

Evaluation of the  
**All-island  
Women's  
Forum**

December 2025



An Roinn Gnóthai Eachtracha agus Trádála  
Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade





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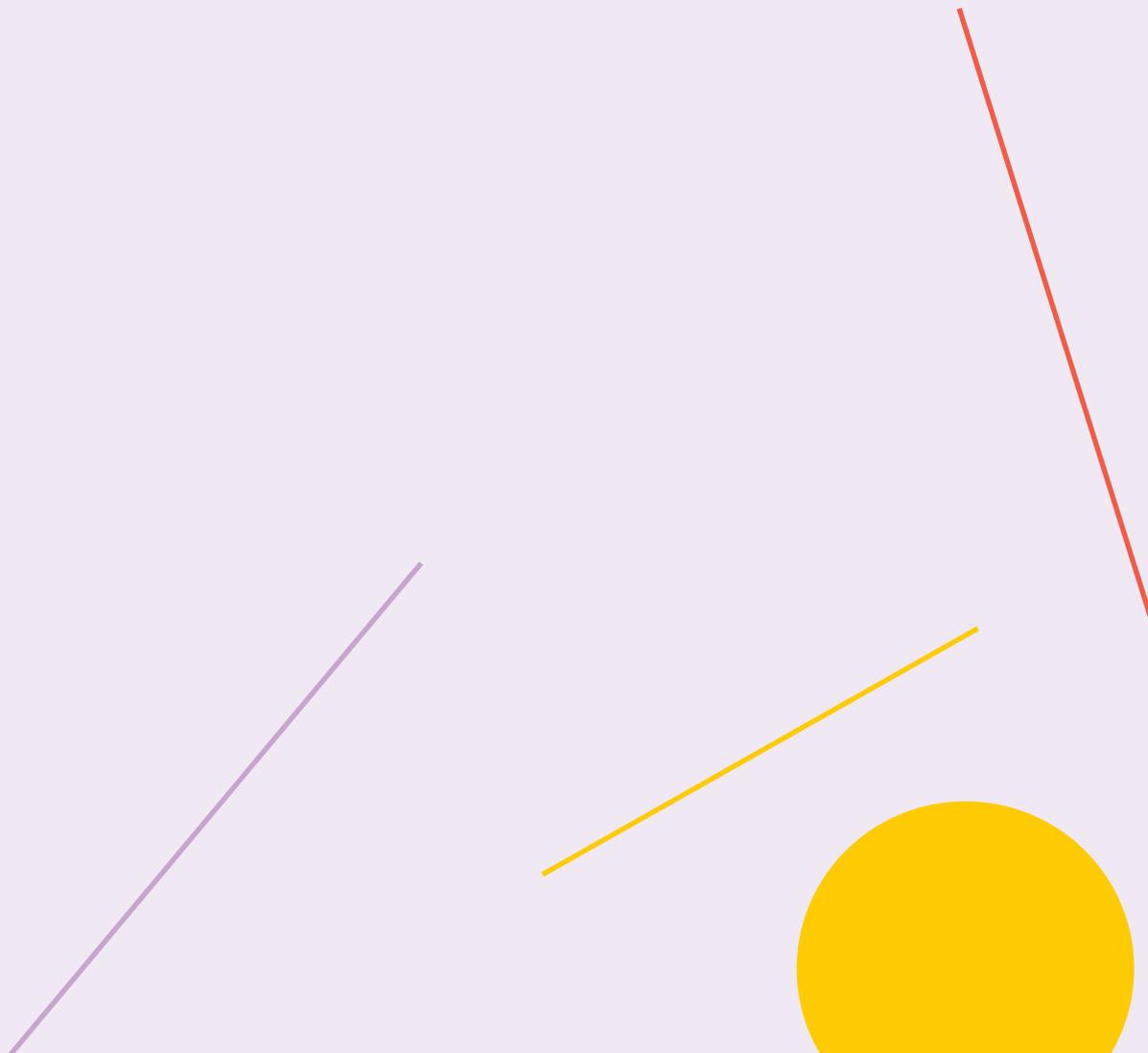
# Acknowledgements

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NWC also wishes to extend special thanks and gratitude to all of the members of the All-Island Women's Forum, who entered into this space with shared determination and ambition to foster an inclusive space for meaningful dialogue and effective change.



# 1. Executive Summary

The All-Island Women's Forum (AIWF) is a cross-border initiative established by the National Women's Council (NWC) in July 2021 to bring together women's groups and activists from both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. Its goal is to foster cooperation, dialogue and inclusion on issues affecting women across the island, especially around peacebuilding, leadership and equality. NWC appointed Avila Kilmurray and Angela Hodkinson from Social Change Initiative (SCI) to evaluate the work of the AIWF, specifically to:

- assess the relevance and effectiveness of the work of the Forum;
- consider its outcomes and impact;
- assess the practical arrangements for management and support; and
- make recommendations for the future work and operations of the Forum.

The evaluation involved reviewing materials that documented the establishment and development of the Forum; a survey and 19 one-to-one interviews with members, staff and funders; analysis of the Forum's impact and operations; and development of a series of recommendations (shaped by two focus groups with members) for consideration by the Forum membership.

## 1.1 Charting the Establishment and Development of the AIWF

The 2021-2024 Strategic Plan of the NWC (*No Woman Left Behind*) set a goal to work strategically as the national representative organisation for women in Ireland, developing partnerships for women's equality on an all-island basis (2.6). Specific measures of success were identified as:

- NWC will have facilitated cooperation and dialogue among women and women's organisations on an all-island basis through programmes of engagement, events, research and publications. (2.6.1)
- NWC will have developed all-island policy frameworks for specific areas of work: Covid impact and recovery; violence against women; healthcare; women's representation. (2.6.2)
- A feminist perspective has been included in the national all-island processes and dialogues, which incorporates NWC's policy position. (2.6.3)

Funding was secured from the Department of Foreign Affairs' Reconciliation Fund in 2021 for an All-Island Women's Forum that would aim to address the under-representation of women and further develop women's roles in peacebuilding and civil society. A staff member was appointed by NWC to co-ordinate

the Forum and 28 women's organisations / individuals – 14 from Northern Ireland and 14 from the Republic of Ireland – were engaged as members.

The Forum's evolution can be mapped in terms of 4 phases, aligned with a programme of work and (with exception of 2024) associated funding. Section 3 of this report details the design, work and outputs of the AIWF in each phase which can be summarised as follows -



## 1.2 Member views on the Effectiveness and Impact of AIWF

Overall, AIWF members were positive about its work and impact in terms of building co-operation and relationships across the island and addressing important issues impacting on women's equality. Members were convinced of the continued need for this all-island approach to women's equality. Key issues arising in member feedback are detailed in Sections 3 and 5, and summarised below:

### Focus of AIWF Priorities and Activities

The Report on the Forum's initial year contained five policy recommendations for governments, North and South, and the

Forum's future work together (e.g. on issues including North/South Relations; Women's Political Representation; Violence against Women; and Media). Although a number of these issues featured in the AIWF meetings over the next three years, there was evidence of a certain frustration amongst some long-term Forum members that the recommendations were not followed up in a consistent manner. For feminist activists working in a policy context this seemed a particular issue, with a certain sense of 'loss of opportunity' being expressed. In contrast to this, a sizeable cohort of members reflected the view that an over-emphasis on policy advocacy was in danger of alienating Forum members who were engaging in North/South contact for the first time. There was deep appreciation of the Encounter Programme supported by Ailbhe Smyth.

The Year 2 on-line connection chats between members were also felt to be useful but had time-limited impact due to lack of funding.

Looking forward there is still a clear view expressed by many of the Survey respondents and interviewees that the Forum should have a role in addressing policy issues and a recognition that if the Forum is to become increasingly involved in policy work, then it is important to have agreed procedures for reaching consensus.

It was also suggested that Forum members (and the NWC) need to be more intentional about the purpose of the Forum, with a clearer agreed *raison d'être* and an achievable plan and strategy, including delineated outcomes. There is a balance between the Forum engaging in specific advocacy and lobbying while seeking to be a broadly inclusive body, although this can be negotiated if agreed decision-making procedures are in place.

Peacebuilding as a theme of the Forum's work was raised in member engagement, with a degree of uncertainty expressed on how central this theme is to the work of the Forum. Members from Northern Ireland were inclined to question the buy-in from women in the South on issues of peacebuilding and women from the Republic expressed concern about saying 'the wrong thing'. Peacebuilding in its broadest sense would seem to be less of an issue than any focus on constitutional change and/or futures. There is still a divergence between those who feel that this issue is 'the elephant in the room' and those who see it as being needlessly divisive. It was felt that the Women's Assembly, held in 2024 had managed to offer a model for navigating potentially divisive issues.

Overall, it would seem that Forum members think that it is important to support critical thinking on a range of prioritised policy issues, drawing on the detailed expertise of clusters of members working through Working Groups. These would come back to the AIWF to discuss what can be learned in terms of progressive change, what recommendations can be taken forward through strategic advocacy and what

are the effective collaborations that might be forged on a North/South basis to take the issues forward on an all-island basis. This approach is not seen at odds with a complementary process of offering the space for women to have conversation that enhance their understanding of the context of 'the other jurisdiction'.

### Structure and Operation of the Forum

Members recognise that the periodic basis of funding for the Forum's work has made it difficult to put in place the longer-term plans they see as necessary for the full development and delivery of its work. Sporadic funding support has also contributed to the regular changes in NWC staff dedicated to AIWF support. However, members felt that the secretariat staffing who worked with the Forum were committed and often went beyond the call of duty in trying to ensure the inclusivity of the Forum and its ability to operate even during periods of reduced funding or delayed decision-making by funders.

The necessity to balance on-line meetings with in-person meetings is accepted as an effective way of maximizing participation in a cost-effective manner. However, the benefits of residential and face-to-face meetings in '*thrashing out of issues*' cannot be underestimated.

It is generally felt that regular communication has worked well though more intentional one-to-one communication is required when proactively trying to recruit women from marginalised and/or under-resourced communities. This was particularly noted in seeking to obtain greater participation from women in the South – specifically from outside of the Dublin-Belfast axis, or from the Border counties. It was recognised that lack of Southern participation at times caused frustration among women from Northern Ireland.

There was general welcome when the Forum membership was expanded from the original 28 in Phase 1 and support expressed for widening engagement and enhancing

participation among women from minoritised groups. However, thought would need to be invested in how the Forum could be structured to include greater membership and participation.

Communication within Forum meetings was specifically raised from the disability perspective, with a call for accessible and varied modes of communication during and between meetings. Various social media approaches might support inclusive approaches between Forum members, on an on-going basis to enhance relationships.

There was frequent mention of the importance of having a clear programme of activities to serve to maintain relationships and momentum, albeit a recognition that practical implementation was closely linked to resources available. Advisory Steering Groups or Business Groups could be used to allow different voices to influence programme design, help with forward planning and allow a broader range of Forum members to take ownership of the proposed programme.

### Relationship with NWC

In terms of the ideal relationship between the All-Island Women's Forum and the NWC itself, a range of options were discussed. Members tended to favour continued management of the Forum by NWC in the context of a sustained commitment by the NWC to all-island working and better incorporation of the work into the policy and leadership aspects of its programme. Providing regular briefings on AIWF work to the broader NWC membership was suggested.

### 1.3 Forum Outputs and Impact

In the context of an uncertain funding base, the work of the All-Island Women's Forum has had direct impact in –

- Providing safe space for interested women to meet on a regular basis in gatherings that are intentionally all-island, with a view to –

- i) Learning and sharing information about the circumstances for women in the two jurisdictions – North and South – as well as the impact of the Border on policymaking and delivery.
- ii) Exploring issues of diversity and identity not only between and within the two jurisdictions but also taking account of the widening intersectionality of identities.
- iii) Drawing out the commonalities of the need for policy change on specific issues such as Violence against Women and Girls, but also the representation of women and leadership in society.
- iv) Highlighting the visibility of issues of concern to women on a cross-Border basis, such as a rising cost of living and the increase in racism and the Far Right, with a view to identifying effective approaches.
- v) Proactive engagement with women from often marginalised or excluded groups and communities with an affirmative approach in the selection of AIWF membership.
- vi) Providing an opportunity for women activists to gain greater awareness of both the broader civil society sector but also of political structures and decision-making North and South.
- vii) Maintaining a focus on the ongoing issues of peacebuilding arising from the conflict in Northern Ireland, through the sharing of experiences and perspectives and allowing space to discuss potentially sensitive issues.
- viii) Keeping a focus on the importance of relationship building with a view to increasing cross-Border understanding but also as a basis for joint work on shared issues by organisations.
- ix) Maintaining the visibility of women's contribution to policymaking and the importance of women's activism,

- representation and leadership across the island, irrespective of any specific constitutional configuration.
- Facilitating a number of specific outputs where the relationship building and policy-making roles of the Forum made a contribution –
    - i) Follow-up linkages between the Ballymoney Women in Loyalism group and the Longford Women's Group, initially forged through an AIWF residential. As one of those involved suggested there was agreement that – *'Even if there is a United Ireland, we would be the people at the bottom of the Titanic!'*
    - ii) Connections between Disability Action NI and Independent Living Movement Ireland that resulted in a successful EU PEACE Plus project application.
    - iii) The All-Island Violence against Women Working Group as a collaborative initiative to foster practical cooperation and develop all-island strategies to combat intimate partner violence (IPV) and support victims and survivors.
    - iv) The design and funding of the All-Island Women's Assembly and launch of the Assembly Report in Belfast and Dublin.
    - v) The AIWF Report 2021/22, with recommendations for Governments North and South, as well as recommendations for future working together in the context of North-South relations, launched by the Taoiseach in 2023.
    - vi) Presentation to the Oireachtas Joint Committee on the Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement (2024) highlighting the need to centre the voices of women, North and South, on any future constitutional issues.
    - vii) The All-Island LGBTQIA+ Forum, involving Rainbow (NI) and LGBT Ireland, with support from Community Foundation Ireland.

- viii) The Grassroots Weaving All-Island Connections Project, involving Women's Collective Ireland, Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network and Shankill Women's Centre, Belfast.
- ix) Integration of the all-island work into the 2025-2029 Strategic Plan of the NWC – *Time to Act for Women's Rights and Equality, 2025.*

Although questions were raised, and suggestions offered, on the focus and structure of the All-Island Women's Forum, there was an overall appreciation of its contribution. None of the respondents to either the Survey or in the interviews felt that the Forum should not continue. If some frustrations were expressed it was because as one woman said – 'I love the Forum, but it could do so much more!'

## 1.4 Recommendations for the Future

The recommendations offered are put forward in recognition of the need for adequate funding to resource the work of the All-Island Women's Forum. It is clear that there is support for the initiative and that it has the potential to make a significant contribution to enhancing cooperation and connection between communities and traditions across the island of Ireland. The work of the All-Island Women's Forum needs to maintain momentum in order to achieve its objectives.

### i) Recommendations on AIWF Forward Planning:

- There was strong support for devising a 3-year Strategy for the Forum that would provide a framework for annual planning. Priorities for the plans should be recommended by a Forum Steering Group for discussion and agreement by the Forum members. The language used should be accessible and jargon free, stating achievable goals that will be reviewed on an annual basis.
- It is important that an annual programme of meetings and discussions is agreed

well in advance so that Forum members can timetable their participation. Due regard must be made for those members that have to travel a distance to in-person meetings.

#### ii) **AIWF Participation:**

- There are still concerns that the Forum should have a membership that includes women from marginalised and/or under-represented groups and communities. This has to be married with providing secretariat support for Forum members (currently through NWC staffing) and ensuring effective inclusive participation. Women specifically mentioned included ethnic minority women, Travellers, working class communities, women from a Unionist identity, Faith/religious groups, young women, disabled people and LGBTQ+ groups.
- Any expansion of Forum membership needs to take account of the capacity of the AIWF to work effectively and may require consideration of various structural approaches. These might include infrastructural organisations cascading information about the Forum to their membership; use of a wider range of communications tools; or the identification of Thematic Working Groups that could enhance and supplement the Forum's core programme. Attention might also be given to the spread of geographic representation over and above the specific north/south dimension.
- Approaches to wider participation could be piloted by the NWC with its own affiliated membership. Similarly, infrastructural organisations such as the WRDA (Women's Resource & Development Agency) and NIRWN (Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network) in the North, could consider the feasibility of a cascade approach.
- Conduct a review of membership of the Forum, and those participating in Forum

activities, on an annual basis with a view to addressing any major geographic as well as sectoral gaps. This applies to representation from both North and South, but particularly in southern counties at a distance from Dublin and to the west of the Greater Belfast region.

- The purpose of the Forum needs to be clearly defined, and this includes clarifying whether the primary purpose is to seek to convene and encourage the participation of women as representative of the broader Women's Sector or whether the Forum is essentially convened to offer a feminist perspective on issues.

#### iii) **Thematic Priorities:**

- For many Forum participants the core purpose of the Forum remains the sharing of experiences by a broad range of women living on both sides of the border and working in various sectors, rather than limiting thematic engagement to peacebuilding issues. The information on comparative rights/services/standards of living North and South has been found to be valuable. This should continue as a key thread in the work of the AIWF, with the annual Forum plans being realistic as to what should be focused on and what is achievable.
- Preference was expressed for the prioritisation of themes rather than focusing on narrower policy issues. Where a small number of priority themes are agreed in the annual plan – these should be accompanied by a statement of the rationale; aim; objective and outcomes.
- Themes relating to peacebuilding are still viewed by many Forum members as being important albeit needing to be addressed in a sensitive manner, with informed input from those with direct experience of these issues. There is also a clear indication that many Forum members are concerned about

peacebuilding and inclusion in their broadest sense – particularly in response to the more overt racism and Far Right narrative that is increasingly evident North and South.

- Thematic discussions are seen as important but what is particularly valued is the space and ability to discuss issues in a respectful manner from different perspectives.
- Where Forum members agree a major thematic priority, it has been suggested that a specific Thematic Working Group should be established to take this work forward, as modelled by the work on Countering Violence against Women and Girls. These Working Groups can allow a continuity of attention on the selected theme; report back to the overall Forum and consider targeted advocacy work. Policy briefings and recommendations to governments North and South was still seen as an important role for the Forum.

#### iv) Relationship Building:

- Based on the earlier Encounters Programme, time and space for North/South relationship building is still important. This does require an investment of time and facilitation, but it can be seen that some of the most successful spin-off cross-border arrangements have developed out of smaller group relationship building.
- The small group relationship building approach can be used to broaden the Forum participation into those geographical areas where there is currently little reach or engagement.
- Small group relationship discussions is found to be the most effective way to address potentially sensitive issues such as diverse identities, while also drawing out common issues.

#### v) Communications:

- There is a clear call for more communications between the Forum

events to maintain the momentum of both the relations and the thematic work. This could take the form of regular e-Briefs/e-zines but also can be as basic as the sharing of emails and contacts to maintain information flows and dialogue. An AIWF WhatsApp group could be revitalised for ease of communication and exchange of information to supplement email communication.

- Reference was made to the expertise of Forum members that could potentially be utilised to support the communications work required.
- Planned communication could help AIWF to become both better known externally as well as having a useful internal function of helping members to see the progress that is being made. Given the high number of competing demands on the time and attention of groups in the Women's Sector it is important that the Forum activities are seen as more than a 'talking shop'.
- Reports on the work of the Forum should be made available on a regular basis to the membership of the NWC to broaden the flow of information. Forum members that are themselves sector infrastructure organisations should also be encouraged to share information on the work of the Forum.
- In order to maximise information flows and impact it is suggested that there should be an effort to map, and make connections with, other cross-Border initiatives, particularly those that involve women. Visibility of the Forum can help contribute to a Forum narrative.

#### vi) All-Island Women's Forum Organisation and Structure:

- There was appreciation of the commitment of the NWC in supporting and maintaining the All-Island Women's Forum. However, it is important that the NWC be clear about whether the Forum is a mainstream strategic initiative or a

project based on available funding. It was further felt that continuity is important to maintain the Forum, albeit that the NWC could usefully hold strategic discussions with parallel Women's Sector organisations in Northern Ireland to clarify relationships and Forum future design and support.

- Based on previous Forum experience of having a Business Committee or Advisory Steering Group, there is still enthusiasm for adopting this approach to extend the range of women involved in planning the implementation of the agreed Forum programme of work. It is important that any such Committee/Group should have North/South representation.
- It was felt that offering a balance between in-person and on-line meetings is about right. While a number of Forum members expressed a preference for more face-to-face meetings, there is an appreciation of the cost involved as well as the time pressure on many women's organisations. The potential to hold some meetings/activities outside of standard working hours to maximise participation was also raised.

## 2. Introduction

The All-Island Women's Forum (AIWF) is a cross-border initiative established to bring together women's groups and activists from both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. Its goal is to foster cooperation, dialogue and inclusion on issues affecting women across the island, especially around peacebuilding, leadership and equality.

Originating from interest expressed by the National Women's Council (NWC) members, and reflected in the NWC's 2021-2024 Strategic Plan, the Forum was created in response to a clear demand for deeper North-South collaboration and to address the ongoing marginalisation of women from key decision-making spaces. Led by the NWC, the All-Island Women's Forum comprises 40 members, 20 members from the South and 20 members from Northern Ireland. The purpose of the Forum is to encourage greater all-island cooperation within civil society organisations and identify key areas that can be addressed on an all-island basis. The All-Island Women's Forum works to empower marginalised groups to participate in similar structures and initiatives, encourage and foster greater all-island partnerships and model the potential for greater cooperation across the island of Ireland.

With ongoing issues such as political uncertainties and the cost-of-living crisis, the AIWF underlines the critical need to include diverse women's voices in peacebuilding and reconciliation efforts across Ireland but also to address the lived issues impacting on women.

The AIWF commenced its work in July 2021, and this evaluation covers the period from that date until December 2025.

This Evaluation Report will:

- i) Chart the Development of the All-Island Women's Forum
- ii) Reflect the Views of AIWF Participants and relevant NWC staff
- iii) Draw out Issues related to the Relevance and Effectiveness of the Work of the Forum
- iv) Consider the Management and Support Arrangements for the Forum
- v) Comment on the Outcomes and Impact of the Forum; and
- vi) Offer Recommendations for the future of the forum.

# 3. Charting the Establishment and Development of the AIWF

The 2021-2024 Strategic Plan of the National Women's Council (*No Woman Left Behind*) spoke about the desire to work with both NWC members, and women throughout the island of Ireland, to bring a radical shift to the place of women in Ireland and beyond. The NWC was positioned as a movement-building organisation, rooted in its membership, working on the island of Ireland, while also being part of the international movement to protect and advance the rights of women and girls. It was recognised that the women of Ireland are a diverse group and that the NWC ought to reflect that diversity in how it operated as an organisation. As part of the stated Strategic Goal - to work strategically as the national representative organisation for women in Ireland - one action domain was to develop all-island partnerships for women's equality across the island, building an all-island approach to the NWC's work (2.6). Specific measures of success were identified as:

- NWC will have facilitated cooperation and dialogue among women and women's organisations on an all-island basis through programmes of engagement, events, research and publications. (2.6.1)

- NWC will have developed all-island policy frameworks for specific areas of work: Covid impact and recovery; violence against women; healthcare; women's representation. (2.6.2)
- A feminist perspective has been included in the national all-island processes and dialogues, which incorporates NWC's policy position. (2.6.3)

An application was made to the Department of Foreign Affairs, Reconciliation Fund in 2021, suggesting that an All-Island Women's Forum would aim to address the under-representation of women, and further develop women's roles in peacebuilding and civil society (2021 - All-Island Women's Forum Interim Funding Proposal). The NWC took receipt of two grants in 2021 - € 36,205 in June 2021 and an additional € 9,116 in November 2021. A staff member, Emma de Souza, was appointed as Leadership Coordinator.

The subsequent phases of the design and work of the All-Island Women's Forum can be summarised as follows -



### 3.1 Phase 1 of the All-Island Women's Forum

The Forum initially came together in June 2021 with the aim of providing a space for women on an all-island basis for cross-border cooperation and dialogue. The aspiration was to bring together women's groups and individuals to examine issues and areas of commonality between Northern Ireland and the South. It was envisaged that the Forum would have an expansive scope on addressing women's rights, equality and barriers across the island, recognising that the two jurisdictions operated under distinct legal frameworks.

In line with the expansive scope envisaged, 7 Objectives were listed in the AIWF Terms of Reference –

1. Provide a space for open dialogue.
2. Examine issues through a gender equality and justice lens and with awareness and attention to intersectionality, with the

purpose of improving equality for women on all-island basis.

3. Improve the representation and participation of marginalised groups with awareness and attention to intersectionality.
4. Improve North-South links.
5. Expand the role of women in peacebuilding in line with UN Security Council Resolution 1325.
6. Provide a critical analysis of women's participation in peace process structures, civil society structures and political spaces.
7. Produce a series of recommendations on how to further progress women's rights and equality on the island of Ireland.

The NWC Leadership Coordinator took the role of Chair and facilitator of the Forum, which consisted of 28 members, evenly split between North and South. In addition, it was agreed that the NWC Chairperson, Deputy

Chairperson and Director were to attend the Forum meetings. The Forum members were identified by the NWC and were asked to commit to the full 12-month cycle of meetings. In the interests of effectiveness and continuity, an Absence Policy was put in place which specified that if a member missed three meetings, they would either forgo their membership of the Forum or could nominate an alternate to take their place. Where a place was vacated, a new member could be identified.

Alongside the monthly Forum meetings (held on-line due to Covid-related restrictions), a Business Committee, consisting of 6-8 Forum members was tasked with setting the agenda for Forum meetings. This committee met monthly between the larger Forum meetings, had representation from North and South and

was also facilitated by the NWC Leadership Coordinator.

The Forum meetings commenced on 29th July 2021 and continued to be held on the last Thursday of every month, with each meeting lasting for 3 hours duration. Meetings were partially live streamed from 30th September 2021. Social Media Guidelines were established following some targeted online abuse that a number of Forum members received following their participation in the meetings.

There were 12 meetings and 3 webinars held over the period 29th July 2021 – 29th June 2022, with the February 2022 meeting being an in-person residential gathering, held in Enniskillen, Co. Fermanagh. The topics covered included:

<p><b>Women's Political Participation and Threats to Security</b></p> <p>(Discussion live streamed)</p>	<p>30th September 2021</p>	<p><b>Contributions included</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Sorcha Eastwood MLA (<i>Alliance</i>)</li> <li>- Cllr. Hazel Chu (<i>Green Party</i>)</li> <li>- Eva McDonnell (<i>Stalking Ireland</i>)</li> <li>- Elaine Crory (<i>WRDA</i>)</li> <li>- Rachel Powell (<i>WRDA</i>)</li> <li>- Salome Mbugua (<i>AkiDwa</i>)</li> <li>- Claire McGing (<i>Gender Researcher, Maynooth University</i>)</li> <li>- Naomi Long MLA (<i>Minister of Justice NI</i>)</li> <li>- Heather Humphreys TD (<i>Interim Minister for Justice</i>)</li> </ul>
<p><b>Engaging with International Mechanisms</b></p>	<p>28th October 2021</p>	<p><b>Contributions included</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Geraldine Byrne Nason (<i>DFA</i>)</li> <li>- Anastasia Crickley</li> <li>- Louise Kennedy (<i>NIWEP</i>)</li> <li>- Rhyannon Blythe (<i>NI Human Rights Commission</i>)</li> <li>- Tara Grace Connolly (<i>UN Youth Delegate</i>)</li> <li>- Diandra Ní Bhuachalla (<i>UN Youth Delegate</i>)</li> <li>- Martin O'Brien (<i>SCI</i>)</li> <li>- Mary Murphy (<i>UCC</i>)</li> </ul>

<p><b>Violence against Women – Protection under the Law &amp; Poverty as a form of State Violence</b></p>	<p>25th November 2021</p>	<p><b>Speakers included</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Daniel Holder (<i>CAJ</i>)</li> <li>– Sarah O'Malley (<i>ICCL</i>)</li> <li>– Naomi Green (<i>National Council for Racial Equality</i>)</li> <li>– Siobhan Harding (<i>Women's Poverty</i>)</li> <li>– Karen Kiernan (<i>One Family</i>)</li> <li>– Kendall Bousquet (<i>Migrant Rights NI</i>)</li> <li>– Louise Bayless (<i>Focus Ireland</i>)</li> </ul>
<p><b>Rural Women on Our Shared Island – Amplifying Women's Voices in Rural Communities</b></p>	<p>16th December 2021</p>	<p><b>Contributions included</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Michelle Maher (<i>See Her Elected</i>)</li> <li>– Paula McAliskey (<i>NIRWN</i>)</li> <li>– Cathy McKeefry (<i>Women's Collective Ireland</i>)</li> <li>– Kerrie Flood (<i>Fermanagh Women's Aid</i>)</li> <li>– Orla Mustapha (<i>Ballyhaunis Inclusion Project</i>)</li> </ul>
<p><b>More than Two Communities: Marginalised Voices</b></p>	<p>27th January 2022</p>	<p><b>Contributions included</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Leanne Abernethy (<i>Women in Loyalism</i>)</li> <li>– Mimi Unamoyo (<i>BOMOKO NI</i>)</li> <li>– Audrey Wilson (<i>Independent Living Movement</i>)</li> <li>– Paula Soraghan (<i>Independent Living Movement Ireland</i>)</li> <li>– Cara McCann (<i>HEReNI</i>)</li> </ul>
<p><b>Women's Voices in Peacebuilding – The Unfinished Work of the Peace Process</b></p>	<p>17th February 2022 <i>(In-person residential held in Enniskillen, Co. Fermanagh, (with President of Ireland, Michael D. Higgins in attendance)</i></p>	<p><b>Contributions included</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Alyson Kirkpatrick (<i>NI Human Rights Commission</i>)</li> <li>– Sinead Gibney (<i>IHREC</i>)</li> <li>– Naomi O'Connor (<i>Alliance for Choice</i>)</li> <li>– Alana Ryan (<i>NWC Health Coordinator</i>)</li> </ul>
<p><b>Post Brexit Rights</b></p>	<p>31st March 2022</p>	<p><b>Contributions included</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Una Boyd (<i>CAJ</i>)</li> <li>– Annemarie O'Kane (<i>Centre for Cross Border Studies</i>)</li> <li>– Tobias Lock (<i>Maynooth University</i>)</li> <li>– Imelda Maher (<i>University College Dublin</i>)</li> </ul>
<p><b>Women's Political Participation</b></p>	<p>28th April 2022</p>	<p><b>Contributions Included</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Aoife Clements (<i>50:50 NI</i>)</li> <li>– Alison Cowzer (<i>Women for Election</i>)</li> <li>– Eileen Chan-Hu (<i>CRAIC NI</i>)</li> <li>– Valesca Lima (<i>Dublin City University</i>)</li> </ul>

As noted above, the residential meeting, held in February 2022, was attended and addressed by President of Ireland, Michael D. Higgins, and received on-line addresses from the Minister for Foreign Affairs & Defence, Simon Coveney, T.D. and from Ambassador Melanne Verveer, Executive Director of Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security (USA). The then Minister for Foreign Affairs and Defence suggested *“This is a very significant initiative that is bringing together a truly diverse and talented group of women from North and South. It provides a space for you to pool your huge experience and expertise, give voice to issues of common concern and build connections and relationships that can make a meaningful contribution to peacebuilding on this island.”*

The topics of the 3 public webinars were:

- i) **Women as Changemakers – International Women’s Day (1st March 2022)**  
*Speakers included:* Vicenza Cirefice (Artist), Linda Ervine (Language Activist), Monica McWilliams (NIWC) and Lydia Gratis (Anti-Racism & Deaf Advocate).
- ii) **The Impact of Covid 19 (16th November 2021)**  
*Speakers included:* Aoife Moore (Journalist), Sarah Mason (NI Women’s Aid), Linda Kelly (Women Ascend), Rachel Powell (WRDA) and Assumpta Kelly (Women’s Collective, Leitrim).
- iii) **Women’s Hour – Stories on Identity across our Shared Island (14th July 2022)**  
*Speakers included:* Nandi Jola (Poet), Claire Mitchell (Author), Doire Finn, Ola Majekodunmi (Broadcaster), Lydia Gratis, Bronagh Hinds (NIWC), Colette O’Regan (LGBT Ireland) and Jennifer Okeke (Immigration Council of Ireland).

An additional webinar was organised to mark Good Relations Week 2021. There was ISL support for all the livestream meetings and webinars to ensure inclusion.

As can be seen the thematic meetings and webinars drew in contributions from many women experts outside of the Forum members,

speaking to the specific selected topic. The broad range of speakers and contributors ensured an intersectoral and intersectional exchange of information and opinions, as well as reflecting the North/South dimension. By necessity, a hybrid approach of on-line and in-person meetings was adopted as well as a combination of private and public sessions, allowing both internal Forum membership reflection as well as outreach through broader engagement.

### **Drawing Out Policy Recommendations**

In a report on Phase 1 of the work of the Forum, it was suggested that there was the potential to inform decision-makers on how to better include women’s voices in policymaking. Recommendations were framed both for the Governments, North and South, as well as to inform the Forum’s future priorities. The recommendations addressed externally included –

- The need for both governments to make a joint commitment to developing an All-Island approach to ending gender-based violence.
- The re-formation of the Civic Forum in Northern Ireland in addition to the establishment of All-Island Citizens’ Fora on issues such as Climate and Biodiversity; Gender Based Violence; Rural Issues; and Integrated Education/Educate Together models.
- The incentivisation of North-South exchanges through educational initiatives and free movement.
- An All-Island media partnership with investment by State broadcasters that would increase women’s voices on a range of issues.
- Gender quotas at candidate selection in local authority elections North and South, as well as in candidate selection for the Northern Ireland Assembly.

The recommendations put forward for internal Forum attention focused on four primary areas – (i) North-South relations (including work on an All-Island Charter of Rights and All-Island Civic Engagement); (ii) Women's Political Participation and Representation (including active citizenship in education and the lowering of the voting age to 16); (iii) Countering Violence against Women (to provide equivalent rights and access to services); and (iv) Media (with the AIWF being a source of diverse women's voices).

The Report was launched in September 2022 by the Taoiseach, Micheál Martin. In his address he commended the work of the AIWF, noting the value of creating space for contact, dialogue and understanding. He specifically referenced the comment by Northern Ireland Forum member, Jane Morrice, that the Forum was the first ever regular encounter that she had with women from the South. Speaking about the Irish Government's focus on open and inclusive dialogue, he noted that women's voices, experience and interests have remained underrepresented, and women's contributions under-acknowledged and insufficiently harnessed. This, he pointed out, highlighted the importance of deepening civic relations on a cross-border basis as being vital for a reconciled future across the island.

### **The Encounter Programme**

The Director of the NWC, Orla O'Connor, reflected in retrospect that there was always a balance between considering high-level issues, such as occurred at the Fermanagh gathering in February 2022, and placing an emphasis on the building of relationships and creating space for conversations. It was the latter that was the main focus of the Encounter Programme, guided by Ailbhe Smyth, as an additional aspect of the work identified under Phase 1. Ailbhe remembers this programme as involving North-South organisational engagement on the basis of *'come together, have a chat, see where that brings you.'* The emphasis was on *'breaking*

*the ice'* on a one-to-one organisational basis, drawing out what women had in common. It worked on the premise of giving women *'time and proximity'*.

The Encounter Programme, which took place over a 12-month period, identified organisations in Northern Ireland and the South, that were seen as potentially sharing areas of common interest. The understanding was that these paired conversations would build better understanding, encourage increased cooperation and cross-Border work, as well as hopefully, resulting in greater collaboration between women's organisations on the island. It was felt that the monthly AIWF meetings could not offer the opportunity for one-to-one in-depth conversations given the focus on information sharing and policy issues. It was accepted that the programme approach would require considerable outreach to potential participants as well as facilitation of the initial dialogues. It was further found that the planning stage was crucial to ensure that the necessary trust was built and to provide reassurance to participants about both time commitments and programme purpose. Participants were reassured that the format would be informal in style, featuring facilitated conversations rather than formal presentations. This proved to be a welcome approach.

The Encounter Programme provided the following connections:

Participants	Shared Focus
Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network & Women's Collective Ireland	Rural women
Rainbow Project NI & LGBT Ireland	Advocacy within the LGBTQIA communities
Corrymeela Community & Glencree Centre for Peace & Reconciliation	Participation of marginalised groups and trauma informed practice
Horn of Africa People's Aid NI and Akina Dada wa Africa (AkiDwa)	Migrant women and capacity building
Women for Election & 50:50 NI	Women's political participation
Northern Ireland Women's Aid Federation & Women's Aid Ireland	Professional and organisational response to women and children experiencing sexual violence
HEReNI & LGBT Ireland	Lesbian and bisexual women
Women's Collective Monaghan, Women's Collective Ireland, North Leitrim & Herstory – Women in Loyalism	Shared cross-Border experiences
Women's Collective Ronanstown, Shankill Women's Centre & Falls Women's Centre NI	Community education and development
Disability Action NI & Independent Living Movement Ireland	Women with disabilities

It was noted that groups involved in four of the ten Encounters had had no previous contact with each other before the programme. The groups in the other six encounters did report some previous professional contact but were keen to re-invigorate that as in many cases previous connections had been lost. It was concluded that there was an appetite among the participating organisations to balance the AIWF Zoom meetings with the less structured conversations offered by the Encounters Programme. These allowed the time and space for enhanced understanding, with connections often transformed into working relationships. At least one grouping (Women's Collective Ireland, Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network and Shankill Women's Centre) was able to build on the connections made to submit a successful independent application to the DFA Fund for Reconciliation.

The fact that the Encounter Programme ran in tandem with the All-Island Women's Forum programme allowed for a cross-fertilisation of contact and communication which provided complementary approaches with the facility to address the varying confidence levels and needs/interests of participating groups.

In a report to the funder on Phase 1 of the All-Island Women's Forum, it was concluded that the NWC saw the programme of work as a long-term strategic piece of work. Challenges were identified – *'At times there can be nervousness to engaging, particularly around issues that have become politicized, such as post-Brexit rights'* – but this underlined the even greater need to build trust and confidence on a North-South basis. It was felt that there was a need for consistent support to ensure the involvement of often over-stretched groups, but if this could be

achieved, then the work of the Forum could help to inform decision-makers as to how to better include women's voices at decision-making tables.

### 3.2 Phase 2 of the All-Island Women's Forum

Phase 2 (2023) of the All-Island Women's Forum was funded by the Department of Foreign Affairs, under the Shared Island initiative with two grants (€ 55,000) and (€ 37,790). A review of the operation of the programme led to both programmatic changes and some internal restructuring of the management and facilitation role of the NWC. The position of Leadership Coordinator was changed to Leadership Officer (Ciara McHugh), who together with Jane Finn (NWC Policy Administrator) oversaw the work of the Forum under the management of Rachel Coyle, Head

of Campaigns & Mobilisation. The Terms of Reference of the Forum were also revised, allowing for greater flexibility to both support diverse participation and to take account of demands on members' time commitment. A reinforced community development approach emphasised the importance of women's engagement at a grassroots level and the membership of the Forum was increased from 28 women to 40 members, again with equal numbers drawn from South and North. Limitations on the number of invited members was always found to be frustrating. As one of the staff recalled 'There are so many women with something to contribute.'

The Table opposite notes the increase in Forum membership between Phase 1 and the subsequent phases, with considerable continuation of participation reflected. In a small number of cases organisations replaced their representative.

Phase 1		Subsequent Phases*	
<b>North</b>			
Danielle Roberts	HEReNI (NI)	Sophie Nelson	
Jane Morrice	Integrated Education Fund (NI)	Jane Morrice	
Kendall Bousquet	Migrant Centre NI	Paulina Zalewska	Migrant Centre NI
Kimberly Robertson	East Belfast GAA (NI)	Kimberly Robertson	
Eileen Weir	Community Activist (NI)	Eileen Weir	
Annmarie O'Kane	Centre for Cross Border Studies (NI)	Megan McDermott – currently Lisa Cartmill	Centre for Cross Border Studies (NI)
Alexandra Brennan	NI Women's Budget Group	Alexandra Brennan	
Elaine Crory	Women's Resource & Development Agency (NI)	Elaine Crory	
Paula McAliskey	Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network	Paula McAliskey	
Tara Grace Connolly	UN Youth Delegate NI	Tara Grace Connolly	
Avila Kilmurray	Social Change Initiative (NI)	Avila Kilmurray	
Joanna McMinn	Community Education & Feminist Activist (NI)	Joanna McMinn	
Eileen Chun Hu	CRAIC (NI)	Eileen Chun Hu	

Phase 1		Subsequent Phases*	
Nicole Parkinson-Kelly	Northern Ireland Youth Forum	Nicola Parkinson-Kelly	
Jonna Monaghan	Northern Ireland Women's Platform	Dervilia Kernaghan	Northern Ireland Women's Platform
		Aoife Clements	50:50 Northern Ireland
		Tracy McArdle	Centre for Cross Border Studies (NI) - currently in Youth Work Ireland
		Emma de Souza	Civic Initiative (NI)
		Nuala Toman	Disability Action (NI)
		Sarah Mason	Northern Ireland Women's Aid Federation
		Eilish Rooney	Community Education (NI)

South			
Margaret Martin	NWC Representative (Chairperson)	Margaret Martin	Violence against Women (Ireland)
Louise Lovett	NWC & Longford Women's Lin	Kathleen Connolly – currently Kathleen Dowd	Longford Women's Link
Tara Farrell	AONTAS (Chairperson)		
Miriam Holt	Women's Collective Ireland	Miriam Holt	
Lydia Gratis	Deaf Youth (Ireland)	Lydia Gratis	
Ethel Buckley	ICTU (Ireland)	Ethel Buckley	
Síona Cahill	LGBTI (Ireland)	Síona Cahill	Women in Media (Ireland)
Jennifer Okeke	Immigrant Council of Ireland	Jennifer Okeke	NWC - Chairperson
Aoife Price	Disabled Women Ireland	Aoife Price	
Mary Moynihan	Smashing Times (Ireland)	Mary Moynihan	
Mary C. Murphy	University College Cork	Mary Murphy	
Amina Moustafa	Glenree Centre (Ireland)	Amina Moustafa	
Clare Austick	Union of Students of Ireland		
Salome Mbugua	AkiDwA, Ireland	Salome Mbugua	
Collette O'Regan	LGBT Ireland	Collette O'Regan	
Ailbhe Smyth	Facilitator & Feminist	Ailbhe Smyth	
		Áine Early	Shared Island Unit

Phase 1		Subsequent Phases*	
		<b>Belinda Nugent</b>	Community Development North-East Inner City Dublin
		<b>Rachel Doyle</b>	Community Work Ireland
		<b>Ann Friel</b>	Donegal Traveller Rights
		<b>Adele O'Connor</b>	Coolock Community Development (Ireland)
		<b>Michelle Maher</b>	See Her Elected
		<b>Denise Charlton</b>	Community Foundation Ireland
		<b>Noirin Coglein</b>	Louth Local Development
		<b>Rachel Coyle</b>	Feminist and trade union organiser

### Continuing the Work Post-COVID

The period throughout 2023 combined emergence from the Covid-19 period with marking the 25th anniversary of the Belfast/ Good Friday Agreement. A report on the work of the Forum noted the transition from the initial phase as now focusing on expanding conversation and, in addition to bringing in new members, developing deeper cooperation and dialogue on an all-island basis. This involved adopting a community development approach to the work as well as facilitating greater collaborative analysis and engagement with key priority areas of interest identified, while continuing to build relationships on an all-island basis.

In practice the structure of the Forum meetings was delivered on a hybrid basis, with quarterly in-person plenary meetings alongside on-line meetings – the latter being reduced in frequency. Drawing on the Phase 1 Report, two Working Groups were set up to examine (i) increasing women's representation in decision-making; and (ii) supporting North/South relations that would deliver solidarity by taking action on issues that specifically impact women. The intention was to move from *'thinking'*, *'exploring'* to *'doing'* and *'problem-solving'* (All-Island Women's Forum Report, 2023).

Both Working Groups agreed Terms of Reference. The Working Group on Representation reflected a number of the specific recommendations from the 2022 Forum Policy Report, as well as agreeing to examine the development of an all-island approach to increasing women's representation in peacebuilding and reconciliation alongside political and civic life. The Working Group on North/South Relations prioritised working with other All-Island organisations to develop the practicalities of this work. This was to be achieved by developing a programme of work to explore areas of commonality and potential solidarity around shared issues, such as the cost-of-living crisis. Reference was also made to identifying opportunities for incorporating an East-West dimension. A set of rules and responsibilities was set out to guide the contribution of both Working Groups.

In order to help frame and focus the work of Phase 2 of the AIWF, a session was held early in 2023 with Professor John Doyle (Dublin City University & ARINS Initiative) who presented an overview on gender pay gaps, childcare and maternity leave, welfare benefits and poverty rates, reproductive rights, LGBTQ+ rights, political representation, health & social care provision and violence against

women, both North and South. Doyle, Kapic & Connolly later published research findings in *International Studies in International Affairs*, Vol. 34/2 (pp. 330-358), November 2023. This concluded that the situation had changed dramatically since the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement in 1998, but despite this, there were still very low levels of knowledge about policy on gender equality in the 'other' jurisdiction; a lack of cross-border knowledge that was similar North and South. The point was further made when considering the gender equality policy gap that had existed between North and South, this had not only closed, but in almost every policy area had seen a reversal, with women's rights being more advanced in the Republic due to liberalising changes since

the 1990s. The area where Northern Ireland performed more strongly, compared to the South, was in women's representation in the Northern Ireland Assembly. At the time of the research, women made up 35.5% of elected Assembly representation in the Northern Ireland, as compared to 22.5% in Dáil Éireann. Consequently, the emphasis within the AIWF programme on women's representation was felt to be timely.

The plenary sessions organised in 2023 took place in Belfast, Monaghan, Newry and Dundalk, with the final one being residential. This was described as offering 'energizing space'. The sessions addressed the following topics:

Date	Venue	Topic	Speakers
24th January 2023	St. Comgalls, Belfast	Consideration of Priority Issues	Agreed on the 2 Working Groups and to revisit Violence against Women as an issue
25th April 2023	Four Seasons Hotel, Monaghan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- LGBTQ+ Discussion</li> <li>- NI Civic Initiative</li> <li>- Austerity Reduction in Community Development Funding</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Collette O'Regan</li> <li>- Emma De Souza</li> </ul>
5th July 2023	Southern Regional College, Newry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Celebrating the Good Friday Agreement: Making Space for Diversity</li> <li>- Presentation on the Cost of Living Crisis</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Eileen Chun Hu (CRAIC NI)</li> <li>- Caroline Munyi (AkiDwa)</li> <li>- Eileen Weir (Belfast)</li> <li>- Eilish Rooney (UU Transitional Justice Institute)</li> <li>- Nicola Parkinson-Kelly (NI Youth)</li> <li>- Elaine Crory (WRDA)</li> </ul>
1st & 2nd November 2023	Dundalk	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Violence against Women and Girls</li> <li>- Creative Connections in Action</li> <li>- Storytelling: Solidarity through the Years</li> <li>- The Future of All-Island Work</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Mary Moynihan (Smashing Times)</li> <li>- Donal Swan (NWC)</li> <li>- Alex Brennan (NI Women's Budget Group)</li> <li>- Joanna McMinn</li> <li>- Ailbhe Smyth</li> <li>- Miriam Holt (Women's Collective Ireland)</li> <li>- Emma De Souza</li> <li>- Rachel Doyle (Community Work Ireland)</li> <li>- Nicola Parkinson-Kelly (NI Youth Forum)</li> </ul>

In addition to the internal Forum discussions, it was found that there was increased media interest in proceedings. This was helped by the organisation of a number of public events that were live streamed:

- Celebrating the Spirit of the Good Friday Agreement: Making Space for Diversity – which drew on the July 2023 meeting, with invitations being sent to a range of political representatives.
- Power, Politics, Participation: Working for Women's Representation and Democracy – with speakers Jeromine Andolfatto, European Women's Lobby; Katie Deegan, Women for Election & Aoife Clements, 50:50 Northern Ireland, which attracted some 100 participants and drew on the Working Group on Women's Representation.

Another development was the decision taken by Forum members to engage in correspondence with relevant statutory and government authorities following the April and July meetings. The detrimental impact of reductions in funding for community development was drawn to the attention of the Northern Ireland Secretary of State and the Irish Minister for Rural & Community Development. It was also agreed to present the AIWF findings to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on the Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement. This occurred a year later, on October 10th, 2024, when NWC Director, Orla O'Connor and Head of Campaigns & Mobilisation, Rachel Coyle presented findings to the Committee on *'Women and Constitutional Change'*. It was pointed out that while neither the NWC nor the Forum had a position on the future constitutional status of the island, an agreed perspective was that any constitutional change should be rooted in feminist principles of democracy, subsidiarity and the full inclusion of women's voices in shaping a shared future based on the diversity of their lived experiences and intersectional perspectives. The following month (5th November 2024) the Oireachtas

Committee published a report on Women and Constitutional Change, which included the following recommendations:

- i) That the Government provide planned, focussed and targeted resourcing for groups working with women on constitutional change;
- ii) There should be a review of the organisation of Citizens' Assemblies to date to identify and dismantle any barriers preventing the full participation of women and underrepresented groups; and
- iii) Calling for the full implementation of the Good Friday Agreement, in all its parts, with specific mention of the implementation of a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland.

The absence of a functioning Executive in Northern Ireland, over a number of years, was a barrier to similar advocacy in Northern Ireland.

It was agreed at the Forum meeting in Newry that the Forum members needed greater opportunities to get to know each other better outside the formal proceedings. Responding to this, a programme of Connection Chats was established over the Summer/Autumn 2023 period. This proved popular. NWC staff noted an *'overwhelmingly positive'* response that *'has created lasting bonds with some members committing to starting new programmes together'*. (All-Island Women's Forum Report 2023).

A combination of these closer relationships (the objective of one of the two Working Groups) and the adoption of the participative democracy model of the AIWF, contributed to three specific initiatives:

- An All-Island LGBTQIA+ Forum, involving Rainbow (NI) and LGBT Ireland, with support from the Community Foundation Ireland.
- The Grassroots Weaving All-Island Connections Project, involving Women's Collective Ireland, Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network and Shankill Women's Centre.

- The NWC and Northern Ireland Women's Aid Federation Violence against Women Project that was supported by the Civil Society Fund, under the Shared Island programme of work.

One of the important learning points recorded from the 2023 work of the Forum was the importance of ensuring that new Forum members had the opportunity to build sustainable relationships. With the benefit of hindsight, it was recognised that the Connection Chats initiative could have been usefully introduced earlier in the year.

### **Priority on Tackling Violence against Women and Girls**

The specific priority issue of Tackling Violence against Women and Girls resulted in a funding application for Practical North-South Cooperation to Tackle Violence against Women from a Civil Society Perspective. This focus was seen as assisting in expanding the work of the AIWF into wider civic society, maximising inclusion and cooperation across communities and across the Border. It had three inter-related components: (i) An All-Island Violence against Women Strategy Group, that included Women's Aid Ireland, Safe Ireland, Northern Ireland Women's Aid Federation and groups working in Border communities; (ii) The overnight residential for the All-Ireland Women's Forum that was held in Termonfeckin, Dundalk in November 2023; and (iii) The Good Friday Agreement 25th Anniversary event to be held in Belfast looking at the impact on women's rights specifically relating to violence against women during the conflict. The work was framed in the context of the ratification by the UK and Ireland of the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and the 3rd National Strategy for Domestic, Sexual and Gender-Based Violence, Ireland.

### **3.3 Phase 3 of the All-Island Women's Forum – 2024**

Phase 3 of the AIWF saw the emphasis being placed on maintaining the commitment of the NWC to what was seen as a vital strategic initiative as well as supporting a continuation of the connections made. There were significant challenges experienced given the inability of the NWC to secure funding to sustain the operation of the Forum at the desired level without breaks in the continuity of the work. In May 2024, a new Leadership Officer, Liliana Fernandez, took up her post, with a priority being to maintain the momentum of the Forum. The Forum persisted in its programme of meetings, albeit in a more constrained capacity. It continued to reaffirm the value of all-island cooperation in advancing gender equality.

It met twice from September 2024 to November 2024 on-line. In addition, NWC secured funding from the St. Stephen's Green Trust to hold a 2-day Women's Assembly in November 2024, that was hosted by the Irish Human Rights & Equality Commission and the Law Society Northern Ireland. While this was a separate initiative, it saw some overlap in membership with the All-Island Women's Forum as well as in many of the issues under discussion. A further link was the organising role of NWC staff member Rachel Coyle.

Within the remit of the Forum, work also continued on the priority issue of North-South Cooperation to Tackle Violence against Women. A series of both in-person and on-line meetings took place over the period November 2023 to July 2024. A Dialogue Report was published in November 2024. The meetings analysed the epidemic of violence both North and South. They also discussed the role of the Border in affecting the availability and accessibility of support available for survivors of violence, while highlighting the vital role that civil society organisations play in both jurisdictions in this area of work. Organisations involved in the dialogue included the Northern Ireland Women's Aid Federation as

well as Women's Aid in Ballymena/Antrim/Carrickfergus/Larne/Newtownabbey; Women's Aid Armagh & Down; Women's Aid Belfast & Lisburn; Women's Aid Causeway & Mid Ulster; Women's Aid Fermanagh; Women's Aid Foyle; Women's Aid Omagh; and Women's Aid North Down & Ards. From the South there was Women's Aid Ireland; AkiDwA; Aoibhness; Donegal Travellers Project; Pavee Point; Tearmann Domestic Abuse (Safe Ireland Cavan & Monaghan); SiSi (Survivors Informing Services & Institutions); Domestic Violence Advocacy Service, Sligo/Leitrim/West Cavan and NWC. In all, participation from some 18 organisations over the nine-month programme.

With a focus on highlighting issues related to IPV (intimate partner violence) and keeping them on the political agenda in both the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, a number of specific themes were prioritised in the cross-Border discussions – Access to Emergency and Long-term Accommodation; Access to Supports; and Access to Justice across the island for victims-survivors. It was agreed that *'the complexities of cross-border movement for victims-survivors of intimate partner violence have only deepened since Brexit, creating new and significant barriers to safety and justice.'* (North-South Cooperation to Tackle Violence against Women: Dialogue Report, November 2024, p. 21). Seven specific recommendations were put forward in addition to the call for a comprehensive, all-island response to violence against women and girls. Included in the demands was the overall call to ensure that victims-survivors have the support they need, whenever and wherever they seek it. The report received considerable media coverage.

The two on-line meetings of the All-Island Women's Forum, which took place in 2024, were held on: (i) 3rd September 2024 (Building All-island Connections and an Update on the Future of AIWF); and (ii) 19th November 2024 (Countering the rise of the Far Right and the Anti-Women's Rights Agenda across the island). The November meeting heard insights from the Hope and Courage Collective (Ireland) on

the challenges being increasingly presented by the Far Right and was also used to take stock of the AIWF work to date and agree priorities for the future.

### All-Island Women's Assembly

Although the Women's Assembly was a distinct initiative from the AIWF, it drew heavily on learning from the latter, being North/South in composition and structured to create a safe, inclusive and deliberative space for women to engage in meaningful dialogue about constitutional change. In line with the position taken by the Forum, it was accepted that any constitutional debate would not follow a direct, linear path, but would be a layered and complex process shaped by competing issues and realities. The one accepted core principle was that women must be central to these discussions and not included as an after-thought. For this to happen, safe women's spaces are essential. Furthermore, like the Forum, the Women's Assembly recognised that constitutional change must be understood as going beyond legal, political and economic structures, to include diverse lived experiences and the rebalancing of power for the better.

Funded under the St. Stephen's Green Trust Participative Democracy programme, the Assembly was held on two separate days, chaired by the previous President of Ireland, Mary McAleese. A list of 54 Assembly member participants included in the Report (*The Women's Assembly: A Feminist Shared Future*) launched in March 2025, named 8 women from Northern Ireland who were active AIWF members and 3 from the South (excluding NWC staff). Day 1 of the Assembly was themed as *Connect, Reflect, Empower* – hearing from John Doyle's research (ARINS) as well as from Panel members, Ailbhe Smyth (AIWF member); Andrée Murphy (Relatives for Justice); Catherine Cooke (Foyle Women's Information Group) and Sophie Nelson (HERE NI and AIWF member). A key takeaway was, yet again, the widespread lack of awareness among women about the lived realities of their counterparts in the other jurisdiction

and the urgent need to bridge the gap. Day 2 was themed as *Imagining a Feminist Future*. Dr. Sinéad Kennedy (Maynooth University) spoke about the need for transformative change rather than simply incorporating women and minorities into existing structures. Mark Garret, Director-General of the Law Society of Ireland highlighted the importance of coalition building and pragmatic activism and Revd. Maria Jansson, former Dean of Waterford, offered insights from the perspective of religious leadership and power. This was followed by Workshops addressing feminist economic frameworks and accounting for care work and climate justice, alongside storytelling exercises to foster a deeper understanding of intersectional struggles. The issue of cultural diversity and identity fuelled discussion on the importance of tolerance, respect, inclusion and recognition in any future Ireland and new research on *The Women's Charter for Inclusive Constitutional Futures*, was presented by Professor Fidelma Ashe.

The key findings from the Women's Assembly complemented many of the issues that had informed the All-Island Women's Forum discussions over previous years. These were presented as:

- i) **Beyond Borders: Advancing Feminist Constitutional Conversations** -looking towards transformative change and inclusive dialogue that prioritises shared values, fundamental rights and collective well-being over political binaries. It was considered that *The Women's Charter for Inclusive Constitutional Futures* provided a framework to embed feminist principles in constitutional processes.
- ii) **Structural Barriers that keep Women Marginalised from Constitutional Conversations** – the need to identify and address such barriers particularly as they impact on the participation of marginalised groups such as lone parents, Traveller and Roma women, women with disabilities, migrant women and working-class women.
- iii) **Reconciliation is incomplete without Women's Voices** – women's lived experiences of conflict, division, oppression and post-conflict recovery remains largely overlooked. One of the most striking themes reflected in the Women's Assembly was the deep disconnect between women in Northern Ireland and women in the South regarding their understanding of the continuing impact of the conflict. Equally, the role of churches and religious institutions was felt to have left a lasting legacy North and South.
- iv) **Recognising and Celebrating Women's Multiple Identities across Our Island** – there needs to be space to recognise and celebrate the island's diverse identities. A key question discussed was how British identity would be recognised and protected, but equally the two reductive indicators of nationalism and unionist fail to acknowledge the complexities of multi-faceted identities.
- v) **Ending Violence against Women must be a priority** – the Assembly recognised that this is not an individual problem, but a systematic issue reinforced by legal, political and economic structures that continue to fail women.
- vi) **A Feminist Shared Island needs an Economy that Works for All** – a feminist economy is about fundamentally redefining what is valued. This entails a shift away from economic policies that primarily serve the market, and the so-called 1%, towards models that prioritise the 99%, equality, sustainability and collective care.
- vii) **Women Leading the Way: The Frameworks Exist, Now It's Time for Action** – Women's agency and activism must be maximized. Reference was made to the All-Island Women's Forum, the Belfast Women's Assembly, and various grassroots feminist movements that are already discussing governance, justice and equality, as well as challenging the traditional male-dominated structures of political debates.

In March and April 2025, The Women's Assembly: A Feminist Shared Future Report was launched in both Belfast City Hall, at a meeting chaired by the Lord Mayor of Belfast, and in the Lord Mayor's Chamber in Dublin. Nuala Toman, from Disability Action NI, and member of the AIWF told the gathering *'What stood out most for me during the Women's Assembly was the raw honesty in that room -the way women spoke not just from policy papers, but from experience, resilience and hope.'* Another Northern participant in the Assembly, Leanne Abernethy from Women in Loyalism, recalled that she found the experience 'really respectful', with 'eye-opening speakers'. Speaking about the recommendations on identity and diversity, she concluded *'We are who we are. You are who you are. Let's talk about the issues... What's the point of going to something where you agree with everything that's being said?'*

The experience of the Women's Assembly meetings and deliberations underlined the importance of continuing investment in the work of the All-Island Women's Forum.

### 3.4 Phase 4 of the All-Island Women's Forum – 2025

Phase 4 of the All-Island Women's Forum was rolled out over the backdrop of *'Time to Act for Women's Rights and Equality'*, the National Women's Council Strategic Plan, 2025-2029. An introductory statement by NWC Chairperson, Jennifer Okeke (a participant in the AIWF), stated that the NWC is *'the leading representative organisation working for women's rights and equality across the island of Ireland... to deliver our purpose – to achieve women's rights and equality.'* It was noted that since 2020, the NWC has played a pivotal role in enhancing cross-Border collaboration amongst women's organisations as well as promoting women's representation in public life, in peacebuilding and in civic society. A commitment was made that the all-island work that NWC has been engaged would continue, creating further opportunities *'to enhance relationships across the island of Ireland, foster reconciliation and continue in a leadership role to grow a feminist network across the island*

*of Ireland.'* (p. 10). The ambitious outcome identified was to develop a strong all-island approach, leading change in both jurisdictions, advocating for greater harmonisation of law, supports and rights for women, playing a key role in building understanding and reconciliation across the island of Ireland. (p. 24).

The funding application submitted to cover Phase 4 of the All-Ireland Women's Forum spoke to the work of two interconnected components – the operation of the Forum itself (both in-person and on-line) and the All-Island work to End Violence against Women and Girls (noted above). Funding of € 50,000 was secured from the Department of Foreign Affairs, under the Shared Island Civic Fund. The funding was to cover the cost of 3 on-line thematic meetings; one in-person conference and 2 additional on-line 'connections' meetings.

A Planning meeting for AIWF members was held in late January 2025 to identify priorities for the work programme. This was supplemented by a members' survey which returned the following:

#### Response A – What do you see as the most pressing Challenges facing Women on the Island of Ireland?

Ending violence against women and girls	90%
Limited representation of women in leadership roles	70%
Housing and accommodation insecurity	70%
The cost-of-living crisis	60%
The rise of the Far Right against women's rights	60%
Economic insecurity, e.g. gender pay/pension gap	50%
Discrimination against marginalised groups (e.g. disabled women, Traveller & Roma women, LGBTQ+ women)	50%

Lack of women's voices in peacebuilding, reconciliation and community development	50%
Inequality in healthcare access (e.g. reproductive and mental health services)	40%
The impact of climate change on women	40%
Lack of access to affordable childcare	20%

When asked whether there were specific areas or themes that the members would like the Forum to prioritise, a wide range of issues were suggested. These included continuing to raise awareness about policy and legislative differences North and South with a view to enhance effective advocacy; women's leadership in public and private life, especially for marginalised groups and the creation of a platform for members to share information on the rise and impact of Far Right groups and toxic masculinity. Other issues included abuse of older people, mental health, drug gangs, gender-based violence and economic inequalities. At least one respondent advocated for the Forum returning to the implementation of the AIWF recommendations from its Phase 1 Report (2022). It was found that the issues identified were much the same for women North and South, with some new challenges (such as the impact of the Far Right) added.

The Survey also asked for views on the operation of the Forum itself.

### Response B – In what Capacity would you like the Forum to Operate in the Future?

A network hub for women to share ideas and collaborate	90%
Strengthening cross-Border partnerships with other equality-focused organisations	80%
Hosting educational events and workshops for women's empowerment	60%
Acting as a consultative space for gender-proofing policy across the island	50%
Providing policy recommendations for governments on key issues (e.g. policy briefings)	40%
Engaging in public advocacy and awareness campaigns	30%

An on-line consultation meeting was held in March 2025 which allowed Forum members to further consider the survey and feed-back findings. Based on this, it was concluded that Forum members were deeply concerned about current and emerging threats to women's rights, democracy and peace across the island. These issues included the rise of the Far Right, persistent high levels of violence against women, and a perceived growing backlash against gender equality.

Against this backdrop, seven priority issues were identified to take forward in 2025 –

- Violence against women
- Amplifying the voice of marginalised women
- Women's political and civic representation
- Women's role in peacebuilding
- Strategic communication and combatting misinformation
- The strengthening of AIWF as a network
- Engaging with the constitutional debate shaping the future of the island

It was concluded that 'the elephant in the room' was a conversation about what it means to live on an island that was divided into two jurisdictions and the possible longer-term outworkings of the constitutional provisions of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement. Discussion and recommendations from the November 2024 Women's Assembly seemed to influence this framing of the issue which had to be balanced with awareness of potential political sensitivities. For the Forum the priority had to be on maintaining its inclusive nature.

In addition to the on-line Connections meeting held in March 2025, three other plenary sessions were agreed:

<b>21st May 2025 – Online</b>	<b>Living on a Divided Island: How the Border Shapes Women's Lives</b>
<b>3rd September 2025 – Queens University Belfast</b>	<b>Reimagining Leadership: Building Inclusive, Political Civic Spaces</b>
<b>12th November 2025 – Online</b>	<b>All-Island Feminist Strategies to confront growing Threats</b>

As in previous years, Irish Sign Language would be provided for each of the meetings as required.

The May 2025 meeting, that took place on-line, was attended by 17 Forum members (with two apologies), four NWC representatives and a representative of the Irish Shared Island Unit. It was noted that following feedback from Forum members it had been agreed to discontinue the two planned on-line Connections meetings given expressed preference for in-person meetings. Although the planned November meeting would proceed on-line, the September 2025 meeting was to be held in Belfast as an in-person gathering.

The May session was framed by an understanding that the challenge was not to debate the existence of the Border itself, but instead to reflect on how it shapes women's access to services and contact. The plenary session also focused on the emotional and

psychological toll of living on a divided island and the need to harmonise standards across the two jurisdictions, with inputs from Ursula McKenna (Women Collective Ireland, Monaghan Project Coordinator), Paulina Zalewska (Migrant Centre NI), Caitlin McIlhennon (Environmental Justice Network Ireland) and Laura O'Neill (Women's Aid). Feedback from two breakout groups highlighted the impact of Brexit on both community and specific groups, such as migrants and asylum seekers; many problems associated with social and economic issues and accessibility of services; but a feeling that there is more of a focus on peacebuilding than on the everyday issues that have direct impact on women, such as access to healthcare. A suggestion was made that there might be a role for the Forum in cataloguing/mapping the range of issues raised.

When asked about possible collaborative and supportive approaches that the Forum could take to raise awareness and advocate for change on the issues highlighted, it was felt that there was a need to draw learning from the various projects actively engaging in cross-Border work. This could sift out what priorities are being identified and reflect this on a shared portal that could host the information. Reference was made to the ARINS (Analyzing Research North and South) initiative, but it was suggested that there was need for a similar initiative at a grassroots level to act as a baseline for cross-Border advocacy. It was important that any such initiatives should stretch beyond a Dublin-Belfast axis.

The in-person Forum meeting in September took place in Queen's University Belfast, addressing the topic '*Reimagining leadership: Building inclusive, Political Civic Spaces*'. The gathering was framed as seeking to explore what truly feminist styles of leadership and governance might look like and how political and civic spaces could be reshaped to better reflect the realities of women across the island. The programme for the day included a presentation on Women's Leadership by Professor Pauline Cullen (Maynooth

University), followed by a panel discussion that was chaired by Dr. Salome Mbugua (AkiDWA). Panel members included Senator Lynn Ruane, Aoife Clements (50:50 NI), Geraldine McAteer (former Belfast City Councillor) and Joanne Sansome (Disability Activist Campaigner). In her presentation, Pauline Cullen outlined the systemic barriers and challenges that women often face in politics and leadership roles. These included pay inequalities, care responsibilities and the impact of increasing expressions of hate and racism. Among the 'key insights' that Professor Cullen later identified in a report on *'Women Who Lead'* (November 2025), conducted for the NWC, was evidence that increased representation of women's interests and voices often occur when women work together both inside, and outside, elected politics – collaborating across politics and civil society. The panellists continued the discussion by sharing feminist values and approaches, North and South, that can unite women, recognising that feminist leadership can be seen in action in politics, civil society and within local communities.

The November 2025 meeting, held on-line, addressed the theme of *All Island feminist strategies to confront growing threats*. This session topic was prioritised in response to issues raised over the course of the AIWF consultation which reflected the growing threats to democracy, women's rights and community cohesion across the island. The focus was placed on exploring successful strategies that have been

identified at local and regional levels, alongside the necessity for cross-Border alliance-building to resist the influence and impact of the Far Right, racism and anti-gender rhetoric. Speaking at the meeting, Elaine Crory (WRDA) outlined work being developed to counter Far Right narrative concerning the safety of women and girls, referring to current work on a guide designed for politicians and the media to counter the weaponisation by the Far Right of Violence against Women and Girls. This was a good example of the sharing of information on a priority theme for Forum members.

Plans are already in hand to convene an in-person conference for the All-Island Women's Forum in January 2026 to take stock of developments, challenges and opportunities as well as to engage in forward planning for the All-Island Women's Forum.

# 4. Reflections on the All-Island Women's Forum: The Substance of the Work

There have been a number of occasions that captured the reflections of AIWF participants over the earlier years of the Forum's existence.

## 2021/2022

'The Women's Forum has provided a timely space to share ambitions. Challenges and concerns about not just the future, but the lived present of women and women's groups across the island. I have met with campaigners and learned from agitators – I have been confronted with my own biases and I've been made do better and think differently as a result. You cannot underestimate the power of constructive and safe spaces for dialogue and learning. You need to keep going...'

**Síona Cahill in All-Island Women's Forum Report, 2021/2022**

'Most valuable of all, from my perspective, was the opportunity to sit with, listen to and learn from other women across this island working on issues both similar and very different to my own work. For a small place we share a lot in common, but there are real differences in how the issues we face present themselves in different contexts.'

**Elaine Croy in All-Island Women's Forum Report 2021/2022**

‘The All-Island Women’s Forum is, in fact, my first ever ‘regular’ encounter with women from the south of Ireland. This, I believe, has been a major weakness in the shared island approach to peacebuilding. Like many of my Unionist friends and colleagues, we have little or no experience of Irish culture, history and way of life, south of the Border.’

**Jane Morrice in All-Island Women’s Forum Report 2021/2022**

## 2023

‘I am happy that these spaces like the All-Island Women’s Forum are cognizant of the richness which the new Irish woman has brought to Ireland going forward, because this is not going to change now and this is the future.’

**Caroline Munyi, in All-Island Women’s Forum Report, 2023**

## 2024/2025

‘It took us out of our own space... Doors have opened to us.’

**Comment from Interview with AIWF participant from Northern Ireland, 2025**

‘The benefit is to get to know issues – similar issues North and South’.

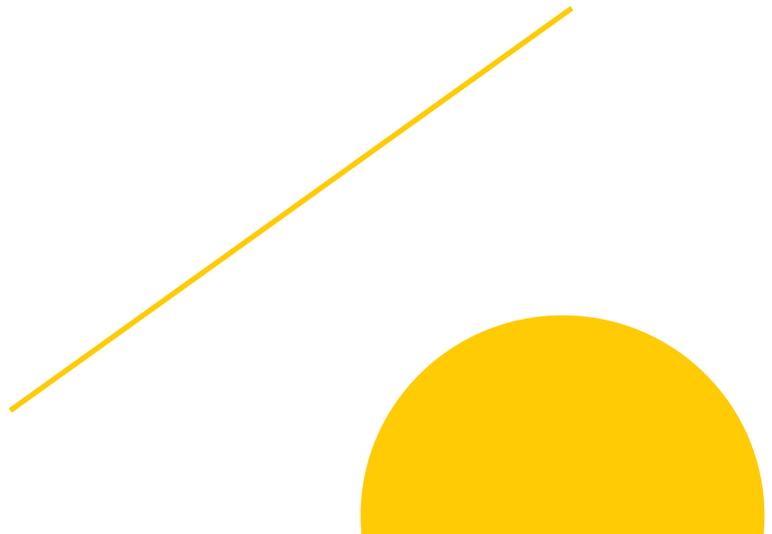
**Comment from Interview with AIWF participant from Republic of Ireland, 2025**

‘If it wasn’t for AIWF I wouldn’t be meeting the breadth of women’s organisations... [It’s o]ne of the very few spaces.’

**Comment from Southern Focus Group AIWF member, 2025**

‘Keeping up the momentum is challenging but we need to continue meeting, grow participation and set a concrete agenda.’

**Comment in Consultative Feedback, 2025**



# 5. Feedback from Members: In Evaluation of the All-Island Women's Forum – September/October 2025

In a Membership Survey of the work of the AIWF carried out in September/October 2025, 17 members completed the hard copy and online survey form. Almost 66% of these had been involved with the Forum since it was established and 50% were already NWC members before they joined the Forum. Just over half of the respondents were based in Northern Ireland. The majority of those responding to the survey were representatives of organisations, with 25% attending the Forum as interested individual activists.

Four in every five of respondents agreed that the Forum was focusing on the most important issues – although it was felt that some of these themes could be further developed. Of these the following were specifically mentioned: (i) Anti-immigration, misinformation and the impact of the Far Right; (ii) Constitutional issues; (iii) All-island economy, the Labour Market, the Pay Gap, Training and Poverty; (iv) Healthcare issues and access to Healthcare; and (v) Sport for girls, with this last being a new area of interest.

Forum members were also asked about their views on whether the current representation is appropriate. While 66% agreed that it was, others were less sure. It was suggested that

the following sectors/communities could be proactively included:

- Minority ethnic communities
  - Traveller, Roma and migrant women
- Women with disabilities
- LGBTQ+ women
- Protestant, Unionist women (North and South)
- Grassroots women's groups, both urban and rural

Perceptions on the impact of the Forum saw the biggest impact being seen as improving cooperation and dialogue on a North/South basis. Three other areas that were viewed as important were: (i) Understanding other perspectives and traditions; (ii) Engaging with policy issues across jurisdictions; and (iii) Enhancing confidence in peacebuilding. Although policy issues featured as being important there was some doubt expressed as to whether greater confidence of Forum members to take forward these issues had been developed. Doubts were also registered as to how successful the Forum had been in establishing effective cross-Border working practices.

The Survey also explored people's views of the structural operation of the AIWF. The mix of online and in-person meetings drew a varied response, with 60% satisfied with the current hybrid approach and 40% expressing a preference for more face-to-face meetings. Alongside this, 66% were happy with the current number of meetings, although 33% felt that there were not enough meetings on offer. This latter point was reinforced by reference to the perceived variability of the programme plan given the time-poor circumstances of many of the Forum members. It was pointed out that often participants had to be able to see direct relevance to their day-job if they were to justify attending Forum meetings and related events. Depending on the work circumstances of some of the Forum participants they needed to get employer permission to attend Forum meetings that took place during working hours.

There was general agreement that the availability of NWC staff and good communications had helped both the overall impact of the Forum and supported ongoing participation.

The responses to the Evaluation Survey were supplemented with one-to-one interviews carried out over the period September/October 2025 with the following:

- Forum participants from Northern Ireland – 8
- Forum participants from Republic of Ireland – 4
- NWC & AIWF Staff – 4
- Funder Representatives – 3

Comments from Survey respondents also offered additional comments and views about the work.

Feedback and reflection will be considered under: (i) The focus of the Forum priorities and activities; and (ii) The structure and operation of the AIWF.

#### i) Focus of AIWF Priorities and Activities:

From the 2021/2022 Report of the work of the All-Island Women's Forum there was an emphasis placed on *'bringing together women's groups and individuals on a cross-Border basis to examine issues and areas of commonality between both jurisdictions.'* As noted above the Report from the work of the initial year that was launched by Taoiseach Micheál Martin and attended by Rose Conway-Walsh T.D. and Emer Currie T.D., contained five policy recommendations for governments, North and South, in addition to recommendations for the Forum's future work together on North/South Relations; Women's Political Representation; Violence against Women; and Media. Several Survey and Interview respondents expressed the view that this work could have been built on in a more strategic manner, with the recommendations for the Forum future work together acting as a programme to be followed up on. This would have involved the Forum:

- Working with other All-Island organisations to develop the practicalities of all-island work.
- Expanding the work of the Forum to encompass east-west dimensions.
- Working to advance an All-Island Charter of Rights and All-Island Civic Engagement.
- Increasing women's political participation including increased participation of marginalised women.
- Work in partnership with youth organisations, in building awareness in active citizenship in education and supporting the lowering of the voting age to 16.
- Seeking to establish a pathway for equivalence of rights and the harmonisation of services, policy and legislation North and South.
- Offering access to diverse women's voices, as well as expertise to the media on gender equality, feminism, democracy, equality and human rights.

While a number of these issues continued to feature in the themes that AIWF meetings focused on over the next three years, others would have needed resourcing beyond what was available to maintain the operation of the Forum. However, there is nonetheless evidence of a certain frustration amongst some long-term Forum members that recommendations contained in the Year 1 Report were not followed up in a consistent manner. For feminist activists working in a policy context this seemed a particular issue, with a certain sense of 'loss of opportunity' being expressed.

In contrast to this there is a sizeable cohort of member opinion which reflected the view that an over-emphasis on policy advocacy was in danger of alienating Forum members who were engaging in North/South contact for the first time and were unsure of the conditions and circumstances on 'the other' side of the Border. There was deep appreciation of the Encounter Programme supported by Ailbhe Smyth, with at least one respondent describing it *'as feeling like it was a gift to us'*. The building of relationships proved important in laying the ground for the design of future cluster work designed by women in the small groups that came together. As one participant in the Encounter programme explained *'The Encounter programme with Ailbhe helped forge connections. Connecting organisations is very important'* – however it can also be time-consuming and requires facilitation to work effectively. The Year 2 on-line connection chats between members were also felt to be useful but had time-limited impact due to lack of funding. One of those involved noted *'The feeling went from something negative to "Wow, we are on to something powerful" – but then the funding dried up.'*

The changes in NWC staffing support for the Forum marked a shift from a tighter policy focused programme (albeit supplemented by the Encounter Programme) in Phase 1, to a stated 'community development' emphasis adopted with an expanded Forum membership in Phase 2. This shift was made with the intention of facilitating more in-depth and

collaborative engagement with the key priority areas; strengthening relationship building and addressing issues on an all-island basis. (2023 Report). The expansion of the Forum membership alone arguably required an investment in relationship building, and while a number of important issues were discussed on a North/South basis, the question was posed as to whether the Forum seemed to be more about organising events than addressing ongoing issues in a consistent manner. From an internal NWC position there was some uncertainty arising from the importance of seeking to balance issues that Forum members identified as being priorities to take forward collectively but being aware that – *'Not everyone agreed on these, although the impact of the cuts was felt by all. There was also some tension around whether the NWCI was getting into space where it shouldn't be.'*

Looking forward there is still a clear view expressed by many of the Survey respondents and interviewees that the Forum should have a role in addressing policy issues. A sample of comments reflect this:

- *'Providing policy recommendations to governments on key issues (eg. policy briefings). Acting as a consultative space for gender-proofing policy across the island. A networking hub for women to share ideas and collaborate... Engaging in public advocacy and awareness campaigns... (Survey responses)*
- *'Found work with the Community Development and Health Network on mental health issues, North and South, to be working well. People need to be interested in the issue. Need to bring people into something that is more than relationship building.'*
- *'The work on Domestic Violence, North and South, has been a long time in the making. It is good to build on previous work.'*

There is a recognition that if the Forum is to become increasingly involved in policy work, then it is important to have agreed procedures for reaching consensus. Such approaches were discussed at various points

during the Forum's development. It has also been suggested that Forum members (and the NWC) need to be more intentional about the purpose of the Forum, with a clearer agreed *raison d'être* and an achievable plan and strategy, including delineated outcomes. There is a balance between the Forum engaging in specific advocacy and lobbying while seeking to be a broadly inclusive body, although this can be negotiated if agreed decision-making procedures are in place.

Both the Year 1 recommendations and responses received from Forum members in 2025, spoke about developing collaborative relationships with a range of existing all-island bodies and initiatives. Youth organisations were mentioned, as were cross-Border community initiatives and organisations such as the Centre for Cross-Border Cooperation (which has a representative in membership of the Forum). On a research level, the ARINS programme of work was referenced alongside a number of other academic initiatives (such as *The Women's Charter for Inclusive Futures – 2024*). One interviewee summed up some of the feelings expressed – *'What can we do on a North/South basis that makes sense? Commonsense issues that need a North/South dimension. What are the policy issues? Who should take them on? What are the different roles? How can the Forum help things to be done collectively?'* There was considerable interest in the thematic Working Group model that has been used to progress the issue of Intimate Partner Violence against Women and Girls, with the proviso that any such thematic Working Groups should be able to report back to the overall AIWF.

## ii) Peacebuilding as a theme:

The theme of enhanced North/South understanding and peacebuilding as a horizontal theme was discussed in both the Survey and the Interviews conducted in Autumn 2025. A number of substantive points were raised, but it would also seem that there is a degree of uncertainty as to how central this theme is to the work of the Forum. If anything, the response to peacebuilding – and any

discussion of constitutional change – was more tentative in comments received from Forum participants in the Republic of Ireland. Perhaps this is to be expected as one interviewee reflected – *'Reflecting back on the Good Friday Agreement – it was a glossy publication and posted to every home in the North. In the South it was A4 printed and you had to get it from the local Post Office. There was very little discussion about what it meant.'* Whatever about history, the theme of peacebuilding – in its broadest sense - would seem to be less of an issue than any focus on constitutional change and/or futures. There is still a divergence between those who feel that this issue is 'the elephant in the room' and those who see it as being needlessly divisive. A Belfast-based Forum member made the point that at times she worried that the Forum discussions were overly politicised and she had to navigate this with report-back to her workplace where constitutional issues were generally avoided. Notwithstanding this, she found that the opportunities for one-to-one engagement did offer her space to map out peace and reconciliation work but commented – *'People need to reflect on how they interact. We have to have a broad church and make space for people to be listened to.'* One option was for the Forum to invest in effective and sensitive facilitation on such issues. It was also found that potentially divisive issues are better addressed during in-person gatherings rather than on-line.

Forum members from Northern Ireland were inclined to question the buy-in from women in the South on issues of peacebuilding. Women from the Republic expressed concern about saying 'the wrong thing' – perhaps understandably so given that a Northern Forum member admitted – *'It is very easy to create the wrong picture – lose people along the way. They (NWC) are trying very hard to be inclusive... [but i]n the North people have been through so much that their back is up before they get in the room. It is important to know what the possible triggers are.'* There was reference made to a number of specific points of tension during Forum meetings. The recommendation was that there

should be a small Steering Group to advise the NWC secretariat of possible tensions on the issues to be addressed.

On a positive note, however, the importance of intersectionality to peacebuilding was recognised in one considered comment – *‘The Forum has created a sense of genuine connection and solidarity between women from very different backgrounds, especially across race, disability and geography. It has allowed for new perspectives on identity, belonging and leadership that move beyond traditional political divides. The Forum has also helped highlight the importance of accessibility and intersectionality within peacebuilding and policy spaces, showing how women’s lived realities across the island are both diverse and deeply interconnected.’* This insight was echoed by a woman from a migrant background who, having been involved in discussions about the experience of women during the Troubles, remarked ‘I’m able to have a look at things from another perspective.’

It is recognised that the Women’s Assembly, held in 2024, was not an integral part of the Forum, but many of the Interview respondents referred to it, with some being active participants. The Forum was not directly involved in the design of the Assembly, but it was felt that the Assembly discussions had managed to offer a model for navigating potentially divisive issues. As one respondent put it – *‘The question is how to mobilise women from across the island to have conversations with not-in-your-face constitutional issues.’* Intentional outreach to women’s groups who might feel marginalised by references to ‘the North’ rather than ‘Northern Ireland’ or an ‘All-Ireland Women’s Forum’ rather than an ‘All-Island Women’s Forum’ remains important. However, any such work to be effective needs to have a long-term commitment. As this woman pointed out *‘To bring women on a journey, you can’t just leave them hanging there after they bear their soul.’*

Again, returning to the need for participants to see participation in policy terms, there was a concern expressed by at least one Forum

member that even with the launch of an impressive report from the Women’s Assembly – it is hard to see any actions emerging from it. Echoes of the frustration that some Forum members feel about policy recommendations from the Forum itself.

Overall, it would seem that Forum members think that it is important to support critical thinking on a range of prioritised policy issues, drawing on the detailed expertise of clusters of members working through Working Groups. These would come back to the AIWF to discuss what can be learned in terms of progressive change, what recommendations can be taken forward through strategic advocacy, what are the effective collaborations that might be forged on a North/South basis to take the issues forward? This approach is not seen at odds with a complementary process of offering the space for women to have conversation that enhance their understanding of the context of ‘the other jurisdiction’.

### iii) Focus on Structural and Operational Issues.

Responses to questions about the structure and operation of the Forum were framed in recognition of the fact that funding for the work has been awarded on a periodic basis, making it difficult to put the necessary longer-term plans in place for the development and delivery of the work. Sporadic funding support has also contributed to the regular staff changes dedicated to AIWF support within the NWC. Overall, members felt that the secretariat staffing who worked with the Forum were committed and often went beyond the call of duty in trying to ensure the inclusivity of the Forum and its ability to operate even during periods of reduced funding or delayed decision-making by funders. From the point of view of the funders (Department of Foreign Affairs & Trade, and the St. Stephen’s Green Trust for the Women’s Assembly) the Forum has received regular tranches of finance in circumstances where the funding programmes are regularly grossly over-subscribed.

The necessity to balance on-line meetings with in-person meetings has already been referred

to, and in general, is accepted as an effective way of maximizing participation in a cost-effective manner. While in-person meetings are appreciated, they do require travel and related costs to ensure participation. There also seems to be greater emphasis on ensuring Belfast/Dublin participation than taking account of travel issues for regions such as Waterford, Cork and Kerry in the south, or from Donegal in the north. The point was made that this is a particular problem if the aim is to get women from deprived areas and/or marginalised groups to attend Forum meetings. In addition to transport costs, there is also childcare costs, and the difficulties that women from migrant or asylum-seeking backgrounds will experience in crossing the Border. However, the benefits of residential and face-to-face meetings in *'thrashing out of issues'* cannot be over-estimated.

Alongside meetings, the issue of regular communication was mentioned. It is generally felt that this has worked well. Both NWC members of the Forum secretariat and several Forum members themselves recognised that simply sending out e-mail communication does not work. This is particularly true in cases where the Forum is proactively trying to recruit women from marginalised and/or under-resourced communities. One-to-one intentional personal communication is required. This was particularly noted in seeking to obtain greater participation from women in the South – specifically from outside of the Dublin-Belfast axis, or from the Border counties. It was recognised that lack of Southern participation at times caused frustration among women from Northern Ireland. Questions were asked as to why the NWC couldn't report on and highlight the work of the Forum among its broader membership group, thus potentially encouraging greater interest and participation. However, if this was to happen thought would need to be invested in how the Forum could be structured to include greater membership and participation. There was general welcome when the Forum membership was expanded from the original 28 in Phase 1 – although it was recommended that when membership is expanded it is

important to have a process of induction in place for new members. While sectoral gaps in membership were highlighted, there has been little thought about an effective re-structuring of the Forum to accommodate any expansion.

The issue of communication within Forum meetings was specifically raised from the disability perspective. Sign Language is provided but it was pointed out that *'Some Forum members seem unsure how to engage with a Deaf person, which creates hesitation and limits interaction. The lack of awareness or confidence in how to communicate becomes an invisible barrier. There isn't a consistent shared space like a group chat or casual ongoing thread, where interaction can naturally develop. Without that, communication feels distant – almost like there's a third wall between me and the rest of the group.'* This contribution raises the issue of how various social media approaches might support inclusive approaches between Forum members, not just during formal meetings, but on an on-going basis to enhance relationships.

There was frequent mention of the importance of having a clear programme of activities to serve to maintain relationships and momentum, albeit a recognition that practical implementation was closely linked to resources available. Comments were made concerning the programming of the work –

*'For me the most effective work has taken place in the first year or so when meetings were regular enough to allow continuity, which helped with the perception that we were working together towards a shared goal even though the issues were diverse – we were finding systemic roots and solutions.'*

- *'More regular meetings, an agreed work plan and a sense of focus which has slipped somewhat recently.'*
- *'My work has been very supportive; however, the preponderance of late-notice meetings recently has been high causing me to miss in person meetings in my own area because work obligations were already locked in.'*

- *'Time is a challenge, however when the forums were monthly and regular it was much easier to just put the time in the diary. Now they are spread out and feel sporadic and it's easier to have other commitments take priority sometimes.'*

It was clear that Forum members are still keen to attend the meetings that are on offer, but there is a need for forward planning to achieve this in practice.

When discussing the required forward planning needed for the Forum, reference was made to the use of Advisory Steering Groups or Business Groups that have been put in place over the course of different phases of the Forum's work. It was generally felt that these were useful. Apart from allowing different voices to influence programme design, such advisory structures helped with forward planning and allowed a broader range of Forum members to take ownership of the proposed programme. They could also support the NWC staff involved with the Forum. One respondent picked up on this issue – *'The secretariat could be strengthened – they seem hesitant and worried about offending people. They need to be empowered to make choices. If the work plan is too based on consensus, it can get stuck. Instead, we need "Here's what we achieved. Here's where we are. What are the next challenges?"* Again, there was an emphasis on the importance of maintaining momentum, with an Advisory Group potentially combining both younger women and veterans, as well as holding the North/South dimension. A Forum member who had experience of being on the AIWF Phase 1 Business Committee felt that it had worked well – *'There needs to be a wider collection of ideas; then consideration by a Business Committee; then a yearly plan to be agreed by the Forum. This would help NWC staff to develop what could be done.'* An agreed annual plan could be informed by time-limited objectives, which can then be used to monitor and celebrate progress. This might go some way to answer the question posed by one interviewee – *'Do not continue with external talking shops. Where does it go? Ask "How can we make a difference?"'*

#### iv) Structured relations with the NWC:

There were a range of opinions expressed on what the ideal relationship should be between the All-Island Women's Forum and the NWC itself. The Survey that was conducted offered several options for consideration:

The Forum should be mainstreamed into the NWC core-funded work	6 Survey respondents
The Forum should continue as a project managed by the NWC	3
The Forum should be jointly managed by a consortium of women's organisations across the island	4
Other	1

One respondent opted for a combination of the Forum being mainstreamed into the NWC core work while being jointly managed by a consortium of women's organisations across the island. She explained – *'I think there needs to be a greater diversity of women having more time to help design, lead, facilitate, etc. So, a combination of both these options would 'contract' time from a variety of skills backgrounds, areas of expertise, to then bring more human resources to the Forum so it could do more.'*

Women who suggested that the Forum should be mainstreamed by the NWC stressed the need for sustainability and better coordination as well as referring to the supportive staff in the NWC. Those who preferred the idea of the Forum being jointly managed by a North/South consortium of women's organisations felt that this might allow it to reach more grassroots women's groups as well as diversifying involvement and building more localised trust. Reference was made to the consortium approach adopted by the Violence against Women and Girls' Working Group that had been successful. The woman who preferred that the Forum should continue as a project managed by the NWC felt that the other options are unworkable.

There was some disagreement in the views expressed during the one-to-one interviews as to the nature of the NWC itself – whether it was an all-island organisation, or primarily a southern one. A number of northern interviewees felt that the NWC had relatively few northern member organisations and was primarily focused on issues in the Republic of Ireland. There was specific sensitivity about any perceived party-political issues that might have an adverse read-across in Northern Ireland. At least one woman remarked – *‘I don't think they understand the complexity of things that happen up here.’* The possibility of the NWC having a northern office/officer was largely dismissed as simply adding to a crowded, and the often competitive, space in Northern Ireland, where financial support for the Women's Sector is at a premium. This is not to dismiss, however, the possibility of nominating a key partner organisation in Northern Ireland to prioritise working on AIWF issues with the NWC.

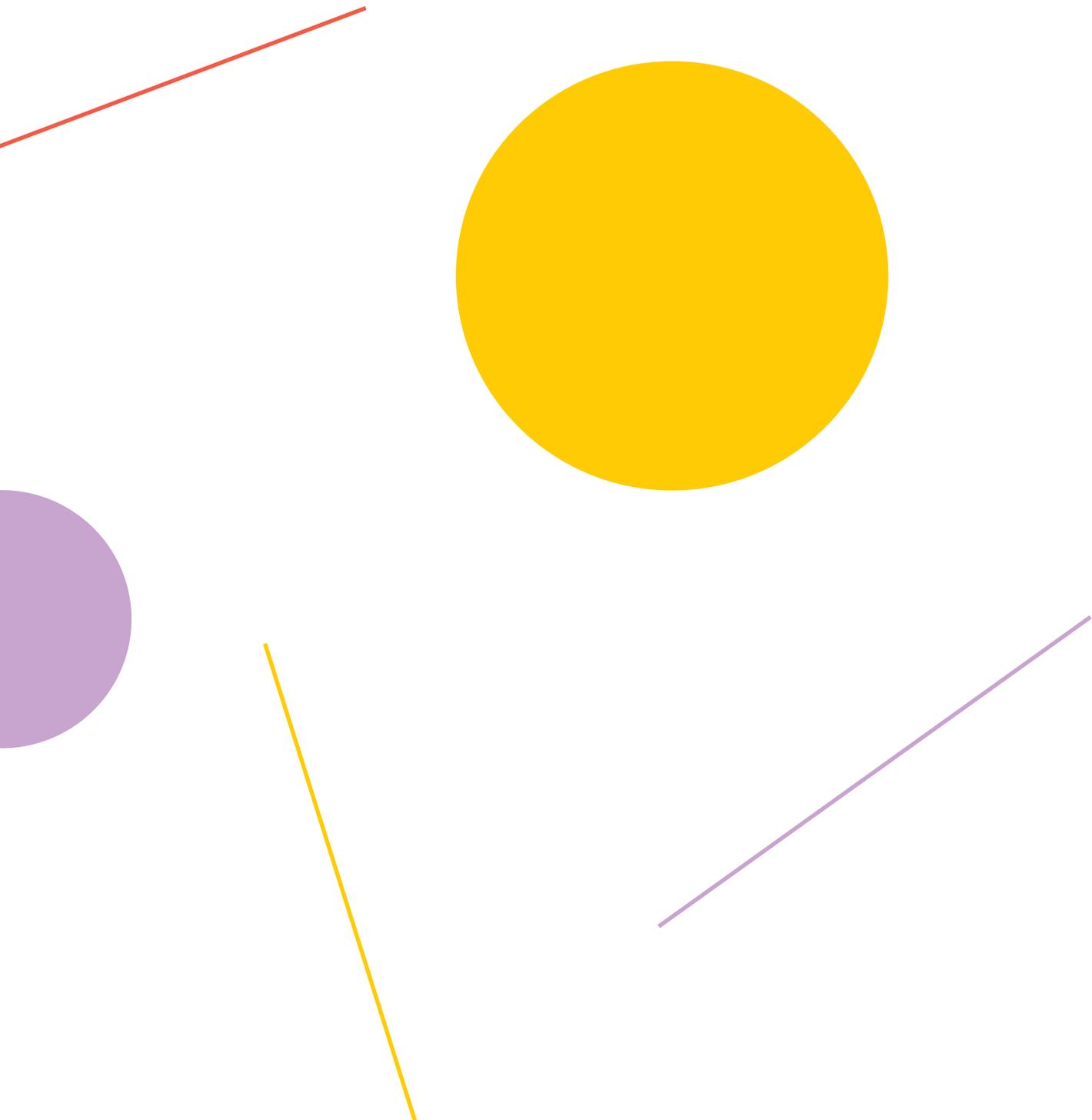
The current Strategic Plan of the NWC makes plain that it does see itself as working across the island of Ireland, noting that the all-island work which the NWC has been engaged in will continue. At least one northern based Forum member suggested that the Forum had *‘forced the NWC to look North. There were massive gaps, but it encouraged a more positive narrative.’* From the NWC's perspective it is felt that the North/South work is now much more firmly embedded in the NWC, with staff engaged and interested in Northern Ireland. It was suggested that *‘People are up to figuring out how the work can progress more’*, although there is still an issue about how the work can be better incorporated into the policy and leadership aspects of the NWC's work programme. One practical suggestion that was made was the possibility of providing regular briefings to the broader NWC membership on the work of the AIWF. Updates could be provided at the NWC AGM or through the members' meetings as well as on-line.

## Appreciation of the contribution of the AIWF

Although questions were raised, and suggestions offered, on the focus and structure of the All-Island Women's Forum, there was an overall appreciation of its contribution:

- *‘I will always keep going – fantastic people there.’*
- *‘It's great to meet people from different parts of the island... It helped to put a face to women in organisations... There is a hunger to get together to talk about issues and problems.’*
- *‘Safe spaces to discuss issues are still very important. Shared visions... We need shared ownership going forward to act as a model for the Shared Island concept.’*
- *‘I would love to see the Forum being used more for research (thematic) – possibly with Working Groups.’*
- *‘The Forum is a good example of deliberative democracy – it punched above its weight.’*
- *‘Enabling a sharing of experiences by women living on both sides of the Border across a broad range of women working in various sectors – this would not otherwise happen as usually working with groups north of the Border is limited only to those working on peacebuilding. This has been the AIWF's greatest achievement from my perspective as so many NGOs and civil society actors need and want to be engaged in thinking and talking and sharing perspectives on the Border, its impact and what the future looks like, but there are very few avenues for this, outside of political parties, which many people don't want to get involved in.’*
- *‘The rise of the Far Right and escalating conversations about the constitutional future mean it is vital.’*
- *‘The Forum is developing an inclusive and intersectional voice for women across the island.’*
- *‘The Forum is vital to discuss shared issues and strengthen collaboration efforts – central to peacebuilding and shared understanding.’*

In short, none of the respondents to either the Survey or in the interviews felt that the Forum should not continue. If some frustrations were expressed it was because as one woman said – *'I love the Forum, but it could do so much more!'*



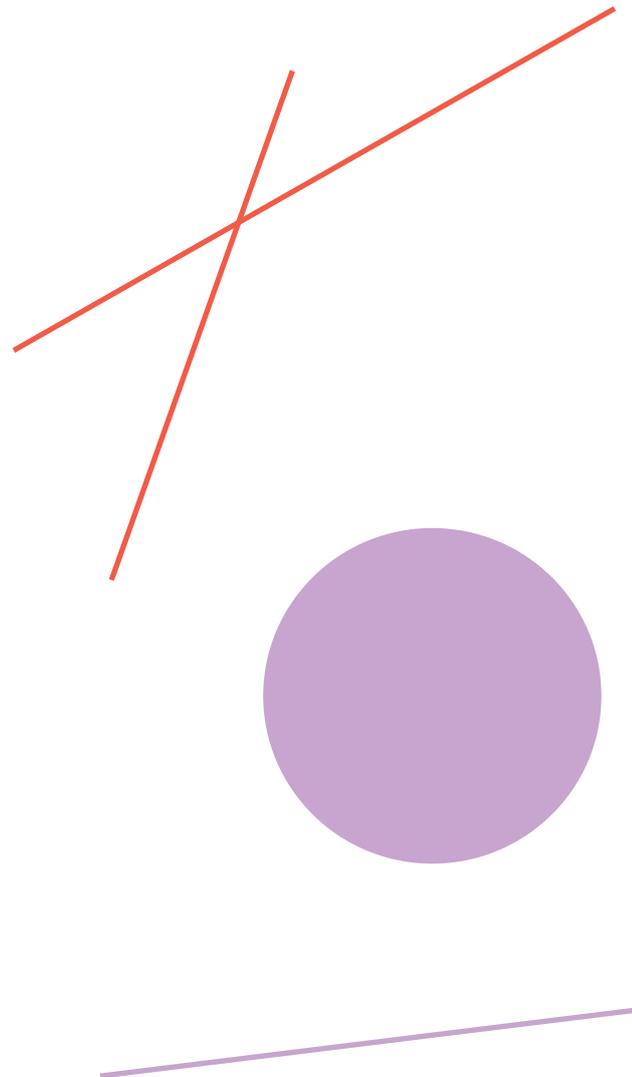
# 6. Forum Outputs and Impact

In the context of an uncertain funding base, the work of the All-Island Women's Forum has had direct impact in:

- Providing safe space for interested women to meet on a regular basis in a gathering that is intentionally all-island, with a view to –
  - i) Learning and sharing information about the circumstances for women in the two jurisdictions – North and South – as well as the impact of the Border on policymaking and delivery.
  - ii) Exploring issues of diversity and identity not only between and within the two jurisdictions but also taking account of the widening intersectionality of identities.
  - iii) Drawing out the commonalities of the need for policy change on specific issues such as Violence against Women and Girls, but also the representation of women and leadership in society.
  - iv) Highlighting the visibility of issues of concern to women on a cross-Border basis, such as a rising cost of living and the increase in racism and the Far Right, with a view to identifying effective approaches.
  - v) Proactive engagement with women from often marginalised or excluded groups and communities with an affirmative approach in the selection of AIWF membership.
  - vi) Providing an opportunity for women activists to gain greater awareness of both the broader civil society sector but also of political structures and decision-making North and South.
  - vii) Maintaining a focus on the ongoing issues of peacebuilding arising from the conflict in Northern Ireland, through the sharing of experiences and perspectives and allowing space to discuss potentially sensitive issues.
  - viii) Keeping a focus on the importance of relationship building with a view to increasing cross-Border understanding but also as a basis for joint work on shared issues by organisations.
  - ix) Maintaining the visibility of women's contribution to policy-making and the importance of women's activism, representation and leadership across the island, irrespective of any specific constitutional configuration.
- Facilitating a number of specific outputs where the relationship building and policy-making roles of the Forum made a contribution –
  - i) Follow-up linkages between the Ballymoney Women in Loyalism group and the Longford Women's Group, initially forged through an AIWF residential. As one of those involved suggested there was agreement that their views would not be taken into account – *'Even if there is a United Ireland, we would be the people at the bottom of the Titanic!'*

- ii) Connections between Disability Action NI and Independent Living Movement Ireland that resulted in a successful EU PEACE Plus project application.
- iii) The All-Island Violence against Women Working Group as a collaborative initiative to foster practical cooperation and develop all-island strategies to combat intimate partner violence (IPV) and support victims and survivors.
- iv) The design and funding of the All-Island Women's Assembly and launch of the Assembly Report in Belfast and Dublin.
- v) The AIWF Report 2021/22, with recommendations for Governments North and South, as well as recommendations for future working together in the context of North-South relations, launched by the Taoiseach in 2023.
- vi) Presentation to the Oireachtas Joint Committee on the Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement (2024) highlighting the need to centre the voices of women, North and South, on any future constitutional issues.
- vii) The All-Island LGBTQIA+ Forum, involving Rainbow (NI) and LGBT Ireland, with support from Community Foundation Ireland.
- viii) The Grassroots Weaving All-Island Connections Project, involving Women's Collective Ireland, Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network and Shankill Women's Centre, Belfast.
- ix) Integration of the all-island work into the 2025-2029 Strategic Plan of the NWC – *Time to Act for Women's Rights and Equality, 2025*.

Alongside these specific outputs and impacts, the experience and work of the AIWF has contributed to a number of studies, such as *Gender and Cross-Border Cooperation on the Island of Ireland (Kapic, Connolly & Doyle, ARINS 2023)* which argued that funded cross-Border work needed to allow organisations to focus on a wide equality agenda rather than a narrow definition of peacebuilding or Women, Peace & Security (UNSCR 1325).



# 7. Evaluation of Contribution of the AIWF to stated NWC Objectives

The objectives set out for the initial phase of the AIWF stated:

1. Provide a space for open dialogue
2. Examine issues through a gender equality and justice lens and with awareness and attention to intersectionality, with the purpose of improving equality for women on an all-island basis.
3. Improve the representation and participation of marginalised groups with awareness and attention to intersectionality.
4. Improve North-South links.
5. Expand the role of women in peacebuilding in line with UN Security Council Resolution 1325.
6. Provide a critical analysis of women's participation in peace process structures, civil society structures and political spaces.
7. Produce a series of recommendations on how to further progress women's rights and equality on the island of Ireland.

Notwithstanding the difficulties of setting up and maintaining the Forum over the period of Covid 19, work was undertaken to progress and meet each of these objectives. The Encounter programme was designed to progress the need for additional space for dialogue and a report

was produced with recommendations on how to further progress women's rights and equality. The series of discussions and dialogues did address objectives 5 and 6, although arguably the critical analysis of women's participation might have been supported by the circulation of a series of short Briefing Papers drawn from the excellent external speaker contributions. This might have deepened consideration of the final set of recommendations but would have required a further investment in the already demanding AIWF programme.

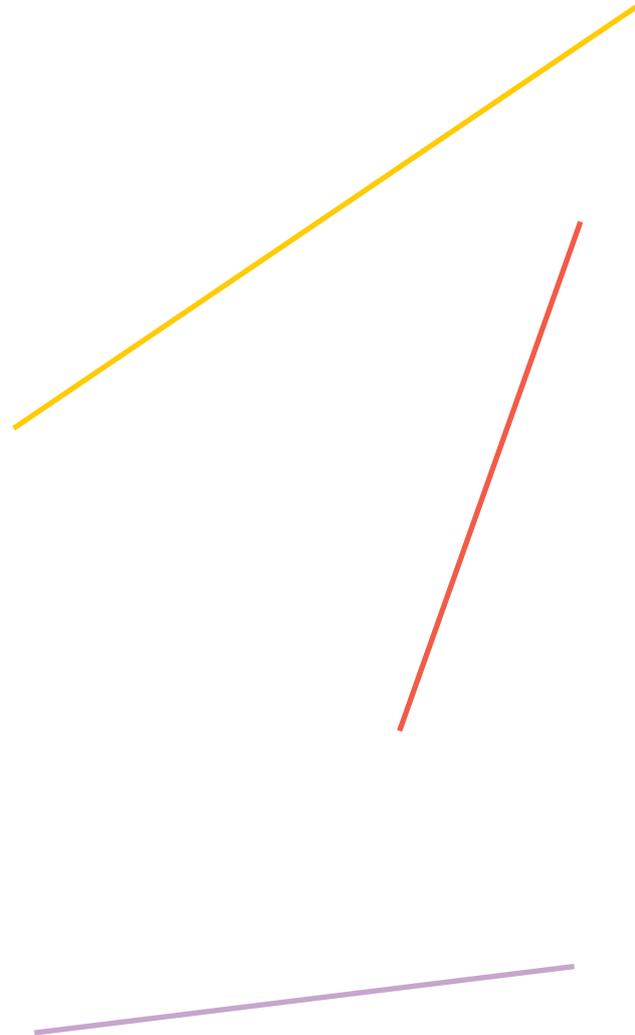
The set of seven objectives also framed the work in 2023, although there was an additional emphasis placed on supporting an increasingly diverse participation of women in the Forum and increased appreciation of the need to extend spaces for dialogue. While the 2 Working Groups on issues of Violence against Women and Girls and Women's Representation did extend space for thematic work, limitations in funding failed to allow a continuation of the Encounters programme. The Forum gatherings did allow attention to be given to offering consultative space for gender proofing a range of policy areas. Again, a series of short Briefing Papers to follow up of the meeting inputs would have been beneficial. The 2023/2024 AIWF funding application mentioned specifically (i) the importance of strengthening relationship building; (ii) identifying new opportunities for North-South cooperation; and (iii) supporting cross-border work around

identifying solutions for issues of commonality. Arguably all these objectives were met if the programme of work on countering violence against women and girls is taken into account. A number of new opportunities for North-South cooperation emerged out of the relationships facilitated during the Forum engagements. Attention was also paid to the anniversary of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement.

The funding for the 2024/2025 period essentially allowed for the continuation and growth of the ongoing work programme of both the main Forum itself and the related thematic work programmes. It was clear, however, that the uncertain year-to-year funding held any development of the Forum back, forcing more of a maintenance than a development approach to the North-South consideration of a broader policy emphasis. The additional funding received from the St. Stephen's Green Trust for the All-Island Women's Assembly went some way to remedying this, although arguably a strategic investment of a minimum of three years funding would allow for a more ambitious AIWF programme that in the longer-term would have the potential to offer greater value for money.

The final consideration is on the positioning of the AIWF within the NWC itself. Under the 2021-2024 Strategic Plan of the NWC, the all-island work was positioned to (i) provide space for cooperation and dialogue; (ii) develop an all-island policy framework on priority issues; and (iii) support a feminist perspective on national processes and dialogues. It can be argued that the phased work of the All-Island Women's Forum (together with the All-Island

Women's Assembly) did go a long way to meeting these objectives. The 2025-2029 NWC Strategic Plan speaks in terms of promoting all-island relationships; working to address and progress reconciliation and to develop feminist leadership. While this will helpfully provide a context to any future work of the AIWF, the NWC, which asserts that it is the *'leading representative organisation of women's rights and equality on the island of Ireland'*, may well be challenged as to how proactively it reaches out to ensure membership from Northern Ireland to substantiate that positioning. Again, a more securely resourced, and reinvigorated programme of Forum work, could serve to address this challenge.



# 8. Recommendations

The recommendations offered below are put forward in recognition of the need for adequate funding to resource the work of the All-Island Women's Forum. It is clear that there is support for the initiative and that it has the potential to make a significant contribution to the current Shared Island initiative which seeks to enhance cooperation and connection between communities and traditions across the island of Ireland. Women have long been at the forefront of dialogue and relationship building, however, to extend this beyond their own local communities and regions the supportive infrastructure for such a movement needs to be adequately resourced. When compared to many physical infrastructure projects under the Shared Island initiative, the funding required is modest given the potential wider value. What is important is that funding should be made available for longer periods than the current year to year allocations (with periodic gaps). The work of the All-Island Women's Forum needs to maintain momentum in order to achieve its objectives.

## i) **Recommendations on AIWF Forward Planning:**

- There was strong support for devising a 3-year Strategy for the Forum that would provide a framework for annual planning. Priorities for the plans should be recommended by a Forum Steering Group for discussion and agreement by the Forum members. The language used should be accessible and jargon

free, stating achievable goals that will be reviewed on an annual basis.

- It is important that an annual programme of meetings and discussions is agreed well in advance so that Forum members can timetable their participation. Due regard must be made for those members that have to travel a distance to in-person meetings.

## ii) **AIWF Participation:**

- There are still concerns that the Forum should have additional membership that includes women from marginalised and/or under-represented groups and communities. This has to be married with providing secretariat support for Forum members (currently through NWC staffing) and ensuring effective inclusive participation. Women specifically mentioned included ethnic minority women, Travellers, working class communities, women from a Unionist identity, Faith/religious groups, young women, disabled people and LGBTQ+ groups.
- Tany expansion of Forum membership needs to take account of the capacity of the AIWF to work effectively and may require consideration of various structural approaches. These might include infrastructural organisations cascading information about the Forum to their membership; use of

a wider range of communications tools; or the identification of Thematic Working Groups that could enhance and supplement the Forum's core programme. Attention might also be given to the spread of geographic representation over and above the specific north/south dimension.

- Approaches to wider participation could be piloted by the NWC with its own affiliated membership. Similarly, infrastructural organisations such as the WRDA (Women's Resource & Development Agency) and NIRWN (Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network) in the North, as well as Women's Collective Ireland in the South, could consider the feasibility of a cascade approach.
- Conduct a review of membership of the Forum and those participating in Forum activities on an annual basis, with a view to addressing major geographic as well as sectoral gaps. This applies to representation from both North and South, but particularly in southern counties at a distance from Dublin and to the west of the Greater Belfast region.
- The purpose of the Forum needs to be clearly defined, and this includes clarifying whether the primary purpose is to seek to convene and encourage the participation of women as representative of the broader Women's Sector or whether the Forum is essentially convened to offer a feminist perspective on issues.

### iii) Thematic Priorities:

- For many Forum participants the core purpose of the Forum remains the sharing of experiences by a broad range of women living on both sides of the border and working in various sectors, rather than limiting thematic engagement to peacebuilding issues. The information on comparative rights/services/standards of living North and South has been found

to be valuable. This should continue as a key thread in the work of the AIWF, with the annual Forum plans being realistic as to what should be focused on and what is achievable.

- Preference was expressed for the prioritisation of themes rather than focusing on narrower policy issues. Where a small number of priority themes are agreed in the annual plan – these should be accompanied by a statement of the rationale; aim; objective and outcomes.
- Themes relating to peacebuilding are still viewed by many Forum members as being important albeit needing to be addressed in a sensitive manner, with informed input from those with direct experience of these issues. There is also a clear indication that many Forum members are concerned about peacebuilding and inclusion in their broadest sense – particularly in response to the more overt racism and Far Right narrative that is increasingly evident North and South.
- Thematic discussions are seen as important, but what is particularly valued is the space and ability to discuss issues in a respectful manner from different perspectives.
- Where Forum members agree a major thematic priority, it has been suggested that a specific Thematic Working Group should be established to take this work forward, as modelled by the work on Countering Violence against Women and Girls. These Working Groups can allow a continuity of attention on the selected theme; report back to the overall Forum and consider targeted advocacy work. Policy briefings and recommendations to governments North and South was still seen as an important role for the Forum.

### iv) Relationship Building:

- Based on the earlier Encounters Programme, time and space for North/South relationship building is still

important. This does require an investment of time and facilitation, but it can be seen that some of the most successful spin-off cross-border arrangements have developed out of smaller group relationship building.

- A small group relationship building approach can be used to broaden the Forum participation into those geographical areas where there is currently little reach or engagement.
- Small group relationship discussions are found to be the most effective way to address potentially sensitive issues such as diverse identities, while also drawing out common issues.

#### v) **Communications:**

- There is a clear call for more communications between the Forum events to maintain the momentum of both the relations and the thematic work. This could take the form of regular e-Briefs/e-zines but also can be as basic as the sharing of emails and contacts to maintain information flows and dialogue. An AIWF WhatsApp group could be revitalised for ease of communication and exchange of information to supplement email communication.
- Reference was made to the expertise of Forum members that could potentially be utilised to support the communications work required.
- Planned communication could help the AIWF to become both better known externally, as well as having a useful internal Forum function of helping members to see the progress that is being made. Given the high number of competing demands on the time and attention of groups in the Women's Sector it is important that the Forum activities are seen as more than a 'talking shop'.
- Reports on the work of the Forum should be made available on a regular basis to the membership of the NWC to broaden the flow of information. Forum members

that are themselves sector infrastructure organisations should also be encouraged to share information on the work of the Forum.

- In order to maximise information flows and impact it is suggested that there should be an effort to map, and make connections with, other cross-Border initiatives, particularly those that involve women. Visibility of the Forum can help contribute to a Forum narrative.

#### vi) **All-Island Women's Forum Organisation and Structure:**

- There was appreciation of the commitment of the NWC in supporting and maintaining the All-Island Women's Forum. However, it is important that the NWC be clear about whether the Forum is a mainstream strategic initiative or a project based on available funding. It was further felt that continuity is important to maintain the Forum, albeit that the NWC could usefully hold strategic discussions with parallel Women's Sector organisations in Northern Ireland to clarify relationships and Forum future design and support.
- There was enthusiasm expressed for a greater sense of ownership of the direction and work of the Forum by its members. This shift in leadership (with NWC playing a supportive role) would be helped by having a Standing Business Committee or Advisory Steering Group, as adopted by the AIWF in the past. This Group would have the responsibility of helping to plan the implementation of any agreed programme of work. It is important that the Committee/Group would have North/South representation.
- It was felt that offering a balance between in-person and on-line meetings is about right. While a number of Forum members expressed a preference for more face-to-face meetings, there is an appreciation of the cost involved as well as the time pressure on many women's

organisations. The potential to hold some meetings/activities outside of standard working hours to maximise participation was also raised.

The recommendations suggested are proposed for discussion at the meeting of the All-Island Women's Forum in January 2026. They are being put forward in the spirit expressed by one founding member of the Forum – *'I love the Forum, but it could be so much more!'*

Avila Kilmurray  
Angela Hodkinson

**Social Change Initiative – December 2025.**

