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15 August 2014

The following submission is made on behalf of Front Line Defenders, The International Foundation for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders.

We are happy for the contents of this response to be made public.

Mary Lawlor

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Executive Director

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Front Line Defenders Submission to Ireland's Second National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security

The following submission is based on Front Line Defenders' work over 13 years on behalf of Women Human Rights Defenders (WHRDs) at risk, who are key players in conflict areas around issues of women's rights, peace and security.

The term 'WHRDs' encompasses women active in the defence of human rights who are targeted for *who they are*, as well as those who defend women's rights who are targeted for *what they do*. They are defined by their actions rather than by their profession, job title or organisation.

The submission draws on consultations we have conducted with WHRDs in order to develop the Front Line Defenders Strategic Plan (2011 - 2014), successive Dublin Platforms for Human Rights Defenders, and Front Line Defenders' Annual Reports on the situation of HRDs.

Front Line Defenders welcomes the progress that has been made in implementing the first National Action Plan (NAP) on Women, Peace and Security (WPS) and its Mid-Term progress report. However, in both documents we note an absence of a gender-specific approach to the protection and support of WHRDs, despite growing international recognition of the role these women play and the risks they face in the course of their work.

The second NAP has great potential as a contribution by Ireland to underpin implementation of UNSCR 1325 and other UN Resolutions on Women, Peace and Security. In this light, we urge the Irish Government to advance understanding of the aforementioned obligations to include reference to WHRDs.

Why should the needs of WHRDs be prioritised as a strategic objective for the second National Action Plan?

In recognising the 'unique and disproportionate impact' that conflict has on women and girls, it is imperative to note the critical role of WHRDs, and place their role in context. WHRDs are key actors and agents of social change in the security and peace space. They play a vital role in defending the rights of their communities in times of conflict and danger, they hold families and communities together and they challenge the power of abusers. WHRDs can play a unique role in tackling the causes and structures of conflict and post-conflict development in local communities. Thus, recognising the work of WHRDs and acknowledging their security and protection needs gives rise to an accumulator effect within a community or society. Their work is an effective and under-leveraged contribution to peacekeeping and building across divided societies.

Why do WHRDs warrant a specific policy approach?

WHRDs challenge traditional gender roles and can be seen as disruptive of

cultural, religious and societal mores, particularly under authoritarian regimes. WHRDs, in the course of their work, must break patriarchal laws and social taboos. Their work is rendered more visible by virtue of their gender. Thus, WHRDs are particularly vulnerable to gender based violence and sexual exploitation and abuse.

- For their legitimate work, WHRDs have been tried using laws criminalising conduct protected under international law, on spurious charges motivated solely by their views and advocacy in support of women's rights.
- Certain discriminatory or sexist interpretations of religious texts are also often used to maintain or establish laws or practices which have a major influence on women's rights.
- The hostility, repression, harassment and retribution that WHRDs face often takes a gender-specific form, e.g. verbal abuse, sexual harassment and rape. These actions have repercussions that are themselves gender specific, e.g. rejection by society and pregnancy.
- Particularly within a militarised context, WHRDs face gender and sexual based violence, deployed to assert gendered and other socio-political hierarchies and as a weapon of war.
- Furthermore, WHRDs are at increased risk of experiencing domestic violence, often as a result of changing power structures within a family. A WHRDs professional role could make her husband or partner feel threatened and try to stop her activities, which may lead to violence. Domestic violence against women includes all physical, sexual and psychological harm, which occurs within a family. In this context, WHRDs can also face economic insecurity.
- In addition to their work, many WHRDs are also the primary care-givers to their children, and often other relatives as well. Such responsibilities, especially if involving young children, will influence many of the security decisions a WHRD may have to make in a high risk situation, and contributes to their vulnerability as a group.

Through our work at Front Line Defenders, we support a number of WHRDs.

- In the DRC, Front Line Defenders makes a number of grants to WHRDs working on the promotion and protection of rights of women and children in rural areas, who have been victims of gender based violence. In the DRC, Abigael Bitondo, of Gender in Action towards a Better Future for Women (GAD), in Uvira said:

“The more you advocate for human rights in this region, the more you make yourself insecure.”

- Also in the DRC, Front Line Defenders supports Julienne Lusenge, a

WHRD who has devoted much of her life as an activist around sexual and gender based violence. She has repeatedly been threatened and she continues to be actively sought by members of one of the former armed groups, many of whose members are now integrated in the national police and military:

“As women, we must manage the social and cultural context in which we are brought up. We run the home, we have children and we need to promote human rights. We need to harmonise all of this.”

In sum, we hope that in identifying the background in which they operate, the experience of WHRDs can be understood as more than individual occurrences, but as part of a systematic and structural oppression, because of their gender and the work they do on gender-related issues. We hope this context can be taken into consideration in the development of the second NAP and the broader human rights policy-making process.

How Ireland can help WHRDs affected by conflict - strategies to ensure protection

The professional and personal security of WHRDs requires a specific and holistic approach in order to create an enabling environment, free from violence, in which they can continue their work.

In drafting the second NAP, we recommend that consideration be given to WHRDs and their specific security needs, outlined below. In taking into account the aforementioned factors, the concept of security for WHRDs must be conceived of as part of the political, economic, environmental space in which they operate. WHRDs are a group encompassing a wide spectrum of identities and experiences.

Front Line Defenders recommends the following processes be taken into account when implementing and developing human rights policy, with the aim of developing gender sensitive responses to violence against women and other defenders:

- Emphasise individual assessment: factors such as age, ethnicity, educational background, sexual orientation and marital status must be taken into consideration, as different groups of WHRDs face different challenges and therefore have different protection and security needs. The assessment of the protection needs of WHRDs will help to clarify the specific and often different vulnerabilities and coping strategies of WHRDs. This way, policy can be more effectively address their needs in emergency and day to day situations. For example, if a WHRD is a primary care giver to her children, this indicates a greater need for integrated support and security, e.g. healthcare and childcare, two elements that are not typically thought of as security measures.
- The unique perspective of WHRDs should be included in any monitoring process that is initiated to track GBV against women.

Gender-based violence is always under-reported, and this is particularly true in the case of WHRDs. The risks faced by WHRDs are increased because there is no systematic documentation of the gender-specific nature and manifestations of the violence and violations of their rights.

- Within the broader human rights framework, female leadership within decision-making mechanisms should be prioritised and mainstreamed, to ensure that gender specific security issues are addressed and appropriate training is provided to WHRDs, in implementing the NAP.
- Training of staff based overseas should include developing awareness about the specific needs of women defenders.

In conclusion, we urge the Irish Government to include the experiences of WHRDs and perceptions when developing and implementing human rights policy, and to ensure that women are at all stages defining security roles and procedures, as well as monitoring and evaluating them.

How can the existing monitoring mechanisms of the first National Action Plan be improved?

With regard to the Monitoring Framework we suggest the following actions be adopted in the second NAP, to more effectively achieve its outcomes and objectives regarding women's rights:

Under P1.01 (Prevention of conflict, including GBV and SEA), we recommend the inclusion of information on security, protection, and support of WHRDs as part of the training received by all relevant HQ based staff and personnel deployed overseas, as part of wider promotion of women's human rights and gender equality. Within this training, the perspective of WHRDs should be incorporated and the effectiveness of the training should be continuously assessed in this regard.

Under P2.02 & P2.03 (Participation and representation of women in decision making), we recommend the incorporation of WHRDs perspectives with regard to decision making in Ireland's peacekeeping, international development and peacebuilding activities at all levels, to further complement the gender expertise already provided for. In particular, we welcome the support of local and community based women's CSOs (P2.A3.1), and would encourage the provision of support for CSOs working with WHRDs be emphasised in the second NAP.

Under P3.02, we believe the institutional and collective capacity of Irish organisations to respond effectively and systematically to GBV and SEA would be improved by noting the particular vulnerability of WHRDs to GBV and SEA. Furthermore, we would advocate an increased funding to CSOs that assist WHRDs in this regard.

Under P4.01, we recommend that security sector reform activities supported by Ireland are responsive to the specific needs of WHRDs.

Under P5.01, we recommend that when revising policy guidance on UNSCR 1325, specific guidance is developed on WHRDs, in order to strengthen institutional capacity to ensure commitments to women's rights are incorporated in all stages of peacekeeping, peace-building and post-conflict transition.

How should Ireland promote Women, Peace and Security in multilateral organisations?

As a small State, Ireland cannot hope to solve global problems, but it can help protect those brave WHRDs who help build democratic societies based on the Rule of Law. We believe the Irish Government holds a unique position within international fora, as a result of a hard earned reputation, to promote the protection and security needs of WHRDs.

In this context, it should be noted that UNSC Resolution 1235 is just one part of a broader existing policy framework under which WHRDs enjoy protection; the EU Guidelines on HRDs, the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders and the work of the Special Rapporteur for Human Rights Defenders. The UNGA Third Committee adopted the first Resolution on WHRDs in November 2013. We urge the Irish Government to advocate for WHRDs across such policy platforms in multilateral and intergovernmental organisations, and to shape the discourse around WHRDs and their right to carry out their legitimate work.

Politically and diplomatically, Ireland can do much to support WHRDs, centrally and through its field missions. Benchmarks for action should be developed and applied consistently.

We recommend the following processes be integrated into the upcoming NAP:

- It is important that the Irish Government recommend a stronger integration of the protection of WHRDs in all aspects of human rights policy creation and debate in multilateral organisations. Efforts should be made to facilitate cooperation between NGOs, HRDs and national human rights institutions on the security of WHRDs.
- Increase recognition of the work of WHRDs at international level: In doing this, more women can recognise themselves as WHRDs and make use of protective mechanisms. WHRDs must be able to identify themselves as legitimate actors. Actions by the Irish Government that can legitimise their work can include public statements of support, and state sponsored awards and initiatives in the community that recognise their work.
- In November 2013, the first resolution on WHRDs by the UNGA Third Committee was adopted. However, a crucial paragraph calling on

States to condemn all forms of violence against women and WHRDs and to refrain from invoking any customs, tradition or religious consideration to avoid obligations related to the elimination of violence against women was omitted. As too were references to the risks faced by those working on issues of sexual and reproductive health, reproductive rights and matters related to sexuality.¹ Ireland should consider ways in which these deficits could be addressed with the objective of strengthening protection of WHRDs.

1 http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/C.3/68/L.64