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# Gender and Cross-border Cooperation on the Island of Ireland

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## ABSTRACT

This article investigates cross-border engagement between women's organisations and other groups working on gender equality policy. It draws on interviews with activists and practitioners and two seminars—one in Belfast and one in Dublin. It is set in the context of the post-Brexit debate on the future of the island of Ireland, and the international Women, Peace and Security agenda's emphasis on the role of women and the centrality of a gender equality perspective to peacebuilding. Participants had very positive attitudes to cross-border collaboration, but in practice there was very little cross-border engagement between groups, and this lack of activity predates Brexit. The key barriers to cross-border work were perceived to be post-Brexit political turmoil, a lack of appropriate funding and a lack of knowledge of

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policy differences between the two jurisdictions. Participants had very little knowledge of the 'other' jurisdiction and their views were strongly shaped by historic stereotypes.

## INTRODUCTION

The international research on United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 on the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda demonstrates that a focus on gender equality in peace processes, and in the negotiated outcomes of those processes, is an important factor in ensuring effective conflict resolution and also successful political transitions. This is based on evidence that women as community activists and civil society representatives are more willing to take part in cross-community engagement than elected representatives, and therefore they are important actors if the goal is to reach out to and engage with diverse communities that otherwise would be underrepresented in the major political and policy debates.<sup>1</sup> In the current contexts of debates on the future of the island of Ireland, this aspect of the public engagement of women's organisations and community groups takes on a particular relevance, not just for cross-border cooperation but also for cross-community engagement in Northern Ireland, which is also a key part of building a peaceful future for the island. The policy agenda on gender equality is an area of cross-community and cross-border cooperation that has not been sufficiently well developed. This policy area provides a point of entry for women's organisations into wider debates on political and policy change, while providing an essential element to these debates. Crucially, it also mainstreams gender issues and gender equality into the debates on the future of the island.

Taking the framework of the WPS agenda, this article examines cross-border cooperation between civil society organisations, especially those concerned with women's rights and gender equality. In particular it focuses on the way in which this cooperation is perceived by members and activists engaged in these issues, and what they see as the barriers to more effective cooperation as well as the potential for this form of

<sup>1</sup> Deirdre Heenan, 'Getting to go: women and community relations in Northern Ireland', *Community Development Journal* 32 (1) (1997), 87–95.

engagement. It is grounded in the realities of relationships on this island in the aftermath of Brexit, an event that shifted economic and social relationships between the two parts of the island as well as relationships within Northern Ireland.

This article is one of two based on a comparative analysis of public policy North and South and an analysis of cross-community and cross-border relationships between women's groups, in the context of the international debates on WPS.<sup>2</sup> Along with an analysis of law and policy, the research included a series of interviews conducted for this study in 2021 and 2022, and two consultative seminars (one held in Dublin and one in Belfast in late 2022).<sup>3</sup> The majority of those who participated in this research were members of NGOs and civil society groups concerned with the issue of gender equality and women's rights, in both the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, both urban and rural. Migrant voices were also included to make sure that their specific perspectives were not lost. Interviews were undertaken with academics whose research interests are peace and reconciliation and cross-community and cross-border collaboration as well as gender equality issues. The article discusses the current level of cross-community and cross-border collaboration on work with a gender equality dimension and the potential contribution to mutual understanding and discussion on a shared future of this type of engagement. As part of this analysis it assesses women activists' level of knowledge of relevant policies in the other jurisdiction and the level of cross-border collaboration on shared policy concerns. But first it considers the framework provided for this form of cross-border collaboration by the WPS agenda.

<sup>2</sup> United Nations, *Preventing conflict, transforming justice, securing the peace: a global study on the implementation of United Nations Security Council resolution 1325* (New York, 2015); Susan Willett, 'Introduction: Security Council Resolution 1325: assessing the impact on women, peace and security', *International Peacekeeping* 17 (2) (2010); Tajma Kapic, Eileen Connolly and John Doyle, 'Looking across the border: comparing gendered policy frameworks', *Irish Studies in International Affairs* 34 (2) (2023), 330–57.

<sup>3</sup> Interviewees or their organisations are not named, so those people could speak freely about cross-border and cross-community relationships. Most interviewees were members of NGOs and civil society groups concerned with the issue of gender equality and women's rights, both in the Republic and in Northern Ireland. The participants included a broadly representative section of those active in women's groups in Northern Ireland and the Republic, by age and background. They included people who mainly worked at community level in Northern Ireland, often in areas largely or exclusively made up of members of one of the main political communities there, and people who worked primarily in cross-community groups. In the South, interviewees reflected a mix of community-based and national-level advocacy organisations working on a wide range of issues. In addition, academics with a track record of engagement on these issues were interviewed as experts and politicians were interviewed about their perspectives on how women's groups engaged with the political system in advocacy work.

## WPS AGENDA ON THE ISLAND OF IRELAND AND THE IMPACT OF BREXIT

UNSCR 1325 (2000) and the subsequent UN Security Council resolutions that are related to it form the basis of the WPS agenda. The resolution was important as for the first time it recognised the role women played in, among other things, peacebuilding and post-conflict reconstruction and called for the increased participation of women ‘at all levels of decision-making’ relating to conflict resolution and reconstruction.<sup>4</sup> The WPS agenda is based on a long campaign by the international women’s civil society sector to gain recognition that the participation of women in peace negotiations and peacebuilding is essential to ensure gender equality in post-conflict states, and to ensure that it is inclusive of both mainstream and marginalised gendered perspectives.<sup>5</sup> The Good Friday Agreement (GFA) signed in 1998 predated UNSCR 1325 by two years, and as a result the WPS agenda is not integrated into the agreement and this has weakened the inclusion of a gender equality perspective in its policy outcomes.<sup>6</sup> Even with the intervention of the Women’s Coalition the negotiation of the agreement was a largely male affair, fitting into an international pattern of post-conflict peacebuilding being a masculinised process with little if any attention paid to gender equality.<sup>7</sup>

Even after the widespread international adoption of UNSCR 1325, its relevance to Northern Ireland or to cross-border relations on the island was not immediately recognised by either government. In the process of developing its National Action Plan on WPS the Irish government was lobbied by civil

<sup>4</sup> Claire Pierson and Katy Radford, *Peacebuilding in Northern Ireland and the women’s sector: an overview of reports and programmes* (Belfast, 2016), 6.

<sup>5</sup> Mary Caprioli, ‘Primed for violence: the role of gender inequality in predicting internal conflict’, *International Studies Quarterly* 49 (2) (2005), 161–78; Erik Melander, ‘Gender equality and intrastate armed conflict’, *International Studies Quarterly* 49 (4) (2005), 695–714; Claire Pierson, ‘Gendering peace in Northern Ireland: the role of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security’, *Capital and Class* 43 (1) (2019), 57–71; Shirley Graham, ‘A gender paradox: discourses on women in UN peacekeeping’, *Irish Studies in International Affairs* 27 (2016), 165–87.

<sup>6</sup> Kapic et al., ‘Looking across the border’, 333; Elena B. Stavrevska and Sarah Smith, ‘A different Women, Peace and Security is possible? Intersectionality in Women, Peace and Security resolutions and national action plans’, *European Journal of Politics and Gender* 5 (1) (2022), 63–82: 63.

<sup>7</sup> Ronan Kennedy, Claire Pierson and Jennifer Thomson, ‘Challenging identity hierarchies: gender and consociational power-sharing’, *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 18 (3) (2016), 618–33; Tajma Kapic, ‘The Dayton Peace Agreement in Bosnia and Herzegovina and lessons for the design of political institutions for a United Ireland’, *Irish Studies in International Affairs* 33 (2) (2022), 1–26; Rupert Taylor, ‘The injustice of a consociational solution to the Northern Ireland problem’, in Rupert Taylor (ed.), *Consociational theory: McGarry and O’Leary and the Northern Ireland conflict* (London, 2009), 309–29.

society groups to include Northern Ireland, with the result that all three of the Republic of Ireland's National Action Plans on UNSCR 1325 include references to Northern Ireland. While the Northern Ireland Assembly established an All-Party Group on UNSCR 1325 in 2010, the UK, while affirming its commitment to implementing the UNSCR 1325 internationally, does not plan to extend this to Northern Ireland.<sup>8</sup>

Ireland's third National Action Plan (NAP) acknowledges that the role that women played in 'the Northern Ireland Peace Process was an essential element in reaching the GFA and in subsequent stages of the Peace Process. Women from all communities and backgrounds at every level of society in Northern Ireland were and continue to be agents for change and peacebuilders in their everyday lives.'<sup>9</sup> In this NAP the Irish government gave a role to the Irish Secretariat in Belfast to promote the WPS agenda through outreach, and included a commitment to promote gender equality as a priority in its wider engagement and through specific WPS events in Ireland, North and South. The Reconciliation Fund (of the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs) also committed to fund civil society groups whose work supports the promotion of gender equality and the WPS agenda.<sup>10</sup>

As a member of the EU Informal Taskforce on Women, Peace and Security, Ireland works in partnership with other member states to ensure effective employment of the EU Strategic Approach, which places the WPS agenda at the centre of 'the full spectrum of the EU Common Foreign and Security Policy, as an essential tool in ensuring that the rights, agency and protection of women and girls are observed and upheld at all times, and to confirm that a meaningful and equitable role in decision-making is secured for women of all ages'.<sup>11</sup> This public commitment by the Irish government sought to incorporate the WPS agenda and gender equality perspectives across all of Ireland's involvement within EU policy-making, budget allocations, programming and reporting in relation to conflict prevention and peacebuilding, Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) and also the Multiannual Financial

<sup>8</sup> Pierson, 'Gendering peace in Northern Ireland', 59.

<sup>9</sup> Government of Ireland, *Women, Peace and Security: Ireland's third National Action Plan for the implementation of UNSCR 1325 and related resolutions 2019–2024* (2019), 21, available at: <https://www.ireland.ie/en/dfa/role-policies/international-priorities/peace-and-security/women-peace-and-security/irelands-national-action-plans-on-women-peace-and-security/> (15 January 2024).

<sup>10</sup> Government of Ireland, *Women, Peace and Security: Ireland's third National Action Plan*, 21. The Irish 'Secretariat' in Belfast is a civil service office, reflecting the government of Ireland's role in Northern Ireland and in British–Irish relations under the Good Friday Agreement.

<sup>11</sup> Government of Ireland, *Women, Peace and Security: Ireland's third National Action Plan*, 21.

Framework. Despite the absence of state-level implementation of UNSCR 1325 in Northern Ireland by the UK (as the recognised sovereign power), there is a plethora of civil society organisations and women's groups who are active in raising awareness in local communities about the importance of creating a NAP for Northern Ireland, and who actively advocate for its creation and implementation.<sup>12</sup> While there is now widespread agreement among women's advocacy organisations that the UK should include Northern Ireland in its NAP, there is less specific focus on the degree to which such a UK action plan should specifically address cross-border activity.<sup>13</sup>

The international literature on WPS suggests that civil society organisations in general and women's groups in particular are much more likely to engage in political activity across a 'political divide'.<sup>14</sup> This was the case within Northern Ireland, and it can be seen in the contacts between women's groups based in nationalist and unionist communities, and also in the fact that such connections took place even at the height of the conflict.<sup>15</sup> While there is no consensus among women's groups on the long-term constitutional future of Northern Ireland, right across the interviews and workshops for this research there was an openness to cross-border cooperation and to discussing the future constitutional arrangements and relationships on the island. The value of cross-border cooperation to enhancing the quality of people's lives and providing better public services was also widely supported. There was a widespread recognition that the level of cross-border cooperation, and funding for such cooperation, has been low. Both funding and levels of interaction are at a much lower level than cross-community cooperation within Northern Ireland. There has been much less research on the question of whether the forms of engagement implicit in cross-community relationships within Northern Ireland were also taking place on a cross-border basis between women's groups in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. However, it is clear that even given the comparatively low level of civil society cross-border engagement and funding prior to 2016, Brexit has had a negative impact on all forms of cross-border cooperation.

<sup>12</sup> Bronagh Hinds and Deborah Donnelly, *Women, Peace and Security: women's rights and gender equality: strategic guide and toolkit* (Belfast, 2014); Pierson, 'Gendering peace in Northern Ireland'.

<sup>13</sup> Pierson and Radford, *Peacebuilding in Northern Ireland and the women's sector*, 8.

<sup>14</sup> Donna Pankhurst, 'The "sex war" and other wars: towards a feminist approach to peace building', *Development in Practice* 13 (2-3) (2003), 154-77.

<sup>15</sup> Monica McWilliams, 'Struggling for peace and justice: reflections on women's activism in Northern Ireland', *Journal of Women's History* 7 (1) (1995), 13-39.



In the 2016 UK referendum on Brexit, 56 per cent of those voting in Northern Ireland voted to remain in the EU. The division on Brexit largely reflected the long-term political divisions in Northern Ireland, with almost 90 per cent of nationalists and over 70 per cent of the ‘middle ground’ opposing Brexit, while 66 per cent of unionists supported leaving the EU.<sup>16</sup> Even though the leadership of the Ulster Unionist Party campaigned to stay in the EU, following the referendum they shifted their position to accept the outcome, meaning that public debate on the lengthy EU–UK negotiations largely saw nationalists, along within the Alliance Party and Green Party, in opposition to all of the main unionist parties.

Brexit undermined the Peace Process in a number of ways. It took Northern Ireland out of the EU against the wishes of a local majority and thereby threatened to create a customs and security border on the island of Ireland, reversing what was widely seen as a key positive outcome of the 1998 Agreement. The tensions around Brexit also made it much more difficult to deal with the ongoing political challenges within Northern Ireland, resulting in the Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly being collapsed and unable to meet for five of the seven years since January 2017. The EU and UK ultimately reached agreement on a protocol to deal with trade issues, which left Northern Ireland within the EU Single Market for goods, in order to keep the land border open, but which therefore required some checks and customs formalities on goods moving from Britain to Northern Ireland—now known locally as the ‘Irish Sea border’.<sup>17</sup> All unionist parties opposed this arrangement. Unionist protests have been on a much smaller scale than in other historic contexts such as the 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement, but power-sharing remained collapsed at the end of 2023, and tensions remained high.

Within this context, cross-community and cross-border activity became more difficult and all those interviewed gave examples of cross-community projects within Northern Ireland that had collapsed, had been paused or were continuing only with a very low profile. Indeed, initially potential interviewees for this piece of research from a unionist working-class background were very reluctant to take part, fearing it might damage their work in their own communities. Interviews ultimately took place on the basis that neither the

<sup>16</sup> John Garry, *The EU referendum vote in Northern Ireland: implications for our understanding of citizens’ political views and behaviour*, Northern Ireland Assembly Knowledge Exchange Seminar Series (2016), 2.

<sup>17</sup> John Doyle and Eileen Connolly, ‘Brexit and the Peace Process in Northern Ireland’, in Federico Fabbrini (ed.), *The law & politics of Brexit: Volume III—The framework of new EU–UK relations* (Oxford, 2020).



individuals nor their organisations would be named. Cross-border activity, as the rest of this article will show, was at such a low level even before Brexit that it was not impacted in the same way by the political tension.

In addition to the political context, other aspects of the post-Brexit dynamics negatively impacted on women's groups' work. The absence of a power-sharing executive meant that much political lobbying (often done on a cross-community basis) could not take place. Access to ministers in London was much more restricted than access to local politicians in the Executive and Assembly. Civil servants too were a little less available, and in many cases were unable to make decisions. Funding for women's groups was reduced in line with cuts in public spending in support of community groups in general, as civil servants were instructed by the British government to reduce public spending in the absence of a functioning Executive. The capacity of groups to take on any additional cross-community or cross-border work was therefore almost non-existent.

#### PERCEPTIONS OF CROSS-BORDER COOPERATION

In the absence of existing research investigating the level of cross-border engagement, the aim of this study is to understand the way in which cross-border cooperation is perceived by civil society activists. How do they compare current levels of activity and funding to those of the past? How can cross-border cooperation be compared to cross-community cooperation in the North? How do civil society activists view the other jurisdiction in terms of its social and political development and gender equality? Related to this is the question of what knowledge they have of the public policy frameworks in the other jurisdiction, as it is the differences and similarities in public policy and practice that may shape cross-border engagement and debates on the future of the island.

In response to being asked about the impact of women's cross-border engagement, most participants believed that women's civil society organisations had played a key constructive role in peacebuilding, both during the Troubles and in the aftermath of the GFA. Many participants also emphasised women's role in cross-community engagement and, as an extension of this, cross-border activities in the border areas. This is a firmly entrenched view of the past that sees women's groups as having played a unique and important role that included keeping some level of cross-community action alive during

the years of conflict as well as seeing cross-border work as part of peacebuilding. A statement by one participant reflected the generally held, if idealised, view of the past:

women's organisations, in particular, have always been at the forefront of cross-border cooperation and really even in the most difficult of times, at the height of the Troubles, women's organisations were making sure that they were cooperating on a cross-border basis ... they were always trying to ensure that those cross-border contacts were maintained.

Some participants believed that at the local authority level in some areas a relationship had developed—but this was limited to 'specific areas of the border region', where 'a lot of practical and pragmatic work is being done together, improving a lot of local level services'. In a few cases there were 'some connections, doing shared work around women's issues, having meetings together, talking, organising webinars' and forging 'links with health services, since a lot of people are travelling for the purpose of health services'.

From a feminist perspective, cross-border contact, even during the years of conflict, also took the form of active campaigning on a range of women's issues. This form of engagement relied on personal commitment and did not rely on or receive official funding. A participant recounted that her 'aunt', who at the time of the interview was in her sixties, in the 1980s had 'helped to ferry condoms across the border over to the South'. Another participant recalled that in the 1980s the Rape Crisis Centre in Dublin gave active support to the newly established Belfast Rape Crisis Centre. This form of engagement has continued among campaigning activists to the present day. A number of participants had been actively involved in the campaign for marriage equality and in the campaign to repeal the Eighth Amendment to allow abortion legislation in the South.

Activism ... has been crossing the border for decades ... the one I've been most involved in would be abortion rights ... So there's been practical support in terms of canvassing and lobbying. There's been a lot of activist cooperation.

Participants were very positive about campaigning as an active form of collaboration with strong and visible cross-border support for campaigns that

were centrally concerned with gender, sexuality or women's rights. As a result of this focus many participants were most enthusiastic about their contribution as individuals, rather than as organisations, to campaigns on gender issues. This form of activism was seen as having a long history. The majority who shared these views had travelled from the North to the South to campaign on the same-sex marriage referendum and the abortion referendum. This was not reciprocated with people travelling from the South to the North, as the political structures in Northern Ireland were seen to militate against the build-up of a campaign comparable to those seen in the South on these issues. Both types of activity (that carried out as an individual and that done on behalf of an organisation) are universally considered to be beneficial, not just for their immediate and intended impacts but also for their more diffuse impacts. This includes building personal contacts across the border and the development of knowledge and awareness of the other jurisdiction.

It is the actual bringing people together and getting them to work together on a cross-border basis. That is where the true value of cross-border cooperation projects lies. Having people coming together, understanding each other, and working together on a project.

On the level of informal relations, participants pointed to the high level of cross-border interactions in the border area that are just the realities of life.

Sometimes I think [there is a] real lack of understanding of how porous that border is ... and how frequently we cross it, our families live in and around it ... because it has been so intangible for the past 15–20 years that people have got used to that.

For the majority of participants, this positive view of the past, and what they see as the potential of women's civil society groups' cross-border cooperation in the present, is eclipsed by their negative assessment of the volume of actual cross-border engagement. Most participants thought that the level of cross-border cooperation between civil society groups was very low: lower than it had been in the years following the GFA, and lower than the levels of cross-community engagement in the North in all time periods.

Even for participants who tried to project a positive image of cross-border engagement, it was noticeable that when they were asked for examples of

cross-border work that they knew of, had participated in or thought were particularly successful, the same examples were repeatedly given by multiple interviewees. Many examples were not recent, and the largest cluster of contemporary work was local-level work along the border. Participants cited a small number of examples of formal cooperation between the health systems, some relationship-building between local authorities in the Northwest, and the links that the Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network has with women's groups in Donegal.<sup>18</sup> There were, until the creation of the National Women's Council of Ireland (NWCi) All Island Women's Forum, funded initially, in part, by the Irish government's Shared Island Unit and the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs, very few concrete examples of cooperation between representative or policy-oriented advocacy organisations with a national or regional focus.<sup>19</sup> One activist from a unionist background with decades of experience in campaigning for women's rights said that the NWCi Forum was their first ever 'regular' encounter with women from the South of Ireland.

Four interrelated reasons for the perceived lack of active ongoing cross-border collaboration can be drawn from the discussion with the participants. The first is the narrow interpretation of the WPS agenda that has been applied to support for woman's civil society organisations. Secondly, the nature of the funding that is available tends to require groups to focus on a single jurisdiction. Thirdly, working across two different legal and policy frameworks adds complexity, which organisations believe they do not have the capacity or resources to deal with, and finally the far-reaching impact of Brexit has both added new legal complexities and, for some groups in unionist areas, made such cooperation more challenging politically.

The majority of research participants argued that from the time of the GFA to the present day the fact that the framework for funding was based on a narrow interpretation of the WPS has limited the potential scope of cross-border cooperation. Some interviewees said that the fact that funding for both cross-community work in Northern Ireland and cross-border work was focused on conflict, or reducing the potential for conflict, narrowly defined, meant that it had not expanded into other policy areas that have the

<sup>18</sup> For a wider discussion of the failure to move beyond the initial cross-border health projects see Deirdre Heenan, 'Cross-border cooperation health in Ireland', *Irish Studies in International Affairs* 32 (2) (2021), 117–36 and Deirdre Heenan, 'Collaborating on healthcare on an all-island basis: a scoping study', *Irish Studies in International Affairs* 32 (2) (2021), 413–47.

<sup>19</sup> National Women's Council, *All-Island Women's Forum report 2021–22* (Dublin, 2022), available at: [https://www.nwci.ie/learn/publication/nwc\\_all\\_island\\_womens\\_forum\\_report\\_2021\\_22](https://www.nwci.ie/learn/publication/nwc_all_island_womens_forum_report_2021_22) (15 January 2024).

capacity to improve people's lives, while also building good practical relationships on a cross-border basis. One participant was of the opinion that 'cross-border cooperation has been focused on the conflict, so it has limited the meaningful and deep cross-border work that could be achieved'. Neither have funding mechanisms seen gender equality, including equality in public decision-making, as a central goal. This has meant that the majority of funding has been through the lens of peacebuilding and conflict prevention, narrowly defined, with the goal of building communal understanding as a way of diffusing future potential communal violence. Within this framework it is inevitable that most funding has gone to cross-community initiatives in Northern Ireland itself, with only a small amount for cross-border projects in the border counties. Currently this focus still limits the type of project that can be funded and in the view of many participants is inappropriate in a post-Brexit context, where a different sort of cross-community and cross-border understanding needs to be fostered.

It was generally agreed that funding was inadequate and in the current climate participants believed that only the Irish government has any interest in funding cross-border cooperation. Participants were also concerned with the technical aspects of these funding streams. Most funding that they can access comes for specific projects, frequently designed by the donor, and lacking a core funding element. The absence of core funding makes it difficult for these civil society organisations to function, deploy their expertise in constructing forms of cooperation or retain experienced staff. They are increasingly finding that in spite of the volume of work that they perceive needs to be done and that they receive requests to do, there is just not enough staff or time. One participant said that there was 'So much work, so many issues to be dealing with, and not very many people to deal with it'. They believed that the situation was now worse than previously and that 'there is not enough money to run these organisations anymore'. In a similar vein, another participant argued strongly that 'we are all exhausted by delivering projects [that] tick boxes for the donors'. In their view the 'model of project-based funding is very challenging' because of a lack of continuity as organisations are always 'dependent on the next project', which means that they are unable to keep the 'few experts in this area' employed. While participants thought this was true across the board, they also argued it was 'very difficult' for organisations that relied on public funding. The result of this funding crisis is that even though the great majority of participants thought there was an urgent need to develop cross-border relationships in the context of Brexit and heightened

debates on possible constitutional change, there was just no core funding, or staff time, that allowed them the flexibility to do this work.

The nature of funding has meant that the difference in scale between funding for cross-community projects within Northern Ireland and funding for cross-border projects was very clear. A large majority agreed that cross-community projects outnumber cross-border cooperation projects considerably. Participants believed that cross-community projects in Northern Ireland had received the overwhelming bulk of EU funding. This was considered to be partly a result of the focus on peacebuilding and preventing conflict. It was also thought that given the many differences between the two jurisdictions, it was an inevitable result of the funding schemes designed to meet specific needs in Northern Ireland. As one of the participants put it:

there is a lot of investment in single-jurisdiction ... cross-community projects rather than cross-border projects ... this is because you have to address some of these issues that are specific to Northern Ireland and not necessarily specific to the South or the border counties of the South.

This primary focus on the single jurisdiction of Northern Ireland has been a feature of this type of funding since the period after the GFA, when peace-support funds were at their height, with the aim of embedding the Agreement. As a result, notwithstanding the contribution of EU cross-border peace funding, at an overall level grants were primarily, if not exclusively, focused on work inside Northern Ireland. Participants saw a dynamic emerge among civil society groups in Northern Ireland designed to maximise their access to funding of this type. For example, this was expressed as follows:

in Northern Ireland, the two communities ... became very skilled in building [cross-community] relationships in order to maximise the funding. The organisations in Northern Ireland know how to utilise the structure they are in.

After 100 years of separate political and policy development the two jurisdictions understandably have considerable differences in their policy frameworks. This makes it difficult for an individual civil society organisation, or groups of organisations working in a specific area, to formulate meaningful cross-border strategies for policy engagement, without resources to develop

that cross-border perspective. A participant who works in an area that has seen significant policy change over the past 20 years said the cross-border engagement with a similar organisation became ‘less and less useful, because of legislation, infrastructure and legal framework differences’. In most cases cross-border policy cooperation can only happen within a government-sponsored framework or at the level of campaigns on individual issues. Separate political development has also meant that organisations on either side of the border lack knowledge of policies in the other jurisdiction. This lack of awareness in itself is a barrier to cross-border cooperation and will be discussed in the next section. The post-Brexit political landscape in the North and the resulting lack of political–institutional support for cross-border engagement were also seen as significant barriers.

While the full effects of Brexit have not yet emerged, civil society groups are very aware of the current changes that the UK’s withdrawal from the EU has brought about, and are also fearful that things will become more difficult in the future, especially for those in border areas. A number of participants talked about how border areas experienced increased integration following the GFA. It was generally argued that this integration was in the form of the private actions of individuals in their daily lives, as they moved backwards and forwards across the border for work, for school and for family and social networks, facilitated by the new reality of a peaceful border zone, without security infrastructures. Post-Brexit civil society organisations have felt the effects of the lack of the institutional framework that was provided by both jurisdictions being members of the EU. Common EU membership had facilitated the political border becoming negligible after the GFA and supported the intergovernmental aspects of that agreement that embedded North–South dialogue, and in specific areas provided a structure for policy integration. Participants from border areas in particular frequently expressed fears that future legal divergence in environmental regulation and health systems will be very disruptive for those who live and work on different sides of the border. Small NGOs were worried about additional legal costs or disruption regarding who could be on their governing boards, whether they could share data on a cross-border basis, or how they should tax employees who work from home on some days, on the other side of the border. They expressed a worry that this type of complexity, and the costs associated with it, would see single-jurisdiction work become the default norm.

Participants said that in addition to the loss of the support of the ‘scaffolding’ of the EU, Brexit has increased political instability and community



division in Northern Ireland, and significantly shifted political views in the South of the possible futures for the island. It was recognised that while there had been ‘some positive periods of the relationship between Dublin and Belfast’ there had also been ‘some really pretty bad periods ... we’re going through one at the moment’, demonstrated ‘by the fact that the North–South Ministerial Council does not function’. Brexit, as one participant expressed it, had ‘forced a lot of new thinking, relationships, and new dynamics around Northern Ireland’ and ‘caused a huge amount of angst in these relationships’. The view was also expressed that increased political divisions in the North had already damaged cross-community relationships, and the increased political instability in the view of some participants was having a chilling effect on civil society groups in the South. A participant from Northern Ireland worried that groups in the South were ‘starting to withdraw, having second thoughts about cross-border cooperation with the North’ as a result of ‘the political instability in the North ... around the Protocol and Brexit’. However, this opinion was not expressed by any member of any organisation based in the South.

The participants in this project came from a range of backgrounds and had diverse political views on the constitutional future of the island. In spite of this diversity, most believed that there is now a need to move beyond the idea of ‘reconciliation’ and ‘peacebuilding’ to discuss issues around a shared island, irrespective of what the final constitutional shape of the island will be. In this regard, it was widely felt that work needs to be done on a North–South basis to promote mutual knowledge and understanding, but also to discuss areas of policy integration and engage in debates around possible futures for the island.

#### CROSS-BORDER KNOWLEDGE

In order to explore the current level of mutual cross-border understanding, we asked research participants about their knowledge of, and views on, policy areas on the ‘other’ side of the border. The primary focus was on the areas that they were working in, and where they would be expected to have a reasonable level of knowledge, especially if networking and cooperation were happening regularly. In light of the new debates on the future of the island, participants were also asked about the general perceptions of policy frameworks and society on the other side of the border. It was clear from

discussions in both jurisdictions that respondents' level of knowledge about the other jurisdiction was very limited, apart from very high-profile issues where there had been recent public debate such as abortion. In many policy areas people's perceptions of the basic facts of major policy areas were even inaccurate. In many cases what people thought they knew was framed by outdated perceptions of the 'other', which could be either positive or negative. This was the case in both directions across the border.

Given the policy focus of the groups targeted by this research, it is not surprising that most discussion took place around gender issues, especially those that had featured largely in the media recently. The majority of participants had the view that the most significant social changes in the past decade were 'in relation to sexuality issues, with more openness towards non-heterosexual sexuality, non-mainstream sexualities and transgender people, and non-binary gender'. There were also more general discussions about key policy areas that affect the quality of individuals' lives—healthcare, social welfare and housing—and it was on these topics that knowledge of the other jurisdiction was especially weak. Participants were most knowledgeable about topics that have been the subject of recent campaigning, policy reform and media attention—abortion, same-sex marriage and gender identity rights. Consideration of these issues generated a discussion on the changing nature of society, especially that of the South, where the changes were perceived to be the greatest, and a comparison of the progressiveness of the North versus that of the South.

Participants expressed a duality of views on the issue of how Irish society was changing. Some participants, perhaps with the objective of being even-handed, argued that both Northern Ireland and the Republic were still conservative societies but that the South has made more progress than the North, so that the two jurisdictions were 'now moving [apart] from each other a little'. Participants from the South were more positive and saw Southern society as having undergone transformative change, so that now it was more progressive than the North. This change, it was argued, reflected a significant shift in public opinion in the South and an ongoing process of secularisation, which for some Southern participants had not happened in the North. According to one Southern view, 'we [in the Republic] have secularised a lot in our decision-making, but in Northern Ireland I do not see this yet, it seems to be an exception to have secular thinking in policy-making'. The views expressed by Northern participants were both more varied and more ambivalent: a minority saw the changes in the South as reflecting a real progressive

change, which meant it was now more progressive than the North, reversing what was perceived to be the historic hierarchy of social liberalism between the two jurisdictions. For example, 'the North in many ways was ahead of the South in terms of gender equality issues, but since 1998 it is now being absolutely reversed, it is now the North that is behind in so many aspects of rights-based issues'.

Other participants from the North were suspicious of the South's new liberalism, presenting an analysis that minimised the impact of these changes, and viewing the North as still having the greater long-term potential for liberalism. These negative assessments of change in the South tended to be based on historic stereotypes, although some Northern participants clearly differentiated the majority of the Protestant population of Northern Ireland from some of the Unionist political parties. One participant stated that the DUP was not representative of Protestantism and that 'Protestants were really liberal and probably more liberal than most Catholic people'. Another participant argued that 'historically because Ireland is very Catholic and very religious, I think it has remained more conservative than Northern Ireland' while Northern Ireland has benefited 'from being connected to Britain', which has made it 'more liberal and more accepting of Western modern values'. However, in making these arguments about greater liberalism in Northern Ireland, participants never went beyond generalities to refer to specific policies or laws.

In discussions about what was driving these changes, some interviewees spoke of the stronger economy and the impact of EU membership in the South driving social change. Others referred to the development of more cosmopolitan attitudes in the South, based on higher inward migration and a more diverse society, which impacted on attitudes across the community, and said that 'politicians in the South have definitely acknowledged and embraced that'. Participants from the North explained the lack of progress primarily in terms of the post-Brexit crisis and the local political structures. Many participants from the North argued that the political cleavages, the complexity of political institutions (in particular veto rights) and the conservatism of some political parties were the main blockages to making progress on the liberalisation of Northern Irish society. As one of the participants said, there was a lack of progress on gender issues because 'the other things are always more important'. Apart from the sidelining effect of constant political crises, a number of participants involved in high-level advocacy over many years highlighted the huge resistance to any proposals to depart from law or policy frameworks currently used in

England. This resistance was not only found when unionist ministers were in charge of the relevant department; it was reflected in the attitudes of a significant number of senior civil servants. The pressure not to depart from English policy practices applied to any international comparisons, but was even stronger if the comparison was with the Republic of Ireland. In some cases, even a comparison with Scotland was deemed controversial, as modern policy reform there was associated with the pro-independence Scottish National Party.

While Northern participants were aware of the impact of years of austerity driven by the government in Westminster and the resulting reduction in spending on all social services in the context of Northern Ireland, when it came to comparisons between Northern Ireland and the South there was a tendency to revert to the lens of historic stereotypes. As a result, the overwhelming majority of Northern participants saw the health service in the North as superior to that of the South in all respects. This stemmed from both a reluctance to see the extent to which the NHS had been hollowed out by public spending cuts and a lack of awareness of the details of health service provision in the South: as one participant said, 'I do not know a lot about health care in the South'. The most common view was that 'we are in a better position in the North because we have universal free healthcare'. Even when the problems of the health service in the North were recognised, especially the very long waiting lists and the problems in accessing GP services, the belief remained that 'it is still a wonderful service'. While a minority of participants from the North acknowledged that not everybody had to pay for healthcare in the South, the majority focused on the issue of payment for health services as the main thing they knew about the Southern health service, and as the aspect of Southern health provision that meant it was intrinsically inferior to the NHS. Research participants from Northern Ireland, from both communities, also assumed that the Southern health system was inferior in terms of health outcomes. It was one (atypical) voice that described the NHS as 'completely broken ... you cannot get an appointment with your doctor ... I would not be so sure of what exists in the South ... it's possibly still better than what is here'. While Southern participants knew that the NHS provided free healthcare at point of access, very few had any knowledge of the waiting times or challenges of accessing the GP system in the North.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>20</sup> For a brief analysis of health outcomes see Kapic et al., 'Looking across the border', 351–5.

It was only in the area of specific women's health issues and issues relating to gender that the NHS came in for more consistent criticism, coupled with the assumption that things were just as bad in the South. As one participant said, 'Difficulties with health care for women are as bad here as they are in the South. Honestly, I could cry sometimes. You could be waiting five years for a hysterectomy in Northern Ireland.' However, in relation to women's reproductive health, specifically contraception and IVF treatment, the situation in Northern Ireland was considered to be much better for women than in the South. This was because women in Northern Ireland 'have access to lots of different forms of reproductive health care for free ... which is not the case in the South', and they perceived 'as the biggest day-to-day difference for most people, the fact that people have to pay for their contraception in Ireland'.<sup>21</sup>

There were similar levels of ignorance about policy provision across the range of social policy areas. While it was recognised that wages were higher in the South than in the North, it was assumed that the high cost of living, especially the cost of housing, would completely erode this advantage: 'our salaries are not as good as in Ireland for comparable jobs, but I also think our living expenses are lower'. There was no knowledge of the gap in the standard of living that now exists between the North and the South, where recent research has clearly shown that even after allowing for cost of living including housing, the average standard of living is approximately 12 per cent higher in the Republic.<sup>22</sup> Some participants raised the issue of the gendered impacts of poverty and social welfare, and notwithstanding awareness of the ongoing impact of austerity, again there was no general awareness of the much higher levels of benefits in the South.<sup>23</sup> Participants simply assumed that the cuts to welfare provision in the UK in recent decades had also happened in the South, where, despite remaining challenges, that was simply not true. The housing crisis in the South was seen as a very negative aspect of Southern society that Northern participants were very aware of through

<sup>21</sup> While historically these views on paying for reproductive health were somewhat accurate, they were not accurate at the time of interviews, when Southern policy had changed or was in a process of change, widely reported in Southern media. Contraception is free in the Republic for all those aged 17 to 31, and free IVF treatment was being rolled out in 2022–3. See HSE website: <https://www.hse.ie/eng/about/who/gmscontracts/free-contraception-service-contract/> and <https://www2.hse.ie/conditions/ivf/> (15 January 2024).

<sup>22</sup> See for example Adele Bergin and Seamus McGuinness, 'Who is better off? Measuring cross-border differences in living standards, opportunities and quality of life on the island of Ireland', *Irish Studies in International Affairs* 32 (2) (2021), 143–60.

<sup>23</sup> See for example Paul Gosling, 'Who is better off: the Irish, the Northern Irish or the British? A regional economic comparison', *Irish Studies in International Affairs* 34 (2) (2023), 186–221; Mary P. Murphy, 'A new welfare imaginary for the island of Ireland', *Irish Studies in International Affairs* 32 (2) (2021), 532–57.

extensive media coverage. But there was no knowledge of the housing situation in the South deeper than the ‘headline’ issues. What was notable was how little participants discussed these wider policy areas in their work: even the aspects that directly affected women and gender issues.

## CONCLUSION

Interviewees for this project were in general very positive about the potential of cross-border cooperation. They believed that it was contributing to peace-building and that it could do much more. Most interviewees were able to talk about specific examples of such work.

Almost every participant believed that cross-border collaboration was at a much lower level than cross-community work inside Northern Ireland, but they still mostly assumed that more was going on that they were simply not aware of, and in that regard many interviewees had an exaggerated sense of the actual level of cross-border networking that was going on at present. The same examples were used again and again. The main exception to this was local networking along the border, which is more developed. However, policy or national/regional cooperation between advocacy groups was at a very low level.

When asked about the detail of policy advocacy, or even the actual legal or policy framework on the ‘other’ side of the border, interviewees had a much lower level of knowledge than about their ‘own’ jurisdiction. Most interviewees had no detailed knowledge at all, and had not personally participated in any specific policy-oriented research, networking or lobbying as part of their regular activity.

In comparing policy areas, healthcare—and in particular the principle of free healthcare at the point of use—was the one very consistent area where almost all respondents saw the Northern Ireland experience as more favourable for women, notwithstanding widespread knowledge among Northern Ireland-based respondents about the serious waiting lists, GP waiting times and other failures of the contemporary NHS. There was, however, very limited knowledge in Northern Ireland about the Southern system, beyond the fact that some people have to pay (or the assumption by some that everyone has to do so). Almost no interviewees knew whether waiting lists were better or worse on the ‘other’ side of the border, or could compare policy other than IVF and the principle of payment.

In general, the South was perceived to be more ‘liberal’ and the examples given were almost always abortion and marriage equality—with specific mentions of the two referenda. There was very little knowledge beyond policy ‘experts’ on other areas where the Southern experience has been widely seen as more positive—such as the level of benefit payments, education outcomes or gender recognition. Likewise on issues where both parts of the island need to significantly improve, such as violence against women, maternity leave or childcare, there was no evidence of active cooperation on researching best practice internationally, beyond the island of Ireland, as an aid to advocacy.

Many interviewees mentioned the NWCi All Island Women’s Forum as filling a real gap in the civil society environment on the island. Participants spoke about the challenge of building sufficient trust so that people were comfortable simply admitting that they knew little about the lived reality for women on the ‘other’ side of the border. It made a major contribution in a very difficult environment (starting during COVID-19 restrictions) and there was a widespread consensus that some means needs to be found to continue and mainstream its work. The demand for this type of all-island engagement, and people’s willingness to take part, was evidenced by the fact that most of the events organised by the NWCi All Island Women’s Forum were over-subscribed. The NWCi was keen to keep the events at a scale where real engagement was possible, but this meant that not everyone who wished to take part could be invited. A wider range of activity, focused on different sectors and policy areas, could extend the range of participants and deepen the level of engagement.

The perception and information gaps among advocates pointed to a potential weakness in knowledge exchange, jointly funded comparative research and advocacy networking on a North–South basis. The level of detailed information on policy and law on the ‘other’ side of the border was low—even on issues that were high on the advocacy agenda such as gender-based violence, gender pay gaps, childcare, maternity leave, benefits and poverty, gender recognition and women’s political representation. Certainly, there are significant opportunities for policy intervention on many of the issues addressed in this article, which could be strengthened by greater cooperation between women’s representative groups North and South on the island. In some cases, such as on gender pay gaps, advocacy now needs to be based on a significant level of technical knowledge about how different definitions will work for or against women. On questions such as violence against women, where neither North nor South has a good track record, best practice is probably to be found by looking



beyond the Irish or UK contexts. Advocacy therefore would be strengthened by cross-border cooperation, regardless of whether 'best practice' is to be found on the island or further afield. However, at present such cooperation on research and advocacy is limited and this means that on occasion the opportunities for better examples and more effective lobbying are being lost.

There was almost universal support for greater cross-border cooperation between women's groups and groups working on gender equality issues, even from interviewees from traditionally unionist backgrounds. Interviewees thought it could make a difference, in advancing the agenda for equality (which would motivate people to take part) but also in building cross-border relationships more generally. However, there was also widespread agreement that it would not happen organically. All those working with NGOs spoke about the pressure within the organisation caused by a near total reliance on project funding. Most organisations interviewed had no core funding at all. Therefore it was very difficult to find time to take on projects that were not funded, as even the projects for which funding was available very often were funded at a level slightly below what was needed, creating pressures on time and energy. Cross-community work within Northern Ireland is still provided with a significant level of funding, which often has a wide scope as to which issues an organisation might focus on. Therefore cross-community work can be mainstreamed into the work of an NGO or community group. The equivalent funding for cross-border work is very limited and organisations reported that this really limits their capacity to engage.

Most participants argued strongly that funded cross-border work needed to allow organisations to focus on a wide equality agenda and should not use a narrow definition of peacebuilding or WPS. In practical terms it would be much easier to get people involved if there was a practical policy, research or outcome objective—for example on gendered aspects of poverty, violence against women or political representation. It was also widely argued that many unionist women would get involved if the work was focused on such practical objectives, and that relationship-building and knowledge sharing would happen as a consequence.

There was, finally, widespread agreement among participants, regardless of their community background (if apparent) or the sector in which they worked, that cross-border collaboration between women's groups could make a very positive contribution, in the range of areas discussed above. This is perhaps all the more important given the post-Brexit tensions in the wider British–Irish relationship.

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