

Good afternoon Mr Chairman and Members of the Joint Committee.

My colleagues and I are delighted to be able to come before you today to talk about the work of the Training for Women Network; our partnerships and the reality faced by us as women in Northern Ireland.

TWN is an organisation which was founded in 1996 by a group of women from all backgrounds in education, business and community whose vision was that all women should have access to and be encouraged to seek and take up education, training, development and business opportunities that would help and promote their role in society.

In 1996, TWN became a Sectoral Partner and then Intermediary Funding Body distributing money from the newly established PEACE Programmes agreed by the European Union. Over a 6-year period, TWN built partnerships with other organisations in the voluntary Community Sector and distributed over 19 million Euros across Northern Ireland and the border counties to projects, all promoting women into education, training, employment and self-employment.

Over the years, TWN has moved from the delivery of money to applying as a project whilst still maintaining its partnership approach and ethos.

This allowed TWN to share money from Europe through both the PEACE and Building Sustainable Prosperity/European Social Fund programmes with like-minded organisations. It also created a mechanism for the filtering of monies down to women in Northern Ireland and the border counties; who promoted our aims but could never have applied to these programmes directly.

TWN has over the years established itself as Northern Ireland's premier women's network, with members ranging from individual women encompassing all ages to community groups and even private organisations and businesses. What does make TWN so different is that it has male staff members as well as female and actively works with males who work with women, helping it to promote the cause of women in education, training development, further education, employment or self-employment; which makes us somewhat unique. It is important that men be part of the solution in redressing the imbalance and barriers women face in society.

Over the years, TWN have been responsible for the research and publication of the role of women across a wide spectrum of issues such as:

- The Victims Sector
- Women in non-traditional roles
- Ethnic Minority Women
- The Role of Ordinary Women in World War I
- Perceptions and attitudes of radical extremism
- Women in politics

This is but a few of the research publications we have disseminated to date.

TWN is also one of only three organisations in Northern Ireland that hold Consultative Status with the United Nations; a role which we take seriously and contribute to regularly. In fact, we managed to take 30 women from Northern Ireland to the 63rd Session of the Commission on the Status of Women in March of this year where they made an amazing contribution to the work being carried out, putting Northern Ireland women firmly on the map through their contribution to both the parallel and side events.

TWN is a lobbying body but are careful to keep its focus on its remit of promoting women in education, training, employment and self-

employment. At times, this has been difficult because we have had to take on Departments, Ministers, MLA's and anyone else who has tried to side-line women.

TWN have been in situations where its staff and partner organisations were starved of their funding, forcing many people to do without wages or live on reduced wages, facing great uncertainty from week to week. Indeed it was a very bleak time for us, just over 2 years ago which we only came through due to the staff's dedication to the work the organisation undertakes.

I thank God that those days are at the minute behind us but the voluntary sector is never very far from financial starvation.

TWN are like many organisations across Northern Ireland, very dependent on European monies and at present with Brexit, are very concerned as to what happens next. TWN prides itself on working with people in partnership and not making assumptions that the organisation knows what is needed in areas but rather works to provide adequate resources to particular organisations that are best placed to determine what is needed in their community.

Over the years, this partnership approach makes TWN proud to say that it has built up excellent relationships with many organisations, not only in Northern Ireland and Ireland but throughout the UK, EU and internationally.

TWN have a staff complement of 12 people and an incredibly supportive Board of Directors coming from a wide background of knowledge and experience in the women's sector. Indeed, TWN's Chairperson, Patricia Lewsley-Mooney is a former MLA and Northern Ireland Children's Commissioner.

TWN's work and research has given it a unique insight into the needs of women and has often helped it in seeking funding in support to bridge these identified gaps and help women move forward.

TWN has also been able to develop training where gaps exist or are non-existent, for example transgender awareness for employers was developed with members from the community and is offered right across Northern Ireland.

TWN also offer various European recognised accredited trainings across a wide range of subjects which again helps in advancing and building CV's for women in Northern Ireland.

Whilst I could spend the whole day talking to members about TWN, I am aware of the time constraints. I would like to briefly talk to you about 3 of our programmes, finishing up with the challenges that I believe TWN and the women we work with are facing or going to face in the future – not only from Brexit but from the ongoing lack of Government, uncertainty around funding and polarisation of communities.

The first project is the PASS – Promote, Advance and Support for Success Project. This project is funded under the Northern Ireland European Social Fund Programme. It is aimed at some of the most marginalised people in society. The project targets young women aged between 16-24 years, not in education, employment or training classified as NEET in eight communities across Northern Ireland. The programme offers Level 1 training and development to encourage young women back into education or employment. The project targets 204 young women per year and is a 4 year project, of which we are now into the latter half of the 2nd year.

Many of these young women face multiple barriers, often they have young children, are single parents, have numeracy and literacy problems – prescription drug addictions and little or no family support.

This project offers hope, it offers help to steer the young women onto a different path. It has not been easy, recruitment has been slow and the young women unpredictable, BUT, we are on target and have received good support from the Department for the Economy.

However, we also struggle to find the match-funding required under this measure; yet in saying this, the successes have been phenomenal with many participants getting jobs and some going on to further training.

One example of this is that several of the young women who completed the Level 1 have gone on to further training to become personal trainers.

Moving on, TWN's PACT– Peace & Conflict Transformation Project supported by the European Union's PEACE IV Programme, managed by the SEUPB is a collaboration with three partners; Foyle Women's Information Network in Londonderry/Derry, Intercomm in Belfast and Queen's University Belfast, who helped develop the pioneering psychometric questionnaire testing. This project is aimed at 1200 women throughout Northern Ireland and the border counties undertaking psychometric testing which then points them on to further individualised bespoke training provided by FWIN or Intercomm. Again, early indication has shown excellent success and created interest in the

concept of psychometric testing across various groupings and even amongst some of our statutory partners.

Whilst only a snapshot of what we do, the final piece of work that we are leading is the Women in Community Transformation or WICT programme for short. This programme is funded through the Department of Communities and is just one of the 43 measures identified in the Fresh Start initiative. It is perhaps the **most** challenging but rewarding pieces of work that we have done to date. Again, we are working in partnership with three others Co-Operation Ireland, FWIN & Intercomm. We are working with women across 26 locations in communities that have high levels of paramilitary control and coercion. These women, many of which are very brave and want to move forward in a Northern Ireland that is free from paramilitary control. They want peace and prosperity for their children and families, not fear, coercion and control.

Our mantra of '***educate a woman, you educate a family, you educate a community***' ties in with the aims and objectives of the WICT Project.

We must make no mistake that whilst we have the Good Friday Agreement and peace, it is not a perfect peace; faceless people remain

in the shadows ready to exploit any weaknesses or fill any voids in the community to further their aims and bring us back to the dark days of violence and separation.

There is a marked upsurge in violence and fear in many of the areas we work in; women are at the front line trying to keep their children safe, whilst surviving often in areas of high deprivation, poverty and isolation.

Brexit has taken a terrible toll on our communities and has the potential to cause further polarization and becoming an orange and green issue or us and them. We cannot let this happen. TWN work tirelessly to help and empower women to face these challenges, often in dangerous and frightening ways that few of us could comprehend.

Many Protestants voted to remain and feel unrepresented and in honesty, I believe frightened about their future and their voice is not being heard. Any void in our fragile peace could be quickly filled by those who seek to return us to violence and segregation.

Women in Nationalist/Republican areas also fear the upsurge in dissident violence and control, this again is a threat that we cannot ignore and pretend it is not happening.

Our young people and more increasingly young women are susceptible to being sucked in, in areas where little or no hope for a future exists; they are sold an alternative which can offer standing and respect despite the end game.

This project offers hope, but needs support both verbal and financially. Organisations such as TWN need the political will and support of our politicians not only in Northern Ireland but in the South of Ireland, the UK, Europe and beyond. The future for us is uncertain both as an organisation and as a community. We face restricted and decreased funding for our work.

We face increased violence and polarization of the communities we work with, moving further away from each other than at any time in the last 20 years. The growth of prescription drugs both using and dealing is higher in Northern Ireland than ever before with GP's struggling to cope with growing numbers of people managing chronic pain versus addiction.

The voices of women are not heard and sectors such as victims of the violence, many of which were women are not being heard. We must

address the past before we can move forward, no matter how painful that could be.

There is no political leadership or apparent joined up approaches from our politicians for all our citizens and the language we use must change; not everything is sectarian, not everything can be 50/50. We grapple with fear, anger and mistrust which we have spent decades trying to breakdown.

The uncertainty of Europe and Brexit is phenomenal for both communities. I highlighted earlier, this **cannot** be underestimated.

Finally, Mr Chairman, I thank you and your colleagues for allowing me to speak about not only TWN, that I am so passionate about and extremely proud of but about the amazing women that I meet daily who remind me of why we do what we do.

We in Northern Ireland are in my opinion, unique and have so much to offer not only internally on the Island of Ireland but to the world and I am proud of what we have achieved and will hopefully continue to achieve well into the future.

Despite the hurdles and obstacles that are put in our way women are a force to be reckoned with. We cannot be returned to the box but must be encouraged to grow, develop and achieve the equality we deserve.

Thank you. I would now ask you to listen to some of my colleagues experiences as women in Northern Ireland.