



Women and Peacebuilding

Report Summary

Prepared for // Community Foundation for Northern Ireland, Social Change Initiative, St. Stephen's Green Trust and Porticus

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Context

The Community Foundation for Northern Ireland (CFNI), the Social Change Initiative (SCI) and St. Stephen's Green Trust (SSGT) have been collaborating since 2019 on the Positive Peacebuilding in Northern Ireland (PPNI) programme, an initiative designed to create new momentum for peacebuilding through innovative support for individuals and groups involved in processes of community change. During the past three years of programme work, the PPNI partner organisations noted a recurring theme of women's involvement with peacebuilding. Through work on the ground in grassroots communities, questions were emerging regarding women's leadership within processes of peacebuilding and social change. While women have been taking on higher profile roles within much of Northern Ireland society, grassroots peacebuilding leadership seemed to be dominated by men in the decades following the Good Friday Agreement. This research is designed to explore key questions related to the current engagement of women in peacebuilding activity in Northern Ireland, namely: what are the current contributions made by women, what are the barriers women face to greater levels of participation, what are the enabling factors that support women's involvement, and how can barriers be addressed to allow women to flourish within peacebuilding roles at all levels?

Methodology

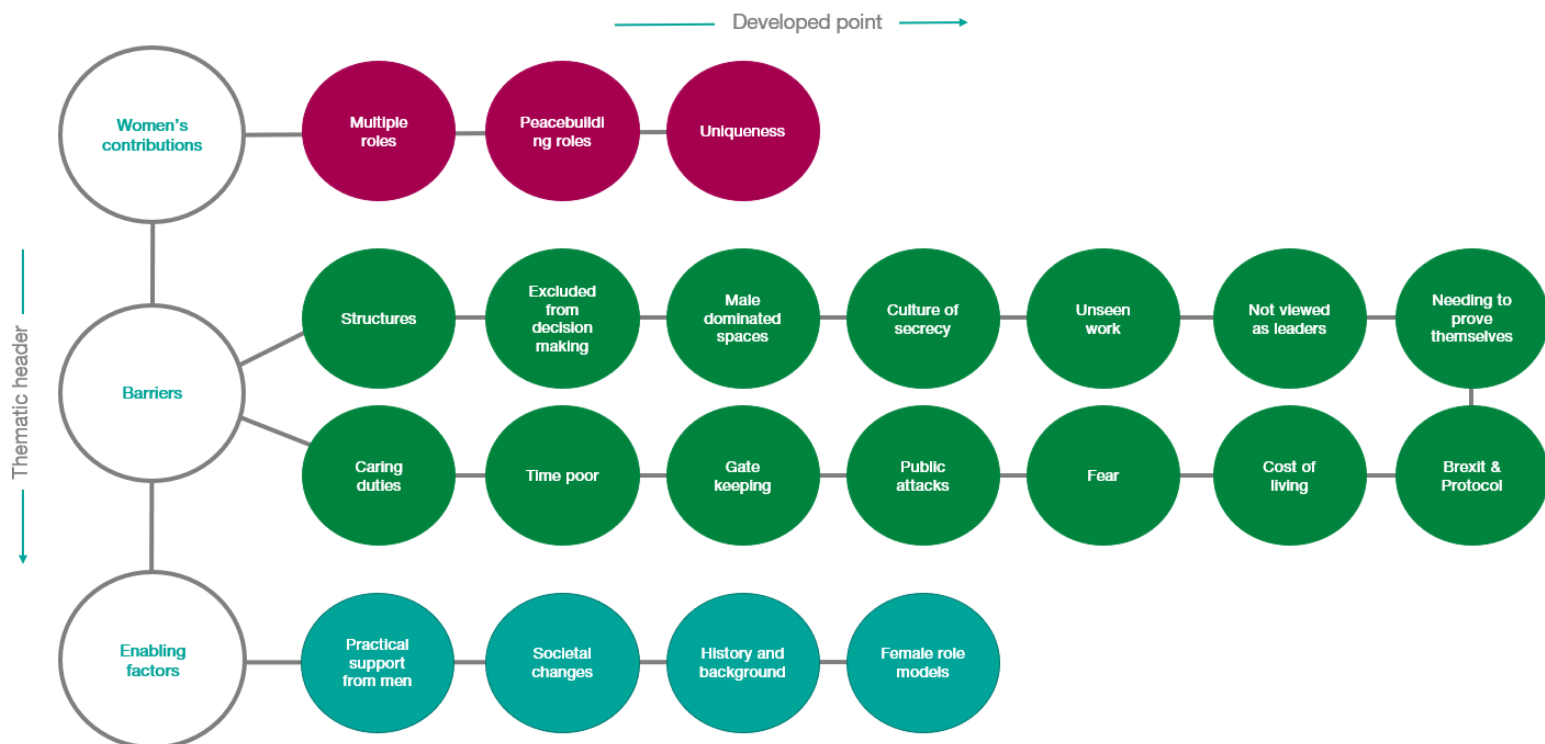
This research explores questions surrounding some of the shifts related to women's roles within peacebuilding and community leadership, looking specifically at how community-based groups working on peacebuilding and interface issues in Northern Ireland might better support and encourage the active participation of women. To give voice to the women and communities most closely related to the research, the methodological focus has been on "action research," harvesting the perspectives and experiences of current peacebuilders through interviews and focus groups. In total, over 30 people contributed to the research findings outlined in this report. The below table demonstrates the various tools which were used for this research.

Table 1: Data collection tools used

Tools	Rationale	Stakeholders involved
Focus Group Discussions	Wide reaching and offered collective insight from groups	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Catholic/Nationalist/Republican-leaning groups2. Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist-leaning groups3. Cross-community groups
Semi structured Interviews	Wide reaching and offered in depth insight from individuals	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Women who are current participants in PPNI projects, including newcomer communities.

Findings

Figure 1: overview of key findings



As shown in figure 1, this research generated findings which touched upon women's contributions to peacebuilding in Northern Ireland, the various barriers which women face to participation, and the enabling factors which reinforce peacebuilding efforts amongst women in Northern Ireland. From this, recommendations on how to improve the participation of women in peacebuilding were then generated.

Findings showed that women are active and engaged at multiple levels in Northern Ireland society. From academia to trade unions, from the climate justice movement to the feminist movement, women are showing leadership across society. Research participants were able to provide multiple examples of leadership roles being taken up by women at the grassroots, mid-level and senior levels.

Women's contributions

Research participants noted that, at the **grassroots level**, women are doing important community organising and development work, particularly in relation to women, families, young people and the elderly. Similarly, women play key roles in preventing unrest within communities; and this work is often unseen in comparison with the frontline work of *responding* to unrest, which is often carried out by men. In rural communities, conservative social mores still define women's roles. At the **middle level**, women are increasingly taking on the leadership of organisations within the community and voluntary sector, in local authorities, in the health sector and in the women's sector. At the **senior level**, women are making great strides. Record rates of women are becoming politicians and government ministers, with increased numbers of women who stood for election in 2022.

In regard to specific peacebuilding roles, many research participants noted that it is still primarily women involved in practical peacebuilding at the grassroots level within communities. Interestingly, both male and female research participants noted that women comprise the majority of restorative practitioners, offering important dispute resolution and mediation

services within communities. However, women are not being resourced for peacebuilding or being invited into decision-making spaces around peacebuilding, which reduces their visibility and impacts on their leadership.

Both the women and the men who contributed to the research noted some of the unique qualities and perspectives that women bring to their work that allow them to be particularly effective within peacebuilding roles. Women have created the space for change by looking at the bigger picture and thinking about long-term benefits to their families and communities. Women are perceived as being selfless and willing to “do the hard graft” and work long hours in unglamorous roles if it means that positive change can be made. Women serve as organisers, facilitators and enablers, creating and maintaining positive bonds within communities. Women are often disengaged from power dynamics and work in a transparent manner, building trust. Women were perceived to be “sensitive” and “more in tune,” as well as calmer during crisis situations. It was also noted that women are frequently willing to work on a cross-community basis to allow safer, more stable situations for their own community.

Barriers

Despite the significant contributions of women to peacebuilding activity, past and present, a number of barriers continue to inhibit the participation of women (see Figure 1). One of the key barriers identified by the research are cultural, religious, and political **structures** that are designed for male leadership and subsequently lead to spaces dominated by men. Many of the cultural structures that have historically influenced Northern Ireland’s society— such as churches, institutions like the Orange Order and the Ancient Order of Hibernians, and sport— are male-dominated spaces in which men take decision-making roles, while women remain in support roles.

Men and women alike recognized that peacebuilding at all levels within Northern Ireland is still a **male-dominated space**. Where harder-edged peacebuilding is taking place, women are almost always excluded from the table. Research participants felt that men occupying decision-making roles related to the resolution of contentious issues has become the status quo. Moreover, one of the complexities identified by the male-domination of decision-making within peacebuilding is that men are often the public face of managing conflict, but women are in the background doing the practical work of peacebuilding. When women are **excluded from decision-making** spaces, they do not have the full picture of the decisions being made at the table, nor do they have a stake in making decisions that affect them and their communities. The **culture of secrecy** around some peacebuilding conversations has reinforced the exclusion of women from harder-edge decision making related to contentious issues and community unrest.

One of the clear barriers to women’s leadership within peacebuilding is **unseen work**— women’s work often takes place quietly and “under the radar.” Women recognised that they can be modest when it comes to talking about their work, which in turn means that women can have a hard time establishing credibility—the community leaders that people can name are almost always men, while women work away in the background. Women identified **not being viewed as leaders** by their communities as a clear barrier. In many communities, men are viewed as the source of authority because of their role in the conflict. In more conservative areas, like rural communities, even some women refuse to see other women as authority figures. Research participants described how people often don’t listen to the views of women, and that it can take years to establish credibility. Because of many of the factors mentioned above, women also face the barrier of **needing to prove themselves** to be able to engage in peacebuilding work.

Caring responsibilities also create a significant barrier to participation in peacebuilding work for many women. Much of the urgent work of responding to unrest or threats takes place during unsociable hours when many women are caring for their children and families. Women who work part-time felt that other professionals see them as not fully committed to peacebuilding work because they are not able to respond as readily to critical incidents that may take place at night or on the weekend. Many of the barriers outlined above contribute to women peacebuilders being “**time poor**.” This is further reinforced with women generally having

disproportionate responsibilities within their households, requiring more time than that of male partners.

Another significant barrier to women's participation in peacebuilding was [gatekeeping](#). One of the factors that drives the dominance of men in harder-edged peacebuilding work is a perceived link between paramilitary experience and credibility in regard to delivery of tension management. Other women have experienced more direct gatekeeping, with men "putting women in their place" and minimising the opinions of women and the role of women's groups. In some communities, women have been prevented from receiving specific support because it came from a "rival" organisation with different political views and loyalties, while in other communities, women have been prevented from doing cross-community work because of issues related to Brexit and the Northern Ireland Protocol. In both CNR and PUL communities, women must often negotiate permission with gatekeepers before new community projects or initiatives take place. Women have also been excluded from strategic spaces and opportunities when perceived to be in disagreement with gatekeepers.

A very real, but often unrecognised, barrier to women's participation in peacebuilding involves [public attacks](#) on social media. Multiple research participants cited the swift and punishing attacks on women via social media as a barrier to their willingness to step into leadership roles, make public statements or even consider politics as a profession. Women noted that online backlash is much more vitriolic for women than it is for men, with women experiencing disproportionate online hate.

Women had a variety of [fears](#) that prevented them from engaging in some peacebuilding work. Some fear reputational impact on their families or that physical or online attacks would affect their family members. Others feared that risky or failed work would create professional damage. Some feared being seen as troublemakers, while other women have a more fundamental level of fear in relation to work with paramilitary organisations, and may exclude themselves from harder-edged peacebuilding work because of this fear.

The emerging [cost of living crisis](#) is a significant barrier to some women's involvement in peacebuilding activity. The financial situation is so stressful and time-consuming that people do not have the mental space to think about leadership work within their communities.

[Brexit, and the resulting Northern Ireland Protocol](#), has resulted in a "chill effect" towards cross-community peacebuilding activities in some communities. Many research participants shared that, for the first time since the Good Friday Agreement, some peacebuilding work is having to take place below the radar. There is a sense of regression associated with this: "we're sliding back rather than moving forward."

It must be noted that [unique cultural barriers](#) also exist for women in Northern Ireland. [Rural spaces](#) are very different to urban spaces when it comes to women and peacebuilding work. Research participants who work in rural contexts mentioned that rural women want to focus on different activities, show more indicators of insularity, and have less willingness to discuss potentially contentious issues. Some women from the broader PUL community felt that [Loyalist women](#) are often doubly marginalised—they are excluded from peacebuilding because they are women and because they are Loyalist. Moreover, [ethnic minority women](#) identified unique barriers and challenges to engagement in peacebuilding work. Participants identified the fact that leadership spaces have not been created for ethnic minorities and black women, in particular, and called for more opportunities and visibility to be created for ethnic minorities within community-level leadership.

Enabling Factors

Research participants recognised that some men are opening doors for greater levels of women's participation through [practical support](#). Women described how some men have amplified women's voices in practical ways, such as publicly acknowledging their work and inviting them into previously closed decision making spaces. Research participants shared that using roles and partnerships effectively across gender lines had the power to maximise their effectiveness in sometimes-difficult peacebuilding environments. Moreover, women described working with men as team to the advantage of various situations.

Men and women participants in the research also recognised that society is changing and that many of these **societal changes** make it easier for women to be engaged in peacebuilding leadership. One male participant observed that life during and prior to the Troubles was harsh and that clearly-defined gender roles seemed to emerge during this time. As life has gotten easier, there has been more flexibility around roles, leading to new opportunities for both women and men.

A number of research participants identified the fact that **women's family background, personal history** and community of origin could serve as enabling factors when pursuing peacebuilding work. For women with ties to paramilitary families, or with experiences of paramilitary involvement or Troubles-related impact, family connections or personal history could open doors and provide credibility.

Perhaps most importantly, the power of **women serving as role models** in peacebuilding spaces is viewed as crucial and cannot be underestimated. Women serve as role models for women in their communities, with other research participants citing them as people they look to as they imagine what is possible for their own peacebuilding aspirations.

Recommendations

Recommendations for community leaders

1. Making space and challenging existing dynamics

Research participants suggested that one of the most impactful actions that men could take would be to “carve space” at the table for women peacebuilders. Women would like access to harder-edged peacemaking spaces and decision-making conversations. Incorporating women from ethnic minority groups into peacemaking conversations is something which could also be acted upon by community leaders driving peacebuilding activity in Northern Ireland.

Women would like to see men becoming allies in addressing barriers and seeking equality. Research participants suggested that men need to become more self-aware regarding the gendered aspects of peacebuilding and educate themselves to better understand the barriers that women face. Similarly, women suggested that men engage in training to equip themselves to help women fight structures and systems of inequality.

2. Increasing visibility

Research participants advocated strongly for the increased visibility of women at all levels of peacebuilding in Northern Ireland. The scale of work being done by women is not being valued and is being taken for granted. Not only do women need to be at decision-making tables, they need to be *seen* at those tables and acknowledged as community leaders. Similarly, the often-hidden, support-based peacebuilding work that women do within communities needs to be made visible through more public recognition by community leaders.

Politically, women need to have proper power, to feel that they have a voice and not fear the repercussions of speaking out or engaging in policy-making that benefits women. At the community level, verbal, physical and online attacks on women need to be publicly challenged by both men and women leaders, so that women can advocate for change without fear. Women's peacebuilding work and women's voices also need to be recognised within the media. Men can be allies in advocating for this change by connecting journalists to women doing peacebuilding work in communities, promoting recognition of the work of female colleagues.

Research participants also advocated for larger and stronger networks of women peacebuilders. They noted that, though there are networks that exist within the women's sector more broadly, there are not the same collective spaces for women within the peacebuilding sector. Not only would networks of women peacebuilders provide space for women to support each other and strengthen their practice, but networks would also help raise the visibility of women peacebuilders, their work, and the issues that are most important to them.

Recommendations for funders and policy makers

Figure 2: Recommendations for funders and policy makers



As per figure 2, the research gathered in this report puts forward nine key recommendations to funders and policy makers.

1. Increased funding for professional support

Focused professional peacebuilding support, such as shadowing and mentoring, was strongly advocated for as a practical mechanism to mitigate some of the barriers and challenges identified by women. Focused professional support, by either women and men, would provide new opportunities for women peacebuilders to take on leadership roles within, and outside of, their communities. Several research participants who operate within male-dominated peacebuilding spaces attributed this ability to engage in harder-edge peacebuilding work to the focused professional support they received from male colleagues early in their career. Mentoring, shadowing and other types of focused professional support take time, and this investment of time should be funded as a part of peacebuilding activity.

2. Increased focus on succession planning

Succession planning was another action that research participants, both male and female, viewed as an area of priority within peacebuilding practice. Younger women peacebuilders noted that they were often amongst the only younger people present in peacebuilding spaces. Some research participants wondered if agism is a factor, with senior practitioners being seen as having the required level of experience to do harder-edged peacebuilding work. Others noted that there should be a progression of leadership, but wondered if funding leads to gatekeeping and the same people being involved over decades. Research participants suggested that peacebuilders needed to spend time on strategic succession planning so that younger women peacebuilders are ready when the work is eventually handed over. Innovative ideas for succession planning should be funded help to ensure younger women can fully participate in all levels of future peacebuilding in Northern Ireland.

3. Provision of childcare support

As one of the biggest barriers to women's participation, virtually all of the women and men participating in the research identified childcare as an essential need for women seeking deeper involvement in peacebuilding work. Participants recognised that there is no strategy for childcare in Northern Ireland, and that child care should be tackled as a matter of policy and offered to all families. Policy makers should tackle child care provision at the macro-level, while funders should integrate child care costs for women who wish to participate in peacebuilding activities into funding packages for peacebuilding.

4. Family-friendly scheduling

Peacebuilding and community and voluntary sector organisations can create a culture of family-friendly scheduling, hosting more meetings via Zoom and scheduling meetings and events during school hours, allowing greater levels of participation from women. Funders should encourage this by funding virtual events and activities at the same level as in-person activities. Further, organisations and funders can work together to re-imagine staffing structures that allow women to engage in meaningful peacebuilding work while maintaining a work-life balance.

5. Subsidised transportation

Transportation can be difficult for women wanting to access peacebuilding activities and meetings, particularly in light of the cost-of-living crisis. Funders and organisations can work together to provide transportation, cover transportation costs or consider central venues to enable greater participation.

6. Building capacity through spaces and development for women

On a fundamental level, accessing new knowledge can also transform women's ability to engage in higher-level peacebuilding work. Participants described how "knowledge acquisition" had enabled them to move into political and peacebuilding spaces with the knowledge-base and specialised language required to engage with confidence. Grassroots women peacebuilders have enormous skill sets that inform their peacebuilding work, but some research participants described how accessing specialised knowledge—especially in areas of politics, academia, and advocacy—allowed them to amplify their own voices and those of their communities. Some groups of women are also engaged in a shared capacity-building approach that is allowing them to bring new information and ideas back to their community, while also gaining the attention and respect of outside parties. Capacity building through specialised knowledge acquisition and development should be supported by funders and policy makers. Further, funders could provide funding for a women's peacebuilding network or forum. This type of space could allow women peacebuilders to provide support to each other, as well as creating visibility for the work of women peacebuilders in Northern Ireland.

7. Request mechanisms for improved accountability

Research participants suggested a number of areas of practical accountability that could enhance the participation of women in peacekeeping work. Women suggested that funders call gatekeeping out when funding is used politically within communities or kept away from women's groups by male gatekeepers. Participants also suggested that organisations create policies that allow for greater accountability regarding inclusion, including in the areas of gender, age and experience. According to a number of research participants, quotas should be used to bring more women into leadership, particularly within organisations that involve

large numbers of women staff and volunteers but few women in leadership positions. Funders and policy makers can work together to ensure greater accountability within the community and voluntary sector.

8. Subsidised education

Lack of education can be a barrier to women, and research participants suggested that subsidised higher education and apprenticeships could be instrumental in getting women into peacebuilding employment. Funders should help women access new knowledge that can also transform women's ability to engage in higher-level peacebuilding work both now and in the longer term.

9. Appropriate compensation and funding

The issue of pay disparity between men and women was raised by a number of research participants. Research participants were advocating for pay equity within peacebuilding work. Proper funding for women's peacebuilding work would allow the work to be seen as professional and rigorous, lending it a legitimacy that it sometimes struggles to achieve within communities. Funders and organisations can work together to ensure that pay scales are equal for women and men engaging in peacebuilding work.

Longer-term funding that is flexible, and where funder outcomes are aligned with the group's outcomes, would serve as an enabling factor for women's groups and projects that support women's engagement. Projects often lose staff when programmes conclude due to "stop-start" funding packages, and women-led programmes could build more consistent relationships with women and stronger knowledge bases if funding was more stable. Research participants also called for funding to hire more staff within organisations and projects that support women. Funders can make meaningful contributions to these changes in the way women's work is compensated and funded.