

Third National Action Plan - Women, Peace and Security consultation

Submission from the Integrated Education Fund

The Integrated Education Fund (IEF) welcomes the opportunity to comment on Ireland's Third National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security.

About the IEF

The IEF is a registered charity, established to provide a financial foundation for the development and growth of integrated education in Northern Ireland. The Fund is registered with the Charity Commission for Northern Ireland (NIC104886). Our mandate is derived from the expressed demand of parents and individual schools who seek integrated education for their children and pupils.

We have distributed almost £20m in grants since the Fund's foundation 25 years ago, to support and develop integrated education to meet demand and local need for places. This has been necessary in spite of a clear legal obligation on the Department of Education to "encourage and facilitate the development of integrated education" (Education NI order 1989).

The Fund has commissioned a range of academic and market research to support our campaign. These projects have explored the appetite for integrated education and measured the aspiration for an education system which would bring young people of all backgrounds, traditions and faiths together in a context which celebrates and discusses diversity.

We have also engaged with communities, voluntary organisations, youth groups, business bodies and political representatives to broaden debate about education reform and share perspectives on the best education system for the future of Northern Ireland.

Integrated Education Fund Response

Based on the expertise and experience of the Integrated Education Fund (IEF), this response aims to primarily address issues in relation to Pillar 1 (Participation) of UNSCR Resolution 1325 as well as the corresponding Pillar 2 (Empowerment, Participation and Representation) of the 2nd Irish National Action Plan. Our response focuses on the Ireland/Northern Ireland context.

In line with the 2nd National Action Plan, we believe that building sustainable peace requires full participation of both women and men. We propose that schools can, and should, play a key role in the process.

Although the Belfast/Good Friday agreement has been in place for 20 years, the legacy of the conflict is still very much present in Northern Ireland through persistent societal divisions and intergenerational trauma. While the majority of children currently in primary and post-primary education were born after the 1998 agreement, they are still impacted on by the dynamics and divisions that prevail as a result of it. We believe that education, and integrated education in particular, can be a key tool in helping to bridge divisions by ensuring that pupils from all backgrounds, cultures, religions, abilities and genders are educated together. Integrated schools currently educate approximately 7% of school pupils in Northern Ireland while the remaining 93% of pupils are educated in schools that are largely dominated by one community or the other, either Catholic or Protestant.

In order to build a sustainable peace in our society, young people need to be included in the process – both boys and girls. As outlined in Resolution 1325, the empowerment of women is essential. We believe that schools are an important context where this should be taking place. This is however best done where girls and boys are educated together to gain an understanding of gender stereotypes and inequalities in our society. As a result, both girls and boys are more likely to be informed and empowered to become advocates for change.

We propose that all education provided in Ireland, north and south, is inclusive and should actively promote understanding, respect and tolerance of difference and diversity. We recommend that anti-bias training is provided to all teachers and also delivered to pupils at an age appropriate level. In a post-conflict context, this type of training is particularly important – for both girls and boys. For instance, the anti-bias training currently delivered by the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated

Education¹ and which has been supported by the Reconciliation Fund could form the basis for developing such a training programme.

With increased diversity in our society comes more diversity in our schools. Newcomer pupils in our schools are likely to come with their own experience of conflict and division which we as a society, including educators, need to be cognisant of. We propose that our schools and educators be better equipped to deal with pupils from a range of backgrounds (local, national, regional and international) and with issues that may come up as a result of conflict-related trauma and experiences amongst the young people. A dedicated training programme for teachers on dealing with difficult and sensitive issues is suggested as one aspect of this.

The Women, Peace and Security agenda stresses that what is needed is meaningful and equal participation of women in all aspects of building peace in a society after conflict. Ireland's 2nd National Action Plan also emphasises that "[e]quitable, durable and sustainable peace and reconciliation cannot be built without women at the table" and calls for "the empowered participation of women". (p. 5) Ireland, north and south, has no lack of strong and influential women. However as events and debates in relation to the 20th anniversary of the 1998 peace agreement revealed, women's role in building the peace has not always been sufficiently highlighted. Providing positive role models is one important element in the process of empowering women and girls. We propose that our schools could do more to provide pupils – boys and girls – opportunities to engage with women who play positive roles in civil society, public life and who hold leadership positions. For instance, experience could be shared by women who have been involved in peacebuilding within their own communities to ensure that divisions are reduced and relationships are improved.

Schools are already under immense pressure and realistically are unlikely to have sufficient time/resources to add specific training regarding gender stereotypes etc. to the curriculum. Additional resourcing would therefore be essential. The Irish government could continue to play a key role in supporting programmes and training delivered to school pupils by civil society organisations in order to promote principles related to the Women, Peace and Security agenda and encourage reflection on broader gender equality issues. The proposed training should be delivered to both boys and girls to ensure that both are encouraged to become drivers for change. The programme should for instance include awareness-raising around gender power dynamics, domestic

¹ <http://www.nicie.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/ABC-Promoting-an-Anti-Bias-Approach-to-Education-in-Northern-Ireland-2014.pdf>

violence, women's rights, masculinities and LGBTQI+ issues as well as regarding the broader Women, Peace and Security agenda, the Irish National Action Plan and the significance of these for building sustainable peace on the island of Ireland.

Young people are our future. Let's provide young people – girls and boys – with education which enables them to reach their full potential, become drivers for change and help us build a sustainable and equitable peace.