

# Summary Report on Reclaiming the Bonfires

**Women explore the international and local history of bonfires and their use in cultural celebrations**



North Belfast Strategic Good Relations Programme



Office of the  
**First Minister and  
Deputy First Minister**  
[www.ofmdfmi.gov.uk](http://www.ofmdfmi.gov.uk)

Community Relations Council



In partnership with

**Belfast  
City Council**

## Introduction

In April 2017 WRDA received a small grant from Belfast City Council to run a project for women. The project, *Reclaiming the Bonfires; Women explore the International and Local history of their use in cultural celebrations*, was to enable women to explore the rich, diverse, long and shared history of bonfires internationally with a view to re-imagining their use in cultural celebrations locally. This report will document the activities and recommendations on how they can be used as a more inclusive cultural activity.

The project attempted to address the silencing of women in communities where there is paramilitary control of cultural expression. The project provided opportunities for women to develop a shared historical narrative on bonfires and develop recommendations on how bonfires can be a more inclusive means of cultural expression.

The project aimed to tackle the undocumented and unrecognised experiences of women in times of conflict by engaging them in developing a shared and alternative narrative on a particular means of cultural expression and by providing the opportunity to develop and articulate their recommendations on how these cultural expressions could be realised in the future. The project also aimed to tackle sectarianism and racism by changing attitudes and behaviours, through direct and meaningful contact while also tackling isolation, polarisation and division by challenging stereotypes between and among groups.

By tackling these issues through a gender lens, the project hoped to address the under-representation of women in decision-making which has an adverse effect on policy making. This project was intended to address this deficit by targeting women in disadvantaged areas and providing them with the opportunity to explore bonfires from different historical and cultural perspectives, and to help co-create good practice guidelines for communities that wish to use bonfires as a means of cultural expression. This project provides the opportunities to re-imagine a cultural expression in a more diverse and inclusive manner.



## Background and Context

The annual bonfires in Northern Ireland have been a flashpoint for sectarian conflict for many years, yet their origins can be traced back to pagan times and have been used as celebratory events internationally. The idea was explored very successfully in Derry/Londonderry through a radical arts project culminating in a Burning Man festival in 2015. It was an ambitious art project aimed at breaking down religious and political barriers, with an estimated 20,000 participating in the project.

Bonfires are traditionally lit in loyalist areas on 11 July, marking the Twelfth of July commemorations. Anti-internment bonfires are also lit in republican areas on the 9<sup>th</sup> of August to mark the anniversary of the introduction in Northern Ireland of internment without trial in 1971. Prior to this they were lit on the 15<sup>th</sup> August to mark the feast of the Assumption (This feast has a double aspect: (1) the departure of Mary from this life; (2) the assumption of her body into heaven. It is the principal feast of the Virgin Mary).

In June 2017 Bonfires were back making the headlines, as were interventions made by Belfast City Council. It was alleged that Council officials agreed to store pallets for the convenience of loyalist bonfire builders. It is not known if they were stolen, or voluntarily donated to bonfire builders. They were then stolen from the council-owned yard they were being stored in by another group of bonfire builders. After a meeting in City Hall of the Strategic Policy committee, an investigation by the Chief Executive has been agreed, with an independent input.

At the end of July Sinn Féin proposed a motion to ensure that Belfast City Council officials be given the power to remove material from bonfire sites. This came weeks after a Belfast apartment building was damaged by an eleventh night bonfire held on council-owned land. Dozens of windows were cracked, and the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service (NIFRS) had to dampen the building because of its proximity to the Sandy Row site. Bonfire material was later removed from a bonfire site in the New Lodge area of North Belfast because of safety concerns.

The Belfast city council motion states: "This council gives permission to our council officers to remove bonfire materials or employ contractors to facilitate the removal of bonfire materials from council sites and other sites, which belong to statutory agencies and those which are in private ownership."

The motion was proposed by Sinn Féin and carried by 31 votes to 21. The DUP then challenged the legality of Belfast City Council's new policy on bonfires arguing that proper procedures were not followed.

What also emerged was that fears of intimidation had forced Belfast City Council to try to use contractors from outside Northern Ireland to remove bonfire material. It is believed more than 70 different firms have been contracted in recent years.

This highly public dispute was the backdrop against which the workshops took place and therefore had an impact on the discourse.

## The Findings

### Positive Experiences of Bonfires

The participants talked about their youth and the teamwork and solidarity of collecting wood for the bonfires. This commenced when school broke up at the end of June and the wood was branches from trees and other 'bits and bobs'. It was then up to neighbours to store the wood until 10<sup>th</sup> July as they weren't built until then. The women talked about building huts and staying in the huts all night (some of them were not allowed to do this) to ensure that no-one stole the wood. It was seen as a running joke that other 'rival bonfire collectors' from other streets would come and steal a few bits of wood off the bonfire if the builders were not vigilant enough. They talked about nearly every street having their own small bonfire and that the men in the street stood with hoses and blankets to ensure nothing caught fire until the bonfire had burned out which was usually in a couple of hours. The bonfires were described as being a 'proper pyramid shape not square or round or super structures'.

They talked about the street games and songs they sang (old War songs and the Sash) and how some of them danced around the bonfires. Family and neighbours gathered for a few hours to chat, sing and celebrate their culture. They talked at length about the community getting together and the community spirit of the event and the evening itself. They talked about being fed stew and hot peas by the neighbours; baking potatoes over the bonfires on sticks, and how children's parties were organised and someone's mum would collect some money in the street so they could buy sweets and juice for the bonfire party. Some of the women talked about the excitement of staying up late, meeting up with friends and how they stood at the same spot at the bonfire every year so their mates could find them. Other talked about how their granny used to make them take a bath before the bonfire which was futile as 'you needed another one after because you were stinking of smoke'.

Many talked about touring the other bonfires with some doing the 'whole' tour with their parents from Sandy Row up to the Shankill. While some were very clear that they had knowledge and understanding of bonfires and their cultural significance ('Beacons were lit for King Billy to light his way') others remarked that they had no idea what the 12<sup>th</sup> was for when they were kids; 'it was just the 12<sup>th</sup>'. Others enjoyed painting kerbstones and putting bunting up. Some of the women remembered getting new clothes which happened three times a year; Xmas, Easter and for the 12<sup>th</sup>. A few women remembered the bonfire moving from 15<sup>th</sup> Aug Feast of the assumption –to the 9<sup>th</sup> August to mark internment, while one recalled jumping over the wall 'to do a bit of courting when your parents weren't looking.' There were also clear differences in rural and urban experiences with women who had grown up rurally saying that 'it was much more of a city thing for 11<sup>th</sup> than a country thing'. In the days before the troubles and when communities were much more mixed, some catholic neighbours would have come and joined in at the bonfires, while others talked of their catholic friends helping gather the wood.



## **How, When & Why the nature of bonfires changed**

The women remembered things changing drastically although many were unsure of just when this happened. They talked about slum clearings in some areas that had an impact in the 70's & 80's. This was coupled by the rise in violence with the onset of the Troubles with many families being put out and displaced or mixed marriage families moving due to security fears. They described a mass movement of people. They described community make-up changing and people didn't know their neighbours anymore. They also talked about when new housing was built there was nowhere anymore for the small street bonfires to be held.

Some women described bonfires really changing at the time of the 2000 Loyalist Feud which 'was a very dark time'. They believed that at this time people were watching over their shoulders; afraid that there would be shootings or stabbings, and this was the period when many of them stopped going to bonfires or letting their children go. The women talked about paramilitary leadership battles and ownership of bonfires with regular shows of strength. They also believed that the more negative media attention some bonfires gained, the more competitive rival bonfires became.

## **Negative Experiences of Bonfires**

The women described how bonfires had changed and what they no longer enjoyed about them. They now bear little resemblance to the cultural, family and community events that had preceded the conflict, and that the women had enjoyed in their youth. The bonfires went from family friendly events to paramilitaries telling local residents to stop collecting money for the kids' parties and that they were taking over. They described how bonfires became these superstructures with burning tyres and pallets; 'toxic for the environment and not at all family friendly'. Some of them smoulder for over 10 days. The recent fire at Grenfell Tower in London and some of the bonfires being built and lit so near to residential areas was also a cause for concern as 'people could so easily lose their lives.'

The women also described how heavy consumption of alcohol and its affects was not conducive to a family event. Women described people being out of their heads on drugs, being abusive and picking fights. They described guns and balaclavas, shots being fired and sexual assaults all taking place at certain bonfires which was described as an 'acceptable level of lawlessness that the PSNI just turn a blind eye to'. The politicisation of bonfires by burning political party posters, and other political symbols and religious effigies all added to the bonfires becoming symbols of fear, power and intimidation which stopped women complaining or trying to get them moved.

Belfast City Council's bonfire policy and scheme did come in for some criticism. Some women complained that the financial scheme for bonfires was not scrutinised properly 'so the money was going into the wrong hands'. Others described that some of the stall holders that would turn up to events to sell food or provide other activities have links with local paramilitaries. Some women found BCC rules around bonfires very stressful and that it should be revisited as some groups don't take the money so they can continue to burn tyres and keep families out. Others commented that the Council needed to review the terms of reference for bonfires and have independent investigations into issues rather than investigating themselves. Some comments were made about council employees having to remove bonfire materials. Some women said that they felt this was unfair as political issues were not the fault of council employees and that the council employees had to live in communities so the onus should not be put on them.

While some said that there were bonfire committees in their areas 'no-one from the local community was on the bonfire committee'. Some women talked about the general lack of trust communities had in the government and politicians as a whole while others commented politicians and councillors who make these decisions don't live in the communities which can experience tensions.

## **The Recommendations**

The participants were asked to generate some recommendations on what they thought would help facilitate bonfires being more culturally inclusive. While all 59 participants did not agree with everything suggested, they do provide creative alternatives and guidelines so that the cultural practice is not lost altogether but can return to a pre-conflict inclusivity and family friendly event.

### **Bonfires & Sites**

The majority of women insisted that bonfires should be on designated safe sites in areas where they are not going to damage property or topple over. They also suggested height restrictions and a list of acceptable, environmentally friendly material to burn (wood and cardboard). To deal with and discourage anti-social/excessive behaviour Community Stewards should be appointed. These independent stewards would have direct contact with the PSNI, NIFRS and NIAS should issues arise. They also suggested a List of NO's such as dumping rubbish, dumping sofas or white goods, tyres, election posters, symbols or effigies. They also suggested community storage space for the wood/ recycling that could be used.

### **Communities Managing Bonfires**

The women said that for bonfires to return to their earlier family fun atmosphere buy-in from the community was essential. They talked about community consultations on the bonfires and sites and that it should be anonymous if people fear speaking out. They discussed bonfire committees made up of local people and set up in each area to liaise with the PSNI, NIHE, Fire Brigade and BCC. They thought that the committees should be gender balanced and reflective of community make-up (young people need represented also) and that there should be a 50 % gender quota. They suggested that venues and events around the bonfire should be advertised locally so that the community know what is going on at what time. They talked about bringing the bonfires back to their roots of being intergenerational with Grans, mums and kids all involved and intergenerational entertainment to create a family festival atmosphere. They also suggested education workshops and a programme on the culture and history of bonfires.

### **Tackling illegal behaviour**

The women were adamant that there needed to be PSNI enforcement and consequences for breaking the law. This would be essential to underpin the changes required and to challenge the perception by many that there is an acceptable level of lawlessness allowed at bonfires. The women also suggested education programmes on the consequences of anti-social behaviour, criminal records and the impact on employment and travel.

### **Media Coverage**

Some women spoke of how they thought media coverage created competition between rival bonfires, and also painted communities in a very bad light. When one woman was involved in organising an 11<sup>th</sup> night party in her community, 600 people turned up. It was a diverse and inclusive event but did not have a bonfire. Feedback from the event suggested that those that attended had a great time and there was no trouble or anti-social behaviour. The woman said that she contacted Nolan and UTV to see if they would cover the story but they were not interested as it went against the bad news story narrative the media in NI feed on. The women suggested buy-in from the media to cover good news stories or making their own media content with local TV station, NVTv.

### **Creative ideas**

Some creative ideas emerged also. Some women suggested having themed bonfires like a 'Country & Western' and a traditional and a modern youth led bonfire. This was suggested to tap into the tourist industry. Some other women suggested a competition could be run to design a sculpture that could be built from environmentally friendly materials as a way to get local kids involved. The winning one would get built and then burned.



## Conclusion

This small pilot project attempted to address the silencing of women in communities where there is paramilitary control of cultural expression, and provide opportunities for women to develop a shared historical narrative on bonfires and recommendations on how bonfires can be more inclusive as a means of cultural expression.

By tackling these issues through a gender lens, the project hoped to address the under-representation of women in decision-making which has an adverse effect on policy making. This project was intended to address this deficit by targeting women in disadvantaged areas and providing them with the opportunity to explore bonfires from different historical and cultural perspectives, and to help co-create good practice guidelines for communities that wish to use bonfires as a means of cultural expression. WRDA believe that this report is testament to a successful pilot project that could be rolled out and developed to re-imagine bonfires.



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