

Peace Brigades International : Ireland

Submission to the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade's Public Consultation for Ireland's

Third National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security

PBI Ireland fully endorses the joint submission from peace and conflict experts

The joint submission calls for *an ambitious vision for transformation*:

"Ireland's third NAP should outline an ambitious vision that seeks to not only recognise and address gender inequalities in conflict-affected contexts, but to transform them. It should also respond to critical gaps in the implementation of the WPS agenda, including the relative neglect of i) conflict prevention; ii) women's economic and political empowerment; and iii) protection and empowerment not only in conflict, but in post-conflict contexts as well."

This submission below expands on elements which resonate with the experience of PBI and its volunteers who provide protective accompaniment to Women Human Rights Defenders (WHRDs) in conflict and post-conflict settings.

PBI Ireland

PBI Ireland is a country group of Peace Brigades International (PBI), which has 36 years of experience working alongside human rights defenders, opening and protecting space for peace, conflict transformation and the defence of human rights. PBI's current field projects are in Colombia, Guatemala, Honduras, Indonesia, Kenya, Mexico and Nepal.

PBI maintains a life-saving international presence in areas of conflict and repression, and a powerful global advocacy network protecting those on the ground. We combine what we call *protective accompaniment*, consisting of long-term, sustained presence alongside human rights defenders on the ground, aimed at witnessing potential abuses and deterring attacks, with strategic advocacy. We also carry out information gathering, awareness raising activities, workshops and training and well as organising speaking tours bringing together human rights defenders and decision makers to encourage the exchange of ideas.

PBI and Women Human Rights Defenders

PBI recognises the key role of women human rights defenders in our peace and human rights work. To cite three examples of recent initiatives:

- A PBI course on integral protection for Women Human Rights Defenders in the countries where the organisation works, with a special focus on Mexico, which produced a set of recommendations on measures to facilitate their work.
- PBI Guatemala has devised a “Gender and Diversity Plan” and organised a national meeting with rural organizations which work with the promotion of women’s rights to discuss the security risk that WHRDs face, and their protection needs.
- PBI Kenya, with financial support from the European Union, launched the WHRD Toolkit which offers resources as well as recommendations to help address the specific challenges of grassroots WHRDs.

We are happy to continue to make the learning from these projects, and from our day-to-day work, available to the human rights and diplomatic community, including the work on the new NAP and its implementation.

Specific recommendations

The following specific recommendations, grouped under the four pillars of the Second National Plan, are drawn from PBI’s experience world-wide.

A. Prevention:

- 1. The Plan should explicitly recognise the specific and crucial contributions of women and women human rights defenders (WHRDs) to building sustainable, positive peace and reflect this in policy and diplomatic practice.**

Irish overseas policy and diplomatic missions in countries affected, or potentially affected, by conflict need to take account of the specific challenges faced by women human rights defenders. This is important part of conflict prevention, providing some level of protection to WHRDs at risk, in line with the EU Guidelines on the Protection of Human Rights Defenders

The causes which women defend are often trivialised, ignored, or met with hostility. Violence against WHRD is seldom acknowledged to be deliberate calculated strategy to silence them and stop them from carrying out their work.

- 2. Ireland should support and facilitate increased awareness raising and dialogue at a local level, targeted specifically at women and WHRDs and other marginalized groups who are hard to reach, about instruments such as the UN SC 1325 Resolution, CEDAW, and the EU Guidelines on the protection of human rights defenders. This should be an integral part of the work of our overseas missions.**

The complex linkage of judicial, administrative and police agencies is often an obstacle to the access to justice, including lack of awareness of availability and workings of protection mechanisms. In many societies, women are discouraged from accessing justice due to family and community fears or prejudices. There is often a lack of confidence that local authorities will respond adequately and sensitively to their complaints. Investigations are usually poorly executed, under-resourced, and liable to corrupt practice. Attitudes of police, prison officers, and public officials often embody gender prejudice, with officials refusing to file cases, investigate, or even recognise that the law has been broken. In many cases, there is no translation of reports into indigenous languages and lack of adequate interpretation. The Fear of retaliation: is ever present.

B. Empowerment and Participation:

- 3. The Plan should promote public recognition of women and WHRDs as peacebuilders as well as their experiences of multiple marginalization and seek to support them in overcoming the challenges they face when participating in the construction of peace.**

These obstacles can be physical (attempted murder, torture, sexual violence, stalking and harassment), verbal (threats, psychological torture), judicial (unfounded arrest and prosecution) psychological (imprisonment in solitary confinement, psychological torture, illegal surveillance) social (cyber-attacks media defamation, and stigmatisation by public officials). However, in the case of women the violence takes on an embodied dimension and passes through their positioning in society, which lends it a configuration specific to gender.

- 4. Irish policy and diplomacy should publicly challenge, at every opportunity, the stigmatization of women and discriminatory attitude towards women's work as defenders. This is a significant barrier to women's participation.**

Discriminatory attitudes towards women's work as defenders are embedded in cultural, social, and religious norms and are pervasive throughout society, often shared by men and women. They are targeted because of what they do to defend human rights, but

also because, as women who do this work, they challenge social and cultural norms, traditions and stereotypes about femininity, sexual orientation, and the role and status of women in society.

Stigmatization can reduce the women's ability to conduct advocacy and encourage violence against them. Gender-based abuse from authority figures can take the form of being labelled prostitutes for defending feminist values and women's rights, and thus a pretext to sexual assault. In the case of land defenders- HR defenders working on behalf of communities affected by large-scale development projects are increasingly being branded 'anti-government', 'against development' or even 'enemies of the State'.

Stigmatization is often a prelude to politically motivated criminalisation of WHRDs and can be used by perpetrators to silence dissent and establishing social control under a veneer of legitimacy.

In having to defend herself from the charges, precious time, energy and money are diverted from their activities defending rights, it can also have a range of other impacts – for example, donors may decide to freeze funding until the case has been resolved.

5. **Ireland should promote and support** efforts to address some of the obstacles that prevent participation of WHRDs in the public arena, such as lack of recognition, precarious economic situations and protection needs that may extend to family members and cover circumstantial factors related to gender. The Plan should commit to ensuring that Irish diplomatic staff and missions receive gender-sensitive training.

Women are often held back by family expectations and duties. Women are often short of time, being busy with domestic and family chores in which they invest time, energy and resources: as caretakers of their families, as workers, and as community leaders in social struggles.

A Mexican defender recounted:

"I am a single mother and had to leave my home with my daughter and be relocated. I had to look for a job in my new place of residence and could not take care of my daughter, so I requested that the state cover these expenses as part of the relocation scheme. But the state did not understand that this should be part of the protection measures. Others with similar requests were confronted with the claim these are protection agencies are not a poverty eradication organization."

6. Capacity building programmes for WHRDs around security and resilience should be promoted and supported as an important contribution to empowerment and increased participation.

Important autonomous initiatives have emerged carried out by women. PBI works with some who, for example, bring together women to defend indigenous land rights, and support those who have suffered the effects of political violence for defending the right to life, for demanding justice in cases of violence against women and girls and for publicly denouncing land dispossession of ancestral lands.

7. Funding for grassroots women’s organizations and financial and institutional support for locally developed protection initiatives should be made available and accessible.

International funding often does not reach the most marginal organization. One of the greatest obstacles to some indigenous women’s organizations is the lack of funding to follow up on community opposition in defence of human rights and of the environment. Involvement in coordination activities, travel between communities or participation in group events is difficult without financial resources.

C. Protection relief and recovery:

8. An integral approach to the protection of WHRDs should be adopted and funding made available to respond to the particularities of threats and risks faced by women peacebuilders. This approach should be both reactive and preventative, addressing the underlying causes of the attacks. Some of these instruments are, for example: recognition, effective investigation and punishment of the attackers; forming solidarity and support networks; access to sources of funding; digital security; international accompaniment and advocacy. These can also include attention to self-care and wellbeing, economic security, family security.

Women play a pivotal role in denouncing abuses, contributing to social justice and peace and promoting fundamental human rights, often filling gaps left by the states’ negligence

Because of their position in society, women are often drawn into this role by life circumstances, seeing the decomposition of the social fabric of their communities, family members disappeared, kidnapped, or assassinated or the repeated use of gender violence around and on them, is a life choice.

Among WHRDs, certain groups are particularly vulnerable. These include “grassroots” NGOs without significant access to national and international networks, those working in remote areas with poor access and communications, and those belonging to social groups marginalised on grounds of ethnicity (including indigenous and Afro-descendent people), and socio-economic status (peasants, migrants).

In Mexico for instance the majority of the people who have requested and who have benefited from international accompaniment have been women. More than half of them live and work in rural and indigenous regions in Guerrero and Oaxaca.

Indigenous women have a triple burden/marginalisation: economic conditions, women and indigenous particularly when it comes to access to justice and basic rights, and to protection by law. To this the stigma of defending human rights is added.

In our experience, most WHRDs in vulnerable areas are critical of national mechanisms including HRD protection programmes and action plans on women’s rights; too often these were toothless, low priority, and suffered from lack of resources, gender-expertise, and genuine engagement with WHRDs.

D. Promotion of WPS in the international arena:

9. Ireland should highlight and promote the need to protect WHRDs as a matter of priority in its global input to WPS.

International: implementation of human rights defences can be sporadic and unsystematic; greater monitoring and coordination between agencies is needed to ensure more comprehensive support for WHRDs at risk. Defenders assert that accessing international mechanisms can prove bureaucratic and long winded, leaving them prone to reprisals in the short term.

There is an impression among WHRDs that offending states are learning how to blunt the effectiveness of international mechanisms. Defenders also express concern about the lack of cooperation given to UN Special Procedures. The cumulative effect of weak implementation of protection measures and impunity is that the political cost for perpetrators is still not high enough to deter them.