can be a tendency for some Governments to see the resolution as a threat. I do not think that there is any evidence of that at all. It is about women, peace and security. It is about encouraging, facilitating and supporting women into equal positions in decision-making. I do not think that any politician or party here would disagree that this is not a good thing to do. It is a good thing to do.

It is also useful in encouraging young people to become involved in politics. If we can get more women into politics, we will get more young people involved in politics too, and vice versa. When we held the inquiry here and saw witness after witness coming forward in the open and closed sessions to talk about why we need the implementation of the resolution here, certainly its principles, nobody could fail to be convinced by that.

We are now writing up all the information from the inquiry. We started to disseminate and discuss it with various women's constituencies. We have had a policy round-table with rural women. We will be going to one with young women very shortly. Then, at the end of June, we are going to have a North/South round-table with policymakers. That is not about collecting more information but is about saying, "Here is the evidence that we have, and we have a lot of evidence, and how can we move forward on that evidence".

In the autumn, the all-party group at Westminster will facilitate a policy round-table there. We then want to bring the inquiry process to its culmination with a conference in Belfast, where we will put the evidence before decision-makers and say, "What can you do now to help us to move forward on these recommendations?" It is very much about moving forward.

As an organisation and all-party group, we feel that we have a lot of credible evidence about the need for these principles to be implemented, so it is about how that is done.

The Deputy Chairperson: In the practical or technical sense, how would the resolution be implemented?

Dr Gray: It is the principles that are implemented. At the technical level, the UK Government could say that they support the implementation of the resolution in Northern Ireland. As this Committee probably knows, the UK Government have so far resisted doing that because of the kind of conflict that existed in Northern Ireland. The UK Government are a firm supporter of this resolution internationally and have done more work than probably any other European Government in increasing awareness and the application of the resolution, but there is an issue with Northern Ireland.

When the UK Government were before the CEDAW committee at the United Nations last July, they were asked about their failure to implement the resolution in Northern Ireland, because it is seen as being so central to women in decision-making. The answer was that Northern Ireland could not be defined as a conflict in international law.

The issue is the implementation of the principles. We want to see the principles that Paula talked about: the participation, recovery, relief and prevention of conflict. We think that they could be implemented here without the UK Government technically implementing the resolution. That debate can still take place but, in the meantime, we can move along on these issues.

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agaibh. Tá fáilte romhaibh. Thank you, and you are both very welcome. Paula, I want to put my support for the work that you are doing on the record. I think it is really important. I know we are from different parties, but we need cross-party consensus. I do genuinely pay tribute to the work you have done. What I can say is that Sinn Féin will be participating. I speak as a former member of the group, and you will know that, once I became Whip, the meetings were at the exact same time as those of the Business Committee. What we need to do now is ensure that we have full participation, and I know that Megan will play a very important role.

I welcome your being part of our deliberations here, because, to centralise gender at every single level of the Assembly, we need to make sure that it does not just become the preserve of one all-party group, and I know that you do not want to see that either. You are the catalyst. It is important that this Committee is looking at it. I also put on record my support for the Speaker's letter to the Committee, because this issue needs to be led from the front and by people in leadership positions.

I am not surprised that the NGOs are ahead. I was in Beijing and saw the power and dynamism of the NGOs. It was the most phenomenal 10 days that I have ever had in my life. We have a lot to learn from the NGOs. Dr Gray, if you have any ideas on how we go forward — and I know that Paula will feed them in anyway — we would welcome your advice. I am sure that you are giving advice to officials here.

I have a small question. Even in the past four days, we have seen a huge increase in the number of women in politics, which I really welcome. I welcome the fact that we have two women MEPs in the North, our party has two in the South, and other parties have women. I hope that we have an increase. I see a big increase of women in local government, and that gives me a lot of hope. They are good, strong, articulate women. My daughters came to me the other day and said that there was some new research out which confirms to me what we have seen anecdotally. It found that although we have advancement of women we do not have enough advancement of working class women. There might be a bit of a difference in our elections, but I wonder whether you would like to comment on that. I do not want to see only middle class women succeeding and working class women being left behind to deal with the poverty, discrimination, child-rearing, lack of child care, lack of education etc.

Ms P Bradley: Can I just come in on this first? I know that Ann Marie and Emma will agree with me on this. During our Westminster inquiry, we had closed sessions with women whom you would deem to be from a working class background, and many of them were suppressed in their own communities

— across all communities, both unionist and nationalist — in giving their voice and saying what they thought.

We have seen an increase in domestic violence and in women being suppressed in the unionist community. One of the reasons for it not being reported is due to the fact that a lot of their men are out on licence as a result of the Belfast Agreement. If they were seen as being perpetrators of domestic violence they would end up back in prison. It has been said in the nationalist community that if women speak out and try to have their voice heard, they are seen as going against the Belfast Agreement. Therefore, there are a lot of things going on in our working class communities that are suppressing female voices, and we are not getting those female voices into the next level and into local government.

I am encouraged by local government. As you say, it is the training ground, and I believe it is where I learned my trade to a degree, albeit that it does not totally prepare you for this place. Nevertheless, it is a fantastic training ground for bringing prospective female MLAs into the Assembly, and I am encouraged by the number of women. It will be interesting to see the final figure for the women elected and see whether it has gone up or down.

There are problems in our local communities, and women's voices are being suppressed. If you were to look at the role of women in our communities prior to the Belfast Agreement, you would see that the role of women was much higher and that they were doing a lot of the peace building. Now that we are post-Belfast Agreement, we find that men are coming forward to take the glory for a lot of the things that have happened. It was not men; it was women in our local communities who were crossing the divide and making a difference. As you know, that is not coming through now, however many years we are — 16 years — down the line. I think that we have taken a backward step.

Dr Gray: I absolutely agree with what Paula said in terms of the evidence we received. Women in communities in which they would have controlled the purse strings, if you like, with respect to projects and budgets, are now saying to us that this is probably less the case in some communities. So, they have less determination over how money is spent, what it is spent on and who it is spent by. What the research tells us about working class women generally is that there are issues around education and the kind of jobs they go into. There is natural progression from some professions into politics, and less so from others. However, I think there are additional issues in Northern Ireland. The fact that we have had weak local government in the past has been an issue. You are right, Ms Ruane, when you say that if we get more women into local government that could hopefully also make a difference to representation at the Assembly.

However, we also have to face the fact that among young women, particularly young working class women in Northern Ireland, there is some disaffection with politics. In our work with this Committee and the inquiry — in addition to being on the NIWEP committee, I also chair a youth organisation, Youth Action, and we have been doing work with NIWEP around political representation — that disaffection has come through really strongly, particularly from young women. We have been trying to talk about why that is the case. Some of it is due to the fact that it seems to be difficult for them to relate to politics because of the lack of role models and because of the sense that it is hard for them to see what is tangibly being done for them. It is an issue of connection, of the mechanisms and structures of the Assembly and local government actually connecting with those young people.

It is not all down to what the politicians or the structures need to do; the youth sector and the education sector have a really fundamental role to play. The experience of the youth sector was that organisations shied away from political education and political literacy in the past because it may have been controversial or sensitive. A number of organisations, Youth Action included, are doing a lot of work now to address that. Among those organisations, this has increased the number of young people who are voting and so on.

We had a day coming up to the European elections. Paula and a number of other MLAs were at that event. What the young women were saying that day was, "What is in this for us? Why should we get involved in politics?" They were reluctant to do so rather than keen to find out. I think that this is an important issue, and maybe a more vibrant local government will help to address that perception, because you will have politics happening to a greater extent in local communities, more powers and so on.

There are broader issues as well. We are behind in a number of fundamental social policies that would help women into politics and into the labour market — issues such as childcare, which we have not really progressed to the extent that we need to yet, and transport. Northern Ireland is a rural area.

If you are a woman with young children who is not living in Belfast and wants to be in the Assembly, I would say that it would be difficult for you to do that. We are not doing enough yet, as a society, to accommodate working women and political women. Every system struggles with it, but I think we are still a bit behind. We have not made the progress that we would like to have made, or need to make, hence the fact that CEDAW keeps coming back to the need to implement the resolution or its principles. It talks about the need to introduce temporary special measures. We are making so little progress that we need to do something very particular and focused to address the situation.

Mr Campbell: I know that it is a topic that a number of people have had an interest in for a time, but I would like to ask you a question. About 20-odd years ago in the north-west, I started to hold open women's meetings to try to get female participation and brought some of our better known females to the meetings. I found that there was very considerable interest at surface level. A lot of people came to the meetings and there was a lot of interest in the lack of female participation, but it seemed that it ended at that point. Once you got below that surface and said, "Now that we have all seen what the problem is and identified the nature of the difficulties, we can try and gauge people and see where they are, what they need to see, and what help they need to translate that from active acknowledgement of the problem to active participation and resolution of the problem", that is where the problem seemed to emerge. I do not know whether there was a glass ceiling, but there was an issue that prevented acknowledgement turning into participation. Is that what you have found? Is that what you identified?

Dr Gray: Yes. We all acknowledged that there is a problem, and political parties here have acknowledged that there is a problem. Experience across the world has shown that sometimes it takes something like quotas — I know that quotas are not always very popular — to almost give the process an impetus and try to get that critical mass of people there.

We have a number of opportunities in Northern Ireland. Due to the history of policymaking here, we have non-departmental public bodies with very significant public responsibilities. The number of women in those bodies has been about 32% to 33% for a very long time — since the mid-1990s in fact. There was a significant increase from the 1980s to the 1990s, and then it just stopped.

The CEDAW Committee has continuously recommended that temporary special measures could be introduced in the appointments process. We do know something about the barriers there. There is the fact that the process can be seen as not being very transparent, the issue with people moving around quangos so that there is not the space that there could be sometimes, that more could be done around mentoring and shadowing, that more could be done with regard to how the actual jobs are described, and so on. There is also the remuneration, and there could be childcare costs and travel costs. I see those as steps that could be taken, and taken quite quickly. If the number of women in public bodies could be increased, that might also feed through to local government and the Assembly, because it is decision-making in the broadest sense.

Mr Campbell: Yes; however, knowing some of the people, I know that there has been an increase in middle-class women coming through, but there does not seem to be the same increase in working-class women.

Dr Gray: No, and it has not been enough of an increase to really change the overall figure very much, and it is also something to do with where women are located. The visibility of women is really important, and Paula touched on that. If women and young women are not seeing other women on public bodies, Assembly Committees and so on, in substantial numbers, what have they got to aspire to? What is there to encourage them to say that that could be them?

Mr Campbell: There is the horrendous ongoing issue — nationally — of the 200 females who were kidnapped in Nigeria, which, hopefully, will be resolved. Does that type of issue not give you a headline to raise the problem in the international arena? Awful as it is with regard to the safety and security problem, does it not provide an opportunity for it to become a cause célèbre almost? Have you done anything on that?

Dr Gray: The interesting thing about this was the fact that, as you know, it was a number of days before it was reported widely by the international media. It was reported when a woman from one of the NGOs in that country contacted the international group that she had links with, and she spoke on 'Woman's Hour' and on the media across the world. One of the things that she said really struck me. She said that we all know that if a child goes missing in the UK, Ireland or France it is all over the media, and a lot of effort is put into finding that one child. She said that 200 children there have been

kidnapped and are missing, it took the international media days to report it, and she had to encourage them to raise the issue.

Yes, Mr Campbell, I think you are right. That is happening. It is happening with the groups that we link to in our work in the UN and the European Union. There is the issue of women and girls being protected and their entitlement to education, work, not to live in poverty and to be part of decision-making. That brings us back to where we started, which is for the UN to realise that the best way of shoring that up, if you like, in countries that are unstable or post-conflict is to have equal representation of women at the highest level.

Mr Campbell: I have one last question. It is slightly tongue-in-cheek. You talked about getting representation on the group. Did you ever think about getting an easier name? That might be a wee bit of a help.

Ms P Bradley: You are absolutely right. We have discussed that in the group, and we feel that the way forward is for the group to change its name, look at 1325, pick out something from that and move it forward. You are absolutely right, Gregory: when I talk to anyone about 1325 they look at me blankly and tell me that they have not got a clue what I am talking about. You are absolutely right.

Dr Gray: Interestingly, it is all about education. I cannot remember when we started this work — it was around 2000 — but when we talked about the resolution then, even people in the NGO sector looked at us blankly. Now, whenever officials in OFMDFM get responses to consultations, such as the childcare or gender equality strategies, the UN resolution is all over them. There has been a lot of education and awareness and it has worked in the sector. That could also be increased politically.

Mr Beggs: Thank you for your presentation. I support your model of encouraging women to become active in their local communities and community organisations. There is then a natural progression to local politics and, ultimately, the Assembly and higher. I think that that is the correct model.

Women have a critical role to play, particularly in disadvantaged communities where there is a very weak community infrastructure. I certainly agree with the point that we can help to create a more stable and better community if we have a stable community infrastructure. I have seen that women have a vital role to play in that; we just need more of it and more women to become involved.

Women feel passionately about the education of their children, road safety issues and a number of other issues. You need a hook to get people involved; they need an issue. It is not just that they want to be active and, because they are women, they want to represent women. Something that affects them and their families tends to be something that motivates them. If we had more support and encouragement, I think that more women would get involved and would be allowed the space to play that important role in their communities and develop further. Thank you.

Mr Rogers: You are very welcome. I fully support what you are doing. The SDLP is very supportive of enhancing the role of women.

The key to this is the role of women, particularly those in local government. It was good to see the representation of women on councils up in all the parties, including my party. You have talked about role models and they become role models for some of our community people to aspire to local government.

The key thing is how women will be facilitated in their role in local government, particularly in rural areas. Our local government areas are now much bigger and, in my area, it could be up to a four-hour round trip to meetings etc. How can women be fulfilled and what can we do to fulfil them in their role of delivering local government? What do we need to do?

Ms P Bradley: A lot of the issues about how representatives will get around, the time commitments and everything else are not just women's issues: they are men's issues too. However, we have to add on the fact that women generally look after the childcare, the elder care, or whatever it might be, in their families. That puts added pressures on. I think that councils will have to look at that, the timings of their meetings, where they will take place and all those issues.

I absolutely agree that councils are one of the best places. Now that our councils have changed and we have our super councils, they will be even more involved in the structure and planning of

communities. We will have some really effective role models working in our local councils, across all the parties.

We cannot detract from the Assembly either. We are the ones who are on the TV news at night-time. We are the ones who women see every night on TV or hear on the radio. Yet again, there are so few of us that the role is not being put across. We have some great role models in the Assembly. We have female Ministers, female Chairs of Committees, and lots of female representation here who are great role models. We have women at MEP level as well, so it is there.

I agree with you that because of the changes in local councils we will see a lot of women involved in the making and structuring of their communities, and how those will change. However, when it comes to demographics, it is a male and female issue as to how that will work.

Dr Gray: We have an opportunity now with local government. Some of it has been lost, we would argue, in terms of the transition committees for example, which were not gendered. We need to make sure that how the new councils operate is conducive to women participating, that issues around childcare are dealt with and that the timings and logistics are confronted.

Some of the other issues you raise are such fundamental issues of gender inequality inside and outside families. This is work in progress, if you like, because we cannot really, arguably, have gender equality in political life or in the workplace until we have it in the home. Whenever Paula says it is a male issue as well, it is a male issue in more ways than one.

The Deputy Chairperson: Thanks very much, Ann Marie and Paula. Of course, the all-party group is well-placed with yourself on this Committee, Paula, to bring forward any suggestions, proposals or whatever during our review. Thanks very much to both of you. I am sure we will hear more from you. Go raibh maith agaibh.