

Conflict Resolution Unit
Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade
79-80 St Stephen's Green
Dublin2
Ireland

Dear Sir/Madam

**REF: Response to the consultation for Ireland's Third National Action Plan
Women, Peace and Security (WPS).**

YouthAction Northern Ireland has seventy four years experience of working with children and young people throughout Northern Ireland aged between 10 – 25 years. We work with young people to tackle issues most critical to them; support them to take control of their lives; enhance skills/qualifications and realise their potential. Our vision is young people are happy, healthy and hopeful. We also seek to extend the understanding of youth work through the development of innovative models of practice.

We proactively support gender equality work through our youth work practice within our Equality Work with Young Women and Young Men's teams , the former established over thirty-eight years ago. We provide services complementary to statutory and other independent agencies throughout Northern Ireland. We also work strategically with our partners in Ireland, England, Scotland and Wales to both challenge and inform Government on youth affairs.

We welcome the opportunity to respond to the WPS consultation and believe it is important that the principles of United National Security Council Resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325) are implemented across the island of Ireland. We welcome the inclusion of Northern Ireland in the consultation and believe that the National Action Plan (NAP) in Ireland can provide a model framework that supports the women, peace and security agenda for Northern Ireland particularly in reflecting the issues specific to young women. Gender equality youth work practice in Northern Ireland should also contribute to and be recognised within the UK National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security 2018 – 2022 as it strives to empower women and girls to improve peace and stability, economic growth and poverty reduction.

We would like to make the following comments;

- We support the 4 pillars which underline the WPS agenda especially the need to encourage and support the greater participation of women and particularly younger women in civic and political life. **Central to this is the need to nurture and support young women into leadership roles as well as providing pathways onto key decision making bodies and platforms for young women to contribute their ideas and opinions.** Young women who engage with us are keen to participate in civil and social actions but generally feel unclear or are unaware of how they can make a difference. Young women often feel disconnected and unrepresented within local political structures, especially here in Northern Ireland. While they have an appetite for change, they are also victims of the ongoing political setbacks that can at times quash hope and

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commitment. This is pertinent given the current political climate around Brexit negotiations and an absent Northern Ireland Assembly.

- In Northern Ireland there is a level of uncertainty and instability, with the suspension of the Northern Ireland institutions and the ongoing challenging negotiations on the UK's departure from the European Union. There is also fragility and concern for the continuation of the Good Friday Agreement. There is a fear of a detrimental impact on women's peace and security in Northern Ireland, especially women's human rights and especially the security of women and girls in areas in which paramilitaries operate. Sectarianism is intensifying and women's and girls' daily lives are blighted by negative attitudes and accompanying behaviours.
- The contribution of women and young women to peace-building in Northern Ireland has been systematically overlooked in critical areas such as policing boards and in public and political life. The NAP framework can provide opportunities for young women to understand, be part of and contribute to the continuous development of peace building across the island of Ireland. In this regard it should take into consideration the evolving diversity of our citizens and the many different cultures, backgrounds, religions and sexual identities that exist. Youth work we believe provides opportunities to engage and integrate young women while paying particular attention to joined up work with young women from migrant communities.
- As identified in the recommendations following the review of the 2nd WPS Action Plan there is a need to consider all those effected by the conflict regardless of their gender identity. While the conflict has impacted upon all members of society being young and male in Northern Ireland particularly paints a depressing picture. There is a long running issue of young men under-achievement in formal education. The Department for the Economy in Northern Ireland shows a significant under-participation of young males in Higher Education, particularly those from disadvantaged communities. The result is that a social mobility gap for young males is emerging with a subsequent risk to economic development and social cohesion. Indications show that improvements are unlikely without **strategically managed interventions informed by robust research.**
- Relevant here also is a growing body of literature examining masculinities and what it means to be a man. Boys, it is argued, learn to become men through unguided and accidental processes whereby each individual has to find his own way to learn about gender. Young men it is argued, particularly from working class communities, become trapped in and aspire to traditional stereotypical male roles. These have become a defining feature of male identity linked to 'toughness' with historical connections to an accepted legitimacy of patriarchy and the perceived dominant position of men in society. There is a need therefore for **more collaborative working between formal, informal and non-formal education to both explore and understand restrictive notions of masculinity and their impact**, both on the young men themselves and the impact on women and those with other identities. This engagement of men and young men increase their ability to shift the dominant norms and ideas about gender and masculinity, and challenge the patriarchal beliefs, practices, institutions and structures that drive inequality between men and women.
- We welcome the result of the recent referendum on marriage equality in Ireland and ask for continued and proactive support for LGBTQ+ equal rights throughout all sections of

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society in Ireland and Northern Ireland. There is a need for **specific and targeted support services for young people who identify as LGBT as well as appropriate training for those working with young people**, such as teachers, youth workers, social workers, health professionals, and community workers.

- In relation to peace building generally there is a need for continued and prolonged investment in **education programmes that provide an opportunity for young people to recognise and understand past injustices and atrocities**. Muldoon (2004:454) argues that *'in order to create and maintain peaceful societies we need to understand the causes of conflict and prevent the 'recreation' of conflict.'* This would certainly reflect the needs identified by young people in having a better understanding of the multiple forces and causes that have led to the conflict. Any future investment should seek to compliment and build on the investment of the European Union through the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB), contributing €229 to peace and reconciliation programmes in Northern Ireland and the Border Counties of Ireland. Young people recognise the benefits of investment in peace building programmes;
"If we learn about different religions and faiths discrimination won't occur. Life would be dull and repetitive without diversity".
"No one is the same. If you respect and treat everyone equal, there will be no discrimination made against them".
- Youth work we believe has a critical role to play in this process. Youth work can provoke young women and young men to question and reflect, ask the hard questions, promote inclusion and support integration and safe mobility. Youth work and youth workers can enable young people to create new realities where hope can prevail. In this way, aspirational and motivational leadership among youth workers can inspire positive change. Youth work can therefore both support and challenge young people's perception and understanding while inspiring young people to continue to build peace.

Our comments have been informed by the following publications;

- Sectarianism and Separation in Northern Ireland: a perspective-based evaluation on the contribution of youth work - Dr Martin McMullan 2018
- Rough Justice: Considerations on the Role of Violence, Masculinity and the alienation of Young Men in Communities and Peacebuilding Processes in Northern Ireland - Ken Harland and Sam McCready 2014
- Still Shouting – the needs and experiences of young women in Northern Ireland who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual and/or transgender 2017

Yours faithfully

Caroline Redpath

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