



## Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General  
29 November 2012

Original: English

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### Commission on the Status of Women

#### Fifty-seventh session

4-15 March 2013

**Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and  
to the special session of the General Assembly entitled  
“Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace  
for the twenty-first century”: implementation of strategic  
objectives and action in critical areas of concern and  
further actions and initiatives**

### **Statement submitted by Training for Women Network, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council**

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.



## Statement

The Training for Women Network recently undertook research to explore the role of women in the victims sector in Northern Ireland, as well as to address attitudes towards statutory services and the services provided by other organizations. In particular, the needs of individuals and groups were to be examined in conjunction with resources available to those helping people who have suffered.

The objectives of the research were to assess how far the promises of the Belfast Agreement have been achieved in providing the resources necessary to meet the needs of victims and to support community-based programmes, and to place women within the context of the victims sector in order to indicate the level of their participation at all levels.

At the conclusion of the research, a clearer view of the needs of victims from the perspective of the victims themselves would be gained. Recommendations could then be made for future action and further research needs identified. In addition, a clearer picture of the role of women in the victims sector could be placed in the general context of post-conflict reconstruction in Northern Ireland.

The dimension of gender in the conflict in Northern Ireland has been in large part hidden. Although studies have been conducted on the participation of women in the conflict and on their role in peace movements, notions of women as victims have seldom been explored. Without resorting to essentialist stereotypes of “bellicose men” and “peace-loving women”, it can be said that men and women experience conflict differently. Women are said to suffer more in armed conflict, either directly or through the loss of sons, husbands, lovers, brothers and fathers. Moser and McIlwaine assert that women and girls are more likely to suffer trauma during and after conflict. This is borne out by the fact that twice as many women as men in Northern Ireland have been reported to use tranquilizers.

Besides experiencing physical and psychological victimhood differently from men, women have suffered in other ways. Conflict is generally reported to sideline other social issues, such as gender equality, and masculine values are deemed to predominate in such circumstances, stifling women’s participation in politics, society and the economy. Women have been marginalized owing to the extremes of politics in Northern Ireland, leading to what Monica McWilliams has been quoted as describing as an “armed patriarchy”.

The needs of victims may be in conflict with each other, such as the demand for justice from some and the desire for forgiveness from others. There is a general wish for more funding for the many projects that attempt to deal with the effects of conflict. To a large extent, however, those who have suffered often simply want to tell their stories.

There is an increasing need for this after the conflict, but, writes Ruth Patterson, there also needs to be a safe place for these often emotionally raw experiences to be told. As the report of the Irish Victims Commission put it, the message coming “most consistently from victims and survivors is their strong wish that their stories and those of their loved ones should not be forgotten”. Whether this happens as part of a truth and reconciliation commission or in a more discreet setting is for the victims themselves to decide. More difficult is gauging the needs of the silent victims or those who do not affiliate themselves with groups.

Since the Belfast Agreement, there have been a number of developments aimed at ascertaining the needs of victims. The scene was set by the report by Sir Kenneth Bloomfield entitled “We will remember them”. This included an extensive introduction to many of the issues relating to the conflict, including timescales, numbers of dead and injured, victimhood, blame and guilt, compensation, justice and reconciliation. The assertion that no one in Northern Ireland has escaped damage indicates the scale of the task of providing for people’s needs.

The recommendations of the report included the following:

- The “fitness for purpose” of criminal injuries compensation should be reviewed.
- Employers should be sensitive towards victims.
- The needs of victims should be made a Targeting Social Need category.
- A senior official should be appointed to take responsibility for coordination in government.
- The recommendations contained in the report entitled “Living with the trauma of the Troubles” should be implemented.
- Victims should be served at least as well as ex-prisoners in rehabilitation and other initiatives.
- A standing commission or ombudsman for victims should be established.
- The Code of Practice for Victims of Crime should be closely monitored.
- The possibility of a truth and reconciliation commission should not be overlooked.
- Efforts should be made to persuade those possessing information about the “disappeared” to disclose it.
- Those uprooted from homes or farms should not be overlooked by the Government.
- A fund for children and young people should be established.

A report by the Cost of the Troubles Study looked at the experiences of the wider population in relation to the conflict and found that 20 per cent had health problems related to the Troubles and 30 per cent exhibited symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). There was a relationship between the areas of most intense conflict and people who had sought help, but there was no straightforward relationship between experiences and effects. It was also noted that the people living in areas where the conflict had been most intense felt insecure outside their own areas, and it was these people who tended not to seek help from official sources.

The evaluation by Deloitte and Touche of services provided to victims and survivors identified a number of issues affecting groups, including recognition, isolation in rural communities, anger at not having received funding when other groups had, lack of support, justice, equality, truth, the definition of “victim” and human rights. Non-political “parallel” providers of support to victims saw funding, recognition of the voluntary and community sectors, gaps in mental health provision and gaps in the treatment of PTSD as problems. The concerns of individuals

regarding groups were also listed, including a wish to deal with trauma privately, political alignment, pressure to join, lack of information, services not being provided where people need them, issues regarding pride, fear and trust, and the stigma attached to victimhood.

The Conflict Trauma Resource Centre explored attitudes towards victimhood and found that most people surveyed had differing opinions about definitions. Although 20 per cent considered that perpetrators should not be considered victims, the majority concluded that they were. Most acknowledged a differentiation in attitudes towards the term “victim”, but felt that a hierarchy of victims had been created as a result of political or funding motivations. The research was generally believed to be valuable, and verbatim responses were included.

The Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency published another report on victimhood in 2003. Twelve per cent of respondents considered themselves to have been victims often or very often, 16 per cent had been direct victims of the Troubles, and 30 per cent had been affected indirectly. Seventy per cent agreed that all victims should be recognized in some way, and the majority were in favour of a memorial and a truth commission. Inter-group forgiveness met with positively by most respondents.

The Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission published a report at the same time, examining the human rights perspective.

The conclusions contained in the Commission’s report were:

- Pain should be acknowledged.
- In definitions of “victimhood”, perpetrators have a choice, whereas “real” victims do not.
- Most victims feel unable to forgive.
- Each experience is different.
- Not all wrongs can be righted in law, so other forms of redress are needed.
- The current situation in Northern Ireland is causing some victims to relive their pain.
- In due course, a truth recovery system may be necessary.
- Extra protection for human rights is needed for Northern Ireland.
- The interests of victims need to be included in a code of practice for criminal justice.
- Better structures are needed in the police force and the judiciary.
- An independent ear, such as a victims’ ombudsman, is needed.
- The State must account for victims of State violence.
- The majority of victims do not join a victims’ support group.

It is clear that none of the reports listed above has dealt sufficiently with the subject of women in the victims sector. There is therefore a need to investigate women’s representation as victims and survivors and their role in groups and services providing for people who have suffered in the conflict in Northern Ireland.

There is also a range of recommendations relating to the provision of services in the sector, and a form of independent assessment is needed to ascertain the degree to which needs are being met. Inquiry involving those working directly with victims and survivors would therefore inform the process of gauging the capacity of the sector.

As a result of the research that has been carried out, it has become apparent that there is much suspicion of statutory agencies in some quarters of the sector, and this suspicion is strongest where the need is greatest, i.e., where the conflict has had its most intense manifestation. It is hoped that research initiated and carried out by an independent organization with roots in the voluntary and community sector, such as the Training for Women Network, would go some way towards reducing this suspicion.

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