

# At the Nexus of Participation and Protection: Protection-Related Barriers to Women's Participation in Northern Ireland

CATHERINE TURNER AND AISLING SWAINE



**Cover Photo:** Women Members of the Northern Ireland Assembly, June 8, 2021. Amanda Ferguson.

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**ABOUT THE AUTHORS**

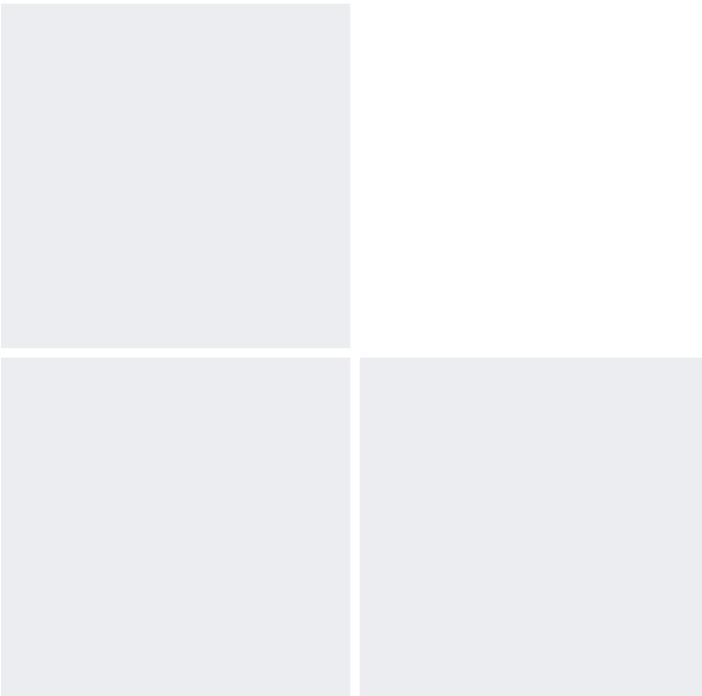
CATHERINE TURNER is Associate Professor in the Durham Law School and Deputy Director of the Durham Global Security Institute.

AISLING SWAINE is Professor of Gender Studies in the School of Social Policy, Social Work and Social Justice at University College Dublin.

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# CONTENTS

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|   |     |
|---|-----|
| Abbreviations .....   | iii |
| Executive Summary .....   | v   |
| Introduction.....   | 1   |
| Participation and Protection under the Women,<br>Peace, and Security Agenda .....             | 1   |
| Northern Ireland and the Ongoing (Re)negotiation<br>of Peace .....                            | 5   |
| The Context of Participation and Protection in<br>Post-Agreement Northern Ireland .....       | 7   |
| The Current Situation of Participation.....   | 8   |
| The Current Context for Protection Challenges .....   | 9   |
| Protection-Related Challenges to Women’s Participation:<br>Threats, Risks, and Violence ..... | 10  |
| Direct Threats to Women’s Lives .....   | 11  |
| Threats to Homes and Families .....   | 12  |
| Threats to and in Work Places .....   | 14  |
| Public Shaming: Threats to Women’s Reputations .....  | 16  |
| Connections Between Protection and Participation:<br>Closing the Loop .....                   | 21  |
| Conclusion .....  | 23  |



## ABBREVIATIONS

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|      |  |
|------|--|
| CRSV | Conflict-related sexual violence               |
| DDR  | Disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration |
| NIWC | Northern Ireland Women's Coalition             |
| WPS  | Women, peace, and security                     |



## Executive Summary

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The protection of women in armed conflict and their participation in peace and security activities are central pillars of the women, peace, and security (WPS) agenda. Overall, however, the WPS agenda has overlooked the relationship between participation and protection. This perpetuates a false binary between the participation of women as leaders with agency and the protection of women as victims of conflict. It also misses the gendered, context-specific, and conflict-related protection risks that accompany women's participation. Finally, it overlooks the critical link between the harms women experience and their low levels of representation.

The case study of Northern Ireland can help inform efforts to better integrate implementation of the participation and protection pillars of the WPS agenda. While often assumed to be free of “global policy” concerns such as WPS, Northern Ireland starkly illustrates the intrinsic connections and tensions between women's leadership and protection in conflict and post-conflict situations. In Northern Ireland, as elsewhere, the legacy of conflict, including sectarianism, violent masculinities, and community polarization, directly influences where and how women participate and their experience of public life.

The women interviewed for this research raised a number of protection-related challenges that they face on a daily basis. The most visible threat is that of violence from a paramilitary organization. Women in leadership across political and public life also experience threats to their homes, work places, or professional integrity as part of efforts to target their work. In addition, many women face gendered and sexualized attempts at public shaming, whether in public community spaces, in

the mainstream media, or on social media.

What emerges is a circulatory relationship between participation and protection: because women's level of participation across institutions in Northern Ireland remains low, those women who do participate are highly visible; this visibility makes them more vulnerable to physical threats and gendered abuse; and this abuse disincentivizes women from participating in public or political life, sustaining low levels of participation that reduce women's influence or their ability to bring about systemic change.

To disrupt this circulatory relationship, engagement on protection and integration must be integrated, both in Northern Ireland and globally. Toward this end, a number of steps should be taken:

- **For the implementation of the WPS agenda:** International interventions that engage with the protection-participation nexus should adopt an approach that combines support for individual resilience with action to tackle structural barriers and should be grounded in context-specific, protection-based risk assessments.
- **For political parties and policymakers in Northern Ireland:** Policymakers should recognize the connections between sectarianism and misogyny that enable abuse against women. This requires adopting a specifically gender-sensitive approach to policy and funding that actively supports and encourages women's participation.
- **On mainstream and social media:** The Northern Ireland Executive should develop a multi-level strategy to tackle online abuse and its effects.



## Introduction

The women, peace, and security (WPS) agenda is broadly understood to include four pillars: participation of women in all aspects of the maintenance of peace and security; prevention of armed conflict; protection of women and girls from violence; and gender-responsive relief and recovery measures in conflict-affected contexts.

While in principle the four pillars are interrelated, in practice their implementation has been uneven. Of the four pillars, participation and protection have arguably received the most attention. This is evident in the predominance of provisions related to participation and protection throughout the ten UN Security Council WPS resolutions, as well as the high level of (usually separate) engagement by member states and civil society on each pillar.

Engagement on each of the pillars has been largely disconnected, with little focus on the relationship between them. The specific ways that women's full, equal, and meaningful participation is impacted by violence and threats directly and indirectly related to conflict have not been fully considered. Nor has the need for the protection pillar to be understood and addressed in ways informed by the safety risks that arise for women in leadership roles in conflict-affected contexts.

This paper considers the intersection between women's participation and protection in the context of Northern Ireland. While often assumed to be free of "global policy" concerns such as WPS, Northern Ireland starkly illustrates the intrinsic connections and tensions between women's leadership and protection in conflict and post-conflict situations. After providing an overview of these connections and tensions more broadly, this paper examines the participation and protection of women in Northern Ireland since the 1998 Good

Friday Agreement. It draws from twenty-five semi-structured interviews with women in leadership positions in Northern Ireland.<sup>1</sup>

The paper concludes that gender inequalities and gendered insecurities intersect with sectarianism, the legacy of violence, and political crises arising from power-sharing arrangements under the peace agreement. These, in turn, intersect with emerging technologies such as social media to stymie women's participation across all areas of post-conflict political life. While these findings underscore the continued relevance of the WPS agenda, they also signify that deeper engagement with gendered protection issues is required if the agenda is to substantively advance women's equality and participation in the longer term.

## Participation and Protection under the Women, Peace, and Security Agenda

The UN's world conferences on women, culminating in the 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, made both the protection of women in armed conflict and their participation in peace activities key concerns of global gender policy.<sup>2</sup> The entry of those concerns onto the agenda of the UN Security Council affirmed their relevance to peace and security. The council adopted Resolution 1325 in 2000, inaugurating the WPS agenda and affirming women's "equal participation and full involvement in all efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security."<sup>3</sup> The second WPS resolution, Resolution 1820 (2008), brought a much-needed focus on conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) and affirmed "protection" as a central tenet of the agenda.

The adoption of Resolution 1820 was the point of

<sup>1</sup> The interviews were conducted in 2021. All interviews were conducted online with women living in Northern Ireland. Participants in the research were drawn from elected politics, leadership in the justice and security sector, and civil society organizations. We adopted a multi-level definition of leadership and focused on women who have a macro-level perspective on the current state of play (on multi-level leadership, see: Catherine Turner, "Women's Leadership for Peace: Towards a Model of Multi-Track Leadership," *IPI Global Observatory*, October 18, 2019). Participants were recruited to ensure that they represented a broad spectrum of political opinions, geographic locations, and ages. We derived our understanding of protection risks from women's lived experiences as they relayed them to us in interviews, rather than by how protection is approached in the WPS agenda or elsewhere. That ensures that the research is informed by women's lived everyday experiences of protection as relevant to participation. The empirical data is supplemented by an in-depth review of the academic and policy literature on the participation of women in political and public life and on the risks faced by women in post-agreement Northern Ireland.

<sup>2</sup> Fourth World Conference on Women, "Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action," September 15, 1995. See: "Critical Area of Concern E."

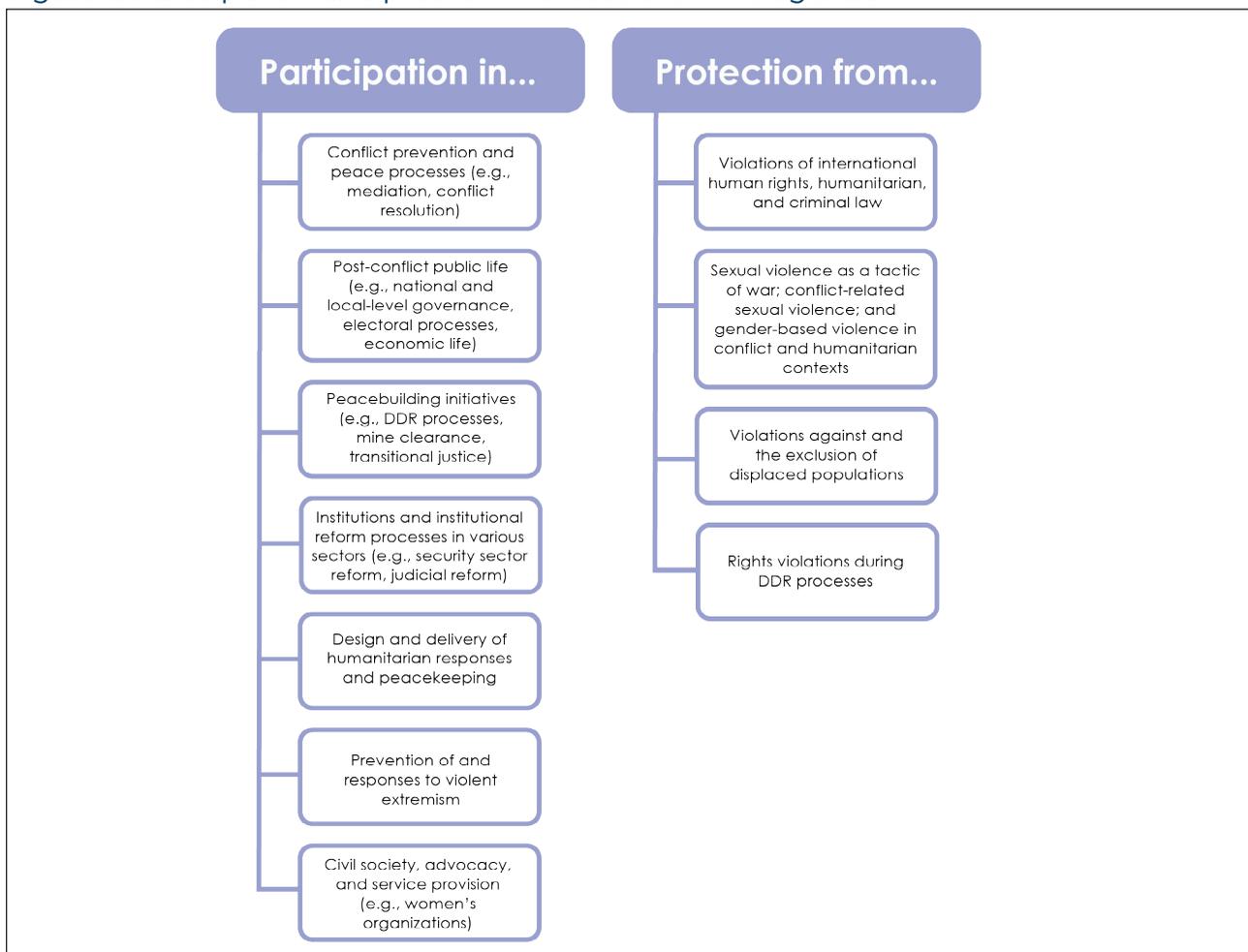
<sup>3</sup> UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (October 31, 2000), UN Doc. S/RES/1325.

departure for the agenda's expansion along two tracks, leading to the present-day body of ten WPS resolutions that can be parsed into five "participation" and five "protection" resolutions.<sup>4</sup> A textual analysis affirms this trajectory, revealing that while participation and protection are predominant in the WPS agenda, they largely feature as separate spheres of activity within and across the ten WPS resolutions (see Figure 1).<sup>5</sup>

The relationship between women's participation and related protection risks is critical to the success of the WPS agenda.

Under "participation," the resolutions promote the inclusion of women across all areas of peace and security, including in formal politics, institutional reforms, and interventions to prevent and respond to violent extremism. In recent years, "participation" has also become predominantly associated with the inclusion of women in peace processes, as well as increasing the number of women in peacekeeping.<sup>6</sup>

Figure 1. Participation and protection across the WPS agenda



4 Karen Engle, "The Grip of Sexual Violence: Reading UN Security Council Resolutions on Human Security," in *Rethinking Peacekeeping, Gender Equality and Collective Security*, eds. Gina Heathcote and Dianne Otto (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p. 23.

5 Note that the textual analysis focused on the ten WPS resolutions only. Issues of women's protection and women's participation also appear across multiple country-specific Security Council resolutions, both separately and together. For example, the preambular paragraphs of Resolution 2542 (2020) on Libya recognizes "the need to protect women's rights organisations, and women peacebuilders from threats and reprisals." The inclusion of protection for "women's rights organisations" is an important example of language that addresses the need for protection across potentially different areas of work led by women's organizations, including but not limited to peacebuilding and human rights.

6 For example, there has been a proliferation of initiatives to enhance women's role in mediation. See the website of the Global Alliance of Regional Women Mediator Networks, available at <https://globalwomenmediators.org/>; and the recent resolution on women's participation in peacekeeping: UN Security Council Resolution 2538 (August 28, 2020), UN Doc. S/RES/2538.

The “protection” resolutions have focused predominantly on violations of international law by armed actors, primarily in relation to CRSV. While one of the resolutions recognizes that “security threats and protection challenges” affect women, it does not clarify whether these “security threats” extend beyond armed political violence.<sup>7</sup> The Security Council’s narrow, securitized framing of CRSV has advanced a partial view of where and how protection concerns relevant to WPS might arise.<sup>8</sup> Some of the participation-focused and CRSV-focused resolutions have since countered this trend by referencing concerns about “gender-based violence” and “all forms of violence.”<sup>9</sup> In practice, however, and particularly for some UN member states, protection remains focused on CRSV by armed actors.

The textual analysis also found that language relating to participation and protection, and their potential interrelationship, appears in a varied way across the WPS resolutions (see Table 1). First, participation and protection are addressed alongside but distinctive from each other in the resolutions to (1) highlight and advance each pillar as a distinctive and primary concern of the agenda and (2) attempt to balance the empowerment associated with participation and the victimhood associated with protection that have emerged in the

agenda. Second, participation and protection appear together in language focused on protection structures whereby (3) women’s participation is promoted within mechanisms of protection (such as policing) and (4) *some* women’s participation in protection mechanisms is understood as a means of securing the protection of other women (e.g., in peacekeeping). Finally, participation and protection appear together in language that represents a potential relationship between the two pillars either (5) in an implicit sense, whereby language could be interpreted as pointing to the link between women’s safety and their participation, or (6) in an explicit sense, where a direct relationship between women’s participation and their protection is made clear and established as of concern to the WPS agenda.

Three main concerns arise from the ways that participation and protection have evolved in the WPS agenda and the ways that their relationship has been, or should be, considered relevant. First, if the WPS agenda does not recognize the relationship between participation and protection, it will continue to perpetuate the binary between the participation of women as leaders with agency and the protection of women as victims in conflict. This binary reinforces the idea that women can only belong to one of these categories and reifies stereo-

Table 1. Relationship between participation and protection across the WPS resolutions

| Participation and protection treated separately in WPS resolutions                         |  | Participation in protection mechanisms   |   | Potential relationship between participation and protection                                      |   |
|--|--|--|---|--|---|
| Participation and protection are treated as distinctive and primary concerns of the agenda | There is an attempt to balance between participation/empowerment and protection/victimhood | Women’s participation is promoted within mechanisms of protection (such as policing) | <i>Some</i> women’s participation in protection mechanisms is understood to advance protection for <i>other</i> women (e.g., in peacekeeping) | Implicit: language may be interpreted as pointing to a link between participation and protection | Explicit: a direct relationship between participation and protection is established |

<sup>7</sup> UN Security Council Resolution 2122 (October 18, 2013), UN Doc. S/RES/2122.

<sup>8</sup> Sara Meger, “The Fetishization of Sexual Violence in International Security,” *International Studies Quarterly* 60, no. 1 (2016); Aisling Swaine, “Beyond Strategic Rape and Between the Public and Private: Violence Against Women in Armed Conflict,” *Human Rights Quarterly* 37, no. 3 (2015).

<sup>9</sup> See, for example: UN Security Council Resolutions 2467 (April 23, 2019), UN Doc. S/RES/2467; 2106 (June 24, 2013), UN Doc. S/RES/2106; and 1889 (October 5, 2009), UN Doc. S/RES/1889.

types attached to women's interests and rights.

Second, the agenda will miss the gendered, context-specific, and conflict-related protection risks that accompany women's participation across all areas of peace and security. Globally, women who take on significant leadership roles increasingly experience intimidation, violence, assassination, and threats to their professional reputations.<sup>10</sup> Violent conflict may also politicize women's rights, deepening gendered barriers and risks for women. While women and men in leadership face some common risks, women also face distinctive gendered risks. Conflict-related tensions intersect with and arise from deeply entrenched gender inequalities in a way that can undermine women's safety, call into question or discredit their leadership, and reinforce gender stereotypes around who they are and who they can and should be.<sup>11</sup>

Third, the agenda will overlook the critical link between the harms women experience and their low level of representation. Of particular concern is the effect of these risks on younger women's willingness to participate in political and public life. Failing to tackle the risks facing older women means that young women will face the same risks. This cyclical dynamic perpetuates women's exclusion, erodes the potential for long-term progress toward women's equal participation, and misses the connection between the youth, peace, and security and WPS agendas.<sup>12</sup>

The relationship between women's participation and related protection risks, therefore, is critical to the success of the WPS agenda. There are signs that the Security Council is beginning to recognize this. The clearest testament came in the two WPS

resolutions adopted in 2019. Resolution 2467 recognized that "women's protection and participation are inextricably linked and mutually-reinforcing." Resolution 2493 "encourages Member States to create safe and enabling environments for civil society, including formal and informal community women leaders, women peacebuilders, political actors, and those who protect and promote human rights."<sup>13</sup>

The same year, the UN secretary-general's annual reports on CRSV and on WPS pointed to the negative ways that sexual violence impacts women's civic participation and the need for protection for women's rights organizations, peacebuilders, and human rights defenders.<sup>14</sup> The WPS report also brought attention to the rise in "misogynistic, sexist and homophobic speech by political leaders" and harassment in digital spaces directed at women in such roles.<sup>15</sup>

Individual member states have also begun to respond. A February 2020 Arrria-formula meeting in the Security Council focused on the risks encountered by women human rights defenders and peacebuilders who engage with the council and the wider UN system.<sup>16</sup> The UK has also committed to supporting initiatives that aim to enhance protections and address reprisals, including better security responses to enhance the safety of peacebuilders.<sup>17</sup>

While this recent engagement on the participation-protection nexus represents progress, it focuses on categories of women defined as "human rights defenders" and "peacebuilders."<sup>18</sup> This focus overlooks the tensions that often exist between the work of human rights defenders and

10 UN Security Council, *Women and Peace and Security: Report of the Secretary-General*, UN Doc. S/2019/800, October 9, 2019; Melinda Holmes, "Protecting Women Peacebuilders: The Front Lines of Sustainable Peace," International Civil Society Action Network, Women's Alliance for Security Leadership, and London School of Economics Centre for Women, Peace and Security, 2020; UN Women, "Preventing Conflict, Transforming Justice, Securing the Peace: Global Study on the Implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325," October 2015.

11 UN General Assembly, *Human Rights Defenders Operating in Conflict and Post-conflict Situations—Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights Defenders*, UN Doc. A/HRC/43/51, December 30, 2019, p. 9; UN General Assembly, *Situation of Women Human Rights Defenders—Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights Defenders*, UN Doc. A/HRC/40/60, January 10, 2019.

12 UN Women, "Young Women in Peace and Security: At the Intersection of the YPS and WPS Agendas," 2018.

13 UN Security Council, *Conflict-Related Sexual Violence—Report of the Secretary-General*, March 29, 2019, UN Doc. S/2019/280.

14 Ibid.

15 UN Doc. S/2019/800.

16 The meeting on "Reprisals against Women Human Rights Defenders and Women Peacebuilders" was co-hosted by Belgium, the Dominican Republic, Estonia, Germany, and the UK.

17 "Statement by the Minister of State for the Middle East and North Africa of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, James Cleverly" in UN Security Council, *Letter Dated 31 October 2020 from the President of the Security Council Addressed to the Secretary-General and the Permanent Representatives of the Members of the Security Council*, UN Doc. S/2020/1084, November 5, 2020; International Service for Human Rights, "Security Council Holds First Meeting on Reprisals and Intimidation against Women Defenders and Peacebuilders," February 25, 2020; Holmes, "Protecting Women Peacebuilders."

18 The UN General Assembly has adopted an expansive definition of human rights defenders. See: UN Doc. A/HRC/40/60, paras. 3, 4.

peacebuilders.<sup>19</sup> Further, while the UN has laid out an expansive definition of human rights defenders,<sup>20</sup> some of those we spoke to in Northern Ireland clearly stated that they would not define themselves as either human rights defenders or peacebuilders and were wary of being labeled in this way. Some also felt that the label of “peacebuilder” was being applied too widely to include those not engaging in peacebuilding work.<sup>21</sup>

Conflating women's participation with narrow categories that may be more likely to garner member-state support and acceptance prevents a broader understanding of the reality of where and how women are participating during and following peace processes. As seen in Figure 1, the WPS resolutions promote women's equal and meaningful participation across all areas of peace and security, not just human rights and peacebuilding. Women experience threats and risks in all of these areas, as we will later demonstrate. Implementing the WPS agenda, therefore, requires addressing the systemic causes of insecurities and linkages between participation and protection beyond the emerging dyad of “human rights defenders and peacebuilders.” This is particularly relevant for women involved in political or community-development work who advocate partisan political positions rather than conciliatory approaches.<sup>22</sup> It is also relevant to women whose jobs are ostensibly politically impartial, such as those in the justice and security sectors, who nonetheless experience risk as a result of those roles.

Given the trajectory of developments to date, there is a risk that a narrow, securitized approach will evolve in response to the participation-protection nexus. A focus on women's personal safety is

imperative, and initiatives that enhance women's physical security are much needed in many contexts. A solely securitized approach, however, will replicate the aforementioned problems that have arisen as a result of the securitized approaches to CRSV. It will pivot the focus of the participation-protection nexus away from tackling the root causes of risks and barriers to participation, and particularly from the ways that gender and insecurity intersect to generate specific risks for women.

It will also eclipse states' obligations to ensure women's equal representation in political and public life, such as those under the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW, 1979) and General Recommendation 30's explicit

guidance that implementation of the WPS agenda should be grounded in substantive equality provisions.<sup>23</sup>

## Northern Ireland and the Ongoing (Re)negotiation of Peace

The case study of Northern Ireland can help inform efforts to integrate implementation of the participation and protection pillars of the WPS agenda. In 1998, the Good Friday Agreement was signed in Belfast, ending thirty years of violent conflict.<sup>24</sup> The agreement remains the cornerstone of politics in Northern Ireland. It is simultaneously a source of stability and the subject of political contestation. The agreement is well known in WPS circles because of the participation of the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition (NIWC), which ultimately became a signatory to the agreement and is widely credited with securing its provisions on human rights and equality.<sup>25</sup>

A solely securitized approach to the participation-protection nexus will pivot the focus away from the ways that gender and security intersect to generate risks for women.

19 Holmes, “Protecting Women Peacebuilders.”

20 UN Doc. A/HRC/40/60, paras 3, 4.

21 One participant noted that not all women are peacebuilders. “I hate this idea that it's only women who can be peacebuilders... like ‘Mother Ireland.’ It... annoys me because there are some women who are paid—well-paid—working [in the] community who are anything but peacebuilders.” Interview 24, February 2021.

22 These women were described by one interviewee as “agitators.” Interview 24.

23 Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, “General recommendation No. 30 on Women in Conflict Prevention, Conflict and Post-conflict Situations,” UN Doc. CEDAW/C/GC/30, October 18, 2013, para. 28.

24 “The Agreement Reached in the Multi-party Negotiations: Agreement between the Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the Government of Ireland,” Belfast, April 10, 1998.

25 Avila Kilmurray and Monica McWilliams, “Struggling for Peace: How Women in Northern Ireland Challenged the Status Quo,” *Solutions Journal* 2, no. 2 (2011).

It is also well known that members of the NIWC were subjected to personal abuse throughout the talks. Their treatment shone a light on attitudes toward women in politics and in peace processes. These misogynistic attitudes remain pervasive in Northern Ireland and contribute to a hostile environment for women who participate in political and public life more than twenty years after the agreement was signed.<sup>26</sup> This demonstrates that it is not enough for women to participate in formal mediation processes; their participation must be embedded throughout the renegotiation and implementation of peace agreements.<sup>27</sup>

The Good Friday Agreement envisaged wide-ranging governance reforms in Northern Ireland to embed new mechanisms for peace, security, and justice that would address the legacy of violence. From an international perspective, these provisions have become elements of a standard approach to peacemaking and peacebuilding, including democratic governance, security sector reform, the disarmament and demobilization of non-state actors, post-conflict justice, and the creation of legislative and normative frameworks on human rights and equality. These aspects of post-conflict reconstruction are all also addressed by the WPS agenda.

However, while the agreement brought an end to the use of violence to achieve political ends, it did not end the political conflict. The divisions that underpinned the violence remain, with contestation simply moving into the realm of politics. This is evident in the ways in which the agreement and its implementation have been negotiated and renegotiated in the intervening years.

One of the most visible examples of the ongoing renegotiation of the agreement is the periodic collapse of the Northern Ireland Assembly (known as “Stormont”) and the resulting need to convene new talks to reestablish the foundations for power sharing. The rules governing power sharing are

complex and have built-in consociational structures and voting regulations to ensure cross-community support for law making.<sup>28</sup> While this is intended to prevent the abuse of power by the majority political community, it has the effect of embedding a “two-community” sectarian structure into all decision making. In the context of Northern Ireland, sectarianism refers to divisions on the basis of the ethno-national and religious identities of Protestant and Catholic and their associated perceived political affiliations of Unionist and Nationalist.<sup>29</sup> The legacy of sectarianism permeates everyday life and is embedded in institutional and societal structures, attitudes, and beliefs. It structures political processes and informs interpretation of the Good Friday Agreement and the ways in which it seeks to reform Northern Ireland. This has been a recipe for political instability.

Since it was created under the Northern Ireland Act of 1998, the Northern Ireland Assembly has collapsed or been suspended five times.<sup>30</sup> The subsequent talks that have been convened to restore power sharing have resulted in significant renegotiation of the terms of the peace agreement. Each new set of talks has introduced new mechanisms and policies into the structure of governance. The accommodations and compromises that have been reached continue to shape the context for women’s political participation in Northern Ireland.

In addition to these high-profile renegotiations of the Good Friday Agreement, there have been challenges implementing many of its provisions, particularly on legal reforms. For example, no Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland has been agreed, despite the agreement’s provisions calling for one.<sup>31</sup> Other issues related to rights and equality, such as the provisions on the Irish language, have also not been implemented and remain contentious and politically volatile. The failure to adequately

26 See also: “Sexism at Stormont Must Be Eradicated,” *Belfast Telegraph*, September 21, 2020.

27 See: Christine Bell and Jan Popisil, “Navigating Inclusion in Transitions from Conflict: The Formalised Political Unsettlement,” *Journal of International Development* 29, no. 5 (2017); Inclusive Peace and Transition Initiative and UN Development Programme, “Implementing Peace Agreements: From Inclusive Processes to Inclusive Outcomes,” May 2020.

28 See: David Torrance, “Devolution in Northern Ireland, 1998–2020,” UK House of Commons Library, February 2020, p. 9.

29 Robbie McVeigh, “Sectarianism: The Key Facts,” Equality Coalition, Committee on the Administration of Justice, and UNISON, February 2020.

30 See: Torrance, “Devolution in Northern Ireland, 1998–2020.”

31 See: “Have Your Say: Human Rights in Northern Ireland—Consultation on the Creation of a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland,” Northern Ireland Assembly Ad Hoc Committee on a Bill of Rights, available at <http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/assembly-business/committees/2017-2022/ad-hoc-committee-on-a-bill-of-rights/have-your-say-human-rights-in-northern-ireland/>.

implement provisions addressing the needs of victims of the conflict could undermine the whole structure of the agreement. While an independent Policing Board was created, policing remains politically divisive and liable to politicization. Other new public bodies such as the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission and the Office of the Police Ombudsman continue to be tied up with politically divisive “legacy” work that undermines their cross-community support and politicizes not only the bodies themselves but also those who represent them.

While Northern Ireland may be in a post-agreement state, it is not post-conflict. The fundamental nature of law and society continues to be negotiated, and it is vital that women participate in this process. Yet despite the agreement's commitment to women's full and equal political participation, and despite sustained campaigning by women's organizations, Security Council Resolution 1325 has not been used as a framework for policymaking.<sup>32</sup> Due to its contested constitutional status, Northern Ireland is not included in the scope of the UK's national action plan on WPS, which is primarily internationally focused. Ireland's third national action plan on WPS, adopted in 2020, does provide for support for women peace-builders across the island of Ireland, but drawing on the support of the Irish government remains a delicate act of political negotiation that is usually only feasible at the local level.<sup>33</sup> As a result, law and policy in Northern Ireland largely fall into the gaps between the two national action plans.

It must also be acknowledged that promoting women's participation is itself a contested issue with divisions along party political lines. Some political parties actively promote women and have used quotas to increase the number of women elected. Other parties do not subscribe to the idea

of quotas for women's participation, preferring instead to adopt a “merit-based” approach. Because of this division, the promotion of women's participation risks being viewed as “belonging” to one party or to one “side” of the community and not the other. There is also no political consensus on the nature and extent of what constitutes women's rights or gender equality, with different women holding different positions.

For this reason, in this paper we do not distinguish women's experiences along political or community lines. We are concerned with the experiences of women as women. The findings reveal a high degree of consistency in women's experiences irrespective of party or political affiliation. This approach has also revealed patterns across the different layers of leadership, with remarkably similar experiences being reported by women in very different roles.

## The Context for Participation and Protection in Post-Agreement Northern Ireland

It is not enough for women to participate in formal mediation processes; their participation must be embedded throughout the renegotiation and implementation of peace agreements.

Protection risks related to women's participation in Northern Ireland must be understood in the context of both current levels of women's participation in political and societal structures and against the backdrop of prevailing sociocultural gendered and political divisions.

Here, the current status of women's participation is first outlined, followed by an overview of how deeply embedded cultures of misogyny and sectarianism create the conditions in which women's participation is assessed. These factors provide the broader context in which direct threats and attacks are possible.

<sup>32</sup> The agreement contains only two references to women. The chapter on “Rights, Safeguards and Equality of Opportunity” includes a commitment by the British Government to advance policies of social inclusion, including the advancement of women in public life. The parties to the agreement also affirm their support for human rights, including the right of women to full and equal participation. On the campaigning by women's organizations, see: Bronagh Hinds and Debbie Donnelly, “Developing and Applying Women Peace and Security Practice in Northern Ireland: Strategic Guide and Toolkit,” Community Foundation for Northern Ireland, June 2014.

<sup>33</sup> Government of Ireland, “Ireland's Third National Action Plan for the Implementation of UNSCR 1325 and Related Resolutions, 2019–2024,” 2019.

## The Current Situation of Participation

At first glance, Northern Ireland appears to be doing well in terms of women's participation in politics. Until June 2021, the first minister, deputy first minister, justice minister, and minister for the economy were all women.<sup>34</sup> Women hold 33 percent of the seats in the Northern Ireland Assembly.<sup>35</sup> There is an All-Party Parliamentary Group on Women, Peace and Security (APPG-WPS) with members from across the political spectrum (both male and female) that seeks to raise awareness of the lack of participation of women in public and political life in Northern Ireland. Family-friendly working hours are now a feature of the Assembly, and nearly all the participants in our research reported that the atmosphere in the Assembly chamber was generally civil and respectful. The majority of participants also reported strong support from their organizations, whether political parties, public bodies, or civil society organizations and boards.

One exception to this is women who work outside formal institutional structures. Since the Good Friday Agreement, Northern Ireland's reformed governance structures have relied on scrutiny and oversight from independent bodies to engender public confidence. There are a number of women in high-level independent roles on such bodies. However, they are largely isolated from broader support structures. One research participant in such a role noted that when she received a threat, "I was simply on my own."<sup>36</sup> Women in these positions are not easily included in existing structures for ensuring participation, but their protection must also be part of the conversation.

Looking beyond the surface, the statistics on women's participation in key political decision-making positions reveal that there is still progress to be made. For example, women's participation is

especially low in two of the key sites of ongoing renegotiation and implementation of the Good Friday Agreement. The first is The Executive Office Committee, which is the parliamentary committee responsible for scrutiny of human rights and equality, including efforts to tackle paramilitarism and advance legacy policies such as pensions for victims of the conflict. The second is the Justice Committee, which is responsible for oversight of policing and the criminal justice system, issues that remain contentious in the negotiation and implementation of the agreement. Since power was devolved to the Assembly in 1999, women's membership of the Executive Office Committee has been about 17 percent, and women's membership of the Justice Committee has been about 21 percent.<sup>37</sup>

The number of women in leadership positions in public institutions related to justice and security is similarly low. For example, only two women have been appointed as Chief Officers since the inception of the PSNI. One retired in 2014 and the other in early 2021. As a result, the few women in senior roles in policing, and in criminal justice more generally, are very visible. This leaves them open to additional scrutiny and to abuse from those who do not support either their position or their work.

There are a number of reasons for the low number of senior female officers. In part, it results from a legacy of active discrimination against women that reduced the number of women recruited. It was not until 1994 that female officers were routinely armed in line with their male colleagues, a policy that had a direct impact on their recruitment and promotion opportunities.<sup>38</sup> Policy and procedure also dictate the specific length of time that must be served at each rank before being eligible for promotion, meaning that there are fewer women who have served long enough to be eligible for leadership posts. This is changing, with more

<sup>34</sup> Arlene Foster, the first minister and leader of the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), stepped down from both positions with effect from the end of June 2021. Diane Dodds, the Minister for the Economy, was also replaced by a male colleague at this time.

<sup>35</sup> Michael Potter, "Who Runs Northern Ireland? A Summary of Statistics Relating to Gender and Power in 2020," Northern Ireland Assembly, January 2020.

<sup>36</sup> Interview 25, February 2021.

<sup>37</sup> Membership of committees changes regularly, making it difficult to establish clear statistics. However, information provided by the Northern Ireland Assembly shows that since it was created, 104 members have been appointed to the Executive Office Committee or its predecessor, of whom only 18 have been women. A total of 66 members have been appointed to the Justice Committee since it was established in 2010, only 14 of whom have been women. See: Northern Ireland Assembly, "Female Membership of the Executive (OFMdfM) and Justice Committees: Information Standards Freedom of Information Response," February 1, 2021.

<sup>38</sup> *Marguerite Johnston v Chief Constable of the Royal Ulster Constabulary*. During the conflict, it was necessary for police officers to carry firearms. An outright ban on female officers carrying firearms led to unequal opportunities to join the police force.

women now coming through the ranks, but the overall gender composition of the police service remains roughly 70:30 male to female.<sup>39</sup>

In contrast, women are overrepresented in civil society leadership. Women comprise 75 percent of both directors and staff in the “third sector”—Northern Ireland’s term for civil society organizations.<sup>40</sup> The role of women’s groups in forging alliances across conflict lines and leading community-level reconciliation, and in supporting women’s participation in the peace talks during the conflict, is well documented.<sup>41</sup> However, the civil society landscape has changed dramatically since the Good Friday Agreement, deeply affecting women’s range and experiences of participation at the community level. Most notably, funding has been diverted toward new actors and bodies and away from existing civil society organizations and women’s groups that had been doing vital work to improve relations both before and after the agreement.<sup>42</sup> Because of this shift, many women working in communities report feeling less safe now than they did during the conflict, a dynamic that is explored in the following sections.<sup>43</sup>

## The Current Context for Protection Challenges

In Northern Ireland, as elsewhere, the legacy of conflict, including sectarianism, violent masculinities, and community polarization, directly influences where and how women participate and

their experience of public life.<sup>44</sup> Insecurity and the low-level threat of violence remain relatively normalized in Northern Ireland. Participants in the research noted that while there may not be “the same bombing[s] or shootings or anything like that now... some within the community... don’t believe in what most of us are trying to do. They want to disrupt that, and they want to really resort to violence.”<sup>45</sup> As one participant put it, while the peace process is ongoing, “there’s a dark side there, and that dark undercurrent is constantly flowing because I’m hearing about it every day.”<sup>46</sup>

The legacy of conflict, including sectarianism, violent masculinities, and community polarization, influences where and how women participate and their experience of public life.

While the majority of non-state paramilitary organizations have gone through decommissioning processes pursuant to the Good Friday Agreement, their influence both at the community level and on politics “remains a concern.”<sup>47</sup> For example, a

recently leaked 2020 security assessment of the status of paramilitarism in Northern Ireland cited 12,500 current members of paramilitary organizations across the political landscape.<sup>48</sup> Northern Ireland is experiencing an upsurge in political violence. This takes the form of both violent clashes at interfaces between communities in Belfast and an increase in paramilitary activity, including the targeting of police officers and so-called “punishment” shootings and beatings.<sup>49</sup> Following the agreement, many with ongoing or former connections to paramilitary organizations “got shifted into power, [and] suddenly... they had money and they had position.”<sup>50</sup> In this context, threats to women from people with violent backgrounds take on a

39 PSNI, “Workforce Composition Statistics,” 2021, available at <https://www.psni.police.uk/inside-psni/Statistics/workforce-composition-statistics/>.

40 Potter, “Who Runs Northern Ireland?”

41 Marie Abbot and Hugh Frazer, *Women and Community Development Work in Northern Ireland* (Belfast: Farset Co-operative Press, 1985).

42 Interview 1, January 2021; Northern Ireland Department for Communities, “Draft Gender Equality Strategy,” 2020.

43 Women’s Resource and Development Agency, “Women and the Conflict: Talking About the Troubles and Planning For the Future,” 2018; Interview 11; Interview 13, February 2021; Interview 24, February 2021.

44 UN Doc. A/HRC/40/60, para. 32.

45 Interview 6, January 2021.

46 Interview 19, February 2021.

47 Independent Reporting Commission, “Third Report,” November 2020.

48 Suzanne Breen, “Leaked Report: Strength of Loyalist Paramilitaries ‘An Indictment of Authorities,’” *Belfast Telegraph*, December 3, 2020.

49 PSNI, “Police Recorded Security Situation Statistics: 1 March 2020 to 28 February 2021,” March 2021, available at <https://www.psni.police.uk/globalassets/inside-the-psni/our-statistics/security-situation-statistics/2021/february/security-situation-statistics-to-february-2021.pdf>.

50 Interview 13, February 2021. A similar reference was made in Interview 25. See also: Aisling Swaine, “Transition or Transformation: An Analysis of Before, During and Post-conflict Violence against Women in Northern Ireland, Liberia and Timor-Leste” (PhD diss., University of Ulster, 2011); Fidelma Ashe, “From Paramilitaries to Peacemakers: The Gender Dynamics of Community-Based Restorative Justice in Northern Ireland,” *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 11, no. 2 (2009).

deeper meaning.<sup>51</sup> As one participant noted, “That undercurrent of violence [is] still present. People who were engaged in violence still live this. That’s part of their history. You have to understand that about them. So they’re used to violence perpetrated on them as well as perpetrating violence. That’s still very close to the surface.”<sup>52</sup>

Both globally and in Northern Ireland, harmful gender norms and inequalities add further layers to the conflict-related protection risks facing women. Northern Ireland experiences high levels of gender-based violence against women both within and outside the home.<sup>53</sup> Many participants noted that everyday gendered insecurities, inequalities, and sexism impact women in public life.<sup>54</sup> They relayed experiences of normalized sexist harassment, including innuendos,<sup>55</sup> comments on women’s bodies,<sup>56</sup> sniggering,<sup>57</sup> “sidebar comments ... and jokey remarks” when women are speaking in formal meetings,<sup>58</sup> and sexist critiques. For example, one woman had a complaint made against her over whether her skirt was the correct length for participation in house meetings.<sup>59</sup> The female first and deputy first ministers have recently spoken out about “the misogynistic criticisms that female public figures have to take” and constant “derogatory comments about your appearance [and] threats of physical and sexual violence.”<sup>60</sup>

While these experiences cannot be quantified as direct physical threats, they create insecurities for women in their personal and professional lives. For example, one participant working in politics experienced enduring harassment from a constituent who, in her words, “was just trying to entice me to his home, and then he became obsessed with me.”<sup>61</sup> She also described a similar

incident when she was alone in a rented hall in a rural constituency when a man unconnected to the premises or her party entered, pretended to do repairs, and later sent a message saying “finally [seeing] you in person is so nice.”<sup>62</sup> Such harassment and gender-specific risks stymie women’s ability to do their jobs effectively. The interviewee explained that she did not feel safe engaging in constituency work in rural areas at night. To do so, she “always [has] to have a male accomplice go with me.” This means that “other parties, if they had more male representatives, had the political advantage.”<sup>63</sup> By heeding gendered personal-safety requirements, women are exposed to further criticisms, undermining their political reputations and professional ambitions.

This subjective sense of threat is not easily captured in the discourse surrounding women’s participation under the WPS agenda and represents a significant gap. Efforts to advance women’s participation need to be grounded in women’s own assessment of their safety.

## Protection-Related Challenges to Women’s Participation: Threats, Risks, and Violence

Women’s participation in multiple levels of Northern Ireland’s political and social structures is impacted by an array of protection challenges and risks. These arise in many ways. They can take the form of direct threats to life and physical threats linked to, and in the context of, work spaces and roles. Other threats come in the form of subtle or

51 Interview 13; Interview 25.

52 Interview 25.

53 PSNI, “Domestic Abuse Incidents and Crimes Recorded by the Police in Northern Ireland up to 31 December 2020,” February 2021.

54 See: UN General Assembly, *Violence against Women in Politics—Report of the Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women, Its Causes and Consequences*, UN Doc. A/73/301, August 6, 2018.

55 Interview 17, February 2021.

56 Interview 4, January 2021; Interview 5, January 2021; Interview 16, February 2021.

57 Interview 4; Interview 5.

58 Interview 5; Interview 7; Interview 17.

59 Interview 16.

60 Arlene Foster, “Statement by Rt. Hon. Arlene Foster MLA,” April 28, 2021, available at <https://mydup.com/news/statement-by-rt-hon-arlene-foster-mla?token=8hhrY5xG4j5Acq-vO2TBwEcF8MUd8yjC>; Colm Kelpie, “Women in Politics Face Misogyny and Abuse—O’Neill,” BBC, May 10, 2021.

61 Interview 16.

62 Ibid.

63 Ibid.

overt sectarian messaging or sexual abuse. Everyday gendered barriers to women's participation intermingle with and add another layer to threats arising from sectarianism, some of which are shared by men in similar roles and institutions, such as the police. All of these forms of threats and risks, and the examples thereof, have taken place since the Good Friday Agreement was signed, with most taking place within the last ten years.

## Direct Threats to Women's Lives

The threat most commonly associated with women in political or public life in Northern Ireland is that of violence from a paramilitary organization. The PSNI have a "threats to life" policy that sets out a process for assessing such threats and taking feasible operational steps to protect life where there is intelligence that a threat is real and immediate.<sup>64</sup> These threats are therefore relatively easily captured and quantified. Several participants reported engaging with the PSNI for threat assessments,<sup>65</sup> and some were notified that they were considered to be a "person at risk."<sup>66</sup>

Several participants reported receiving death threats from a paramilitary organization. The threats were directly tied to their work, as in this example:

I got a phone call [in the] evening from someone that I knew... and he put on a local paramilitary leader... who basically threatened me on the phone, and I wasn't sure if that was just bluster or serious, until the police arrived at my door in the middle of the night to confirm that there was a threat out against me... and it was quite serious.<sup>67</sup>

The ongoing security situation creates a general

level of threat that must be managed daily. As one participant summed up, "The physical threat is always there."<sup>68</sup> This sentiment was echoed in most of the interviews. The threat of violence is a constant undercurrent for women working in politics or in their community. For example, the routine practice of checking under one's car for explosive devices, which emerged during the conflict, continues to be widely practiced, particularly, but not exclusively, by police officers.<sup>69</sup> One participant commented how she "[had] to check the car every day."<sup>70</sup> Many live with the daily threat of being recognized and targeted. One participant noted how she was advised, "Your car is too visible, your registration is too obvious. You're going to have to get a car that's a little bit less easily identifiable because it could easily be tracked to the area you live in."<sup>71</sup>

Because of the constant nature of this threat, many women adjust their lifestyles to avoid standing out.<sup>72</sup> One participant noted how "for women in the justice and security sector, most try to conceal

The threat of violence is a constant undercurrent for women working in politics or in their community.

their roles to benefit from anonymity until such times as their seniority makes them visible. This has an impact on the way they live their lives."<sup>73</sup>

Some also felt the need to adjust their appearance to be less noticeable. One felt that "people tune into women's physical appearance more, and, therefore, you're more recognizable in your private life."<sup>74</sup> This speaks to the extent to which everyday sexism intersects with safety threats and insecurities arising from sectarian conflict, requiring women to make adjustments even at the level of their personal choices over clothes or hairstyle.

New generations of children and young people grow up believing that such precautions are

64 PSNI, "Threats to Life," Service Instruction 2317, June 1, 2017, available at <https://www.psni.police.uk/globalassets/inside-the-psni/our-policies-and-procedures/corporate-policy/threats-to-life-310517-ext.pdf>.

65 Interview 9, January 2021; Interview 12, February 2021; Interview 16.

66 Interview 13; Interview 5.

67 Interview 5.

68 Interview 12. Also: Interview 8, January 2021, on the ongoing nature of the security risk.

69 Interview 9; Interview 15, February 2021; Interview 17; Interview 19; Interview 22, February 2021.

70 Interview 19.

71 Interview 17.

72 Interview 8; Interview 9; Interview 22; Interview 17.

73 Interview 22; Interview 8; Interview 9.

74 Interview 17.

normal, and this passing on of risk is something that women in leadership live with. As one participant noted, “I’m resilient and robust, and I’m used to the security apparatus around me, but here’s my nineteen-year-old daughter getting down on her hands and knees to check under her car, just in case something has been put under her car because [of who her mother is]. I found that very hard.”<sup>75</sup>

Some did not see these risks as particularly gendered, but simply a consequence of being in political and public life. However, while men are also at risk due to the general security situation, the targeting of women is perceived differently because it is culturally taboo. For example, when female police officers are targeted by paramilitary organizations, media coverage centers on the status of the officer as a woman and, in some cases, as a mother, in a way that draws on gendered understandings of the need to protect women from political violence.<sup>76</sup> Attacks on women in political and public life undermine this implicit social contract. They also call into question the assumption that women are safe doing peace and security work, which is implicit in much of the participation-focused advocacy under the WPS agenda.<sup>77</sup>

## Threats to Homes and Families

Those who make threats against women often exploit the home and family as sources of vulnerability. This issue is especially acute for elected representatives as a result of rules in most constituencies that require anyone standing for election in Northern Ireland to publish their home

address on the ballot paper. A number of participants highlighted the vulnerability that this created.<sup>78</sup> While this rule has now been replaced in some constituencies,<sup>79</sup> Northern Ireland is a small place, and people live in close-knit communities. As one participant noted, “We live in our communities, we’re part of our communities. Everybody knows you, they know where you live, they pass your house, they know when you’re in, they know when you’re out, they know you when you go looking in Marks or Tesco with your shopping trolley.”<sup>80</sup>

This visibility leaves women politicians feeling vulnerable in their own homes. Following security assessments in response to threats, the PSNI have advised many women to take security precautions (see Figure 2). These have included installing security cameras and lights,<sup>81</sup> bulletproof glass,<sup>82</sup> fire extinguishers (as a result of threats of arson attacks),<sup>83</sup> and panic buttons.<sup>84</sup> Some have even ultimately been advised to move to a new home.<sup>85</sup>

These precautions are not unfounded. As one participant shared, “I had an incident that happened at my house... where I had a break-in, and they totally destroyed my entire house... That was seen by the police as... somebody warning to say, ‘We know where you live.’”<sup>86</sup> Another reported the threatened burning of her family home.<sup>87</sup> Participants noted the strain this placed on them and their families, leading to them being questioned about their career choice<sup>88</sup> and experiencing tensions with their parents,<sup>89</sup> spouses,<sup>90</sup> or children.<sup>91</sup>

75 Interview 15.

76 “Dungiven: Fireball Bomb Bid to Kill Police Officer and Her Daughter,” BBC, April 21, 2021.

77 See, for example: Judy El-Bushra, “Feminism, Gender and Women’s Peace Activism,” *Development and Change* 38, no. 1 (2007), p. 131; and Catherine Turner, “Soft Ways of Doing Hard Things: Women Mediators and the Question of Gender in Mediation,” *Peacebuilding* 8, no. 4 (2020).

78 Interview 7; Interview 10, January 2021; Interview 16.

79 Jayne McCormack, “Máiría Cahill Settles Election Address Case with the NIO,” BBC, January 26, 2021.

80 Interview 10. Marks and Spencer and Tesco are two of the largest supermarkets in Belfast.

81 Interview 3. Online. Northern Ireland. January 2021; Interview 5; Interview 9; Interview 10; Interview 19.

82 Interview 5.

83 Interview 19.

84 Interview 10.

85 Interview 10; Interview 9; Interview 22.

86 Interview 10.

87 Interview 19.

88 Interview 1; Interview 16; Interview 18, February 2021. Given the importance of personal resilience and informal support networks for women in political and public life, this is a worrying trend.

89 Interview 1; Interview 10; Interview 18; Interview 19.

90 Interview 5.

91 Interview 10; Interview 12; Interview 15; Interview 19.

Figure 2. Security measures recommended in response to threats



The high visibility of women leaders in the justice and security sectors creates additional security challenges. A number of participants noted that they were unable to return to their home communities to visit their parents or families because they would be too visible in the face of ongoing security risks.<sup>92</sup> This is particularly risky for women from rural areas who cannot avail themselves of the relative anonymity of the city.<sup>93</sup>

The ongoing division and control of space in Northern Ireland is also reflected in the ways in which threats are made. Those making threats often emphasize women's vulnerability within the physical space of their homes and within their own perceived political community. For example, participants spoke of having to "watch the windows" as a result

"I had a break-in, and they totally destroyed my house.... That was seen by the police as... somebody warning to say, 'We know where you live.'"

of their work, in reference to the practice of forcing people out of their homes by throwing objects such as rocks or pipe bombs through the windows, usually at night when residents are indoors. Other common forms of intimidation include the posting of graffiti that identifies personal information such as their home address on walls near where women live,<sup>94</sup> the erection of symbols and flags associated with paramilitary organizations outside women's homes,<sup>95</sup> and the painting of curbstones to mark territory and authority in a particular area.<sup>96</sup> A particularly sinister form of threat is the suggestion, painted on walls near women's homes, that women working in the community are "informers" to the state, a term that is loaded with historical significance, potentially exposing them to sectarian targeting.<sup>97</sup> These

92 Interview 8, January 2021; Interview 12; Interview 17.

93 Interview 16; Interview 17; Interview 19.

94 Interview 2; Interview 6; Interview 5; Interview 15; Interview 19.

95 Interview 14, February 2021.

96 Interview 2, January 2021.

97 Interview 6; Interview 13; Interview 19.

actions send women a message that powerful men know about their work and are not happy with it.

Too often, the response of the PSNI to this type of harassment is to advise women to move to a new house, removing them from the communities they have grown up in and seek to serve. This reinforces the idea that protection issues can be solved by removing women from the risk. It also consolidates the power of those making the threats rather than challenging the power structures that enable them.

## Threats to and in Work Places

Those threatening women in political and public life in Northern Ireland often target their professional integrity, signifying that the subject matter of their work is a problem. Women in both political and community-sector roles have experienced direct threats to their work places. One participant described how a gang had “basically marched on the office and... tried to burn [it] down twice.”<sup>98</sup>

Carrying out constituency business exposes elected women to risk, particularly when they are working alone in constituency offices or out visiting constituents.<sup>99</sup> One participant noted how “in the constituency office... there would be times where you’d be working on your own and without lone-working training and security things in the office. I did feel quite vulnerable because people would have just come in and didn’t make an appointment. People were just coming in off the street.”<sup>100</sup>

Another woman described how she received a voicemail in which she was subjected to sectarian abuse and warned to stay away from a town she represented. Further inquiries revealed that the person responsible for the abuse lived one mile from her house. Reflecting on the impact of this, the woman noted, “When I go to the shop, or I go to the pub, or I go for a walk at night with the dog, who’s to say this guy isn’t four doors down or four streets over? You could run into him at the post

office. He’ll know me, but I won’t know him.”<sup>101</sup>

Women working in the community sector experience similar verbal attacks. Oftentimes, because of the cross-community nature of their work, they are subjected to surveillance and threats by other community activists who hold differing views on what is needed for their community.

One participant noted how sometimes some male leaders in her community try to take over and control the work of women leaders: “[They] were having a meeting, and three guys with baseball bats walked in and stood them down and told them they were in charge, that they were taking over and that they were running everything for that area.”<sup>102</sup> Another explained how the women’s center in her community was covered with sectarian graffiti because it had planned a high-level event that brought in leaders from the “other side.”<sup>103</sup> One woman reported how, following a disagreement with local political actors in her area, “our building was burnt to the ground.... They came in [one day], and then two days later somebody climbed on top of the roof, took the tiles off, poured petrol down inside, and set fire to the [building].”<sup>104</sup>

It is worth noting that women’s centers were also burned down and covered with sectarian graffiti during the conflict.<sup>105</sup> These present-day threats and attacks thus represent a sustained attempt to upend, undermine, and inhibit cross-community work led by women’s organizations. These organizations’ efforts to transform sectarianism threaten the status quo that emerged during the conflict and that remains in place following the Good Friday Agreement.

These examples must be understood in the context of the status-related power and impunity of those affiliated with paramilitary organizations. These dynamics are deeply embedded in the fabric of the peace in Northern Ireland.<sup>106</sup> They are felt implicitly, such as when paramilitaries ostensibly control

98 Interview 5.

99 Interview 16; Interview 7.

100 Interview 7.

101 Interview 16.

102 Interview 13.

103 Interview 2.

104 Interview 1.

105 Cynthia Cockburn, *The Space between Us: Negotiating Gender and National Identities in Conflict* (London and New York: Zed Books, 1998).

106 Ashe, “From Paramilitaries to Peacemakers”; Swaine, “Beyond Strategic Rape and Between the Public and Private.”

their communities, including by acting as arbiters for whether and how to give access to statutory bodies.<sup>107</sup> These dynamics also include explicit controls, such as the aforementioned “paramilitary-style attacks” whereby these organizations police communities by carrying out shootings and assaults for perceived transgressions.<sup>108</sup>

Many of the threats that women relayed are linked to the subject and purpose of their work, whether they work in institutions like the police that some see as unwelcome or in organizations that provide support services for women. The women we spoke to were all challenging both gender norms and the sectarian status quo. They all were clear that their work was “cross-community” or “all community”—a colloquial and policy term denoting an intention to be inclusive and anti-sectarian. Others were challenging the status quo by adopting progressive stances on social issues.<sup>109</sup> More generally, as articulated by one participant, many of those with political power simply “have an issue with women in powerful positions.”<sup>110</sup> The work of many of these women disrupts the informal power contract arising out of the peace agreement that benefits some over others. Women who dare to participate visibly in public life meet that power contract head on.

While some of these risks are shared with men who take on similar roles, they have a gendered dimension that affects women specifically. As one woman said, “It’s knowing [that] if a threat is carried out, the chances of it being a gender-based attack... hav[ing] a sexual violence element to it, is something [to be] conscious of.”<sup>111</sup> These are threats that are felt by women because of their own

lived experience of the ways that legacies of violent conflict can be expected to play out, and their deep consciousness of where and how gendered risks arise.

There have been initiatives under the Good Friday Agreement and subsequent agreements to transform conflict-era paramilitary systems of control. One such initiative, the Tackling Paramilitarism Programme, has pursued this aim by supporting the transition of paramilitary groups toward community-development, restorative-justice, and conflict-transformation practices.<sup>112</sup> This approach has been justified with reference to

Women who dare to participate visibly in public life meet the informal power contract arising out of the peace agreement head on.

international best practices of integrating so-called “ex-combatants” into legitimate social structures, in line with UN-backed disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) programs.<sup>113</sup>

However, there are risks associated with this strategy. As one participant noted, “I think, cross-sector, there is a huge challenge here to ensure that paramilitary groupings do not get a grip on communities, which would be very, very hard for statutory and voluntary agencies to come in and pull back.”<sup>114</sup> DDR initiatives in Northern Ireland have legitimized paramilitary organizations’ operation in and gatekeeping of communities. As a result, some community activists in Northern Ireland never refer to these actors as “ex-paramilitaries” but as paramilitaries who conduct activities “in a different way, under a different name.”<sup>115</sup>

Beyond the general risks that result from enabling violent actors to control communities, such initiatives present particular risks for women and women’s organizations at the community level. For

107 Claire Mitchell, “The Limits of Legitimacy: Former Loyalist Combatants and Peace-Building in Northern Ireland,” *Irish Political Studies* 23, no. 1 (2008); Colin Knox and Rachel Monaghan, “Informal Criminal Justice Systems in Northern Ireland,” Economic and Social Research Council, 2000.

108 PSNI, “Police Recorded Security Situation Statistics 1 February 2020 to 31 January 2021,” February 5, 2021; Rachel Monaghan, “‘An Imperfect Peace’: Paramilitary ‘Punishments’ In Northern Ireland,” *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 16, no. 3, (2004) 439-461.

109 Interview 10.

110 Interview 5.

111 Interview 25.

112 Northern Ireland Executive, “Tackling Paramilitarism, Criminality and Organised Crime: Executive Action Plan,” July 2016; Ashe, “From Paramilitaries to Peacemakers”; Ashe, “Gendering Demilitarisation and Justice in Northern Ireland,” *British Journal of Politics & International Relations* 17, no. 4 (2015).

113 Kieran McEvoy and Harry Mika, “Restorative Justice and the Critique of Informalism in Northern Ireland,” *British Journal of Criminology* 42, no. 3 (2002). See also: “£10 Million Spent on Tackling Paramilitaries,” BBC, October 23, 2017. Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action, “Government Challenged to Take Action over Scale of Paramilitary Activity in Northern Ireland,” 2016.

114 Interview 8.

115 Swaine, *Conflict-Related Violence against Women: Transforming Transition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 168–169.

example, while the Tackling Paramilitarism Programme has created funding streams for women's organizations and recognized their importance in peacebuilding, it has also displaced and downplayed their work by empowering paramilitary structures.<sup>116</sup> Moreover, it has placed women's organizations in direct competition with paramilitary groups over programming and funding. The shift of community work into the hands of much-better paid paramilitaries sends a signal as to the value the state places on women's community work.<sup>117</sup>

While UN policy and the WPS agenda provide for gendered approaches to DDR, the focus tends to be on ensuring that women who are part of or associated with armed groups are included in the DDR process.<sup>118</sup> The case of Northern Ireland demonstrates that empowering armed actors through DDR can also create protection concerns for women leaders, underscoring the link between women's protection and women's participation. A gendered approach to DDR, therefore, needs to consider the social power dynamics of the DDR process, including the broader context in which DDR is taking place. In Northern Ireland, this means that the Good Friday Agreement's provisions on gender equality should lie at the center of DDR.

## Public Shaming: Threats to Women's Reputations

Many interviewees experienced acutely gendered and sexualized attempts at public shaming. This has included "sexual baiting," a tactic used to deride and discredit women's professional reputations by questioning and making damaging insinuations about their sexuality and reproductive and

marital status.<sup>119</sup> These tactics often represent an attempt to impede women's equal participation, whether on an individual or a collective basis.<sup>120</sup> While the exact source of these attacks is not always identifiable, they often target women in public spaces in which women work, in the mainstream media, and on social media.

## Attacks in Public Community Spaces

One example of the shaming of women can be seen in the way sexually explicit language and images have been used to publicly target senior female police officers. This material appears in public spaces in the constituencies in which they work or near their homes. One woman described how she had experienced "some horrendous, sexually explicit, abusive, awful stuff and graffiti [about me] close to my home."<sup>121</sup> Such attacks usually directly target women in areas where policing itself is controversial, thereby challenging the authority of the police. This attempt to link gender and sectarian politics can be seen on both sides of the sectarian divide.

"My male colleagues might have been getting abuse about decisions they'd made...[but] they weren't being talked about the same way I was being talked about."

Participants clearly linked their images and reputation, the risk of sexualized abuse, and their professional integrity. One woman who has experienced this form of attack described what it meant to her, underlining its efficacy: "My values and integrity are exceptionally important to me.... Any sense that those have been challenged... was probably... [what] I found most difficult to struggle with."<sup>122</sup> One participant also noted that, while her "male colleagues might have been getting abuse about decisions they'd made or operational things that were happening... they weren't being talked about the same way that I was being talked about and [didn't face] the very, very personal, sexual nature of the [accompanying] comments on Twitter."<sup>123</sup>

116 Northern Ireland Executive, "Tackling Paramilitarism Criminality and Organised Crime"; UN Doc. A/HRC/43/51, p. 9; Ashe, "From Paramilitaries to Peacemakers"; NI 111; NI 113; NI 103.

117 See: Northern Ireland Department for Communities, "Draft Gender Equality Strategy."

118 UN Department of Peace Operations, "Gender-Responsive DDR: Promoting the Women, Peace and Security Agenda," 2020.

119 UN Doc. A/HRC/40/60.

120 UN Doc. A/73/301, paras. 14–15.

121 Interview 15.

122 Interview 9.

123 Interview 15.

### Box 1. Who pays the price of peace? Tensions between women's participation and protection in tackling paramilitarism

Under the Communities in Transition Project, the Northern Ireland Executive funds initiatives that build the capacity of former combatants in areas such as personal transition, community development, and area regeneration.<sup>124</sup> The project is part of the broader Tackling Paramilitarism Programme.<sup>125</sup> As one participant noted, with this program, “the paramilitary became illegal but very acceptable.”<sup>126</sup>

The Communities in Transition Project represents a point of convergence between women's participation in conflict-transformation work and women's protection concerns by creating a framework for women's leadership in conflict transformation.

On the one hand, *women's participation* under WPS is predicated on the idea that women are perceived as nonthreatening interlocutors with neutral political standpoints, a phenomenon also arising in Northern Ireland.<sup>127</sup> Research participants in this study spoke of the ways that they engaged behind the scenes—acting as intermediaries between paramilitaries and the police or paramilitaries and the community. On the other hand, *the level of violence and risk* that they face when carrying out these roles is not acknowledged. This is at odds with other ways that women's vulnerability is woven into security and justice structures.<sup>128</sup> Assumptions that women will experience no risk through engagement with powerholders at the community level underpin existing policy approaches to demilitarization. These policies, however, are fundamentally at risk of simply passing the responsibility for dealing with organized crime and criminality onto women mediators and peacebuilders. One participant noted,

[It's] great to recognize the valuable role that women have, but setting it within the Tackling Paramilitarism framework... is ultimately saying, “Well, the police can't do anything, so we're going to train up the women, get them to put their heads above the parapet, and then basically leave them [to it].”<sup>129</sup>

When carrying out this work, women exist in a legal gray zone. The necessary invisibility of their work places them beyond the scope of the protection available under law and policy. This puts them at risk. Women in such roles expressed fear of engaging with formal authorities as part of their work. For example, one noted, “There's no way I'm going to put anything down on paper.... You don't know who is going to see that or who is going to come back to you.”<sup>130</sup>

There is a widespread sense that programs to tackle paramilitarism have re-branded paramilitaries as community workers and enabled their access to funding and influence within communities. Participants said that these groups control access to justice, money lending, and even domestic-violence services. When trying to challenge this dynamic at the political level, one participant was told, “Well, you know, there's a price to be paid for peace.” She responded, “Yes, but unfortunately women and children in Northern Ireland are paying that price.”<sup>131</sup>

124 Northern Ireland Executive, “Communities in Transition: Background,” n.d., available at <https://www.executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk/articles/communities-transition-background>.

125 Northern Ireland Executive, “Tackling Paramilitarism, Criminality and Organised Crime.”

126 Interview 11, January 2021.

127 Turner, “Soft Ways of Doing Hard Things.”

128 NI 101, NI 102, NI 109, NI 114, NI 120.

129 Interview 20.

130 Interview 1.

131 Interview 13. While we acknowledge that the use of the term “women and children” in policy and in the WPS agenda is problematic, “children” in the context of this quote refers primarily to teenage boys who are subjected to vigilante justice that includes so-called “punishment shootings” for transgressing community norms. “Punishment’ Crime Must End for Good,” *Belfast Telegraph*, November 7, 2020. See also: *A Mother Brings Her Son to Be Shot*, directed by Sinead O'Shea (2017), available at <https://www.catndocs.com/index.php/categories/women/965-a-mother-brings-her-son-to-be-shot>.

The constant risk of harassment and abuse shapes the way women who participate in political and public life live their lives. For example, one participant commented how she made “choices in and around where I’d go and what I would do because I wanted to protect my own reputation.... That was the first thing for me in making sure I never gained a reputation which would undermine my role and all I had compromised and had sacrificed to get to where I’d gotten to.”<sup>132</sup> Another participant noted, “I very rarely go out now because if you’re a politician you can’t enjoy yourself, it’s just fact. You have to do it behind a closed door because people frown upon you already.”<sup>133</sup>

In the context of women’s participation in peace and security institutions in post-conflict environments, these kinds of threats and abuse are read by the women involved as sending a clear message that women should not be in these positions and to diminish their decision-making authority.<sup>134</sup> The gendered nature of these attacks is often missed in the current framing of protection under the WPS agenda even though it has direct relevance for women’s participation.

### Mainstream Media

Mainstream local media, including print and broadcast, also undermine the image of women in political and public life. At its seemingly most innocuous, such abuse includes comments on women’s appearance, weight, hairstyle, clothes, or voice. Newspapers regularly run stories about women’s private lives, including their relationships, families, and choice of clothing. One participant noted,

I’ve been plastered across the Sunday papers because I’ve maybe been seen out.... They don’t have a right to know [my personal business]. That’s my own private life. It doesn’t

affect my politics, it doesn’t affect my job, so I find that intrusive. I don’t like that intrusion, but sadly that seems to be part of politics, certainly within the world that we live in.<sup>135</sup>

Many women understand such incidents as “journalism that just wants to discredit us and make us look like complete lowlifes.”<sup>136</sup> One woman whose private life became the subject of ongoing gendered and sexualized slander in the media wondered, “When do you ever hear of a man being referred to in that way?”<sup>137</sup>

The use of women’s images to discredit them came through as a theme across the interviews.<sup>138</sup> While in some cases this tactic was simply used to attack their image, in others, women’s professional decision making is undermined through suggestions published by the media that they are unqualified for their roles or that their roles are somehow politically undesirable. Such suggestions can be fed to the press by politicians or on social media, with stories being picked up in the papers or broadcast media.<sup>139</sup> The purpose of these attacks can be more sinister than simply ridiculing a woman’s image. One participant recalled how “it was made very clear to me... [that the pictures of me in the newspapers were] meant to make me feel under threat. They had to carry out a security assessment because suddenly my face is attached to [my work].”<sup>140</sup>

It also matters who is making the attack. One woman who was required to make a decision on the conduct of a particular power holder was subject to a “very personal attack” by that person, whereby her pictures were splashed across social media under the subtext of, “She’s out of control. She’s mad.”<sup>141</sup> The identity of the person saying these words and publishing them to followers on their account added a feeling of risk for the woman. She noted, “I did, at the time, feel that... with [his]

132 Interview 22. In this context, “reputation” refers to sexual behaviour and a culture of discrediting women by alleging that they have had affairs with colleagues.

133 Interview 16. Also: Interview 10; Interview 18; Interview 22.

134 Interview 12.

135 Interview 10.

136 Ibid.

137 Interview 18.

138 Interview 5; Interview 12; Interview 25.

139 Interview 12; Interview 15; Interview 25.

140 Interview 25.

141 Interview 12.

audience I could potentially be under threat. And I did think about going to the police, but I hesitated.... I think it's the language and the image: She's a mad woman. Here's your picture, look at this."<sup>142</sup>

## Social Media Platforms

Threats via social media are more pervasive than direct physical threats against women.<sup>143</sup> Social media has been used to threaten, abuse, and discredit women across all categories. This abuse ranges from snide comments about women's appearances, such as comparing them to farm animals,<sup>144</sup> to threats that reach the threshold for criminal prosecution. Many of these threats share similar characteristics as attacks in the mainstream media. However the anonymity of online platforms makes it harder to hold either the attackers or the publishers to account for this content.

These attacks are often made when women are speaking out on progressive issues or in a way that challenges the sectarian status quo.<sup>145</sup> Very quickly, however, the attacks move from what a woman had said or a decision she had made to personal attacks rooted in both misogynistic and sectarian attitudes that speak to a broader online audience. The women who were targeted understood the purpose of these attacks to be to undermine their credibility and their authority to speak.<sup>146</sup> For example, one participant said she "had put up [a comment] saying.... 'There's evidently still barriers for women in politics. We continue to turn a blind eye.' And some guy responded saying, 'Oh, maybe you shouldn't be such a whore then.'"<sup>147</sup>

The timing of these attacks often points to their motivations. For example, a high-profile Twitter

user attempted to shame First Minister Arlene Foster by spreading rumors about her private life during negotiations to restore the Northern Ireland Assembly in 2019.<sup>148</sup> The secretary of state for Northern Ireland at the time subsequently noted how the rumors had been intended to discredit her politically at a crucial moment in the negotiations.<sup>149</sup>

Uncertainty about the extent or nature of sexualized images or rumors circulated through social media groups exacerbates the insecurity these women face. In some cases, social media accounts have been specifically created to publish information about women and the work they are doing. These accounts have published their home addresses, information about their family, and rumors about their work.<sup>150</sup> For a number of participants, these online attacks rose to such a level of intimidation and threat that they reported them to the PSNI.<sup>151</sup> One participant noted that "some of it was actually quite threatening and intimidating. People... mention that they have seen you places, but it sounds like they're taking just a bit too much interest."<sup>152</sup>

Participants experienced great difficulty trying to address online abuse. The use of anonymous accounts makes identifying the perpetrator nearly impossible. While such abuse is covered by criminal law, it is hard to meet the evidential threshold for proving the offense and attributing it to a perpetrator. There are also signs of the use of "journalistic privilege" to defend the comments made on public figures on social media, which contributes to a climate of impunity for online harassment and abuse.<sup>153</sup> Because the nature of the threats is often veiled rather than explicit, there is little that the PSNI can do.

142 Ibid.

143 A survey conducted by the journalist Suzanne Breen found that 78 percent of female members of the legislative assembly had experienced sexism or harassment online. Suzanne Breen, "Amnesty Slams Twitter's Inaction over the Online Abuse of Female MLAs," *Belfast Telegraph*, September 22, 2020.

144 Interview 4; Interview 19.

145 Interview 8; Interview 10; Interview 15; Interview 16; Interview 23.

146 Interview 5; Interview 12; Interview 23.

147 Interview 16.

148 Mason Boycott-Owen, "Arlene Foster Humiliated by Rumours of Affair," *The Telegraph*, April 14, 2021.

149 Julian Smith (@JulianSmithUK), "For all those committed to equality & diversity, this case really matters. During a key negotiation, a gender based slur was weaponised with intent to destabilise & change the course of events," Twitter, April 14, 2021, 1:48pm, <https://twitter.com/JulianSmithUK/status/1382390262333378560>.

150 Interview 1; Interview 19.

151 Interview 5; Interview 19.

152 Interview 5.

153 Northern Ireland Department of Justice, "Gillen Review: Report into the Law and Procedures in Serious Sexual Offences in Northern Ireland," May 9, 2019.

Women have had to fight hard to have offensive content, particularly sexualized images, removed from social media platforms. Some have been successful because they had the weight of an institution behind them.<sup>154</sup> But for those acting as individuals, this has often proved impossible, meaning that the content remains online and “follows” them about.<sup>155</sup> As one participant noted, “Google never forgets.”<sup>156</sup> Another described the inadequate response from social media companies:

Whenever the horrible stuff appeared—on Twitter mainly, but also on Facebook—and whenever I reported it to the social media platform, it was hopelessly inadequate in terms of removing the material. If it were posted at 3 o’clock this afternoon and I reported it at 5 o’clock, it would have been three or four days before Twitter even acknowledged my report, and in the world of social media, that is no good.<sup>157</sup>

When women experience this type of abuse, they often encounter ambivalence and face questioning about whether it qualifies as abuse.

There is often no separation between the public and private sphere on social media, with abuse entering women’s homes and families.

At times, nuances of language have made the severity of the abuse not apparent outside of the political context of Northern Ireland, leading to inaction by social media companies. One participant reported a comment on social media that said she “needs taking out.” Within Northern Ireland, this is clearly understood as a threat, or at the very least an incitement, to murder. However, this did not register with Twitter’s complaints department, which considered it not to contravene the company’s community standards.<sup>158</sup>

Another common complaint was that misogynistic abuse is not generally recognized as abuse in the same way as abuse based on other factors such as race or disability. This is, in part, a legacy of

Northern Ireland’s failure to adopt a gender-based approach to issues such as hate crimes. Northern Ireland’s legal and policy framework does not recognize misogyny as a distinct and important lens through which abuse should be understood. This reflects a gender-blind approach to policy-making.<sup>159</sup> It also relates to entrenched differences between the political parties over some aspects of gender equality, which results in women’s rights being weaponized as part of broader political and ideological struggles. This politicization of women’s rights leaves women’s rights advocates more open to abuse. As one participant noted, “We talk about the most basic forms of women’s rights issues and huge human rights violations, and because we do that we are automatically told, ‘Well, you box yourself off and you don’t deserve a platform,’ because there are so many men who don’t agree with us.”<sup>160</sup>

Social media, and digital communication generally, infiltrate women’s private lives. There is often no separation between the public and private sphere on social media, with abuse entering women’s

homes and families. Women have nowhere to hide from the abuse and no way to switch it off. As one participant noted,

It’s just attack, attack, attack. I used to have one [person] that sent me stuff every Sunday at about seven o’clock [in the] evening, when you’re just after dinner and...it [had been] a lovely day. And then, [at] seven o’clock this whole tirade of nonsense would start on my Twitter account about me and my party and my children. It was awful.<sup>161</sup>

Another noted the personal nature of such abuse:

I’ve had many, many dark times profession-

154 Interview 15; Interview 17.

155 Interview 15.

156 Interview 9.

157 Interview 15.

158 Interview 5.

159 Interview 23. See, for example: Northern Ireland Department of Justice, “Hate Crime Legislation Independent Review,” December 1, 2020; and Northern Ireland Department of Justice, “Stopping Domestic Violence and Sexual Abuse in Northern Ireland Strategy,” last updated April 28, 2021.

160 Interview 23.

161 Interview 10.

ally... but this was getting right into my bedroom, as it were, because when you're sitting with your mobile phone, you're looking at this stuff and it's getting into your head much more than perhaps any sort of security type threat might have done, albeit that that's in your head as well.<sup>162</sup>

## Connections between Protection and Participation: Closing the Loop

What is remarkable about the findings of this research is both the ways in which threats are consistent for women irrespective of their leadership context and role and the resilience that women show when having to live with these threats daily.

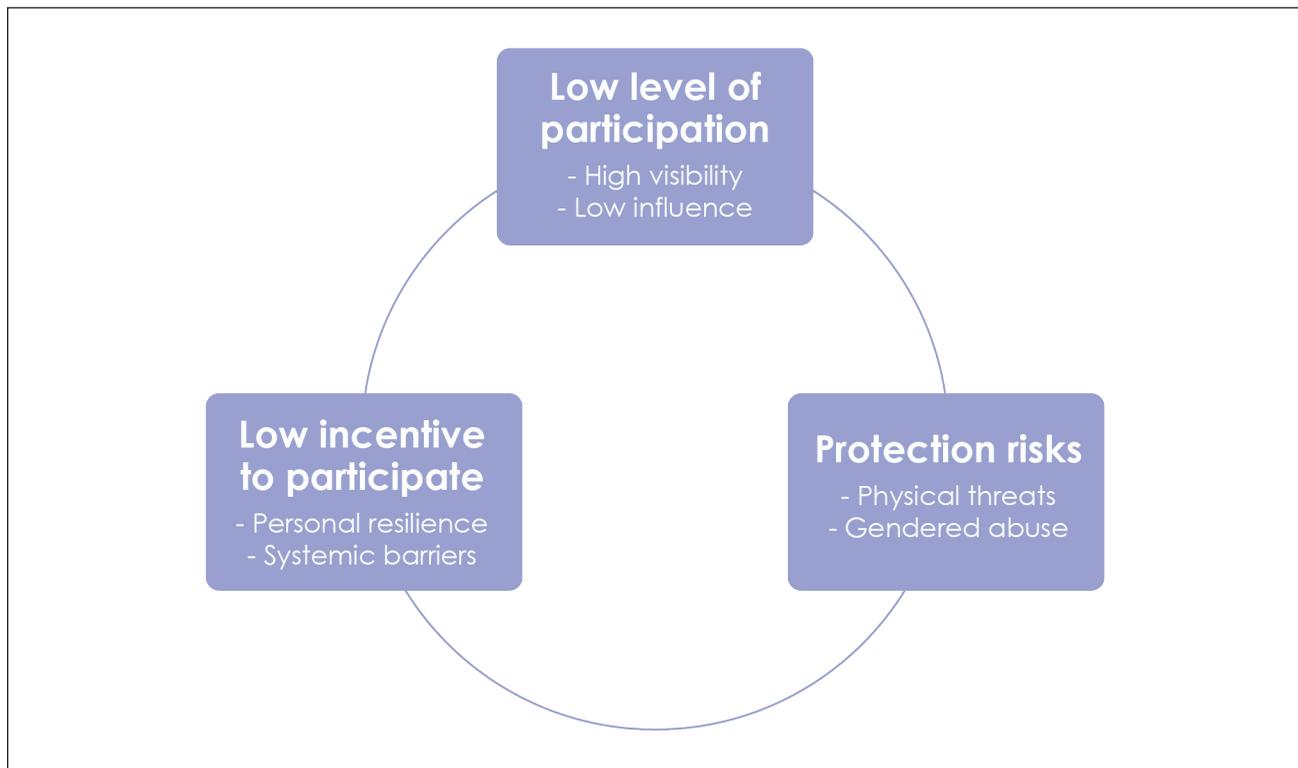
On the basis of the research, we identify a circulatory relationship between low levels of women's participation across institutions in Northern Ireland, a heightened level of visibility for the

women who are in those public roles, and a related high level of exposure to protection risks, which in turn has the effect of sustaining low participation (see Figure 3).

While it is often expected that women's participation in political and public life, including in the security sector, will make these spaces safer for women, this research demonstrates that when women participate in small numbers, they lack the influence to have any meaningful effect on systemic barriers. Instead, women face the types of threats and abuse that have been outlined above. To address this, the response must extend beyond approaches that support individual resilience and actively address the systemic barriers—such as misogyny—that enable threats against women and perpetuate low levels of participation and influence.

Women in Northern Ireland who participate in political and public life at all levels experience significant risk, including sexism, abuse, and harassment directed at them and their families and

Figure 3. Heighted visibility and heightened risk: A circulatory relationship



162 Interview 15.

targeting their professional integrity and authority. The combination of gender inequalities, legacies of sectarianism and violence, and conflict-determined power structures means that women “participate” in an environment that is hostile to their public visibility and leadership.

This has significant consequences. One participant noted how she “moved in to a state of fear constantly. I lived that way [so] long that I didn’t realize I was doing it.”<sup>163</sup> Another noted how she “jump[s] when the phone rings... or the doorbell or the knocker goes. It’s constantly in my mind that it could be something else, something bad.”<sup>164</sup> Living in this way is detrimental to women’s health and sense of safety. One participant reflected, “I just think to myself..., could I stand another five or ten years of this job? Could my mental health stand it? I don’t think it could at this level. I think that it will suffer. And actually, I think my entire health will suffer through anxiety or through fear.”<sup>165</sup>

The range of threats to women’s physical security and the persistent nature of public abuse lowers their motivation to participate.

The hostility that these women face silences them both directly and indirectly. One participant noted that if she were to take the abuse seriously it would lead to “stasis—[I] would never make a decision.”<sup>166</sup> Another noted that she had “just stopped sharing political opinions online.”<sup>167</sup> Another commented how she “came off all social media. [My employer] closed down all my social media accounts.”<sup>168</sup> In the latter case, the participant’s experience on social media and her fear of raising her public profile held her back from applying for higher-level positions. A number of participants commented on how junior female colleagues had simply chosen not to enter or remain in public life after witnessing their treatment.<sup>169</sup>

While no participants intended to leave their roles as a result of abuse, it was clear that they were being left to develop individual coping strategies. These

strategies included everything from engaging in mindfulness activities to deploying the “mute” function on Twitter. Such strategies are informal, individualized, and wholly inadequate. The women in our study continued participating in political and public life not because of formal support they received but because of their personal resilience and informal support networks with other women.

The range of threats to women’s physical security and the persistent nature of public abuse lowers their motivation to participate. This self-silencing gets to the heart of the participation-protection nexus and the circulatory relationship between low levels of women’s participation across institutions in Northern Ireland (see Figure 3). The WPS agenda encourages women to participate in public life. To do this, they need to make themselves visible. The public targeting of women—in their homes, in their work places, in public spaces, in the mainstream media, and on social media—discredits women’s voices and pushes them out of the public debate. This signals the need for a deeper understanding of the implications of the visibility of women’s participation that the WPS agenda has ostensibly promoted.

Overall, the experience of Northern Ireland suggests that there is no guarantee of gender equality in a post-conflict environment, even when women participate in negotiations. The constant negotiation and renegotiation of the terms of the Good Friday Agreement, which is essentially an elite bargain, has sidelined progress on gender equality. The ongoing political struggle over the meaning of peace and justice has kept Northern Ireland trapped within sectarian structures, rewarding sectarian voices and eliding the voices of women and others who challenge the status quo and its effects.<sup>170</sup>

163 Interview 3.

164 Interview 25.

165 Interview 10.

166 Interview 12.

167 Interview 23.

168 Interview 19.

169 Interview 5; Interview 25; Interview 4.

170 This is explored in depth in: Catherine Turner, *Violence, Law and the Impossibility of Transitional Justice* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016).

This, in turn, has impeded gender-sensitive policy-making from taking root, despite the efforts of many women activists across the political spectrum. Many policymakers remain ambivalent about whether and how gender equality is relevant to political progress at all. They isolate gender equality from other areas of policy and treat it as separate from the “real” business of government. For example, responsibility for gender equality rests with the Department for Communities, whereas responsibility for tackling paramilitarism falls within the remit of the Executive Office. This allows the two issues to be treated as separate and prevents cooperative thinking about the relationship between them (see Box 1). The equality provisions of the Good Friday Agreement are widely interpreted as requiring a “gender-neutral” approach to policy, and this is erroneously assumed to represent an inclusive approach. In particular, equality impact assessments, intended to prevent discrimination in policy-making, are conducted through a “two-community” lens without a much-needed gender analysis.<sup>171</sup>

The harmful implications of this approach were most recently seen in the adoption of a gender-neutral domestic violence strategy, despite strong lobbying for an approach that recognizes the deeply gendered aspects of violence against women and girls. A recent review of the scope of hate crime legislation resulted in a gender-blind approach that did not differentiate violence against women and girls from other forms of violence. This was despite strong attempts to have gender and misogyny included.<sup>172</sup> There is a pervasive sense that violence impacts everyone in Northern Ireland and that there is no need for additional protection for women and girls. This misses the reality of how the conflict continues to affect different people in different ways, with women in public roles experiencing risks arising from the intersection of gender and sectarianism.

Implementing the WPS agenda requires moving beyond the usual “additive approaches” focused on making women present and visible.

## Conclusion

Promoting women’s participation across the entire realm of peace and security and across all phases of the implementation of peace agreements remains an important imperative of the WPS agenda. Efforts under this pillar of the WPS agenda include government-led initiatives to ensure women’s full, equal, and meaningful participation in conflict prevention, mediation, and peace brokering at the micro and macro levels across the panoply of post-conflict institutional reforms and initiatives in sectors such as governance, security, and justice. They also include similar efforts by UN peace operations and UN agencies, funds, and programs. Civil society and women’s organizations are also central to these efforts, and their work requires long-term political and financial support.

However, protection risks are a barrier to participation. If women are not safe, they cannot participate fully and equally. At the same time, women leaders must not be positioned as passive recipients of protection delivered by securitized state institutions and political entities. Rather, protecting women requires confronting and changing the structural inequalities, misogyny, and conflict-related, politicized insecurities they face. An ethic of safety and care should underpin all efforts to encourage women to take public leadership roles in contexts characterized by politicized tensions and political polarization.

For this to happen, those implementing the WPS agenda must move beyond the usual “additive approaches” focused on making women present and visible. These approaches have not taken into account the relationship between heightened visibility and risk: low numbers of women in leadership positions make those women who are present more visible, exposing them to risk, while discriminatory structures sustain those low levels

171 NI 107; NI 123. Equality impact assessments are a requirement under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act of 1998, which brought the Good Friday Agreement into law in the UK. Where a policy is likely to have an “adverse impact” on any group, policymakers must consider how they will reduce this impact. On this general point, see: Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, “Submission to the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women: Parallel Report to the Eighth Periodic Report Submitted by the Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland,” January 2019.

172 Northern Ireland Department of Justice, “Hate Crime Legislation Independent Review,” December 1, 2020.

of participation. Existing approaches also often overlook the legacies and layers of gender inequalities, violent conflict, and sectarianism that are deeply embedded in peace agreements and the institutions and societies that implement them. To secure peace and enable and sustain women's participation in and contribution to their society, these destructive forces need to be holistically understood and consciously subverted.

Protection and participation cannot be viewed separately. The nexus between them needs more attention, both in Northern Ireland and in the overall WPS agenda. The current compartmentalized approach must be transformed to address the interconnection between participation and protection and maximize the impact of the WPS agenda. The following recommendations are intended to help policymakers move in this direction.

#### Recommendations for the Implementation of the WPS Agenda

- **States and UN actors and entities responsible for implementing the WPS agenda must address the risks and barriers that impede women's participation in public life.** This requires sustained attention on the risks facing women peacebuilders and human rights defenders and extending it to women working in all areas of peace and security.
- **States and UN actors and entities responsible for implementing the WPS agenda must expand their understanding of protection beyond conflict-related sexual violence to encompass all gendered risks, including those related to women's participation in public life.** Gender inequalities, insecurities, and sexism intersect with sectarianism and politicized drivers of conflict, the legacy of violence, and emerging technologies to pose covert and overt protection risks that stymie women's participation. These risks must be addressed across all areas of post-conflict reconstruction.
- **Member states and the UN system should ensure that all international interventions that engage with the protection-participation nexus do so in ways that both support individual resilience and ensure the safety of women, while also tackling gender inequalities, sexism, and gendered barriers to women's participation.** This includes investing in making change to political and institutional cultures of misogyny and sexism that undermine women (or men) because of their gender or sexuality.
- **All international interventions advancing women's participation should be grounded in context-specific, protection-based risk assessments.** These should be undertaken with and by women's organizations and leaders in each context.
- **The UN needs to take a system-wide approach to connect responses to online abuse against women across thematic areas.** A systemic institutional strategy is needed to counter the influence of social media companies and put pressure on them to improve their performance when it comes to tackling all forms of online abuse. A lead agency should be appointed to develop and deliver this strategy, including by cultivating links with social media companies and implementing an information campaign about online abuse.

#### Recommendations for Political Parties and Policymakers in Northern Ireland

- **Policymakers in Northern Ireland should move from a gender-blind approach to a specifically gender-sensitive approach to policymaking.** Tackling a culture of misogyny that enables threats to women in political and public life requires a cohesive and strategic cross-departmental approach to policymaking that is informed by and responds to gender analysis. Policymakers need to assess how rights and inequalities differ among men, women, and gender or sexual minorities. Security Council Resolution 1325 provides a framework for effective, gender-sensitive policymaking across government in Northern Ireland.
- **The Department of Justice should conduct a review of the Tackling Paramilitarism Programme to identify gendered risks and harms arising as a result of its implementa-**

**tion.** This review should be cross-departmental and include representatives from civil society. In particular, it should focus on the gendered impact of the program on policing and on the community sector.

- **The Northern Ireland Executive should assess the operation of current funding structures to identify how to support the work of the community sector more effectively.** Participation in peace and security processes and institutions requires sustainable funding. In line with global moves to make funding for women's participation more sustainable, the Northern Ireland Executive could review how current funding structures impact the resilience and sustainability of the community sector as a whole.
- **The Northern Ireland Executive should commit to a public information campaign on the impact of sexism on political and public life.** All parties should seek to engage men to challenge sexist attitudes. This includes education on the place of social media in public debate.
- **Political parties, public bodies, and those implementing statutory and community-level initiatives should adopt internal policies for tackling misogyny and ensuring gender balance.** These policies should tackle attitudes and organizational cultures that make it possible to undermine women or men on the basis of their gender or sexuality and provide structured support for employees who experience abuse.
- **The Northern Ireland Executive should put in place measures to enable and encourage women's participation.** It should provide mentoring for women who enter formal politics and take on leadership roles in public bodies. These measures should be tailored to

meet the specific priorities and needs of young women, rural women, and women in impartial oversight roles. This support should go beyond short-term strategies and should instead be provided incrementally, progressively, and on an ongoing basis.

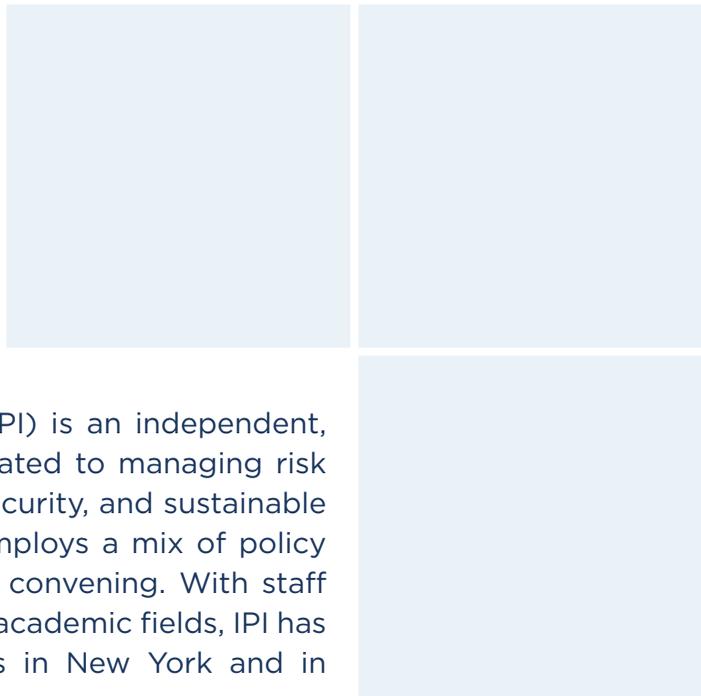
### Recommendations on the Mainstream Media and Social Media

- **Mainstream media outlets should adopt and implement codes of responsible journalism that deter sexist attacks on women.** Such codes would include a duty of care whereby editors must satisfy themselves of the legitimacy of the source and motivation behind a story and conduct an assessment of whether the public interest in the story outweighs the risk to a woman's personal or professional reputation.
- **The Northern Ireland Executive should create a working group to look at ways in which laws and procedures in Northern Ireland could be strengthened to increase accountability for online abuse.** This group could build on the recommendations of Judge John Gillen on tackling the role of social media in serious sexual offenses and should include senior lawyers as well as cyber experts and civil society campaigners.<sup>173</sup>
- **The Northern Ireland Executive should provide funding to enable the development of a local civil society focal point to develop a strategy for engaging with social media companies.** This strategy would include identifying and working with a point of contact in social media companies, creating a centralized support hub for people affected by this type of abuse, and enabling the collection of data on the prevalence of this type of abuse in Northern Ireland as a basis for developing policy.

<sup>173</sup> See: Northern Ireland Department of Justice, "Gillen Review."







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777 United Nations Plaza  
New York, NY 10017-3521  
USA  
TEL +1-212-687-4300  
FAX +1-212-983-8246

51-52 Harbour House  
Bahrain Financial Harbour  
P.O. Box 1467  
Manama, Bahrain  
TEL +973-1721-1344