

## CCNR Submission : Ireland National Action Plan

### I. Strategic Objective Priorities for Ireland 2<sup>nd</sup> National Action Plan

The Sexual Violence in War Initiative at the Center for Conflict, Negotiation, and Recovery is pushing for more robust research to support new programming and policies to end sexual violence, a central challenge facing women in conflict zones globally. The focus of this work suggests that strategic priorities should center the political impact of sexual violence on individual women.

The responses to sexual violence in conflict have focused on supporting women's "independence", by encouraging stronger economic roles -- providing training and start-up assistance for home-based businesses. The argument is that economic empowerment will eventually lead to a greater political voice that may provide better security. There has been little examination of whether this enables women to establish sustainable security or whether support for livelihoods eventually ensures a greater political voice.

Where political participation is incorporated in donor responses, the focus is often on the inclusion of women from formal political institutions, where structural barriers prevent women's engagement from creating social change (as many scholars note has been in the case in Afghanistan). Expanding existing programs to promote informal political mobilizing can unleash energies in those traditionally cast as vulnerable, and can inform new forms of nonviolent activism -- allowing survivors themselves to address underlying causes of sexual violence.

### II. How can Ireland help empower women affected by conflict?

Preliminary research shows that while livelihood and psychological support for victims of sexual violence in conflict is necessary, the complex political environment that persists limits the "power" these programs provide to beneficiaries. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, recently, women who lived in INGO-sponsored "safe houses" report being raped once or twice *after* residence in such spaces, highlighting the inability of programming to address root causes of violence. Donors have tended to steer clear of programming that has a more direct impact on the political activities of women, fearing in many cases that this will either upset recipient governments, support groups that are either violent or not in favour politically, or violate humanitarian principles of neutrality.

This has meant that considerations of political engagement at the individual and community level have been sidelined from the conversation about sexual violence and few of the assumptions that underlie programming have been sufficiently examined. Expanding these programs can unleash political energies in those traditionally cast as vulnerable, and can inform new forms of nonviolent mobilization allowing survivors themselves to address underlying causes of sexual violence. A recent collective of grassroots women's activists in Sri Lanka found "the biggest challenge facing women's activism is that project-oriented funding agencies do not focus on women's rights or equality—ie, war politics".

A critical examination of current livelihood-based interventions can help challenge underlying assumptions of the link between economic independence and political power. Collaborative research between policymakers, academics, and local practitioners can produce recommendations for multiple audiences on a new approach to victims of sexual violence.

### **III. How can the second National Action Plan reflect the commitments in Ireland’s Policy for International Development, One World, One Future, and other relevant government policies and strategies?**

A more nuanced approach to the impact of sexual violence on women, both at domestically and internationally, is required in order to develop more effective, sustainable programming that addresses the fundamental human rights concerns that contribute to gender inequity.

In most complex conflict environments the position of women is determined by social, economic, cultural, and political factors. Existing programming often overlooks political factors (such as the marginalization of a particular community) as driving human rights violations and vulnerabilities for women, producing incomplete interventions. When applying the commitment to “act beyond aid”, specifically to meet the needs of women and girls, programs and policies must support the political mobilization of women in formal and informal political spaces.

### **IV. How should the National Action Plan approach actions relating to Ireland-Northern Ireland.**

Women were a significant part of both the violent and non-violent political struggle in Northern Ireland. The impact of conflict on both sides has had a specific impact on women, who face unique vulnerabilities in conflict zones – central among these is sexual violence.

Particularly within marginalized communities, it is essential to understand the impact of these experiences on women’s political identities. A failure to do so creates an opportunity for women to be mobilized into more violent forms of political expression. Supporting non-violent avenues for formal and informal political engagement will productively address the past and ongoing grievances of women, but act as a deterrent for a return to violence.

### **V. How can the existing monitoring mechanisms of the first National Action Plan be improved? How can the Oireachtas play a greater role?**

Ireland has taken a leading role in this issue, which should be applauded. We believe that any national plan should include a close scrutiny of some of the assumptions underlying policymaking, particularly the demands for data on issues like sexual violence. The difficulties of gathering such data and its capacity to distort priorities by providing a veneer of authority on policy must be closely considered.

### **VI. How should Ireland promote Women, Peace and Security in multilateral organisations?**

Current initiatives that aim to integrate women into meaningful conversations around peace and security often operate on a limiting set of narratives. These most often position women as victims of violence and men as perpetrators of violence, overlooking the complexity of women’s roles in warzones. Both operational and advocacy programming have ignored the distinctive political identities of women, often presuming that women occupy a more peaceful platform. Drawing on new and ongoing research agendas to highlight multiple forms of women’s engagement in conflict, multilateral organisations can draw on recommendations to shape more effective interventions.