



Community Relations Council



# Women and Sectarianism in N.I.

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## Introduction

Sectarianism is rooted in the foundations of Northern Ireland society and has underpinned much of the segregation and violent conflict throughout the 'Troubles'. Since the Good Friday Agreement sectarian issues continue to dominate the religious and political landscape and sectarian violence continues to instil fear and disrupt lives. The cause and effect of sectarianism in Northern Ireland has attracted a significant degree of writing and research, however, there has been limited research focusing specifically on women's experiences and perceptions pertaining to sectarianism. Through their ongoing community relations work with women, Women's Information Northern Ireland (WINI) and Community Dialogue identified that, when discussing peace and reconciliation, the issue of sectarianism was continually on the agenda. Therefore the Women and Sectarianism Project was developed to provide a platform to give women an opportunity to have their voices heard, to reflect and share their experiences and ideas around sectarianism with other women from across communities in Belfast.

The Women and Sectarianism Project was carried out during February and March 2015. The project used dialogue and discussions primarily focused upon key themes in order to explore how sectarianism has impacted on women's lives and how women felt sectarianism could be addressed by policy and decision makers.

The project was a joint initiative developed by Women's information Northern Ireland and Community Dialogue and funded by the Community Relations Council N.I.

Women's Information Northern Ireland (WINI) (previously Women's Information Group) was established in 1980 by local women across the interface area of West Belfast. The objective was to retain and build contact and relationships between women on both sides of the sectarian divide, as well as provide those women with information which would allow them to make informed choices in respect of health, family, housing, finance. Indeed anything that impacted on the lives of women, their families and communities.

Today, Women's Information has in excess of 1200 members. Our work is based on a women led peer support model through provision of information, awareness raising and community conversations on a myriad of issues that affect women's lives, for example, living on the interface, culture and tradition, debt and welfare reform, gender equality and the barriers to women's participation.

Information and signposting is crucial to the empowerment of women and we work to ensure that WINI provide topical and up to date information through monthly Information days, workshops, dialogue and community conversations, seminars, conferences, residentials, roadshows, lobbying activities, creative arts and learning programmes. Much of this work is rooted in community relations and is the focus of our recently established Women's Words Project.

Community Dialogue is a charitable organisation that empowers people through dialogue and training to address issues of division and exclusion. The organisation was formed in 1997, a few months before the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement,

when a group of Unionists, Nationalists, Republicans, Loyalists and others in Northern Ireland, came together to form the organization. Contentious issues are addressed in a face-to-face context, dealing with the root causes of division, and people can be “skilled up” to practice dialogue in their own communities. The organisation provides a safe context for people who are often diametrically opposed to engagement with each other and offers dialogue experiences through workshops, residential sessions, and training courses.

Community Dialogue takes no party-political position on any issue, endeavouring to ensure that it remains impartial during its often challenging and contentious dialogue processes. We also believe that it is much more effective and empowering to raise questions than to answer them.

Community Dialogue works with all people, realising that dialogue is needed in all contexts. As our communities are often polarised, opportunities to engage with each other are limited. It has become increasingly apparent that we need to increase the numbers of Dialogue Practitioners in each community, who can act as catalysts for positive engagement and transforming of often limited understanding.

Conflict of itself is neither good nor bad, it is a natural, necessary and inevitable consequence of life. It is how we use conflict that renders it good or bad, creative or destructive. This is where dialogue comes in as a tool which we can use to mould conflict into a creative, positive and productive process. It does so by deepening our understanding of the positions of others and ourselves and of the conflicts between others and ourselves.

## **Community Dialogue’s Vision of the Dialogue Process**

Dialogue is a process involving active listening as well as talking. It implies accepting and respecting the views of others and trying to understand where they are coming from. Diversity and division are openly addressed in this process.

Dialogue deepens understanding of our own, and each other’s positions, often leading to shared understanding and an enhancement of our ability to make informed decisions.

## **Project Methodology**

In order to capture the essence of sectarianism, targeted dialogues were undertaken to gain qualitative insights and analysis into women’s experiences and perspectives pertaining to sectarianism. Dialogue and discussions primarily focused upon key themes in order to elicit a wide range of what the women participants considered to be drivers of sectarianism, and to demonstrate how cultural and past experiences have molded their perceptions and individualistic experiences of sectarianism.

Between February and March 2015, a total of 72 women drawn from Protestant and Catholic communities across Belfast participated in a series of six structured dialogues. The dialogues were facilitated by Community Dialogue facilitators and were attended by staff from both WINI and Community Dialogue. The dialogues were held in venues in Andersonstown, Glengormley, Rathcoole, Belfast and Corrymeela.

The dialogues focused on key questions to lead the discussion exploring women's experience of sectarianism, what sectarianism means to women and how it affects them and their communities. Other questions looked at what women thought needed to be done in order to tackle sectarianism and how women would envisage a society free from sectarianism.

The next section provides a synthesis of the thematic analysis.

## What has been your experience of sectarianism?

Many of the women who participated in the dialogues grew up over the course of the N.I. conflict therefore a lot of their experiences were recurring themes directly related to the past.

Women from both communities talked about their experiences in the context of segregated secondary education with incidents ranging from dubbing of sectarian slogans on school property, offensive taunts and name calling to physical violence from pupils at other schools (other religion).

One woman talked about her school bus being attacked by bottles and stones and subsequently hijacked by masked men during the loyalist strike (1974). The children were abandoned, left stranded and terrified in a strange area. Another woman said that in the 1970's kids going to all the schools on the Antrim Road (BRA, Little Flower, St. Patrick's Bearnageeha etc.) had to be escorted to the bus by teachers for safety as the 'other side' were spitting at them and throwing missiles.

*"I was pelted by nails on the way to the bus stop."*

Other women pointed out that even when you got on a bus it didn't mean you were safe from attack:

*"My hair was tied to the seat and I was egged on the bus on my way home from school."*

Whilst many of the women outlined similar experiences, they all felt that segregated education played a massive role in sectarianism, as you were:

*"Instantly identified as who and what you were by your school uniform."*

Identity was a cross cutting theme with experiences associated not only with schools but with pronunciation of letters, wearing of symbols (crosses and badges), names, (particularly Irish) and areas:

*"Your name gave it away - or your school!"*

Across the dialogues women spoke about individual experiences in their local areas but also alluded to conflict related incidents in the wider community which had a direct impact

on their daily lives. Fear of sectarian violence was the most significant across the themes.

The majority of responses outlined incidents related to living and working on peace lines and interface communities. One woman talked about how they (her community) hated to hear of bombings, shootings or attacks in other areas as it was likely that it would 'start' in their area:

*"We've lived with sectarian violence throughout the troubles, is still a big fear in our area, with issues not sorted out in Ardoyne/Twaddell there's always the chance things will flare up."*

Others spoke about the continual rioting and sectarian attacks on homes in interface areas:

*"There were numerous sectarianism attacks on my home/family by 'the other side' we lived in terror, but they suffered the same."*

*"My family had to sleep in track suits for years because we lived on the interface and were out of bed nearly every night due to sectarian attacks, riots and security alerts."*

These experiences were not confined to those who lived in interface areas, many women also highlighted experiences where they were forced to leave their homes:

*"My family were burned out of New Barnsley in 1969, I'll never forget it we were left with the clothes on our backs, people came from other areas to help us get away, when we were leaving people we lived beside for years were spitting on us and calling us 'orange b's'. That has stayed with me all my life, things are better now but there is still a fear inside and it's hard to trust them."*

*"We were told to get out of our house in Rathcoole and the windows were put in, my Dad had to get a coalman he knew to take our stuff away!"*

*"I was put out of my home in Ballybeen in 1972"*

Losing their homes and being displaced had a serious impact on many of the women, many indicated that they have carried the fear and distrust from that time onwards. In addition, some women suggested that by moving from mixed areas to segregated areas during the troubles only sought to fuel sectarianism as the result of their experiences has had a negative impact on future generations.

Women also talked about the danger and fear associated with crossing the peace lines:

*"I cross lines now into Protestant areas I wouldn't go into before because I had two family members killed out shopping in the 1990's, that whole time was frightening but I am less afraid now."*

*“Because of what we went through in the past people are “heart scared” of them taking the peace walls down. It’s really a trust issue it will be hard to change the mindset on both sides”.*

*“I was always scared walking from the bus stop at the bottom of the Newtownards Road to visit my granny in Short Strand. I was chased and things thrown at me, a lot of name calling “fenians.”*

The impact of living in a divided community was highlighted and it was further pointed out that the lack of affordable housing in mixed communities has kept women and their families from integrating:

*“Sectarianism – growing up and staying in ‘your own area’ has kept me living in an area where paramilitaries now reign supreme – I can’t afford to move to a mixed housing area”.*

Although the majority of women supported the idea of living in mixed areas some of them pointed out that even in a mixed area there can be a fear of sectarianism. At certain times of the year there are tensions as flags go up, usually put there from people from outside the area. Residents can’t say anything about it as they feel intimidated and are afraid of reprisals.

The dialogues highlighted numerous incidences of sectarianism in the workplace, particularly prior to the introduction of anti-discrimination legislation. In this regard women talked about being stoned and shot at going to work in protestant areas, as in many instances there were no options as there was no work in nationalist areas. Further, women were refused work in what they perceived along blatant sectarian lines, losing out to lesser qualified Protestants:

*“Religion determined what jobs you got – Catholics left with the scraps.”*

Others talked about sectarianism in the workplace particularly the use of flags and emblems to intimidate leaving feelings of anger and resentment as there was no recourse especially where there was majority rule and no-one was disciplined.

*“I worked in Gallaghers, in July, a Union Jack was put over the machine.”*

Conversely, some women stressed that sectarianism in the workplace was not ‘one sided’:

*“I couldn’t stay in my job in the hospital, it was the small things like a tricolour pinned to my locker and things going quiet when I came into the room, I was afraid so I left.”*

Experiences of sectarianism as a result of mixed marriages and relationships (mixed religions) was discussed. Women emphasised how they were often badly treated as a result of engaging in mixed relationships. Many were ridiculed, cut off from friends and families and exiled from their communities:

*“I had to go and live in England when I married a Catholic, we only came back after the Good Friday Agreement but my family is still divided because my kids stayed in England.”*

Others said they were treated as outsiders and felt afraid to return to visit their families and in some cases threatened with violence:

*“My daughter used to go with a Protestant boy on Blacks Road and was threatened.”*

*“I couldn’t visit my family on the Shankill, I was an ‘outsider’.”*

A number of women related painful and emotional experiences regarding the sectarian murders of friends and family and the subsequent impact on their lives:

*“My dad was murdered by the IRA he wasn’t even involved in anything, I stick to my own community.”*

*“My mate’s brother was shot dead by loyalist paramilitaries, I’ll never forget it”*

Long term effects of losing loved ones over the course of the troubles has been well documented, this was not further explored as part of the discussions.

As identified the past was the main focus of the women’s experiences of sectarianism, however it was recognised that the past and present are inextricably linked, as one woman put it:

*“The past keeps coming up again and again, sectarianism has been reinvented time and time again, and experiences repeat themselves in each generation, this is because sectarianism and bigotry are perpetuated in homes and communities.”*

The women’s experience of sectarianism has been wide and varied and has left a profound impact on so many lives, this can be a lifelong experience:

*“Sectarianism in this society stole my entire youth, created no-go areas and restricted my life choices and freedom – sectarianism cost me my human rights.”*

## **What does sectarianism mean to you?**

The overwhelming response to this question was the use of specific words to describe what sectarianism meant to the women as individuals: pluralism, threats, inequality, fear, discrimination, control, polarisation, intimidation, hatred and division.

Many considered division and pluralism in society based on religious, political and cultural beliefs and affiliations to be the main determinant of ongoing sectarianism. A few talked about this aspect in the context of how sectarianism is perpetuated. The lack of tolerance and hatred for ‘the other’, lack of trust, ignorance, lack of

understanding of history and culture, and the handing down of sectarian beliefs from generation to generation were seen as major contributors to keeping sectarianism going:

*“Sectarianism nowadays has been taken to a new level and some of the younger people involved in the problems didn’t grow up in the troubles so all the hatred is being passed down and then some.”*

It was further highlighted that ‘generational’ sectarian beliefs and attitudes were not the only influence on younger people, some politicians were seen as responsible for perpetuating sectarianism to keep the communities divided:

*“Politicians use their own sectarianism to promote division in this place.”*

It is important to note that across all of the dialogues it was perceived that Northern Ireland is still a sectarian society with people belonging to one side or the other. It was suggested that even if people integrate in work or school they still go back to their own area and vote for a particular political party determined by ‘what side of the fence’ you were born on. Furthermore, it was suggested that this is played out at Stormont by politicians who bring out the orange and green cards to score points off each other and ‘stir things up’ in communities.

*“Sectarianism is alive and well and living in Stormont!”*

Some women argued that sectarianism is a learned behaviour, wittingly or unwittingly, and on this basis people develop notions and perceptions which put labels on people. Subsequently people are seen as the ‘what’ and not the ‘who’ which dehumanises them:

*“Sectarianism changes the way you see other people. You then see people as a label e.g. paratroopers, RUC.”*

Others suggested that it is too easy to label people. Someone could be identified as a Loyalist when it wasn’t her own perception of herself. As one woman said:

*“Living in a loyalist community I am perceived as sectarian even though my personal views and opinions are not.”*

The majority of women concurred that branding and labelling people was in essence wrong, however it was seen as part and parcel of growing up in Northern Ireland, where:

*“Orange or green is inbred in you at birth”.*

It was recognised that people cope with sectarianism in different ways, however the majority of women agreed that it should be challenged irrespective of where and in what form it manifests itself.

## Does sectarianism affect you/your community? If so, how?

When asked how sectarianism affects individuals and communities the discussions focused on perceptions of whole communities being branded as sectarian, particularly Protestant, Loyalist, Unionist (PUL) communities. The main issues associated with sectarianism in communities were seen as flags, emblems, paramilitary activity and parades. Further, it was considered that although sectarianism is visible throughout society it was perceived during the discussions to have more of an impact on communities deemed as disadvantaged, particularly those situated in interface areas.

Ongoing paramilitary activity was raised as a key issue by many of the women. Concerns ranged from acting as gatekeepers and hampering progress of brokering peace between communities, to scaremongering, organising protests, demarcation of territory using flags and emblems, controlling the community through criminality, intimidation, violence and fear and accessing funding that would otherwise go to other community groups. Many of the women also stressed that sectarianism in these circumstances is mainly perpetuated by men.

*“Those involved in work to eradicate sectarianism and bring people together are ignored, the ones who ‘lead’ the divided areas are duly rewarded and courted by the decision makers.”*

There were also some other comments relating to ex-combatants:

*“Ex combatants are a small percentage of the population yet they walk away with vast sums of funding – cost of peace?”*

*“When do ex-combatants just become ordinary people?”*

Much of the criticism levelled at paramilitaries and ex-combatants was also attributed to the lack of positive leadership in PUL communities both at community and political level.

Flags and emblems, flag protests and parades were high on the agenda. Some of the women said that they would be too afraid to enter areas that outwardly displayed flags and other emblems. Others spoke of deliberate provocation as:

*“They know they will offend and provoke people with opposite views and opinions.”*

Other women stated that although they lived in a particular area they were perceived as sectarian although they did not agree with the flags and other trappings such as red, white and blue kerb stones:

*“Not everyone wants the flags or bonfires or painted kerbs but unfortunately everyone who lives in the area are tarred with the same brush as the minority who put them there, the community are not consulted.”*

Some of the women however supported the flying of flags and the flag protests as a right to display, stand up for and celebrate their culture, thus negating any act of sectarianism.

Others suggested that everything associated with the flags made an intimidatory statement about the dominance of one community over another and as such is blatantly sectarian in nature and could be attributed to both sides of the community.

*“Flags, murals and other paramilitary trappings in all communities are sectarian these need to be taken down.”*

Women also commented on the ongoing sectarian violence in some interface communities. They referred to gatekeepers, tribalism, ignorance and a lack of willingness to negotiate and compromise by the Orange Order and community representatives as the major contributors in keeping the violence going, particularly in North Belfast. However, it was also suggested that it was also perpetuated by individuals hiding behind the guise of community groups.

Anti-social behaviour and social media were also said to play a huge role in perpetuating sectarian violence at interfaces with young people organising riots on facebook bringing their peers from all over the country to participate. Many women said that the impact of sectarian violence holds their communities in fear and many dread the ‘marching season’ and the summer holidays.

*“You can’t go about your normal life around the twelfth the whole country is held to ransom by sectarian marches.”*

The destruction of communities and the economic cost were highlighted as some of the most serious impacts of sectarianism. Others expressed concern about the impact of witnessing sectarian acts on other people, in addition they felt that some communities were going:

*“Back to the future.”*

## **What needs to be done to tackle sectarianism?**

In their discussions, women overwhelmingly agreed that the best way to tackle sectarianism is through education and awareness raising. One of the key recommendations was integrated education for all children with no input by any churches.

*“If parents want kids to practice religion then they should teach it and take them to whatever church they want. Keep it out of schools.”*

It was also suggested that education and awareness of other cultures, religions and politics should be taught in schools, communities and workplaces to try and tackle sectarianism, particularly the language used:

*“People need to stop and think about the things they say and how they affect others, years ago men got away with saying sexist remarks to women and made a big joke out of it. Thanks to legislation this has changed, the same thing could be done for sectarian slang.”*

In terms of bringing communities together to tackle sectarianism, the women referred to the example set in Derry/Londonderry as leading the way in tackling sectarianism by showing the positive side of both cultures and embracing shared history and culture. It was recognised that although Derry/Londonderry still has some resistance to change the work that has been done especially with the Apprentice Boys and flute bands has been a massive step forward in uniting the communities:

*“The rest of the country especially Ardoyne and Twaddell needs to look at what they are doing up in Derry/Londonderry and use similar methods to resolve issues in their communities.”*

A change in perceptions about ‘the other’ was highlighted as significant in order to tackle sectarianism:

*“Perceptions need to be challenged. We need to look at what we have in common rather than what divides us. We need to humanise people.”*

Developing cross community links and projects was seen as crucial in changing negative perceptions about other communities, the women felt that more of this work needs to be supported. Many of the women related examples of the benefits of creating opportunities to bring people together in a neutral or shared space such as recognising commonalities and hearing other opinions and ideas. One woman said:

*“There is a lot of myths about the other community, it was only when I started work and made friends with Protestants that I realised the influence that sectarianism has had on my life.”*

Another woman suggested:

*“We need more investment in the community, reward the people working together and trying to move forward – not the paramilitaries and gate keepers who keep things going!”*

While many women expressed that sectarianism needs to be tackled at grass roots level, (community led approach) others remarked that changes should also come from the top down. Politicians should show more positive leadership and stop making inflammatory sectarian remarks that fuel the media and subsequently sectarianism. More women in politics and legislation linked to equality for all not just ‘Orange & Green’ was deemed a vital component in moving away from sectarianism. A number of women advocated that if women changed the way in which they vote and encourage other women to cast their vote, they could effectively change the political climate as they are after all, 52% of the population.

The common thread throughout the dialogues intimated that although there is no easy answer to tackling sectarianism, it must not go unchallenged and sectarian issues must

be dealt with sensitively and fairly in order to change the current attitudes and behaviours that enable it to flourish.

## How do you envisage a society that is free from sectarianism?

Across the dialogues women were asked to share thoughts on what a society free from sectarianism would look like. The majority of women talked about communities, envisaging strong, resilient communities, free from violence, living, cooperating and working together.

*“People working together, building communities of opportunity and trust.”*

Shared housing schemes and integrated education would be seen as the preferred option by most people and differences in culture, politics and religion would be understood and respected. They also discussed a future where young people had employment prospects and education and training opportunities within a ‘booming economy.’

Many commented on dealing with the past so that society was focused on real time issues and not fixated on what went before, particularly the ex-combatants and paramilitaries. Communities having a voice that is heard was deemed of high importance with the implementation of the Civic Forum (as per the Good Friday Agreement) seen as a platform to accommodate community issues and concerns. Voting for political leaders who are prepared to work together were also mentioned as was relevant equality legislation to encompass everyone in order to build a society based on fair and equal opportunities for all.

*“I would love to live in a society where everyone is valued, free from fear, well educated and empowering future generations to achieve their potential in whatever field they choose.”*

Lastly, the women talked about empowerment and their space and place in a future society where women would be valued, respected and represented as equal citizens and not as in the past excluded or included to suit the particular need arising, the ‘add women & stir’ approach.

## Conclusion

This report on ‘Women and Sectarianism’ reflects the views of women from the greater Belfast area. The Women’s Words (quotes) contained in this report were contributed by those women attending the dialogues.

The women produced a wealth of information about their experiences of sectarianism and how it has impacted on their lives. Although the women came from different backgrounds and areas, there was also a similarity in their experiences and how they dealt with consequences. The themes discussed in the report also highlighted the importance of the legacy of the past and the link to wider unresolved issues today, for instance women’s exclusion from the peace process and recognition of their contribution to peace building.

Sectarianism is prevalent throughout Northern Irish society, perpetuated through beliefs, attitudes and behaviours passed down from generation to generation, playing a major role in creating mistrust, dividing communities and providing the platform for violence.

The *'Women's Words'* highlighted in this report point out that the responsibility for tackling sectarianism lies with everyone in order to challenge negative perceptions and the sectarian attitudes and beliefs that continue to divide communities and impede a shared space and place.

It is evident from this report that a considerable body of work needs to be carried out to raise awareness of and take further steps to tackle sectarianism.

There are a number of key observations:

- There is a need to create relevant funding streams that allow the empowerment of and education of women in order to address and challenge sectarianism as well as embracing other cultures, religions and beliefs.
- Specific programmes should be resourced to support young people to learn about other cultures, religions and beliefs which complement the current work carried out in schools and in the youth sector.
- Segregated education actively promotes sectarianism. The majority of the women who participated in the dialogues suggested that integrated education must be the norm if we are to have a normal democracy.
- Negative perceptions about 'the other' should continually be challenged but this can only be achieved for example, through more resourcing of cross community work that enables focused dialogue with 'the other'. Many worthwhile and valuable community peace building projects have disappeared at the end of their funding streams. Government Agencies and the European Union need to review their funding strategies to include continuation of resources to the relevant projects.
- Women are under-represented in all aspects of the political arena, from community level to public office. Women need to be empowered to fulfil their potential in their communities and have a platform where they can engage with politicians and decision makers to have 'women's words' concerns and issues tabled. WINI and partner organisations need to be supported in their efforts to enable this, for example, through the Women's Word Project Geographical Information Groups and through the delivery of accredited peace building training such as the LEAD (Leadership, Equality, Advocacy & Democracy) programme across Northern Ireland.
- The failure to implement the Civic Forum as part of the Good Friday Agreement has been a major loss to the entire Third Sector as a vehicle through which their issues and concerns could be channelled.

- This pilot study was aimed at women in the Greater Belfast area. The study should be widened to target women across Northern Ireland and Border Counties to enable a more inclusive and rigorous understanding of attitudes on, and suggested responses to sectarianism.

The women perceived that further work on the areas encapsulated in the observations would be a step in the right direction if we are to ensure that future generations can live in a society free from sectarianism, where there is equality and rights for all so that everyone can realise their full potential as citizens.

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