

# North Belfast Women's Voices Project Report

## A Visible Force for Change



---

ssgt

st.stephen's  
green trust

---

# **North Belfast Women's Voices: Report**

## **Table of Contents**

Introduction: the aims of the project  
Origins of the project: original research & the need for this work  
Recruiting: who took part?  
Methodology: what did we do?  
Writing the Charter  
What worked & what did not work?  
Conclusion  
The Charter

## **Introduction: The aims of the project**

The goal of this project was always to produce a Women's Charter for Change, and to do this by having a cross-community group of women in North Belfast to work together to produce it. The Charter itself was designed to look at some of the most entrenched issues in society here; issues around cultural expression and shared space, and to chart a way forward – lessons we can use to build a toolkit that can be adapted and used in different circumstances and in different places.

The project has achieved more than this, though, and the various difficulties and successes have taken us all on a journey over the course of two years, teaching us unexpected lessons about how best to engage in this kind of work.

Conversations like this aren't unusual here, and we are accustomed to hearing the same arguments repeated, the same soundbites and the same standoffs. Rarely are these conversations productive, there is little expectation that they will result in epiphanies or mutual agreement. This project had to approach the issues from a different perspective and in a different way to avoid repeating the same pattern.

## **Origins of the Project: Original research & the need for this work**

The project was born from a piece of research carried out in 2017 in North Belfast by the Good Relations Worker at the time. Tensions in the area were high at the time, especially around the issue of parades, and many of the more scarring incidents of the Troubles period had left their mark on people's lives.

WRDA's research saw 1,200 women share their experiences and views. They showed what we have always argued; that the impact of the conflict is different for women than it is for men. It was also experienced differently in different parts of Northern Ireland / the North.

North Belfast, where this project was based, was easily one of the worst impacted areas, with 557

conflict related deaths recorded between 1969 and 2001 and a further 12 up until 2016. It was also the site of some of the more protracted post-1998 disputes, including the Holy Cross School dispute and standoff that followed the Parades Commission decision on the 12<sup>th</sup> July parade passing Ardoyne Shops, centred around Twaddell Avenue. North Belfast also has 45% of the peace walls in Belfast, a host of interface areas, and as of 2016 the highest number of sectarian incidents in the 11 policing districts across Northern Ireland. There is also a limited amount of leadership around creating shared spaces and addressing interface areas.

As with all of our work, it focused on the perspectives and experiences of women. We believe that women's voices are marginalised worldwide and across society here, but especially so in conversations about the history of the conflict here and discussions around how best to deal with disagreements around cultural expression.

UN resolution 1325 has never been adopted here, and as such there has been no compulsion or requirement to include women in these conversations. The result of this, combined with the reality that our society is especially patriarchal, has resulted in few women being involved in attempts to resolve or even to understand the issues that we face.

Women, who suffered enormously during the conflict, who led many of the attempts to end the conflict, and have so much to offer to the process of dealing with the past and building a better future, are often side-lined. At the same time statutory bodies on issues such as flags, identity and culture tend to be dominated by men, and women often find themselves battling gate keepers to have a say in their own communities, let alone at the level of statutory bodies.

The report written from this piece of research is illuminating as to the attitudes of many of the women who have lived through the worst of the conflict here, and who have tried to hold things together throughout and piece things together afterwards.

## **Recruiting: Who Took Part?**

Recruiting for this project was not straightforward. A number of women's groups are at work in the area, and while quite a number were happy to speak to our Good Relations worker quite frankly during the initial research, a significant number of those groups were not interested in taking part in this project that flowed from the research. The reasons given for this varied, but in most cases the women did not feel comfortable with cross-community work as a general rule.

For this reason, and for more practical reasons, we worked with a smaller selection of women in this project than we had spoken to for our research. Some of the participants in this work had not taken part in the research work at all, but were keen to be engaged in cross community work.

The women we worked with came primarily from two groups: Vine Women's Group and Grace Women's Group. The group was not large, with an average size of 17 and a maximum of 20 attending. The reasons for this were twofold; it is relatively difficult to engage busy people for such a sustained project and, more relevant to our goals, it was important to us to ensure that the group was small enough to allow for each member of the group to take part in a meaningful way. The groups who took part in the project were committed and determined to make the project a success.



*Working on the Charter during the 2<sup>nd</sup> Residential*

## **Methodology: What did we do?**

The project plan was adjusted a number of times over the course of the two years, beginning with a programme of training that was later expanded upon, with some topics revisited more than once where there was a concern that some of the learning was especially important or needed more time to be fully understood and absorbed by the participants.

We took the approach that shared learning would naturally draw out the common concerns and worries that the women shared, as well as the commonality of their experiences, would form a solid foundation before we moved on to talk about the more controversial issues.

Topics we covered included:

**Session 1: An overview of the research** that informed the project, clarification of the goals

**Difference & Othering - with Community Relations in Schools** – CRIS work usually with young people and in training teachers, but their methods work with people from all demographics. A discussion took place in mixed groups on stereotypes and assumptions and how these further othering and deepen divisions between communities.

**Assertiveness Training** – the idea behind this was to help to affirm the participant's faith in speaking publicly or even in closed groups about their views, particularly if they are challenging the status quo.

**Introduction to Human Rights** – this had been covered to some degree in the first Residential as part of Year 1, but we revisited it here in more detail in order to tackle some of the more concerning language we were hearing with regards to recent immigrants. It focused on the role of women in peacebuilding, UN 1325 and the need for a similar approach here in NI.

**Health Inequality – with PPR** – Participation & Practice of Rights were invited to deliver this session because the participants had repeatedly voiced concerns regarding the persistent health issues they saw in their community. PPR work with communities in NI to empower them to address issues of structural inequalities for example in health and housing. This session helped the women articulate these concerns and focus on practical ways in which some of these issues could be alleviated.

**Gender Inequality** – Again focusing on our approach to these issues as structural inequalities that would help to give participants a foundation both to better understand the issues and to find common points of interest before moving onto more difficult issues. This also linked with earlier sessions in focusing the group's minds on how women have been excluded from peacebuilding in NI.

**Critical Literacy** – this initial session aimed to help the women to develop the tools they would need to unpack any preconceptions that they have and approach problems with an open mind, essential to enable the work needed to produce the Charter. Some of the women were sceptical of its usefulness although a second workshop really did help people to see things with fresh eyes when the tough work began.

We held a **second workshop on critical literacy** focusing on case studies at the 2<sup>nd</sup> Residential, and it helped participants to understand the goals as well as the methods used in this process to see through other eyes.

**Focus on Young People** – the participants repeatedly voiced concerns for the future and for young people in NI, fearing that economic anxiety, high unemployment, social pressure, drugs and paramilitary influence would encourage many away from a potentially bright future. To reflect this we added another section to the Charter.

**Workshops to write the Charter x3 – two sessions across 2 days of the Residential, one follow up-session some weeks later.**

This work was spread across approx. 12 hours and formed the toughest and most productive part of the project. The Charter is included in this report. It was difficult work at times and some members of the group became upset or agitated particularly around discussions on parades and flags. Each time we worked to calm the situation and to return to the topic with a renewed commitment to respect each other and to try to see the issue from another perspective. We believe this approach led to a successful piece of work.

**Discussion with local politicians** – we had proposed this in the initial plan, and while we initially attempted to organise this during our Residential, it happened to fall between local council elections and European elections, during which elected representatives were understandably busy. For this reason we rescheduled for our very last session in August. Despite the rescheduled time only two politicians, both recently elected local councillors, were available; Fiona Ferguson from People Before Profit and Malachai O'Hara from the Green Party. Although there were only two, the fact that they represented smaller parties led to a very productive and lively discussion with the women in the group, and the session was thoroughly successful.



*Speaking with local politicians*

## **Writing the Charter**

The Charter writing process was carried out across two different days; one full day as part of a residential, and one 4.5 hour session approximately one month later. The gap in time between the two was purposeful, as the residential had brought up some difficult issues and at times had been upsetting for group members. By the time the group reconvened some fraught feelings had calmed and a more productive discussion took place.

Despite these difficulties there was a surprising amount of consensus among the women from the outset, primarily because of their focus on commitment to making North Belfast a peaceful place where all can live together peacefully, and a shared concern for the young people of the area.

Initially, the group was divided into small groups and given different topics to discuss. These topics then rotated among each group to ensure that we had input from everyone on each topic. Each suggestion or idea was then discussed by the group as a whole, and further suggestions were added as a result of the discussions.

We used an approach which allowed every individual to respond to every suggestion with an initial reaction so that every suggestion was categorised as one of the following:

- Consensus
- Agreement
- Reservations
- Block

This approach showed us very quickly that there were far more suggestions in the first two category than had reservations, and no suggestions at all were blocked outright.

The most painful discussions revolved around issues that some participants had deep reservations and worries about, especially concerning the issue of parades, which has been an especially fraught topic in North Belfast in recent years.

Rather than try to force agreement on issues so troublesome to so many, we instead sought creative solutions to these seemingly intractable problems, suggested by the women themselves. Some of these were short term; such as having community liaisons and interface workers in the area when

parades are taking place to ensure things run smoothly and conflict is at a minimum - this has been practiced in the area around the Ardoyne shops since 2018, and most participants agree that it has made a significant positive impact on the community.

Other ideas included a more long-term view, based on the idea that a lot of our more persistent issues stem from a lack of knowledge or from misinformation about each other's communities, and sometimes about our own community, too. Focusing on this lack of knowledge around the reasons for certain celebrations and certain practices, the participants suggested that education was the key to unlocking some of these problems. This was explored in terms of formal education, such as shared schools and integrated education, but most importantly the participants encouraged community education that is specifically tailored to address this problem.

Similarly, many participants had limited or even no knowledge of the complex history of their area, their city, Northern Ireland as a whole and the island of Ireland overall. This began to change when they began to engage in cross-community work including in other projects which emphasised the shades of grey in our history over the black and white version that makes for a clearer us vs them narrative.

## **What worked & what did not work?**

At the close of the project it is, naturally, easier to see what parts of the process worked best and which did not than when the project was ongoing. Given that this was a pilot project, overall it yielded meaningful results and the process we chose helped the group to bond with each other and to identify the common concerns they had before we moved onto the more difficult issues. This had mostly positive outcomes, although there were certainly difficulties.

Beginning with topics that considered inequalities and concerns that were common across all communities in North Belfast was a solid foundation for tackling more controversial issues. The principle behind this was that nobody, including these participants, is "just" a Nationalist or "just" a Unionist. Everybody has, at once, multiple identities. Finding the shared perspective and shared experiences that grow from certain parts of these complex identities was the goal, and it bore fruit; as well as leading to consensus on many issues around women's participation in public life and in decision making in their communities. This approach also revealed something we had not anticipated; the women asked to add proposals for helping young people divert from casual rioting, drugs and paramilitary involvement – particularly in light of incidents in the area in the Spring of 2019. We did so as it demonstrated the shared concern that young people do not have the same difficult experiences as they had.

While on one hand the group shared concerns, for instance around poor health in the area, particularly mental health and a growing addiction problem, this was not without its issues as there was a tendency among some participants to shift blame to recent migrants to the city.

This pattern emerged more than once, even when discussing issues where there was no connection to the demographic make-up of the city. Despite facilitators intervening to divert such conversations and to ensure that it was clear that the concerns were largely without merit, the topic came up more than a few times and our concern was that ending the discussion did not satisfactorily deal with the sentiment itself.

One of the topics we returned to twice was Human Rights, and the other was Difference & Othering. We did this partially because we felt that these were foundation stones of the programme, and also because of a concern that some of the lessons of the earlier sessions were not being fully absorbed. Facilitators were careful to relate this material always to the lived experiences of the women, and to use foundational principles of Human Rights to tackle prejudice whenever it arose. We believe that progress was made in this regard, and was visible in the final session while discussing issues with local politicians during which some nuanced understanding was visible, although it is difficult to be sure to what degree some of this work truly penetrated.

Finally there was, at times, a sense of pessimism. Some of the women seemed to think that the future was bright for our young people, and others seemed to feel that divisions were so entrenched that interventions would never work and that the same problems would persist across generations. While not something that “went wrong” per se, these sentiments made the challenge of creating a positive Charter a little bit more challenging.

## **Conclusion**

This project was comparatively short-lived and resources and other demands meant that we met, on average, once a month. While this was, in one way, a challenge to overcome in terms of ensuring continued engagement, the group were committed to working on this Charter, committed to cross-community work to untangle the greatest divisions in our society and to contributing everything that they could to that work. The determination of the women who participated and the design of the programme combined to result in a successful project and a detailed Charter of which the participants should be proud.

# CHARTER

## Summary

- People want a better future for the next generation but fear this may not happen
- Integration, whatever way that happens, is key
- Understanding and education can help us understand the difficult parts of our history, as well as the reasons for certain traditions
- This understanding enables genuine respect and that must be mutual
- There is a feeling that certain vested interests want to keep us divided and suspicious; what more can be done about that?
- There is a role for women, specifically, who are more willing to engage in cross-community work and healing.
- There is an enormous well of trauma and grief and not enough help available for those who need it.

## History, traditions, emblems and culture

- People should **learn respect and acceptance** for each other's culture and traditions and always remember that this works both ways.
- Community groups should get together and **learn more about why** celebrations take place and the history and reasons behind certain traditions, parades, and so on. This would help to demystify them and may help reduce the worry that they exist to antagonise.
- We are all proud of our roots but can still work together to the common goal of peace.
- Flags mark territory and can create tension & division, because of this there will always be issues with flags.
- The flags and emblems themselves don't hurt, what is behind them can be worrying. We should be encouraged to **consider what we are communicating when we fly flags**.
- In some areas certain flags eg Pride flags cannot be flown without fear of reprisal, this is because of the heightened tension around flags of all kinds and should not be the case.
- People are entitled to fly flags outside their own home / on their own property, but we should **be respectful of public space on roads and in interface areas**.
- Murals are an important part of our history as well as tourist attractions and should stay for that reason, but we should **be mindful of what we are saying to the world when we produce new murals**.
- Too many flags fly all year round, it is disrespectful to flags to let them get destroyed. **Flags should be removed after the celebration season is over**.
- Alcohol has become an issue around parades and there are too many "hangers on" which can cause tension. **The community can act to ameliorate this** and where they do it is often successful.
- Parades Commission determinations do not really resolve the issue fully and some parades will still be contentious. This can be approached better through **genuine community dialogue**.

## Shared space and Integration

- There were good shared spaces before the Troubles and there are good shared spaces developing now for example the Houben Centre, where much of the work for this project was carried out. **The community must demand more of these and actively encourage their use.**
- This would encourage more **cross-community youth work can be transformative** for example R City, the café in the Houben Centre that is run by young people from across the communities.
- The idea of **integrated housing is good** but most previous attempts have failed – we need to get to the root causes of why this is and question who doesn't want it to work as this is the only way it can be successful. **Those models that have worked should be studied, learned from and replicated.**
- **Integrated schools are excellent** at helping children grow up with a wider perspective. Alternatively **integrated clubs** for example sports / scouts / etc to encourage mixing and mutual respect even if the children go to single identity schools.
- **Mutual respect is vital** for shared space to work, so this works best alongside other areas of work designed to encourage respect and understanding.

## Young people & the future of our communities

- We must ask what we as a community can do to help them and **involve them in this process.**
- **Petition statutory bodies for help** for example counselling – there is a need for better mental health facilities and provisions, waiting lists are too long.
- Try to get young people together to talk over their problems & help each other with **peer support**, we need infrastructure for this.
- YTP helped to build confidence & a sense of worth, **apprenticeships should be encouraged and education should be encouraged.** Many young people feel hopeless and this can alleviate that stress and divert from drugs, casual violence and mental health issues.
- **Youth clubs and sports** are named as ways to help young people find an alternative.
- **Positive role models** can make a difference.
- Greater **involvement in the community** can help young people's sense of self-worth
- Concern about suicide that can come from a feeling of judgement or blame, as well as mental health more broadly.
- Concern about social media's influence & peer pressure.
- **Organised fights** are an issue, they undermine the chances of a more harmonious future. Diversionary youth work should be put in place.
- Drugs are a major issue and tied to suicide & mental health as well as paramilitarism.
- Focus on **education and prevention** rather than trying to manage the consequences, there needs to be investment and it must be strategic.
- The younger generation are the key to a more shared future, they are not as divided as previous generations and have friendships, relationships, etc across communities.

## The role of women

- **Women have been excluded** or shouted over to an unacceptable degree.
- Women and their community work was **vital to building peace** and now that they are left out of the conversation or struggling to survive in a difficult economic climate the peacebuilding work is faltering.
- Women are **more likely to be willing to engage in cross-community work** and to be willing to listen to take on board other perspectives.
- Women would be ideal to **lead some community learning sessions around traditions** and would be better placed to lead conversations around these thorny issues, but some are not willing to because of **fear of paramilitary organisations** which are still active.
- This is also part of the broader problem of society more widely not taking women's roles seriously enough.
- Major progress could be made by determined women but it **would need investment and time to foster respect**. Any such work should be led **within communities**.