



Women and Peacebuilding

Research Report

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

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Introduction

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 within 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?

Background

During the 30 years of Northern Ireland's violent conflict, women played significant roles in responding to violence within communities and supporting peacebuilding activity across society. From the Peace People to the Women's Coalition, women took direct action to challenge entrenched conflict and make space for new possibilities within the peace process. Women were seen as leaders within their communities in providing practical and community-focused responses to the conflict. Women from grassroots communities were particularly active in the 1970s and 80s, leading protests, organising civic action, and establishing much-needed community resources in areas most affected by the Troubles. On a global scale, the leadership and success of the Women's Coalition in making space for women's voices to be heard within the negotiations leading to, and following, the Good Friday Agreement is still viewed as a shining example of women's participation in peace negotiations.

Yet, in the decades since the Good Friday Agreement, grassroots peacebuilding within the communities most affected by Troubles-related violence has been dominated by men. As paramilitary organisations began the process of disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration, much of the leadership held by predominantly male paramilitaries translated into the community space, with implications for peacebuilding leadership. As funding flowed into Northern Ireland for peacebuilding activity, peacebuilding became "professionalised" and men often applied for the paid positions within peacebuilding organisations. As a result, the voluntary peacebuilding roles often held by women prior to the Good Friday Agreement gradually diminished. Men have largely held decision-making roles within grassroots peacebuilding over the past two decades, dominating the conversations about contentious issues within and between communities, as well as "harder-edged" peacebuilding related to paramilitary activity and interface violence. Less clear is how and why the space for grassroots women to be part of this developing peace process appears to have reduced. Were women deliberately excluded or did they self-exclude and, if so, what were the triggers for this?

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 to highlight learning. As such, all of the information contained in this report—including the findings and recommendations—comes directly from research participants. Focus groups and interviews were the primary tools used in the research, with the intention of reaching a wide number of research participants, while also allowing for the depth required to probe into some of the more complex questions posed by the research. Because of the risks and pressures experienced by many women peacebuilders, deliberate care was taken to protect the identities of participants and to ensure their anonymity.

Semi-structured interviews took place with women who are current participants in PPNI projects. Focus groups were carried out with women's groups, as well as a cross-community group comprised mostly of men associated with Republican and Loyalist paramilitary organisations. Care was taken to ensure that interviewees and focus group participants were evenly divided between the those who would identify as Catholic/Nationalist/Republican (CNR) or Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist (PUL), with specific input sought from newcomer communities. Women in Northern Ireland have multiple identities and are not homogenous in relation to their perception of nationality or their perspectives on peacebuilding. With this diversity of identity in mind, women involved in the research represented a wide range of ages and backgrounds, including women involved in community work, advocacy, politics and the media. Rural and urban experiences were explored, with research participants based in communities throughout Northern Ireland. In total, over 30 people contributed to the research findings outlined in this report.

It is important to note that the definition of peacebuilding was broadly interpreted within the research. As one research participant said, "if you're active in your community, you're doing peacebuilding." For the purposes of the research, community development work, youth and community work, political engagement, advocacy and broader change-making processes taking place within Northern Ireland were all considered to be "peacebuilding" activity. However, the research also focused on what is sometimes considered "harder-edged" peacebuilding work. In the context of Northern Ireland, this type of peacebuilding relates to work done to manage and respond to community tensions that may evolve into violence if not addressed. This work often requires people who have authority within communities and have the ability to communicate directly to people who might engage in violent action. This exploration of the role of men and women within this type of front-facing, harder-edged peacebuilding work was an important focus within the research.

Findings

Women's Contributions

Multiple roles

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.

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. Women excel at support-based work, such as engaging hard-to-reach or socially isolated members of communities. This sensitive work was particularly needed during and after the Covid-19 pandemic, and in communities impacted by the legacy of the conflict, where mental health concerns on are the rise. However, the subtle work of improving confidence, encouraging engagement and improving wellbeing often goes unnoticed and unacknowledged. 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. Through voluntary roles in communities, women provide support for activities ranging from festivals to bonfires to children's activities. In rural communities where more conservative social mores still define women's roles, women often occupy support roles for organisations such as the Orange Order, the Ancient Order of Hibernians and churches of all denominations.

Women are leading social justice and activism campaigns at the grassroots level, particularly in relation to women's causes such as reproductive rights. This campaigning has served as a unifying platform for women's action, bringing together women from both main communities, along with newcomer populations, to advocate for rights that affect all women. Women have mobilised more effectively over the past five years than at any other point in recent times, galvanised by changes in legislation related to key social issues. Interestingly, while women drive campaigns and processes of social change at the grassroots level, it often men that take on front-facing leadership roles within broader advocacy processes. Women also support higher levels of political engagement within communities, through work focused on policing and human rights and creating space for dialogue with politicians.

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. Research participants affirmed that they have seen changes in many community-based and statutory organisations over the last number of years, with greater levels of gender parity within staff teams and women taking on leadership at multiple levels within organisations. More women are present now in strategic decision-making spaces within some communities; though it was noted that there has been push-back in some instances when women take on leadership roles within community-based organisations.

At the **senior level**, women are making great strides. Record rates of women are becoming politicians and government ministers, with Arlene Foster and Michelle O'Neill's recent joint leadership of the Stormont Executive serving as a powerful reminder of how far women in politics have travelled since the conditions that necessitated the creation of the Women's Coalition. Increased numbers of women stood for election in 2022, amplifying the visibility of women and creating a sense of shift in political power dynamics. Several of the women who participated in the research have run for political office. One of these respondents explained that she did so to allow people to see an ethnic minority woman in a position of power, observing, "You have to see it to be it!"

Peacebuilding roles

In regards 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. Women are involved in the practical process of “everyday” peacebuilding, but are largely excluded from the essential framing of the peacebuilding agenda and narrative. One research participant noted that, ““Women have been a constant within peacebuilding in Northern Ireland, it’s just that their role hasn’t been as valued as men’s.” Men often serve as spokespersons for peacebuilding within communities, while women are carrying out the work behind the scenes.

It is important to recognise that women also had roles related to the conflict. There were significant numbers of women prisoners during the Troubles, associated with both Republican and Loyalist groupings. Likewise, many women whose partners were in prison took on unique roles within their own homes— offering leadership that would have been considered to be the purview of men at the time— until their partners were released and returned home. The partners and wives of paramilitary members often “know the ins and outs of what is going on.” These women have influence and that influence can be used to the benefit of community stability, particularly if women are supported in this role.

Unique contributions of women

Both the women and the men who contributed to the research noted some of the 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 communities. Women tend to take a more holistic approach to peacebuilding, merging cost of living issues, with inter-community issues, with childcare issues, etc. As one research participant observed, “women are about creating a legacy for their children, grandchildren and communities, whereas men are focused on creating a legacy for themselves.”

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. 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.

“I love here—I want to feel safe and I want my child to feel safe. If it means putting in a couple of hours a week, a couple of days a week, it’s worth it. It’s important to me that my friends, neighbors, family, community, experience our area as the best place it can be.”

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 noted that women are approachable and often serve as a sounding board and provide space to reflect—male leaders in communities, including paramilitaries, frequently approach women for advice. Women are also recognised to be problem solvers and “fixers,” leading to roles in conflict prevention and mediation, as well as increased representation within the Police Service of Northern Ireland.

When asked what work of their own they are most proud of, women research participants cited a variety of significant achievements, including: enabling paramilitaries to transition, supporting communities on the margins, supporting the most vulnerable in society, supporting young people with mental health needs, helping a group to get charity status, transforming their organisations, supporting their teams, addressing homelessness experienced by other women, supporting other women, engaging in education and personal development, setting up a support group for women from ethnic communities who are affected by domestic violence and amplifying the voices of women.

One research participant described setting up a new programme of engagement with rural women through funding from SSGT, saying, “I’m hugely proud of this, because we realised that we needed to stop waiting for someone else to take the lead and do it ourselves. We were powered by 80% rage and 20% frustration. But, looking back, it should have been us doing this work [all along]—we have the expertise and knowledge. It’s taken some time to realise that we are the experts!” Another participant described her unique role as a woman who sits at tables usually only occupied by men. She affirmed her role by observing, “I’m proud of the fact that I’m probably the only female in this area who can walk into a room with any group. I have no political alignment with any group. I can just as easily meet with police as with armed groups. I have worked hard to get to this point. It’s taken years to establish the trust—it’s like I’ve been chipping, chipping, chipping away at it. It started with getting in the backdoor, sitting and listening, waiting until they began to ask for my opinion. It was something that happened gradually, particularly with armed groups.” These serve as powerful examples of how women are using their passion for their communities, as well as their own considerable skill-base, to make important contributions to peacebuilding and change-making processes.

Barriers

Structures

Despite the significant contributions of women to peacebuilding activity, past and present, a number of barriers continue to inhibit the participation of women. One of the key barriers identified by the research are cultural, religious, and political structures that are designed for male leadership. Many of the cultural structures that have historically influenced Northern Ireland’s society are male-dominated spaces in which men take decision-making roles, while women remain in support roles. Both the Catholic Church and many Protestant denominations reserve leadership roles for men, with women providing support services including food preparation and hospitality, management of rotas, childcare, etc. Church teachings and structures reinforce the gender divide within these influential spaces, employing theological justification for women occupying secondary roles within church life. Other cultural structures within society prevent the full inclusion of women, including the Orange Order, the Ancient Order of Hibernians and sport. Men who participated in the research noted that even the Ulster Covenant, which some consider to be the foundational document of Northern Ireland, was a “men-only” document (women were signatories to a parallel document), reinforcing the notion that women could not exist in certain cultural and political spaces within Northern Ireland.

Research participants observed that it is hard to identify structures that support women in peacebuilding at high levels in Northern Ireland. It was noted by research participants that political parties were not interested in the participation of women at the start of the peace process, requiring women to create their own route into the talks. The political structures put in place post-ceasefire, and by the Good Friday Agreement, did not foster the active involvement of women. The issues advocated for by the Women’s Coalition were, largely, dropped from the implementation of the Good Friday Agreement and the Women’s Coalition disappeared from the political scene shortly after the establishment of Stormont.

Several research participants noted that because women have historically been excluded from politics, many women lack the specialised political knowledge and language that would help them comfortably

navigate the world of politics, creating a barrier to advocating for political and policy-level change. It was also noted that the political system is not structured for grassroots involvement, creating additional barriers for working class women. Further, some research participants noted that women who have challenged political parties and other structures of power are often isolated and marginalised afterward. It was felt by research participants that the structures that underpin Northern Ireland have historically created a “cold house” for women, subconsciously reinforcing the notion that leadership is not for women.

Male-dominated space

Men and women alike recognised that peacebuilding at all levels within Northern Ireland is still a male-dominated space. Particularly in spaces where harder-edged peacebuilding is taking place, women are almost always excluded from the table. Harder-edged, substantive issues are often conflict related; consequently, institutional funders in particular look to the men that have the perceived credibility with paramilitaries. Research participants felt that men occupying decision-making roles related to the resolution of contentious issues has become the status quo.

Male research participants felt that sometimes the exclusion of women from these spaces is subconscious—men have been occupying these roles for so long that it does not occur to conveners to bring women to the table. Other male participants observed that some men feel superior and want to protect their space, or even that men are jealous of the leadership roles that some women are now occupying in society. Still other male participants noted that the culture of protection still influences men, particularly from paramilitary backgrounds. They explained that in potentially violent or contentious situations, a traditional protective stance from men included sentiments such as, “you don’t send a woman in, just in case they get hurt” or “if anyone is going to jail, it’s going to be us.” One participant described this strong sense of obligation to protect women as “a paramilitary thing.”

Women research participants responded differently to the male domination of peacebuilding spaces. For example, some felt that men were hiding behind mental frameworks such as “protection” to maintain their power, while other research participants appeared to understand and accept the existing gendered dynamics within peacebuilding in Northern Ireland. One participant described it by saying, “They follow a role. I would be respectful of them. [Men have] worked themselves into the positions they have been in. Their space at the table has been earned over four decades.”

Regardless, women are still pushing for space at the table, in some cases advocating for their right to be a part of decision-making processes. Some women also find the “old boys’ network” dynamic to be challenging when they make it into some of these peacebuilding spaces, describing how the banter before meetings can be very exclusionary, or even that some men will ignore women who are in the room. However, women also described the positive changes created by accessing decision-making spaces, including men becoming aware of the practical impact of decisions on women, children and families within the community. It was noted that women in grassroots communities are often some of the last voices to be heard, and that representing women’s concerns in these spaces can be transformational.

Some women felt that the government reinforces the dominance of men at the “big tables” of peacebuilding in Northern Ireland by excluding women and women’s groups from consultative processes. One research participant described how she was only one of two women in an important Brexit consultation and sees this pattern repeated in many of her engagements with Stormont or with the European Union. Other women cited the lack of interest in implementing United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 as an indicator that Stormont is not interested in fostering women’s engagement in higher-level peacebuilding.

Being excluded from decision-making

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. Women often have a voice at the community-level on less contentious issues, but when it comes to “political” issues, men dominate. Where men are making space for women’s voices to be heard, it is often in a controlled environment—women are mobilised to publicly support the decisions that men have made behind closed doors.

Many women research participants noted that men want to be seen in positions of authority and to receive the credit for peacebuilding, but then do not want to do the follow-up work. Some women observed that men want to be the gatekeepers of money and politics within communities, but that some men don’t know how to put their decision into practice because they haven’t put the time in to build networks. Because women develop strong community networks, they are brought into ensure that decisions can be carried out at the community level.

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. Because many women still occupy support roles within community peacebuilding systems, women are often carrying out the decisions that men are making in closed spaces. . . but without important background information shared around the decision-making table. One participant described how she received a synthesized version of the conversation that had taken place in one of these spaces, then had to follow up with each man at the table so that she could have enough information available to do the work of implementing the decisions that had been made, saying, *“It would be so much easier just to be at the table.”* The work of having a range of quiet, confidential conversations, rather than direct conversations around the table, means that women are spending disproportionate amounts of time trying to piece together the details required to carry out the practical work of peacebuilding. One woman described this process of gathering information from men as, “working with them and working around them.”

Culture of secrecy

Many people who participated in the research discussed the culture of secrecy around some peacebuilding conversations. One woman described peacebuilding in her community by saying, “Peacebuilding is so secretive that we don’t know much about it. There are only a few men that are involved that have that higher profile.” In communities such as this, women described how the culture of secrecy means that people often have to go through four or five people to get an issue resolved, despite the fact that they know the people who will be responsible for addressing the issue. Others described how people often “talk in code” when discussing sensitive issues, which can mean that it is difficult to gain clarity in some discussions.

Men who participated in the research recognised the complex dynamics associated with the closed discussions related to contentious issues. They described the situations requiring secrecy as being sensitive and that secrecy is often important in getting resolution in these situations. However, they also spoke of the mental health toll that maintaining secrecy can take, particularly over the course of years. For some Loyalists and Republicans, remaining silent about the impact of some of their experiences has had a lasting and personal impact.

Unseen work

One of the clear barriers to women’s leadership within peacebuilding is the fact that women’s work often takes place “under the radar.” Women recognised that they can be very modest when it comes to talking about their work. Research participants described how they do their work quietly and often don’t take credit for it. The refusal to “blow their own trumpet” 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.

The culture of women taking supporting roles can play into the dynamic of women's unseen work. During the Troubles, women visited prisons, brought parcels and kept things going at home. These support roles reinforced the notion that women are willing to take on supportive work that keeps them in the background. Research participants describe how women are often left with administration and organisation roles resulting from committee decisions, even when they are on the committee. Women also shared about their continual work to keep their estates and communities quiet by remaining visible and engaged during times of unrest. One participant described how she regularly gardens in public spaces within her estate, not necessarily for the sake of gardening, but to be a visible presence and to gain information about the current needs in the estate. While this quiet and supportive approach to work doesn't gain women recognition, it does allow important and sensitive work to take place. Women reported that some of the best work is done without people knowing anything about it and wouldn't take place if people were talking about it publicly.

Not being viewed as leaders

Women identified not being seen 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. When looking for someone to resolve conflicts or be in a position of authority, people "go looking for men." In more conservative areas, like rural communities, even some women refuse to see other women as authority figures. Religious structures and teachings can contribute to women not being viewed as leaders, as can class structure, particularly in PUL communities. One research participant described having to focus her work on young people, as middle-aged people have a "standoffishness" about women not having authority.

Research participants described how people often don't listen to the views of women, and that it can take years to establish credibility. There is a sense that women don't have the credentials to speak with authority, and that the right to be heard on peacebuilding issues has to be earned through lived experience or through close connections to people involved in the conflict (i.e. the loss of a loved one to Troubles-related violence or a family member in prison). Some research participants shared that they are still struggling to feel that they have something to say in the public space. It was noted that women are more reluctant than men to own their own space when they're speaking, making it easier to shut them out. Women can be reluctant to put themselves into "important" spaces. Who is seen as legitimate and what views are perceived as important are significant factors in women being silenced.

Needing to prove themselves

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. One participant described it by saying, "I think there's even more having to prove yourself, prove your worth, prove your mettle when you are a woman." Women described having to be more resilient and organised, as well as patiently facing more pressure and scrutiny than male counterparts. Some women felt that men try to put women into boxes, requiring women to prove that they can push beyond those boundaries. One research participant noted that, "even as a perceived leader, there is still a hierarchy at play" and that sometimes this can be about "keeping you down."

In order to prove themselves, women described the importance of building trust, earning a place at the table and being willing to be tested. Building trust often requires women to take the time to build strong relationships with colleagues and members of the community, placing a disproportionate burden on women who may also be working and maintaining caring responsibilities. Women shared that accomplishing something for the community or delivering a service within the community helps provide authority and amplifies women's voices, earning them the respect required for peacebuilding work.

Women reported frequently being tested to see if they can be trusted and if they are capable of handling themselves with confidence. Women who meet the challenge are able to engage in peacebuilding work with more authority.

Caring responsibilities

Caring responsibilities create a significant barrier to participation in peacebuilding work for many women. As noted by most research participants, community-level peacebuilding is a 24/7 job. 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. Street-level peacebuilding work is still male-dominated because Friday and Saturday nights pose childcare issues for women. 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. Women peacebuilders with children at home described how they have brought their children to high-level meetings with armed groups or out into the streets in order to fulfill their caregiving responsibilities and their responsibilities to work. Women described struggling with guilt for not being able to do more for their peacebuilding work, while also feeling guilty when they spend time away from their children. For younger women hoping to access education or development opportunities that may lead to more involvement in peacebuilding work, caring responsibilities and expensive childcare can be a barrier.

“If there is a threat, I need to be able to respond immediately. I would have brought my daughter with me into the streets. Some people would have probably looked at me and thought that it wasn’t the safest situation, but I didn’t want to let people down.”

“If you’re out in the community doing work, people are always asking where the kids are. No one asks men this.”

“When you have a family and caring responsibilities, you are pulled in every direction.”

Time poor

Many of the barriers outlined above contribute to women peacebuilders being “time poor.” Women generally have disproportionate responsibilities within their households, requiring more time than that of male partners. As one woman described it, “Time is a big thing for most women. Men don’t always appreciate how little time women have. Working mothers have even more pressure. Everything just magically gets done around the house and garden. . . and you fit everything else in, as well. People tell me I shouldn’t do so much, but this is the way of it with women.” For women peacebuilders, the additional time required by their work means that they generally need strong support networks to help maintain caring responsibilities alongside their work, particularly for evening and weekend meetings. Participants suggested that men need to reframe their roles within the home, noting, “In the home it’s not 50/50. So, even if there was gender parity in peacebuilding and community work, women would still have more to do at home. Men need to change to allow some of these bigger changes to take place.”

Overcoming the barriers of advocating for a place at the table and proving themselves to colleagues and communities requires a huge commitment of time from women peacebuilders. Building trust and creating confidence requires a heavy investment in relationships, which takes significant amounts of time and patience. As one woman noted, “the amount of time that has to go into building relationships—I don’t think people give you enough credit for doing it.” One research participant working within grassroots communities affirmed that it takes years to develop the trust to work freely in communities

that have been impacted by the conflict, and that many women only have the time to do this when their children are older and require less support.

Gatekeeping

Gatekeeping was identified as one of the significant barriers to women's participation in peacebuilding. There is still an "old guard" mentality in some men that results in a narrow understanding of who can participate in harder-edged peacebuilding activity. Even in communities with high levels of participation from women in community and voluntary sector activity, strategic meetings and decision-making process are still driven by men. 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 regards to delivery of tension management. Over time, networks form between credible community gatekeepers, police and political party representatives, creating a closed loop that is difficult for women to enter.

Some women feel that men don't realise the power they have because of operating throughout their lives in a patriarchal space. As one woman said, "I don't think they're always keeping women out, I just don't think they think to invite them in." 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. It was noted that, in the post-Good Friday Agreement years, the men coming into decision-making spaces have often transitioned from paramilitary activity into community-level peacebuilding: "they were important people in their communities before, so they've followed the authority and the money into peacebuilding spaces." This creates a power dynamic that can be hard to challenge for women seeking to make their voices heard in peacebuilding spaces.

Collective gatekeeping was also noted by several participants as a dynamic that affects some communities. While gatekeeping in communities is often associated with paramilitary organisations, it can also be carried out by community groups and/or networks of community leaders. In these instances, people work together to control resources and power within communities, keeping each other in work and in positions of influence. This can limit community members' ability to engage or influence what takes place within their community. Though collective gatekeeping is not a gendered dynamic, these groups and networks are often dominated by men.

Interestingly, many women research participants identified gatekeeping by other women as a barrier to their participation in peacebuilding work. It was noted that, while "men are a more acceptable adversary," women have often followed patriarchal structures when creating their own spaces. Women rising into positions of leadership are often perceived as leaving other women behind. Research participants theorized that women have fought so hard to get into positions of authority, that they become protective of the space and create gatekeeping dynamics that cause other women to feel isolated, unsupported and disempowered. This gatekeeping dynamic amongst women can be more amplified for grassroots women, with women from working class backgrounds reporting that they are more likely to be excluded by other women and women's organisations. It was recognized that talented women have been lost from the women's sector because of gatekeeping and that gatekeeping has also kept some younger women from getting involved in peacebuilding. As one participant said, "you feel greater disappointment when women work against you because you had expectations of what woman can be to each other."

It was also noted by participants that some women still like men to be gatekeepers. Some rural communities see this dynamic at play, particularly because rural people are still very connected to churches. Conservative churches still see men as heads of the household, meaning that men lead in all parts of church life with the exception of work with toddlers and women. This understanding translates into other leadership roles, which means that women voluntarily “submit” to men’s leadership at church and within the community. For example, one participant said that, though she is very involved within her community and church, she probably wouldn’t consent to be the Chairperson of a committee because it is a leadership role.

Public attacks

A very real 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 are also aware of the sensitivity of much of their work, and are strategic about how to protect the work from online targeting. Women noted that online backlash is much more vitriolic for women than it is for men, with women experiencing disproportionate online hate. In one example of this, a participant shared about the online backlash that came when women were speaking to the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee about the potential effect of Brexit on communities. The online attacks were so swift and threatening that one woman who testified had to move out of her home until the backlash passed.

Women worry about how public attacks affect their families, sometimes choosing not to speak out for fear that it will worry their children or partners. Other women maintain public profiles and face the backlash head-on, but describe the personal toll that this takes physically and mentally. Women participating in the research shared that some women are rejecting front-facing roles because of the fear of backlash they may receive for speaking out at the community level or engaging with contentious issues. Others are adjusting their working practices to be minimise potential physical risk to themselves and their families.

One research participant shared that the windows of her house were shot through because of her work, and that her family and friends fear for her wellbeing because of her involvement in peacebuilding. She feels that there is more acceptance when men put themselves forward for that level of risk, but that society is changing and women are now seen as people who can offer their skills in spite of potential risk or threats. It is important to note that women politicians were threatened in startling numbers during the 2022 election. Some research participants felt that this is having an effect on women’s willingness to participate in politics, and that women who might have gotten involved 10 years ago are now avoiding politics because of their fears of online or physical attacks. Other participants felt that the attacks on politicians have galvanized some women to speak out and raise the issue of attacks on women.

“Now my daughter is here, I’m more careful. I don’t want her to see me come home with a black eye or broken teeth. I’m more wary of my surroundings and more careful with my own wellbeing.”

Fears

Women face other fears in addition to public attack, and these are additional barriers to participation for some women. Younger generations have a different understanding of paramilitaries, seeing them as criminals and feeling that they will not leave the stage. Some women are scared that they will be viewed as professionally failing if they can’t deliver the reintegration of paramilitaries into post-conflict

community life. Young people are more risk-adverse than previous generations—and there is the sense that some younger women do not want to be burnt professionally by engaging in potentially risky work.

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. Some women have a low comfort level with “conflict-related” environments, in general, choosing to “opt out” of work that is perceived as risky or intense. Finally, some women do not want to be seen as trouble-makers, so are careful to avoid contentious issues. Several participants mentioned fears about their families suffering reputational risk if they were perceived to be too out-spoken within their communities.

Contextual changes

Cost of living crisis

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. For women deeply affected by the dramatic rise in the cost of living, there is no time left for “optional” activities because of the time and energy directed towards essential tasks such as securing food, housing, etc. As one woman said, “You kind of give up your own dreams because there is no time left for it. Dreams become a luxury.” For communities concerned with the Northern Ireland Protocol, the cost-of-living crisis is overtaking the Protocol as a priority in their thinking and advocacy. For women supporting other women, the cost of living is such a big issue that it is taking over most of their work.

Even before the cost of living began to spiral in early 2022, changes in universal credit became very difficult for many women. Under the new system, women get penalized for working and for not working, creating confusion and uncertainty that has led to some women pulling back from voluntary community activity for fear of losing their financial support.

Brexit and the Protocol

Brexit, and the resulting Northern Ireland Protocol, has resulted in a “chill effect” towards cross-community peacebuilding activities in some communities. Women peacebuilders are seeing the impact of this very clearly at the grassroots level and are beginning to think about changes that may need to be made to terminology surrounding cross-community work to make people feel comfortable coming into shared spaces. 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.”

Unique cultural barriers

Rural spaces are very different to urban spaces when it comes to women and peacebuilding work. As mentioned previously, the role of churches and the more conservative view of women’s roles result in different perceptions of women and leadership within peacebuilding spaces. As one participant observed, “Culturally, we’re at least 10 years behind in rural communities regarding women being valued in these spaces as more than caregivers. Being a visible, vocal woman in rural areas isn’t a comfortable place to be unless you’re made of Teflon!” Research participants who work in rural contexts mentioned that rural women want to focus on different activities (i.e. arts and crafts), show more indicators of insularity, and have less willingness to discuss potentially contentious issues. The funding for peacebuilding work is also different in rural spaces. Much of the Peace money has gone into interface areas or heavily impacted urban spaces. However, though the conflict has played out in rural areas

very differently (i.e. invisible rather than visible community boundaries, unspoken permission required to use certain spaces), peacebuilding work is still needed and requires funding support to thrive.

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. One participant shared her frustration at being excluded from broader peacebuilding conversations by saying, “Loyalism is more than men!” Some research participants also felt that “strong” Loyalist women don’t “fit the agenda” within their own community, as well. They felt that independent women speaking the truth are often isolated. Participants felt that outspoken Loyalist women are sometimes censored—they are not asked to speak, not invited to meetings.

Women supporting **ethnic minority women** identified unique barriers and challenges to engagement in peacebuilding work. Research 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. On a more fundamental level, women from ethnic communities can find it hard to integrate into community life due to the challenges of starting over in a new society. Building trust and relationships, navigating the language barrier, building networks, finding childcare can all be barriers to the involvement of ethnic women in peacebuilding and community leadership at multiple levels.

Conclusions

It is important to note that some research participants felt that they were not excluded from peacebuilding leadership, while others either hadn’t experienced barriers or felt comfortable pushing through them. As one woman said, “I would have never looked at the challenges and barriers as being associated with being a woman. I have just seen work that I wanted to do and have done it. I’ve never let anything stop me.”

Research participants shared their hopes for the development of their own work if boundaries, such as those that have been identified by the research, were not a factor. Several women shared their interest in policy-making and politics, imagining that they would do work to support communities transitioning from conflict-related violence and to create a fairer system regarding benefits and education. In these instances, women imagined using social policy to create changes in the “daily things that affect women.” Other participants talked about the possibilities of engaging in creative work and work in new spaces and contexts if they didn’t face some of the aforementioned barriers and constraints. Interestingly, many women were content in their own work, feeling that, despite the challenges they sometimes face, they are achieving significant and meaningful change.

Enabling Factors

Practical support from men

As one woman peacebuilder noted, “Not all men are gate keepers. Some men are gate openers. We need more gate openers.” Research participants recognised that some men are opening doors for greater levels of women’s participation through practical support. From a manager encouraging self-care and a stronger work/life balance, to men inviting women into decision-making conversations, men taking action to support women has made a difference.

Research participants also shared that using roles and partnerships effectively across gender lines had the power to maximise their effectiveness in sometimes-difficult peacebuilding environments. Women described working with men as team to the advantage of various situations.

Societal changes

Men and women participants in the research recognised that society is changing and that many of these 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. Women described how some men are starting to step back and allow women to take the credit for work, while other male leaders are listening more to women. Opportunities for women are increasing as equality becomes a nearer reality for women.

“In 10 years’ time, there will be more women at that top table. Things are changing and it’s a new society.”

“Things are changing and it’s women coming out that are making those changes. Women are taking opportunities, earning their positions and demanding that they are in those spaces. Men aren’t offering it up.”

Some women experienced the Covid-19 pandemic as an enabling factor. When men were at home during lockdown, they saw the often-hidden work women do at home and in the community. Because of this, some men are providing more help at home, are acknowledging the contributions of women, and are supporting women to take on larger roles within the community. Because statutory bodies were slow to respond at the start of the pandemic, community organisations moved into the vacuum, challenging the status quo and highlighting women’s essential roles within communities. The use of Zoom during lockdown served as an enabler for women’s participation, as it eliminated the conflict between caring responsibilities and attending meetings, as well as reducing costs associated with transportation and childminding.

Background and personal history

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. Women described how their family background helped them gain respect in the community and led to opportunities to support peacebuilding activity. Other women described the importance of growing up in the area where they now work, sharing that working in a place where they have deep connections gives them a sense of safety, flexibility and confidence in their peacebuilding work. The sense of trust and localised knowledge can be helpful in managing difficult dynamics that can arise when managing contentious issues within and between communities.

Women role models

The power of women serving as role models in peacebuilding spaces cannot be underestimated. Two women peacebuilders who work in harder-edged spaces spoke about their respective experiences in Republican and Loyalist communities. They both noted that they are perceived almost as a “non-figure,” neither male nor female, at high-level peacebuilding tables. After years of hard work and trust building, both women have experienced the rare space in which they can step outside of the power dynamics often present in high-level conversations. As a result, they can serve as a trusted voice in those spaces, bridging the gap between communities and decision-makers. Both 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.

Research participants from Derry/Londonderry noted that women have long had reputation for strength in their city, with many women who could be looked to as leaders and role models. Women politicians, in particular, have always made time to champion and lobby on behalf of their community, while maintaining their own families and creating a strong example of working women who have balanced work and life.

Women participating in the research noted that there are not many men who pass on their expertise within broader peacebuilding and that women should commit to sharing their expertise to other women. Some women called for women to take on mentoring roles with younger women to support them to move up into leadership roles. Participants felt that women need nurturing, support and space to learn from their mistakes. Research participants also felt that it is important not to lose sight of the fact that peacebuilding work is rewarding. When women can support each other to remember that the work is making a difference to people's lives and creating community transformation, it helps provide strength for the journey.

Suggested Actions

Focused professional support

A number of tangible actions emerged from the research conversations. Focused professional 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. Most women had not seen examples of men providing significant developmental support to either women or men within their spheres of influence. However, in one extraordinary example, a participant in the research was mentored by a man in her community who brought her into harder-edged peacebuilding spaces and enabled her to begin developing the trust and connections that now allow her to work with all of the paramilitary groupings in her area. She shares the powerful impact of this support here:

My mentor probably wouldn't see himself as a feminist, yet had no problem taking me as his wingman into dangerous situations. He would have always pushed me to the forefront and made sure I was invited into meetings. He helped pave a path for me. There were young men my age who were active, but it was me he chose. I have no doubt that this changed things for me. He would have valued my opinion and would have asked "What do you think?" He would have had to trust me to have his back. I still feel that, even though he's in his 70s and I would be doing a lot of the talking, he has my back. He has transitioned me into taking the lead in the conversations.

Participants identified that 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. One of the reasons that this type of professional support is so effective is that it allows the person in leadership to share their authority. A leading woman peacebuilder spoke of how authority can be shared by saying, "people won't speak to anyone but me. When they come into the office, they only want to speak with me about certain issues. I try to connect them to others where I can. I share my authority where I can and this is important."

Existing peacebuilding leaders can also provide spaces where younger women can learn by experience. Women described learning valuable professional lessons such as which spaces they can influence through their work and which they can't. Women also shared passionately about being able to open doors for younger women peacebuilders, getting them into the right spaces, giving them space to observe and understand and ask questions, and introducing them to the structures and networks that will influence their work.

The men who participated in the research were very open to providing shadowing, mentoring and other types of support to women. They viewed it as a practical way of changing some of the entrenched dynamics that often keep women out of leadership roles within peacebuilding.

“We can open doors when we have the opportunity to mentor and to push and pull younger women forward. It’s us as women giving more of our time. We talk about being time poor, but we need to give younger women time and space to ask about those things they’re interested in. Mentoring is really important for this reason.”

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 felt that the peacebuilding sector needs to find ways to share power and bring young people into this work at every level. Issues of legacy and sustainability are quickly becoming more urgent as peacebuilders who provided leadership in the early days of the peace process are nearing retirement age. Participants worried that experienced peacebuilders won’t have people to “pass the baton to” who are equipped with the skills, knowledge and experience required to lead. Some research participants suggested that women teaching and sharing their skills with each other would allow the next generation to become teachers and pass this wisdom on to younger women.

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. Some women are exploring the creation of “shadow committees” comprised of young people who can apprentice into leadership roles within their communities after a period of shadowing existing community leaders. Brexit was identified as possible galvanizing factor for the younger generation who has grown up outside of the context of the Troubles. Irrespective of people’s positions on Brexit, research participants hoped that Brexit would clarify the importance of political engagement for young people, allowing a more fertile ground for sharing about the peace process and the importance of engaging actively in peacebuilding work.

“We are needing to now look at legacy issues—where are the younger women? We haven’t managed to hold the space we’ve created. We need to create a society and a sustainable peace that can deal with those hard things (i.e. Brexit) and not be rocked.”

Practical supports

Women across Northern Ireland are starting to ask for ways of working that allow for deeper levels of engagement that will allow their voices to be more clearly heard. Tackling practical challenges to women's participation can enhance women's involvement in peacebuilding and amplify their voice.

Childcare

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. Because the burden of childcare lies almost completely with women, and because there are so many responsibilities competing for women's attention, women often don't have the time to get engaged in peacebuilding work. Providing childcare for women could be life-changing, allowing women to access continuing education and development opportunities, as well as "on the ground" peacebuilding experience.

One woman leader shared that, as a single mother, a childcare and personal development package—funded through financial support that is no longer available to young women—allowed her to become equipped for the work she does today. She wondered how many younger women coming behind her will be prevented from accessing development and education opportunities because of lack of childcare. One male peacebuilder discussed how his organisation offers childcare to women who want to engage in programming, opening access to all. Another man shared how Sinn Fein and the Alliance Party prioritised childcare a number of years ago as a mechanism for getting women involved, and now both parties are led by women. These practical examples of childcare provision are a testament to the efficacy of structured childcare support as a mechanism for increasing the participation of women.

Family-friendly scheduling

Because of caring responsibilities, women are often prohibited from participating in peacebuilding activities that are scheduled in the evenings and on weekends. Hosting more meetings via Zoom, and scheduling meetings and events during school hours, would allow greater levels of participation from women.

Transportation

Transportation can be difficult for younger women wanting to access peacebuilding activities and meetings. Providing transportation, covering transportation costs or considering central venues can make a difference to women's participation.

Capacity-building

Capacity-building and support for women have been central to improving the confidence of women to get involved in peacebuilding. One research participant told of her journey into peacebuilding beginning with some basic engagement with a women's group and expanding into the extensive work she does today. Another participant shared that her participation in CFNI's leadership programme has given her the confidence to realise that people in her community turn to her for support and that she really is a leader. For both women, confidence-building and focused leadership support have allowed them to transform their practice.

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 community building and peacemaking employment. On a fundamental level, accessing new knowledge can also transform women's ability to engage in higher-level peacebuilding work. One participant described how "knowledge acquisition" had enabled her 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. One research participant described how a group of women from her community is working together to acquire new knowledge and to become equipped with the skills to analyze research and political documents. This shared capacity-building approach is allowing the women to bring new information and ideas back to their community, while also gaining the attention and respect of outside parties. Because of this, the women are now being sought out by politicians, statutory bodies and leaders within their own community for consultation and engagement—their voices are being amplified.

Opportunities at the community-level

For women who are socially isolated or lack confidence, offering engagement at the community-level can help them overcome the barrier of getting out of the house and getting involved in community activity. For some women, the idea of going into city centre, and the related worries of transportation and appearance/clothing, is enough to shut down engagement. Helping women engage in women's groups, educational programs, residents' groups, volunteer opportunities, etc. at the community level can serve as a gateway to increased involvement. Access to buildings can also be helpful, as "ownership" of buildings can be insular and politically-driven in some communities. Giving women responsibilities over their own space within buildings is important.

Appropriate compensation and funding

The issue of pay disparity between men and women was raised by a number of research participants. If monetary value isn't attached to work, people in positions of power don't see the work as valuable. Individuals also perceive their own work as valuable if there is proper monetary value attached to it. Research participants were advocating for pay equity within peacebuilding work. When women are involved in budget making, it was suggested that they ensure that pay scales are equal for women and men. Women have to take the lead on achieving pay equity within the peacebuilding sector.

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. Longer-term funding that is flexible and not outcome-driven 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. Women's programmes could build more consistent relationships with women and build stronger knowledge bases if funding was steadier. Research participants also called for funding to hire more staff within organisations and projects that support women.

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.

Proactive change-making from men

Self-awareness and education

Women research participants recognised that there are “a lot of men trying to do a lot of good work” and who are beginning to understand some of the issues that affect women (i.e. domestic violence). However, women felt that even the men who are making a focused effort to support women’s participation don’t really understand the barriers that women face. It is just accepted that “there are always men at the table, men in the room, men in positions of leadership.” Women reported that their male colleagues will address issues if they are brought to their attention by women, but that men rarely take the time to educate and challenge themselves to be more aware of the barriers women face when seeking greater levels of participation and engagement. For that reason, women would like to see men becoming allies in addressing barriers and seeking equality.

Women encouraged their male colleagues to “do the work,” to educate themselves about women’s issues and find ways to “fight in women’s corners.” A research participant observed that women spend a significant amount of energy adapting their communication styles to build relationships and trust with men, while men do not usually reflect the same level of care back to women. Women noted that men often say sexist or inappropriate things to women during meetings—men need to challenge themselves and others when this takes place. Women suggested that men need to engage in training to equip themselves to help women fight structures and systems of inequality. One research participant said, “if I could ask men any question, I would ask them ‘do they think it’s equal?’ Whatever their answer is, I would then want to ask, ‘why do they think that?’”

“Individual men are starting to do bits and pieces, but men as a whole aren’t. Collectively, they need to bash their heads together and realise [what women can do].”

“Don’t call us ‘wee girls!’”

It is important to note that the men who participated in the focus group were very open and receptive to the idea of becoming advocates for women’s equality and inclusion. Men from the focus group suggested that they need to be more aware of women’s work at all levels, keeping women’s community-based work, in particular, “on the radar.” The men were also enthusiastic about “making the space right for all inputs” by removing practical barriers and exploring ways to schedule meetings and host events that would allow greater levels of participation (i.e. childcare, family-friendly scheduling, transportation, etc.). Men also mentioned the importance of noticing those women who are involved within communities and inviting them into deeper engagement.

Making space

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. Men inviting women into these spaces and providing access to decision-making process could be transformative to women’s participation in peacebuilding. One research participant provided a powerful example of men making space by sharing that Mike Nesbitt, who chaired the working group on UNSCR1325, publicly stated that it wasn’t appropriate for him to sit as a chair for a group designed to address women’s inclusion in peacebuilding processes. In addition to inviting a woman to take up that leadership role, he expressed a genuine interest in promoting gender budgeting, policy making and the feminist recovery plan.

There are spaces where women are being deliberately silenced, but also spaces where the exclusion is inadvertent. These second spaces are where change can really be made in significant ways. Quite simply, women encouraged men to look around, “see who isn’t at the table,” and invite women into decision-making spaces. For their part, the men who took part in the focus group were very open to considering new ways to make space for women within peacebuilding. Men advocated for ensuring women are “in the room” by actively doing away with the existing dynamics that keep women out of decision-making spaces. Examining the culture of secrecy and breaking down power dynamics were specific suggestions for making space at the table. Men also said they could look for opportunities to push women forward and to acknowledge the work of women.

Men were also keen to engage in focused developmental support and succession planning with women. By supporting women with opportunities to work closely with them within communities, men mentioned that they could share the confidence that others put in their leadership with the women they support, providing tacit permission for people in the community to come to women for leadership and guidance. The men also wrestled with how to change the structures of “men-only” organisations such as the Ancient Order of Hibernians and the Loyal Orders, with some men stating that it is the responsibility of men to do away with the structures that keep women separate.

Many women research participants shared experiences of men claiming public credit for the work that women did behind the scenes. For some women, an important part of being fully at the table is to have their work acknowledged. One research participant shared a recent example of acknowledgement in action. She was bringing a European film crew to an interface area to do a short piece on interface work in Belfast. When they arrived, the man who was her contact introduced two women he had invited to meet the crew by saying that they were “actually the people doing the work.” Small changes like this are indicators that women’s peacebuilding work is starting to be credited appropriately.

Proactive change-making from women

Women were conscious that they need to model better behaviour by creating more inclusive spaces for female colleagues. A research participant described how SCI’s leadership programme has helped her think more deeply about how she can maximise the invitations and opportunities she receives to join influential spaces. She is now asking herself, “how can I invite other women into these spaces?” It was noted by research participants that misogyny is often internalised and that women often compete with each other. Women are increasingly aware of the need to recognise this dynamic, challenge it, and support each other in fundamental ways.

Some women who participated in the research are examining ways to break down access to power structures, giving women the confidence to say what they want from government and policy makers. One participant advocated for democratising conversations about government and policy, making policy real and using language that is accessible. Women leaders are also thinking about new ways of helping women value themselves and their own contribution to these spaces and processes—understanding and valuing the power of their own voice is an enabling factor for many women.

Women are also finding ways to reduce barriers to engagement through providing wraparound services such as childcare and transportation, with one woman commenting, “we shouldn’t be coming to women about human rights issues without addressing barriers.”

Because of the high degree of online abuse currently being experienced by women leaders, some research participants were keen to put structures in place to provide immediate support to women who are getting hassled online. These structures would allow women to feel supported and to know they are being offered solidarity by other women leaders.

Finally, women felt that there is a challenge to all women involved with peacebuilding to help everyone see that peacebuilding in Northern Ireland is important to us all and deserves investment.

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. Acknowledging the importance of prevention work, well-being support, youth and children's work, etc. will allow women's roles to be better understood and valued.

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 peacebuilders need to have the same visibility within communities as their male counterparts without fearing reputational damage or personal attacks.

It was noted by women who participated in the research that the media often features men as spokespersons for communities. Further, the media often features confrontationist debate regarding grassroots issues, which tends to exclude and/or disadvantage women. Women's peacebuilding work and women's voices 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. As one participant noted, "It's harder to shut the door on a collective."

Conclusion

As a part of the research, women were invited to imagine what change could look like if women were more engaged at all levels of peacebuilding in Northern Ireland. Research participants felt that greater levels of women's participation in peacebuilding would result in higher levels of cross-community engagement. Participants felt that women more readily humanise each other—seeing areas of commonality and opportunities for shared problem solving—and that women are ready to break down barriers.

Many of the women who participated in the research expressed gratitude at being given space to identify barriers to participation and to imagine what their engagement with peacebuilding could be like if those barriers were removed. Being recognised through the research was also important to many of the women—their work being made visible helped them feel acknowledged and valued. Hearing the voices of women and learning from their experiences through this research is an important and proactive step in better understanding the contributions of women to peacebuilding in spaces and places throughout Northern Ireland.