

Margaret Ward

The particular circumstances of Northern Ireland

It is generally accepted that most international instruments reflect the minimum consensus of agreement between State parties who ratify any subsequent agreement. As a result of this, we would greatly welcome recognition of the international importance and overall ethos of CEDAW coupled with a determination to both reflect and build upon the standards laid down by the Convention.

Within the Bill of Rights debate to date there has been little acknowledgement of the particular circumstances of Northern Ireland in terms of the material reality of women's lives. There is no acknowledgement that the conflict has impacted on women's lives in many ways, affecting their under-representation in public and political life; violence against women; mental health issues in communities; the impact on women's life opportunities in education, employment and training opportunities. Measures such as UN resolution 1325 have made no impact on this.

The following are the main areas of concern for women in Northern Ireland:

Democratic Rights

In the political and public sphere women are seriously under-represented. 18 of our newly elected Assembly of 108 members are women.

By any measure women do not have full and equal participation in political and public life and access to power and decision making.

A commitment to positive action could have compelled political parties to select equal numbers of male and female candidates. No positive action measures have been introduced to deal with this and at the present rate we will all be into the next century before a critical mass of women in politics is reached.

The women's sector would like to advance the case that this situation is so fundamentally undemocratic that the Bill of Rights must promote and protect women's rights in this sphere.

Violence Against Women: The right to dignity and physical integrity

Within the debate to date the gender-specific nature of domestic violence and sexual violence has been obscured. There is no 'gender parity' in terms of who is most affected by gender-based violence. In her report to the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations, 2 February 1996, the Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women stated very clearly that 'the language of law must be clear and unambiguous in protecting women victims from gender-specific violence within the family and intimate relationships.'

Women are currently at threat of violence in the home, and society at large and little recognition or resources have gone into dealing with this onslaught.

We need an acknowledgment of the problem and its impact on the lives of women and girls and an explicit commitment to eliminate gender-based violence.

This should reflect the standard laid down in the 1993 UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women, asking states to pursue by all appropriate means and without delay, a policy of eliminating violence against women.

Health issues

Because of women's particular reproductive capacities, access to sexual and reproductive health services is critical to their health and well-being. Adequate resources for sexual health services, including family planning and reproductive rights is essential. Without a guarantee of access to these rights all other rights for women become contingent.

Social and economic rights

Women view the inclusion of socio-economic rights generally within a Bill of Rights as essential. There has been an abject failure in this society to promote the equality of women in society in socio-economic terms eg. pensions, pay, social security etc.

Much of this inequality stems from the lack of acknowledgement and (financial) value attached to the 'caring role' appropriated to women leading to blatant inequalities being faced by lone parents, carers and women pensioners, eg lack of affordable childcare.

The establishment of a culture of socio-economic rights could fundamentally lift the position of women in society - and thereby also lift many of the families and groups in society who are suffering from the dual nightmare of poverty and inequality.