

North Belfast Women's Voices

EXPLORING IDENTITY,
CULTURE AND THE FUTURE



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Women's Resource and Development Agency (WRDA) has been working with women and providing support to women's groups and networks across Northern Ireland since 1983. WRDA's vision is of a fair and equal society where women are empowered and are a visible force for change and influence in all areas of life.

Our mission, as a regional organisation, is to advance women's equality and participation in society. We work with women to achieve social, economic, political and cultural transformation. We engage across all traditions with women based in the most disadvantaged urban and rural areas of Northern Ireland.

Our work covers a wide scope and keeps us right at the heart of local communities. We are a membership organisation, existing for the benefit of our members, representing their interests and informing them of the latest issues affecting the women's sector. Our membership includes a wide range of local and international women's groups and organisations, as well as many individuals.

We gratefully acknowledge the financial assistance and support from our funders the Community Relations Council. We would also like to acknowledge the women who gave of their valuable time to speak to us with such honesty, integrity and openness.

"Walls turned sideways are bridges"

Angela Davis - Angela Davis: An Autobiography (1974)

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FOREWORD

The Women's Resource and Development Agency's Women and Peacebuilding Project 2012-2014 captured the experiences of women living through the conflict and the subsequent period of conflict resolution and peacebuilding in Northern Ireland. The contextual framework for the project was the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 and women on a cross community and cross border basis addressed the following themes in facilitated discussion groups:

- ⇒ Violence, personal safety & security
- ⇒ Decision-making & Representation
- ⇒ Women & Social Justice
- ⇒ Women & Institutional Change
- ⇒ Women & the Legacies of the past

The 1,200 women who participated voiced their views and concerns that women continue to be excluded and silenced in their communities. Specifically their invisibility in conflict and peace building processes while levels of domestic violence, sexual abuse, mental – ill health and drug and alcohol misuse are rising significantly.

In view of the referencing of women in the Stormont House Agreement-SHA 2014, Fresh Start Agreement-FSA 2015, positive and progressive policy discussions and engagement with politicians in the promotion and mainstreaming of gender equality, WRDA was prompted to initiate research in North Belfast to hear women's voices of their lived experiences of decades of conflict and highlight the issues that are important to them in terms of identity, culture, flags and parades.

The clear message coming from the women of North Belfast which resonates with all women across NI and internationally is that the experiences and impact of conflict are substantially different for women than they are for men. There are existing high levels of gender inequalities that hinder women's participation in meaningful and sustainable responses to the conflict, peacebuilding and reconstruction processes.

Kellie O' Dowd the research author has helped to shine a light on the issues which need to be addressed in north Belfast and detailed in the five recommendations; paramilitarism, flags and emblems, political leadership, funding and housing.

This research should act as a catalyst in assisting the promotion of gender equality across all sectors and importantly to influence policy, institutional thinking and change concerning women in the context of peace and security in Northern Ireland.

Anne McVicker

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

North Belfast was ravaged by 40 years of conflict which was disproportionately concentrated in this part of the city. This undoubtedly has had a massive physical and psychological impact on the inhabitants. The Women's Resource and Development Agency carried out this research to give voice to women in North Belfast, by capturing their lived experiences and how they individually, their families, their communities, and in turn, their geographical and cultural relationships have been affected. It also records recommendations on how they can move communities forward by those who have borne the brunt of the political, social, economic and cultural fallouts Northern Ireland has had to offer.

This report will bear witness to the realities of women that are working in both single identity and/or cross community groups in this locality; women who are well versed in dealing with the grassroots issues that arise from cultural, social and political instability throughout the conflict. In sum, this study will highlight the issues that are of importance to them in terms of culture, identity, and flags, whilst sketching out a number of recommendations which the women themselves feel are required to move their community forward namely in terms of dealing with paramilitaries, funding for work with women, flags disputes, housing and political leadership.

The report makes the following recommendations:

1. Paramilitaries

The PSNI and criminal justice system must be more proactive in addressing paramilitary intimidation and control of communities. Women who live in these communities must have some meaningful input into the policies, practices, programmes and funding aimed at addressing the legacy and impact of paramilitarism. This cannot happen until the PSNI and criminal justice system acts effectively so that women can engage confidently. All engagements between statutory bodies and community groups should be required to meet a 50% gender quota to ensure that women do not have to fight community 'gatekeepers' for their place at the table.

2. Funding

Funding must be ring-fenced specifically for community development and community relations. This needs to be a long term, strategic approach and not piecemeal and short term. This is particularly important for women who have not had their share of the dividends of peace. In order to demonstrate a commitment to addressing the gender impact of the conflict there should be a meaningful spending commitment when it comes to funding women's groups. The United Nations recommends a 15% minimum of budgets to be targeted towards gender programmes. There also needs to be a more proactive approach to trauma work in North Belfast, ensuring it is well resourced and accessible, getting to the people who need it most.

3. Flags and Emblems

The findings of this research suggest that women tend to be more concerned with the pragmatic implications and community impact when disputes arise over flags and emblems.

Although we cannot dictate to communities who represents them when it comes to these negotiations, the hyper –masculinity that permeates these issues must be recognised and addressed. Where statutory agencies are involved in the negotiations there must be a 50% gender quota, in order to develop and sustain meaningful and effective flag protocols with women equally involved in the negotiations.

4. Political Leadership

Although the conflict in Northern Ireland is not recognised by the UK government as a conflict under international legal definitions, the experiences of women who participated in this research experienced it as such. Progress has also been made by the All Party Group on UNSCR 1325 in Stormont. The principles of participation embedded in the UNSCR 1325 on women, peace and security must be implemented that would create pathways for women in communities to have more access to political and public roles.

5. Housing

The work on this issue in North Belfast has been addressed by the Participation and Practice of Rights group. In the knowledge that a focus on redevelopment and regeneration will shortly mean that land available for social homes will run out, we call on all Belfast City Council and Northern Ireland Housing Executive to use all of their power to ensure social housing is built on the sites named in the latest PPR report, especially the Dunnes Stores and Hillview Industrial Park.

THE AIM

The purpose of this research is to give voice to women in North Belfast, by capturing their lived experiences of four decades of conflict, which was disproportionately concentrated in this part of the city. As such, this study explores how the women, their families, their communities, and in turn, their geographical and cultural relationships have been affected by the conflict. This report will bear witness to the realities of women that are working in both single identity and/or cross community groups in this locality; women who are well versed in dealing with the grassroots issues that arise from cultural, social and political instability throughout the conflict. In sum, this study will highlight the issues that are of importance to them in terms of culture, identity, and flags, whilst sketching out a number of recommendations which the women themselves feel are required to move their community forward, namely in terms of dealing with paramilitaries, funding for work with women and young people, housing and political leadership.

**The information presented in this report aims to increase understanding of
THREE key issues:**



The historical, gender and policy contexts and the impact of these realities on women living in North Belfast



The issues that are of concern to women with regards to flags, identity and culture



How women in North Belfast can best be supported to tackle the issues of most concern to them

THE CONTEXT

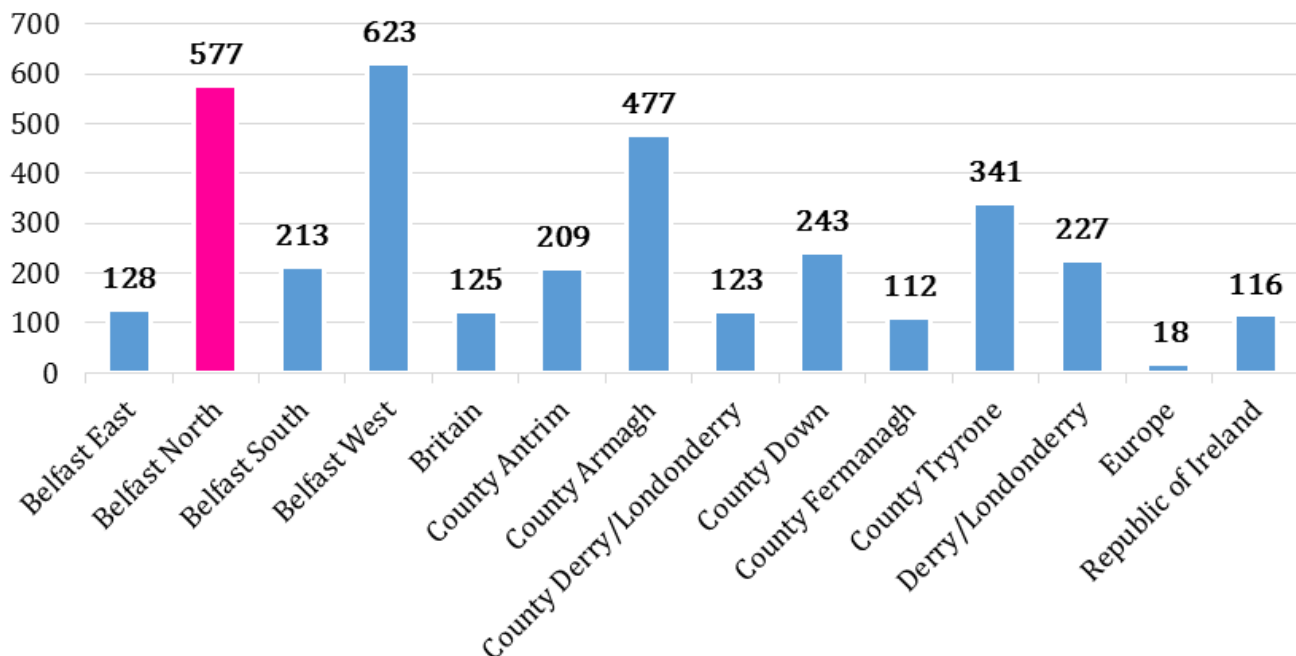
Socio-Economic Profile of North Belfast

Commonly referred to as the ‘Troubles’, the conflict in and about Northern Ireland almost paralysed the normal functioning of society. It was concentrated in the working class communities which became fertile ground for paramilitary recruitment and violence. This was particularly evident in North Belfast. This section will provide a general overview of the context in this part of the city.

The Historical Context

North Belfast bore much of the brunt of the conflict with 577 conflict related deaths recorded between 1969-2001¹ with at least a further 12 conflict related deaths between 2002-2016.²

Geographic Locations of Troubles related deaths



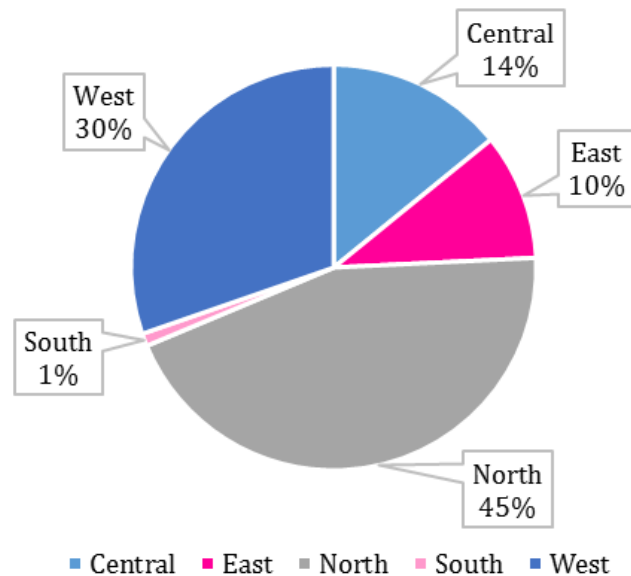
1. <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/sutton/tables/Location.html>

2. <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/issues/violence/deathsfrom2002draft.htm>

Peace Walls

Peace walls or 'security barriers' are a common feature in working class areas of Belfast as defensive architecture to keep Catholic Republican Nationalist (CRN) and Protestant Unionist Loyalist (PUL) communities apart and appear at what is known as interface areas³. In Spring 2011 Belfast Interface Project commissioned the Institute of Conflict Research to identify and classify these defensive barriers in Belfast. There are 99 barriers in Belfast; 44 of them are situated in North Belfast.

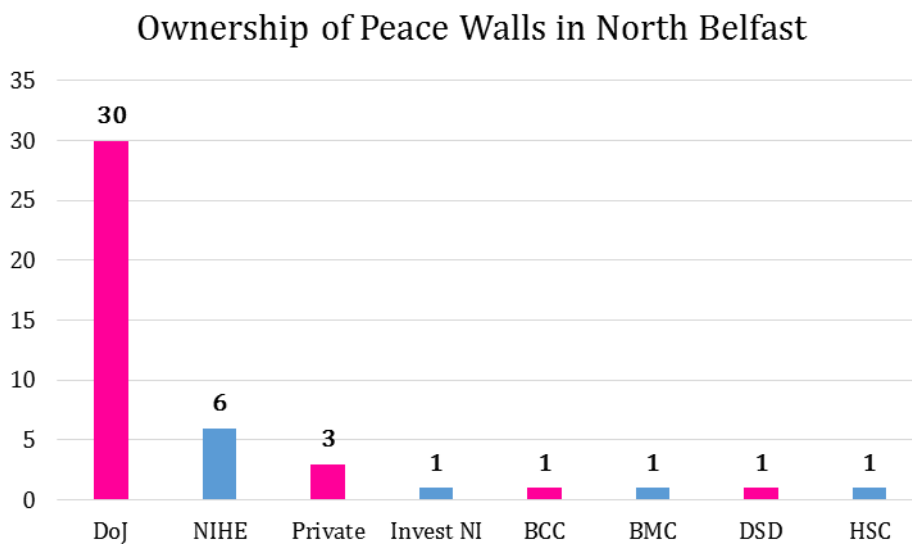
Number of Peace Walls in Belfast



The vast majority of the barriers in Central, East and West Belfast were constructed prior to the ceasefires in 1994. However, of the 44 barriers in North Belfast 17 have been constructed after 1994.

Ownership of Peace Walls

When the conflict first erupted onto the streets, it has been argued that communities themselves responded to the violence and fear of the 'other' by creating make-shift barricades to separate the two communities. This soon gave way to formal structures and today, these structures are managed/owned by various stakeholders. According to the Belfast Interface project, eight different owners of various structures were identified in North Belfast; most (30) are owned by the Department of Justice who inherited them from the Northern Ireland Office after the devolution of policing and justice powers in 2007. Six are owned by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive. Three appear to be in private ownership while Belfast City Council, Invest NI, Belfast Metropolitan College, Department of Social Development (now Department for Communities) and Belfast Health & Social Care Trust all own one each.



Sectarian Incidents

There was an increase in the total number of incidents with a sectarian motivation in North Belfast from 316 in 2005- 2006 to 487 in 2006-2007, an increase of 54.1%.⁴ In 2014/15 there were 254 incidents which dropped to 205 in 2015/16 which was a decrease of 19%. Although the figures indicate a decrease in sectarian incidents, North Belfast still has the highest number of sectarian incidents of the 11 policing districts in Northern Ireland and the highest in the four areas of Belfast.⁵

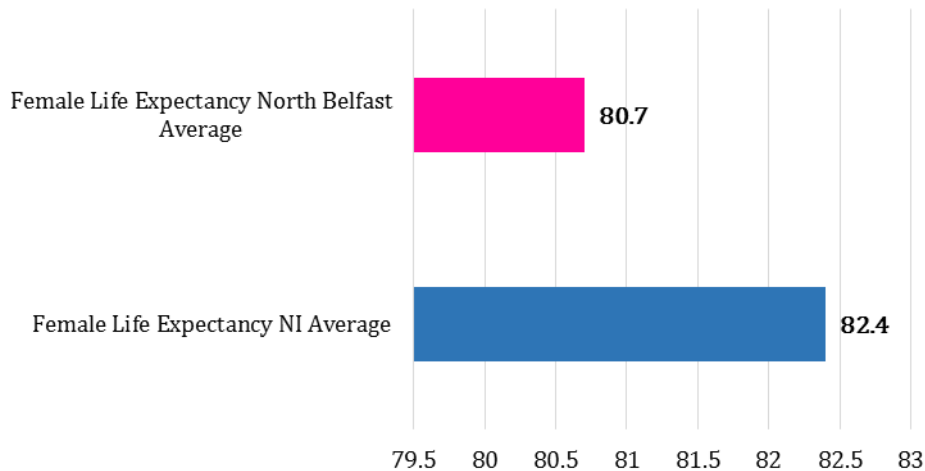
4. PSNI, 2007

5. PSNI, 2016

The Gender Context

⁶North Belfast is one of the most deprived areas in NI. Nine of North Belfast's 25 wards are ranked in the 10% most deprived wards in NI. Women in North Belfast have a life expectancy two years lower than the NI average although it has increased by 0.4% between 2011 and 2013. Women in North Belfast outlive men by an average of almost six years. Female life expectancy is 80.7 years and male life expectancy is 74.9 years compared to the NI average of 82.4 years and 78.1 years respectively.

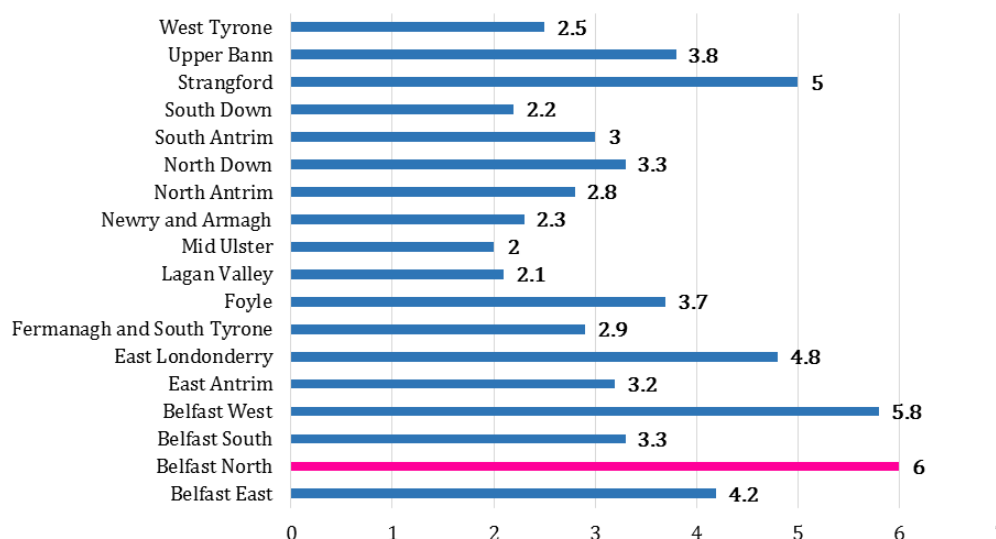
Female Life Expectancy



Teenage Pregnancy

North Belfast has almost double the NI average rate of teenage mothers at 6% in 2014; although this represents a reduction by 0.2% since 2013. North Belfast had the highest proportion of births to teenage mothers in the State.

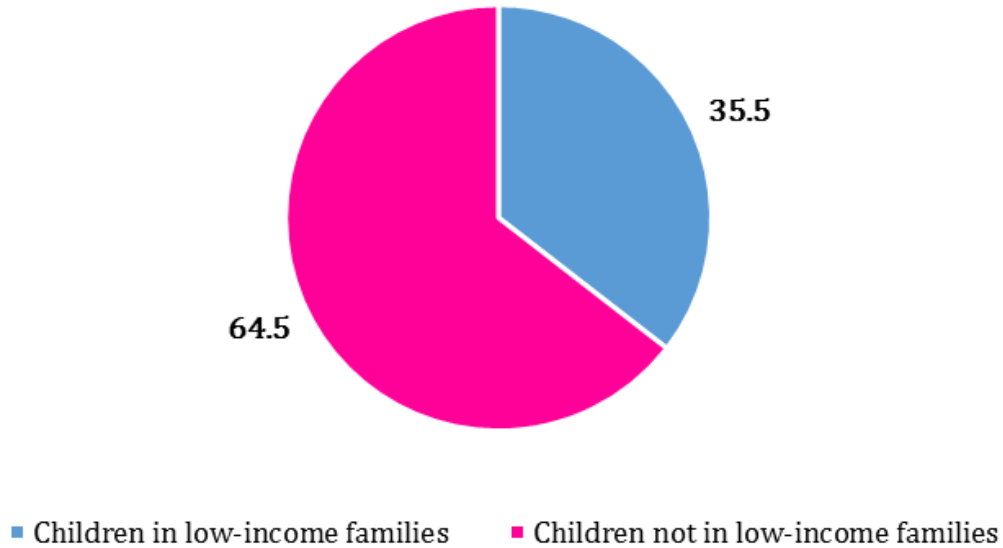
Proportion of all births which were to teenage mothers, 2014



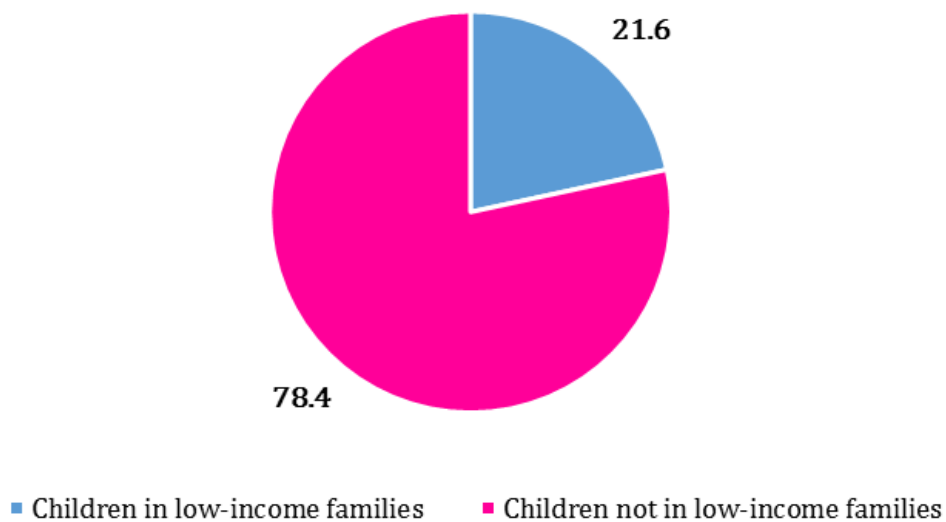
Low Income Families

35.5% of children in the constituency live in low income families compared to the NI average of 21.6%. In the wards of Ardoyne, Crumlin and Dunanney the majority of children live in low income families.

North Belfast



Northern Ireland Average



Domestic Violence & Sexual Abuse

In terms of domestic violence and sexual abuse the crime statistics are not broken down according to victim or perpetrator gender, however the overwhelming majority of sexual offences and domestic abuse are perpetrated on women by men. North Belfast rates of sexual offences are over a third higher than the NI average. In 2014/15 there were 223 incidences per 100,000 persons in North Belfast compared to the NI average of 148.

12.1% of all crimes recorded in the area had a domestic abuse motivation. This is slightly lower than the NI average of 12.8% of all crime but still represents 1,221 incidences of domestic abuse.

Recent research⁷ on violence against women in Northern Ireland found that high-profile extraordinary violence related to conflict has diverted attention from regular violence in domestic settings, and that discrimination policies have generally focused on religion rather than gender.

Mental Health and Suicide Related Deaths

⁸There is a well-established association between deprivation and ill-health. Multiple deprivation indicators rank North Belfast 2nd out of the 18 most deprived constituencies in Northern Ireland⁹. Although the figures for North Belfast have not been broken down by Constituency, it is clear that all the issues outlined below impact massively on women in the area.

Northern Ireland is reported to have a 25% higher overall prevalence of mental health problems than England. According to the Northern Ireland Health Survey

2014/15, 19% of individuals show signs of a possible mental health problem, consistent with the previous year in 2013/14.

On average, more women (20%) than men (16%) report signs of mental health problems. Similar rates of poor mental health were reported in a 2013 study into the prevalence of mental health disorders in Northern Ireland, which suggested rates of 23.1%, with estimates for each disorder as:

- 14.6% for anxiety disorders
- 9.6 % for mood disorders
- 3.5% for substance misuse disorders
- 3.4% for impulse control disorders

7. McWilliams, M., & Ni Aolain, F.D. (2013). 'There is a War Going on You Know': Addressing the Complexity of Violence Against Women in Conflicted and Post Conflict Societies. Transitional Justice Review, 1 (2).

8. <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/sites/default/files/FF16%20Northern%20ireland.pdf>

9. <http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/documents/raise/publications/2012/health/13512.pdf>

There are significant inequalities in the prescription of medication for mental health problems in Northern Ireland: the prescription rate for mood and anxiety disorders in 2013 was 66% higher among women than men, and twice as high in the most deprived areas than the least deprived areas.

In Northern Ireland women are more likely than men (20% to 16%) to report signs of mental health problems. According to figures for 2014, more suicides occurred in areas of higher deprivation.

Figures obtained from NISRA for 2013-2015 recorded there were 22 women whose death was classified under intentional self-harm or undetermined intent (both of which are included as ‘suicide’) in the North Belfast Area.¹⁰

Evidence has found that the traumatic experiences and exposure to violence related to the conflict in Northern Ireland leads to adverse mental health not only for the person themselves, but also for their children and grandchildren. The result is a trans-generational cycle which impacts upon the wellbeing of subsequent generations. However, there is minimal research as to the longer-term consequences of this trans-generational trauma or of the impact on children of living in deeply-divided, sectarian communities. The ongoing impact of transgenerational trauma highlighted that children continue to suffer the consequences of poor mental health associated with conflict trauma and living under the ongoing threat of paramilitaries.

Women and Community Relations Policy & Political Agreements Context

Community relations policy and legislation in Northern Ireland is designed around the ‘two communities’ perspective of Northern Ireland. Such policy makes scant reference to women and when they are referenced it is generally with regard to participation. Pierson & Radford (2016) produced this table below¹¹:

Policy / Legislation	Year	Reference to Women
The Good Friday Agreement	1998	<div>⇒ Strand 3, Rights, Safeguards and Equality of Opportunity – ‘the right of women to full and equal political participation.’</div> <div>⇒ Strand 3, Rights, Safeguards and Equality of Opportunity - Economic, Social and Cultural Issues – ‘...promoting social inclusion, including in particular community development and the advancement of women in public life.’</div>

10. NISRA, 2017
11. https://www.academia.edu/29854873/Peace-building_in_Northern_Ireland_and_the_Womens_Sector

Policy / Legislation	Year	Reference to Women
Shared Future	2005	<p>⇒ Section 2.8 – p42 Good Relations, Community Development and Tackling Disadvantage ‘Best practice will be drawn from the practitioners in community development, good relations and reconciliation, including...women’s organizations (who) ...have demonstrated considerable expertise in community development work sensitive to good relations needs and this should be considered when modelling future approaches.</p> <p>⇒ Section 3.4 Action at Regional Level – p55 -Government also recognises the contributions made for example by... women’s groups...These organisations continue to have a role to play in helping build relationships across Northern Ireland. These contributions will be important as Northern Ireland moves forward to a shared society.</p>
St Andrews Agreement	2006	<p>⇒ No reference to women.</p>
Cohesion, Sharing and Integration	2010	<p>⇒ Section 3.41- p22, Places - ‘Creating shared spaces and facilities is not only vital in urban areas but is also instrumental in building a more vibrant rural community. In recognition of this, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) currently funds 75% of and the Rural Community Network, Rural Support Networks and NI Rural Women’s Networks, which all play a key role in promoting good relations in rural areas.’</p> <p>⇒ Equality Statement, p75 - Duties under Section 75 (1) of the Northern Ireland Act in relation to good relations and equality to promote equality of opportunity between men and women.</p>
Together: Building a United Community	2013	<p>⇒ Introduction - p14 ‘Good Relations and Equality’ - Duties under Section 75 (1) of the Northern Ireland Act in relation to good relations and equality to promote equality of opportunity between men and women.</p> <p>⇒ Section on ‘Gender’ – 1.27, p17 ‘Women have made, and continue to make, an important contribution to the political process and have been a named beneficiary group under successive EU-funded PEACE Programmes (1995 to present). The Government remains committed to ensuring the right of women to full and equal political participation and will continue to work towards increasing women’s representation in public and political life.’</p>

METHODOLOGY

The first stage in producing this report was a desktop review of research undertaken by gathering evidence in relation to the role of and the impact of the conflict on women living in North Belfast. As well as collating and analysing quantitative and qualitative data, government responses to the conflict in Northern Ireland that have gender implications were also examined. This data then informed the context to this study and the analysis of the findings. Primary data was gathered through three mechanisms:

Research information and participant self –selection

The researcher was invited along to a number of single identity and cross community women's groups to give an overview of the research. Participants were then asked if they wished to participate in semi-structured interviews at another time. Seven presentations were made and five groups registered an interest. The five groups that participated in the study were based in North Belfast. All those who participated in the research have lived there for most of their adult lives, if not their whole lives. For purposes of confidentiality the groups will be referred to as follows; there were two groups who were from a Protestant Unionist Loyalist area (PUL1) & (PUL 2). There were two groups from a Catholic Republican Nationalist area (CRN1) & (CRN2) and one Cross- Community Group (CC).

Interviews with individual women

Semi-structured interviews/focus groups were carried out with the five women's groups. The groups varied in size with three attending the smallest and 15 attending the largest. The researcher began the interviews by informing the participants of the rationale of the research and the intended outcome of study. The researcher outlined that there is a perception that women's views are neglected and that the participants themselves should have a say in determining the way forward for their communities.

Participant feedback on researcher's notes

Conscious of the power dynamic between researcher and participant and the opportunity for mis-interpretation, the researcher returned her raw data to the participants to ensure they were a true and accurate reflection of the conversations that had taken place, with the understanding that not all data may be included in the final report.



FINDINGS

Introduction

The findings have been collated under broad themes which capture the major issues that emerged in the study. North Belfast is such a small area to research, therefore places, names and community organisations have been redacted to ensure confidentiality and protect the contributors.

Holy Cross

Two major events in the history of North Belfast were mentioned time and again and have been recorded here as it would have been remiss of the researcher to leave them out. They are included to provide context but are not referred to in the conclusions and recommendations.

The Holy Cross dispute 2001-2002¹², has left a lasting legacy of trauma and mistrust for some women who were interviewed.

One woman interviewed remarked:

"The worst time for me in North Belfast through the history of the conflict was in September 2001 with Holy Cross. I really felt that all the good work that had been going on in communities stopped and people retracted into their own corners, it took us years to re-build friendships." (CC)

Another woman interviewed said:

"The group was formed and born out of the Holy Cross dispute and people in this community still feel traumatised. We feel that we were demonised as child abusers but it was the residents who put their own children through the ordeal. I witnessed a parent speaking to a camera man saying 'should we walk now?' He said wait till we get the shot lined up. The child was already crying and didn't want to walk up the road. The kids were trailed up the road for the media." (PUL1)

Another woman shared:

"My daughter was 6 years old and attended the school at the time. I took her to school a few times when the dispute was going on but I found it too stressful. My husband walked her to school at the height of the dispute. One of the days an RUC officer pushed my husband off the kerb. My daughter, only 6, turned around and said 'Daddy let them have their kerb, we will walk on the road' I had a nervous breakdown a year after the dispute. I went to get my daughter a new school uniform and that was the trigger. I was diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and couldn't bring my daughter to school from P3- P7 I had to get my husband to do it." (CRN1)

The Camp at Twaddell

The Twaddell Ave Parade dispute has also left a legacy for the women interviewed and changed relationships both within and outside of the community.¹³

One woman shared:

"There were a small number of local people at the camp and the rest were outsiders. The camp caused a lot of damage to some members of the community, but others it made stronger and more confident. It gave some women something to do when they were doing their shifts and were not sitting in the house on medication. Some women are still involved, others went down a political route. The camp was a focal point and when it went it left a gaping hole." (PUL2)

The 'outsiders' comment was reiterated by another woman:

"Sure the camp at Twaddell, it was mostly outsiders that came in to support it. That changed things and I don't think the influences were helpful. We were the ones left to live there and deal with the fall-out, they could just pxxx off back to their own areas." (CC)

Another participant commented:

"Some of the women's group were involved in the camp and some weren't. Some of the women's groups were operating at quite a high powered level attending Parades forum meetings and were involved in marshalling the parades as well. There were women who were purposefully kept out of the camp while agendas were pushed forward; which created a 'them and us' scenario. (PUL2)

Another shared:

"As the camp continued some women moved out of the community but others remained. I moved out because things were being said to my kids and I just thought that that was below the belt. Some women were intimidated. Some stayed and put up with it and some walked away. You could see there were different power struggles going on which was making it really difficult to do cross community work" (PUL2)

Paramilitaries and Gatekeepers

¹⁴While some participants reflected on paramilitaries during the early days of the conflict as community defenders and protectors, there was a very negative view of them after the Ceasefires.

One woman said:

"I firmly believe that paramilitaries were allowed to take over in some areas. I know they were as I lived on the xxxx at the time of the loyalist feud"¹⁵ (CC)

13. <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-northern-ireland-37458065>

14. While some women referred directly to paramilitaries others referred to gatekeepers; some of whom were paramilitaries while others were perceived to be closely linked with them.

15. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2000/nov/26/northernireland.henrymcdonald>

One woman told the group that:

"The xxxx estate is now riddled with heroin and all the paramilitaries are working together" (CC)

Other women talked about how the community suffered as the paramilitaries gained:

"When our houses were being built in xxxxxx the contractors had to pay the paramilitaries £1000 per house protection money and what they ended up with was really bad fittings; boilers were rubbish, cupboards and sinks, that all fell apart in no time." (CC)

Another woman talked of;

"how the contractors used to be able to write off the protection money against their taxes" and said "so of course they were gonna do it everybody was a winner, the paramilitaries got their money and so did the contractors. It was a good way of the State to pay the paramilitaries without ever getting their hands dirty." (CC)

The issue of money being paid to paramilitaries came up time and again. One woman said:

"I feel that the so called Peace dividends all went to the wrong people. The paramilitaries got jobs and took the money out of the community." (PUL1)

Another commented:

"After the Ceasefires money was thrown at paramilitaries to go into schools and youth clubs and say don't become a paramilitary – what sense does that make? They drive big cars, live in nice houses and can afford to go on holiday 3 or 4 times a year – how is this a deterrent to young people? (PUL1)

Some women did comment about how the community stood up to the paramilitaries:

"The xxxxxx paramilitaries were put out by the people because the people didn't want them and now it is a lovely wee place to live – they were put out by the community and told not to come back." (CC)

Other spoke of how they challenged paramilitaries and the consequences for doing so:

"There was a leadership struggle in our area and a new paramilitary leader took over. He told us that the women's group wasn't allowed to operate without his say so. I told him to fxxk off, and the next thing I knew there was a death threat issued on me and my child. Now we can't get women back to the group because they are afraid." (PUL2)

One woman shared how she was put out of her house by the paramilitaries at the time of the Loyalist feud¹⁶:

"I was put out of my home when the loyalist feud was on for being in the UVF – I was never in the UVF as my ma would have broken my arms. My ma was dying at the time and the paramilitaries wouldn't let the Marie Curie nurses in. We had to go half way round Belfast to try and get them through because they said we were a UVF family and we weren't. The same thing is happening in Carrickfergus¹⁷ now" (CC)

Another shared:

"When the feud was on and if the paramilitaries were blocking the roads we would just phone up our (catholic) mates to say don't come over today as we were doing Irish classes in the centre. When the catholic staff were threatened in the xxxxx centre the paramilitaries said to me 'you warned them fenians off' and I just said 'no – I warned my friends off'. Some women didn't come back to the centre because of what had happened, others weren't allowed to come back because their husbands told them not to come back. Others came back despite what their husbands said ." (CC)

Some women talked about the perception of the identity of paramilitaries:

"The paramilitaries in the estate want you to think that they are true blue loyalists and have no catholic relations in their families, that's just nonsense because I know for a fact one of the paramilitaries ma's was a catholic and had to change her religion to get married. Sure they are always the worst, they are the most bitter" (CC)

Flags, Emblems and Marking Space

On the topic of flags, emblems and marking space there were varying comments; while the majority of those interviewed had no difficulty with putting flags up, most wanted them taken down after the commemorations were over. The 'peace walls', the physical and psychological impact and negotiating them, were also discussed.

"I have no difficulty with flags being put up in 'their own areas' at the appropriate times and taken down again. I understand that that is their culture and they wish to mark and respect it, but when flags are left up and end up tattered and shabby looking – is that really showing respect to your flag?" (CRN1)

Another participant remarked:

"I think we should show respect for all the flags as long as they are put up around the the right times – everybody should be able to hang whatever flags they want up." (CC)

One woman said:

"I think it is handy for the kids to know which areas they are going into" (CC)

16. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2000/nov/26/northernireland.henrymcdonald>

17. <http://www.itv.com/news/utv/update/2017-03-13/man-suffers-life-threatening-injuries-in-carrick-shooting/>

Another said:

"The kids aren't intimidated by them; it's just middle class people don't like them bringing down the price of their houses." (CC)

One woman who would identify as a loyalist puts three flags out; Union, Ulster and Pride of Ardoyne:

"My husband is in the Orange¹⁸ and Black¹⁹ I have a son in the Pride of Ardoyne²⁰ I had my granddaughter outside the xxx bar this year draped in a tri-colour on St. Patrick's Day. One of my son's friends who gets dressed in his Pride of Ardoyne Flute band uniform and under it he wears a Celtic²¹ t-shirt and has a Celtic tattoo which covers his back. He has followed the football team since he was a kid. He also puts his Celtic flag out on the 12th²². Another one of my son's mates has his bedroom completely kitted out in Celtic gear." (CC)

In terms of the Peace lines one woman commented:

"To come to the cross community group some of the girls told me about a shortcut through xxx area which is predominantly Protestant and I am coming from a Catholic area. Yes I am happy to do that now, but will I do it in July when all the flags are up? I don't know. There is always that fear in the back of your mind that you might be targeted." (CC)

Another said:

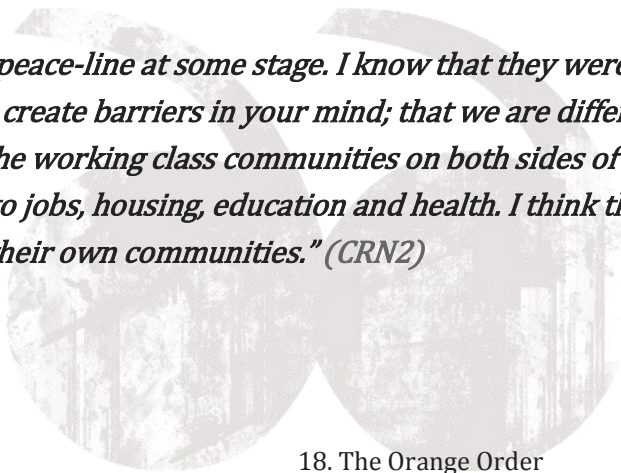
"The Peace line stopped us getting through to xxx. I used to go to xxx library – but not now the situation has got so bad. I don't shop on the road as I'm known to the others because of the Holy Cross dispute – I go over to Shankill." (PUL1)

Another commented:

"There used to be a gate at xxxx that we could have used and then they permanently locked the gate, so you can't get through anymore." (CRN2)

Another woman said:

"No matter where you go around here you will meet a peace-line at some stage. I know that they were put up at the beginning to make people feel safe, but they create barriers in your mind; that we are different from the community on the other side, but are we? The working class communities on both sides of the peace walls have the same problems when it comes to jobs, housing, education and health. I think they make people feel more trapped in their own communities." (CRN2)

- 
- 18. The Orange Order
 - 19. The Royal Black Preceptory
 - 20. The Pride of Ardoyne Flute Band
 - 21. Celtic Football team
 - 22. 12th of July

Political Leadership

The Political Leadership of the two largest parties were discussed off the back of another set of elections on 2nd March 2017 and no political agreement to govern in Stormont at the time the interviews took place.

One participant commented:

"Our problem is that we don't vote for who or what we want – we just vote to keep the others out."(PUL1)

Another said:

"They have no long term plan or strategy, they are not looking to the future in twenty years' time and saying this is what we need to do. They just try and keep the electorate happy for the next round of elections. How's that political leadership?"(CRN2)

On the death of Martin McGuinness there were conflicting views depending on your community background. One commented:

"Sure look at the coverage of the life of Martin McGuinness you'd think he was a saint to see what they are saying about him on the tv and radio. It just goes to show you that there is nobody to fight for us and our political beliefs."(PUL1)

In direct contrast to this one participant said:

" You know you watch what they are saying about Martin McGuinness's death and that Adams and McGuinness were to blame for the conflict when it was them reacting to the sectarian and discriminatory environment that made them what they were."(CRN1)

Another commented:

"I'm proud of what the Republican movement did for my community, standing up for our rights so we were no longer treated as second class citizens, against the British Army and the Loyalists." (CRN 2)

One participant remarked:

"I've no time for them. They (politicians) are just looking out for themselves – and not the ordinary working class people." (PUL1)

Another shared an interesting experience:

"My husband became a councillor for Sinn Fein after the Holy Cross dispute. He is quite surprised about how many working class protestant people come to Sinn Fein to ask for their help on issues. It's like they have no-one to represent them on issues they need resolved." (CRN1)

Women involved in politics were referred to by some participants:

"The arrogance of the likes of Arlene Foster makes me really angry – how dare she play victim because things happened to her and her family. There is no-one who hasn't suffered through the Troubles. She is not the only one who suffered and she needs to remember that. Republican people are really angry by her arrogance and attitude."(CRN1)

One participant said

"I think Michelle O'Neill as the new leader of Sinn Féin, has big boots to fill so it remains to be seen how she will do but she seems to be standing her ground and as long as there is no return to the status quo then I'll be happy enough." (CRN2)

Feelings about politicians can run deeply as one participant explained:

"Listen I have lived through the troubles and went to visit Mary Mc Aleese when she was President of Ireland. I told her special adviser Protestants don't put murderers in government – what would you do if there were murderers in your government? He said I understand where you are coming from and gave me his direct line number if I ever needed anything."(PUL1)

The Impact of Funding in Groups

Funding has an impact on groups in terms of changing relationships and dynamics sometimes for the better as it can increase the capacity to do more work but it also can be perceived to have a detrimental impact also.

One participant commented:

"To access Housing Executive grants the group needed to do cross-community work. The Women's group wanted to but the residents association had no interest." (PUL2)

Another said:

"After the Good Friday Agreement when the men got out of gaol, they started giving the funds to men's groups and ex-prisoner groups. Women still volunteered and got the work done but on much smaller budgets or none for that matter so we had to cut our cloth to suit; less work with less resources, but we still did what we could." (CC)

One participant reported:

"We were promised the moon and the stars to get off the road. Like we were offered £14K to go to London but we did not want to work on a cross community basis so the funding got pulled." (PUL1)

Another participant explained:

“Funding changed dynamics of relationships. The first year the women’s group and residents association applied and both were funded and that worked well. The second year the funding application was put in but none of the group saw it – another women’s group got funded to do work with only 3 women in the area – we thought that this was unfair. The other women’s group had received massive cuts and we saw our grant going to them to help fill their deficit. The problem was that there was no committee meetings so the decision-making processes were not transparent. I have no difficulty with the wider community benefitting but the women in the area were being left out. You have to make sure you offer the women and kids in the area the opportunity to participate; make sure they know that there are opportunities there for them and if they don’t want to avail of them then that’s fine.” (PUL2)

Some groups did not apply for money but used other groups to access what they needed:

“When the xxxx first happened the women’s group were a bit rocky – we did get constituted but never applied directly for money – we didn’t really feel that we had the capacity to manage and we were able to access training and events through other organisations like Tides, GNBWN, Belfast City Council – through BCC we were able to do strategic planning, we got our feelings aired and had a plan to move forward.” (PUL2)

Some funders were explicit about who and what they fund and this was welcomed:

“Some of the funders are nervous as they want to see a vibrant women’s group and they only fund women and young people’s activities, but we really don’t know where we are at, or if we will get back to where we were.” (PUL2)

Community Development and Community Relations

On issues of community development and community relations the participants shared many and varied examples.

One women highlighted:

“We take part in cross community work – we go to the xxx Centre to events such as Meet the Neighbours with the xxx and xxx ones. We do workshops, you can get your hair trimmed and make-up done. Everybody gets on well as it was all women.” (CRN1)

Another commented:

“The group was formed off the back of the residents association who were older members and then funding dried up. The members were all retired and weren’t interested in doing cross community work. So some of the women approached some of the parents and over the period of a fortnight they had organised a community clean-up and daily activities for the kids. It then really dawned on them that the group needed to be a woman’s group. A woman’s group could keep the gatekeepers out, and get cross community work done.” (PUL2)

Another participant explained:

“The women’s group met weekly since it started –only taking the 12th fortnight off. We ran cultural diversity programmes for the kids, and ran the premises voluntarily answering phones and providing housing advice and basically keeping the shutters open when they lost their worker. But because of the xxxx and protests women stopped using it.” (PUL2)

Some participants described the cross community solidarity when groups and services were under threat:

“The Campaign to save the Royal Maternity Hospital²³ in May 1996 – we were Protestant women but we got behind the campaign.” (CC)

Another said:

“The campaign I remember that some of the women of North Belfast got behind was when the Falls Women’s Centre was threatened with closure 2004/05 so we have always worked across the political divide.” (CC)

Community Relations work can be difficult in times of relative peace but incidents can happen that put much of this work back by years as one woman describes:

“The women’s group were interested and motivated to do cross community work. We knew something needed to happen and we wanted to get stuff done. We had a bad summer in 2001 – and I come from a mixed family so we never grew up with that bitterness. We realised that catholic working class families had the same problems we did so we started to do some cross community work. Then the flags protest²⁴ happened in 2012 at City Hall and that was like ten steps back.” (PUL2)

One woman really wanted to get two areas working together but it didn’t happen to the extent she would have liked it:

“We are geographically very close and we did do a couple of residential with women from xxxx. We met some women who said we are just the same as you and aren’t involved in anything and then we seen them marching on the anniversary of the Easter Rising all rigged out in uniforms – that puts work and relationships back.” (PUL2)

Another woman commented:

“There was far more work done on a cross-community basis before the ceasefires. Once they happened and the agreement was signed the political parties basically carved up areas and said that’s ours and that’s yours. It divided the groups more than before and made working together more difficult.” (CC)

23. <http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1996/may/09/royal-maternity-hospital-belfast>

24. <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/issues/identity/flag-2012.htm>

Issues with doing any kind of community development work were highlighted:

"You know you try to do your best and put things on for everyone but communities are strange; if some people use the premises then others will say 'oh they are just a clique, I'm not going id he's going' It's hard to include everyone no matter how hard you try." (CRN2)

Another said:

"We are now doing a newsletter so that any courses that are on local women and children will at least know about them. We did a mural last year but got grief from some people about that as well – as not everybody was happy with it." (PUL2)

Another commented:

"At the same time the woman who had set up the women's group took a job as the administrator for the residents association. The women's group had to fight to get using the premises and the administrator was told in a roundabout way to make a decision between the residents association and the women's group. When the residents association were holding the AGM the women's group got two representatives elected on to the committee, they weren't told when the AGM was happening so had to keep an eye on the premises to see when the committee turned up. They didn't want us on the committee but we got elected on." (CC)

Housing

Housing inequality in North Belfast, particularly in relation to the Catholic Republican Nationalist communities has been well documented²⁵. Yet this study shows that there is a perception that the Protestant Unionist Loyalist communities have also been treated unfairly.

One participant shared:

"I was born in the district and have lived my whole life in the District. Most houses in xxxx have 2 bedrooms. One woman down the street from me reared 8 of a family in a 2 bedroom house." (CRN1)

Another Commented:

"Housing is a massive issue for Catholics in North Belfast and what did they do instead of building houses for Catholic families? They built Girdwood instead, not only that but local groups can't even afford to use it." (CRN2)

However, like many issues perceptions are people's realities in North Belfast.

One participant said:

"We only get offered 2 bedroom houses while the catholics are offered 3 bedroom houses. This community feels like they are second class citizens." (PUL1)

Another added:

"When they built the houses in xxxx, you had to fight to get a house, there were so few of them." (PUL1)

Comparing the houses in different areas one woman said:

"They built better houses in Catholic areas – look at xxxxxx; they look like houses out of Dallas. What they did in xxxx protestant area? They only built 4 houses and a bungalow, and we are crying out for houses here. But they don't build new ones, If you are lucky, they give you new windows and kitchens and only some of the houses get them and we don't know why." (PUL1)

Another highlighted the issue in her area:

"In xxxx Park they built twelve 2 bedroom houses right against the peace line – why 2 bedroom? Nobody wants 2 bedroom houses we need 3 bedroom houses. Also people need houses renovated at the very least. But again it is a lottery – Only 4 houses got renovated in xxxx. They got new bathrooms and bedrooms, but there are other people who need it done but didn't get it done." (PUL1)

Perceptions of the Future and Moving Forward

Many of the participants acknowledged the past and the need to move forward positively for the future; not only for themselves but also the next generations coming along.

One woman commented:

"I think we all have our hang ups, but through education, conversation and working together we can learn to challenge sectarianism and old stereotypes and make the changes required – women have and will make the changes required to make North Belfast a better place to live in." (CC)

Another woman said:

"Look you can't live your life through hating people as it eats you up. I don't dislike people because of their religion, I dislike them because they are just not nice people." (CRN1)

One woman reflected:

"I see the person and not their religion – whether you practice or not, you live in a community and that is the brush you are tarred with. If you want to work with women from across the divide then that's what you do." (CC)

Another woman said :

“The best thing is seeing a couple of good women stepping forward and taking that leadership role which they may not have done if I hadn’t have taken a step back . They now have the confidence to go to meetings and taking information back to the women’s group. The group has been badly damaged by what we’ve gone through. You have to make a decision; do we walk away or do we continue and bounce back? We are committed to getting this group back to being active and vibrant.” (PUL2)

While some women were optimistic about the future others were less so.

One woman said:

“I am proud of what people did for my community. My Mummy was a cleaner at Queen’s university and I was able to put my 4 kids through university – that is progress in my book. But now my kids are going to move out of the area because of abuse the family are getting from dissenting republicans because my husband is a Sinn Fein Councillor.” (CRN1)

Another woman reflected:

“What is the point in talking to others from the other community when our own area is in such a state.” (PUL1)

Another woman remarked:

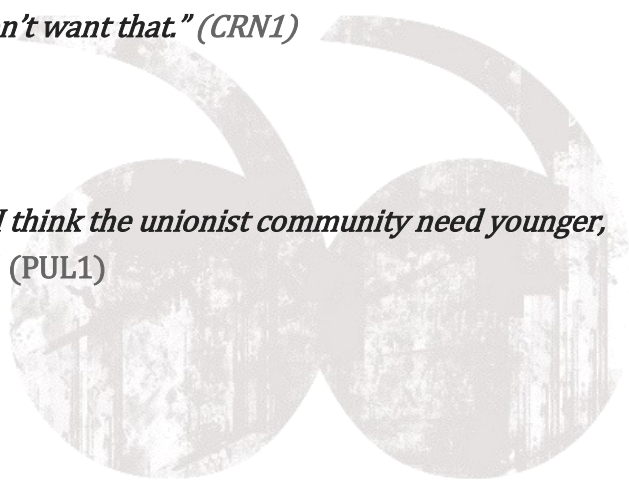
‘I often wonder will there ever really be peace? I mean we had riots in the 30’s 40’s 50’s then the conflict, and riots happen every so often so maybe we are destined to riot often are as we are known in some circles as the ‘fighting Irish.’ (CC)

One woman stated:

“All we ever wanted was equality. We have been discriminated since the creation of this state and all we ever wanted was what was rightfully ours. Houses, jobs, education and be treated as equals in Northern Ireland, but the unionists still don’t want that.” (CRN1)

Another reflected:

“We always have been and we always will be divided – I think the unionist community need younger, stronger women.” (PUL1)



One participant said:

"I feel we need to heal our own people first before we can start engaging in cross-community work." (PUL 1)

Another Commented:

"You still fear for your kids; where they are and what they are doing' I think because of what we lived through, this is the way that it's going to be, but sure every mother worries about their kids." (CRN1)

About the current political fallout with no government in Stormont:

"Everyone is in limbo. We don't want to go back and how can we move forward when unionists do not want to see us as equals – they just won't let go of the way things used to be." (CRN1)

One woman reflected:

"We all want peace for the grand children's sake but history always repeats itself." (PUL1)

CONCLUSIONS

Political and Social

North Belfast was ravaged by 40 years of conflict with related deaths the second highest recorded in terms of geographical area. It has the highest number of peace walls in Belfast accounting for nearly half of all of them. This segregation is not just physical but undoubtedly has had a massive psychological impact on the inhabitants. Research carried out in 2016 concluded that living in an area segregated by a 'peace line' is detrimental to mental health suggesting segregated areas characterised by a heightened sense of the 'other' pose a greater risk to mental health.

There are no less than eight respective owners of these 'peace walls' should residents decide that they wish to negotiate any changes. Others have grown to see them as providing safety, security, protection and comfort, entrenching segregation and/or minimising sectarian incidents. North Belfast has the highest number of sectarian incidents out of all the 11 policing districts and the highest in the four areas of Belfast

Nine of North Belfast's 25 wards are ranked in the 10% most deprived wards in NI and life expectancy for women is two years lower than the NI Average. Although the teenage pregnancy rate for the whole of NI is in decline North Belfast has still twice the NI average the highest number of births to teenage mothers. Almost 36% of children in North Belfast live in low income families and in three wards the majority of children live in this situation.

Reported Sexual offences are a third higher than the NI average. Reported Domestic abuse crimes are a little lower than NI average but still represent 1,200 per year. The under-reporting of domestic abuse incidents is known to be an issue, due to the nature of the crime. From 2008/09 to 2010/11, only 31.1% of domestic abuse 'worst' cases were reported to the police. In the case of lifetime abuse cases (where the victim had experienced some form of partner abuse at any time since the age of 16), the figure is even lower: only 27.1% of these cases had been reported to police.

Mental health issues, prescription drug and alcohol misuse, and recreational drug dependency and suicide prevail in areas of higher social deprivation; North Belfast ranks 2nd out of 18 wards as the most deprived. Adverse mental health and transgenerational trauma are therefore very prevalent in North Belfast.

Policies and Political Agreements

The 'two communities' focus of Northern Ireland's community relations policies and political agreements reflect an environment where gender is not considered relevant to community relations and issues that predominantly impact on women such as domestic and sexual violence are not considered within a community relations framework. Platitudes with regards to the advancement of women in public life and political participation have been made since 1998 with no action plans, time frames or indeed financial resources being committed by government. The out workings of this have been that women who are active in community relations and community development work as demonstrated through the research have also noted a shrinking of the space for their participation, as this work became male dominated since the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement and the release of (mostly male) political prisoners.

Although recorded in various political agreements and strategies, the vital expertise in community development work and the building of relationships across Northern Ireland, the contributions to the political processes that women have been made and continue to make and the desire to see an increase of the influence of women, the actions and resources to develop and realise these acknowledgements are absent.

This lack of commitment can be exemplified in the new Northern Ireland 'Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition' Commission, of which only one of the 15 nominees and appointees was a woman.

Recent research conducted with women working in community relations and development in interface communities has acknowledged the lower status and visibility that women now have in such arenas.

Paramilitary Influence and Control

The power and control of paramilitary groupings in North Belfast was a dominant feature of the discussions. Women described how they were respected and roles understood at the height of the conflict but post ceasefires and Agreement and they were now viewed as a blight on the community.

The participants described in great detail how communities suffered as the paramilitaries gained control in some areas. Other described standing up to the paramilitaries with relative success, while others described the consequences for doing so; death threats being issued. Questions arose over the financing and policing of paramilitaries in communities that remain to be answered. Their influence and control in some communities is still strong and needs challenged by police and the law.

Flags Emblems and Marking Space

The women interviewed had a very pragmatic attitude to flags in the area. Most of them said that they had no difficulty with flags going up in the areas where they were wanted and coming down again at an appropriate time after the different commemorations. They discussed community consultation in more controversial areas, but the dynamic of male control can make this difficult. It was mentioned that those who had the most difficulty with flags were more affluent people who did not want their property prices affected by flags and emblems demonstrating a class rather than a religious difference of opinion.

The negotiation of the 'peace walls' was an issue for some of the women interviewed while others seemed oblivious to them or so used to them that they no longer saw them as temporary but permanent fixtures. Others were able to look beyond the barriers and see that the working class communities had many of the same social and economic issues no matter what side of the 'peace-line' you lived on.

Political Leadership

The research was carried out at a time when we had been back to the polling stations for another election within a period of nine months, no operational government and the death of Martin McGuinness former Deputy First Minister of the NI Assembly. The comments on the death of McGuinness reflects the political perspective and narrative of the two communities. However broader political analysis was given around voting patterns and the lack of a long term political plan to heal a deeply divided society.

The two female leaders of the main political parties were named but not uncritically. The idea that women just want to see more women elected without exploring their policies and the impact of those policies on women, communities and families is a mistake. A desire for more young women to get involved in politics was also mentioned. It is difficult to comment on the general feeling about political leadership without it being influenced by these two major events, but the general feedback was not inspired.

The Impact of Funding in Groups

The research uncovered mixed feelings about funding coming into groups and the impact that has on dynamics, relationships and roles. Work once carried out on a voluntary basis becomes funded and the volunteer becomes a worker with a contract and terms and conditions. Work becomes measured against funding criteria and outcomes or outputs. If processes are not open and transparent then there is room for agendas to be driven and power struggles to play out.

It also creates opportunities for women to get a 'slice of the pie' if funders insist that work with women and young people has to be part of the outcomes. However many women reported that any jobs that did become available were taken up by the men; marginalising the women who had done the work voluntarily before the funding arrived. Others refused funding on point of principle, while others did not want the responsibility for accounting for money. There was a feeling among most that the resources for work with women had shrunk and opportunities were harder to identify.

Community Development and Community Relations

Community development and relations is difficult and painstaking work in any society emerging from conflict. When we analyse the impact of what happened in areas such as North Belfast, this is very much compounded. However most of the women interviewed undertook this work with enthusiasm and optimism. Some women were able to bypass the control of community 'gatekeepers' to get cross-community and community development work done because they recognised the needs in their own communities and wanted to be part of a long term solution of peace-building.

Women crossed sectarian lines to support community and hospital campaigns, while others dealt with the fall-out of some incidents, and at the appropriate time proceeded to build bridges. A small number of women felt that community relations work was pointless as they felt that their own community needed to be healed first before they could reach out to others, while other women did the best they could despite criticisms and outright resentment from within their communities.

Housing

In 2013 The housing situation in North Belfast came to the attention of the United Nations Special Rapporteur on housing, Ms. Raquel Rolnik, in the wake of the Equality Can't Wait report by the Participation and the Practice of Rights (PPR) organisation, which detailed a decade's worth of missed opportunities and failures by the government to tackle the housing crisis in North Belfast, and made concrete proposals to begin addressing these failings.

Housing was a concern for the women interviewed on both sides of the community. The lack of affordable social housing available for families was an issue while decisions over renovations of some houses, building new houses and leaving derelict ones to rot and the difference between those who had bought their own houses and those who hadn't were all discussed.

Perceptions of the Future and Moving Forward

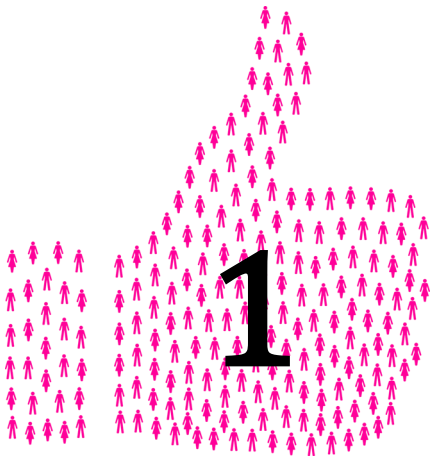
The women interviewed were quite reflective about the future and moving forward. This may have been influenced by the political vacuum in Stormont, projects coming to end and the fear that many who have worked with them in their communities may lose their jobs as a result of the delay in budget allocations directly linked to the above. Other influences include the austerity agenda, change in the benefits systems and the precarious nature of work with low paid zero hour contract on the increase.

It was clear that most women wanted to move forward and not return to the dark days of the conflict, but they were very well aware that you maybe take three steps forward in two years, but that work and relationships can be quite easily undermined by incidents and actions far outside of their control, and that progress can be put back years in a matter of weeks.

Women in North Belfast have seen so much, endured so much and have been part of so much of the out workings of a political conflict. They have yet to reap the benefits of relative peace. They are entitled to their rightful place at the political and decision-making tables, to have a voice on issues that impact their communities and not just be called on the clean up the political and community messes once the television cameras, politicians and gatekeepers have all disappeared.

RECOMMENDATIONS

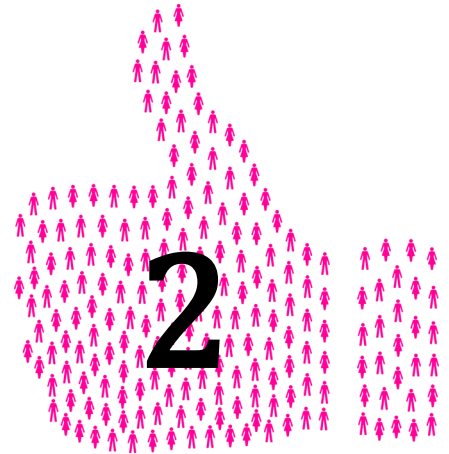
Paramilitaries



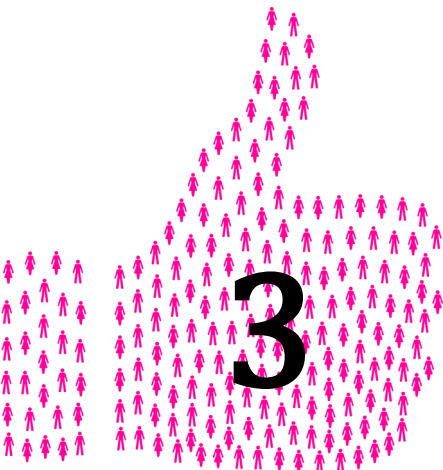
The PSNI and criminal justice system must be more proactive in addressing paramilitary intimidation and control of communities. Women who live in these communities must have some meaningful input into the policies, practices, programmes and funding aimed at addressing the legacy and impact of paramilitarism. This cannot happen until the PSNI and criminal justice system acts effectively so that women can engage confidently. All engagements between statutory bodies and community groups should be required to meet a 50% gender quota to ensure that women do not have to fight community 'gatekeepers' for their place at the table.

Funding

Funding must be ring-fenced specifically for community development and community relations. This needs to be a long term, strategic approach and not piece meal and short term. This is particularly important for women who have not had their share of the dividends of peace. In order to demonstrate a commitment to addressing the gender impact of the conflict there should be a meaningful spending commitment when it comes to funding women's groups. The United Nations recommends a 15% minimum of budgets to be targeted towards gender programmes. There also needs to be a more proactive approach to trauma work in North Belfast, ensuring it is well resourced and accessible, getting to the people who need it most.



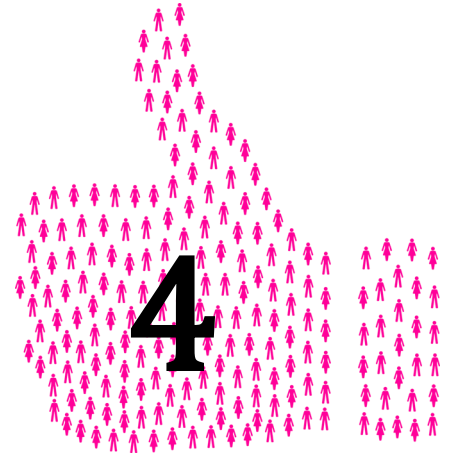
Flags and Emblems



The findings of this research suggest that women tend to be more concerned with the pragmatic implications and community impact when disputes arise over flags and emblems. Although we cannot dictate to communities who represents them when it comes to these negotiations, the hyper-masculinity that permeates these issues must be recognised and addressed. Where statutory agencies are involved in the negotiations there must be a 50% gender quota, in order to develop and sustain meaningful and effective flag protocols with women equally involved in the negotiations.

Political Leadership

Although the conflict in Northern Ireland is not recognised by the UK government as a conflict under international legal definitions, the experiences of women who participated in this research experienced it as such. Progress has also been made by the All Party Group on UNSCR 1325 in Stormont. The principles of participation embedded in the UNSCR 1325 on women, peace and security must be implemented that would create pathways for women in communities to have more access to political and public roles.



Housing

The work on this issue in North Belfast has been addressed by the Participation and Practice of Rights group. In the knowledge that a focus on redevelopment and regeneration will shortly mean that land available for social homes will run out, we call on all Belfast City Council and Northern Ireland Housing Executive to use all of their power to ensure social housing is built on the sites named in the latest PPR report, especially the Dunnes Stores and Hillview Industrial Park.



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