

***The Society for Ecumenical Studies  
in association with the Iona Community***

## **Breaking Down Barriers in the Twenty-First Century**

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### ***Women and Breaking down Walls in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century***

#### **Introduction**

In this presentation I intend to give some examples of initiatives by women who have recognised a barrier and have tried to find ways of overcoming the. One will be an ecumenical example, another an international example supported by women across the world, and a third a national secular initiative.

#### **The Women's Interfaith Media Literacy Project**

The National Board of Catholic Women of England and Wales has been engaged in Interfaith dialogue at national level, but wanted to enable this to happen at local level. Therefore through our contacts and networks among faith communities we identified three issues relating to the media which were of particular concern to women of faith. These were –

- The way that the media market to children, especially in relation to their premature sexualisation.
- The stereotyping and portrayal of women in the media, particularly concerning violence against women

- The stereotyping and portrayal of faith communities in the media. Muslims and many Christians were alarmed at media portrayal of wearing the hijab.

We were anxious to involve other Christian Churches and Faiths in raising awareness of these issues. Hence we applied to the Faith Communities Capacity Building Fund for a £50,000 grant. We outlined our plans to bring together representatives from within the faith communities to discuss the concrete possibilities for working together and sharing resources in the area of media literacy. (Media literacy is the ability to be critical users of the media and to be able to communicate/negotiate with the media on issues of concern.) We proposed to establish a service and resource (i.e. a web-site) designed to help them work together, to become more active, informed, critical and appreciative media users who would be able to express their views to and interact confidently with broadcasting and other media organisations and regulators. This, we hoped, would encourage and strengthen inter-faith co-operation and understanding.

Research conducted for the media regulator (Ofcom) in 2005 has shown that women, who are the main regulators of the domestic media use by children, often feel less confident than men in relation to the new media. Women are also often excluded from the decision taking processes in their own faith communities and the project would also be a confidence building exercise. This would be a three year project.

We were awarded a grant of £25,000 in March 2006 for twelve months, when we would have to re-apply to continue the project. Much of the grant was spent in employing a part-time worker for 15 hours a week, whose main task was to compile a data-base of faith-based organisations and networks, particularly those of women, and also media-literacy networks. A web-site was established, We also employed media literacy and faith network consultants. The Management Committee is ecumenical with membership from the Mother's Union, The Women's Co-ordinating Group of Churches Together in England, and NBCW. A multi-faith advisory panel was set up to try and

ensure that the needs of women in all faith communities were included in the project. We held a launch of the web-site in March this year which was well attended and we now have a data-base.

In the current year plans are in process to take the project into the regions. This autumn we are hoping to hold events in Leeds/Bradford and Birmingham, with maybe two or three after Christmas in London, Bristol and the North-West. These are intended as training events for women who will cascade the skills learned into their communities and enable them to work together for a common purpose breaking down the barriers of ignorance which exist between them.

[www.wiml.org](http://www.wiml.org)

### **UN Resolution 1325**

The second issue is about women's role in peace-making. For many years women's NGOs had been calling for a greater role for women in the many aspects of peace-making. This culminated in Resolution 1325, adopted by the UN Security Council in the year 2000.

The Resolution expressed concern that civilians, particularly women and children, account for the vast majority of those adversely affected by armed conflict. It urged

- Measures to support local women's peace initiatives for conflict resolution.
- All parties in armed conflict to take special measures to protect women and girls from gender based violence, particularly rape and other forms of sexual abuse.
- Respect for the civilian and humanitarian character of refugee camps and settlements and to take into account the particular needs of women and girls, including their design
- Specialised training for peacekeeping personnel on the protection, special needs and human rights of women and children.

Subsequently a study was mandated by the PRESIDENT OF THE Security council on women, peace and security. The study showed that in many conflict areas, e.g. East Timor, Guatemala, Kosovo, Somalia, women, sometimes, working with men, are beginning to transform societies by changing social institutions, traditional gender roles and influencing warring parties. Its main conclusion is that sustainable peace and lasting security cannot be achieved without women's empowerment and full involvement. A report in 2006 showed a patchy response to the Resolution. There were very few countries which had come up with an action plan- those that had were mainly developed countries such as Norway, Sweden, the UK and Canada.

Iraq is an example of the difficulties women face. Iraq is struggling to define its future and women have been largely left out of the process. In the 2005 elections women secured 33% of seats in the National Assembly but remain largely absent from other influential branches of government. Nevertheless a network of 150 women's organisations across Iraq is fighting to preserve women's rights in the new constitution revision process. They are campaigning against Article 41 in the text of the draft constitution that places personal status laws under the influence of religion, sect or belief. These are the laws that administer marriage, divorce, inheritance, child custody, and how religious courts settle disputes among Muslims, Christians and Jews. In 1970 Iraqi women were formally guaranteed equal rights and additional laws ensured their right to vote, attend school, run for office and own property. Under Saddam Hussein women were disenfranchised and Islamic and tribal traditions were strengthened. In spite of protests and appeals to the United Nations and the US Speaker of the United States House of representatives, Article 41 remains in the draft constitution. The leader of the NGOs in Iraq says that women have much support, but that "women's issues are one of the compromise issues among politicians".

NGOs continue to campaign for full implementation of Resolution 1325.

## **Women's National Commission – Violence against Women**

The Women's National Commission is the official and independent advisory body giving the views of women to the Government. It has a few hundred women's NGOs as its partners. One of its strengths is that it is funded by the Government, but this is also a weakness. The remit of one of its working groups is Violence against Women.

The statistics on Violence Against Women make sombre reading. For example:

- Almost half of all adult women in England and Wales have experienced Domestic Violence, sexual assault or stalking.
- In England and Wales, the rate of conviction for rape, after trial, has decreased from 1 in 3 cases reported in 1977 to 1 in 16 in 2002.
- 85% of forced marriage cases dealt with by the FCO involved female victims
- 2 women a week die as a result of Domestic Violence.

In 1995 the Beijing Platform for Action required governments to implement national action plans to end VAW. In the UK progress has been slow and the working group considered that an integrated approach across government departments was needed. The group set about finding evidence to support its judgement.

In December 2004 a letter was sent with twenty questions to each Central Government Department to ask them to set out all the relevant work it was doing to address VAW, and the resources which were allocated. Responses came in in the first quarter of 2005.

The results of the survey were widely reported in the national press. Most departments only recognised responsibilities to VAW in a limited way. It showed that Government does not adopt a consistent approach to VAW. Out of 16 government departments 6 scored 0/10, the highest score was 3.5/10. The Department for Culture, Media and Sport scored 0. Their policies were

described as gender neutral. There was no mention of the Department's work in the licensing of sex-establishments, extending licensing hours for alcohol or regulating media standards. This is in spite of the fact that research on the London borough of Camden revealed inconsistency in licensing regulations. The majority of lap-dancing clubs are licensed as public entertainment premises, with special nudity permission, rather than as sex establishments, which would entail higher licensing costs and more restrictions on available services. The research also showed links between the opening of lap-dancing clubs and sexual assaults against women. The Department of Health received the highest score. Whilst its work on Domestic Violence and Mental Health was praised, there was little on other forms of violence. Similarly there was good training for health professionals on DV but not on VAW more widely.

Among the twelve recommendations put forward were the following:

- all levels of government should work to an agreed definition of VAW
- Integration of VAW into relevant policy initiatives and the encouragement of local inter-agency work
- Training for public servants in VAW and in gender perspectives

Not long after the report appeared the funding for WNC was drastically cut and it no longer had the resources to follow up the report. However NGOs have taken much of this on board and are working to push the issue and to raise awareness.