



Submission from Women Now for Development to the Government of Ireland re: EWIPA

Women Now for Development welcomes the draft political declaration circulated last month by the Government of Ireland on the use of explosive weapons in populated areas (EWIPA). Women Now for Development welcomes this encouraging step, and we thank you for taking the time to consider our feedback. The draft was shared with us by colleagues from the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) and we have developed this response in coordination with them.

Our organisation works to empower Syrian women everywhere, aiming to engender the development of a society governed by democracy, freedom, and justice – a society where women have a meaningful role in everyday Syrian life. We advocate for the rights of Syrian women, and build awareness of and support for their demands. We work to secure women's political participation as well their participation in society.

Inside and outside Syria, we operate well-equipped safe spaces that give women in our community centers to gather, exchange ideas and access information, receive protection services such as psychosocial support, and learn skills that will promote their economic empowerment in order to help them secure incomes. These activities are critical for promoting their participation in social and political life.

By virtue of operating within Syria, our teams are unfortunately no strangers to the catastrophic impact of EWIPA. The women's centres we have run, some in-besieged areas, have been routinely hit, damaged, and forced out of service by explosive weaponry. Missiles, mortars, chemical weapons, barrel bombs and more have been launched from the ground and from the air at or near our centres in Daraya, Eastern Ghouta and Idlib. Civilians in schools, markets, hospitals and homes, are killed and injured in these attacks on populated areas. Homes, shops and other property are of course also lost, causing severe economic hardship to families and communities.

Repeatedly, our staff have had to scout new locations to rebuild our women's centres. Inevitably, we must operate in populated areas, in locations accessible to the communities we work with. In many locations, we have begun our programmes at 6:30 AM, allowing women to travel at dawn when the bombing is the quietest. Despite adjusting our schedule to the schedule of the bombers, we have still had to evacuate our centres in the midst of particularly vicious campaigns. Indeed, the use of explosive weapons in populated areas has restricted women's freedom of movement more than patriarchal structures in society.

We have lost two members of staff, young women working at our centres in Daraya and in Ghouta. Another young woman who used to attend activities at our centre in Saraqeb was killed at home with her family. People left wounded or disabled by these attacks have still not been able to access care or obtain prosthetic limbs or specialist equipment, particularly women. Countless women we work with are caring for relatives hurt in attacks by EWIPA, but for those

who are injured or left with disabilities themselves, they are ostracised by society and lose opportunities for education and participation in public life.

Explosive weapons, without a doubt, have a gendered impact. They cause severe injuries, and in some conservative communities, women and girls may struggle to get the care they need because of the absence of female medical staff. Women and girls are lower down in the list of priority to receive prosthetic limbs.

In our experience, men, women and children suffering from mental or physical disabilities are also disproportionately impacted by explosive weapons. Women, some who were playing a role in public life, are forced to assume more caretaking duties as a result.

To that end, we believe what is missing from the draft declaration is an outright commitment to stop the use of explosive weapons in populated areas. Language that recommends mitigation based on the scenario that they will be used is quite discouraging in Part B / Section 3 and in particular line 3.3. Line 3.3 comes close to the language we need, however without the caveats of “with wide area effects” and “whose effects extend beyond the immediate area of a military objective”. Essentially, this line should read

3.3 Ensure that states and their armed forces adopt and implement policies and practices to protect civilians from harm including by banning the use of explosive weapons in populated areas.

We believe this will be the key takeaway phrase of the declaration and the language should be unequivocal, clear and without qualifiers and should be the first point in the section.

Additional comments are --

Section 1

1.1 - The phrase “complex challenges” to the protection of civilians undermines the severity of the situation. The use of explosive weapons in populated areas, rather, halts civilian life and causes masses casualties.

1.2 - Markets should also be name-checked.

The effect on civilians with disabilities should also be mentioned. This destruction limits access to services for people with special needs. The psychological and psychosocial harm to civilians disproportionately affects people with disabilities and mental or developmental disorders and may exacerbate health conditions. The impact of injuries is also disproportionate on women and girls who may face challenges accessing treatment and services.

1.3 - Explosive weapons may also be employed to force displacement or to serve strategies of demographic engineering.

Specify that it is children who are disproportionately affected by unexploded remnants long after hostilities have ended.

1.5 - The mention of operational good practices by many armies is an odd one here, and the overall tone of the paragraph doesn't reflect the urgency and scale of violations to IHL which are a key impetus for this declaration.

1.6 - Recommend the inclusion of "gender" here and not just sex and age.

It should be emphasised that sex should not be a presupposition of civilian status (I have in mind some studies that find that the United States army counts all men killed as fighters.)

Along with collecting data on the type of weapon used, which WILPF mentioned in the feedback, there should be mention of which party to the conflict is known to have these weapons in possession or to have used them in that particular conflict.

Section 4

4.8 - Add that feedback from civil society groups should be solicited ahead of these meetings and considered in deliberations. This will ensure an avenue for our own monitoring to be taken into account.
