

Eleventh Meeting

6th March 2017, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Iveagh House

Minutes: Thematic Meeting

The theme for this meeting focused on the **Domestic Implementation of WPS within the Migrant Populations in Ireland**. It included two sessions: 1) Migrant Women and Integration in Ireland and 2) Engaging Faith Leaders Against GBV.

Session 1 – Migrant women in Ireland

The first session focused on the challenges around the integration of asylum seekers and refugees in Ireland. In order to present the group with first-hand knowledge in this area, two speakers were invited to present their experiences and note some of the challenges and difficulties that they themselves, and the women they work with, have faced during their time in Ireland.

The first speaker was **Rawan Almasri**, a young Syrian woman who came to Ireland as part of the refugee resettlement programme, 3 years ago. Rawan worked as a translator for the Syrian community in Ireland for two years but has now returned to study pharmacology at UCD.

The second speaker was **Madiza Siyokwana**, who is originally from South Africa but has lived and worked in Waterford since 2001. On realising the difficulties of exclusion, fear and loneliness suffered by migrant women living in the Waterford area, she established an organization that brings predominantly African women together to discuss and address common problems they are experiencing. It also provides a platform for their voice to be heard within Irish society. **The following issues were raised within both presentations.**

Language

The most commonly noted problem for women, either arriving through resettlement programmes or the system for international protection, is language difficulties. Within the Syrian community, most of whom have arrived via the resettlement programmes, there is a lack of English language and they have limited access to classes and translators. Rawan described how she was one of only two translators in the whole of Ireland that could translate on behalf of Syrians. For the first year she worked as a volunteer and then for the second year she was employed as a translator via an agency. She noted that there is a lack of funding for translators, which limits the ability for Syrian women to participate in Irish society. Also, limited translators create problems for women to access services, and can be particularly problematic when seeking medical help. For cultural reasons, women would find it difficult to communicate their medical needs without a female translator.

Rawan noted that for children that go to school, language is not so much a barrier as they tend to pick it up very quickly, and have much more confidence in their communication. However, for the 15-25 age group, language is more problematic and affects their ability to continue their studies. For the older generation, language acts as a significant barrier to accessing resources and participating in Irish society. This, in turn, can lead to depression and feelings of limbo and exclusion.

Madiza also noted similar language problems. She highlighted that women find language barriers particularly difficult as they tend to be more within the home. They therefore have less opportunity to communicate outside the home and practice English.

Remaining in a situation of Limbo

Rawan noted that, in the context of Syrian women arriving in Ballaghaderreen, many refugees had no idea that they would have to wait another year before they could move to their own accommodation and participate in employment or society. Moreover, she highlighted that she herself had not realised that she would have to wait for three years before being able to study. This was after already spending 3 years as a refugee in Greece. The broader discussion on this issue, raised the point that it seems very unfair that the time spent in another EU member state is not taken into account in the access to employment or further education after arriving in Ireland.

Rawan noted that resettlement candidates are not told of such restrictions when they are accepted for the resettlement programme, and therefore come as a shock when the reality becomes clear. This feeling of limbo and inability to 'get on with life' is very difficult for women to deal with, especially young women who are anxious to begin, or continue, a career.

The situation of limbo is also experienced to a greater extent within the Direct Provision service, where women may wait many years to hear the results of their application.

Access to Further Education

Rawan explained how she has now managed to gain a scholarship to UCD to study pharmacology but she noted how information about scholarships is not easily available. A further problem is that, despite starting her studies in Syria, her previous qualifications are not recognised in this country. As a result she is obliged to start her studies at the beginning again.

The lack of recognition of qualifications or training, the group agreed, is a major obstacle to employment and educational opportunities within the refugee community. However, as noted, this is also made even more difficult when people have had to flee without taking their documents.

The discussion, however, noted that both DCU and UCD are now Universities of sanctuary and therefore commit to demonstrate a commitment to welcoming asylum seekers and refugees into the university community and to fostering a culture of inclusion for all. It also means that there are a number of scholarships reserved for refugees. Trinity does not yet have this status but advocacy is underway in working towards changing this.

The Fear Factor

Both speakers described how fear is frequently experienced by migrant women coming to Ireland. For Madiza, coming from Apartheid South Africa, she described to the group how terrified she was of the gardaí when she first arrived. Similarly, Rawan and others in the group who had worked with Syrian women, explained that fear of the gardaí in other refugee communities was prominent. Maria O'Toole, National President of the ICA, who have worked with Syrian women in Ballaghaderreen, also noted that women were terrified of doing wrong, but also terrified of being exploited - for example through exploitative employment.

Both speakers noted that it was important to be able to speak to a female guard but that sometimes this facility is unavailable. However, Louise Synnott, from An Garda Síochána explained that everybody has the right to ask for a female guard but may not realise it. The group suggested that maybe this could be more clearly explained to women coming to Ireland and could be more clearly signed in the station.

Louise Synnot also explained that there are now 300 ethnic liaison officers within An Garda Síochána, and also an increasing number of Racial Integration Officers. Nura, however, noted that in her work with the gardaí in Cork, none of them had heard of the Women, Peace and Security agenda.

Support Structures

The speakers highlighted further problems around a lack of support from organisations and the community. Madiza raised the issue that within Direct Provision, families tend to be supported, but single women are often lacking in support and tend to be left to find their own way. Madiza noted that although there are some organisations that are ostensibly acting as supports, they are frequently ill informed about needs, and come across as 'out for themselves'. She also highlighted that such organisations often do not have migrant women at the management level and they appear to be acting on 'behalf of migrant women' rather than working *with* them.

Madiza also noted that it would be useful to have more platforms for migrant voices to be heard. As a radio presenter herself, she noted that the media could be used more effectively as a platform for a diversity of voices.

Depression and Trauma

Both speakers highlighted that depression in refugee women is a big problem. This can stem from the experience of conflict, exclusion, isolation, leaving family members behind, or from the situation of limbo that many women find themselves in. Also it was noted that depression can stem from body image. African women are supposed to be large, which signifies that 'a husband is feeding her'. However, this image is inconsistent with the 'ideal type' body image in this country. Rawan also agreed that body image was a problem for Syrian women.

Racism

Racism was also raised as an issue as many refugee women have experienced racism within Irish society. However, Rawan highlighted that this stems from a lack of knowledge and ignorance. She finds that some people think that she comes from a very primitive life and does not realise that she has the same normal relationships with members of her family. She highlighted how important it is for the exchange of knowledge between communities in order to combat racism and 'othering'. The group noted that this was important to be incorporated into the education system.

ICA and NCCWN Input

In response to the presentations by the first two speakers Marie O'Toole, National President of the Irish Countrywomen's Association and Sharon Perry, from the National Collective of Community Women's Networks, gave their responses from the perspective of prominent women's collective organizations in Ireland.

Marie O'Toole, first provided some background to the work of the ICA. The objectives of the ICA are to bring women together in fellowship and through co-operative effort, to develop and improve the standard of rural and urban life in Ireland, having due regard for Irish culture. She explained that the ICA is involved in a large variety of activities such as sewing, arts and crafts. Working cooperatively is a way of getting involved with the community and engaging in social networks. See the website for further information - <http://www.ica.ie>.

Marie noted that the ICA had had some input in Ballaghaderreen. She highlighted that many of the issues that Rawan had described were observed by the ICA, particularly in the area of language problems.

She described how the ICA is always open to new membership and extended an invitation to the speakers to engage with the ICA. She suggested that women in the ICA would benefit by learning from newcomers and a greater diversity in membership. She assured the group that the ICA would warmly welcome greater membership from the migrant and refugee population.

Sharon Perry described how the NCCWN is an organisation that is based on equality and it will support all women. It is a collective of 17 organizations and works in various areas around Ireland. It is funded by the Department of Justice, with funding of 1.3 million, and also receives 250,000 from the European Social fund to support women who are particularly excluded. It also works to create channels of communication between women who are experiencing similar problems. She also extended an invitation to refugee women to join the collective and noted that they have programs in Waterford and Kerry. For more information see the website - <http://nccwn.org>.

Both the ICA and the NCCWN highlighted that they need greater levels of diversity in their organisations and extended their invitation to join. A discussion around diversity in the management of women's organisations followed, and both the ICA and the NCCWN noted current management is very 'white' Irish but are that they open to diversifying. The National Women's Council, however, highlighted that their management board is more diverse as it

represents their membership. The speakers highlighted the importance of being 'invited' in to an organisation as migrant women would find it difficult to get involved without an invitation. Both the Marie O'Toole and the Sharon Perry offered to share contacts of local groups within their networks with the speakers.

Muslim Women's Centre

In the discussion of Women's groups, Nura also explained that in Cork they have set up a Muslim Women's Centre, which meets once a month. It is an excellent platform for meeting other women from a variety of Islamic communities. She described how women enjoy the day as a social occasion and also use it to discuss problems and challenges. Nura also highlighted how it is also a useful platform for engaging with the boarder community. For example, the organisers also invite service providers and gardaí to their events.

Oversight Group members found the presentations interesting and informative, and agreed that more supports should be put in place in order to address some of the challenges that were outlined. Without this, as Michael Rowan inputed, the Irish state is not fulfilling its obligation to rehabilitation as part of the WPS agenda.

The Role of Faith Leaders in Challenging Gender Based Violence Afternoon Session - 13.30 – 15.00

The second session primarily heard presentations by Egide Dhala from Wezesha, and Salome Mbugua from Akidwa, who both have been working on a campaign to engage faith-leaders in challenging GBV. They both have inside experiences of the ways in which faith-leaders have contributed to perpetuating GBV within some of the migrant community in Ireland.

Egide began by explaining how culture and religion are interlinked. He clarified that religion, in many African communities, plays such a salient role in culture the two cannot be disconnected. In many African communities the word of the pastor is taken as unchallengeable, and if the pastor advocates for suffering then members will accept. Although many pastors will state publically that they do not discriminate, in private and within their personal practices, the reality contradicts this. Most pastors do not challenge the power of men in the home and may endorse some forms of GBV in order for the man to retain power. This then perpetuates the normalization of violence against women, and it becomes difficult to challenge.

For some African men that buy into the cultural acceptance of domestic violence, they have been challenged when coming to Ireland. For example, where the law deems violence against women as unacceptable, women have in some cases found ways to challenge domestic violence or male authority in the home. In other cases, however, this has led to a backlash against women, with increased levels of violence or the break-up of marriages. An example is evident in the manner by which child benefit is received. As child benefit automatically goes to the mother it may be perceived as challenging male economic authority in the home. As a result men often complain that in Ireland they are without rights.

In Ireland there are many 'Charismatic Churches' that have been established as a result of rising African populations. They are becoming increasingly popular and proliferating in membership, for example the 'Redeemed Church' in Gardiners Street has a support base of around 4 million. The pastors in these churches can be very influential in the lives of African families. For example, if a pastor states that if a woman challenges her husband's beating she may be visited by the devil, then the word of the pastor tends to be followed. They may also ask someone to sell all their possessions in order to solve a problem, which is defined as being a result of an encounter with the devil. Pastors therefore have a very strong hold over the home. Many women and men are engaged in the church from the point of arrival in Ireland, which results in a perpetuation of gender hierarchies, machoism and women finding themselves trapped within the authority of the church.

The pastors are overwhelmingly men, although the wives of pastors play an important role in the church. However, the role of the pastor's wife is predominantly dictated by her husband and thus the decision-making power remains with the (male) pastor. Some wives of pastors also suffer GBV. For example, in their research, Egide and Salome described a pastor's wife who told them that she was 'dying inside' at the hands of her husband.

Egide also noted that for a man to become a pastor they really need no training and may just decide themselves to become a pastor. There is therefore no quality control. However, for a women to gain a position of influence in the church, she will require extensive training.

Egide and Salome described how important community education is in changing attitudes and raising awareness of rights. This will allow for critical thinking around challenging gender norms and the ability to challenge the dogmatism of the pastor's word.

Beyond the Charismatic churches, Salome noted how other religious faiths continue to perpetuate GBV within Ireland, despite legal instruments intended to prevent it. For example, she noted how the interlinking of religion and culture may influence the continuation of FGM¹ or other discriminatory cultural practices. Salome highlighted that, even where a practice is not specifically advocated by the religion, a religious leader could influence the elimination of such a practice by condemning it. For example, in Cork a young girl was recently taken to Pakistan to become a child bride. She highlighted that although Islamic leaders in Ireland may not specifically advocate for such a practice, by stating that it is unacceptable, they can play an important role in preventing it.

Salome and Egide have been working towards engaging faith leaders in dialogue and challenging gender discriminatory norms within various religious practices, through their programme, **Dare to Dialogue**. Within their work they have been engaging closely with the Dublin City Interfaith Forum, who have been very open to their initiative and continue to engage in this area. As a final speaker, the Chair of the DCIF, **Hilary Abrahamson**, presented an overview of her organisation, and provided the group with an explanation of the work that they are engaged in around promoting dialogue and tolerance.

¹ FGM is not specifically a religious norm, but is not entirely unrelated to dialogue involving the interlinking of religion and culture.

Dublin City Interfaith Forum

In November 2010, working in partnership with Dublin City Council's Office for integration, the Irish Council of Churches began implementing a project that led to the establishment of the Dublin City Interfaith Forum on 31st January 2012.

By taking this creative, 'thinking outside the box' approach, Dublin City Council and Irish Council of Churches helped to establish a unique organisation where Dublin's faith communities work together with the City to support and facilitate the process of integration for both migrant and the indigenous communities.

The central vision of the Forum is that it is not only a talking shop but is also a body that acts. According to its constitution the purpose of the DCIF is to:

- To support and strengthen the contribution of faith communities towards social and civil integration in Dublin City.
- To promote and support the participation of migrants in the civic, community and public life of the city.
- To challenge all forms of injustice and discrimination and contribute to a fully integrated city for all.
- To promote respect for and acceptance of the diversity of faith and culture in Dublin City.
- To actively liaise with Dublin City Council and other statutory and voluntary basis towards these ends.

The main focus of the forums activities is the Interfaith Work Programme, which consists of events and cities and projects relevant to the City of Dublin from an interfaith and integration perspective. These events provide an opportunity for participants to witness people from many different cultural, religious and ethnic backgrounds working together, not only in harmony, but in genuine friendship. Some of the activities the forum engages with include:

- Visiting each other's places of worship.
- Regular capacity building and planning workshops
- The Faith in the City Programme, which includes public talks on history, beliefs, and rituals etc.
- On-going meetings with An Garda Síochána are held to discuss security and policing issues of special interest to faith communities.
- The Interfaith Walk for Peace to mark the UN International Day of Peace, which is led by leaders of various faiths.

DCIF also engages in education programmes, which they view as extremely important. They are used to break down habits of intolerance, prejudice and suspicion, which underpin racial and religious antagonisms. The forum has devised a number of strategies to educate people about faith communities, such as school engagement strategies, which have been piloted in secondary schools around the city and a 'Come and See for Yourself' initiative, which involves the distribution of leaflets that guide what to expect when visiting churches, Mosques, temples etc.

Again the oversight group members found the speakers interesting and insightful, and vibrant discussion followed the presentation. It was agreed that working with faith leaders from a WPS perspective is important in moving forward with the agenda.

Secretariat to the Oversight Group to the 2nd National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security
21th March 2018