

Opening Statement to the Committee on the Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement

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WRDA was founded in 1983, while the conflict was still in full swing. Originally called the Women's Education Project, it sought to educate and empower women to overcome the many barriers faced in a place that was beyond a standard patriarchy, but an "armed patriarchy".

41 years on, much has changed, but much remains the same. This includes our core mission, and in the intervening years we have been involved in significant peacebuilding and community relations work, alongside our partners in the sector and the many women we have worked with in all communities.

One of the barriers we face in seeing real progress is the fact that the Good Friday Agreement has not been fully implemented, either in word or in spirit.

We continue to fight for a **Bill of Rights**. In fact, we continue to have rights respected and recognised at all, quite a lot of the time. We have actively fought for many banner wins, such as equal marriage and abortion rights, but sadly these have only come to us through Westminster. A rights-based society remains an unrealised ambition.

Civic society lost its voice through the ending of the **Civic Forum** which could have lent momentum to the fight for human rights and reconciliation, as well as credibility to the civil society organisations that our government so often ignores. Meanwhile democratic progress is often stifled by measures like the Petition of Concern which is used as was never intended and is part of an inter-party agreement over which the people had no say.

Integration and reconciliation efforts have not just stalled, they seem to be deliberately stymied, with integrated education underfunded such that demand far outstrips supply, more so-called "peace walls" than we had in 1998, and little to no integrated housing – in fact, little to no new housing at all, with homelessness figures now at around 25,000, of which around 5,000 are children living in temporary accommodation.

We find ourselves often with a massive **democratic deficit**, with frequent collapse, constant **political instability**, and persistent, neglectful **underfunding**. Massive cuts have decimated the community sector and civil society, which continues to deliver basic services for the most marginalised on behalf of government but at a bargain bin price. **Poverty** remains endemic, with the areas most deprived in 1998 still the most deprived now.

Our young people emigrate in significant numbers; they do not see a future for themselves here. Waiting lists for the NHS are the worst in the UK, our children receive less funding per head towards their education than elsewhere in the UK, we have no childcare strategy, no gender equality strategy, no LGBTQIA+ strategy, no anti-poverty strategy – despite the latter being a legal requirement. We remain the only place on these islands without a strategy for tackling Violence Against Women and Girls, and although that should change soon, we do not have a commitment for anything beyond a fraction of the funding needed. The UK government bring in measures intended for a different population that are in practice unworkable here; for example, in 2023 it made more childcare hours available to pre-school age children in Britain, and required their primary carer to therefore be available for and search for more working hours. That obligation is

being forced on parents here, too, despite no additional funded childcare hours – in fact, no childcare hours at all – being available to them.

We have significant rates of deaths of despair; suicide or accidental overdose. In fact more people have died by suicide since 1998 than died in the conflict itself. Paramilitaries are, we are told, still “transitioning”, as they apply for public funding and operate in plain sight.

Perhaps worse than this, we have collectively become used to this state of affairs. Asking for what is seen as standard in other parts of these islands is seen as demanding, unreasonable, even greedy. We often seem to be more of a headache to the governments that act as guarantor of the Agreement than a project and a people worth caring about.

The Good Friday Agreement was meant to bring us hope and a brighter future. The lack of implementation has instead brought us a new set of problems, and the old ones persist.