

UNSCR 1325 in Northern Ireland: Opportunities, Challenges and Complexities

Written by Melanie Hoewer

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MELANIE HOEWER, OCT 2 2012

“Working on UNSCR 1325 in Northern Ireland is like working in a virtual reality” (Civil society member from Northern Ireland).

The UN envisaged Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325, passed on the 31 October 2000 as a landmark document that promises to protect women’s rights and guarantee their equal participation in peace processes[i]. UNSCR 1325[ii] takes into account women’s different experiences of conflict and their contributions to building peace and sustainable security. Celebrating its twelfth birthday, it has yet to reach its full potential, as implementation remains problematic, not only due the lack of political will, but also as result of diplomatic sensitivities arising out of the positioning of some conflict regions. This is evident in Northern Ireland, a conflict region in which UNSCR 1325 has yet to be implemented.

The way the resolution is implemented is through national action plans (NAP) whose development and delivery is the responsibility of national governments. The unique positioning of Northern Ireland as part of the United Kingdom, but also closely linked to Ireland brings to light both the challenges and the innovation potential arising out of implementation processes of UNSCR 1325 at the official state and community levels

One plus one equals zero? Women from Northern Ireland and the national boundaries of peace & security

National Action Plans (NAP) for the integration of UNSCR 1325 have been developed in both the UK and in Ireland. Ireland’s NAP has been launched in November 2011, while the UK already introduced a first revision of its action plan in November 2010. Both the Irish process and the UK revision have been informed by lessons learned from other 1325 processes and have contributed innovative elements to the 1325 toolbox. The focus on a three-pillar approach looking at national, bilateral and multilateral actions increases the strength and efficacy of the British action plan. In Ireland, the emphasis on the consultation process has ensured a greater inclusiveness and transparency in the development of an action plan. The process is led by an independent chair includes public servants, members of the civil society and academia, as well as women who have been affected by violence. The continued pressure from organisations in civil society has significantly contributed to this process, in particular by the absence of a 1325 action plan for Northern Ireland. While some women from Northern Ireland have formed part of consultation processes and informed the creation of the British and Irish NAPs, the region remains largely outside the scope of these legal frameworks.

Women from Northern Ireland have been affected by armed conflict, but are largely excluded from the macro level peace process, which is acknowledged in academic literature[iii] and in official British and Irish government documents and statements[iv]. The Belfast or Good Friday Agreement, signed in 1998, was an important point in determining constitutional and legal frameworks of peace; it predates UNSCR 1325. A number of authors[v] have discussed the exclusion of women from narratives on the Northern Ireland conflict and peace process and highlight the significant role women have played and are still playing in civil society and in community-based work. The impact of women’s activism is visible in the increasing spaces for addressing women’s concerns such as NGOs working on

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women's rights or women's centres. Further the presence of the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition[vi] at the peace table has increased women's visibility in the picture of peace and led to the inclusion of general issues of human rights and equality in the peace agreement that set out to benefit women. In addition to the already existing equal opportunity and sex discrimination legislation, the Northern Ireland Act (1998) established in Section 75 'gender' as one of nine areas of equality to be promoted by public authorities. This has resulted in the establishment of a Human Rights Commission and equality safeguards such as the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland, instruments which have led to progressive legislation on same-sex civil unions, employment equity and social welfare. However, the emphasis on the ethnic dimension in the political peace process in Northern Ireland has pushed aside class and gender dimensions and demands. Gains for women achieved through the work of the Women's Coalition are at risk to be watered down and lost in general 'diversity issues' of Section 75 of Northern Ireland Act[vii]. Women remain marginalised in political and public life in Northern Ireland, which reveals the need for the implementation of UNSCR 1325 in the region to provide an essential framework for improving gender equality and creating a sustainable peace[viii].

Yet, the exclusion of Northern Ireland from the UK National Action Plan on UNSCR 1325 prevents a strong framework from delivering a comprehensive women, peace and security policy for the post-conflict region. To date, the UK government has not followed the recommendations of the CEDAW Committee from 2008[ix] to "fully implement UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security in Northern Ireland" and concrete provisions to integrate Northern Ireland into the UK's National Action Plan remain absent[x].

Making UNSCR 1325 relevant for Northern Ireland

On the positive side, there has been an awareness raising and lobbying campaign by a strong civil society women's network on the need to implement UNSCR 1325 within the region and beyond. Much of the work of civil society organisations has been dedicated to education and information on international legal frameworks on women, peace and security and its relevance for Northern Ireland. UNSCR 1325 is positioned in a limbo when it comes to the conflict in the region and it has been a challenge to make it relevant for everyone. Among many policy makers the perception prevails, that as placed by the British government in the 'foreign affairs' pocket, the implementation of UNSCR 1325 falls into the responsibility of London and not of the devolved government in Belfast. A stepping stone towards making the aspirations of UNSCR 1325 for women in Northern Ireland reality was the establishment of the All Party Group on UNSCR1325 in the Northern Ireland Assembly in December 2010. The group receives support from the Northern Ireland Women's European Platform[xi], who has concentrated its work on briefing the members of the all-party group on the women, peace and security initiatives and frameworks and on changing the perception that it is not relevant for them.

The Irish government acknowledges the benefits of involving women in conflict resolution, as "clearly evident in Northern Ireland, where women played and continue to play a pivotal role in building peace."[xii] Building on that recognition of the strategic role played by women, Ireland appointed Dame Nuala O'Loan, former Police Ombudsman in Northern Ireland, as Ireland's Special Envoy on Women and Peace Making. Further, the Irish government recognises in its National Action Plan (NAP) on UNSCR 1325[xiii], the need to "engage with appropriate Northern Ireland authorities to encourage development of policies and measures consistent with the aims of UNSCR 1325, in consultation with civil society organisations"[xiv]. However, Northern Ireland's constitutional positioning remains to date within the UK and the positioning of UNSCR 1325 in the area of external affairs keeps the work on UNSCR 1325 in Northern Ireland in a 'virtual' rather than in an actual reality.

An alternative framework to implement UNSCR 1325 into existing structures in Northern Ireland has been proposed by Hanna's House[xv]. Following the framework of the Good Friday (Belfast) Agreement, the all-Ireland women's organisation is lobbying for a bi-national and three-strand approach to further the implementation of UNSCR 1325 in both parts of the island of Ireland[xvi]. The three strands of the peace agreement connect the internal democratic arrangements within Northern Ireland; the relationships between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland (North-South); and the relationships between Britain and Ireland (East-West). If it finds support within institutional arrangements set up as part of the peace process such as the Ministerial Councils[xvii] and the Joint Committee on the Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement (GFA), the Hanna's House initiative could provide an vehicle to

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place UNSCR 1325 at the heart of the political processes in Northern Ireland.

However, post-Good Friday Agreement, the conservative nature of macro level politics, which are dominated by male republican and loyalist voices poses a challenge to transform interesting initiatives arising from women's activism into policy-making in Northern Ireland. Within the new post-conflict political setting 'finding accommodation with opponents'[xviii] takes priority over feminist concerns in everyday Northern Irish politics. Feminist community activism on women, peace and security is limited by the legacies of a male dominated peace process at the state level of society. This macro level process is characterised by two intertwined dynamics: a) the conservative top-down approach, created by the power-sharing mechanism at the macro level, and b) the remaining and constantly reinforced division of women from different communities and different levels of society[xix].

The debate over the positioning of Northern Ireland within the development of national action plans in the UK and on the island of Ireland has brought together once again universal approaches to women, peace and security and the question of nationality. It has revealed how deeply entrenched political processes both North and South of the border are with the competing nationalisms and sensitivities developed around those. The question is whether the work on UNSCR 1325 creates a common ground and allows for bridging boundaries between women from different community backgrounds and between civil society and grassroots activists? If so, it has the potential to set off a revolution from below by addressing weaknesses of the consociational peace agreement and allowing for a development towards a more sustainable peace within the region.

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Melanie Hoewer is Lecturer in the Politics of Conflict and in Conflict Resolution in the School of Politics and International Relations in University College Dublin (UCD). She was academic adviser to the Consultative Group of the Department of Foreign Affairs on the UNSCR 1325 National Action Plan in Ireland and has written on gender and identity in peace and conflict processes.

[i] For example, United Nation Secretary General. (UNSG) 2010. Report of the Secretary General, *Women's Participation in Peacebuilding*, A/65/354-S/2010/466, 7 September 2010, http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/65/354

[ii] Key areas of UNSCR 1325 on Women, Peace and Security are: prevention, participation, protection, relief and recovery.

[iii] For further information please see for instance: McWilliams, M. 1995. Struggling for peace for peace and justice: reflections on women's activism. *Northern Ireland Journal of Women's History* Vol. 6, No. 4: 13-39., Morgan, V. and G. Fraser. 1995. 'Women and the Northern Ireland Conflict: Experiences and Responses'. In: *Facets of the Conflict In Northern Ireland*. Ed. S. Dunn. London: Macmillan Press Ltd., Cockburn, C. 1998. *The space between us: negotiating gender and national identities in conflict*. London and New York: Zed Books

[iv] For instance: The Irish Department of Foreign Affairs' cross learning report highlights the instrumental role women from Northern Ireland have played during the conflict (DFA. 2011:9) or Tony Blair referring in his speech to the Irish parliament on 26th of November 1998 to the need for more women in Northern Irish politics (Dáil Éireann 1998). Dáil Éireann. 1998. *Address by Prime Minister of the United Kingdom*. Volume 497 – 26 November. <http://historical-debates.oireachtas.ie/D/0497/D.0497.199811260003.html>

[v] For instance: Morgan, V. and G. Fraser. 1995. 'Women and the Northern Ireland Conflict: Experiences and Responses'; Roulston, C. and C. Davies (eds.) 2000. *Gender, Democracy and Inclusion in Northern Ireland*; Ward, M. 2006. 'Gender, Representation and the Northern Peace Process,' *Women's Resource and Development Agency. 2008. Women and the Conflict: Talking about the "Troubles" and Planning for the Future*.

[vi] The Northern Ireland Women's Coalition (NIWC) was a women's political party formed in 1996 in order to contest elections to a peace forum.

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[vii] GAPS UK. 2010. *Global Monitoring Checklist on Women, Peace and Security. Executive Summary* http://www.gaps-uk.org/docs/Global_Monitoring_Checklist.pdf

[viii] Ward, M. 2006. 'Gender, Representation and the Northern Peace Process,' *Irish Feminist Review*, V2, pp. 8-35 (p.7)

[ix] CEDAW Committee 2008 Concluding Observations, recommendation, Para 38. d)

[x] Ibid p.61-62

[xi] NIWEP. 2008. *Submission to the Committee on the Convention for the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). 6th Periodic Report of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Shadow Report.* <http://blog.niwep.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/06/cedaw-9-may-2008-report.pdf>

[xii] Anglo-Irish Division, Department of Foreign Affairs, 'The role of women in the NI Peace Process', paper presented to the Council of Europe (December 1 2003). As cited in Ward, M. 2009. *From negotiation of the peace to implementation of the peace agreement: a gender analysis of the Northern Ireland experience* <http://www.osce.org/gender/36863>

[xiii] The Irish NAP was launched on 25th November 2011.

[xiv] DFA (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade). 2011. *Ireland's National Action Plan for the Implementation of UNSCR 1325, 2011 – 2014.* <http://www.dfa.ie/uploads/documents/CRU/national%20action%20plan%20%28web%29.pdf> P.13

[xv] Hanna's House. 2012. *Women, Peace & Security Presentation – 7 March 2012. Ireland's National Action Plan on United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325* www.hannashouse.ie/PDFs/1325_position.doc

[xvi] Ibid

[xvii] Including the British-Irish Council, British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly, North/South Council and the North-South Parliamentary Forum.

[xviii] Gerry Adams as cited in Tonge, J. 2002. Tonge, J. 2002. *Northern Ireland. Conflict and Change*. Harlow, Essex: Pearson Education Limited.p. 73.

[xix] However, M. 2011. *Crossing Boundaries. Gender and Identity in Peace and Conflict Processes*. PhD Thesis, UCD (unpublished).

About the author:

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