

# **UN RESOLUTION 1325: THE EXPERIENCE WITHIN LOCAL COMMUNITIES**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper considers the 'Women and Peacebuilding – Sharing the Learning' project which was developed through a partnership of the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland (CFNI); the Women's Resource & Development Agency (WRDA) in Northern Ireland, and the National Women's Council of Ireland. This provided the project with a reach into both Catholic/Nationalist/Republican and Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist communities across Northern Ireland as well as connections to women in local communities in the six southern counties that fringed the border.

## **BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION**

Avila has been the Director of the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland since 1994. Avila has written extensively on community development, women's issues and Civil Society and is an active member of the Foundations for Peace Network – a peer network of independent Trusts and Foundations, both located and working in, conflict areas.

Feminists have long argued that the social phenomena of peace, security and war are gendered. In 2000, the United Nations' Security Council (UNSC) recognized this when it adopted Resolution 1325 on 'Women, Peace and Security' (UNSC 1325), a development celebrated by activists who had engaged in advocacy on this issue over many years. Indeed much of the foundation work was laid during the UN International Women's decades (Nairobi, Mexico and Beijing) where the platform of action featured 'Women and Armed Conflict' as one of the twelve critical areas of concern (Peace Research Institute Oslo, 2012). Resolution 1325 in essence acknowledges the specific effect of armed conflict on women, alongside women's role in preventing and resolving conflict, in the context of the Security Council's responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security. The resolution applies to all 198 UN member states, including the United Kingdom (UK) and Ireland. The resolution encompasses a number of pillars of priority action, namely: Participation; Protection and Prevention; and Relief and Recovery. Pillar 1 – increasing women's participation in decision-making is an important cross-cutting theme, whilst prevention of gender-based violence and protection against it has been bolstered by a series of subsequent resolutions (UNSCR 1820; UNSCR 1888; UNSCR 1960) as has the need for a clear understanding of gender needs during times of war. Relief and Recovery provisions includes a focus on the application of a gender perspective to reconstruction and peacebuilding programmes and the responses of local, national and international systems to women's priorities in post-conflict situations as they impact stability and development (McMinn and O'Rourke, 2012). The other interesting trend of United Nations' policy relevant to this area is the developing policy-making around peacebuilding and peace-keeping, as indicated by the establishment of a UN Peacebuilding Commission.

While the European Union has addressed the regional implementation of UNSCR 1325 in its *Comprehensive EU Approach to Implementation of UNSCR 1325 and 1820*, the implementation of the provisions of Resolution 1325 at state level has been through the development of National Action Plans (NAPs) – a specific plan developed by a UN member state to nationally implement UNSCR 1325, and related resolutions 1820, 1888 and 1889 that promote women's protection, participation, and leadership in the full spectrum of peacebuilding processes. NAPs are official government documents that include measures to mainstream gender into peace and security operations within a country; translating mandates into plans for action and providing structures for implementation into order to transform policy into practice. The best NAPs draw on the insights and experience of civil society during the processes of their formulation. Both Ireland and the UK have NAPs in place, however a project supported by the Special EU Support Body (SEUPB), under Measure 2.2 of the EU PEACE 111 Programme (Contributing to a Shared Society through the development of key institutional capacities) was designed with the intent of examining both local knowledge of Resolution 1325 as well as of the National Action Plans, and the applicability of the provisions of the resolution to women in a range of local communities.

## WOMEN AND PEACEBUILDING – SHARING THE LEARNING

The 'Women and Peacebuilding – Sharing the Learning' project was developed through a partnership of the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland (CFNI); the Women's Resource & Development Agency (WRDA) in Northern Ireland, and the National Women's Council of Ireland. This provided the project with a reach into both Catholic/Nationalist/Republican and Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist communities across Northern Ireland as well as connections to women in local communities in the six southern counties that fringed the border. While the interest of the WRDA and the National Women's Council of Ireland was clear, the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland, as an independent charitable Foundation, had a long established commitment to supporting community-based Women's Groups and initiatives (Kilmurray, 2012). A study on the Women's Sector in Northern Ireland, commissioned by the Community Foundation in 2001 (CFNI, 2001), estimated that there were some 1,071 'traditional' Women's organisations active across the North, and 423 'activist' Women's Groups/Centres, with the vast majority of the latter (some 90%) being community-based Women's Groups. The distinction made between the two held the 'traditional' organisations as being long established and often linked to specific religious denominations, whilst those warranting the 'activist' label tended to be more likely in the business of providing support, advice, education and refuge on a daily basis, with a social change agenda that was more challenging than the 'traditional' organisations. The majority of the 'activist' groups had emerged over the decades of the Troubles in Northern Ireland with feminist author, Cynthia Cockburn, celebrating the potential of 'transversal dialogue' that she identified in a study of activist Women's Groups in Northern Ireland, Bosnia and Israel/Palestine, which she described as the idea that each participant in the dialogue brings with her the rooting of her own identity and communal background, but at the same time tries to shift in order to put herself in a situation of exchange with women from different backgrounds (Cockburn, 1998:8/9). The 'Women and Peacebuilding – Sharing the Learning' project also drew on the importance of bringing women into dialogue.

The 1990's had been a vibrant period of varied activity for the Women's Sector in Northern Ireland and the southern border areas, given a combination of financial support provided through the EU Special Support Programme for Peace & Reconciliation (PEACE 1), and particularly through the Programme Measures that specifically referenced the inclusion of women, but there was also the political space opened up by the election of the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition to the peace talks chaired by Senator George Mitchell (1996-1998). Although clearly not all women who voted supported the Women's Coalition, but as Beatrix Campbell noted their presence opened up space and visibility (Campbell, 2008). It was the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition representatives that argued for provision of a Civic Forum to be included in the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement and that insisted on the insertion of the 'right of women to full and equal political participation' and the 'advancement of women in public life' (Belfast Agreement: 1998) on the basis that

the violent conflict of the previous three decades had constituted 'an armed patriarchy' (Fearon, 1999). Responsibility for implementation of these commitments was allocated to the British Government.

A decade after the stumbling implementation of the Agreement itself, the Civic Forum had been mothballed; the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition had disbanded; and there was little indication that the commitments to the active inclusion of women in decision-making was being honoured, let alone proactively promoted. Alongside this, the availability of funding for community-based women's groups and initiatives was, if anything, more limited. A range of work had been supported under the EU PEACE 11 Programme, but the emphasis had moved from a focus on social inclusion to peace and reconciliation. The WRDA was funded to carry out a project on 'Women and Conflict' under Measure 2.4. PEACE 11 in 2007/8, which was based on the premise that women had very distinctive and diverse experiences of conflict, including those of meeting the challenges of organising and sustaining family life. The diversity of women's experiences charted also included differences experienced between Catholic and Protestant women, as well as between rural and urban dwellers. The project was also informed by the view that these diverse experiences were often absent from the grander narratives of the conflict and that they directly inform women's views on contemporary issues. The process adopted was one of collective remembering and of individuals contributing stories based on their personal experiences in the group discussions. These stories were related to the timeline of 'historical' events (Gormally and McEvoy, 2009). By 2010, however, it appeared that the findings from this project had little impact on decision-making. The 'Women and Peacebuilding – Sharing the Learning' project was drafted with an emphasis on impacting on institutional policy and practice.

#### PUTTING THE PROJECT TO WORK.

At the heart of the project was touching base with the perceptions of women in communities across Northern Ireland and in the six southern border counties that had experienced the impact of the violent conflict over the period since 1968. Clearly there were a variety of experiences as had been highlighted by the earlier 'Women in Conflict' project, but it was felt important to touch base with perceptions as they had evolved since the referenda that had voted in the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement in 1998. It was felt important to broaden the basis for discussion by placing the local perceptions in the context of UNSCR 1325 with its emphasis on the gender lens with regard to conflict transformation and peacebuilding. The initial focus was on the organisation of a layered set of meetings to glean the views of community-based women, with an emphasis on those communities that had both experienced the worst impact of the conflict in addition to socio-economic deprivation in rural and urban areas. These proved easier to identify in Northern Ireland than in the southern border counties. However over the initial 18 months of the project seminars were organised in Derry/Londonderry; Dundalk; Rathcoole (Newtownabbey); and Monaghan on a localised basis, with an additional two cross-

border seminars being held in Newry and Armagh. A smaller Focus Group was held in Cullyhanna in South Armagh. The process was organised around specific seminars in Northern Ireland and the southern border counties respectively, with a follow up invitation to participate in a joint cross-Border seminar. Each phase of the seminar series was organised to consider one of the themes related to the main pillars of UNSCR 1325 – Participation; Protection and Prevention; and Relief and Recovery. A process of facilitated reflection and discussion is adopted to elicit local views, with the added input of a keynote speaker relevant to the particular theme of 1325. In the specific case of the second level cross-border seminars the keynote address is generally delivered by an international speaker to hold true to the broader remit of the resolution. The international partner to the ‘Women and Peacebuilding – Sharing the Learning’ initiative has been the Foundations for Peace Network.<sup>1</sup> To date the cross-Border seminars have hosted speakers on women’s issues in the context of peacebuilding from Sri Lanka, Serbia and Cyprus in order to explore the possible ramifications of UNSCR 1325.

The initial finding arising out of the seminar series was that local women were largely unaware of the UNSCR 1325 notwithstanding the discussion around the issue by women involved in the more developed regional/national organisations and academia. The terminology adopted by the resolutions was also found to be off-putting, thus the ‘Women and Peacebuilding – Sharing the Learning’ project re-framed the issues under consideration as (i) Violence, security and safety; (ii) Women’s Rights are Human Rights – women and social justice; (iii) Women’s participation in decision-making and representation; (iv) Women and the legacies of the past (specifically of the Troubles); and (v) Women and institutional change – which was a cross-cutting theme. Seminars were organised in the North, the South and then cross-Border, around each of these re-framed areas of interest. While the seminar series is still on-going, the final project output will include the organisation of some eight gatherings of women in Northern Ireland; six seminars across the southern border counties; and six cross-Border meetings. There is also provision for a concluding project conference. In order to provide a point of relevant comparison the ‘Women and Peacebuilding – Sharing the Learning’ project has also provided for a facilitated discussion with women from the Roma community in both Belfast and Dublin. The two main questions posed to each gathering of women within the specific theme under consideration are (a) Do you feel that women’s lives are better or worse now as compared to fifteen years ago – and in what ways?; and (b) What stops you from doing what you want to do in your life – and what would you change? The responses are instructive.

## LISTENING TO LOCAL VOICES

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<sup>1</sup> The Foundations for Peace Network is a peer led network of independent indigenous foundations working for peacebuilding and social justice in violently contested societies, established in 2004. Its current membership includes Foundations working in Israel; Palestine; India; Nepal; Serbia; Georgia; Indonesia; Mexico; Bangladesh; Sri Lanka and Colombia.

Apart from the lack of any awareness of UNSCR 1325, it is becoming clear that few of the very many women who have participated in the seminar series feel that they have any influence on decision-making or impact on institutional practice. This was a shared finding across the spectrum that ranged from the women in the Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist housing estate of Rathcoole who had little previous involvement in the Women's Sector, to women from South Armagh where there had been many years of activism. In both cases there was a sense of marginalisation, but in the latter this was exacerbated by anger over perceived loss of voice. The seminar findings around the specific theme of Violence, Community Safety and Security were influenced by factors concerning the community context and the age range of the women participating in the discussions (held in Derry/Londonderry; Dundalk and Newry), with a number of quandaries being identified. There was a common belief that whereas the years of violent conflict had been marked by a communal fear, now the sense of insecurity was more individualised in nature, which in many ways made it harder to address. These concerns reflected the feeling that social cohesion within even single identity communities was increasingly under strain, whereas during the years of conflict there had been essential community solidarity in the face of 'the other'. In areas where high rates of unemployment were an ever prevalent feature, women expressed fears that community fragmentation was increasing the likelihood of young people – their children and grandchildren – becoming engaged with the new paramilitary groups as a result of feelings of alienation and the glorification of the past. Fears were also expressed about levels of anti-social behaviour, which in a number of areas in Northern Ireland was spinning into retaliatory punishment attacks, notwithstanding the dramatically increased acceptance of the PSNI (Police Service Northern Ireland). Another issue that women felt strongly about was the perceived increase in domestic violence that figures from the Women's Aid organisations, both North and South, would seem to support. Particular concern was expressed about the reported number of younger women who were victims of physical attack. Women also expressed concerns about the continued prescription of, and dependence, on prescription drugs – a feature of the years of the Troubles when such drugs were readily available, and often shared, but which Health authorities had moved to prevent. The call was made for appropriate mental and emotional health support initiatives to be put in place to replace the need for dependence on medication. Again, this requirement was related back to the enhanced feelings of individualised insecurity.

On a positive note the view was expressed that many women are now more empowered with information about the support options available, although equally they still bear the brunt of a plethora of pressures – both social and economic. There is still the assumption that they carry the primary caring role in the immediate, and often the extended, family, in circumstances of dwindling resources. In a number of cases examples were shared about how the caring role of women had been stretched as a direct result of the legacy of the Troubles – involving them in looking after people who were survivors/victims in whatever guise; while still taking the main

responsibility of fear for younger family members should they become involved in any activities that might be deemed to be 'anti-social' in nature. Added to this were the demands at community level, with ever more talk of care in the community by institutions without an acknowledgement that such policy changes might entail a disproportionate level of demands placed on women within communities.

Views expressed around the challenge of change mechanisms highlighted the need to proactively create opportunities for the greater participation of younger women at both community and broader societal levels. Possible approaches whereby older women could mentor younger women were discussed, but there was also an acute awareness of the deep differences in life opportunities and expectations as between young women (and men) who were educated as compared to those who were effectively caught in cycles of poverty, low educational attainment and deprivation. It was felt that the programmes of economic and social 'recovery' from the Troubles had not sufficiently addressed this challenge, with too much reliance being placed at political level in a possible trickle down economic effect. Seminars held in Monaghan and Dundalk also addressed the negative impact of the economic austerity measures and the sense of growing inequality levels. Again, there was a concern that younger generations were likely to be specifically disadvantaged, although reference was also made to 'The Empty Purse' campaign currently being conducted by the WRDA across Northern Ireland, to underline the feminisation of poverty and disadvantage in the North.

With regard to the legacies of the past there was a belief that it was now easier to work on a cross-community basis, notwithstanding two caveats. On the one hand women in some of the Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist areas still felt the need for intra-community permission to engage in these activities; whilst there was recognition of the continuing challenge to ensure that the voices of women from the Protestant community were heard and acknowledged south of the border. However the nature of their silence was accepted as being somewhat different from the silencing of women north of the border, where it was felt that the new power-sharing political dispensation allowed little or no room for critique or questioning. This was ascribed to the fragility of the political settlement reached and the remnants of a range of command and control political parties. Consequently there was a call for more channels to be established to facilitate the expression of women's views, as participants believed that women had the potential to address some of the issues raised in the seminars, but needed the resources to take the lead in prioritising community concerns rather than simply responding to siloed, top down official programmes. At least one participant argued that civic education in schools should raise awareness around the need – and right – for women's participation in decision-making. Many agreed with this suggestion.

Concerns about the effective silencing of women were repeated throughout the seminar series, and while it was recognised that individual women were in the executive structures of government both North and South, there were still fears that

at local community level decision-making structures and positions were overly 'owned' by one or other political party or organisation, and that active citizenship was welcome when it adhered to particular party allegiances. There was also a sense of the impact of change fatigue at both political and institutional levels - so much had changed over the years since the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, eliciting the response – What, you still want more? However, the reality remained that for many community-based women, living in areas that had suffered the combination of high levels of disadvantage as well as the brunt of the conflict, the experience of positive change to date had been limited. One participant summed up a range of the frustration expressed, when she argued that at both local and macro levels, political decision-making had to be 'stripped back and opened up'. This view reverberated with seminar participants both North and South.

While the seminar discussions are still continuing<sup>2</sup> it would seem that the issues being raised relate to the main pillars of UNSCR 1325, although arguably in not as dramatic a form as the dilemmas presented by the speaker from Sri Lanka who addressed one of the cross-Border seminars in Newry. However, there was a clearer alignment with a range of the issues highlighted in the Gender Advisory Team report from Cyprus that were shared with women who attended the cross-Border seminar in Enniskillen, Co. Fermanagh.

#### DEVELOPING A TOOLKIT FOR INSTITUTIONAL LEARNING.

As the 'Women and Peacebuilding – Sharing the Learning' project is concerned to effect institutional change the final phase of the initiative will be to take the issues raised during the programme of seminars, relating them to UNSCR 1325, and to fashion a toolkit as to how institutional decision-making and practice can address them. A project Expert Advisory Group of women drawn from academia and NGOs (non-governmental organisations), under the chairpersonship of Professor Monica McWilliams, is helping with advice in this regard. In order to ensure relevance, a number of Stakeholder meetings have been held to ascertain the concerns of statutory departments and agencies, with one-to-one interviews being conducted as a necessary follow-up. It is recognised that all too often project reports can sit unread if there is not a clear fit and relevance to stakeholder interests. However given that community-based women would seem to have largely fallen beneath the decision-making radar in the official narratives of peacebuilding – both North and South – it is hoped that there is still room for them to pose new questions of the old problem as to how society can be framed in such a way that might ensure inclusion. As Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, President of Liberia, once remarked – “Women’s contribution to the search for durable peace is remarkable, unparalleled – but most often overlooked”. UNSCR 1325, and related resolutions, seek to address this challenge, but can only be effective if the purpose and principles espoused can be

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<sup>2</sup> For Seminar Updates see [www.communityfoundationni.org](http://www.communityfoundationni.org), scroll to Women and Peacebuilding – Sharing the Learning.

reflected at a practical local level. However one of the quandaries highlighted by the 'Women and Peacebuilding – Sharing the Learning' initiative is that the UK Government fails to accept the applicability of UNSCR 1325 to Northern Ireland: there are narratives and legacies of the past still to be resolved.

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