



**Women's Regional Consortium**

# **Consortium for the Regional Support for Women in Disadvantaged and Rural Areas**

## **Response to: Addressing the Legacy of Northern Ireland's Past**

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Foyle Women's  
Information  
Network



## **Women's Regional Consortium: Working to Support Women in Rural Communities and Disadvantaged Urban Areas**

### **1. Introduction**

**1.1** This response has been undertaken collaboratively by the members of the Consortium for the Regional Support for Women in Disadvantaged and Rural Areas (hereafter, either the Women's Regional Consortium or simply the Consortium), which is funded by the Department for Communities and the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs.

**1.2** The Women's Regional Consortium consists of seven established women's sector organisations that are committed to working in partnership with each other, government, statutory organisations and women's organisations, centres and groups in disadvantaged and rural areas, to ensure that organisations working for women are given the best possible support in the work they do in tackling disadvantage and social exclusion.<sup>1</sup> The seven groups are as follows:

- ♀ Training for Women Network (TWN) – Project lead
- ♀ Women's Resource and Development Agency (WRDA)
- ♀ Women's Support Network (WSN)
- ♀ Northern Ireland's Rural Women's Network (NIRWN)
- ♀ Women's TEC
- ♀ Women's Centre Derry
- ♀ Foyle Women's Information Network (FWIN)

**1.3** The Consortium is the established link and strategic partner between government and statutory agencies and women in disadvantaged and rural areas, including all groups, centres and organisations delivering essential frontline services, advice and support. The Consortium ensures that there is a continuous two-way flow of information between government and the sector. It also ensures that organisations/centres and groups are made aware of consultations, government planning and policy implementation. In turn, the

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<sup>1</sup> Sections 1.2-1.3 represent the official description of the Consortium's work, as agreed and authored by its seven partner organisation

Consortium ascertains the views, needs and aspirations of women in disadvantaged and rural areas and takes these views forward to influence policy development and future government planning, which ultimately results in the empowerment of local women in disadvantaged and rurally isolated communities.

**1.4** This response is informed by women's perspectives articulated in Consortium engagement events, reflecting the views of Consortium regional membership bases.

## **2. General comments**

The Women's Regional Consortium appreciates the opportunity to respond to the NIO's 'Addressing the Legacy of Northern Ireland's Past' Consultation Paper. The Consortium works to advance the interests and wellbeing of disadvantaged, marginalised women in some of the most deprived areas of Northern Ireland. This includes women who have been victims and survivors of the Troubles as well as women from families and local communities who have been affected.

This is a very important consultation and arguably one of the most important consultation exercises since the Good Friday Agreement. These proposals could help to transform the lives of victims and survivors and make a positive difference to the lives of people in Northern Ireland and beyond.

The impact of the conflict in Northern Ireland is far-reaching and has the potential to affect many people's lives both directly and indirectly. The Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency conducted a population survey for the Commission for Victims and Survivors and 26% of respondents said they were affected by the conflict in Northern Ireland.<sup>2</sup> This equates to

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<sup>2</sup> NISRA (2017) Commission for Victims and Survivors Module of the September 2017 Northern Ireland Omnibus Survey, Belfast: NISRA.

one in four of the population. Around 15% or 213,000 adults in Northern Ireland have developed mental health difficulties linked to their conflict-related experiences.<sup>3</sup> Although many younger people did not experience the conflict directly, *“young people in Northern Ireland face a real life threat of inheriting the psychological vulnerability of their parents.”*<sup>4</sup>

In discussions at engagement events with women there was a general consensus that everyone who lived in Northern Ireland through the Troubles was a victim.

“Nearly everyone who lived here during the Troubles is a victim in some way.”  
- Participant at Consultation Event

“Everyone who lived here is a victim. I was a teenager in the Troubles and we never went out! I didn’t have a normal teenage life.”  
- Participant at Consultation Event

It was not a normal society and people did not live normal lives. It was normal for people not to talk about the things they saw or experienced and to just keep quiet and get on with it. This is likely to have had a significant impact on how they lived their daily lives and in their relationships with those closest to them. It is also likely to have led to untold inter-generational issues.

“You got used to it but it’s not normal. You didn’t think anything of it at the time you just got on with it.”  
- Participant at Consultation Event

“We never talked about these issues you just didn’t.”  
- Participant at Consultation Event

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<sup>3</sup> Towards A Better Future: The Trans-generational Impact of the Troubles on Mental Health, Prepared for the Commission for Victims and Survivors by Ulster University, March 2015

<sup>4</sup> Addressing the psychosocial needs of young men: the case for Northern Ireland, Gallagher & Hamber, 2014

“I have seen a lot of impacts, psychological trauma in parents and poor coping mechanisms coming down through generations.”

- Participant at Consultation Event

It is clear therefore that the proposals contained in this consultation are an issue for everyone. This will include those who do not necessarily identify themselves as a victim or survivor but who have been affected by the conflict in some way. It is vital therefore that engagement with this consultation process is as wide as possible so that the resulting mechanisms are fit for purpose and can address the needs of all victims and survivors, families and future generations.

“Everyone in Northern Ireland should get a copy of this consultation. It should have been put through our doors the same way as the Good Friday Agreement.”

- Participant at Consultation Event

Despite the need for meaningful and widespread engagement on these important issues it is feared that the consultation may not reach those who have vital contributions to make about its proposals:

*“The lack of a high-profile public information campaign could result in thousands of victims and survivors in Northern Ireland missing out on the opportunity to have a say on the institutions designed to give them access to justice, information and services.”*<sup>5</sup>

We echo the concerns of the Commissioner for Victims and Survivors about the lack of publicity around this consultation process and the resulting potential for limiting responses. These proposals have the potential to

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<sup>5</sup> Judith Thompson, Commissioner for Victims and Survivors, 26 July 2018  
<https://www.cvsni.org/news/2018/july/legacy-consultation-in-danger-of-low-ni-response/>

transform the lives of victims and survivors in Northern Ireland and ultimately this society as a whole. It is therefore critical that victims and survivors are fully engaged in this process and have the opportunity to put their views forward.

In our engagement events it was clear that many of the women had not heard about the consultation taking place and therefore did not know any of the detail about the proposals. There was work to be done in assisting the women to understand the proposals in the consultation before discussions could take place to engage their views. This is a complex issue and there is much to read and understand around the proposals contained in it. For some groups especially those who are more marginalised it is difficult to properly consult their views without first supporting them to properly understand the proposals.

We acknowledge the valuable outreach work carried out by the Commission for Victims and Survivors around this consultation. However we remain concerned about the lack of publicity around such an important consultation. In order for the consultation process to be genuine and effective there needed to have been a proper publicity and outreach campaign to inform people about the proposals and help to ensure maximum engagement.

We welcome the Secretary of State's announcement to extend the consultation period to 5<sup>th</sup> October which allowed us to further canvas the opinions of women. However we remain disappointed that the consultation was held over the summer months. We feel that holding the consultation over the summer, in addition to a lack of publicity around the proposals, will have reduced the potential to engage people in this process.

With particular reference to the women's sector the summer months can be the most difficult in terms of resourcing. Staffing levels in women's centres are often greatly reduced due to childcare demands, holidays and the operation of summer activities such as summer schemes. This makes it difficult to get groups of women together to discuss their views on

consultations. We would have liked to see a consultation period that avoided the summer months completely.

“It is hard to get views in especially over the summer months when women’s groups are off or have childcare activities arranged and are now busy preparing for the start of the new school year.”  
- Participant at Consultation Event

It is important to note that setting the timing of this consultation over the summer months caused the women in our engagement events to question how meaningful this consultation exercise really was. They were concerned that their views would not be taken into account and they would not be listened to.

“You know what they say if you want something to go through quickly consult on it over the summer.”  
- Participant at Consultation Event

“Will we really be listened to?”  
- Participant at Consultation Event

## 2.1 Involvement of Women in the Consultation Process

Given the extensive role of women in the peace process in Northern Ireland and the success of women’s involvement in peace negotiations around the world it is vital that women’s voices are central in addressing the legacy of the past. *“The marginalisation of women can delay or undermine the achievement of sustainable peace, security and reconciliation.”*<sup>6</sup> Research suggests that women’s participation in peace negotiations makes the resulting agreement 64% less likely to fail and 35% more likely to last at least 15

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<sup>6</sup> S/2010/173. <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7b65BF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7d/WPS%20S2010%20173.pdf>

years.<sup>7</sup> It is of great detriment to this consultation if the voices of women and the organisations who work with them are not meaningfully heard.

We are very concerned that there was no active engagement, on the part of the NIO, with the women's sector in Northern Ireland to inform and encourage responses to this consultation. It was apparent at our engagement events that many of the women present had not heard about the consultation. Some of the women's groups represented at these events also reported that they had received no correspondence from the NIO to inform them about the consultation exercise. This lack of engagement with the sector meant the women were questioning if their views would even be listened to.

"They didn't get in touch with anyone in the women's movement about this consultation. What confidence do we have in getting our voices heard when we weren't told about this?"

- Participant at Consultation Event

"We didn't receive anything to ask us our views. There was nothing specifically acknowledging us as a women's centre and that our voice could be relevant to this consultation."

- Participant at Consultation Event

## 2.2 Representation and Participation of Women

*"Sustainable and durable peace requires the participation of women and girls, as well as the integration of gender perspectives in all reconstruction processes."<sup>8</sup>*

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<sup>7</sup> Desirée Nilsson (2012) Anchoring the Peace: Civil Society Actors in Peace Accords and Durable Peace, *International Interactions*, 38:2, 243-266, DOI: [10.1080/03050629.2012.659139](https://doi.org/10.1080/03050629.2012.659139)

<sup>8</sup> Women, Peace and Security, Study submitted by the Secretary-General pursuant to Security Council resolution 1325 (2000), p111, United Nations, 2002, <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/public/eWPS.pdf>

Research across the world has shown the importance of women's involvement in peace and reconciliation work. Women's perspectives must be reflected in the establishment and governance of all the legacy institutions. *"All key peacebuilding and reconstruction strategies - including shared-learning with other societies in conflict - should be informed by women's perspectives."*<sup>9</sup>

To date, the UK government has not followed the recommendations of the CEDAW Committee from 2008 to fully implement UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (UN SCR 1325) on Women, Peace and Security in Northern Ireland.<sup>10</sup>

UN SCR 1325 demands recognition of the role of women in conflict prevention, management and resolution and calls on the international community to take specific steps to enhance the meaningful participation of women in these processes, as well as to protect women in situations of conflict and post conflict transition. Actions to increase women's participation in both formal political decision-making and in the informal sphere of policy influence is essential if women are to be seen as more than either victims, carers or passive observers.<sup>11</sup>

In engaging with women there were many discussions about their experiences of the conflict here. The women were very much of the view that what they lived through and experienced was a war situation. They believed it had all the characteristics of a war and viewing it as anything else negates what they went through.

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<sup>9</sup> Peacebuilding and The Women's Sector in Northern Ireland, Claire Pierson and Katy Radford, Institute for Conflict Research,

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.un-documents.net/sr1325.htm>

<sup>11</sup> Women, Peace and Security: Women's Rights and Gender Equality, Strategic Guide and Toolkit, Bronagh Hinds, Debbie Donnelly, June 2014

“They are not prepared to acknowledge it as a war and deal with it the way other countries have dealt with it. To me that is a real slap in the face – they are trivialising it.”

- Participant at Consultation Event

Full implementation of UN SCR 1325 would ensure the representation and participation of women in these legacy institutions. Unfortunately we see no evidence of a commitment to involve women in the establishment and/or governance of these institutions.

**Recommendation:**

**The UK Government should accept the application of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 in Northern Ireland through provisions made within the UK National Action Plan to ensure women’s participation in peace building and political processes.**

We are concerned that the current proposals for the setting up of the four institutions will result in mostly male appointments. Indeed this has already happened in the setting up of another Stormont House Agreement body the Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition. Of the 15 Commission members only one is a woman.<sup>12</sup> “*Women have been written out of issues to do with the legacy of the past as their issues have been seen as secondary or personal.*”<sup>13</sup> We firmly believe that there needs to be formal gender balance in the setting up of the legacy institutions.

In her research Dr Claire Pierson highlights the importance of making gender more central to the analysis of conflict and peacebuilding.<sup>14</sup> “*Women continue to be left at the margins of processes to discuss and resolve ongoing*

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<sup>12</sup> <https://www.fictcommission.org/en/commission>

<sup>13</sup> An Inquiry into the position of women in Northern Ireland since the Peace Agreement, Summary Report, NIWEP

<sup>14</sup> Claire Pierson; One Step Forwards, Two Steps Back: Women’s Rights 20 Years after the Good Friday Agreement, *Parliamentary Affairs*, Volume 71, Issue 2, 1 April 2018, Pages 461–481, <https://doi.org/10.1093/pa/gsx032>

*contentious and conflict-related issues. Such silencing of gendered experience leaves out integral issues and perspectives on both the future of Northern Ireland and legacies of the past.”<sup>15</sup>*

Progress has been made in increasing women’s political representation in both the Assembly and in the leadership of political parties however this does not assume a more progressive focus on gender policy issues.<sup>16</sup> Indeed the proposals in this consultation continue to focus on traditional religious and political grounds. *“Feminist analysis of the consociational model has shown that women struggle to get equal representation under these structures, and that the primacy of ethno-national identity tends to push alternative identity issues off the radar.”<sup>17</sup>*

The development of these legacy processes should have been used as an opportunity to promote gender equality and to ensure the participation and involvement of women. This should not merely be a tick-box exercise but a way of ensuring that the resulting institutions effectively deliver for victims and survivors. *“The EU considers peace processes as opportunities to promote women’s empowerment, gender equality, gender mainstreaming and respect for women’s rights within resulting peace agreements and in its interventions will seek to ensure that these issues are integrated and prioritised in the subsequent peace building and post conflict reconstruction phase.”<sup>18</sup>*

If gender is not integrated from the outset of the process it will not receive the necessary attention and priority throughout the remainder of the process. Gender parity should be a priority in all institutions and processes dealing with the past.

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<sup>15</sup> <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/the-marginalisation-of-womens-rights-in-northern-ireland-20-years-after-the-good-friday-agreement/>

<sup>16</sup> Ibid

<sup>17</sup> Ibid

<sup>18</sup> Council of the European Union 15671/1/08, p13 para 25.

**Recommendation:**

**A specific group responsible for overseeing the integration of gender into dealing with the past should be established as a priority.**

**Recommendation:**

**The final Bill should make specific provision for women’s involvement and effective participation in all stages including design, implementation and evaluation.**

### **2.3 Learning from the Women’s Sector**

We believe that the women’s sector has a huge amount to contribute around addressing the legacy of the past. Women are a significant presence in victims and community organisations in both providing and receiving services and their experiences are central to this process.

Many women’s centres opened in the heart of communities where the impact of the conflict had been greatest. They opened in response to a need in their local communities which was not being met by Government or anyone else. Women’s centres are often in the best place to contribute to addressing the needs of victims and survivors because they operate within local communities and are trusted to do this work. They are able to reach and engage those who are the most marginalised and potentially some of those most affected by the legacy of the Troubles.

There is much to learn from work already undertaken by the women’s sector in peace building, reconciliation, storytelling and engagement with marginalised groups. It is vital that this valuable learning and experience forms part of the development of this legacy process.

“Women’s Centres, like Footprints, have been doing peace and reconciliation work for years.”

- Participant at Consultation Event

Many of the women in the engagement groups talked passionately about the work the women's sector was already doing and had been doing for years arising out of the impact of the Troubles. These women's groups already deal with the effects of the past conflict in terms of addressing trauma, mental health issues, alcoholism, addictions to prescription and illegal drugs, domestic violence, parenting issues and isolation.

The women stressed the importance of a community-led approach to some of the proposals in the consultation believing that a bottom-up approach would ensure better engagement and trust in the process.

"It needs people working at grass roots level. There needs to be a bottom-up approach so that everyone's voices will be heard."

- Participant at Consultation Event

"The community needs to have a bigger role in this – there's trust at community level."

- Participant at Consultation Event

### **Recommendation:**

**The women's sector must be fully involved in the legacy process. There is much to be learned from the successful work of the women's sector on peace and reconciliation and in the way that women's centres operate and engage with their local communities.**

## **2.4 Resourcing**

The level of funding and likely timescales proposed in the consultation also give rise for concern. The UK Government has committed to providing funding of up to £30m per annum for five years to support the establishment

and working of the four institutions.<sup>19</sup> In a letter to the NI Affairs Committee, the Chief Constable estimated the bill for the PSNI's overall organisational effort towards legacy for the 2017/18 financial year "*could be in the region of £25m*".<sup>20</sup> This would suggest that the total financial contribution from Government could be nearly completely swallowed up by the Historical Investigations Unit alone. In addition the 5 year time frame seems unrealistic given the volume of cases left to be investigated.

We believe that the institutions need to be properly resourced in terms of both time and money so that they are truly fit for purpose and can achieve the desired outcomes for victims and survivors. If the institutions are not properly resourced it will damage the credibility of the process, fail victims and survivors and ultimately this society as a whole. The Bill should include a commitment to resourcing so that the institutions can effectively achieve what they have been set up to do in a timely manner.

**Recommendation:**

**The final Bill should include a provision to ensure that all the institutions are adequately resourced, in terms of both time and money, to effectively perform their tasks.**

## **2.5 Current political situation**

Many of the proposals contained in this consultation are contingent upon a functioning Government in Northern Ireland. For example, OFMDFM and the NI Executive are to make nominations to the Implementation and Reconciliation Group (IRG), the First Minister and Deputy First Minister are to make appointments to the Independent Commission on Information Retrieval (ICIR) and the Northern Ireland Policing Board is to provide governance for the Historical Investigations Unit (HIU).

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<sup>19</sup> Page 58,

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/709091/Consultation\\_Paper\\_Addressing\\_the\\_Legacy\\_of\\_Northern\\_Irelands\\_Past.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/709091/Consultation_Paper_Addressing_the_Legacy_of_Northern_Irelands_Past.pdf)

<sup>20</sup> PSNI chief tells of frustration as policing the past costs soar, Belfast Telegraph, Rebecca Black, 12 Jan 2018 <https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/psni-chief-tells-of-frustration-as-policing-the-past-costs-soar-36480743.html>

There are questions to be asked about what happens in the absence of a fully functioning Government in Northern Ireland. How will the institutions be established and governed without it? Even if devolution was restored tomorrow workable arrangements need to be put in place to deal with governance issues should the NI Assembly collapse again in the future. There should be safeguards to ensure that the operation and resourcing of the proposed institutions is not negatively impacted by the lack of devolved Government here.

Women at the engagement events were exasperated by the lack of political progress here and how it is holding everything back. They want to see things changing and addressing the needs of victims and survivors is part of that.

“We’re stuck every way with no Assembly.”  
- Participant at Consultation Event

“It’s not moving on it’s going round and round in circles.”  
- Participant at Consultation Event

### 3. Specific comments

In our response we have not answered the consultation questions as our feedback did not neatly fall within the prescribed questions. We have instead grouped our response under relevant headings.

#### **Current system for addressing the past**

There was consensus in the engagement events held with women that the current system for addressing the past was not serving the needs of victims and survivors. The women were clear that there is a need for reform of the current system.

“The process does not unite victims it has actually caused divisions.”

- Participant at Consultation Event

“The process has ‘let people down’ right across the divide. Those who went through the HET were let down. The process is too highbrow.”

- Participant at Consultation Event

“The current system leaves victims powerless, they are withdrawing.”

- Participant at Consultation Event

#### **Stormont House Agreement Proposals**

In discussions around the four proposed legacy institutions the women mostly agreed that the institutions could help with the issue of legacy in Northern Ireland. However this is very much dependent on how they are established and run. Evident in the discussions with women were concerns about governance, political interference, resourcing and the support available for victims and survivors through each process. These issues will be discussed in more detail under each individual institution.

“These principles are on the surface good but narratives can ‘unpick’ these.”  
- Participant at Consultation Event

Participants also expressed disappointment that the proposals for the legacy institutions did not include any meaningful involvement from victims and survivors groups and other groups who work directly with victims and survivors. Discussions around the need for involvement of groups who work directly with victims and survivors were prominent with suggestions that representation from these groups needs to be included at all levels of the proposed institutions including in their governance.

We suggest that there is a need for co-design and collaboration between the relevant departments, victims and survivors groups and other relevant stakeholders such as the women’s sector. This would help to engender confidence in the new institutions, which is critical to their success.

**Recommendation:**

**There is a greater need for involvement of victims and survivors groups and other relevant stakeholders such as the women’s sector in the design of the institutions.**

**Historical Investigations Unit (HIU)**

Families of victims have reported many problems and dissatisfaction with the operation of the HET in the past. Many families had very negative experiences with the HET process and there is a clear need for a more victim-centred approach. Women at the engagement events agreed that the HET was not victim-centred and some gave examples of people who had received letters and reports from the HET when they were not wanted. This had caused enormous hurt and upset to their families. Operation Kenova<sup>21</sup> was mentioned as a model of good practice in terms of communicating with families.

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<sup>21</sup> <https://www.opkenova.co.uk/>

**Recommendation:**

**Lessons should be learned from Operation Kenova in the establishment and operation of the HIU.**

The HIU Director will need to inspire confidence across a diverse community in order that the HIU process can be trusted. While this appointment will not be institutionally driven it remains key that this post is completely impartial and independent. This may require international oversight which could go some way to building trust in this process.

The HIU Director will have a very powerful role with complete operational responsibility for the HIU. They will receive all the information about cases and have decision-making responsibility for whether this information should be shared with families. We question whether this amount of power should reside with one person and whether this will call into question the independence of this role.

We welcome that the consultation makes provision for dedicated family support staff to ensure that the next of kin are involved and have access to advice throughout the process. This is the only way to ensure that the process is centred around them and works for them.

It is likely that an investigation by the HIU will re-awaken trauma for many family members, victims and survivors. It is essential that they should have access to high quality support services throughout this process. These support services need to be put in place from the very beginning so that proper care and support is available from the outset and continues for as long as is required. It is vital that these support services are sufficiently resourced so that victims and survivors can access the help they need, when they need it and in the way they need it. This will be key to ensuring that victims and survivors can deal with their pain and suffering and help them face the future.

**Recommendation:**

**The availability of high quality support services should be specifically written into and resourced in the HIU process to help victims and survivors deal with their pain and trauma.**

In carrying out its duties “the HIU cannot do anything to prejudice the national security interests of the United Kingdom.”<sup>22</sup> National Security is not defined in UK legislation and this gave the women in the engagement events cause for concern. The women considered if this would be used as an excuse not to give families the truth. If it is perceived that National Security is being used in this way then it will remove any confidence and trust in this process.

**Recommendation:**

**An independent judicial mechanism should be set up tasked with reviewing decisions made on National Security.**

**Independent Commission on Information Retrieval (ICIR)**

We are very concerned that there should be appropriate support structures in place to help families in the ICIR process. Similar to the HIU it is also likely that this process will re-awaken trauma for those wishing to get information about what happened their loved one. If this pain and trauma is not properly addressed it will do little to help the recovery of the individuals concerned or help to build reconciliation in this society.

“What support is there for dealing with the outcomes?”  
- Participant at Consultation Event

Discussions around the issue of support for families going through this process were about providing the right support at the right time and in the right place. It is important that support is available from victims and survivors groups who have the necessary experience to do this work.

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<sup>22</sup> Page 35,

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/709091/Consultation\\_Paper\\_Addressing\\_the\\_Legacy\\_of\\_Northern\\_Irelands\\_Past.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/709091/Consultation_Paper_Addressing_the_Legacy_of_Northern_Irelands_Past.pdf)

“Victims and survivors should be able to get all the support they need to get them through their trauma.”  
- Participant at Consultation Event

**Recommendation:**

**The availability of high quality support services should be specifically written into and resourced in the ICIR process to help victims and survivors deal with their pain and trauma.**

Women at our engagement events were also concerned that many people do not see themselves as ‘victims’ or ‘survivors’ and therefore would not naturally see themselves approaching a victims and survivors group. Many people have experienced incidents throughout the Troubles and were affected by them but do not identify as a victim or survivor. Figures from the Commission for Victims and Survivors state that victims and survivors groups represent up to 20,000 people in Northern Ireland but there are more than 200,000 people who have been affected by the conflict here.<sup>23</sup>

“Some people have associations with the word ‘victim’. It wasn’t a normal society that we lived in.”  
- Participant at Consultation Event

Who is going to give emotional wellbeing and support to people who don’t go to a victims and survivors group? How to effectively engage and support people who do not identify as a victim or survivor must be a key consideration in this consultation.

The women were exercised about this point talking about the support many of their women’s groups provide to families day and daily around these issues. This support is often provided in the course of talking to women about other

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<sup>23</sup> <https://www.cvsni.org/news/2018/july/legacy-consultation-in-danger-of-low-ni-response/>

issues they have such as childcare, access to education and training, social security or simply providing a space for women to talk.

“All our groups work with victims and survivors but are not recognised as victims and survivors groups and get no recognition or resources to do this work. A lot of people don’t want to use ‘victims and survivors’ groups and would prefer to come to our groups. We source what is required for them.”

- Participant at Consultation Event

We believe there should be a specific commitment to involve not only victims and survivors groups in the provision of support for families but other community organisations such as women’s centres. The women felt that the ICIR could learn valuable lessons from the work of the women’s sector in providing support to families in these circumstances.

“This centre [Footprints Women’s Centre] was set up because support was needed in the community and it didn’t exist.”

- Participant at Consultation Event

**Recommendation:**

**The knowledge and experience of the women’s sector should be harnessed in order to better support those who do not access the services of victims and survivors groups.**

The proposed governance of the ICIR gave participants at engagement events cause for alarm. All five people appointed to the ICIR will be appointed by Governments. We question whether this will inspire confidence and trust in this process. Participants felt that victims and survivors groups should be represented in the governance of the ICIR.

“Needs involvement from victims and survivors groups  
– there needs to be representation here.”  
- Participant at Consultation Event

We again suggest that valuable lessons can be learned from the community and voluntary sector, including the women’s sector, in the establishment and operation of the ICIR.

**Recommendation:**

**Victims and survivors groups should be represented in the governance of the ICIR.**

**Recommendation:**

**The community and voluntary sector, including the women’s sector, should be involved in the establishment and operation of the ICIR.**

**Oral History Archive (OHA)**

Participants welcomed the need for somewhere for people to share their experiences of the Troubles and felt that this was important in recognising and understanding what happened in Northern Ireland if it was done properly.

*“There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you.”<sup>24</sup>*

There were discussions around the work that had already been done within the Women’s Sector on oral history and storytelling projects. The women welcomed the fact that the OHA would include existing oral history projects and that these stories would all be held in a central place which would make it easier for people to access it.

However participants felt that the OHA should have a strong involvement from the community and voluntary sector from the outset. The voluntary and community sector, and in particular the women’s sector, has played a key role

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<sup>24</sup> Poet Maya Angelou, I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings

in bringing together groups of people and their families from both communities to tell their stories. The sector has worked on many projects to promote storytelling, conflict resolution and reconciliation. Participants at the focus groups felt that many lessons could be learned from the women's sector in terms of both engagement in the process and in the collection of stories. They felt that there was a need for this to be a community-led initiative so that possible contributors would feel comfortable talking and would be more likely to record their stories.

“Our groups have been working with victims and survivors for years. They need to give resourcing to groups who already do this kind of work. Our groups get these stories every day. Put money into groups on the ground who are working with victims and survivors and who can support them.”

- Participant at Consultation Event

There is insufficient detail in this consultation to determine whether the establishment of the OHA will involve the expertise that already exists within the community and voluntary sector on this type of work. If it does not it will be a major failure in the establishment of a mechanism which could ensure that victims and survivors are listened to. The consultation document makes reference to a steering group containing people with experience of oral history to provide advice on the functions of the OHA.

**Recommendation:**

**We strongly recommend that the OHA steering group should include members from the women's sector and the wider community and voluntary sector who have the experience to provide valuable insights into this work.**

“Where’s the reconciliation work around the OHA going to come from? We are already doing this work in communities.”

- Participant at Consultation Event

In addition there was discussion around support structures for those involved in the OHA process. It is likely that in the course of their contribution that painful memories and hurt will be brought to the fore and could result in a re-awakening of trauma. In addition those reading contributions to the archive could experience trauma. It is vitally important that any such trauma is addressed and that individuals are properly supported in working their way through their feelings. The consultation makes brief reference to support arrangements in the rules that PRONI will develop around the function of the OHA. We believe that this needs to be much more explicitly detailed in the arrangements for the OHA from the outset so that it is an integral part of the process and resourced as such.

People will be more likely to take part, and the organisations that work with victims and survivors are more likely to encourage engagement with this process, if they know that proper structures are in place to deal with any resulting trauma or distress.

**Recommendation:**

**The availability of high quality support services should be specifically written into and resourced in the OHA process to help victims and survivors deal with their pain and trauma.**

In general there were concerns about the lack of detail around the OHA. There was insufficient detail around the format of how oral histories would be provided. It is difficult to make further comment on this proposal without the necessary detail.

There were some discussions around the location of the OHA in PRONI. There was concern that this may create some barriers due to the access arrangements for the building, its location and if marginalised groups would be comfortable in this venue. Some of the women were quite happy to go to PRONI as they had already been there but others felt it needed to be more community-based so that some groups of people would be more encouraged to tell their stories, for example, women and those living in rural areas. If the OHA is to be based in PRONI then they need to be working closely with community groups to ensure they are reaching out and engaging with everyone who wants to tell their story.

We have concerns about the level of power that will reside with the Deputy Keeper in PRONI. This senior civil servant will have the power to make decisions about what is included, what is not included and what will be destroyed. It brings into question the independence of this process if this amount of power rests with one individual. Due to the high level of subjectivity within this role we believe that there is a key need for oversight of the decisions made about what is included in the archive. Without independent oversight it could damage the trust and confidence in this process and ultimately lead to its failure to deliver on acknowledgment of the past.

“There are no resources for the community and voluntary sector and there is no Ethics Committee to make decisions.”

- Participant at Consultation Event

We believe that the only way to ensure that people are properly engaged and encouraged to record their stories is by involving the women’s sector and the wider community and voluntary sector in the OHA process from the very beginning.

There is important learning to be gained from women’s groups who have led the way in collecting deeply personal and traumatic stories about their own and their family’s experiences of the Troubles. In one such oral history project

'Beyond the Silence'<sup>25</sup> which focused solely on the experiences of women the researcher told of the challenges and rewards of such a project:

*"it struck me just how many of these women presumed their story was unimportant, and how they found it cathartic to speak out. In the majority of instances, women expressed gratitude that someone actually asked to hear about their experiences, and some stories had been buried so deeply, they had yet to be shared with other family members. While many women are resilient, others remain fragile and needed referred on to support services to manage trauma and stress."*<sup>26</sup>

This quotation highlights some of the engagement issues which the OHA will need to consider. In order for it to be a valuable resource it needs to ensure engagement with those who have stories to tell. It is often those who are the most marginalised that have the most to say but who are the least likely to participate. In order to do this effectively the OHA needs to engage with the community and voluntary sector including the women's sector. The women's sector has years of experience in working with marginalised groups of women and in securing their engagement in storytelling work.

It was evident in our engagement events that women have a lot to say and want to tell their stories if they are given the appropriate opportunity to do so. The sharing of deeply personal and often painful stories often only happens in an environment that is familiar and trusted, for example, a local women's centre/group. Facilitating the provision of oral history in familiar and trusted settings may be key to engaging those who are more marginalised in this process.

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<sup>25</sup> Arising from the oral history strand of Creggan Enterprises' Unheard Voices Programme  
Julieann Campbell, Breaking their silence: women tell their stories of the Troubles, Irish Times, May 6, 2016 <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/breaking-their-silence-women-tell-their-stories-of-the-troubles-1.2637739>

<sup>26</sup> Ibid

**Recommendation:**

**The OHA should learn from the work of the women’s sector in providing safe and trusted spaces and in engaging marginalised groups in existing oral history/storytelling projects.**

As previously stated many people do not identify themselves as victims or survivors. There are those with valuable stories to tell who do not see themselves in this category and do not use victims and survivors groups. It is possible that they may not identify themselves with the OHA process and may therefore not take part. The key to engaging with these people is to work closely with the existing community and voluntary groups who already work with and engage these people.

**Implementation and Reconciliation Group (IRG)**

The IRG has a very important task as it is responsible for promoting reconciliation and encouraging acknowledgement. The women attending the engagement events were unanimous in the view that the structure proposed in the consultation document would not result in the promotion of reconciliation. All of the appointments to the Governance of the IRG are political appointments and the women felt this would simply result in an ‘orange and green’ group which becomes more about replicating division than promoting reconciliation.

“In Northern Ireland we are already split into orange and green. Right away the IRG is divisive in the way it has been set up.”

- Participant at Consultation Event

“The way the politicians behave now is evidence for how this isn’t going to work.”

- Participant at Consultation Event

The women also discussed their concerns about the representation of women in the Governance of the IRG. They felt that it is likely that most of the appointments to the IRG would be men. There was no commitment in the

proposals to take into account gender, age or diversity of any kind. The women felt that this would be detrimental to the IRG.

“There is a wider acknowledgement that women’s voices need to be heard yet there is no sign of taking into account gender balance here just orange and green. More than likely these will be men. Orange and green men but they will be men.”

- Participant at Consultation Event

There was lively discussion among the women at the engagement events about the reconciliation work that has been going on in the women’s sector for years. Some of this work has been going on since the very start of the Troubles. There are important lessons to learn from this work and the involvement of the women’s sector and the wider community and voluntary sector should inform the IRG’s work in promoting reconciliation.

**Recommendation:**

**The learning and experience of the women’s sector should inform the IRGs work in promoting reconciliation.**

“If they would invest this money into community groups who are already doing this work, in particular in the women’s movement, then this would work. I haven’t heard any sectarianism in any of the women’s groups we work with and we have been working together since the start of the Troubles. We have been doing this work for over 30 years since before the Good Friday Agreement.”

- Participant at Consultation Event

It is important to note that the women talked about the central role of women and women’s groups in dealing with the trauma coming from the Troubles and in promoting peace and reconciliation. Despite this, many of the women’s groups were seeing their funding being cut. The women felt that the involvement of women was central to the issue of true reconciliation and

therefore the women's sector should be properly resourced to continue and develop this work.

"Women have held communities together yet services for women are being cut and cut and cut."  
- Participant at Consultation Event

**Recommendation:**

**The women's sector should be adequately resourced to continue and develop its work on peace and reconciliation within and between communities.**

**Overall view of Stormont House Agreement Proposals**

The package of principles proposed by the Stormont House Agreement must follow the key guiding principles agreed by the Victims and Survivors Forum for the establishment of new organisations to effectively deal with the past. To ensure that the package of measures commands the confidence and trust of the community it must be co-designed and collaborative, victim-centred, independent and impartial, inclusive and fit for purpose.<sup>27</sup>

It must be recognised that it is at community-level where the need exists and that it is often at community-level where issues are best dealt with and supported. Appropriate processes to deal with the past must draw on the learning, experience and knowledge that exists within the women's sector, in local communities and in existing victims organisations. Throughout our response to this consultation we have called on the Government to involve the women's sector and to learn from women's experiences so that this package of measures can effectively address the legacy of the past and secure a brighter future for everyone in Northern Ireland.

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<sup>27</sup> <https://www.cvsni.org/media/1316/key-guiding-principles-for-establishment-of-new-organisations-to-effectively-deal-with-the-past.pdf>

**Recommendation:**

**Appropriate processes to deal with the past must draw on the learning, experience and knowledge that exists within the women’s sector, in local communities and in victims and survivors groups.**

**Impact of the Stormont House Agreement Proposals**

We believe that unless gender is integrated from the outset the Stormont House Agreement proposals will negatively impact on women. Gender must be fully integrated into the processes for dealing with the past (including design, implementation and evaluation). Without this it will structurally determine that gender does not receive the necessary attention and priority it should in all of the processes for dealing with the past.

**Recommendation:**

**A specific group responsible for overseeing the integration of gender into dealing with the past should be established.**

**Opportunity to promote equality of opportunity or good relations**

Other accountability mechanisms may be more useful in the promotion of equality of opportunity and good relations such as Article 14 of the European Convention on Human Rights. The Equality Coalition has suggested that there should be additions to the nine current Section 75 categories. One of the proposals has been the explicit inclusion of a ground relating to socio-economic status.<sup>28</sup> Section 75 has nothing to say about economic disadvantage.

In Northern Ireland 370,000 people live in poverty, 110,000 of whom are children<sup>29</sup>. Northern Ireland has higher worklessness and lower employment than other parts of the UK which are important factors affecting poverty in Northern Ireland<sup>30</sup>. Social deprivation and poverty serve to exacerbate the

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<sup>28</sup> Equal to the Task? Investigative powers and effective enforcement of the ‘Section 75’ equality duty, An Equality Coalition, research report, January 2018

<sup>29</sup> Poverty in Northern Ireland 2018, Joseph Rowntree Foundation Briefing, Helen Barnard, February 2018

<sup>30</sup> Ibid

mental health impact of the consequences of the conflict.<sup>31</sup> Poverty is one of the biggest issues in determining people's life outcomes and must therefore be a central consideration in policy making and implementation.

Around 670,000 people live in rural communities in Northern Ireland (around 37% of the population).<sup>32</sup> This must also be an important consideration in this consultation. It is imperative that women in rural areas are listened to and supported so that their historic invisibility is not mirrored in a post-conflict society.<sup>33</sup>

Consideration must be given to the barriers that rural women face in effective participation. The accessibility of education, training, work and childcare provision and the cost and availability of public transport are factors in determining women's participation particularly in rural areas.<sup>34</sup> Networking, collaboration and genuine partnership within and between organisations and different sectors are vital to support effective peace building in rural communities.<sup>35</sup>

### **Additional Comments**

Paragraphs 26-29 of the Stormont House Agreement outline a number of actions for victims and survivors which do not form part of this consultation including access to high quality services, a Mental Health Trauma Service, a pension for those severely physically injured and the availability of advocate-counsellors to victims and survivors. It is our view that the actions contained in these paragraphs are also important to the legacy process and must be implemented in tandem with the institutions and without delay.

Access to high quality services by victims and survivors must be a priority in addressing the legacy of the past. This should be an integral part of the

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<sup>31</sup> Towards A Better Future: The Trans-generational Impact of the Troubles on Mental Health, Prepared for the Commission for Victims and Survivors by Ulster University, March 2015

<sup>32</sup> <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/dard/rural-statistics-infographic-2016-final.pdf>

<sup>33</sup> Rural Women's Manifesto, Rural Women Speak, NIRWN, June 2015

<sup>34</sup> Ibid

<sup>35</sup> Rural Communities...Polite avoidance and denial – rhetoric or reality? Tony Macauley, March 2013

legacy proposals and a genuine commitment must be made to ensure that all service provision for victims and survivors is of the highest quality.

We particularly welcome the commitment in the Stormont House Agreement for the Northern Ireland Executive to implement a comprehensive Mental Trauma Service. While this does not form part of this consultation we believe that this is a key aspect in supporting victims and survivors and providing rehabilitation. The Mental Trauma Service should be set up immediately with sufficient resources to meet the needs of victims. Access to the Mental Trauma Service should be specifically set out and integrated into each of the legacy institutions. This should include a commitment to adequate funding to ensure that it provides effective rehabilitation for those who need it and to sustain the participation of victims and survivors.

The women at our engagement events agreed that all the necessary help should be provided to help people deal with their issues arising out of the Troubles. The provision of services to support people suffering from mental health issues and trauma were seen by women to be very important. Added to this was the issue of trauma being passed on from generation to generation. This made it imperative that mental health issues should be addressed as a matter of priority.

“Mental health issues are transgenerational. We don't know how to talk about difficult things/violence here we just didn't talk about it. It was weak to not accept what was going on and just get on with things.”  
- Participant at Consultation Event

Effective advocacy is going to be critical in facilitating the engagement of victims and survivors in the legacy processes. We welcome the commitment in the Stormont House Agreement to provide access to advocate-counsellors. Again we would suggest that this needs to be an explicit part of each of the legacy processes with a commitment to adequate resources for this work. If

this is done properly it could help to offset the social exclusion and disillusion felt by many who feel they have been failed by the existing system.

**Recommendation:**

**The Mental Trauma Service should be set up immediately and sufficiently resourced. It should be specifically integrated into the arrangements for the legacy institutions to ensure access and funding.**

**Recommendation:**

**Access to advocate-counsellor provision should be set up immediately with sufficiently resourced. It should be specifically integrated into the arrangements for the legacy institutions to ensure access and funding.**

There are some other issues which are not included in the Stormont House Agreement which are relevant to this consultation and should warrant further consideration in these proposals:

- **Transgenerational impact of the Troubles** – traumatic experiences and exposure to violence can lead to adverse mental health and other consequences not only for the person themselves, but also for their children and potentially their grandchildren, resulting in a trans-generational cycle which impacts upon the well-being of subsequent generations.<sup>36</sup> Evidence of trans-generational impact was mentioned by some of the women at engagement events and the women felt that this needs specifically addressed so that these issues do not keep repeating themselves from one generation to the next.
- **Gender-based violence against women** – there are increasing levels of domestic violence experienced by women in Northern Ireland. In 2009/10 there were 6,436 female victims of domestic abuse crimes which rose to 9,042 in 2016/17. In 2017 69% of all domestic abuse victims were female.<sup>37</sup> In launching a recent study by the University of

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<sup>36</sup> Towards A Better Future: The Trans-generational Impact of the Troubles on Mental Health, Prepared for the Commission for Victims and Survivors by Ulster University, March 2015

<sup>37</sup> Trends in Domestic Abuse Incident and Crimes Recorded by the Police in Northern Ireland 2004/05 to 2016/17, PSNI, January 2018

Ulster<sup>38</sup> Professor Monica McWilliams said that the peace process “*has made a huge difference but there is still much work to do*”.<sup>39</sup> The conflict masked the perpetuation of domestic and sexual violence in Northern Ireland and this area needs further research to determine its extent.

- **Paramilitaries** – another enduring legacy of the conflict is ongoing paramilitary activity that continues to cause significant harm and distress to many families across Northern Ireland. Paramilitary organisations continue to control significant numbers of communities in disadvantaged areas leaving families on low incomes particularly vulnerable. Paramilitary activity also perpetuates the trans-generational impact of the Troubles with serious consequences for both physical and mental health.
- **Hidden legacy of the Troubles** – the lack of proper rehabilitation for many victims and survivors and others who lived through the Troubles has led to a hidden legacy of the conflict. Some people have turned to alcohol and prescription drugs as a coping mechanism for what they have experienced.
- **Impact on women** – there are wider impacts on women who lived through the Troubles which have not been properly recognised or researched. For example, the limiting of opportunities for women to access education, training or work because they took on a caring role for a victim or survivor. There is a need to gather statistics about the numbers of children who have had to be brought up without a father or male role model. What have been the consequences for women? Have they received reparations and compensation for the injustices they have suffered? What have been the effects on women’s mental health and the mental health of their children?<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Intimate Partner Violence in Conflict and Post-Conflict Societies, Insights and Lessons from Northern Ireland, Jessica Leigh Doyle and Monica McWilliams, Transitional Justice Institute, University of Ulster, May 2018

<sup>39</sup> <http://www.irishnews.com/news/2018/09/13/news/study-first-of-its-kind-to-compare-years-during-and-after-the-troubles-on-abusive-relationships-1431700/?param=ds441rif44T>

<sup>40</sup> An Inquiry into the position of women in Northern Ireland since the Peace Agreement, Summary Report, NIWEP

#### **4. Conclusion**

We are pleased to see proposals being brought forward to address the pain and suffering of victims and survivors of the conflict in Northern Ireland. There is an agreed need for reform of the current process for handling legacy issues and a desire to move things forward for the benefit of everyone in Northern Ireland.

Given the significance of this consultation there was a need to ensure that as many people as possible were engaged in the process. In our engagement events with local women we found that most did not know any of the detail of the proposals and in fact most did not even know the consultation was taking place. The lack of a public information campaign and wide-reaching outreach programme about these proposals is a major downfall of this process and could lead to the exclusion of many victims, survivors and others with important contributions to make.

The proposals outlined in this consultation document could help to improve the situation for victims and survivors but it very much depends on the way the proposed institutions are set up and run. This must be done in a way that puts victims and survivors at the very centre of the process, is truly independent, inclusive and fit for purpose.

The institutions must be co-designed with victims and survivors and where relevant include the input of the wider voluntary and community sector and in particular the women's sector. The women's sector has many years of experience in peacebuilding and reconciliation work and the ability to engage those who are most marginalised.

Women's Centres are often located in the hearts of communities to meet the needs of local people that are not being met elsewhere. They provide trusted spaces where people can feel comfortable in talking about difficult issues and where they can receive the support they need to deal with the impact of these conversations. There is much to learn from where they are situated, how they

operate and engage with people and the valuable projects and services they provide around peace and reconciliation.

Many of the women we spoke to at engagement events were vocal about the importance of the work being done locally within women's centres around legacy issues and reconciliation. Much of this work has been ongoing for many years. They believed that this has been ignored in this consultation process and were disappointed that the role of the women's sector was neither acknowledged or included in the proposed legacy processes. The women also believed in the importance of a bottom-up approach to some of this work so that it was community-led. They felt that this would help to ensure engagement and trust in the legacy processes.

Women have played a central role in peacebuilding and reconciliation work in Northern Ireland for many years. The role and contribution of women to peacebuilding and conflict transformation throughout the Troubles and in the post-conflict period should be recognised and built on, not side-lined or ignored. Women are also still primarily the main person responsible for care within families and communities and as such have a vital role to play in furthering peace and dealing with the past. We fear that the proposals in this consultation will not result in the inclusion of women and this will be to the detriment of this process. The integration of gender balance in the proposed legacy institutions would help to ensure the success of these proposals and that women's voices are heard and valued.

If this consultation is going to truly make a difference to the lives of victims and survivors then it must be adequately resourced in terms of both time and funding to do this work. The level of funding and the timescales for the work of some of the institutions proposed in this consultation are woefully inadequate. If realistic commitments are not made in terms of resourcing it will erode confidence in the process and once again let down victims and survivors.

The provision of support services for those involved with the legacy institutions is critical to ensuring that victims and survivors can access the help they need to deal with their pain and trauma. The establishment of a Mental Trauma Service and the availability of advocate-counsellors for victims and survivors was a commitment in the Stormont House Agreement but does not form part of this consultation. We would argue that the provision of high quality support services needs to be an integral part of the proposals in this consultation and that specific resources should be set aside for this work.

There is a large number of people who have been affected by the Troubles but who do not access the services of victims and survivors groups. Many of these people will use other voluntary and community groups including the women's sector. Work needs to be done with the wider voluntary and community sector around informing, engaging and supporting these people in the legacy processes.

*"Peace is not just the absence of conflict; peace is the creation of an environment where all can flourish regardless of race, colour, creed, religion, gender, class, caste or any other social markers of difference."*

Nelson Mandela