Women: Domestic and Sexual Violence

Summary of roundtable discussions

12th June 2012
Canal Court Hotel, Newry

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Introduction of overall project:

The Women's Resource and Development Agency (WRDA) and the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland are partners in a Peace 3 project that aims to capture the experiences of women living through conflict and through the subsequent period of conflict resolution and peace building.

The aim is to learn from the experience of women who have lived through these processes and to try to identify ways in which to make a positive impact. Over the next two years this project will bring women together on a cross community and a cross border basis and they will have an opportunity to exchange learning with women from other conflict areas through the Foundations for Peace Network.

Key issues will be highlighted in different workshops which will take place throughout Northern Ireland and in border county areas. These are:

- Violence, safety and security
- Decision making and representation
- Women's rights are human rights – women and social justice
- Women and the legacies of the past
- Women and institutional change

The first them addressed in the project is 'Women: Violence, Safety and Security'. Workshops were held in Derry, Dundalk and Newry and a final cross-border workshop will take place on 21st June. At this event 'Women, Violence and Security: A Shared Learning Workshop', ten participants from each of the 3 previous workshops will come together to pull together the various strands of the discussions develop recommendations and decide how best we can influence policy.

The final part of the project is aimed at placing on an international stage all that has been learned through the discussions between women from different communities and regions. The project will have two important outcomes:

- The learning gathered will be used for the design of policy recommendations that will be disseminated through the production of a Policy Report on Gender and Peacebuilding which will be primarily focused on influencing institutional change in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland
- A Tool Kit on Women and Peacebuilding: Developing Practical Approaches will be produced. This will be circulated internationally with the intention of influencing governments and agencies responsible for providing grants and assistance to war-torn societies.

Methodology:

Over 50 women from across the Newry City area and its hinterlands were invited to attend a workshop to discuss and provide their personal perspective on issues around Domestic and Sexual Violence
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The morning began Professor Monica McWilliams providing a contextual presentation to the audience. This presentation is attached as a separate document.

Facilitated discussions took place around five tables with a scribe noting the issues that were raised. Participants were asked to focus their discussions around the following 4 key questions:

- In what ways do women feel unsafe in their homes and communities?

- What needs to change in order for women to feel safer?

- How has violence towards women changed in the last 15 years?

- Has violence affected women more or less since the Peace Process?

At the end of each table discussion the women were asked to prioritise 4 issues and note these on a flipchart which was then put up on the wall for all the groups to see. At this point all of women had a chance to read what other tables had discussed and prioritised.

A short plenary discussion ensued.

Below is synopsis of the issues raised in response to the first question:

In what ways do women feel unsafe in their homes and communities?

Feeling unsafe within the home:

For many women, the fear or threat of abuse or domestic violence within their home is a core to feeling 'unsafe'. It was clear that perpetrators can be partners, husbands, sons and teenage children. In this context perpetrators have access to their victims 24 hours a day, seven days a week. There is a strong sense that there is a lack of protection for women who experience abuse in the home.

Domestic abuse and violence takes many forms: the more subtle manipulation and emotional abuse, financial abuse (precluding access to financial resources), verbal abuse and actual violent behaviour including sexual violence.

The feelings evoked in victims of domestic and sexual violence are complex. The women spoke of feelings of isolation, embarrassment, shame and guilt. These were also voiced as the reasons why women didn't report abuse or violence. Potential repercussions of reporting incidents were often seen as too much to deal with. There was also the fear of reprisal from the perpetrator.

Isolation is a real issue both in terms of feeling isolated from wider family networks and also in geographic terms ie. rural isolation. Women who move to live in their 'husband's area' can be isolated from their own familial networks and the values and traditions of the perpetrators family hinder her from seeking help. For many women the sense of isolation results in them thinking 'no one will believe me' or projecting that the family reaction will be 'it can't be that bad'. Victims did not want to bring shame on the family or 'let the family down'. In terms of geographic isolation, there was a strong sense that victims of domestic violence and abuse had less access to resources if they live in rural areas. It was much more difficult to find emotional or practical support in these areas.

The issue of 'children' discussed in a variety of contexts. Clearly, there are children within homes who are the perpetrators of abuse and violence. Women spoke of abuse or fear of abuse from 'sons who didn't move out of the home' (much more common in today's economic conditions) and of the bullying/abusive behaviour of teenage children generally. For some women this constitutes a significant perceived 'threat' within the home. It was acknowledged domestic violence crosses all social classes and that 'violence' is often a 'learned' behaviour and in many instances sons are aping the behaviour of their fathers. In many of these cases alcohol and drugs are viewed as a causal factor in relation to violent behaviour.

The other context of the discussions on 'children' centred around the women who were victims of domestic violence and their attempts to protect their children. Feelings of insecurity and fear were exacerbated for those women who felt they could not protect their children in the home. Many women felt 'it is better for **me** to get hurt than the children' and that was how protection for children was manifested.

Some of the discussions centred around victims of violence fearing that they would lose their children. The potential involvement of Social Services or the Police Service also for many women provokes feelings of fear, shame and stigma. Thus the resources and support available are not viewed by many as an option.

Some of the women believed that a societal culture of 'women's inferiority' prevails generally. More value is placed on what men say that what women say and the huge issue of the financial dependence of women on men was viewed as significant matter that must be addressed. There are too many women with young children who live in financially precarious situations as they lack economic independence within the home.

Feeling unsafe within the community:

Less time was spent discussing this issue but key concerns raised by the women in relation to feeling unsafe within the community were: being out alone at night, walking through some parts of the city at night time; sectarian tensions due to paramilitary activity or during the parading season, being in public houses; gangs of youths drinking on street corners and the lack of street lighting or street wardens.

Some women also spoke about feeling intimidated by men/boys shouting sexual innuendos and remarks whilst walking through the town. Other women spoke about feeling unsafe when they moved to live in other areas.

Below is synopsis of the issues raised in response to the second question:

What needs to change in order for women to feel safer?

There was a clear view expressed that the attitudes of men to women needed to change. Inappropriate and sexist language should be deemed unacceptable. Everyday language employed, such as girls = 'sluts' while men are 'bosses' or 'breadwinners' must be challenged. Men's voices must be heard in these discussions encouraging respect for women and speaking out loudly against violence against women. Respect is key in building and sustaining human relationships and the bottom line is there should be zero tolerance in relation to violence against women.

Women also felt strongly that societal attitudes need to change and education should play a crucial role in this. Children should be taught through the curriculum 'what is acceptable and what is not'. There was a strong view expressed that education is the only way 'to move from the old ways of acceptance and minimising how violence is perceived in society – particularly gender based violence'. The feelings of 'stigma and shame' often felt by victims of domestic violence could be mitigated if the violence and associated issues were dealt with in schools and from a young age. The balance to preventative measures through education is educating women and girls about gender equality and raising awareness in relation to their rights as women and as citizens. It was felt that many women lacked awareness about their rights in relation to domestic violence. An equal society is one where women can wear what they want without being harassed and go where they want knowing that they are safe

Access to better amenities and services for victims of domestic violence across urban and rural areas was viewed as important The provision of such amenities and services should correspond with awareness raising campaigns. Stigma and fear of the consequences of reporting this crime must addressed and removed. It has to be made easier for women to seek help. The importance of establishing trust in order for support to be sought must be recognised by relevant authorities and public services. To address the issue adequately a

5

multi-agency approach would ensure better communication across professional bodies and was deemed essential accompanied by better sign-posting and awareness-raising.

The final broad response to this question centred on changing attitudes within the judicial system; accompanied with harsher sentencing – 'the sentence should fit the crime; less emphasis should be placed on physical injury and other more subtle abuse associated with domestic violence recognised as an integral aspect of the crime'. While education and training on the wider issues and complexities of domestic and sexual violence were voiced as important; more female representation in the judicial system was viewed as crucial. Women themselves should be more proactive and measures introduced to ensure they are equally represented on policy and legislative making bodies. The criminal justice system also needs to ensure that the needs of victims are acknowledged and met at all levels of the judicial process.

Overall societal and community perceptions and attitudes of and to domestic and sexual violence need to be challenged and changed.

Below is synopsis of the issues raised in response to the third question:

Q3   How has violence towards women changed in the last 15 years?

A number of interesting issues were raised in response to this question. Some of the women believed that domestic violence has escalated over the last 15 years but it was also asserted that the appearance of the rise in this particular criminal behaviour could be that women are reporting it more often than before. Essentially however it was believed that domestic violence in its widest sense is more prevalent – emotional, financial, physical and sexual. It has been exacerbated by the economic downturn and the consumption of more alcohol in the home. Many victims become adept at hiding the problem for the sake of children and many women remain terrified of contacting professional agencies.

It was also contended that the violence prevalent in society over the period of the conflict has not necessarily dissipated but rather some of it now manifests itself as violence in the home – 'violent men still need an outlet'. Access to legal arms was also muted as threat to women within their homes.

Over the last 15 years there have been various campaigns publicising and heightening awareness of domestic violence and in many ways this has empowered women to speak out and address the issue earlier in the cycle of abuse. Due to publicity campaigns some women are more vocal and tolerate less. They feel less ashamed to report domestic violence and abuse. Some women contended that these behavioural changes are also a result of less influence on society from the church. Attitudes of previous generations and of the church, "you made your bed so you can lie in it", are less accepted by women. Divorce rates have risen and women who are victims of violence are less prepared to put up with it. As more women have become educated and enter the workforce they are also less likely to be financially dependent on men. Financial autonomy enables women to be less fearful of what the future may hold if they report the crime and/or leave their abusive partners.

Saying this, there was still a strong view that it can still be very much a hidden crime and there is still stigma attached to the issue. Some of the women felt that it could be more difficult for professional women to come forward and many are still less likely to report the

crime to police. While there is greater publicity and understanding of the complexities of domestic violence resulting in an increase in reportage to police, there was also a concern raised that some younger women are more tolerant of Domestic Violence and violence eg. 'bitch slapping' and the sexist behaviour portrayed widely in some music trends.

The escalation of sexist behaviour as evidenced in some parts of the music industry has been accompanied by the huge growth in the use of technology. Discussions took place at all of the tables on how technology has impacted (mostly negatively) on violence against women. Social media can be used to harass, bully and blackmail. Mobile phones can be utilised as a control mechanism and there are many more and different forms of gender based violence and abuse levelled at younger women eg. texting, stalking and cyber abuse. Of course the internet and social media websites are also used to 'groom' young girls for potential sexual abuse.

A further issue raise is the escalation of violence against women in terms of the increase in human trafficking; affecting women and children (in the main). This is a much more prevalent crime and is moving up the political and policing agenda.

Finally, many women felt that there have been beneficial changes in terms of prosecuting perpetrators of domestic violence and in how victims are treated by the police and the in the court system. The PSNI now have dedicated domestic violence officers and can now prosecute perpetrators without a victim statement. There is a much wider understanding of the issue, how it is perpetrated and what it is. Other abuse is also more widely recognised and understood – continuing undermining, emotional, verbal, financial etc – and how insidious these abuses can be. That domestic violence is recognised as a crime now, as opposed to 15 years ago, was also lauded by the women.

Below is synopsis of the issues raised in response to the fourth question:

Has violence affected women more or less since the Peace Process?

In response to this question participants believed that women today are more empowered with information and support and are more likely to report domestic violence. The police are also more likely to respond and geographically areas have become more accessible to the police.

In some communities it has become more culturally acceptable to contact the police. Some contended that some 'older generations' of women older would be wary of contacting the police in relation to this but this would change for younger women. During the conflict it would have been perceived as 'disloyal to the cause' for women in some communities to access assistance from the police. As well as this some of the participants thought that throughout the peace process there was less media attention focussed on political violence and the 'normalisation' of our society allowed the media to focus on other everyday issues, including the prevalence of domestic and sexual violence. That men in our society have moved from a violent context into a peaceful one does not necessarily mean peace prevails everywhere. Some participants contended that violence affects women more now. Security Force personnel are dealing with the aftermath of a violent conflict and for some this affects their behaviour at home; there is increased violence in the home and access to weapons. For other men, they have been released from prison and are returning home to a very different society where they often have with little hope of accessing employment and their home situation has changed in their absence; women have become more independent in the

absence of their partners. There was a view that this societal transition has resulted in the potential for an increase in violence in the home; that many women and families are more vulnerable during the years of the Peace Process.

Generally, however, the women believed it is very difficult to measure due to the lack of available data and because of the secrecy and stigma attached to the crime. Some of the women from ethnic minority backgrounds said that over these years more and more women from other countries have migrated to Ireland and for many the problem of domestic and sexual violence is still shrouded in secrecy.

Some changes over this period were welcomed by participants, for example, the noticeable increase in female police officers since the Peace Process. It was hoped that having more women in the police service would mean domestic and sexual violence crimes would be prioritised. There was a strong view, however, that more police officers dedicated to domestic violence crime were needed as well as more government funding for services for victims.

Finally, in relation to this question some of the women were concerned that young girls have taken on the mantle of violent males and that they are more likely to display violent behaviour now than before and that this issue needs to be addressed.

At the end of the roundtable discussions participants were asked to prioritise issues they had raised.

A synopsis of the roundtable priorities are below:

Priorities and Conclusions:

Immigration laws need to change

More women in the judicial system
Educating the judicial system
More women on the judiciary

Isolation contributes to feeling 'unsafe'

Fear of losing children/social services involvement – shame and fear**
Need to address the issue of embarrassment and fear of repercussions and the 'no one will believe me'
Protecting children first rather than 'self'
Fear of failure

Information sharing
Better signposting to services
Education through the curriculum
Better education for all on domestic violence and safety ******
Need to highlight the realities and consequences of abuse in all its forms and the consequence for both victims and perpetrators
Recognise it's not specific to class, race or creed
Really need to recognise the consequences of abuse
Complete change of attitudes to the issue – police family, friends etc.
Removing stigma and shame

Changes in last 15 years:- alcohol, internet, TV/Games, Human Trafficking, Better support, More openness

Effect on mental health – self esteem and body image.

Women must be enabled to be more financially secure and supported

What's missing!!!

DASH form – Domestic Abuse, Stalking, harassment/honour based killings