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The Role of Diplomatic Tools in Supporting All-Ireland Efforts to Reduce Violence Against Women

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Introduction

Violence against women is a widespread issue with long-lasting impacts on individuals, families, and communities. It encompasses various forms of abuse, including domestic violence, sexual assault, and human trafficking, affecting women across all backgrounds. Globally, one in three women will experience physical or sexual violence in their lifetime (World Health Organisation, 2017), and in Ireland, one in four women will face domestic violence (Safe Ireland, 2022).

On the island of Ireland, violence against women is a significant concern. Both Ireland and Northern Ireland have high rates of domestic violence, sexual assault, and gender-based violence. Public recognition of the problem has increased, but challenges remain in ensuring comprehensive support for victims and consistent application of policies. Despite legal advancements, gaps persist in service provision, with barriers to accessibility and coordination, particularly in cross-border areas.

International frameworks, like the [Istanbul Convention](#), provide a comprehensive approach to combating violence against women. Ratified by both Ireland and Northern Ireland, the Convention sets out standards for preventing violence, protecting victims, and prosecuting perpetrators. However, challenges in fully implementing its provisions persist, as resource constraints, cultural attitudes, and political complexities hinder progress.

Highlights

One in four women in Ireland experiences domestic violence, highlighting the widespread nature of the issue and the urgent need for systemic responses.

The Istanbul Convention, UN initiatives, and EU programmes shape Ireland's policies on combating violence against women, though challenges in full implementation persist.

Ireland and Northern Ireland have distinct legal frameworks, complicating seamless service provision for victims, despite shared initiatives like the PEACE PLUS programme.

National action plans in both Ireland and Northern Ireland face challenges such as inadequate funding, inconsistent coordination, and accessibility issues, especially in rural areas.

Sustained efforts, including increased funding, cross-border partnerships, and diplomatic collaboration, are essential for a unified and effective approach to reducing violence against women across the island of Ireland.

Both Ireland and Northern Ireland have developed national action plans addressing gender-based violence, but gaps in coordination, funding, and accessibility remain. Cross-border cooperation is essential, as initiatives such as the [PEACE PLUS programme](#) aim to support survivors and tackle shared challenges. However, differences in legal frameworks between the two regions complicate seamless cooperation. This insight brief explores the role of diplomatic tools in supporting efforts to reduce violence against women across the island of Ireland, examining frameworks, challenges, and the need for greater coordination in cross-border efforts.

The Role of International Diplomatic Tools

International diplomatic tools are critical in addressing violence against women. Ireland and Northern Ireland actively participate in international frameworks aimed at combating gender-based violence, especially through the Istanbul Convention, United Nations (UN) initiatives, and European Union (EU) programmes. These frameworks shape regional policies and encourage cross-border cooperation.

Through EU mechanisms, Ireland can advocate for harmonised legal frameworks across member states, fostering cross-border cooperation

The Istanbul Convention

A key international framework is the Istanbul Convention, ratified by both Ireland and Northern Ireland. It sets comprehensive standards for preventing violence, protecting victims, and prosecuting perpetrators. The Convention focuses on the root causes of violence, such as gender inequality, and mandates legal and institutional measures. In Ireland, the Convention has influenced reforms like the Domestic Violence Act 2018. However, full implementation faces challenges, including inconsistent application, resource limitations, and political barriers.

United Nations Engagement

Ireland plays an active role in international forums like the UN, advocating for gender equality and the elimination of violence against women. A significant initiative is [UN Security Council Resolution 1325](#) on Women, Peace, and Security, where Ireland has highlighted the importance of women's participation in

peacebuilding and violence prevention. This participation strengthens Ireland's global position and promotes a unified approach to addressing gender-based violence.

Northern Ireland, however, has a more limited diplomatic role due to its status within the UK. While Northern Ireland's concerns are often included in broader UK foreign policy, there are opportunities for cross-border engagement with Ireland, particularly within the EU framework, to address shared challenges despite Northern Ireland's absence from global diplomatic spaces.

The European Union

The EU is another vital diplomatic tool. As a member state, Ireland can influence EU policy and participate in programmes addressing gender-based violence, such as the EU Gender Equality Strategy. This provides a foundation for national policies and funds initiatives combating gender-based violence. Through EU mechanisms, Ireland can advocate for harmonised legal frameworks across member states, fostering cross-border cooperation.

While Northern Ireland is no longer part of the EU post-Brexit, it continues to benefit from EU-funded programmes like PEACE PLUS, which address cross-border issues, including gender-based violence and reconciliation. However, differences in legal frameworks between Northern Ireland and Ireland make it challenging to align domestic policies with EU initiatives.

The Role of International Diplomatic Tools

Effective coordination of international tools is key to addressing violence against women. Cross-border programmes like PEACE PLUS and the All-Island Community Fund offer significant collaboration opportunities. These initiatives allow Ireland and Northern Ireland to pool resources and align strategies, leading to more unified responses.

Ireland's international participation helps elevate gender-based violence as a global issue, encouraging stronger global commitments and funding. Although Northern Ireland has limited diplomatic influence, cross-border partnerships ensure its concerns are considered in global and regional efforts.

National and Regional Action Plans

Both Ireland and Northern Ireland have developed national action plans to combat violence against women, focusing on prevention, protection, and prosecution. These plans aim to create frameworks that support victims, prosecute offenders, and address violence's root causes.

framework aims to improve prevention, protection, and support services, specifically addressing issues like online harassment.

- However, challenges include inadequate funding and lack of coordination across schools, health services, and social care systems. While progress has been made, resource distribution between urban and rural areas remains uneven, undermining the impact of services

Although Northern Ireland has limited diplomatic influence, cross-border partnerships ensure its concerns are considered in global and regional efforts

Northern Ireland's Recent Strategy: A Critical Look

Northern Ireland's Stopping Domestic and Sexual Violence and Abuse Strategy offers a comprehensive approach to gender-based violence, focusing

Ireland's Strategy

- [Ireland's Third National Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security](#) (2019–2024) tackles a broad range of issues, including gender equality in peacebuilding and the prevention of violence.
- The Action Plan has influenced legal reforms such as the Domestic Violence Act 2018. However, it is still being implemented, and its full potential has yet to be realised due to resource limitations.
- There are also challenges in adequate funding and delays in implementation, particularly in rural areas, due to resource challenges.
- Ireland's Domestic, Sexual and Gender-Based Violence Strategy (2016–2021) faced significant criticism for insufficient funding and delayed services.

on prevention, protection, and justice. However, challenges remain in its implementation. Despite progress in legislative reforms and the establishment of survivor-focused services, gaps persist in accessibility, especially in rural areas.

Inconsistent resource allocation remains a challenge. Funding has been insufficient to meet the demand for services, and equitable distribution across regions is difficult. Rural areas face significant barriers to accessing support, and while the strategy's focus on community-based services has proven effective, it has yet to be fully realised in some regions. The strategy must also navigate a complex political landscape, where political instability can delay the implementation of reforms.

The strategy must also navigate a complex political landscape, shaped by the broader context of the Northern Ireland Executive and its relationship with the UK government. Political instability and lack of consensus on key issues can undermine the strategy's effectiveness and delay the implementation of reforms.

Northern Ireland's Strategy

- [Northern Ireland's Stopping Domestic and Sexual Violence and Abuse Strategy](#) (2016–2026) aims to reduce domestic violence and sexual abuse through prevention, protection, and victim support.
- It has prioritised improving services such as refuges and helplines but faces criticisms for gaps in coordination and insufficient data, making it difficult to address diverse needs across populations.
- The Violence Against Girls Strategic Framework 2024–2031 is a new initiative in Northern Ireland focusing on younger women and girls, recognising that this group experiences gender-based violence in distinct ways, including peer violence, sexual harassment, and online abuse. This

Cross-Border Cooperation and Challenges

Cross-border cooperation between Ireland and Northern Ireland is crucial in tackling gender-based violence. Programmes like PEACE PLUS and the All-Island Community Fund focus on reconciliation, gender equality, and supporting survivors. These initiatives allocate significant resources to women's shelters, helplines, and community-based outreach.

Despite efforts, coordination remains a challenge. Ireland and Northern Ireland have distinct legal frameworks, creating

obstacles in providing consistent services for victims, particularly those near the border. Cross-border cooperation has been essential in addressing these gaps, but differences in legal and policy landscapes make seamless cooperation difficult.

Ongoing diplomatic engagement, increased funding, and stronger cross-border partnerships will be critical to ensuring sustained efforts to combat violence against women across the island of Ireland

Initiatives like PEACE PLUS and the All-Island Community Fund support joint efforts to tackle gender-based violence but face challenges in harmonising services across the two jurisdictions. Laws such as the Domestic Violence (Northern Ireland) Order 2008 and the Domestic Violence Act 2018 create different legal environments, complicating cross-border referrals and joint initiatives. Administrative differences, such as variations in funding mechanisms and governance, further complicate the creation of a coordinated approach.

Cross-border projects depend on the priorities of both the Irish and UK governments, leading to disparities in funding, management, and implementation. These differences result in inconsistent service delivery, leaving border communities under-resourced.

Conclusion

Violence against women remains a significant challenge across the island of Ireland, with both Ireland and Northern Ireland making substantial efforts to combat this issue. Through international frameworks, national strategies, and cross-border cooperation, progress has been made in reducing the prevalence of gender-based violence. However, gaps remain, particularly in policy implementation, resource allocation, and coordination across jurisdictions.

Diplomatic tools, such as international agreements and regional collaborations, play an important role in fostering a unified approach to combating violence against women. The Istanbul Convention, alongside national action plans like Ireland's Third National Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security and Northern Ireland's Stopping Domestic and Sexual Violence and Abuse Strategy, provides a strong legal

and policy foundation. However, inconsistent application of these frameworks at the local level, particularly in rural and border areas, continues to hinder progress.

Cross-border initiatives, such as the PEACE PLUS programme and the All-Island Community Fund, have proven effective in addressing shared challenges and providing support services. Yet, legal, and administrative differences between Ireland and Northern Ireland create barriers to seamless cooperation, limiting the potential for these programmes to achieve their full impact.

Ongoing diplomatic engagement, increased funding, and stronger cross-border partnerships will be critical to ensuring sustained efforts to combat violence against women across the island of Ireland. A coordinated approach, addressing cultural and societal barriers, holds the potential for meaningful, long-term change.

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This insight brief was developed by Jackie Manning, D&I Project Manager at Gas Networks Ireland. It provides an overview of key efforts in reducing violence against women on the island of Ireland, outlining the roles played by international agreements, national strategies, and cross-border initiatives.

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