

**Oral Presentation to:** Joint Committee on the Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement

**Presenter:** Ailbhe Smyth

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Thank you very much for the opportunity to make a presentation to the Joint Committee.

I will focus briefly today on a North-South cross-border programme, **Encounters**, which sought to empower and facilitate women to get to know one another and to build understanding with a view to developing useful working relationships.

The programme was broadly inspired by an earlier North – South educational experience developed in the years around and after the signing of the Good Friday agreement. The **POWER** programme (funded by Peace and Reconciliation funds) aimed to support women’s political development by placing their participation in community development in a political context.

Both programmes are rooted in the principles of equality and democracy, and in the commitment to ensuring that all women, whatever their context, background or social class, can participate fully and meaningfully in decisions which will directly impact their lives.

Arising from these and other North-South educational, research and campaigning experiences I have been involved with over many years, I believe that there is a crucial job of work to be done in ensuring that women – and most especially marginalised and disadvantaged women (including, for example, working-class, rural, LGBTI, disabled, ethnic minority and older women) can fully contribute to decisions and processes regarding the future of our island.

***Bringing women together across geographical borders and socio-economic and cultural dividing lines to focus on areas of commonality and of difference is critical to the process of developing a new configuration and constitutional base for Ireland.***

***This means, in practice, that we fully recognise the equal importance of ‘bottom up’ alongside ‘top down’ involvement in all constitutional development processes/***

***It is also clear that in this process, it is vital to ensure – in the interests of equality, justice and democracy – that specific focussed efforts must be made to ensure that marginalised and disadvantaged groups are fully included in developmental and decision-making processes.***

## **Encounters Programme**

In 2021 – 22 the Encounters Programme ran in tandem with the All-Island Women’s Forum (funded, under the aegis of the Shared Island Unit, by the DFA Reconciliation Fund) as a series of monthly meetings bringing together one organisation from the North and one from the South, working in an area of commonality but who might not have had an opportunity to build a working relationship. Located in the National Women’s Council, which acted as programme secretariat, the programme was initiated and facilitated by Ailbhe Smyth. Ailbhe was the founding head of Women’s Studies at

University College Dublin and is a long-standing LGBTIQ and feminist activist. She played a central role in the marriage equality and abortion referendum campaigns.

**Note:** Given the reality and impact of Covid, sessions were held via Zoom, itself a new departure for many women. This worked remarkably well. However, there is no question but that in-person meetings lead to deeper and more lasting connections.

### **Programme Aims**

The Encounters Programme identified organisations North and South, including at local, regional, and national levels, who had areas of commonality.

The objective was to facilitate an information sharing meeting where two organisations could meet to get to know one another, discuss their work and build a relationship.

It was hoped that through these encounters, organisations would be inspired to look at how they could partner or collaborate with others in practical ways to achieve shared outcomes, by:

- building greater understanding of the issues and challenges they face in their work
- establishing practical channels of crossborder communication and exchange
- creating greater opportunities for collaboration on specific aims and issues

A clear overall theme of the Encounters programme was the challenge of ensuring women are seen and heard within their community.

**For example**, in the Encounter between Herstory – Women in Loyalism, Women’s Collective Ireland Monaghan, and Women’s Collective Ireland North Leitrim, the challenge of ensuring women are seen and heard within their community was a recurring theme, with some very practical questions being explored on how each organisation has and continues to manage this challenge. This Encounter proved particularly effective in building understanding and finding common ground, the three organisations spoke about some of the everyday challenges currently facing each organisation, and the impact COVID-19 had on their work. It was noted that for the Women in Loyalism group that there were challenges that were specific to the identity of loyalism and how this can pose a bigger challenge than being a woman, a distinct point had been made about the curiosity of the topic of loyalism, and an interest to learn more about this.

At the conclusion of the Encounter, on reflection, participants were incredibly enthusiastic and encouraged to continue contact. Several groups that participated in the Encounters Programme spoke enthusiastically about further contact with a notable interest in meeting in person.

Whilst many of the Encounters presented organisations who had never interacted with an opportunity to connect, it was also an opportunity for some participants to reconnect.

**For example:** The Encounter between Women’s Aid Ireland and Women’s Aid Federation NI presented an opportunity to reconnect participants who through this sector of work, had previously encountered one another. It was noted that several the participants had in fact visited each other’s offices on previous occasions. It was clear in this encounter that many of the

participants would have welcomed the opportunity for an in-person meeting and a continuation of the conversation. The suggestion of regular meetings was raised as a potential way for Women's Aid Federation NI and Women's Aid to stay in communications. It was particularly noted at the conclusion of the 2-hour session, how the organisational leads exchanged contact information for immediate follow-up at the conclusion of the session. This was seen to be greatly encouraging and welcoming from the facilitator.

There was general curiosity in the operational aspects of each other's work across all the Encounters with a lot of practical questions being asked about funding, premises and where there was commonality and differences in this. At the conclusion of the Encounters programme, on reflection, participants were incredibly enthusiastic and encouraged to continue contact, with a notable desire to meet in-person, it is considered that there is enormous potential for follow-up with many of the participant groups. All participants found a range of similarities between their groups, and the ideas of ensuring that women's voices are heard and seen was something they had all had challenges with.

### **Closing Reflection**

Whilst many of the Encounters presented organisations who had never interacted before with an opportunity to connect, it was also an opportunity for some participants to reconnect. All participants found a range of similarities between their groups, and the idea of ensuring that women's voices are heard and seen was something they all clearly identified with, even while it presented some practical challenges. A two-hour virtual encounter can help in breaking down the surface barriers to connecting, it cannot go much further than that. A further year's funding for follow-up in more depth would have been highly desirable. Some groups and organisations have since gone ahead and set up strong working relationships, but they are generally organisations with structures and funding. There has also been excellent follow-on progress between Women's Collective Ireland and, for example, the Shankill and Falls Road centres. However, a more concerted all-Ireland programme is necessary if we are to ensure that all voices are indeed heard in re-configuration and constitutional processes.

Understanding does not drop down from the sky. It is achieved – as we well know – through connection, conversation, and more conversation.