

WOMEN IN NORTHERN IRELAND – CONNECTING TO EUROPE

Advancing Women's Equality through
European Policy and International Conventions



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Bronagh Hinds

A report on NIWEP's public participation activities
under the European Commission's Plan D for
Democracy, Dialogue and Debate 2007 – 2008

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FOREWORD

Women in Northern Ireland – Connecting to Europe is a project developed by the Northern Ireland Women's European Platform to increase knowledge and understanding of European and international standards on women's equality in order to achieve change. This report is an account of our work on the project.

The report fulfils many purposes. It is first of all our official report to the European Commission of the project work. Second, it provides feedback to those who took part in the dialogues at the events. Third, the Women's Manifesto for the European Parliament Election 2009 owes much to the discussions noted in the report. Fourth, the views on issues in the report will be invaluable to the NIWEP team working on the next Northern Ireland Shadow Report to CEDAW. While the next full Shadow Report is not due for another four years, NIWEP is preparing to issue a short report in 2009 – the UK Government was examined in 2008 and the CEDAW Committee requested a response to a number of its recommendations within the year. Finally, the report will reaffirm our priorities and set our agenda for the next two years.

The project was funded under the European Commission's Plan D for Democracy, Dialogue and Debate intended to promote public participation in debates on topics of European interest. We were delighted to lead a project on women's rights that seamlessly connected local to global using the key markers of the EU Roadmap on Equality between Women and Men and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. We are grateful to the Commission for its support, the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister for its co-funding, all those who took part, the NIWEP team who worked in a voluntary capacity and Bronagh Hinds who supported the project and authored the report.

Liz Law
Executive Member
European Women's Lobby

Kate McCullough
Chair
NIWEP



Kate McCullough, NIWEP Chair, speaking at the NIWEP-WIG "Knowing me, knowing you" conference at the Wellington Park Hotel, Belfast, 11 November 2008

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SUMMARY: WOMEN IN NORTHERN IRELAND – CONNECTING TO EUROPE

Northern Ireland Women’s European Platform

The Northern Ireland Women’s European Platform is the leading organisation for women in Northern Ireland on European and international matters. It speaks for over 40 organisations which together represent the main regional women’s organisations as well as many grassroots women’s groups in Northern Ireland.

NIWEP is one of four national organisations – the other three are in Scotland, Wales, and England – who together as the UK Joint Committee on Women represent the UK in the European Women’s Lobby. NIWEP collaborates with the National Women’s Council of Ireland who along with the UKJCW is a founder member of the Lobby.

The European Women’s Lobby promotes women’s rights and equality between women and men in the European Union. Headquartered in Brussels, it is the largest umbrella women’s organisation in the EU with representatives in 27 Member States and three candidate countries. Through the EWL, NIWEP is in regular dialogue with the European Parliament, European Commission and other institutions. NIWEP is the current representative for the UK on the forty-person Board of the EWL and was elected by the Board to serve as Treasurer on the seven-person Executive for 2008-10.

Women in Northern Ireland – Connecting to Europe

The European Commission’s Plan D for Democracy, Dialogue and Debate 2007-2008 promotes public participation in debates on topics of European interest. It supported NIWEP’s project *Women in Northern Ireland – Connecting to Europe* to inform women’s groups and others on European and international developments using the EU Roadmap for Equality between Women and Men 2006-2010 and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women.

Conferences, seminars and training sessions were organised and inputs made to events arranged by others. NIWEP presented question and answer sessions, debates with local women and on-line information; prepared guides, training materials and an e-consultation with young women; advanced EU and international knowledge among equality officials; and shared lessons on women and conflict with women from countries emerging from conflict elsewhere.

In Brussels there were meetings with the Office of the Northern Ireland Executive and discussions with other NGOs on trafficking. NIWEP took part in the EWL General Assemblies in 2007 and 2008, contributing to groups on gender budgeting and conflict resolution. It drew upon the expertise of its executive committee, members of the European Economic and Social Committee, the local representation of the European Commission, its membership of the European Women’s Lobby and its Special Consultative Status at the UN to deliver the various aspects of the project.



Participants at the NIWEP Engaging with Europe on Gender Equality conference at the Wellington Park Hotel, 19 November 2008

The project linked the local to the global, showing the relevance of EU and UN standards and policies. Intense debate and discussion signalled that women are interested in the EU, and in engaging through NIWEP and the European Women's Lobby in building networks with women across Europe and on a global platform.

Reaching women across Northern Ireland

NIWEP collaborated with the Training for Women Network's *Peace by Piece* project, providing a training programme on the EU and the UN in which fifty women took part and mentoring twenty women on a study visit to Brussels and thirty at the 2008 UN Commission of the Status of Women in New York. Assistance was also given to TWN for an international conference on women in conflict and peace-building.

Later in the year NIWEP partnered the Women's Information Group to bring the European story to women who have least exposure to the EU. The conference on the EU Equality Roadmap reached almost seventy women from grassroots women's groups across Belfast, while a newsletter article reached 850 women.

In November 2008 NIWEP's Belfast conference on the Equality Roadmap and CEDAW drew participation from the Women's Resource and Development Agency, Women into Politics, DemocraShe, Women's Support Network, Women's Information Group, Business and Professional Women, Queen's Women's Graduates Association, Soroptimists, Women's Forum and the Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network; along with representatives from London-based Gender Action on Peace and Security (GAPS), Amnesty, the Family Planning Association, several government departments and the Northern Ireland Assembly's Committee of the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister.



Participants at the NIWEP Engaging with Europe on Gender Equality conference at the Wellington Park Hotel, 19 November 2008

A similar conference held in Derry/Londonderry in conjunction with Foyle Women's Information Group involved women from local community groups as well as from branches of large regional organisations. It also attracted a number of women to travel across the border from the Republic of Ireland.

An expert roundtable on violence against women involved the UK nominee on the European Observatory on Violence Against Women and the coordinator of the European visit of the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women. They were joined by representatives of Women's Aid, the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, Amnesty and several women's organisations active on the issue.

A session on the EU Equality Roadmap and CEDAW was held for equality officers of government departments in the Northern Ireland administration. NIWEP also undertook:

- A briefing for women members of a political party.
- An information and training session for the Women's Committee of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions comprising women from ten trade unions.
- A presentation to Community Dialogue.
- A Meeting with the Junior Ministers in the Office of the First and Deputy First Minister.
- A meeting with the Chair and Deputy Chair of the Committee of the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister in the Northern Ireland Assembly.
- A submission to the OFMdfM Committee for their *Consideration of European Issues*.

Mapping equality issues across the EU Gender Equality Roadmap

Women expressed concerns and priorities through the numerous project dialogues and these were mapped across the six priority areas of the EU Gender Equality Roadmap:

Achieving equal economic independence for women and men:

- Women must not be treated as being expendable in times of recession and equality provisions that protect women's rights and offer a level playing field must not be undermined.
- The gender pay gap must be eradicated and women's pension entitlements should not suffer through less pay than men and careers interrupted because of lack of childcare services.
- Traditional education routes and career choices must be consistently challenged to reduce limiting factors for women.
- Information and training should be offered to enable women to become more articulate on economic matters.
- Women face the brunt of managing the consequences of debt and economic difficulty; increased support is needed for vulnerable groups: lone parents, pensioner households, low income families and disadvantaged communities.
- Access to healthcare and medicine should be universal and equal and not determined by postcode.
- Following the CEDAW recommendations in 1999 and 2008 the barriers women face in exercising their reproductive rights should be removed.

Enhancing reconciliation of work, private and family life:

- Northern Ireland needs a care infrastructure fit for the 21st century which is able to provide women, and men, with the security they need for their children and dependents so they can access employment, education and training.
- Childcare should be accessible in terms of quantity, range of support – including after-school and holiday care – and cost.
- Improved legal protection for flexible working, maternity and paternity leave and pay should provide the imperative for greater employer commitment to these provisions and a culture of work/life balance.
- Greater recognition of caring responsibilities is needed with realistic care subsidies, adequate benefits for those who cannot work due to caring responsibilities, respite support, training, home visits and assistance for support networks for carers.

Promoting equal participation of women and men in decision making:

- The gender neutral approach adopted by policy drafters and decision-makers must be reversed and greater commitment given to consulting women across the full range of public policy areas before priorities are set.
- Resolution UNSCR 1325 on Women, Peace and Security must be applied in Northern Ireland, most particularly in relation to advancing women in politics, public appointments and all levels of decision-making.
- Assembly Members should consider founding a women's advisory committee, seeking to establish is as an advisory arm in decision-making and one important liaison point between women inside and outside the Assembly.
- In line with CEDAW's call for the use of temporary special measures and permissive UK legislation, political parties should use the discretionary powers given to them by law to introduce positive action measures to advance more women candidates in all elections until gender parity is reached.

- Greater equality between women and men should be delivered through the Review of Public Administration. Gender-awareness among policy leaders and implementers of the RPA should be increased and equality impact assessments conducted on all policies and actions throughout the process.
- All tools – legislation, policies, procedures, preparations, training and capacity building, recruitment and selection – should be deployed during local government reform to deliver equality for women and under-represented groups rather than replicate current imbalances in councils.
- The following are needed to overcome barriers to political participation: leadership commitment and action; visible management interest and encouragement; mandatory gender equality training for men and women; an established process to welcome, incorporate, value, educate and train women; gender-proofed internal party policies and party manifestos; gender-proofed procedures and processes e.g. meeting times, candidate selection and culture of debate; recruitment of women to senior staff positions; consideration of family friendly measures such as childcare, job-share working hours; special measures to select women as candidates to redress historical ingrained bias.
- Leadership should be given in all political parties to reject the adversarial political culture that has put women off politics and undermined confidence in government, politicians, political parties and the political process itself.
- Political parties should provide evidence of their serious attention to achieving results on priorities identified by women and supporting parity of women's representation in policy dialogue.
- More training in EU and international standards should be provided for policy makers and politicians; and all political representatives, including MEPs, should be encouraged to undertake gender-awareness training.
- A proactive, more transparent approach to public appointments is required and the Commissioner for Public Appointments should review the process to introduce changes that are more effective in reaching gender balance.
- The EU should monitor the European Parliament election process not just the results; and ensure that Member State appointments to EU institutions are gender balanced.

Eradicating gender based violence and trafficking:

- The use of gender neutral terms when referring to domestic and sexual violence is unacceptable. The gender neutral approach to policy-making is having a negative impact on women's services.
- In line with the 2008 call by the CEDAW Committee for a national UK strategy on VAW, the Northern Ireland Executive should develop its strategy on ending all forms of violence against women along the continuum of physical, mental and sexual violence – drawing on expertise in the voluntary sector – ensure it interlocks with strategies across the UK and commit substantial resources to it. The national strategy should be designed with contributions from the different nations in the UK.
- A mapping exercise should be carried out within and across the nations of the UK to establish what exists and common ground on VAW. Where one nation has better practice than others this should be shared as a model.
- The hidden problem of human trafficking should be exposed and its gendered nature recognised. Gender-based analysis of human trafficking is required. Strong legislation should be enshrined with proactive application and collaboration across Europe and beyond.

- Women suffering violence and abuse should not be prevented by their uncertain immigration status from having recourse to public funds.
- Sexual violence cannot be excused by reference to cultural factors; and more information is needed in Northern Ireland about female genital mutilation to increase knowledge on how to handle it.
- Continuous improvement to systems is needed to tackle violence against women and support affected women: refining the court and justice systems; seeking more justice for women with appropriate sentences for abusers; keeping policies, systems and arrangements for child custody and protection under review, drawing on advice from experts and practitioner agencies; examining the reasons behind the poor rape conviction record and improving capacity to convict; ensuring there are enough advice and support centres and contact points for abused women with interpreters available on demand.
- Judges, police and relevant public officials should have access to gender-awareness training that covers the link between VAW and male power and control, the impact of consistent violence on producing low self esteem and confidence and the increasing forms and nature of all violence against women.
- Anger management courses should be made compulsory for men found guilty of domestic violence.
- VAW and trafficking requires a coordinated response across Europe and internationally in which the European Women's Lobby's Observatory on Violence Against Women, as a model of collaboration, can play a part.
- Better indicators for and monitoring of VAW must be developed and agreed.
- Sustainable funding should be provided for the infrastructure of VAW support organisations including an independent rape crisis centre in Northern Ireland.

Eliminating gender stereotypes in society:

- Education and training must be employed to overcome culture and practice that suppresses aspirations and confines women within narrow parameters.
- Young women should be encouraged onto and supported on non-traditional career paths.
- Degrading and offence portrayals of women in the media, which fuel explicit and subliminal negative messages about women's role and status and play a role in domestic and sexual violence, must be tackled.

Promoting gender equality outside the EU:

- The EU must adopt a social justice agenda underpinned by human and women's rights in all its external business and development dealings with other countries and in how it conducts itself in international arenas.
- Given its investment in peace-building in Northern Ireland the EU should advocate the application of UNSCR 1325 in the region.
- The EU should adhere to UNSCR 1325 and insist on compliance by others in all situations of conflict, including in the composition of European and international missions.
- The EU should call upon the expertise of women in Northern Ireland to assist it in building capacity in conflict prevention, crisis management, transition from conflict and sustainable peace-building in conflict areas.

The international women's rights convention: CEDAW

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, is overseen by a CEDAW Committee which examines periodically governments signed up to the Convention. The UK Government was examined in July 2008 and the Northern Ireland Executive was represented on the delegation. The Committee laid down a number of requirements for the UK in its Concluding Observations including requiring the Government to report *within a year* on some issues. This report is due in July 2009. On a number of overarching themes the Committee requires:

- Application of the Convention across the jurisdictions of the UK to include development and implementation of a '*unified, comprehensive and overarching national strategy and policy for the implementation of the Convention throughout the UK*' ensuring full implementation of the strategy in a consistent and coherent manner across the UK; establishment of an effective coordination and monitoring mechanism on implementation; and comprehensive information on steps and measures taken.
- Adherence to substantive equality standards to ensure the practical realisation of the principle of equality between women and men; which means achieving measurable equality of outcome that goes beyond equality of opportunity, same treatment; with progress towards equality not limited or undermined by gender neutral interpretations of legislation and policy.
- Education and promotion of the Convention and the Optional Protocol within government and to the general public and awareness-raising to increase understanding of the concept of substantive equality.

In relation to Northern Ireland the CEDAW Committee was explicit about its concerns on:

- The under-representation of *women in decision making* and lack of application of *UNSCR 1325* and called upon Government to take measures with benchmarks and concrete timetables to increase representation of women at all levels of political and public life including through the introduction of Special Temporary Measures. There should be *full* implementation of UNSCR 1325 in Northern Ireland.

Jane Morrice EU Economic and Social Committee and Equality Commission for NI, at the NIWEP Engaging with Europe and Gender Equality conference, Wellington Park Hotel Belfast, 19 November 2008



- The failure to progress women's equality in relation to *reproductive rights* in Northern Ireland and the '*detrimental consequences for women's health*' resulting from the illegal status of abortion. It advised Government to review the law with a view to removing '*punitive provisions imposed on women who undergo abortion*'. Furthermore, all health services and policies are expected to integrate a gender perspective.
- The inadequate provision made for *women in prison* in Northern Ireland and urged Government to introduce prevention programmes; alternative sentencing and custodial strategies; small custodial units and community establishment; and separate women's facilities in Northern Ireland.
- The lack of progress on addressing discrimination, exclusion, under-representation and poor socio economic conditions experienced by many *ethnic minority groups*, including the high number of miscarriages and stillbirths and maternal mortality rates among the *Traveller community*. Government was urged to intensify efforts to eliminate discrimination and increase participation; adopt culturally sensitive programmes to address mental health; regularly study intersectional discrimination; monitor through data collection; and take concrete measures to tackle health inequality and access to services for Traveller communities.
- Changes in methods of allocation of funding and the negative impact of gender neutral interpretations of equality legislation on *support, including financial, for women's organizations and women's only services*. Government was urged to provide increased and sustained funding to non-governmental organizations involved in women's rights; ensure there is no impact on women's-only services or restriction on women's organisations from interpretation and application of equality duties; and conduct an impact assessment of funding frameworks on women's organisations.

Many of the UK-wide issues addressed by the Committee were also relevant in Northern Ireland, of note being the Committee's concerns on:

- The high rates of *violence against women* and the inadequate progress on addressing VAW, including very low conviction rates for rape. It called on Government to adopt and implement a unified and multifaceted national strategy to eliminate violence against women and girls; ensure full implementation of legislation including prosecution and conviction of offenders; training for politicians, judiciary, police and health official; and provision of support services.
- The persistence of *gender pay gap*, one of the highest in Europe, and gender segregation in the workplace and advised Government to take proactive and concrete measures to introduce mandatory pay audits; eliminate occupational segregation; promote equal sharing of domestic and family tasks; and provide improved childcare.

Advancing women's rights and supporting women's organisations

NIWEP was urged to assist women's organisations and others develop European and international knowledge and access by:

- Circulating information and visiting local women's groups regularly.
- Providing training, advice and support.
- Facilitating dialogue and communication.
- Organising seminars and networking opportunities.
- Undertaking joint projects and campaigns and sharing resources to ensure that a wider network of women can receive regular information.
- Assisting wider dissemination of information within institutions and the public sector.
- Offering information and support to develop confidence and knowledge among women in political parties.
- Disseminating email newsletters and consulting women on their views to lobby decision makers.
- Highlighting issues at international level, educating women's groups on CEDAW and UNSCR 1325 and raising awareness of issues.
- Being the voice of women in Northern Ireland in Europe and at the United Nations.

European and International Material Disseminated

The following materials were disseminated widely during the project:

- Introduction to Plan D for Democracy, Dialogue, Debate
- The Period of Reflection and Plan D 2006
- Debate Europe – Building on the Experience of Plan D for Democracy, Dialogue and Debate
- European Commission Roadmap for Equality between Women and Men 2006-10
- European Women's Lobby Evaluation of the Roadmap
- CEDAW Explanatory Memorandum
- Explaining the CEDAW Optional Protocol
- Concluding Observations of the CEDAW Committee: United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland July 2008
- NIWEP Northern Ireland Shadow Report to CEDAW
- EWL Policy Positions on Violence Against Women
- EWL Women's Sexual Rights in Europe
- Violence Against Women in the UK Report to CEDAW

CHAPTER 1 NIWEP

Northern Ireland Women's European Platform

The Northern Ireland Women's European Platform is the leading organisation for women in Northern Ireland on European and international matters. It speaks for over 40 organisations which together represent the main regional women's organisations as well as many grassroots women's groups in Northern Ireland. There are a number of individual members and observers or non-voting associate members which are primarily statutory bodies or generalist NGOs with an interest in or responsibility for gender equality.

Since its inception in 1988, NIWEP has focused on making the connection between Northern Ireland and UK policies and European and international policies and standards in relation to women. NIWEP provides training on European and United Nations policy and procedures, organises conferences on European and international matters and leads delegations to the EU and the UN.

NIWEP is one of four national organisations – the other three are in Scotland, Wales, and England – who together as the UK Joint Committee on Women represent the UK in the European Women's Lobby. NIWEP collaborates with the National Women's Council of Ireland who along with the UKJCW is a founder member of the Lobby.



From Left to Right: Liz Law, NIWEP and EWL, Zoë Robinson, Researcher for the OFMDFM, Aoibhinn Treanor - Committee Clerk, Northern Ireland Assembly, Cathie White, Clerk to the OFMDFM Committee, Linda Gregg - Assistant Committee Clerk to the OFMDFM Committee, Northern Ireland Assembly, Marie Abbott, Business Support Unit DSD. Dr Anne Marie Grey NIWEP

NIWEP's European work

NIWEP's activities are extensive. In the last ten years NIWEP:

- Organised several successful study visits to the European Commission, the latest in 2008 as part of its training programme on the EU.
- Participated in the 50th session of the Commission for the Status of Women (CSW) in February/ March 2006 which prioritised *Equal Participation of Women and Men in Decision-making Processes at All Levels* and at the EU ECE Prep-com in Geneva for the 49th CSW.
- Hosted a meeting of the UK Joint Committee, the body representing England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, at the European Women's Lobby General Assembly in 2006.
- Held a number of consultations with women in Northern Ireland and organised a conference entitled *Gender in the New Europe* on the draft EU Constitutional Treaty in May 2005.
- Delivered an EU-funded project on women and decision-making, *Cracking the Code*, which focused on women in public bodies during 2001-2002.
- Coordinated a UK-wide consultation of young women on *Mobilising Young Women for Equality* in 1999-2000 for the European Women's Lobby publication *Young Women's Guide to Equality between Women and Men in Europe* 2001.
- Ran its IT-based *Celebrating Equality in the New Millennium* Project during 2000 to link rural women with the EU and its work on equality and gender issues.
- Developed a trans-national partnership under an EU programme on women and decision-making to deliver *Getting the Balance Right* with the national women's Council of Ireland, Engender Scotland and Sweden's County Administration Board of West Götaland.

NIWEP liaises with the main EU institutions and policy bodies, and the Northern Ireland Executive's Office in Brussels. To summarise: NIWEP ensures that Northern Ireland women are represented at European and international levels which it does through its EWL membership and UN Special Consultative Status, and that they have opportunities to participate directly in European and international special sessions, and conferences.

Women in Northern Ireland – Connecting to Europe

The Northern Ireland Women's European Platform received financial support for its project *Women in Northern Ireland – Connecting to Europe* from the European Commission as part of the Commission's Plan D for Democracy, Dialogue and Debate 2007-2008 to promote public participation in debates on topics of European interest.

NIWEP is keen to ensure that women in Northern Ireland understand the work of the European Union, the



NIWEP Engaging with Europe on Gender Equality conference at the Wellington Park Hotel, 19 November 2008

United Nations and their inter-relationship with that of national and regional government; and to create a greater understanding of European issues in the region, particularly among women. Furthermore, NIWEP is determined that women will have a platform through which they can shape and develop social, economic, political and cultural policies at all levels. It acts as a bridge to decision-making at the heart of Europe as well as responding directly to domestic consultations on issues affecting women.

The project *Women in Northern Ireland – Connecting to Europe* enabled NIWEP to share European and international information and experiences with women, women's groups and other partners; support women's organisations in developing knowledge and understanding; and stimulate momentum on policy development on equality and human rights for women. The project prepared women in the region for policy discussions and lobbying on gender equality. Dissemination of information, training and dialogue drew on European and international standards and good practice and demonstrated their value, thus encouraging action to press for their greater application to domestic law and practice.

The results from this project will feed into the European Women's Lobby's deliberations and actions on developing social policy such as on women in decision-making, women in economic life and violence against women. They can also assist the European Commission's evaluation of progress on the current Roadmap for Equality between Women and Men.

Working together on the European dimension has strengthened relations and enabled experiences, best practice and skills to be shared between NIWEP and its sister organisations in England, Scotland and Wales as well as throughout Europe. Collaboration continued during the *Women in Northern Ireland – Connecting to Europe* project through a special focus event on violence against women and trafficking.



Participants at the NIWEP' -WIG "Knowing me, knowing EU", conference at the Wellington Park Hotel, 11 November 2008

CHAPTER 2 PLAN D

The European Plan D – dialogue, democracy and debate

Developing the capacity for informed debate on European issues enables citizens to become engaged in dialogues on policy and direction, including on the Constitutional Treaty on which NIWEP has fostered discussion in the past. Reaction to constitutional developments within the EU was the prompt behind the European Commission's Plan D project, beginning with a period of reflection following negative referenda. This period of reflection sought to encourage broad debate in each country of the EU involving citizens, civil society organisations, social partners, national Parliaments and political parties.¹ Issues raised in these debates included: the economic and social development of Europe, the role of the European Union, Europe's borders and its role in the world and the way the EU works.

Some Member States were more active than others in fostering debate while steps were taken by the Committee of the Regions and the European Economic and Social Committee to ensure that regions and social partners were involved, listened to and had their views taken into account.²

Nevertheless, more remained to be done with the Commission pointing out that '*citizens have a fairly low knowledge and interest in how the EU Institutions operate*' while having a '*high expectation on delivery and policy content*'. This, said the Commission, '*puts important demands on the EU Institutions to better involve citizens in the policy process at all levels*'. The Commission particularly referred to the importance of engaging young people.³

Some steps taken or identified by the Commission included:

- Visits by Commissioners to Member States to stimulate wider public debate;
- A network of 'European Goodwill Ambassadors' to raise the profile of the European debate;
- Strengthened relations with national parliaments;
- A drive for more openness over Council meetings;
- More effective consultation to promote citizen participation in the democratic process;
- Proactive generation of dialogue on European policies through surveys, online forums and focus groups;
- Support for citizen's projects and projects to increase voter participation.⁴

In October 2007 the Commission launched its objective for greater coherence and synergy between the EU Institutions and Member States '*in order to offer citizens better access and a better understanding of the impact of EU policies at European, national and local level.*' The Commission's Communication described the Plan D approach as '*listening better, explaining better and going local*'.⁵

¹ Communication from the Commission to the European Council, *The Period of Reflection and Plan D*, Brussels, 10.5.2006 Com (2006) 212 Final p2

² Ibid p7

³ Ibid p7

⁴ Ibid Annex p8-10

⁵ Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, The Council, The European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, *Debate Europe – building on the experience of Plan D for Democracy, dialogue and Debate*, Brussels Com (2008) 158/4 p4

Plan D's outreach mode chimed with the style of civil society organisations, thus many civil society projects were co-funded by the Commission under Plan D. The Commission recorded over 40,000 people taking part in six trans-national projects in person with hundreds of thousands linked in through the internet proving that '*participatory democracy can usefully supplement representative democracy*' with participants going through '*both a human and a political experience*'.⁶

The Plan D citizen's conference *The Future of Europe – The Citizens' Agenda* sent its recommendations to EU Heads of State and Governments, national parliaments, EU Institutions and European political parties proposing that they be discussed with citizens as part of the agenda for the European Election in 2009. One demand was for Heads of State and national governments to encourage active European citizenship at all levels of governance.

It is not news to Northern Ireland women, despite major advances for women having been achieved as a result of EU vision and directives, that Plan D activities demonstrated a gap between citizens' expectations and the actual domains of EU competence, for example in social affairs, education and diplomacy/defence. But, learning through engaging enables people to understand the decision-making process and how to challenge it to narrow the gap between policy-makers and citizens.⁷

Debate Europe is the democratic focus for the current period. The European Commission envisaged a series of initiatives emanating from Plan D from face-to-face debates to e-action pilots involving citizens in the legislative and decision-making process at EU level. The 2009 European Election is the highest profile event on the radar and an EU Regulation enables political parties to establish foundations to raise awareness of the election through training, communication, internet and networks.⁸

Pilot Information Networks have been developed to network European, national and regional parliamentarians, journalists, and European opinion-formers to share information, knowledge and ideas. Some cities have been experimenting with European Public Spaces. There is room for Northern Ireland's MEPs and representatives on the Committee of the Regions and the European Economic and Social Committee to band together with local politicians and citizens to drive Plan D's *European Roundtables for Democracy* concept. Debate Europe, backed by funding for actions at both pan-European level and national and regional level, wants to see more citizen consultations in each Member State and greater engagement with European civil and political representatives.⁹

⁶ Ibid p5

⁷ Ibid p5

⁸ Regulation (EC) No1524/2007 of The European Parliament and of The Council of 18 December 2007

⁹ Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, The council, The European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, *Debate Europe – building on the experience of Plan D for Democracy, dialogue and Debate*, Brussels Com (208) 158/4 p8-10

CHAPTER 3 NIWEP'S PLAN D PROJECT

NIWEP's Plan D focus

NIWEP intended that its Plan D project should demonstrate the common thread linking international, European and domestic requirements, commitments and aspirations for reaching equality for women. It sought to:

- Recognise the importance of the EU in policy development and the role the EU plays in the social, economic, cultural and political development of women.
- Recognise the contribution of the EU towards gender equality for women in Northern Ireland.
- Recognise, in the previous absence of elected democratic government, the key role played by the Northern Ireland NGO sector in influencing EU policy and development, and to ensure that this work continues in the context of the devolved administration in Northern Ireland.
- Understand the impact of the European Union in a global context in addressing gender equality and other key issues which affect women socially, economically, culturally and politically.
- Highlight and share the experience of the role of women in Northern Ireland's transition from thirty years of conflict to peace with women in other EU member States and internationally.
- Explore other European policies which could assist in increasing women's participation at a local level in politics and decision-making.
- Involve women of all age groups, ethnic origins and women with disabilities in debating EU issues.



Joan Carson, Ulster Unionist Party, at the NIWEP Engaging with Europe on Gender Equality conference at the Wellington Park Hotel, 19 November 2008

Working beyond Northern Ireland constraints

NIWEP's project was set within the constraints of a society emerging from conflict. Indeed, although the basis of the peace agreement was set in 1998 with the signing of the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement, the intervening years have seen on-off government while political parties argued and teased out further agreement in specific areas. It was not until 2007 that a reasonably stable government, the Northern Ireland Executive, was formed after elections to the Northern Ireland Assembly. However, even 2008 saw months of stalemate when the leadership at the top of the Executive changed. Autumn 2008 brought some resolution and steps towards partnership in the governing involuntary coalition.



Kathleen Feenan, Women's Information Group, speaking at the NIWEP-WIG "Knowing me, knowing EU" conference at the Wellington Park Hotel, Belfast, 11 November 2008

Despite consistent support from the EU, ratcheted up with injections of EU peace funding from the mid-1990s, the intensity of the conflict concentrated most people's attention inwards. The peace funding enabled NGOs to grow and develop into an extensive repository of citizen action, but one which was not focused in the main on the European dimension beyond project funding. Nevertheless, NIWEP believes the time is ripe to acknowledge and demonstrate how the European Union shapes both domestic and global policy and has had a positive impact on advancing women's equality.

NIWEP's project set out to work with NGO women, political women and policy makers in the public sector and to promote the unique role Northern Ireland women can play in sharing experiences across Europe and internationally. It aimed to reach hundreds of women from women's centres and local women's groups as well as many unattached to either.

Over the course of the work NIWEP organised conferences, seminars and training sessions for women and women's groups and contributed its European and UN focus to many more. It presented question and answer sessions, debates with local women and on-line information; prepared guides, training materials and reports; and prepared an e-consultation with young women which is ongoing. NIWEP leaders engaged in an expert roundtable to advance the EU and international knowledge among equality officials in the devolved administration. It made substantial input to a conference in 2008 on women and conflict showcasing lessons that women in Northern Ireland can share with those in countries emerging from conflict elsewhere.

The project enabled members of NIWEP to travel to Brussels to consolidate relationships with the Office of the Northern Ireland Executive in Brussels and engage in discussions with other NGOs particularly on trafficking. NIWEP took part in the European Women's Lobby General Assemblies in 2007 and 2008, contributing to the UK Issue Group on Gender Budgeting and the EWL Issue Group on Conflict Resolution. It drew upon the expertise of its executive committee, members of the European Economic and Social Committee, the local representation of the

European Commission, its membership of the European Women's Lobby and its Special Consultative Status at the UN to deliver the various aspects of the project.

Plan D activities were made visible through a 'tag' on NIWEP's new website; in the NIWEP newsletter, circulated monthly to over 500 subscribers including Northern Ireland Assembly members and senior government officials; and in flyers for events, articles in local women's network magazines,¹⁰ advertisements and photos in local newspapers¹¹ and electronically through Women's Link and e-mailing directly to individual women. Many hundreds of women in Northern Ireland were reached through the website, circulations and events including in grassroots groups, leading women's organisations, political parties and networks. Additionally, women from England, Scotland the South of Ireland were drawn into the project.



Liz Law NIWEP speaking at the NIWEP Engaging with Europe on Gender Equality conference at the City Hotel, Derry, 26 November 2008

Word-of-mouth recommendations travel for successful events. Women enthused about the sessions and were pleased to learn about citizen-centred and women-friendly policies they had not been aware of before, leading to some who had missed an earlier conference travelling from Belfast to Derry/Londonderry to take part. They requested more information and support from NIWEP to increase their confidence in using the new-found learning in discussion with public officials, councillors, Assembly Members and MEPs. They were encouraged to use NIWEP's website for further exposure to EU and UN information and models. They looked forward to seeing the result of the dialogues in the project report.

Reaching project goals

Did NIWEP meet the impressive goals it set for itself? NIWEP wanted to:

- Increase awareness of the role the EU plays in addressing women's issues and concerns locally, in Europe and globally.
- Enable women to understand the EU's role in policy development and impact at local, European and international levels.
- Encourage women to recognise the power of collective lobbying to influence EU issues.
- Develop a network of women who understand the EU and can pass knowledge and skills to women in political parties, community groups and voluntary organisations; and who are able to share experiences beyond Northern Ireland.

¹⁰ Women's Information Group, December 2008

¹¹ The Derry conference was advertised in the Londonderry Sentinel which also took a photo on the day of the event in November 2008

- Encourage the development of a European and global network for women to share experience, skill and knowledge.
- Ensure that women who move to a higher level of politics possess the background and knowledge required to understand the role and work of the European Union.

As a result of the project many more Northern Ireland women understand the role of the European Union, how it advances equality for women and that it has been a major catalyst in gender equality across Europe and internationally. Women learned about accessible routes to information about Europe, such as the Office of the European Commission in Belfast; as well as channels to the centre of European policy-making such as the Northern Ireland Executive Office in Brussels and locally-rooted members of the European Economic and Social Committee.

The project was able to make the link from local to global, and demonstrate the correlation between the EU and the UN and their relevance to domestic standards and policies in a user-friendly manner. The intense engagement in debate and discussion during the project dialogues demonstrated that women are interested in the EU and its influence over local, European and international developments. It was not something remote from them. Greater numbers of women began to grasp the possibility of engaging with these structures through the Northern Ireland Women's European Platform and the European Women's Lobby; and believe that Northern Ireland women can build networks with women across Europe and on a global platform.

NIWEP is convinced that an EU-focused network of Northern Ireland women will add to the clamour for increased participation and expression of citizenship inherent in the Plan D project. Such a network will appreciate the correlation between promoting the work of the European Union and engaging government to recognise that Northern Ireland civic society must be a partner in governance. Linking political and civic society women through the Plan D project builds capacity for this approach.



From Left to Right: Jen Loughridge Soroptimist International, Paddy Skates, Women's Forum, Liz Law, NIWEP and EWL, Jeanette Thornton, European Commission Office Belfast, and Leander Monroe, BPW and European Movement

CHAPTER 4 REACHING WOMEN ACROSS NORTHERN IRELAND

Maximising reach through partnership

As the leading women's NGO in European and international affairs in Northern Ireland NIWEP used a variety of opportunities and channels to share the project's aims, expertise and resources in order to maximise reach and appreciation of the meaning of citizenship in the EU and an increasingly global world. It collaborated with the Training for Women Network to deliver *Peace by Piece* providing a training programme on the EU and the UN. Fifty women, some from voluntary and community organisations and others in business, took part.

The training introduced new cadres of women to European history, EU institutions and experience, and how to engage with Europe. Women learned from European experts including the Head of the European Commission Office in Northern Ireland, one of the Northern Ireland members of the European Economic and Social Committee and voluntary sector activists in Europe. It prepared twenty of the fifty women for a study visit to Brussels – to the European Parliament, the Office of the Northern Ireland Executive in Brussels, the European Economic and Social Committee Secretariat, the European Women's Lobby and a Northern Ireland MEP.

The EU element of the training programme demonstrated the connection between the EU and the UN and the second part of the programme focused on the United Nations. Women in Northern Ireland were presented with a training manual on the UN for the first time and the programme introduced women to the UN institutions and the key players, policies and programmes in the gender field. Women were educated for the cut and thrust of international dialogue and negotiation with training on preparing policy statements and interventions, organising workshops and networking and lobbying in the international arena. Following the training sessions, the trainees translated their learning into practice immediately. Thirty women participated in the NGO Forum at the 52nd Commission on the Status of Women in New York in 2008, mentored throughout by NIWEP's Kate McCullough and Margot Hesketh.

NIWEP assisted the planning of *Peace by Piece* and the delivery of its June 2008 international conference to highlight women's experiences in conflict and peace-building. Kate McCullough led the conference inputs on *Outward and Forward – a European and International View*. She spoke about the EU Peace Programme's commitment to local capacity building that had been essential in empowering women and enabling networks to flourish. She informed delegates of how the EU investment had created women leaders who reached beyond the narrow confines of conflict-ridden Northern Ireland to help establish the European Women's Lobby, playing an active role in lobbying at the EU and the UN and receiving in return solace and support from across Europe and internationally. The relevance to domestic life of the European and international dimensions was thus made visible and real to both Northern Ireland women and international visitors.

An innovative part of the *Peace by Piece* programme designed by NIWEP was particularly well received – a *Courtroom Trial of UNSCR 1325*. This mock court, with 'Judge' Kate McCullough and the audience comprising the jury, put government on trial for lack of application of the

Resolution passed by the UN Security Council on Women, Peace and Security in October 2000 which required attention to be paid to women during conflict, transition and peace-building. The model aroused great interest among the international visitors.

Reaching grassroots communities

The Women's Information Group (WIG) has been in existence since 1980. It has hundreds of members; some are individual members unattached to any group but most are local groups supporting grassroots women in the Greater Belfast area.¹² WIG's defining characteristic is its primary membership base of very local women's groups in housing estates in disadvantaged, marginalised and interface areas.¹³ For more than twenty-five years, throughout the worst of the conflict and during transition and post-conflict peace building, WIG has successfully steered its way through community division and communal violence. Throughout those years it continued to bring women from across the political divide together regularly, sometimes monthly, to discuss their common and different concerns and interests. Its mailing list for information and its monthly magazine reaches 850 women.¹⁴

NIWEP partnered with WIG to bring the European story to women who have least exposure to the EU. A penchant for ABBA songs led Kate McCullough to design a very user-friendly approach to understanding Europe. Launching into *Knowing Me...Knowing EU – ah-ha ...*, she guided the packed room through thirteen ABBA songs to demystify the intricacies and illustrate the benefits of EU and UN policies. It was a fun way to be introduced to what Europe and the United Nations are doing for women. Participants started off laughing about regulations on 'bendy bananas' and moved onto understanding the benefits of easy travel, lower mobile phone rates, consumer protection and environmental safeguards introduced through the EU.

Hearing about the benefits women gained by way of European equal pay and anti-discrimination legislation, the women were singing 'Gimme, Gimme, Gimme' the European Roadmap for Gender Equality through which the EU is trying to increase women's rights in such areas as: equal economic independence, balancing work and family life, ending gender-based violence and getting more women into positions of influence and decision-making.

Following Kate's presentation the participants vented their concerns in workshop discussions which were mapped across the areas of the EU Equality Roadmap. For example, equal economic independence is difficult to achieve when women are the key managers of poverty struggling with higher bills and living expenses on low incomes, the higher cost of living and lower wages/incomes in Northern Ireland, the dramatic decrease in living standards in the economic downturn, the culture of debt and the choice between 'heating or eating'. Some women described the impact of home working on women's pension entitlements and there was sympathy for the hardship faced by women and migrant workers on low incomes, with a call for single parents to be entitled to extra benefit for heating, and strong concern about the impact of increasing unemployment on local areas and specifically on women.

¹² Women's Information Group also has some member groups as far away as Bangor

¹³ Interface areas are those where communities from each side of a deeply divided community abut and affect each other. There can be clashes, sometimes violent, along the dividing line between them. The dividing line can be invisible to those who do not know the geography or dynamics; or it can be a solid feature such as a wall or fence

¹⁴ The NIWEP/WIG conference was reported in WIG's December magazine

Women spoke about health standards for their families with lengthy waiting times for appointments with doctors and dentists, lack of maternity services in some areas, poor standards of care and cleanliness in hospitals, long waiting lists for mental health appointments, young people's suicide and the lack of mental health provision generally. They argued for greater liaison between mental health agencies and family support groups, an end to postcode access to medicines through the use of cheaper but safe medicines and the elimination of the age limit for breast screening. The impact of the conflict on health was not forgotten.

Juggling caring responsibilities and work place a substantial burden on women and there were calls for more childcare places to be made available at an affordable rate along with paid leave for other family care responsibilities. The women present were acutely aware of the impact on women of cutbacks in home helps and care support. Some women were personally affected by what they perceived to be an unequal status and inequality of treatment accorded to grandparents looking after children when compared with other childcare providers. They wanted carers to have proper support, training and respite arrangements, and more funding for family and community support projects and facilities for young people.

Compulsory anger management courses were suggested for men involved in domestic violence. There was exasperation at the fact that there were not enough women in the Assembly or local councils and not enough was being done proactively by political parties to change this. Women would like to see a women's advisory committee in the Assembly. Finally, an appeal was made to women to '*recognise their power*'.



Back row: Dr Anne Marie Grey, NIWEP and Liz Law NIWEP and EWL. Front row: Charlotte Onslow, GAPS, and Grace Glenny, Family Planning Association FPA

Policy-makers and women activists

Leading women's organisations were joined by public officials, representatives of political parties and others at the NIWEP conference in Belfast in November 2008. Among those attending were representatives of the Women's Resource and Development Agency, Women into Politics, DemocraShe, Women's Support Network, Women's Information Group, Business and Professional Women, Queen's Women's Graduates Association, Soroptimists, Women's Forum and the Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network. Some of the organisations are made up of individual members, but most are forums of organisations or support many local women's groups and women's centres in urban and rural areas. Between them the organisations reach many thousands of women.

The group was also joined by representatives from London-based Gender Action on Peace and Security (GAPS), Amnesty and the Family Planning Association. Two government departments took part – the Voluntary and Community Unit of the Department of Social Development and the Gender and Sexual Orientation Equality Unit in the Office of the First and deputy First Minister (OFMdFM). Several officials from the OFMdFM (scrutiny) Committee in the Northern Ireland Assembly also attended, as did two members of the Ulster Unionist Party.

Participants were supplied with documentation to inform their understanding of the EU's equality provisions and goals and the UN's conclusions and recommendations on improving women's equality in the UK with specific reference to Northern Ireland. These included:

- Introduction to Plan D for Democracy, Dialogue, Debate.
- The Period of Reflection and Plan D 2006.
- Debate Europe – Building on the Experience of Plan D for Democracy, Dialogue and Debate.
- European Commission Roadmap for Equality between Women and Men 2006-10.
- European Women's Lobby Evaluation of the Roadmap.
- CEDAW Explanatory Memorandum.
- Explaining the CEDAW Optional Protocol.
- Concluding Observations of the CEDAW Committee: United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland July 2008.
- Information on NIWEP.

Beyond Belfast

The conference in Belfast was followed by another in Derry/Londonderry the following week. As in Belfast the turnout was good, with NIWEP returning to partnership mode in organising the forum. The Foyle Women's Information Network (FWIN), established in 1994, does not confine itself to women's groups alone, but reaches out to women across the range of organisations in the North West of Northern Ireland, and works collaboratively with public organisations such as the local council and health board. Its vision is to provide a supportive place for women and women's groups from different neighbourhoods and locations across the city to meet. FWIN sends out information to 220 organisations, including a newsletter six times a year, and works directly with around five hundred individual women in various ways throughout the year.

As Derry is located close to the border with the Republic of Ireland, cross-border relationships and projects are encouraged. Of the forty five participants at the Derry seminar, five were from across the border. Twelve local community and women's groups were represented, along with two disability organisations and a leading children's organisation. Each of the local groups works with between twenty and thirty women.

The same material was supplied in Derry as in Belfast and the same format was used: Introduction to the EU and Plan D majoring on *Partnership and Participation*; followed by inputs from NIWEP experts on the *EU Gender Equality Roadmap 2006-10* and *CEDAW: Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against all forms of Discrimination Against Women*. Finally, there was a guest contribution before the participants got down to work discussing the equality priority areas. In Belfast Jane Morrice combined her role of Deputy Chief Commissioner of the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland with her membership of the European Economic and Social Committee to link equality with accessibility within Europe, pressing the point home that 'we are all European'.

In Derry the conference was addressed by Valerie Watts, Chief Executive and Town Clerk of Derry City Council. Valerie spoke about the 'unsung heroines' in every facet of community, work and family life and Derry City Council's commitment to a women's strategy aimed at identifying women's needs and priorities, removing barriers and promoting fairness for women. In tune with Plan D principles she stressed the imperative for women's engagement in the design of the strategy which covers the same critical areas as the EU Gender Equality Roadmap. She paid tribute to the EU's financial support for a two-year cross-border project between Derry City Council and Donegal County Council to tackle under-representation of women within the councils. Through research, training, mentoring and outreach the project reached more than six hundred women, with 98% of participants believing that it had made a difference. Valerie also referred to the drive of the innovative, Northern Ireland-wide initiative, Women in Local Councils as another contribution to the EU priority on increasing women in decision-making.



Valerie Watts, Chief Executive and Town Clerk of Derry City Council, at the NIWEP Engaging with Europe on Gender Equality conference at the City Hotel, Derry, 26 November 2008

CHAPTER 5 EQUALITY MESSAGES

Partnership and participation

Leading off the day in Belfast,¹⁵ Jeanette Thornton introduced the twin concepts behind Plan D: communicating the activities of the European Union and listening to citizens' concerns about European legislation, policies and proposals on constitutional reform; and citizen participation, or participative democracy, engaging voluntary organisations, social partners and people in debate about what type of society, what type of Europe and what type of democracy they want.

She drew attention to Commissioner Margot Wallstrom's speech *No Democracy without Equality* in the Republic of Ireland in mid-November in which she focused on the issue of women's participation in decision-making structures across Europe. Commissioner Wallstrom strongly endorsed the European Women's Lobby's *50/50 campaign*. Pointing to the importance of the EU to women's progress so far, Jeanette pointed out that the goal of parity democracy is critical for national and local elections as well and noted that the 2009 European Parliament election is an opportune moment to raise the political parity issue.

Jeanette referred to the extensive consultation carried out throughout Northern Ireland by NIWEP during 2007-08 to prepare the Northern Ireland Shadow Report to the CEDAW Committee examining UK compliance with the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Violence Against Women. NIWEP's Shadow Report put the NGO case on the table to assist questioning of government policies and priorities by the Committee in July 2008.

Despite the distance travelled on women's equality since sex discrimination legislation in the 1970s, and the European Union's proactive interest, there is still a long way to go. Unequal pay is rampant with the result that it can be said that women work for no pay at all from October to December each year when their annual wage is compared with men. Most women still carry a pension disadvantage. Childcare remains a major problem both in supply and cost. In 2008 the CEDAW Committee pointed up serious shortcomings in tackling violence against women in the UK. Women are still grossly under represented in public life. Women's perspectives are not being taken into account in shaping priorities and policy content cross the wide range of public policy areas. Women are struggling against the concept of a gender neutral approach, which in reality is another excuse for not addressing women's specific needs and rights or promoting an equal playing field and outcome for women.

The EU Gender Equality Roadmap

NIWEP's representative to the European Women's Lobby, and 2008-10 Executive and Board member of the EWL, Elizabeth Law addressed both the Belfast and Derry conferences on the European Commission's Roadmap for Equality between Women and Men 2006-2010. There are many interfaces between domestic and European policy and actors, several in the areas of equality and social inclusion. Northern Ireland's Gender Equality Strategy and the EU Gender Equality Roadmap should share a coincidence of interest reinforced by the fact that the Office

¹⁵ The same approach was taken by Bronagh Hinds in Derry

of the First and deputy First Minister holds the briefs for both equality and Europe. The Barroso Taskforce on Northern Ireland and the Office of the Northern Ireland Bureau in Brussels form two more bridges as well as various politicians and experts representing Northern Ireland in European institutions. A route for voluntary and community groups might be through the Northern Ireland counterpart of European NGO networks such as NIWEP.

Elizabeth demonstrated how issues existed in parallel on multiple levels – local, regional, national, European and beyond. Using the Roadmap’s six critical areas as a framework (see below) she populated it with examples of domestic issues requiring attention. She mapped, for example: the Review of Public Administration, including reform of local government, against the Roadmap’s decision-making priority; adequacy of legislation and action since 1976 against the pay gap priority; sufficiency of rape crisis services against the gender-based violence priority; and the application of the s75 statutory equality duty to advancing economic decision-making.

Each of the Roadmap priority areas has key actions attached and indicators to monitor progress, although it is acknowledged that more work is required from the European Commission and Member States to further develop indicators for both the EU Roadmap and the Beijing Platform for Action. The European Commission has a range of structures dedicated to improving equality:¹⁶

- The Advisory Committee on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men created in 1981.
- Inter-service Group on Gender Equality created in 1996.
- Advisory Committee on Women and Rural Areas created in 1998.
- Group of Experts on Gender Equality in Development Cooperation (informal group) created in 1999.
- Helsinki Group on Women and Science created in 1999.
- European Network to Promote Women’s Entrepreneurship (WES) created in 2000.
- High Level Group on Gender Mainstreaming (informal group) created in 2001.
- Expert Group on Trafficking in Human Beings created in 2003 (consultative group).
- Network of Gender Focal Points (informal group).
- Network of Focal Points on Equal Opportunities created in 2004.
- High Level Group on Gender Mainstreaming in the Structural Funds (informal group) created in 2004.
- Group of Commissioners on Fundamental rights, Non-Discrimination and Equal Opportunities created in 2005.
- European Network of National Equality Bodies created in 2006.
- European Network of Women in Decision-making in Politics and the Economy created in 2008.

The European Commission notes in the Roadmap that gender equality can only be achieved with the support of political will at the highest levels. Demonstration of commitment requires better governance directed towards achieving major progress. Key elements proposed include: reinforced networking and social dialogue; gender impact assessment of policies and legislation;

¹⁶ All except the last network named are referred to in Communication from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, A Roadmap for Equality between Women and Men 2006-10, Brussels 01.5.2006, COM (2006) 92 Final

gender budgeting from local to EU level; reviewing and updating legislation; and monitoring implementation and enforcement. A European Institute for Gender Equality was inaugurated in 2007¹⁷ to support EU institutions and Member States with information and analysis.

The European Women's Lobby had a number of improvements to suggest after the first year of operation of the EC Roadmap.¹⁸ Among these were:

- Concrete targets and timetables for desegregation of labour markets, provision of quality, affordable care services for dependents and reducing the gender pay gap.
- Policies to support the potential of a women's social and solidarity based economy; and gender impact assessment of measures regulating migration flows and return policies.
- Payment for parental leave, incentives for fathers to take leave and taxation policies that ensure women are not considered more expensive employees than men.
- Binding measures to achieve equal representation of women and men in the European Parliament and quotas at the decision-making levels of public and private companies.
- An EU violence against women definition and strategy to define the best way of enshrining prohibition of violence against women in EU law.
- Gender sensitive strategies for different forms of trafficking and exploitation.
- Compulsory gender training in teacher and media training institutions.
- A social justice development framework with human and women's rights enforcement for development, trade and external relations policies.
- EC support for social dialogue between state and civil society actors through regional roundtables on gender equality.
- Gender budgeting guidelines and a permanent gender impact assessment procedure for all European Structural Funds.
- A Directive on equality between women and men outside employment.

The international women's rights convention: CEDAW

Dr Ann Marie Gray, the Northern Ireland expert on CEDAW, explained that the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women came into force and was signed by the UK in 1981. It was the first convention to address women's rights in a comprehensive and inter-connected way and benefits women through addressing direct and indirect discrimination and promoting positive action. The CEDAW Committee acknowledges that discrimination is socially constructed and works to a *substantive* rather than a *formal* definition of equality.

CEDAW places duties and obligations on governments. By becoming a party to CEDAW, the UK committed to take all appropriate measures, including introducing legislation and temporary special measures, so that women can enjoy all their human rights and fundamental freedoms. The rights enshrined in CEDAW broadly cover all aspects of women's lives – including political participation, health, education, employment, marriage, family relations and equality before the law.

¹⁷ Set up by Regulation (EC) No 1922/2006 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 December 2006

¹⁸ European Women's Lobby, Evaluation of the Implementation of the European Commission's Roadmap for Equality between Women and Men 2006-10 – Year One, 18.10.07

As an agreed set of human rights for women CEDAW provides a solid framework for challenging policy, structures, budgets and attitudes. Shifting the emphasis from problems and needs to rights puts the focus on *entitlement* – women should be encouraged to think of their right to childcare, right to non sexist careers advice, and so on. CEDAW assesses progress over time and in relation to their previous recommendations to particular governments, and its international scrutiny of government performance can in itself be a powerful tool.

Stronger still is the optional protocol to CEDAW which includes:

- *The Communications Procedure*, giving individuals and groups of women the right to complain to the CEDAW Committee about violations of the Convention.
- *The Inquiry Procedure*, enabling the Committee to conduct inquiries into grave or systematic abuse of women's rights in countries that become States Parties to the optional protocol.

The CEDAW Committee is made up of 23 members elected in their capacity as *gender experts*. Every four years governments are required to report to the Committee on their progress in implementing the Committee's previous recommendations. In examining a government the Committee considers both government reports and NGO shadow reports, questions the government and makes recommendations in accordance with its findings.

The UK Government was examined in July 2008 and the Northern Ireland Executive was represented on the delegation. Five NGOs from Northern Ireland submitted Shadow Reports as did the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland and the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission. The NGOs were the Northern Ireland Women's European Platform (NIWEP), Lesbian Line, the Northern Ireland Centre for Ethnic Minorities (NICEM), the Committee on the Administration of Justice and the Family Planning Association in Northern Ireland. The UK Women's National Commission also carried some references to Northern Ireland.

NIWEP, NICEM and the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission attended the examination in New York, briefing CEDAW Committee members before and during the hearing. NIWEP addressed the Committee formally for five minutes of the ten-minute UK NGO slot. The Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission addressed the Committee for five of the ten minutes allocated for the UK's internationally recognised human rights bodies.

There was consensus across the Northern Ireland shadow reports on the list of issues that required the attention of the CEDAW Committee: failure to apply UNSCR 1325; the impact of devolution on women's equality in Northern Ireland; under-representation of women in decision making; violence against women; prostitution and trafficking; reproductive rights; discrimination in employment, education and health care; poverty and socio-economic issues; equality before the law and civil matters, including in relation to women and prisons; the impact of equality legislation, both the existing s75 statutory equality duty and proposed single equality legislation; and support and resources for the women's sector.

Dr Anne Marie Grey, NIWEP speaking at the NIWEP Engaging with Europe and Gender Equality conference at the Wellington Park Hotel, Belfast, 19 November 2008



From Left to Right: Liz Law, NIWE and EWL, Dr Anne Marie Grey, NIWE, Jane Morrice, EU Economic and Social Committee and Equality Commission for NI, and Jeanette Thornton, European Commission Office, Belfast at NIWE's Engaging with Europe and Gender Equality conference, Wellington Park Hotel, Belfast, 19 November 2008

During the examination of the UK Government a number of overarching themes emerged in the Committee's deliberations on which they concluded the following were required:

- Application of the Convention across the jurisdictions of the UK to include development and implementation of a '*unified, comprehensive and overarching national strategy and policy for the implementation of the Convention throughout the UK*' ensuring full implementation of the strategy in a consistent and coherent manner across the UK; establishment of an effective coordination and monitoring mechanism on implementation; and comprehensive information on steps and measures taken.
- Adherence to substantive equality standards to ensure the practical realisation of the principle of equality between women and men; which means achieving measurable equality of outcome that goes beyond equality of opportunity, same treatment; with progress towards equality not limited or undermined by gender neutral interpretations of legislation and policy.
- Education and promotion of the Convention and the Optional Protocol within government and to the general public and awareness-raising to increase understanding of the concept of substantive equality.

In relation to Northern Ireland the CEDAW Committee was explicit about its concerns on:

- The under-representation of *women in decision making* and lack of application of *UNSCR 1325* and called upon Government to take measures with benchmarks and concrete timetables to increase representation of women at all levels of political and public life including through the introduction of Special Temporary Measures. There should be *full* implementation of *UNSCR 1325* in Northern Ireland.

- The failure to progress women's equality in relation to *reproductive rights* in Northern Ireland and the '*detrimental consequences for women's health*' resulting from the illegal status of abortion. It advised Government to review the law with a view to removing '*punitive provisions imposed on women who undergo abortion*'. Furthermore, all health services and policies are expected to integrate a gender perspective.
- The inadequate provision made for *women in prison* in Northern Ireland and urged Government to introduce prevention programmes; alternative sentencing and custodial strategies; small custodial units and community establishment; and separate women's facilities in Northern Ireland.
- The lack of progress on addressing discrimination, exclusion, under-representation and poor socio economic conditions experienced by many *ethnic minority groups*, including the high number of miscarriages and stillbirths and maternal mortality rates among the *Traveller community*. Government was urged to intensify efforts to eliminate discrimination and increase participation; adopt culturally sensitive programmes to address mental health; regularly study intersectional discrimination; monitor through data collection; and take concrete measures to tackle health inequality and access to services for Traveller communities.
- Changes in methods of allocation of funding and the negative impact of gender neutral interpretations of equality legislation on *support, including financial, for women's organizations and women's only services*. Government was urged to provide increased and sustained funding to non-governmental organizations involved in women's rights; ensure there is no impact on women's-only services or restriction on women's organisations from interpretation and application of equality duties; and conduct an impact assessment of funding frameworks on women's organisations.

Many of the UK-wide issues addressed by the Committee were also relevant in Northern Ireland, of note being the Committee's concerns on:

- The high rates of *violence against women* and the inadequate progress on addressing VAW, including very low conviction rates for rape. It called on Government to adopt and implement a unified and multifaceted national strategy to eliminate violence against women and girls; ensure full implementation of legislation including prosecution and conviction of offenders; training for politicians, judiciary, police and health official; and provision of support services.
- The persistence of *gender pay gap*, one of the highest in Europe, and gender segregation in the workplace and advised Government to take proactive and concrete measures to introduce mandatory pay audits; eliminate occupational segregation; promote equal sharing of domestic and family tasks; and provide improved childcare.

The CEDAW Committee decided to require the Government to report *within a year* on some issues, indicating that immediate action is required from the devolved administration in Northern Ireland and from Westminster before the report is due in July 2009.

CHAPTER 6 DIALOGUE AND DEBATE ON EQUALITY

The dialogue groups

NIWEP tracks issues of importance to Northern Ireland women through the European Roadmap for Equality between Women and Men, CEDAW, the Beijing Platform for Action and UNSCR 1325. It brings international attention to bear on Northern Irish matters and presses for application of the highest international standards within Northern Ireland.

The Plan D project facilitated women to come together to discuss core equality issues in the context of the Roadmap and the Convention and made it possible for NIWEP to gather these views from women in different parts of Northern Ireland. They were advised of two international routes for the next stage of advancing women's equality:

- A Women's Manifesto for the European Parliament Election in 2009.
- A CEDAW Committee Hearing in 2009 at which the UK Government – including the devolved administrations in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales – must respond to the Committee's communication of July 2008.

To frame the issues for the European Manifesto, populate the NGO response to the upcoming Government report to CEDAW and help shape its future priorities and activities, NIWEP asked women to consider the six areas in the EU Equality Roadmap:

- **Achieving equal economic independence for women and men:** reaching Lisbon employment targets; eliminating the gender pay gap; women entrepreneurs; gender equality in social protection and the fight against poverty; recognising the gender dimension in health; combating multiple discrimination, in particular against migrant and ethnic minority women.
- **Enhancing reconciliation of work, private and family life:** flexible working arrangements for both women and men; increasing care services; better reconciliation policies for both women and men.
- **Promoting equal participation of women and men in decision making:** women's participation in politics; women in economic decision-making; women in science and technology.
- **Eradicating gender based violence and trafficking:** eradication of gender-based violence; elimination of trafficking in human beings.
- **Eliminating gender stereotypes in society:** in education, training and cultures; in employment; in the media.
- **Promoting gender equality outside the EU:** enforcement of EU legislation in acceding, candidate and potential candidate countries; promotion of gender equality in external relations, development policies and humanitarian interventions.

Women met in dialogue groups in three conferences in Belfast and Derry to discuss the priorities at EU level and understand how these translated into regional and local issues in Northern Ireland. They made their views known as outlined below.



Participants at the NIWEP Engaging with Europe on Gender Equality conference at the Wellington Park Hotel, 19 November 2008

Making change happen

Many participants at the conferences were inspired by President Barack Obama's theme of *change* which seemed to promise hope and a new and inclusive vision, arguing that women should recognise their power and the solidarity provided by women's groups and networks. 'We want change' and 'Now is the time to speak up' were words spoken on behalf of many as attention focused on the need to build a strong, effective lobby that included women in the broader voluntary sector alongside women in community groups and women's groups focusing on the essential 3Ps for women – Participation, Protection and Provision.

Promoting equal participation in decision-making

Experience suggests that women are not included sufficiently in consultations before priorities are set across the range of public policy areas. Resolution UNSCR 1325 serves to reinforce that women's voices must not only be heard in policy and decision-making but they ought to be accorded greater influence. Furthermore, the retreat to the gender neutral approach adopted by many policy drafters and decision-makers must be reversed.

It was suggested that members of the Assembly might consider establishing a women's advisory committee. This could be of two-fold benefit: it could be a liaison point between women inside and outside the Assembly; and it could advise periodically in decision-making. This would increase women's influence over issues of government at a time when their numbers are extremely small.

The dearth of women across the spectrum of political institutions, within political parties and in senior management positions in the public and private sector was of considerable concern in itself and because of the knock-on effect on policy-making i.e. that incomplete and inadequate policies and skewed priorities are the likely results of the absence of women. As one woman put it, 'Why do very able women still not reach enough top positions?' Women politicians in Northern

Ireland comprise: four Ministers in the Northern Ireland Executive, eighteen of the 108-member Northern Ireland Assembly, three of the eighteen Members of Parliament, one of the three Members of the European Parliament and 21% of councillors. Senior women in local government are also few in number with female Chief Executives in just three of Northern Ireland's twenty-six councils in 2008.

While *DemocraShe* and Women in Local Councils are working to improve the situation specific measures, such as the Special Temporary Measures advocated by CEDAW, could assist by tackling some of the structural obstacles to progress. The Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Act 2002 – which applies to parliamentary, Northern Ireland Assembly, district council and European Parliament elections – is such a temporary measure available until 2015 and it may be extended. It allows registered political parties to regulate the selection of candidates for the purposes of reducing inequality in the numbers of men and women elected.

In response to a question in parliament about the effectiveness of the legislation Minister Meg Munn answered '*We have not yet carried out a formal assessment of the effectiveness of the Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Act 2002, which enables political parties, if they wish to do so, to use positive measures to reduce inequality between the number of men and women selected as election candidates for their party. However, an independent report published by the Hansard Society in 2005 found that all-women shortlists are the quickest and most effective means of delivering equal representation.*'¹⁹

Political parties in Northern Ireland have so far chosen not to exercise the licence given to them under the legislation. The loss of the Women's Coalition²⁰ was lamented at the conferences where women expressed support for the European Women's Lobby 50/50 campaign. Elsewhere in Europe there are penalties for failing to meet gender quotas and there was a call from many women for parties to begin using their discretionary positive action measures. On the other hand, should parties take this step women must be ready to put themselves forward for a political career; and women were encouraged at the conference to think about pathways to political life and civic leadership. The importance of ensuring registration of women, daughters and friends listed on the electoral roll was stressed.

¹⁹ Meg Munn, Hansard, 10 July 2006, Column 1507W

²⁰ The Northern Ireland Women's Coalition was formed to seize the opportunity of the special election to the 1996-98 multi-party peace talks. Successfully elected it played a notable and constructive role in reaching the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement in 1998. Two of its candidates were elected to the first Northern Ireland Assembly in 1998, but not thereafter. The party dissolved in 2008



The potential for adverse impact on women from the Review of Public Administration is another point of concern. Policy leaders in the field were called upon to be gender-aware and to conduct equality impact assessments, including from a gendered perspective, on all policies and steps throughout the process. Local government reform – through legislation, policies, procedures, preparations, recruitment, capacity building, etc. – can be managed so as to open up or close down opportunities for women and other under-represented groups to enter politics.

A number of actions to overcome barriers to political participation were identified: leadership commitment and action; visible management interest and encouragement; mandatory gender equality training for men and women; an established process to welcome, incorporate, value, educate and train women; gender-proofed internal party policies and party manifestos; gender-proofed procedures and processes e.g. meeting times, candidate selection and culture of debate; recruitment of women to senior staff positions; consideration of family friendly measures such as childcare, job-share and working hours; special measures to select women as candidates to redress historical ingrained bias. There was support for more girls to be advised to look upon politics as a career opportunity.

Extremely adversarial political cultures put women off politics in places beyond Northern Ireland. The added dimension of entrenched political division over cross community conflict in Northern Ireland is an additional obstacle, undermining confidence in government, politicians, political parties and the political process itself. This also translated into a quiet anger towards parties who refuse to talk to each other and politicians who will not work together, especially among those in the electorate who believe that building a cohesive society following thirty years of divisive conflict is a priority.

Beyond opening up their party structures to women, political parties need to be serious about addressing priorities identified by women and supporting women's involvement in policy dialogue. The acute lack of gender awareness among political representatives including MEPs must be addressed.

The general view of public appointments was that there needed to be a more proactive and more transparent system applied to all public bodies; and that payment may need to be considered for all appointments. The Commissioner for Public Appointments should undertake a review of public appointments process to understand why women are under-represented among members and chairs of public bodies and inform changes to deliver a system that is more effective in reaching gender balance. It was suggested that NIWEP might run a course/workshop for women interested in public office similar to the *Get on Board* course offered by Belfast Metropolitan College.

The EU influence on advancing women's equality was appreciated, and it was proposed that young women should be educated on what Europe means for women. At the same time, more EU support is needed to train policy makers and politicians to understand EU equality standards and expectations. The EU ought to monitor what is happening during European Parliament elections, not just the result of the election. It should also ensure that Member State appointments to EU institutions are gender balanced.

Economic independence

In frustration the question was asked, 'Why is this pay gap still here?' although the answer of continuing sex discrimination in the workplace was obvious. Furthermore, women's lesser pay and interrupted careers for child bearing and rearing reduces their pension entitlements, while women at home have no right to an independent pension at all. Traditional education routes and career choices are limiting factors for many women. Many employers fail to apply good standards in maternity situations, with little provision for replacement staff and some dismiss pregnant women just before they are due to go on maternity leave. Concern was expressed that women are viewed as expendable in times of economic pressure. There was a desire to become more knowledgeable and articulate on economic matters and to become skilled in advocating women's rights in this arena.

In part due to anxiety about the prevailing poor economic climate a great deal of attention was devoted to poverty and the general decrease in the standard of living and the knock-on effect on health. With household and general living expenses rising and many bills higher than in Britain – e.g. gas, electricity, utilities, food due to transport costs, exclusion from many UK offers – the position was worsened by lower wages than in Britain. People were acutely conscious of the difficulties experienced by lone parents, pensioner households, low income families and disadvantaged communities generally where choices were being made between heating and eating with the danger of causing long-term problems.

Fear of greater unemployment on already disadvantaged communities and the infrastructure within areas, of young people leaving school without hope and increasing pressures leading to further child deprivation and family break-down was apparent. There was a call for single parents to be given extra benefit for heating as they do not qualify at present and for provision of rights and proper wages for migrant workers. Debt and the culture of debt is a major worry, with women facing the brunt of managing the consequences of economic difficulties. More transparent and accessible benefit advice was called for along with assistance for family support and community projects.

There was talk about increasing homelessness among young families with social housing policy not keeping up with population changes; the need to retain bungalows for elderly or disabled people's housing needs; appropriate, not high-rise, housing for families; and the lack of 'voice' that people have on housing matters. Comments were made about older people being driven into isolation with consequent impacts on personal confidence, health, social networking and quality of life as a result of public policy decisions; one example was that by the Department of Employment and Learning to withdraw subsidised fees for lifelong learning from the elderly and those on low incomes.

There were concerns about poor home care and isolation for elderly people, of whom women make up the major portion; and worry about having to sell the family home to meet nursing home costs. Reduction in free personal care for the elderly, less community care and cutbacks in home helps, the closure of several elder homes and concern about the quality of profit-oriented care all conspired to make women very nervous about what faces them in old age.

Standards of GP services were described as '*hit and miss*', with long waiting lists to see GPs or dentists, ten-minute appointments and long waiting lists for operations. There was opposition



Participant at the NIWEP' -WIG "Knowing me, knowing EU", conference at the Wellington Park Hotel, 11 November 2008

to postcode access to medicine; a proposal to use cheaper, but safe, medicines; and support for health MOTs as a preventative measure. Disgust was expressed at the state of cleanliness and standard of care in hospitals with an appeal to '*Bring back the Matrons*', train medical staff in respect for the public and raise the awareness of GPs about the existence and benefits of self-help groups. It was felt that the privatisation of health services had brought many problems.

Another topic that drew a lot of attention and consensus was the inadequacy of mental health services. '*Mental health services are not really available, there is a long waiting time*', said one woman to the agreement of others with quotes of nine-month referral times and concern about there being few after-care services for mental health patients. Women talked of stress and depression, the stress of vulnerability which leads to ill health which in turn increases the need for basic items like heat. These pressures and illnesses were also closely bound up with '*the troubles*' which was also seen as impacting on child trauma, child drinking and high suicide rates. Women were upset that they could find nowhere to turn to for young people's mental health problems such as anorexia. They called for better liaison between mental health agencies and family support groups.

A number of matters relating to women's health require special attention. The age limit for breast screening should be reduced below fifty years of age; some called for the age limit to be scrapped altogether. Maternity services need to be easily accessible from all areas of Northern Ireland and women should be assisted to develop the confidence and articulacy to question doctors.

Last, but not least, was the question of women's reproductive rights. Despite the recommendations of the CEDAW Committee in 1999 and 2008, women do not expect early movement to improve the position for women seeking abortion. Annual estimates of those travelling for abortions vary between 1,400 – 2,000 women.²¹ Most women travel to Britain,

²¹ Official statistics and Family Planning Association estimates

some choose to go to Amsterdam while others resort to medication purchased through the internet. Family Planning Association staff and women attending the FPA counselling service are frequently harassed by protesters opposed to abortion. CEDAW recommended that government remove the pecuniary disadvantage to women, undertake public consultation and provide healthcare in a gender specific manner. Women have been waiting for a very long time for clarification of guidelines from the Department of Health Social Services and Public Safety which does not appear to be forthcoming any time soon. 'Can we challenge this via the [CEDAW] Optional Protocol?' was the nub of the discussion.

Reconciliation of work, private and family Life

Severely inadequate childcare provision – in quantity, range and cost – is a long-standing problem in Northern Ireland.²² With childcare significantly below provision in Britain, even where nursery schools are concerned, and proving to be very expensive, women's employment opportunities are depressed and they are prevented from accessing education and training. Elder care responsibility is another factor. Women's rights and children's opportunities demand a childcare infrastructure for the 21st century.

Advances have been made around flexible working, maternity and paternity leave and pay but more remains to be done. Attitudes in the private sector were held to be less supportive than in the public sector in relation to maternity leave and other provision. Some other European countries were regarded enviously for being much further ahead on work-life balance and sharing care responsibilities with Finland quoted as a model where parental leave works well.

After-school care posed a significant problem. Many women, particularly those who are low paid, rely on their own parents to mind children of all ages. Despite being essential given the poor infrastructure of childcare support, these grandparents feel their role is undervalued by society. They receive little acknowledgement or financial consideration because they are not registered childminders. Women are concerned that this traditional method of childcare might be under threat from new legislation and standards without anything affordable to replace it.

Caring responsibilities takes its toll on women in worry, making arrangements and providing support for dependants whether these are elderly parents and relations, children or disabled dependants. Lack of recognition, poor respite, insufficient allowances and under-developed support networks for carers were all named as problems. Demands for carers included more support, home visits, training, respite, more realistic care subsidies and adequate benefits for those who cannot work because of caring responsibilities.

Violence and trafficking

There is considerable exasperation at the increasing use of gender neutral terms when referring to domestic and sexual violence. '*It is violence against women – call it what it is instead of falling into gender neutral terminology*', was a sentiment universally agreed. The good work on domestic violence in the voluntary sector is greatly appreciated. The Northern Ireland Executive was asked to develop a strategy devoted to ending all forms of violence against women along the continuum of physical, mental and sexual violence. Agencies across the public sector should

²² According to Gingerbread NI there are only 8 child daycare places per 1,000 children

be involved in designing the strategy with Women's Aid and other expert voluntary organisations. Substantial resources should be committed to implementation.

The perception is that trafficking is swept under the carpet in Northern Ireland and virtually hidden, and so the impending release of research by the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission and the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland was welcomed as work that would increase its visibility and shed light on the specifics of the problem. The gendered nature of human trafficking should be recognised. Strong legislation should be enshrined and given weight by proactive application and collaboration across Europe and beyond to eradicate trafficking.

Women are solidly of the opinion that sexual violence is sexual violence and cannot be excused by reference to cultural factors; there is no excuse for female and male genital mutilation. There is little information about female genital mutilation and knowledge levels are low about the forms female genital mutilation or the extent of the problem in Northern Ireland, including among professionals who may have to deal with situations. It was noted that while there is legislation on female genital mutilation, none exists for male genital mutilation. There was concern about children being at risk when out of the country on holiday and agreement that while awareness-raising with mothers is one strategy, the law should be applied to ensure the message is driven home.

A process of continuous improvement must be applied to systems to tackle violence against women and support affected women including: refining the court and justice systems; seeking more justice for women with appropriate sentences for abusers; keeping policies, systems and arrangements for child custody and protection under review, drawing on advice from experts and practitioner agencies; examining the reasons why there is a poor rape conviction record and finding ways of improving capacity to convict; ensuring there are enough advice and support centres and contact points for abused women with interpreters available on demand.



Participants at the NIWEP Engaging with Europe on Gender Equality conference at the City Hotel, Derry, 26 November 2008

Judges, police and relevant public officials should have access to gender-awareness training that covers the link between violence against women and male power and control, the impact of consistent violence on producing low self esteem and confidence and the increasing forms and nature of all violence against women. Compulsory anger management courses for men guilty of domestic violence were advocated.

A coordinated response across Europe, and internationally, on violence against women was supported. The European Women's Lobby's Observatory on Violence Against Women, with an Irish Observatory in existence and UK Observatory being established, provide a good model of networked collaboration. In July 2008 CEDAW called for a national strategy across the UK which places an onus on the Northern Ireland Executive to play its part. The administration was urged at the conferences to build upon its interaction with experts from the voluntary sector. The inclusion of Women's Aid in some departmental initiatives and the work of the End Violence Against Women (EVAW)²³ network with government were noted as models of good practice.

Gender stereotypes and equality outside the EU

Conference participants chose which areas from the Roadmap to focus on. Overall women ranked participation in decision-making as their top priority, followed by economic independence, reconciliation of work, family and private life and violence and trafficking in that order.

While the topic of gender stereotypes received less attention a number of points were made. There was support for the Roadmap's criticism of the role education, training and culture play in transmitting gender stereotypes. Instead, education and training need to be turned into tools that are applied with consistent effort to overcome the culture and practice that suppresses aspirations and confines women within narrow parameters. Young women should be encouraged onto and supported on non-traditional career paths. Degrading and offence portrayals of women in the media fuel explicit and subliminal messages about women's role and status. These factors, which also play a role in domestic and sexual violence, must be tackled.

Consideration of equality outside the EU raised the subjects of poverty and marginalisation in other regions of the world. Participants echoed the European Women's Lobby's call for a social justice agenda underpinned by human and women's rights in all EU external business and development dealings with other countries and in how it conducts itself in international arenas. Women acknowledged the EU's investment in peace-building in Northern Ireland, and its significance to the women's sector which has depended on EU funds to develop an infrastructure of projects working with and for women and communities in transition from conflict to peace.

The arrival of UNSCR 1325 in 2000 was a welcome development and women called on the EU to adhere to it and insist on compliance by others in situations of conflict. Many Northern Ireland women who acquired considerable expertise during 30 years of war are keen and available to transfer knowledge and skill in conflict prevention, crisis management, transition from conflict and sustainable peace-building to others, in part as a reciprocal gesture to the EU for its support to Northern Ireland. EU institutions, and other agencies, should call upon their expertise.

²³ EVAW NI is a focus for Amnesty, Women's Aid and other women's groups and voluntary organisations to lobby on violence against women

CHAPTER 7 VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

Roundtable on VAW

Northern Ireland represented the UK at the start of the European Observatory in the 1990s, with NIWEP nominating domestic violence specialists Women's Aid Northern Ireland to take part. In December 2008, as part of the Plan D project, a number of experts came together for a roundtable dialogue on violence against women. They discussed developments on violence against women at the international and European levels and explored how these mapped across priorities within Northern Ireland. In particular, NIWEP was keen for women in Northern Ireland to air their views about a potential UK Observatory on Violence Against Women linked to the European Observatory operating under the auspices of the European Women's Lobby.

The roundtable, hosted by Belfast and Lisburn Women's Aid in partnership with NIWEP, involved representatives from: the Women's Aid Federation, Belfast and Lisburn Women's Aid, End Violence Against Women in Northern Ireland (EVAW), Women's Support Network, Women's National Commission (WNC), Lesbian Line, Coalition on Sexual Orientation, Amnesty, Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, National Alliance of Women's Organisations (NAWO), Engender and the UK Joint Committee on Women (UKJCW).

NIWEP was fortunate to be able to call on Annette Lawson from NAWO in England who had organized the first visit to the UK and Europe by the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women; and Marsha Scott from Engender in Scotland who is the current UK expert to the European Observatory on VAW. Annette spoke on the UN dimension and Marsha on European developments and the establishment of a UK Observatory. EWL Executive member Elizabeth Law introduced the background and facilitated the meeting while Annie Campbell, Director of the Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland, rooted the discussion in the Northern Ireland experience and challenges.

In addition to the information circulated at previous events (see page 28) NIWEP provided participants with:

- NIWEP Northern Ireland Shadow Report to CEDAW
- EWL Policy Positions on Violence Against Women
- EWL Women's Sexual Rights in Europe
- Violence Against Women in the UK Report to CEDAW

Emerging issues

The roundtable noted: the EU Gender Equality Roadmap's priority on gender-based violence and trafficking; EWL policies and actions on VAW; the CEDAW Committee's recommendation to the UK Government that it should draw up a national strategy on VAW; that the UK was expected to report to CEDAW again in mid-2009; that the 2008/09 topic for the Special Rapporteur's 2008/09 report to the Human Rights Council is the political economy of VAW; and that the UK is responding to a Council of Europe stock-take on VAW which is currently underway.



From Left to Right: Kathleen Feenan, Women's Information Group, Etaine O'Kane, Women's Support Network, Maria Morgan, NIWEP and NIPSA, May De Silva, Women into Politics, Nora Smith Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network, Lynn Carville, Women's Resource and Development Agency, and Liz Law

The three-day conference that took place in London during the visit of the UN Special Rapporteur was attended by more than one hundred from across Europe. The conference was organised around three themes covering infrastructure matters such as legislation, implementation and policing; provision for victims including cross-border aspects; and prevention covering gender stereotyping, education and other matters. The key issues and problems identified were:

- Violence against women stems from inequalities.
- Language e.g. use of 'gender' instead of 'women'.
- Gender neutral legislation and policies.
- Loss of focus on the views, experiences, concerns of women.
- Absence of an agreed international definition of VAW.
- Indicators not sufficiently developed to measure problems and solutions.

It was accepted that an agreed international definition was urgently needed, along with the collection of reliable data. A European Directive and Action Plan along with National Action Plans for Member States were called for. A regular European-wide consultation was proposed. There was consensus among NGOs that they need to establish a unified voice in order to ensure some influence over priority setting.

The conclusion of the Special Rapporteur's conference chimed with issues emerging through the European Women's Lobby. The EU does not have a competence on violence against women which means that it has no legal basis for holding Member States to account on their policy and

action. Therefore, the priority at EU level is to attain an EU competency which can provide a sound legal basis from which sanctions for non-compliance can be imposed.

There is diversity in strategies and provision across countries; for example, provision of women's refuges is not the norm. It is important not to assume that '*one size fits all*' and the EWL is developing regional responses so that its work is context specific and relevant. The EWL is working towards establishing a national observatory in every Member State linked to each other through the European Observatory.

There is considerable work at NGO level in the UK that could be shared with others across Europe, with the domestic violence sector particularly strong in all four nations of the UK. A recent meeting in Edinburgh was the first to explore how a new UK Observatory might fit with existing structures and actions such as the UK Joint Committee on Women, the Women's National Commission, EVAW, Making the Grade, Map of Gaps, etc.²⁴ Some challenges were identified: the uneasy relations among sectors and nations; uneven development of NGO activity; uneven resourcing between sectors and nations; and diverse priorities.²⁵

The particular circumstances of Northern Ireland have both positive and negative implications for further progress on VAW. The women's sector is strong, but under pressure financially. There is a solid domestic violence strategy on paper signed up to by government and public agencies, but its flaws include gender neutral language and approach, nothing on sexual violence and diminution of funding for the women's sector. There is a sexual violence strategy but it does not guarantee rape crisis funding. An Inter-Ministerial Group on VAW is beginning to join together sexual violence and domestic violence, but there is no comprehensive, integrated strategy yet. The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland is organising a high level master class on s75 and, during an EVAW meeting with the Minister and officials in the Office of the First and deputy First Minister, Minister Jeffrey Donaldson promised a roundtable of key officials across government to discuss s75 and gender equality.

Framework for a UK Observatory

Some examples were given of difficulties encountered by NGOs in Northern Ireland when centrist, top-down approaches from England were followed. In addition different contexts set different challenges; for example, the land border with another EU Member State in Northern Ireland, or the fact that violence against women has to be seen from the perspective of a society in and emerging from conflict. To quote the EWL practice, it needs to be '*context specific and relevant*'.

On the other hand, how the national picture is framed and constructed is important. There was consensus among Northern Ireland participants that the UKJCW four nations partnership is a good model as it builds the UK framework from the nations up rather than from the centre down. This is important in terms of shaping a UK agenda relevant across the UK and ensuring 'voice' at national level. How the UKJCW learned to be UK-wide might offer a useful lesson for others.

²⁴ The last two are reports on VAW

²⁵ Marsha Scott referred to a paper by Nicki Charles and Fiona McKay on different government priorities and resourcing at the Roundtable on VAW, Belfast, 11 December 2008

The story of England-based Southall Black Sisters' success in winning their case for funding by showing that a proper equality impact assessment (EqIA) had not been carried out was an inspiration. It highlighted gender-blindness in public authority decision-making and underlined the importance of ensuring that EqIAs are gendered. It was suggested it might be useful to undertake work on building the capacity of organisations to use EqIAs as a tool as one common task across the UK.

There was some discussion on limits of action to ensure focus. What would be the boundaries of any UK Observatory's remit? For example, would it focus on violence against women or gender equality more broadly? It was further suggested that rather than get bogged down in an unwieldy comprehensive data collection exercise it might be better to pick one or two issues and pursue them rigorously to success.

The discussion demonstrated that expertise in Northern Ireland, and in the other nations, can be matched to policies and actions at the European and international level. For example, gender blind policy-making is one area of common concern.

Northern Ireland priorities for VAW

Priorities identified at the roundtable for ongoing attention are:

- The absence of an independent rape crisis centre in Northern Ireland.
- The lack of attention to trafficking and the need for gender-based analysis of trafficking.
- Issues surrounding access to justice for those affected by domestic violence.
- No recourse to public funds for women with uncertain immigration status.
- The negative impact of a gender neutral approach to policy-making on women's services.
- The need to develop better indicators and measuring
- Collaboration beyond Northern Ireland including equality of nations in a UK Observatory on VAW.
- The need for sustainable funding for the infrastructure of VAW support organisations.

A number of things were noted about a strategy on VAW. The momentum is towards an integrated strategy on violence against women rather than unconnected strategies on a number of grounds. A national strategy on VAW is required but it is imperative that it is designed from the basis of equal participation across the UK not forged at the centre and handed down. What exists within and across the nations of the UK should be mapped and the common ground established; and where one nation has better practice than others this should be shared as a model.

Assessment by participants

A post-roundtable assessment by participants of the discussion session showed that knowledge about Plan D and the EU Equality Roadmap was sketchy. However, in the words of one participant, '*promotion of dialogue, debate and democracy in Europe can only aid awareness raising and ultimately, bring about the necessary changes, on the many issues and inequalities facing women*'.

There is keen interest in linking into the Roadmap's priority on gender-based violence and trafficking noting that the EWL Observatory on VAW provided a route to do this. It was suggested the Roadmap can be used to point out gaps in domestic legislation, add weight to the demand for gender-based analysis of trafficking and add value to the research project into the nature and extent of trafficking in Northern Ireland. The UK Observatory, linked to the European Observatory, is described as *'the most significant step in forwarding work across the UK that I can imagine'* by one participant and *'potentially such a group could bring together the strands of gendered violence work we should be exercising leadership on'* by another.

Participants were more familiar with CEDAW and most had heard of the UN Special Rapporteur on VAW. Several had contributed to NIWEP's and other shadow reports. Two had been at the examination of the UK Government in New York in July 2008 while others had been involved in discussions in Northern Ireland.

Participants found the roundtable very worthwhile, providing them with the opportunity to receive a briefing on the findings of the CEDAW Committee and learn that the UK Government has one year to set out its next steps. Getting to know what is happening at European level was regarded as new and valuable. All are keen to receive more European and international information to assist their work. They identified contextualising issues in wider dimensions, influencing change and raising visibility and awareness as the potential gains. Sustained interaction also enables Northern Irish women to contribute in European and international arenas.



Marie Abbott, Department of Social Development, at NIWEP's Engaging with Europe and Gender Equality conference at the Wellington Park Hotel, Belfast, 19 November 2008

CHAPTER 8 OTHER EVENTS AND ACTIONS

Workshop for equality officers

A training session for equality officers in government departments was held in November 2008. Officials from the Department for Education, Department of the Environment, Department for Social Development and the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure attended.

The officials welcomed the opportunity to learn more about the EU Gender Equality Roadmap and CEDAW and how they fit with local policies. Without the benefit of much exposure to international developments none of the officers had known about Plan D, and only one was aware of the Roadmap before the event. On the other hand all had heard of CEDAW, mainly from OFMdfM requests to departments to assist with briefings for Northern Ireland's participation in the UK Hearing in July 2008.

They valued the opportunity of having in-depth conversations on issues they could now track to the Roadmap to help inform their work. Several mentioned '*recognition of the issue surrounding gender neutrality*'. Other areas they highlighted were: gender stereo-typing; promoting women in decision-making including public appointments; eradication of gender-based violence; social protection and the fight against poverty; and multiple discrimination; as well as mechanisms like mainstreaming and monitoring.

Having supplied information for the Northern Ireland Executive's first representation in front of CEDAW they appreciated feedback about the process and the content of the Committee's conclusions. It gave them an '*insight into the role of CEDAW*' and the reporting requirements i.e. an interim report requested for mid-2009 and the regular periodic report due in four years. The former raised issues of immediacy of action but, at the same time, they felt the benefit of having advance notice. The detailed scrutiny devoted to Northern Ireland at the UN level was a surprise to all.

The topic that made the greatest impression on officials was not a specific policy area but the more technical aspects of approach and expectation. Officials were interested to learn that the CEDAW Committee is dissatisfied with governments taking a gender neutral approach. Furthermore, that it requires equality of outcome not just equality of opportunity and it is outcome that is measured.

Consistent information on EU and international equality developments would be welcomed by officials, as would the opportunity to liaise with NGOs for information, dialogue and as a sounding board. The equality officers are keen for the session to be the beginning of more dialogues that can assist them to link domestic policies with the EU Gender Equality Roadmap and CEDAW. They intend to brief the departmental Equality Practitioners Group with the view to extending an invitation to NIWEP to lead another session for a larger group. They requested support with case studies and models of good practice. They felt that the matter of gender neutrality ought to be addressed in more depth. It was also suggested that a book of women role models for use in schools would be useful.

Submission to OFMdfM Committee

NIWEP took the opportunity during the project to prepare a submission to a Northern Ireland Assembly Committee. The Committee of the Office of the First and deputy First Minister launched their *Consideration of European Issues*, inviting written evidence in late 2008 and continuing their deliberations into 2009.

NIWEP's submission called for a strategic approach to Europe and for leaders and citizens in Northern Ireland to '*consistently seek out opportunities to contribute to European dialogue and development*' and '*be part of the expertise the EU offers across Europe and internationally*'. One route for this is through offering expertise in conflict resolution and peace-building. Women can add value to EU peace-building initiatives through assisting the application of the principles and standards of UNSCR 1325 on Women, Peace and Security. Another area of significant knowledge and skill in Northern Ireland is that of equality.

NIWEP was critical of the poor attention paid to EU policy and legislation within the Assembly. It said in its submission that, '*The Committee and more Assembly members need to be conversant with a range of EU matters, and be as comfortable talking about the EU and being European as about domestic policy and being British/Irish/ Northern Irish.*'

The submission drew attention to the EU Gender Equality Roadmap with its six priorities and impact assessment and gender budgeting tools; and to Plan D's work to ensure an informed, engaged citizenship. It proposed that the Assembly should take a greater interest in the work of MEPs and representatives on the Committee of the Regions and the Economic and Social Committee. It should also foster networking among the EU interest groups within Northern Ireland and draw on their expertise.

Sharing information and knowledge

During the course of the project NIWEP undertook a number of other engagements to talk about Plan D, the EU Equality Roadmap and CEDAW/1325 including:

- A briefing for women members of the Alliance Party.
- An information and training session for the Women's Committee of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions comprising women from ten unions.
- An information and discussion session for Community Dialogue and its membership of community groups.
- A Meeting with the Junior Ministers in the Office of the First and deputy First Minister.
- A meeting with the Chair and Deputy Chair of the OFMdfM Committee in the Northern Ireland Assembly.

NIWEP also developed a new, more user friendly website to provide information about European and international matters to its members and wider civil society.

CHAPTER 9 ASSESSMENT OF KNOWLEDGE AND NEED

Survey of knowledge and need

NIWEP gathered further data about people's knowledge of European and international issues and their ongoing information and support needs from a survey completed by conference participants (see Appendix 1). The data also assisted in the evaluation of the project. There was a high rate of returned forms: 83% in Belfast and 86% in Derry/Londonderry.

There were distinct differences in the replies from Belfast and Derry to some questions. For example, many more women in Belfast than in Derry were aware of CEDAW. Much fewer women in Derry receive information on European and international affairs. Clearly organizations in Belfast have greater access to information than those in Derry. There are three possible reasons for this: the location of Belfast-based organizations closer to the centre of information and opportunity; differences in the type of organization in each city with Belfast having larger, strategic organizations and networks with funding compared with smaller locally-based community groups; and, thirdly, a combination of both.

The following sections summarise the responses of conference participants in the survey forms to key issues closely following how women expressed themselves.



Participants at the NIWEP' -WIG "Knowing me, knowing EU", conference at the Wellington Park Hotel, 11 November 2008

Participation and engagement

Plan D principles on democracy, dialogue, debate are similar to those in the NGO sector. In order for citizens to become more engaged more opportunities to participate must be provided. Plan D ought to be publicised widely as a vehicle for citizen participation and engagement. The women's sector can play a role in increasing citizens' engagement. It is important to listen to concerns and issues and have open debates so as to get everyone's point of view and be representative. It is important to learn how to communicate effectively to share information and pass on knowledge.

Plan D presents an opportunity and mechanism for dialogue and information on EU affairs. European structures can be accessible routes to effective lobbying. Women can feed directly into EU institutions and processes, 'leapfrogging' Northern Ireland structures and going directly to Europe with issues. More communication of EU activities is needed in Northern Ireland so that people can feel part of Europe. More engagement is needed between citizens and elected representatives and with EU-wide organizations on European matters.

Plan D is an opportunity to raise awareness of issues that affect women. Women themselves need to remember to keep abreast of proposals and debates on the European agenda so they can take action to ensure women are included across the breadth of issues. Democracy, dialogue and debate must equally include women's voices, making sure to bring in women at the grassroots.

The six EU Gender Equality Roadmap priorities

Conference participants prioritised the six themes in this order and the notes under each theme indicate the issues which they felt need particular attention.

- Equal participation/representation of women in decision-making.
- Achieving women's equal economic independence.
- Reconciliation of work, private and family life.
- Eradicating gender-based violence and trafficking.
- Eliminating gender stereotypes in society.
- Promoting gender equality outside the EU.

Equal participation/representation of women in decision-making: Equal participation and representation should be enforced by law; more women should be promoted to Brussels; women need to be supported to come into the public sphere; greater representation of women in politics and business; equal political participation.

Achieving women's equal economic independence: There were specific references to equal pay/pay gap/fair pay; reproductive health (abortion).

Enhancing reconciliation of work, private and family life: There were specific references to the role of senior managers in the private and public sector; childcare, care services; flexible working hours; flexicurity.

Eradicating gender-based violence and trafficking: There were specific references to challenging 'violence' as a natural part of life; and protection of women from rape.

Eliminating gender stereotypes in society: There were specific references to eliminating gender stereotypes along with gender neutral approaches so that government policies truly comply with Section 75 equality legislation; and tackling stereotyping through education, training and culture.

Promoting gender equality outside the EU: This was prioritised by fewer women and no specific comments were made in the survey form.

Lessons learned about CEDAW

When asked about the lessons learned about CEDAW from the conferences participants identified the following. It provides international support, security and awareness.

CEDAW was the first Convention to address women's rights in a comprehensive and connected way. It places obligations and duties on governments. It is about implementation of entitlements; entitlement is not a problem or a need but a right. It addresses direct and indirect discrimination and promotes positive action. It acknowledges that discrimination is socially constructed and works to a substantive rather than a formal definition of equality. The focus is on entitlement and the need for equality of outcome rather than simply equality of opportunity. It allows temporary special measures to ensure women's rights. It needs to be better implemented and promoted.

By becoming a party to the Convention governments are committed. CEDAW is a tool for scrutiny as governments are required to report every four years and their progress is assessed. CEDAW has not been fully entrenched in UK law but the UK, including devolved administrations, is monitored and it is important to provide alternative views from NGOs to the CEDAW Committee. The UK Government can be shamed for not delivering CEDAW on the ground. It was commented that, '*the administrations better get busy as they have to report again in 9 months*'. Governments have to report to the CEDAW Committee every four years.

CEDAW Committee recommendations include: the requirement for the devolved administrations to raise awareness of CEDAW issues; provision of funding for women's organizations for policy work; a strategy to eliminate violence; closer working between officials and NGOs; implementation of UNSCR 1325. Other issues are: right to childcare; women in decision-making and public life; discrimination; poverty; and trafficking of women.

The women's NGO sector in Northern Ireland has been strengthened by UN participation. This is especially heartening given the lack of true political will to work towards true equality for women here. Women should take the argument for women's rights to the politicians. Government should be reminded that it must report on the Concluding Observations of the CEDAW Committee within one year.

The Optional Protocol provides the right to complain and a new avenue for change. It could possibly be used to attain full reproductive rights, namely access to abortion. CEDAW is accessible and the Committee is committed to engaging NGOs meaningfully. The Committee is interested in Northern Irish issues and concluded there should be a full implementation of



Participants at the NIWEP' -WIG "Knowing me, knowing EU", conference at the Wellington Park Hotel, 11 November 2008

UNSCR 1325 in Northern Ireland. The gender neutral approach adopted by many in applying Section 75 may be detrimental to the promotion of women's rights. Eliminate gender neutral approaches so that policies truly comply with equality legislation.

There are opportunities to address concerns to CEDAW by following up the recommendations from the July CEDAW Committee. It is important to have a coordinated response. Therefore we need to work and communicate more with each other so that views are fed back.

How knowledge of the European and international dimensions helps women

Information raises awareness which is useful in all areas of life. It connects women in the home to the decision-making process. Information empowers one to speak up. Women become more confident to put their views forward and feel they are valuable.

It provides an up-to-date picture on how EU issues impact on Northern Ireland. It is important to make the European and international links as this gives the fuller picture. It lets us know what has been achieved and allows us to learn from good practice, otherwise it is difficult to know what is or is not working. It helps us to look at precedents that have been set and to give timely attention to what is going on in Europe to be able to lobby in time.

It is possible to use the European and international information and policies locally. Information could be circulated to local authority employees and to women's community groups to pass on. More information on funding and political structures would be useful. It is important to provide easily understood information locally and enable grassroots women to understand how it can be deployed in lobbying.

It is beneficial for people working on a European project to share good practice and introduce a much-needed external dimension to their work.

Lessons Northern Ireland women can share internationally

Women in post conflict societies are in a unique position to expose the hidden aspects of society such as inequality and violence and politics dominated by men. They can share experiences of living through troubles and coping afterwards and how the change between conflict and peace affects women. They can pass on skills gained through 30 years of war, peace-building, coming out of conflict and post conflict reconstruction. Women can talk about collaborative work, particularly in war zones where women crossed 'lines' to work together for their community and children and demonstrate the great efforts made to understand others' thinking, belief in reaching out to each other and meeting together in learning and social occasions. At a recent Women Peace-building Conference in Salzburg women from conflict areas all over the world expressed great interest in women's peace-building activities in Northern Ireland, including their actions in conflict resolution and reconciliation and on the peace process.

Women involved in the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition have lessons to share with women elsewhere.

Many in Northern Ireland have developed extensive skills in equality matters including: Section 75 and mainstreaming equality; making equality meaningful; development of fair employment legislation; the impact of equality legislation particularly anti-discrimination legislation in stopping/containing prejudicial actions and discrimination and sending a clear message that discrimination is unlawful (as well as being morally bad). Over time this has affected attitudes and accepted norms.

There is considerable, successful grassroots level work with good practice in grassroots organizing and meeting the needs of women in disadvantaged areas in Northern Ireland. A participant from Spain suggested that other European countries could learn a lot about community-based local groups for women – how they organised and the services they provide e.g. providing childcare to ensure learning is accessible.

Many women in community work have a strong voice *and can and do* make a difference. Collaborative working and partnership, including joint working on a cross-border basis, are useful practices to share. A participant from the South of Ireland spoke about how much she was learning given the strength of community action and partnerships among women in Northern Ireland.

The vibrancy and determination of the women's sector under very difficult circumstances is itself a lesson; its persistence, enthusiasm and tenacity.

How can NIWEP help?

NIWEP was urged to assist women's organisations and others develop European and international knowledge and access by:

- Circulating information and visiting local women's groups regularly.
- Providing training, advice and support.
- Facilitating dialogue and communication.
- Organising seminars and networking opportunities.
- Undertaking joint projects and campaigns and sharing resources to ensure that a wider network of women can receive regular information. Some groups mentioned specifically were the Women's Information Group, Foyle Women's Information Network, Community Dialogue, Soroptimists and Alliance for Choice.
- Assisting dissemination of information within institutions and the public sector.
- Offering information and support to develop confidence and knowledge among women in political parties.
- Disseminating email newsletters and consulting women on their views to lobby decision makers.
- Facilitating women's groups, including smaller groups, to build their knowledge of what is going on and assist them to put issues forward and lobby the EU and other for change.
- Highlighting issues at international level, educating women's groups on CEDAW and UNSCR 1325 and raising awareness of issues.
- Being the voice of women in Northern Ireland in Europe and at the United Nations.



Liz Law, NIWEP and EWL, speaking at the NIWEP Engaging with Europe and Gender Equality conference at the Wellington Park Hotel, Belfast 19 November 2008

APPENDIX 1

Europe in 3D: Democracy, Dialogue, Debate ENGAGING WITH EUROPE ON GENDER EQUALITY

Feedback Form

EU

1. Had you heard about 'Plan D: Democracy, Dialogue, Debate' before today?
2. What is the most relevant message from Plan D for your work?
3. Were you aware of the Equality Roadmap before today?
4. What three things from the Equality Roadmap are the most important for your work on women's equality in Northern Ireland?

UN

5. What has been your involvement in CEDAW to date?
6. Did you know before today that:
 - (i) the UK, including Northern Ireland, is examined regularly by the CEDAW Committee at the UN?
 - (ii) the Northern Ireland Executive was represented on the UK delegation at the CEDAW Examination in July 2008?
7. What three things you learned about CEDAW today are the most important for your work on women's equality in Northern Ireland?

Needs Assessment

8. In your women's equality work do you/colleagues get much information on:
 - (i) European policies, practice, ideas and experiences?
 - (ii) UN/international policies, practice, ideas and experiences?
9. Would European and international information and experiences help your/ colleagues' women's equality work? Can you say why/how?
10. Do you think Northern Ireland has anything to offer others in Europe and internationally on women's equality? Can you give an example(s)?
11. How can NIWEP assist your work?



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