

Women's **Policy Group NI**

WPG NI Evidence Submission to the
International Development Committee
Inquiry on Women, Peace and Security

May 2025

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1. Introduction:

The Women's Policy Group (WPG) is a group of policy experts and practitioners who advocate collectively for women and girls by promoting gender equality through an intersectional feminist lens. We challenge systemic injustice and discrimination affecting women and girls by informing society and influencing policy and law. Our work is informed by women and girls' lived experiences and rooted in international human rights law.

The WPG is made up of women from trade unions, grassroots women's organisations, women's networks, feminist campaigning organisations, LGBTQ+ organisations, migrant groups, support service providers, NGOs, human rights and equality organisations and individuals. Over the years this important network has ensured there is good communication between politicians, policy makers and women's organisations on the ground. The WPG is endorsed as a coalition of expert voices that advocates for women in Northern Ireland on a policy level.

If you have any questions or queries about this response, or would like to discuss this evidence further with the WPG, please contact Elaine Crory, Women's Sector Lobbyist at elaine.crory@wrda.net

This response was prepared by the following WPG members:

- Elaine Crory – Women's Resource and Development Agency
- Meghan Hoyt - Women's Resource and Development Agency
- Danielle Roberts - Reclaim the Agenda
- Sarah Stack - Women's Resource and Development Agency / Women's Spaces

Please note that this response also includes evidence from other WPG work, compiled by a range of WPG members, and not all member organisations have specific policy positions on all the areas covered in this response.

1. Past Consultations Responses, Evidence Submissions and Briefings:

The WPG has published a wide range of evidence through various evidence submissions, public consultation responses and specific briefings on issues relating to flags, emblems and specifically the impact of paramilitaries on society in Northern Ireland. Responses made by the WPG, and some of our members, in relation to these issues include:

- Women's Policy Group NI response to Westminster Northern Ireland Affairs Committee Call for Evidence on the Effect of Paramilitaries on Society in Northern Ireland (2022)¹
- Women's Regional Consortium, Women Living with Debt (2022)²
- Women's Policy Group NI Response to OHCHR Call for Evidence on Challenges faced by women human rights defenders (WHRDs) working in conflict, post-conflict or crisis-affected settings. (2023)³
- Women's Policy Group NI, Feminist Recovery Plan: One Year On (2021)⁴

2.1. Content from previous WPG Responses

The Women's Policy Group has conducted several pieces of primary research into the experiences of women with a range of issues relating to gender inequality and violence against women and girls. These research projects have included:

- The WPG Feminist Recovery Plan Primary Research Project,⁵
- The WPG Protection from Stalking Bill Primary Research Project⁶ and,
- The WPG Violence Against Women and Girls Primary Research Project⁷.

In total, the WPG has engaged with over 1200 women in Northern Ireland through this research.

Although we did not directly ask women about their experiences with paramilitarism in any of this research, women repeatedly raised issues relating to paramilitarism and anonymously provided us with personal stories, which we have included below.

¹ WPG NI Response to NI Affairs Committee Call for Evidence on the Impact of Paramilitaries on Society in Northern Ireland (2022). Available at: <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/66c475c740e7194ba8ee6a81/t/6710e750655fed282e0b949c/1729161040797/WPG-NI-Response-to-Westminster-Northern-Ireland-Affairs-Committee-Call-for-Evidence.pdf>

² Women's Regional Consortium, Women Living with Debt (2022). Available at: <https://www.womensregionalconsortiumni.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Women-Living-with-Debt-1.pdf>

³ Women's Policy Group NI Response to OHCHR Call for Evidence on Challenges faced by women human rights defenders (WHRDs) working in conflict, post conflict or crisis-affected settings (2023) Available at: <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/66c475c740e7194ba8ee6a81/t/6710e2e57724471d5f643ebb/1729159917572/WPG-Response-to-OHCHR-Call-for-Evidence.pdf>

⁴ Women's Policy Group NI, Feminist Recovery Plan: One Year On (2021). Available at: <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/66c475c740e7194ba8ee6a81/t/66fe6333c896440f0174aeba/1727947575958/WPG-COVID-19-Feminist-Recovery-Plan-Relaunch-One-Year-On.pdf>

⁵ Women's Policy Group (2021) WPG COVID-19 Feminist Recovery Plan Supplementary Research Report: [Putting Women's Voices at the Core](#)

⁶ Women's Policy Group (2021) Joint Evidence Submission to Justice Committee on the Protection From Stalking Bill: [WPG Joint Submission on Stalking Bill](#)

⁷ Women's Policy Group (2022) 'Just a Fact of Life: Violence Against Women and Girls in Northern Ireland' [WPG Primary Research Findings](#).

Please refer to the full reports for information on methodologies, research methods and signposting/support for victims and survivors.

A) Protection from Stalking Bill Primary Research Content:

- Paramilitary Involvement in Stalking and VAWG:

“An abusive ex fiancé sent me letters, and also his friend, to try to ascertain if I would take him back. This was scary for me as he was emotionally, financially and sexually violent and had drugged me when we were together. He was also in the paramilitaries. A man I met in a chippy followed me home and sat outside my house in his car and kept coming back. I gave him my number in the chippy, and he scared me because he said he was watching my house, and my cats. He also said he was ex PSNI and had done traces on me. The police didn't really take me seriously because I was on antidepressants at the time. One policeman, in my own home, said "ah, that explains it"! The stalker played cat and mouse with the police for months. They did find out who he really was but advised against me pursuing charges because the stalker would only get a rap on the knuckles, at best. And my health would suffer.”

- Primary Research Respondent

Twenty-three years after the Good Friday / Belfast Agreement, paramilitary activity still exists. We see the public-facing side of this activity quite often, but much is hidden behind closed doors. In the 2018 report *Intimate Partner Violence in Conflict and Post-Conflict Societies*, referring to 2016 research, Professor Monica McWilliams⁸:

“The continuation of paramilitary control on women experiencing IPV remains a concern although it is two decades since the cessation of formal paramilitary hostilities. In the 2016 study, 11 of 53 participants (21%) raised the impact of paramilitarism on their lives when asked about the impact and legacy of the conflict in Northern Ireland, making it a relevant issue. The impact of paramilitarism was evident in two main respects: on the one hand, affiliation to paramilitary groups provided a source of power to perpetrators of IPV; while, on the other hand, the armed groups represented an alternative and more rapid response to IPV for victims.”

⁸ https://www.politicalsettlements.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/2018_PSRP-Violence-ReportNI.pdf pp.57-58

She notes also that coercive control was maintained within the home by claims by the perpetrator that they were connected with paramilitary groups and while:

“many participants who raised this issue claiming these connections had been fabricated with the specific intent of controlling and threatening them. Most participants, however, had only discovered the fabrication after exiting the relationship, showing that these threats had the same impact as if they were real. The fact that perpetrators of IPV use their affiliation with armed groups to threaten and abuse their partners points towards the different sources of power that may be open to perpetrators of IPV in conflict and post-conflict contexts.”

There is little reason to believe that this is not still an ongoing reality, particularly as many paramilitary groups seem to be increasing their activity and recruitment in light of heightened tensions. In addition, paramilitary involvement by the perpetrator - or the suggestion thereof - may make reporting to the PSNI difficult or impossible. It may also mean that surveillance of victims can continue even if a perpetrator is imprisoned, as their affiliations may mean that the victim will still be monitored and controlled.

Indeed, many women's centres across NI deal with the fall out of this, by providing care packs to women they know who are trapped or stalked by violent men who also happen to be 'well-connected', but they must do so quietly to avoid raising suspicions and inviting repercussions. There is an urgent need to address ongoing paramilitarism in Northern Ireland for a number of reasons, there has always had a strong correlation with coercive and controlling family violence and their effect on public safety is demonstrably corrosive, this is a part of their influence that needs particular attention.

B) Men's Violence Against Women and Girls Call for Views Primary Research Responses:

We received the following responses to the question 'Do you think there are any forms of violence against women and girls that we have not mentioned that should be included in the strategy?'

*“Revenge porn, involvement in organised crime eg prostitution, trafficking into domestic labour, **paramilitary or gang violence or threats of to women** - the gender specific nature of that eg threat of sexual violence, degradation or coerced sexual activity with male gang members to “initiate” into groups.”*

*“**Paramilitary**, educational.”*

"Sectarian abuse."

*"Self-worth, home life, misplaced loyalty, **'the troubles'** institutionalised behaviour."*

We received the following responses to the question 'Would you like to share any details about how you've been impacted by violence against women and girls and what age you were when this first happened?'

*"...Friend was held at knife point for two days by a group of three men who brutalised her body, tortured her with cigarette burns and hundreds of knife cuts and repeatedly raped her because she was lesbian. **The men were paramilitary and lived on her street.** She never reported it because the police and paramilitaries were on the same side. Her family left Belfast."*

*"Raped between ages 4-8, again aged 16, 25, 35. All of my relationships have been abusive, emotionally, physically, financially with coercive behaviour. **My ex got his uvf paramilitary friends to burn me out of my Belfast home with our 2 babies** in 2018, I had to flee to start over in Derry. The court process indulged his abuse, put the babies at risk, allowed him access to our children as a violent drug addict. He has no contact now, we are safe, but he refuses to pay maintenance despite working cash in hand."*

We received the following responses to the question 'What do you think are the root causes of sexism, misogyny, victim-blaming, rape myths and rape culture?'

*"Religion and **sectarianism**, outdated views represented in government."*

*"Toxic masculinity is embedded into our society, **deriving from historical roots, whether it's religious institutions and paramilitary activity.** Households can perpetuate gender norms and stereotypes through child rearing and everyday casual sexism. There isn't enough being done to change these aspects of our society through education."*

*"The underreported rapes, the Belfast Rugby rape trial and the victim making of it. Police not believing victims. **Sectarian groups controlling areas and the sexist hierarchy they maintain.**"*

*"The patriarchal, religious structure of the NI culture which is propped up by our history of violence and the political manipulation of deep seated fears of men involved with the troubles and the legacy of the troubles. This is further compounded by lad culture and toxic masculinity, where being a 'hard man' is revered and seen as a leadership trait in communities **where community development is anchored in workers who are (ex?) combatants as role models.** I also do not think there is a political option for equality based thinking outside the traditional split which means **the issues women work to address are downgraded in terms of importance as politicians manipulate the legacy of the troubles to stay in power.**"*

*"**Toxic masculinity especially that which is caused by the legacy of the troubles.** Lack of proper integrated sex education in schools especially Catholic schools. General attitudes towards women and girls in terms of their place in society and what they can and cannot achieve/what they are good for. We have a real issue with "bro culture" with our young men and boys believing violence against women is funny or something that women ask for especially by dressing or acting in a certain way."*

We received the following responses to the question 'What do you think the barriers are to victims in reporting?'

*"**Paramilitaries**, threat from family members bringing shame on the family name."*

*"In Northern Ireland there are **too many people connected to or pretend to be connected to or involved with paramilitaries.** Also being threatened by their abuser. And loving the abuser. There's no financial support at all if the victim works. Even on a low income. I have seen that with my former colleague and also my friend when she and her dog got beaten up by her ex-partner."*

*"Lack of evidence to convict if it is one person's word against the other. **Paramilitaries looking after their own no matter what they have done.**"*

*"Police either don't believe you or drag you over the coals for it. **Fear of sectarian retaliation** if seen going to police."*

We received the following response to the question ‘What sort of measures do you think are necessary to change men and boy's actions?’

*“Peace education from Primary school up. **The militarization/paramilitarisation of our society stunts boy's emotional growth and promotes harmful ideas** of what it means to be a man. Consent education. Getting them to understand what sexism looks/feels like.”*

We received the following responses to the question ‘Could you please expand on what additional factors need to be considered or what additional action needs to be taken to support these women?’

*“Women who are disabled are more vulnerable to many types of abuse particularly financial abuse and coercive control. Rural women are at increased risk of physical violence, easy to cover up signs of domestic abuse when you live on a farm. I know a woman whose husband tried to crush her with a round bale wrapper, she thought to herself that if he succeeded he would be able to claim it was a farm accident. **Loyalist women are less likely to report due to lack of trust in the police and a reluctance to be seen to be bringing the police into the area, paramilitarisation and the pressure that it will be used to make the community look bad, play into the 'thug' narrative.**”*

*“Cultural norms can vary in different groups, meaning certain women are more at risk. **Loyalist macho culture** should also be listed here.”*

We received the following responses to the question ‘What sort of changes would you like to see within the justice system in relation to men's violence against women and girls?’

*“Review of rape allegations and trails. Greater recognition that some women offenders are or have been exploited. I think there's a particular need for work around **paramilitary-style groups** and VAW [violence against women].”*

We received the following responses to the question ‘Is there anything else that you would like to share that you think the WPG should be calling for within the Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy?’

“A focus on Primary Prevention, through Education in all schools. Emotional literacy, rights and responsibilities, relationship

*education, power, consent, social media, sexual harassment. All children need to be educated and empowered to choose different paths than those modelled in our society. **Violence towards women and girls is a cornerstone of oppression and all forms of violence in Northern Ireland.** Challenging it and changing it will support anti-sectarianism.”*

*“Also need to look at the **linkages with the troubles** - talk to victims and survivors - I would expect a large proportion of women and girls already impacted by the troubles have also been impacted by violence - other strategies need to link in.”*

2. Response to Select Questions

- What financial resources has the UK allocated towards advancing the WPS agenda? Are these resources appropriately distributed across programmes and regions?

Resourcing still focuses entirely on international action, which in itself seems likely to be reduced based on the approach that has been signalled by Ministers recently. This will contribute to instability and erode peacebuilding work and networks in volatile areas globally.

Domestically, while the Women’s Policy Group was pleased to note that the 2023 National Action Plan referred for the first time to Northern Ireland, this acknowledgement has not resulted in sufficient action and, particularly, in resourcing. The NAP refers explicitly to the Ending Violence Against Women and Girls Strategic Framework which is Northern Ireland’s first, and which has had its ambitions limited by very restricted funding, having been funded by the very restricted Northern Ireland block grant, which has experienced significant pressure from Westminster in the last few years and which is uncertain even within the lifetime of the Strategic Framework.

Given the Northern Ireland’s women’s sector’s expertise in peacebuilding, the ongoing political instability that we are familiar with,, and the fact that many funders are withdrawing from Northern Ireland entirely (for example, European funds following Brexit) or withdrawing from funding the women’s sector specifically, there is significant pressure on organisations that have both driven progress and formed the bedrock of peacebuilding work here for so long⁹.

⁹ Deiana, M. A., Hagen, J. J., & Roberts, D. (2022). Nevertheless, they persisted. feminist activism and the politics of crisis in Northern Ireland. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 31(5), 654–667. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2022.2039103>

For these reasons we encourage ring-fenced budgets dedicated to investing in domestic work, with a specific focus on Northern Ireland's women's sector. In addition, we support the full implementation of UNSCR 1325. Women's Policy Group member Danielle Roberts outlines this in her paper 'The 6th C? conflict as a barrier to women's political participation in Northern Ireland'¹⁰ in the NCAFP 'Northern Ireland Emerging Leaders: Advancing Peace through Policy' report on the Northern Ireland Emerging Leader programme.

"After refusing to include Northern Ireland in several National Action Plan's on UNSCR 1325, despite campaigning from grassroots women's organisations and policy workers alike, the United Kingdom government included Northern Ireland for the first time in 2023. Conversely, the Irish government has included Northern Ireland in all three of its National Action Plans. Even though the United Kingdom has now included Northern Ireland this was limited to recognising women peacebuilders for the 25th anniversary of The Agreement and supporting the development of a Violence Against Women and Girls strategy. There is already some recognition of UNSCR 1325 for women in Northern Ireland with the establishment of the All Party Group on UNSCR 1325 in the Assembly in December 2010.

UNSCR 1325 could have great potential if implemented in Northern Ireland as a tool to ensure the inclusion of women in formal politics, as well as broader peace building activities. The adoption of UNSCR 1325 must be intersectional and consider the needs of different groups of women in relation to political participation.

The long overdue Bill of Rights could be the mechanism to adopt UNSCR 1325 as an international human rights mechanism, a less ambitious route would be through legislation similar to the proposed adoption of some UN Conventions in the devolved Scottish Parliament."

- How does the UK's current WPS National Action Plan compare to its previous iterations? To what extent is the UK successfully achieving the strategic outcomes it set out within the 2023 National Action Plan?

As outlined above, we welcome the explicit inclusion of Northern Ireland in the 2023 National Action Plan, however future iterations could go much further by including Northern Ireland, both in terms of investment in organisations that are

¹⁰ Danielle Roberts, 'The 6th C? conflict as a barrier to women's political participation in Northern Ireland' in NCAFP 'Northern Ireland Emerging Leaders: Advancing Peace through Policy' (2024) Available at: [REPORT: 2024 Northern Ireland Emerging Leaders](#)

dedicated to tackling Violence Against Women and Girls and investing in those with expertise and experience in peacebuilding efforts.

The Northern Ireland Office could and should act as a vital part of the WPS infrastructure by being fully equipped and resourced to act as the conduit between central government and the work carried on the ground in Northern Ireland towards the WPS agenda.

- Are women's voices, particularly those from conflict-affected communities and marginalised groups, sufficiently included within the UK's approach to the WPS agenda?

Northern Ireland's third sector is presently experiencing a degree of alienation from the local Executive, and this is being driven from the Executive itself, which increasingly excludes the voices of the sector - and particularly of women's groups - from the mechanisms of policy making, co-design, and similar. This in turn contributes to a situation in which it is difficult to raise issues and concerns that relate to WPS. In addition, on occasion when providing relevant evidence to decision makers, women's organisations in Northern Ireland have received threats and attempts at intimidation that have made participation riskier and more specialised¹¹.

As outlined above, an additional barrier to participation is the funding landscape that the expert organisations face. Increasingly, charitable organisations have withdrawn from women's work to focus elsewhere, and since Brexit the bulk of large funding sources, particularly funding for carrying out peacebuilding work on the ground in Northern Ireland, are no longer available. British government funding has not replaced this - overwhelmingly it is explicitly focused on employability work and on economic development. This is no doubt valuable, but is a different stream of work. This situation contributes to a loss of expertise, a distance from the decision makers, and a lack of succession planning to carry out work that continues to be necessary.

As noted in the Women's Major Group Factsheet on Women, Peace and Displaced Women "Peace is not possible without meaningful and equal participation of women; especially women from civil society groups and women affected by conflict in the peace process and decision making at all levels. The process must focus on gender-inclusive outcomes and implementation with women being equal and meaningful part of both policy making and implementation."¹²

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<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/66c475c740e7194ba8ee6a81/t/6710e2e57724471d5f643ebb/1729159917572/WPG-Response-to-OHCHR-Call-for-Evidence.pdf>

¹² Women's Major Group (2019). Peace, Security and Displaced Women. <https://www.wecf.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/2.12.-PEACE-SECURITY-and-displaced-women-2.pdf>

Overall, more could be done in the service of elevating the voices of women in Northern Ireland.

- Are there appropriate accountability mechanisms in place to ensure that the Government is meeting its WPS commitments, and that these commitments are translated into substantive outcomes?

Greater accountability could be ensured by engaging with organisations working within the women's sector. This should be regular and structured. In addition, as outlined above, these organisations must be resourced to carry out this work, including in carrying out engagement with their service users to inform this dialogue.

- What can the UK Government do to ensure that its WPS efforts are sustainable long-term, particularly in light of global political shifts?

The most positive contribution that could be made is to follow the explicit inclusion of Northern Ireland with the organisational structures and investment needed to make that inclusion truly meaningful.

In addition, the women's sector in Northern Ireland has long recommended the implementation of UNSCR 1325 in Northern Ireland, and this would be both a symbolic and a meaningful commitment; it would very likely contribute to both the resourcing and the status of the WPS agenda in Northern Ireland and in the UK as a whole.

Following the model of Ireland's 3rd NAP and best practice, a whole-of-government approach that links WPS to education, health, foreign affairs, community, social development and other issues should be developed in the next iteration. Policy coherence across departments should be based on human rights and gender, supported by mandated training on WPS, gender, and women's rights.

In addition, the impact of internal displacement should be recognised to give more possibilities to provide support, particularly in relation to paramilitary-related violence against women and girls. This is particularly relevant given recent research

by WRDA¹³ and the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland on the intersection between violence against women and homelessness.¹⁴

As recommended by a ICRC cross white paper¹⁵, the definition of armed conflict should be widened to include terrorism, paramilitary activity and organised criminality linked to armed conflict in terms of non-international armed conflict for ensuring appropriate humanitarian and governmental responses¹⁶.

We also call for an expansion in the definition of security¹⁷: in addition to the existing definition of state security, we need to increase the focus more on human security, which includes economic security, political security, community and personal security, environmental and food security. This shift must affect implementation and budgeting issues which are or are not covered by policy. Otherwise, we will not succeed in establishing long-lasting and qualitative peace.

Finally, we want to bring your attention to the Open Letter to Permanent Representatives to the UN¹⁸: Recommendations on the Security Council Open Debate on WPS which was sent to all UN Member States on behalf of 438 civil society organizations across 94 countries in October 2019. The letter calls on Member States and the Security Council to prioritize and commit full political support for 5 key WPS issues, and includes a signature from Women's Platform (#250), formerly Northern Ireland Women's European Platform (NIWEP), which is still relevant to this day.

ENDS

¹³ WRDA, The Connection between Domestic Violence and Homelessness in Northern Ireland. (2024). <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/66c475c740e7194ba8ee6a81/t/67d1ae64c7e4796bf94e1822/1741794916886/The+connection+between+domestic+violence+and+homelessness+in+Northern+Ireland+Executive+Summary.pdf>

¹⁴ WRDA's Shift the Shame Campaign. (2025). <https://www.wrda.net/stepstosafet>

¹⁵ International Committee of the Red Cross, How is 'Armed Conflict' Defined in International Humanitarian Law. (2024) Available at: https://www.icrc.org/sites/default/files/document_new/file_list/armed_conflict_defined_in_ihl.pdf

¹⁶ A new challenge or a new role? The ICRC in Northern Ireland. <https://international-review.icrc.org/sites/default/files/irrc-888-loane.pdf>

¹⁷ Women's Major Group (2019). Peace, Security and Displaced Women. <https://www.wecf.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/2.12.-PEACE-SECURITY-and-displaced-women-2.pdf>

¹⁸ Open Letter to Permanent Representatives to the UN. (2019). <https://www.womenpeacesecurity.org/resource/open-letter-UNSC-WPS-anniversary-october-2019/>

For any questions or queries relating to this submission, please contact:

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