

The Women's Assembly: A Feminist Shared Future

Report 2025

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Acknowledgements

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We would like to sincerely thank the Women's Assembly Chair, former President of Ireland, Mary McAleese for her leadership and inspiration throughout the Assembly.

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We would like to thank Rachel Coyle, Head of Campaigns and Mobilisation at NWC, for her leadership and creativity in the development of the Assembly and of this report. We also want to thank all NWC staff who assisted throughout the Assembly process.

Above all else, we would like to extend our sincere gratitude to our Assembly members.

Thank you for the generosity of your time across the two days, your commitment to the Assembly process and your honesty as we engage in these critical conversations to inform future feminist engagement in Ireland's constitutional discussions.



Foreword

Mary McAleese

Nothing stays the same. Ahead of all of us who share this island, in what is now, thankfully a post-violent conflict society, is a time of rapid social and political development with the added possibility of constitutional change. The Good Friday Agreement, so overwhelmingly supported in both jurisdictions, sets out a road map for a shared future. We will all be impacted by the discussions and decisions that will shape that future. That is why it is essential that women's voices, experiences, vision, and views drawn from every corner of the island make their contribution to the mutually respectful and honest debates needed to guide us safely to a better future for all. Too often, women's voices are absent and excluded from the significant discussions and decision-making arenas. In the past, that has cost us dearly and it is not the kind of future we can countenance.

The Women's Assembly provided a critical opportunity for an open conversation between women who refuse to settle for being side-lined or silenced while their future is being constructed around them. The Assembly participants were drawn from the widest spectrum of experiences and perspectives. They took time to listen intently to the views of others, to share their own views, and to explore how those diverse experiences could be distilled into a shared vision for a stable, egalitarian future—one informed by and fit to meet the needs and aspirations of women on this island.

From the outset the Assembly made space for very diverse voices, ensuring that particularly those from underrepresented communities had their say. During the Assembly, we created a supportive environment for connection and reflection, where personal stories were shared, and the challenges faced by women in both the North and South of the island were heard with open, trusting hearts. We embarked on a journey that moved from reflecting on the current realities of living in a divided society to exploring our differences and our perceptions of each other, to envisioning a thoroughly inclusive, diverse, and equitable, future society, where the empowerment of women makes for dynamic, healthy societies.

Across the island we need safe, respectful spaces like the Women's Assembly, where we can approach hard issues, like the looming constitutional question in a spirit of good neighbourliness, curiosity and mutual tolerance, where a realisation of our common values and especially our hopes can develop; where a deeper comprehension of one another's outlook can dawn; and where confidence can grow that we do indeed have a collective power, which can be harnessed to the betterment of all regardless of jurisdictional boundaries. The bonds that formed over these days of reflection and interaction are, we believe, significant and helpful in enabling us to move forward together to face the challenges ahead, and to contribute to their solution with new perspectives distilled from our deliberations. By facilitating genuine exchanges and fostering a sense of common purpose, the different paths we all came from did not inhibit the articulation of a common determination that the future will be one where all women thrive and where the barriers to their flourishing will be dismantled together so that all men, women and children thrive in a reconciled world where justice, equality, and parity of esteem prevail.

The Assembly openly recognized and explored the layers of complexity in our experiences as women living on a divided island. Yet, we found wells of commonality and mutual regard, from which to draw a solidarity and collaborative strength. That solidarity and strength allows us to believe in the imperative of amplifying women's voices, views, and vision, so they can be key influencers of the changes needed to put the wasteful days of conflict well behind us, and put in front of us the shared benefits of progress through partnership.

Introduction

Our island is undergoing profound political and social change.

From the lasting impact of Brexit and the Good Friday Agreement to the urgent challenges of climate change and the global rise of the far right, Ireland stands at a crossroads. Despite the deep effect these issues have on women's lives, their voices have too often been absent from these critical conversations.

The Women's Assembly - A Feminist Shared Future was convened by the National Women's Council (NWC) to challenge the historical exclusion of women from political and constitutional discussions, creating a space where women can take the lead in shaping Ireland's future. Rooted in feminist principles, the Assembly sought to move beyond the binary debates that often surround discussions on Irish reunification, focusing instead on the broader social, economic, and political changes needed to build a more just and equal society. This work goes beyond representation, seeking to embed NWC's feminist values such as care, economic equality and climate justice into the foundations of Ireland's evolving political landscape. By bringing together diverse voices, challenging systemic barriers, and fostering cross-border collaboration, NWC is positioning women as essential architects of the island's future, ensuring that any constitutional change reflects the realities, needs, and aspirations of all women.

As we mark International Women's Day 2025, we acknowledge that the future of our island is shaped by both the weight of its history and the urgency of present global challenges. Confronting the realities of colonialism, partition, and their enduring inequalities is essential for healing and progress. We must recognise the unseen ways our divided island has shaped our lives and the barriers it continues to reinforce. These historical legacies, combined with today's crises, deepen gender inequality, making it more urgent than ever for women to be at the forefront of shaping what comes next.

This NWC initiative, chaired by former President Mary McAleese, provided an important space for women to share their hopes, concerns, and ideas about the future of Ireland. The Women's Assembly sought to nurture thoughtful dialogue, active sharing and listening rather than push participants toward a singular position on constitutional change. Too often, national debates on constitutional change are framed as divisive, dominated by male voices, and shaped by traditional power structures which can leave women's perspectives marginalised or overlooked.

Without creating intentional and dedicated spaces for women's participation, women's voices risk being sidelined once again. The issues that shape women's lives, issues like care, economic justice, and safety, must not be treated as peripheral to political change, instead they must be central. Women are not bystanders, passive recipients, or mere stakeholders in this process - they are essential architects of our shared future.

Building on the National Women's Council's (NWC) long standing commitment to cross-community and cross-border solidarity, and for advocacy and policies that reflect the realities of the lives of women, North and South, the Women's Assembly brings together 50 women from diverse backgrounds to develop a shared feminist vision for Ireland's future that prioritises equality, social justice, and inclusive decision-making. We believe in the principles of democracy, subsidiarity, and feminist leadership and with decades of experience in creating safe spaces for women to share their experiences, challenge narratives, and drive collective action, NWC is committed to ensuring that women's voices are not just included but central to shaping the future.

Made possible through funding from the St. Stephen's Green Trust and hosted by both IHREC and the Law Society of Ireland, the Assembly stands as a powerful model of how we can secure women's rightful place in shaping constitutional conversations.

Women's Assembly

A Feminist Shared Journey

The Women's Assembly was carefully structured to create a safe, inclusive, and deliberative space for women to engage in meaningful dialogue about constitutional change.

Recognising that women's voices have historically been excluded or marginalised in political decision-making, the Assembly was designed to prioritise participation, listening, and collective imagining while maximising inclusion, intersectionality, and accessibility to ensure that all perspectives, particularly those from underrepresented communities, were heard and valued.

The Women's Assembly was held over two days, with each day serving a distinct but interconnected purpose. Day One focused on building connections and exploring the realities of living on a divided partitioned island, while Day Two shifted towards imagining a feminist shared future. Each session was structured to try and balance formal presentations, panel discussions, and breakout group discussions to foster as much dialogue and sharing of ideas as possible.

The Assembly made space for storytelling and lived experiences, acknowledging that political discussions are often dominated by legal and policy language that can alienate those outside formal political spaces.

A foundational figure in this conversation was the Women's Assembly Chair, Mary McAleese, whose profound understanding of the island's political and social divisions helped shape the Assembly's direction. As a former President of Ireland and a native of Belfast, Mary McAleese brought a unique and authentic perspective. Her ability to navigate complex discussions fostered an inclusive and constructive environment. The Assembly's deliberations unfolded against the backdrop of unfinished work from the Good Friday Agreement, the ongoing ramifications of Brexit, the rise of far-right rhetoric, and global instability driven by climate change and conflict. Despite these challenges, the Assembly Chair consistently emphasised our shared struggles and aspirations as women, reinforcing the Assembly's role in shaping a collective narrative on constitutional change. Through her leadership and good humour, meaningful discussions flourished, inspiring participants to carry these conversations into their own communities. We extend our sincere gratitude to our Chairperson Mary McAleese.

To ensure open and meaningful discussions, the Women's Assembly agreed upon a set of ground rules by consensus. These principles created an environment where participants could engage honestly, respectfully, and without fear of judgment. Central to this was the commitment to Chatham House Rules, ensuring confidentiality so that participants could speak freely without concern for attribution. This was crucial for women from communities where conversations about constitutional change can be sensitive, and fear of retaliation



or ostracism remains a real concern, especially in areas with a legacy of paramilitary influence. Creating an open, safe, and inclusive space was not just an objective but a necessity for the Assembly's success.

The group established the following key principles to guide discussions:

Confidentiality matters

Chatham House Rules applied to all discussions.

Respect diverse perspectives and opinions

Every voice is valued.

Listen actively

Engage with care and attention.

One voice at a time

No interruptions, allowing all views to be heard.

Assume good intentions

Approach conversations with openness.

Be honest and non-judgmental

Fostering trust in the space.

Stay curious

Ask questions and seek deeper understanding.

Speak clearly, with courage and responsibility

Words carry weight.

Be empathetic and supportive

Avoid assumptions about others' experiences.

The Assembly's journey mirrored the broader constitutional debate in that it did not follow a direct, linear path, but was instead a layered and complex process shaped by competing issues and realities. One principle remained clear from the discussions however, that women must be central to these discussions from the start, not included as an afterthought and while women's spaces are essential, they cannot exist in isolation from decision-making arenas.

The Assembly reaffirmed that constitutional change must be understood beyond legal, political, and economic structures. It must also centre lived experiences, truth and justice, and the rebalancing of power for the better. Ultimately, the Women's Assembly stood as a testament to the power of deliberative democracy and collective action, forging a path toward a feminist, shared future.

Connect, Reflect, Empower

Day 1

The first day was hosted in the Law Society and centred on building connections and deepening understanding. After icebreakers and exercises to ground participants in the work, Professor John Doyle, Vice President of Research at Dublin City University and Academic Editor of the ARINS Project delivered a presentation on disparities in women's rights and protections, highlighting the gaps in legal frameworks across the island. His comparative analysis revealed how these differences shape women's lives in often overlooked ways and exposed many shared challenges, North and South, for women's access to decision making and economic equality. A key takeaway was the widespread lack of awareness among women about the lived realities of their counterparts in the opposite jurisdiction and the urgent need to bridge this gap.

A dynamic panel discussion followed, featuring Assembly members Ailbhe Smyth (Irish academic, feminist and LGBTQ activist), Andréé Murphy (Director of Relatives for Justice, a national victim support NGO), Catherine Cooke (Community Activist and Coordinator of Foyle Women's Information Network),

and Sophie Nelson (Policy Officer at HERe NI LGBTQIA+ women's organisation). They explored the gendered impact of conflict, ongoing barriers to political participation, and the exclusion of marginalised voices. The discussion emphasised how the constitutional debate presents a crucial opportunity for women to advocate for greater recognition and rights regardless of the outcome of any future referendum on Irish reunification.

A key takeaway was the widespread lack of awareness among women about the lived realities of their counterparts in the opposite jurisdiction and the urgent need to bridge this gap.



In the afternoon, breakout group sessions provided a deeply moving space for women to share their experiences of living in a post conflict or divided society. Participants reflected on how these realities have shaped their lives and expressed their hopes for the future. Participants shared their different experiences in the North and the South and across communities. Many spoke about the enduring impact of division, sectarianism, and discrimination especially for marginalised groups such as Traveller and migrant women.

While politically fueled violence has decreased, structural barriers continue to limit women's lives in accessing decision-making spaces, social protection, economic equality and the high levels of violence against women serve as a stark reminder of how far we still need to go.

Despite frustration over the slow pace of change in achieving women's rights, there was a powerful sense of solidarity and determination. Calls for sustained reconciliation spaces, support for feminist activism, women's community and

voluntary groups, inclusive education, and political recognition of women's lived experiences resonated throughout the discussions. Above all, the day reaffirmed the resilience and power of women to drive change, strengthening a shared commitment to continuing these conversations and building a more just and inclusive future.

Structural barriers continue to limit women's lives in accessing decision-making spaces, social protection [and] economic equality.



Imagining a Feminist Future

Day 2

With the groundwork laid, Day Two, hosted at the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, shifted from reflecting on the past to imagining the future, opening with a recap of the previous day's discussions and a panel on dismantling oppressive systems. Introduced by Mary McAleese, the panel explored how legal, economic, and religious structures perpetuate inequality, linking these systemic barriers to the broader themes of the Women's Assembly. Dr Sinéad Kennedy, a senior academic at Maynooth University and a leading advocate for reproductive rights, emphasised the need for transformative change rather than simply incorporating women and minorities into the existing structures, described as "add gender and stir", critiquing how their concerns are often treated as peripheral rather than central to systemic reform. Mark Garrett, Director General of the Law Society of Ireland, highlighted the importance of coalition-building and pragmatic activism. Revd Maria Jansson, former Dean of Waterford, drew on her extensive experience in religious leadership and activism to challenge the privatisation of religion and its role in upholding patriarchal power, advocating for radical reform within faith institutions to create inclusive, safe spaces free

from fundamentalism and the importance of women's voices in social change.

The discussion highlighted the deep interconnections between political and legal institutions, economic systems, and religion in reinforcing inequality, creating a space where these structures could be critically examined and reimagined. Panellists and participants explored the effectiveness of applying both internal and external pressure in driving change, considering whether the ongoing constitutional debate across the island provides a meaningful opportunity to address inequality. The panel concluded with a strong call for feminist collective action to dismantle entrenched power structures and a move beyond incremental change towards a fundamental overhaul of power dynamics.

Workshops throughout the day explored feminist economic frameworks accounting for care work, and climate justice, while storytelling exercises fostered deeper understanding of intersectional struggles.



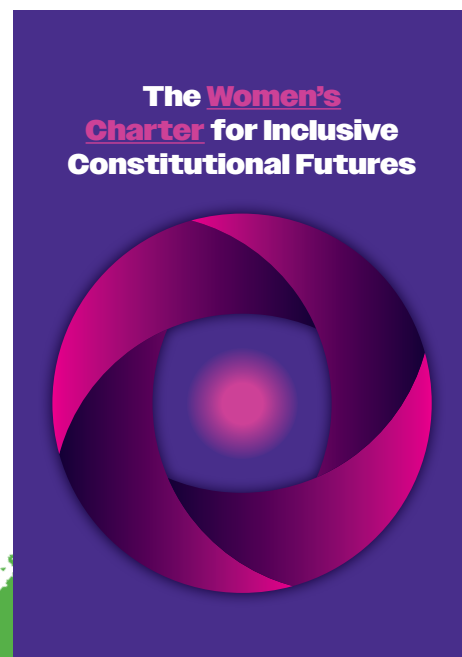


The afternoon was a celebration of cultural diversity, weaving together personal stories and poetry to highlight the richness of Ireland's cultural tapestry, shaped by many identities. Beautiful readings and poems were shared by Helena Power, a proud Traveller woman and National Membership Officer at the Irish Traveller Movement; Leanne Abernethy, Project Manager and Director of HERstory - Women in Loyalism, working to increase the participation of Loyalist women in community and politics; Maria-Elena Costa Sa, a human rights activist and Community Development Lead at the Irish Network Against Racism (INAR); and Andrea Ní Fhearail, the youngest member of the Women's Assembly who is a passionate Gaeilgeoir and advocate for language rights, currently studying at Ulster University. Their contributions, reflecting their respective cultural backgrounds, shared a common thread emphasising the importance of tolerance, respect, inclusion, and recognition in shaping Ireland's future.

New research was presented by Professor Fidelma Ashe on *The Women's Charter for Inclusive Constitutional Futures*, offering a structured approach to feminist constitutional engagement.

This helped Assembly members move from reflection to strategy, recognising that feminist values had already been articulated, but the challenge now was ensuring they became central to future discussions. The Charter serves as a tool to guide advocacy efforts, demand meaningful participation, and push for structural changes that would embed gender equality in constitutional and political processes¹.

As the Assembly concluded, participants committed to amplifying feminist values, ensuring the ongoing engagement of women in this conversation and demanding a seat at the table. While there was a strong call to move beyond discussion into action, members also emphasised the importance of balancing the drive for solutions with the need for deeper reflection, recognising that fully understanding the impact of the past on women's lives is essential for building a more inclusive and informed constitutional conversation. The event closed with a collective commitment to securing resources and recognition for this work, ensuring that future generations inherit greater rights and opportunities than we have today.



¹Ashe, F. (2024) *The Women's Charter for Inclusive Constitutional Futures*, The Women's Charter for Inclusive Constitutional Futures Available at: <https://pure.ulster.ac.uk/en/publications/the-womens-charter-for-inclusive-constitutional-futures>

Key Findings from the Women's Assembly Process

Based on the discussions, breakout groups, panels, and reflections across both days, the Women's Assembly surfaced several key findings that are crucial for informing future feminist engagement in Ireland's constitutional discussions. These findings capture the insights, challenges, and opportunities that emerged from the two day deliberative process.

1. Beyond Borders: Advancing Feminist Constitutional Conversations

For too long, Ireland's future has been framed as a binary choice of whether the North remains within the UK or reunifies with the Republic of Ireland. However, the Assembly highlighted that this debate is too narrow. While a referendum or "border poll," as provided for in the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement, will ultimately require a simple yes or no vote, the future of the island cannot be defined solely by territorial boundaries. Instead, it presents an opportunity for transformative change that focuses on the kind of society we want to create. By incorporating diverse voices, particularly those of women, the Assembly pushed for a broader, more nuanced conversation that prioritises shared values, fundamental rights, and collective well-being over political binaries.

Women in the Assembly expressed frustration that issues central to daily life like healthcare, childcare, economic justice, gender-based violence, and sustainability are sidelined in constitutional debates. Women's voices have been marginalised despite their leadership in community-building, and peace efforts. To create an inclusive future, we must ensure that women, particularly those from underrepresented groups such as rural communities, working-class backgrounds, migrant and Traveller communities, LGBTQ+ groups, disabled women, and survivors of violence have meaningful access to these discussions. Unionist women also require additional support to engage.

The *Women's Charter for Inclusive Constitutional Futures*, a framework to embed feminist principles in constitutional processes. It calls for conversations about constitutional change to be facilitated at the most local and accessible level, ensuring democracy is diverse and representative. The Charter outlines eight guiding principles for gender inclusive democracy that support stakeholders to actively facilitate, resource and value women's participation. It is a product of a series of research projects that aimed to ensure women's voices were included in constitutional discussions on the island. The projects challenged the binary frameworks that dominate discussions of constitutional change, valued and demonstrated the importance of women's inclusion, in all their diversity, in any framing of change, and identified the barriers to women's inclusion in constitutional debates.

Constitutional debates often focus on ownership of land, governance, and identity. Given the urgency of the climate crisis the Assembly was encouraged to rethink this approach. Rather than seeing land as something to possess, a feminist approach recognises it as something that sustains life. Our relationship with land on this island should be one of stewardship, not ownership and exploitation. Examples like Costa Rica's constitutional right to a healthy environment² and Wales' Future Generations Commission explored by the Women's Assembly offer models for ensuring political decisions today make us "good ancestors" by considering their impact on future generations³.

At a time when far-right forces threaten hard-won rights, we must resist rollbacks and commit to building a feminist, inclusive, and sustainable future. Being "good ancestors" means creating a constitutional framework that does not repeat past injustices. Women's equality is not an add-on to constitutional debates, it is central to democracy, justice, and lasting social transformation. A "New Ireland" must offer something genuinely new and this means transformative thinking, alternative systems, and a vision of governance, economics, and social life that is truly equal.

²United Nations Human Rights Council (2014) Report of the Independent Expert on the issue of human rights obligations relating to the enjoyment of a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment on his mission to Costa Rica (A/HRC/25/53/Add.1) United Nations

³Comisiynydd Cenedlethu'r Dyfodol Cymru / Future Generations Commission for Wales www.futuregenerations.wales

2. Structural Barriers Keep Women Marginalised From Constitutional Conversations

Women across Ireland continue to face systemic barriers to full participation in decision-making and constitutional conversations. While progress has been made, structural inequalities persist, particularly for marginalised groups such as lone parents, Traveller and Roma women, disabled women, migrant women, and working-class women. Limited resources further exacerbate these challenges, leaving women underrepresented in political leadership⁴.

A particularly stark example of women's marginalisation is the undervaluation of care work. Care and support work, which is disproportionately carried out by women, remains largely unpaid and is not recognised as a fundamental pillar of the economy⁵. The lack of financial compensation forces many women into precarious economic situations, limiting their participation in the workforce and political activism⁶. This undervaluation reinforces traditional gender roles and perpetuates the idea that caregiving is a private responsibility rather than a public policy issue requiring state support⁷.

Political institutions remain inflexible, designed without consideration for caregiving responsibilities. The absence of family-friendly policies and accommodations for women's leadership styles makes political participation difficult⁸. Instead of evolving to reflect societal diversity, political structures remain rooted in patriarchal, adversarial models that prioritise competition and hierarchy, expecting women to change themselves to adapt to the system rather than the other way around⁹.

Gender bias within political parties and government institutions further restricts women's access to leadership roles and decision-making spaces. This bias is evident not only in women's underrepresentation but also in policy decisions that fail to

consider their specific needs, such as those related to domestic violence, reproductive rights, and social protection. The systemic failure to address women's and marginalised communities needs in policy not only perpetuates inequality but can also lead to disengagement from political processes reinforcing gender inequality in politics¹⁰.

A feminist framework for constitutional change recognises that true democracy is not possible without women's full participation. Women's participation in constitutional processes cannot rely solely on voluntary activism either, it must be structurally and financially supported. All actors involved in future constitutional debate must actively remove financial, logistical, and cultural barriers, ensuring that political movements are structured to support women's participation and leadership.

3. Reconciliation is Incomplete Without Women's Voices

Women's lived experiences of conflict, division, and post-conflict recovery on this island remain largely overlooked in political, social, and constitutional discussions. The violence, trauma, and systemic oppression women faced during the most recent phase of conflict on the island have been consistently sidelined, even though women were deeply affected by conflict not just as victims, but as caregivers, community leaders, peacebuilders, and in some cases, combatants, a reality that remains uncomfortable for many to acknowledge.

The Good Friday/Belfast Agreement is often celebrated as a landmark peace deal, yet it failed to meaningfully address the gendered impacts of conflict. Women who endured violence, displacement, and systemic oppression were left to rebuild their lives with little formal acknowledgment, institutional support, or resources to heal.

⁴NWC (2023) National Women's Council opening statement to the Joint Oireachtas Committee Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth "Challenges facing women accessing education, leadership and political roles" Available at: https://data.oireachtas.ie/oireachtas/committee/dail/33/joint_committee_on_children_equality_disability_integration_and_youth/submissions/2023/2023-06-13_opening-statement-rachel-coyle-head-of-campaigns-and-mobilisation-the-national-women-s-council_en.pdf

⁵IHREC/ESRI (2019) Caring and Unpaid Work in Ireland - https://www.ihrec.ie/app/uploads/2019/07/Caring-and-Unpaid-Work-in-Ireland_Final.pdf

⁶NWC (2025) Pre-Budget Submission 2025 https://www.nwci.ie/images/uploads/NWC_Pre-Budget_Submission_2025_FINAL.pdf

⁷Action Aid/NWC (2024) A Feminist Vision of Care and Economic Equality - <https://www.nwci.ie/images/uploads/A-Feminist-Vision-of-Care-and-Economic-Equality.pdf>

⁸NWC 2022 A Toolkit for Local Authorities on Supporting Family-Friendly Local Government Available at: https://www.nwci.ie/images/uploads/NWC_Family-Friendly_Toolkit.pdf

⁹Cullen, P., and McGing, C 2024 Women Beyond the Dail: Access, Representation and Retention in Irish Local Government, National Women's Council of Ireland, https://www.nwci.ie/images/uploads/Women_Beyond_the_Dail_2024.pdf

¹⁰NWC (2024) Alliance for Gender Quotas at Local Level Position Paper https://www.nwci.ie/images/uploads/FINAL_Formatted_Gender_Quotas_Position_Paper.pdf

The abuses suffered by women whether at the hands of paramilitary groups, state forces, or within their own homes have never been adequately acknowledged, let alone addressed in legal frameworks.

One of the most striking themes that emerged in the Women's Assembly was the deep disconnect between women in the North and South regarding their understanding of the conflict and its continuing impact. Many women from the South had never considered themselves part of a post-conflict society, viewing the conflict or "Troubles" as something that happened "up there". However, Assembly discussions revealed that partition, media censorship, historical injustices, and church and state repression shaped women's experiences on both sides of the border. Women in the South reflected on how successive Irish governments, through silence or deliberate avoidance, distanced themselves from the conflict in Northern Ireland. This lack of engagement created a widespread failure to recognise and understand the struggles of women in the North, leading to expressions of shame and guilt when participants learned about the ongoing realities of discrimination, economic inequality, and political instability that still shape women's lives today.

While official narratives often frame the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement as the end of conflict, the Assembly made it clear that its legacy continues through transgenerational trauma, addiction, mental health issues, sectarian intimidation, segregation in housing and education, policing practices, and the persistent exclusion of victims and survivors from justice and reconciliation processes. Women also challenged the perception that violence and division were exclusive to the North, highlighting the systemic abuses faced in the South such as state and religious control over women's bodies, the Magdalene Laundries, and forced adoptions. These were forms of systemic violence that have not been framed as part of the wider post-conflict conversation.

Participants emphasised that while the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement was a historic milestone it failed to fully address the past; particularly for victims and survivors of violence, but ignoring the past does not make it disappear¹¹. Assembly members expressed concern about the culture of historical

denial and reluctance to engage with the realities of conflict, a pattern that exists across the island. While improving relations between North and South and between Ireland and the UK is important, any meaningful constitutional debate must embed truth, justice, and reconciliation as core pillars, rather than treating them as afterthoughts.

Women's exclusion from peace and reconciliation processes is not a new phenomenon. Historically, these efforts have been male-dominated, with women's experiences of conflict largely ignored. As Women's Aid Federation NI highlighted in the late 1990s, the political peace process in Northern Ireland was only one part of the equation. What was also needed was "another peace process, one which tackles violence in the home"¹². Without an honest understanding of the gendered impact of conflict and women's exclusion from decision-making, future political frameworks risk reinforcing inequality.

One of the most overlooked aspects of this history is that 91% of those killed during the conflict were men and boys¹³. While this statistic has often been used to reinforce a narrow, male-centred narrative of the conflict, it reveals a more complex gendered impact. Women, though also killed, interned, and imprisoned during this period, were largely left to play the role of rebuilding shattered communities, raising families alone, caring for the injured, and advocating for justice within a political system that continually marginalised them. Experiences of conflict related sexual violence, domestic abuse, and trauma remain largely absent from mainstream justice mechanisms. The abuses suffered by women whether at the hands of paramilitary groups, state forces, or within their own homes have never been adequately acknowledged, let alone addressed in legal frameworks.

Religious and state institutions have played a central role in controlling women's lives across the island. The close relationship between church and state shaped laws, policies, and social norms that restricted women's autonomy and

¹¹Duggan, D. (2024) The Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Act 2023 and the Irish government response ARINS blog <https://www.ria.ie/blog/the-northern-ireland-troubles-legacy-and-reconciliation-act-2023-and-the-irish-government-response/>

¹²Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland (1999). Annual Report 1998/1999. Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland

¹³Relatives for Justice (2024) Opening Statement Andrée Murphy, Deputy Director, Relatives for Justice Committee on the Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement

reinforced patriarchal structures. Partition cemented this control, creating two deeply conservative states where religious institutions wielded significant influence over society, shaping gender roles and limiting women's rights. While sectarian divisions in the North reinforced rigid social expectations, the South saw the Catholic Church maintain a dominant role in areas such as healthcare, education, and family life. This institutional control has left a lasting legacy. Any discussion of reconciliation must acknowledge how partition enabled these structures to thrive, shaping gendered oppression in ways that still impact women and marginalised communities today.

The unresolved legacy of conflict continues to hinder meaningful discussions about the way forward. Without directly addressing historical trauma, reconciliation will remain limited and surface-level. A feminist approach to constitutional change recognises that reconciliation is not only about addressing past violence but also about dismantling present inequalities. Conflict and misogyny are deeply interlinked, shaping the political culture and everyday life on this island. Tackling these systemic issues is essential to building a just and caring society where all voices are heard and valued. However, many women fear that discussions on the island's constitutional future will pressure them to "move on" without fully reckoning with the deep legacies of conflict. This concern became evident in the Assembly, particularly as discussions shifted from reflecting on the past on day one to envisioning the future on day two.

Reconciliation is essential to building a truly shared and feminist future. For reconciliation to be meaningful, it must be deliberate, structured, and embedded in constitutional change. Healing spaces must be purposefully created. Reconciliation is not a box-ticking exercise or a one-time event but an evolving process that requires time, resources, and commitment. A feminist approach to constitutional conversations challenges the assumption that peace is already achieved, instead emphasising that true peace requires truth-telling, reparations, and structural transformation centring truth, justice, and

healing as essential in breaking cycles of violence, exclusion, and silencing in the pursuit of an inclusive and just society.

4. Recognising and Celebrating Women's Multiple Identities Across Our Island

The Women's Assembly highlighted that meaningful constitutional change cannot be discussed without addressing deep-rooted histories of colonialism, sectarianism, and exclusion and how these have shaped our identities.

Despite time constraints, the Women's Assembly created space to acknowledge and celebrate the island's diverse identities. Discussions highlighted the need for a deeper exploration of how these identities were historically constructed, weaponised, and reinforced through legal and political structures. Meaningful engagement to unpick deeply rooted identities to better understand ourselves and each other will require sustained dialogue, resources, and long-term time commitment which must be the essential foundation for any future constitutional process.

For many participants, identity was not just about political affiliation, but about how identity has been controlled, policed, and even erased in public and private life. Women who identify as Irish living in Northern Ireland spoke about how, for decades, they were forced to suppress or hide their Irish identity for their own safety and that even today, the Irish language and culture is diminished in public spaces. While much of the constitutional conversation focuses on Unionist fears in a post Irish unity scenario, there is far less recognition of the historical and everyday realities of suppression that those described as Catholic/Nationalist have endured and continue to endure.

A key question that emerged from the Assembly was how British identity would be recognised and protected in any future

constitutional arrangement. Women from Unionist backgrounds expressed uncertainty and fear that their cultural and political identity could be sidelined in a post Irish unity scenario. However, there was also recognition that identity protections should not be framed as an exclusive concern for one group but as a universal principle. A shared feminist future offers an opportunity to address the systemic inequalities and historical hurts that have shaped this island, ensuring that everyone's identity is recognised and respected, on equal terms, without hierarchy or exception.

The right to identify as Irish, British, or both, is already enshrined in the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement, but beyond this, there is currently no broader framework that actively protects British identity, or indeed, any identity, within the structures of Northern Ireland or the UK. Despite concerns about identity protections in a united Ireland, Unionist identity is not currently safeguarded beyond the symbolic recognition within the Good Friday Agreement, there are no constitutional guarantees in the UK that explicitly protect British identity in Northern Ireland, nor does the region have the Bill of Rights that was originally promised in the peace process. Yet, the fear of identity loss is often cited as a reason to avoid engagement in constitutional discussions which is a challenge that highlights the need for an open, rights-based conversation rather than retreat from the debate. Some women noted that the constitutional conversation presents an opportunity to build pressure within the Unionist community for progressive reforms from Unionist leaders in Northern Ireland such as a long-overdue Bill of Rights, improved equality legislation, and stronger protections for workers and public services.

Despite Assembly members coming from many different backgrounds and identities, the issues facing women, and the hopes for future generations were remarkably similar. For many, this process was the first time they had meaningful conversations with women from a Unionist background, proving that when safe, inclusive spaces are created, dialogue across

divides is possible and transformative. The Assembly facilitated this through the ground rules of active listening, staying curious and assuming good intentions leading to a space where women could speak more openly about their lived experiences, fears, and hopes for the future without judgement.

Beyond the binary of nationalism and unionism, two reductive indicators that fail to acknowledge the complexity of women's identities, migrant women and women of colour in the Assembly raised a different set of questions about identity and belonging. Migrant women felt excluded from the constitutional debate, treated as outsiders despite the direct impact constitutional changes would have on their lives. It is often overlooked that our migrant communities can offer valuable perspectives from their own experiences if they have come to Ireland from a post-conflict country.

There were no Roma women in the Assembly but for Traveller women it was clear that their identity is deeply impacted by experiences of structural discrimination, exclusion from public life, and criminalisation by the state. Many Traveller women experience housing discrimination, disproportionate support for their families, and routine racism in employment, healthcare, and education¹⁴. For these women, the constitutional conversation raised questions about whether the future of the island will finally offer them equality, recognition, representation and security.

Avoiding these conversations will only deepen divisions. A shared feminist future offers the chance to build a society where all identities are recognised, with rights, protections, and dignity guaranteed. The Assembly did not produce concrete solutions for this but highlighted the urgent need for deeper engagement. It exposed how constitutional debates have long sidelined women, migrants, Travellers, and other marginalised communities, framing identity and reconciliation through a narrow political lens while ignoring ongoing systemic racism, sectarianism, and exclusion.

¹⁴ Government of Ireland. (2024). National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy II (2024–2028) Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/834f1-national-traveller-and-roma-inclusion-strategy-ii-2024-2028/>

Violence against women remains one of the most pervasive and structurally embedded forms of oppression across the island of Ireland. It transcends national identity, political affiliation, class, race and geography, affecting women in both the North and South.

To move forward, any constitutional model must ensure that those historically locked out of power are finally heard, represented, and protected in a future where justice and equality are realities for all who call this island home.

5. Ending Violence Against Women Must Be A Priority

Violence against women remains one of the most pervasive and structurally embedded forms of oppression across the island of Ireland. It transcends national identity, political affiliation, class, race and geography, affecting women in both the North and South. The Assembly recognised that this is not an individual problem, but a systemic issue reinforced by legal, political, and economic structures that continue to fail women. In particular, the legacies of conflict and division have shaped patterns of gender-based violence, with patriarchal power structures reenforced by paramilitary groups, religious institutions, or state actors keeping survivors silent and blocking their path to justice¹⁵.

Despite progress in recent years, both jurisdictions still fail to provide adequate protections, resources, and justice for survivors of domestic abuse, sexual violence, and coercive control. There is an inconsistency in law enforcement responses and a general culture of victim blaming. While legal and judicial systems remain flawed, with many cases never making it to trial, or resulting in convictions¹⁶. Economic structures and poor state policies also trap women in abusive relationships through housing insecurity, financial dependence, and inadequate social protections¹⁷. The border further complicates access to safety and support, as differing legal systems, social welfare policies, and law enforcement practices create barriers for survivors who may seek refuge across jurisdictions¹⁸. Addressing violence against women requires not just legal reforms but also the transformation of social and economic conditions that enable violence to persist.

The Assembly called for an end to violence against women to be a priority in our shared future. There is an urgent need for stronger accountability mechanisms to ensure governments and public institutions uphold their obligations to protect women. While both Northern Ireland via the UK and the Republic of Ireland are signatories to the Istanbul Convention, implementation remains inconsistent. The principles of the Istanbul convention must be fully integrated into future constitutional conversations and frameworks. A feminist approach to constitutional change recognises that true equality and justice are impossible without prioritising the eradication of violence against women. The Assembly emphasised that tackling violence against women must be a core component of any feminist reconciliation process, rather than a secondary or separate issue.

6. A Feminist Shared Ireland Needs an Economy That Works for All

The current economic system in both jurisdictions on the island prioritises profit over people and planet, endless economic growth over community wellbeing, and market stability over care and support¹⁹. A feminist approach to constitutional conversations recognises that women's economic equality must be central, rejecting the outdated notion that women's issues are peripheral to the economy. Without a feminist reimagining of economic structures, constitutional change risks perpetuating, rather than dismantling, existing inequalities.

Doughnut Economics and other feminist economic models were explored by the Assembly as alternatives to the dominant current systems that have failed both people and the planet²⁰. Feminist models prioritise sustainability, human rights, and collective well-being over extractive, highly polluting capitalism. Women's unpaid and underpaid work including caregiving, domestic work, and community activism must be formally brought into the economic planning and policymaking rather

¹⁵ NWC (2024) North South Co-operation to Tackle Violence Against Women Dialogue Report Available at: https://www.nwci.ie/images/uploads/NWC_WAFNI_Violence_Against_Women_REPORT.pdf

¹⁶ National Women's Council (2023) Justice system reform for survivors of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence: Ensuring a victim/survivor-centred approach. Available at: https://www.nwci.ie/images/uploads/NWC_DSV_Justice_Report.pdf

¹⁷ Women's Aid (2020). The domestic abuse report 2020: The hidden housing crisis. Available at: <https://www.womensaid.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/The-Domestic-Abuse-Report-2020-The-Hidden-Housing-Crisis.pdf>.

¹⁸ NWC (2024) North South Co-operation to Tackle Violence Against Women Dialogue Report Available at: https://www.nwci.ie/images/uploads/NWC_WAFNI_Violence_Against_Women_REPORT.pdf

¹⁹ European Women's Lobby (2020) Purple Pact - https://www.womenlobby.org/IMG/pdf/purplepact_publication_web.pdf

²⁰ Roworth, K. (2017). Doughnut economics: Seven ways to think like a 21st-century economist Chelsea Green Publishing

than remaining an afterthought²¹. Economic justice cannot be separated from climate justice and a truly feminist economy would protect natural resources, promote regenerative practices and sustainable industries, and ensure that environmental policies do not disproportionately impact already marginalised communities.

A feminist economy is about fundamentally redefining what we value. The Assembly called for a shift away from economic policies that serve only markets and the so called “1%” and toward models that prioritise the “99%”²², equality, sustainability, and collective care. If constitutional change is to be meaningful, if we are to begin looking towards a “New Ireland” then it must truly offer something new, it must guarantee economic structures that work for all, while protecting the environment for future generations.

7. Women Leading the Way: The Frameworks Exist, Now It's Time for Action

The Women's Assembly made it clear that women will not be passive observers in the constitutional debate. There was overwhelming consensus that women must actively shape Ireland's future.

Women are not waiting for solutions or deferring to decision-makers. Women across Ireland are already occupying space, creating forums, and leading critical conversations about the island's constitutional future. NWC's All-Island Women's Forum,

the Belfast Women's Assembly, and various grassroots feminist movements have already begun shaping discussions on governance, justice, and equality, challenging the traditional, male-dominated structures of political debate.

The tools to ensure meaningful participation already exist. The Women's Charter for Inclusive Constitutional Futures, developed through extensive feminist research and deliberation, provides a clear, actionable framework for embedding gender equality in constitutional discussions.

Additionally, the Joint Oireachtas Committee for the Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement in the Republic of Ireland recently concluded its investigation into women's perspectives on constitutional change, producing strong recommendations that should now be advanced by the relevant authorities, North and South²³.

Women are already leading the way, shaping the discourse, and putting forward feminist frameworks for change. The challenge is ensuring that political systems adapt to support and sustain this momentum and meaningfully resource these conversations.

The Assembly called for resources to be made available to continue our important work and to bring the Women's Assembly around the island and into marginalised communities. The Assembly also called for endorsement of *The Women's Charter for Inclusive Constitutional Futures* as a tangible positive framework for inclusive constitutional conversations.

²¹ UK Women's Budget Group (2022) A Green and Caring Economy <https://wbg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/A-Green-and-Caring-Economy-Report.pdf>

²² Taneja, A., Kamande, A., Guharay Gomez, C., Abed, D., Lawson, M., & Mukhia, N. (2025) Takers not makers: The unjust poverty and unearned wealth of colonialism. Oxfam International. <https://www.oxfam.org/en/research/takers-not-makers-unjust-poverty-and-unearned-wealth-colonialism>

²³ Joint Committee on the Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement (2024) Perspectives on Constitutional Change: Women and Constitutional Change https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/committee/dail/33/joint_committee_on_the_implementation_of_the_good_friday_agreement/reports/2024/2024-11-06_perspectives-on-constitutional-change-women-and-constitutional-change_en.pdf

Key Learnings

The Assembly succeeded in moving beyond the current binary debate on Ireland's constitutional future. It succeeded in creating space for difficult conversations centring marginalised experiences and voices. It challenged dominant narratives about women's roles, about our island's unique history, the legacy of conflict and its impact on reconciliation, all while encouraging bold feminist aspirations for what the future could look like.

Discussions surrounding identity requiring deeper exploration and outreach beyond activist circles was identified as a priority for future engagements. Political will and sustainable funding to meaningfully engage women's experiences and voices remain critical concerns.

Time constraints restricted deeper engagement in these vital conversations, limiting opportunities for reflection and meaningful dialogue. More space for healing would have been beneficial before moving participants toward developing solutions. Our Assembly was held over two days spanning three months. A residential format might have provided a better environment for deeper connection, processing, and collective visioning.

The Assembly brought together 50 women from across Ireland, but this gathering alone could not fully capture the diversity of women's experiences. Many voices remain unheard. Unlike the formal Ireland's Citizens' Assembly process which provides financial support for participants, including travel, accommodation, and other expenses, this Assembly did not have the resources to offer expenses for care or travel. As a result, some women, particularly those with caregiving responsibilities or financial constraints may have been unable to take part. While funding limitations will always pose challenges, ensuring greater accessibility in future initiatives will be important to truly reflect the realities of women's lives.

The Assembly marked the start of a longer feminist intervention that will be led by NWC. It is essential that spaces be created to ensure women are part of constitutional discussions but more critically we must ensure that feminist principles shape the process from the outset. This requires holding political leaders and influencers accountable, ensuring they speak and act responsibly in the future debate and securing the necessary resources to make meaningful democratic engagement a reality.

Conclusions/ What's Next?

The Future of Feminist Constitutional Engagement

The Women's Assembly was a success in bringing together women's experiences and feminist perspectives on constitutional change. It moved the conversation beyond a binary framework, highlighting that feminist perspectives can be a guiding force in shaping Ireland's future. We hope that its impact will be felt into the future as having laid the groundwork for concrete strategies to embed feminist principles into constitutional processes.

The Assembly reinforced the critical role of women-only spaces where women can engage openly, build solidarity, and shape feminist visions of the future without fear of exclusion. Assembly members also highlighted that while women-only spaces are vital, there are many potential allies we can bring along with us. Indeed, these conversations are important, but we must also ensure that we are not "preaching to the converted" or that we do not inadvertently silo ourselves from where decisions are being made.

The Assembly process also affirmed NWC's role in fostering reconciliation by providing spaces that bridge the gaps between divided communities.

The support of St Stephen's Green Trust for this work was courageous and timely. The Assembly highlighted the importance of resourcing feminist led democracy building efforts and made clear that greater investment is required to ensure that women's voices are heard and influential in decision making. The Assembly recognised that democracy is incomplete if women and marginalised communities are not actively shaping it. Securing long-term funding for follow-up assemblies and ongoing deliberative engagement is critical. One-off consultations are not sufficient and risk being tokenistic rather than transformative.

To sustain the momentum generated by the Women's Assembly, feminist engagement must extend beyond the community space and into formal political structures. Without intentional efforts to embed feminist voices in these processes, patterns of exclusion will persist. Women are already leading the way in shaping discourse, developing feminist frameworks, and advancing visions for change. The real question now is whether political institutions will acknowledge and integrate these frameworks creating a future that is truly inclusive and equal for all.

While the Assembly brought together 50 women from across Ireland, including a participant from one of the offshore islands, it was clear that this gathering alone could not fully capture the diversity of women's experiences. Despite efforts to ensure broad representation, there are still many voices that remain unheard. Future engagement must be expanded to include women from diverse sectors, professions, and lived realities, ensuring the meaningful participation of working-class women, disabled women, LGBTQ+ women, younger voices, and migrant, Traveller and Roma women and other groups that continue to be marginalised in decision-making spaces. The next phase of this work must prioritise reaching out to these communities, ensuring that their perspectives are not only part of the conversation but actively shape constitutional discussions and policies.

NWC approached the Women's Assembly with a genuine openness to learning, engaging fully in the process without preconceived ideas about outcome. This willingness to be immersed allowed for meaningful dialogue and valuable insights to emerge. The process was rich with discussion, creating space to confront barriers and explore new ideas. While many important conclusions can be drawn from this experience, the Women's Assembly is just the beginning. The momentum must now be directed into activism, advocacy, and institutional change. Women must claim their rightful place in shaping Ireland's future, ensuring that gender equality, care, justice, and inclusion are not just ideals, but the very foundations of a New Shared Ireland.



List of Assembly Member Participants

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Alexa Moore, The Rainbow Project
Amanda Ferguson, Journalist
Amanda Slevin, Queens University
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Catherine Cooke, FWIN
Chloe Ní Mháille, Comhar Caomhán Teo
Eileen Weir, Community Development and Peacebuilding Practitioner
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Eilish Walsh, Sisterhub
Ethel Buckley, SIPTU
Fiona Dukelow, UCC
Gabriela Burnett, Latina Women against Violence
Helena Power, Irish Traveller Movement
Jennie Stevens, Maynooth University
Jennifer Okeke, National Women's Council Chairperson
Joanna McMinn, Community Development and Feminist Activist
Kateriona Nevin, Pavee Point
Kelsey Doyle, Belong To
Leanne Abernethy, Women in Loyalism
Louise Bayliss, Spark
Lynn Carvil, Women'sTec
Lynsey Kavanagh, Pavee Point
Margaret Coughlan, ICTU Women's Committee
María Elena Costa, INAR
Martina Devlin, Journalist
Martina Quinn, Alice PR
Mary Hartnett, Sisterhub
Mary McAleese, Former President of Ireland
Mary McAuliffe, UCD
Mary McGuiggan, Community Activist, Educator, and Environmental Advocate
Maureen Bassett, Feminist Activist and Equality and Social Justice champion
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Nikki Gallagher, IBEC
Nora Stapleton, Sport Ireland
Nuala Toman, Disability Federation NI
Rachel Morrogh, DRCC
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Roisin Markham, Innovative Strategic Designer for Societal Transformation
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Sarah Mason, Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland
Shirley Scott, DRCC
Sian Muldowney, ICON
Sonya Lennon, Entrepreneur and advocate for gender equality
Sophie Nelson, Here NI
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