

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COMHCHOISTE UM

FEIDHMIÚ CHOMHAONTÚ AOINE AN CHÉASTA

JOINT COMMITTEE ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE GOOD FRIDAY AGREEMENT

Déardaoin, 24 Deireadh Fómhair 2019

Thursday, 24 October 2019

The Joint Committee met at 2.15 p.m.

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair / Members present:

Teachtaí Dála / Deputies

Seanadóirí / Senators

Declan Breathnach,	Gerard P. Craughwell.
Maureen O'Sullivan,	
Brendan Smith.	

I láthair / In attendance: Senator Ian Marshall.

Teachta / Deputy Seán Crowe sa Chathaoir / in the Chair.

Challenges facing Women in Northern Ireland: Discussion

Chairman: As we have a quorum the meeting will commence in public session. Apologies have been received from Deputies Sherlock and O'Dowd and Senators Ó Donnghaile, Black and Ned O'Sullivan.

Today we are delighted to hear from Training for Women Network, TWN. As members are aware, the impact of the Good Friday Agreement on women in the North of Ireland and the challenges they face is a key item of our work programme.

I remind members, witnesses and those in the Public Gallery to turn off their mobile phones. Members are requested that for the duration of the meeting mobile phones are turned off completely or switched to airplane, safe or flight mode, depending on the device. It is not sufficient for members to put their phones on silent mode as this will maintain the level of interference with the broadcasting system.

I remind members of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that they should not comment on, criticise or make charges against a person or body outside the Houses of the Oireachtas either by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable.

By virtue of section 17(2)(l) of the Defamation Act 2009, witnesses are protected by absolute privilege in respect of their evidence to the joint committee. However, if they are directed by the Chair to cease giving evidence on a particular matter and they continue to so do, they are entitled thereafter only to a qualified privilege in respect of their evidence. They are directed that only evidence connected with the subject matter of these proceedings is to be given and they are asked to respect the parliamentary practice to the effect that, where possible, they should not criticise or make charges against any person, persons or entity by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable.

Members are reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that they should not comment on, criticise or make charges against a person outside the House or an official either by name or in such a way as to make him or her identifiable.

I welcome Ms Norma Shearer, CEO of the Training for Women Network, Ms Elizabeth Thompson, manager, Ms Sharlene Anderson, Ms Myrtle Neill, and Ms Joanne Shortall. On behalf of the committee I congratulate Ms Shearer on receiving a highly commended award in July in the women of influence category in the Northern Ireland women's awards 2019. Ms Shearer was also nominated in the chief executive category, and these nominations and award reflect Ms Shearer's hard work and commitment and those of her organisation.

We will hear opening statements before going into a question and answer session with members of the committee in private session.

Ms Norma Shearer: My colleagues and I are delighted to be able to come before the committee today to talk about the work of the Training for Women Network, TWN, our partnerships, and the reality faced by us as women in Northern Ireland. TWN is an organisation that 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 an intermediary funding body distributing money from the newly established PEACE programmes agreed by the European Union. Over a six-year period, TWN built partnerships with other organisations in the voluntary community sector and distributed more than €19 million 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 while still maintaining its partnership approach and ethos. This has allowed TWN to share money from Europe through both the PEACE and Building Sustainable Prosperity-European Social Fund programmes with like-minded organisations. It has also created a mechanism for the filtering of moneys 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 makes TWN so different is that it has male staff members as well as female and it 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. TWN has 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 the First World War, perceptions and attitudes of radical extremism, and women in politics. These are 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 that 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 is 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, MLAs and anyone else who has tried to sideline women. TWN has been in situations where its staff and partner organisations have been 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 two 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 behind us at the minute, but the voluntary sector is never very far from financial starvation.

TWN, like many organisations across Northern Ireland, is very dependent on European moneys, and at present with Brexit we 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. 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 has 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 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 offers various European recognised accredited training courses on a wide range of subjects, which again helps in advancing and building CVs for women in Northern Ireland.

While I could spend the whole day talking to members about TWN, I am aware of the time constraints. Therefore, I would like to talk briefly about three of our programmes, finishing up with the challenges that I believe TWN and the women we work with are facing or are 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 Promote, Advance and Support for Success, PASS, project. This project is funded under the Northern Ireland European Social Fund programme. It is aimed at some of the most marginalised young women in society. The project targets women aged between 16 and 24 years, who are not in education, employment or training, NEET, and who are 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 four-year project, of which we are now in the latter half of the second year. Many of these young women face multiple barriers. Often they have young children, are single parents, and have numeracy and literacy problems, prescription drug addictions and little or no family support. This project offers hope and help to steer the young women onto a different path. It has not been easy, recruitment has been slow, and the young women have been very 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 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.

TWN's peace and conflict transformation project, PACT, supported by the European Union's PEACE IV programme and managed by the special EU programmes body, SEUPB, is a collaboration with three partners: Foyle Women's Information Network, FWIN, in Derry-Londonderry, Intercomm in Belfast, and Queen's University Belfast, which helped develop the pioneering psychometric questionnaire testing. This project is aimed at 1,200 women throughout Northern Ireland and the Border counties undertaking psychometric testing that 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 among some of our statutory partners.

While this is only a snapshot of what we do, the final piece of work that we are leading is the women in community transformation programme, WICT. This programme is funded through the Department for Communities and is just one of the 43 measures identified in the Fresh Start initiative. It is perhaps the most challenging but rewarding work that we have done to date. We are working in partnership with three others: Co-Operation Ireland, FWIN and Intercomm. We are working with women across 26 locations in communities that have high levels of paramilitary control and coercion. These women, many of whom are very brave, 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, “educate a woman, you educate a family, you educate a community”, ties in with the aims and objectives of the WICT programme.

We must make no mistake that while 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 in which we work. Women are at the front line trying to keep their children safe, often while surviving in areas of high deprivation, poverty and isolation.

Brexit has taken a terrible toll on our communities and has the potential to cause even further polarisation and become an orange and green or an us and them issue. We cannot let this happen. TWN works 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. In honesty, I believe they are frightened about their future and their voices are 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 and republican areas also fear the upsurge in dissident violence and control. Again, this is not a threat we can ignore and pretend is not happening. Our young people, and more increasingly young women, are susceptible to being sucked in. In areas where little or no hope exists for a future they are sold an alternative that can offer standing and respect despite the end game.

This project offers these women hope, but it needs verbal and financial support. Organisations such as ours 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 as an organisation and as a community. We face restricted and decreased funding for the work we do. We face increased violence and the polarisation of the communities we work with, moving further away from each other than at any time in the past 20 years.

The growth in using and dealing prescription drugs is higher in Northern Ireland than anywhere else in the UK and GPs struggle to cope with the 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 whom were women, are not being listened to. We must address the past before we can move forward, no matter how painful that could be. There is no political leadership or joined-up approaches from our politicians for all our citizens and the language we use must change. Not everything in Northern Ireland is sectarian and not everything can be 50:50. We grapple with fear, anger and mistrust, which we have spent decades trying to break down. The uncertainty of Europe and Brexit is phenomenal for both communities. I highlighted this earlier and it cannot be underestimated.

I thank the Chairman and his colleagues for allowing me to speak to them not only about TWN, about which I am so passionate and extremely proud, but about the amazing women I meet daily who remind me of what I do and why I do it. We in Northern Ireland are unique. We have so much to offer, not only internally on the island of Ireland but to the world. I am proud of what we have achieved and I hope we will 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 will not and cannot be returned to the box but must be encouraged to grow, develop and achieve the equality we deserve. I now ask the committee to listen to some of my colleagues' experi-

ences as women in Northern Ireland.

Chairman: Because of the sensitivity involved in many of the issues that will be raised I propose that we continue the meeting in private session to hear the evidence of the group that has come in. Is that agreed? Agreed.

The joint committee went into private session at 2.45 p.m. and adjourned at 3.50 p.m. until 2.15 p.m. on Thursday, 7 November 2019.