

Critical Epistemologies Across Borders

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Executive Summary

This report delineates a collaborative interdisciplinary research project developed by University College Cork and Ulster University in partnership with women's groups across the island of Ireland, entitled Critical Epistemologies Across Borders. The project was motivated by concerns regarding women's historical exclusion from constitutional debates and agenda setting on the island of Ireland. It sought to identify and address these exclusions through the establishment of cross-border, cross-identity, secure, participant-oriented spaces for grassroots women to consider questions pertaining to the future of the island in the context of expanding post-Brexit constitutional discourse. This report elucidates the research context, methodology, findings, and conclusions distilled from those findings.

The inclusion of women in constitutional debates has the potential to reframe constitutional agendas by expanding discursive boundaries beyond ethno-nationalist binaries and matters of sovereignty, focusing instead on the needs of the entire community. Moreover, women's constitutional participation can facilitate the incorporation of more gender-sensitive rights and protections into any new or revised constitution. Fundamentally, the inclusion of women in constitutional change is a matter of equity that necessitates a progression beyond traditional gender narratives that suggest grassroots women have limited interest in or contributions to make regarding 'hard' political issues.

Any research project addressing women's voices must acknowledge women in all of their diversity, and this study adopted a pluralist approach. Due to logistical constraints, the research team was unable to include specific groups of women; however, it is anticipated that future research will provide further opportunities to do so. Based on these findings, the researchers assert that action is required from policymakers and stakeholders to ensure women's inclusion in constitutional discussions and representation at all decision-making levels. In the report, the researchers advocate for a pluralistic and inclusive approach to developing new visions of sharing the island, one that encompasses historically marginalised groups such as women, who are often doubly marginalised through intersecting identities such as class, race, nationality, socio-economic status, geographical location, or nationalist affiliation.

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Anaka Collective (<https://www.communityni.org/organisation/anaka-womens-collective>)

Falls Women Centre (<https://www.fallswomenscentre.org/>)

Focus Project Derry (<https://rathmor.com/focus-project/>)

Glencree Centre for Peace and Reconciliation (<https://glencree.ie/>)

Her Loyal Voice (<https://herloyalvoice.com/>)

HereNI (<https://hereni.org/>)

Hilltown Women's Group (<https://www.facebook.com/hilltowncommunityassociation/>)

LGBT Ireland (<https://lgbt.ie/>)

Longford Women's Link (<https://www.lwl.ie/>)

Shankill Women's Centre (<https://www.shankillsharedwomenscentre.org/>)

Women's Collective Ireland – Donegal (<https://womenscollectivedonegal.org/>)

Women's Collective Ireland - North Leitrim Women's Centre
(<https://www.womenscollective.ie/wci-north-leitrim>)

Women's Collective Ireland – Monaghan (<https://www.womenscollective.ie/wci-monaghan>)

Women's Collective Ireland – Ronanstown (<https://www.womenscollective.ie/wci-ronanstown>)

Introduction

The Critical Epistemologies Across Borders (CEAB) research project was conducted between September 2022 and February 2025. It was fully funded by the North-South Research Project (HEA 2022) which is a collaborative funding scheme arising from the Irish Government's Shared Island Initiative. The funding programme is delivered by the Higher Education Authority (HEA) on behalf of the Department of Further and Higher Education Research Innovation and Science (DFHERIS) and involves projects in multiple Higher Education institutions on the island. Critical Epistemologies Across Borders (CEAB) reflected the ideals of the Shared Ireland Initiative, as it represented a partnership between University College Cork (UCC) and Ulster University (UU) to promote and enable the inclusion of grassroots women in constitutional discussions on the island of Ireland. Any constitutional change on the island will drive transformations that will affect women's lives, particularly those of grassroots women. Given the history of the relationship between gender equality concerns in public life and constitutional planning on both sides of the British/Irish border, women face exclusionary barriers in shaping the island's constitutional future (Ashe, 2022). CEAB addresses these issues directly through its theoretical approach and innovative methodological tools.

While the aims and values of CEAB were embedded in the principle that women have the right to be included in discussions and debates around any form of constitutional change that will affect them, it was shaped by findings from earlier research conducted by the UU team North and South of the border. That research project, Gendering Constitutional Conversations, found clear evidence that women wanted to have their say across a range of issues (Ashe, 2022). The UU research identified these issues and uncovered a range of barriers to women's participation, which the UU team's methods attempted to address throughout the project. Critical Epistemologies Across Borders (CEAB) was designed to further explore women's often subjugated knowledges of political, social, and cultural issues across the island, and to provide spaces to enable this knowledge to be shared. It also aimed to open spaces for learning. CEAB hypothesised that such shared knowledges would not only support inclusion but would lead to diverse visions of constitutional change.

Through the development of an innovative mix of political analysis, feminist theory, civic education, and creative methods drawn from Latin American feminist activism, CEAB held

seven cross-border cross-identity workshops, each comprising approximately 20 grassroots women. A final workshop was held with representatives from all the participating groups. These workshops were designed to facilitate women in building and sharing knowledges about constitutional change and their visions of the island's constitutional, social, and economic futures. The research facilitated and gave visibility to those voices that had been historically diminished, side-lined, and devalued – working-class women, rural women, migrant women, and women from the LGBT+ community. The findings from these workshops expose the important role women play in framing constitutional debates, challenging existing hierarchies, and historical exclusions. The conversations that developed in the workshops were sometimes difficult, but they demonstrated the importance of creating spaces in which difficult conversations could occur.

Part One

Constitutional Context

The aspiration to unify Ireland dates to its partition into Northern Ireland (NI) and the Republic of Ireland (ROI), enacted in 1921. From 1969 to 1998, this aspiration was pursued through physical force violence by Irish Republican groups in the context of a complex political and social culture. The 1998 Peace Accord incorporated the aspiration for unification and inserted it as a valid political aim in the final draft. This accord set out the conditions for unity. Any change to the constitutional status of the region can only be achieved with the consent of the majority of the people in both NI and ROI (The Agreement, 1998, Article 1) through referenda on both sides of the border.

After the Agreement, the aspiration for the unification of the island remained, but in political abeyance. However, the UK's exit from the European Union (EU) brought unification to the forefront of political debate, as it represented a route for NI to remain within the EU. Since Brexit, there has been extensive media discussion on this issue, particularly in the print press. Academics have also explored many aspects of the unification process and published key studies (O'Leary 2021; O'Leary 2022). Irish politicians who were previously silent on the issue have become more engaged in speaking publicly about the issue, and the Shared Ireland

Initiative has attempted to strengthen North/South relationships (Leahy, 2021). Put simply, there is now a live public sphere discussion of Irish unification that is taking place in a context that has witnessed demographic and identity shifts in NI. The catholic population has increased and the opening of a political ‘third space’ is reflected in the greater electoral success of the cross-community Alliance Party Northern Ireland (APNI). McGrattan (2024: 10) explains the third space succinctly: ‘The predominance of the two ethno-religious traditions in Northern Ireland suggests that anything that problematizes, troubles or resists that duality of belonging and othering can be defined as a third space’. In the ROI, rapid social and economic change also removed many of the more traditional objections to unification in the form of claims about South’s economic and social ‘backwardness’ (Clark, Kavanagh, and Lenihan, 2017).

North-South

Recent opinion polling suggests that support for unification by the broader Catholic and/or nationalist population would not deliver a yes vote in a border poll in NI (Todd, McEvoy, and Doyle, 2023). If polling results are correct, the Protestant and/or unionist community remains opposed to unification and deeply attached to their British identity (Daly, 2019; Todd, 2021). Despite the emergence of the third space, which is primarily a middle-class space, many people in NI continue to identify strongly as either British or Irish, and the persistence of deeply held nationalist identifications, both British and Irish, means that the debate around unity is entrenched in a bipolar nationalist political space. It is this space that women from Northern Ireland enter when they participate in discussions on Irish unity. It can be an uncomfortable foreboding space entrenched in divisive ethno-nationalist politics. As Todd (2021) notes, discussions on unity are occurring around kitchen tables. However, private conversations do not represent the same risks as entering into public discussions on politically sensitive issues such as unity. Moreover, engaging with the ‘other’ perspective, the ‘other’ community is difficult, often prone to friction, and can result in a reinforcement of perspectives rather than a reconfiguration of positions through dialogue. Therefore, as witnessed in many conflict-affected societies, participation in political discussions poses a challenge for women.

ROI, according to recent statistics, supports unification, with almost two-thirds in favour. Just one in six is opposed, and slightly more than one-sixth either ‘do not know’ how they would

vote in a future referendum or would not vote (ARINS-Irish Times, 2024). An important difference is that the issue is far less politically charged in ROI, and the debate is often conceptualised as abstract. What is more, for an increasingly multicultural South where 12% of the population are now non-Irish citizens with growing migration from areas of the global South such as India and Brazil, there is less awareness of the issues around unification. Nor is there any knowledge of the border's history or extensive evidence of its involvement in constitutional politics. Research suggests (All Ireland Research, 2023) that there is little gender difference in terms of attitudes of women versus men towards unification, but there is little qualitative data that explores more fully how women on both sides of the border think about unification and the issues it raises. We must recognise that historically marginalised identities require the development of spaces for exploration 'crystallising subaltern discourses' in the context of constitutional debates (Wojciechowska, 2019: 906). Women cannot remain marginalised stakeholders in Ireland's future but must be included in meaningful ways.

When women participate in constitutional debates, discussions, and processes, they lobby for the insertion of gender-sensitive rights and protections into new or revised constitutions. Moreover, their knowledge of social, political, and economic conditions can reframe the constitutional agenda away from matters of sovereignty and toward socioeconomic issues. Both Ashe (2022) and Todd, McEvoy, and Doyle, (2023) found that the inclusion of marginalised groups in the Irish context reframed constitutional questions around the entire community's economic and social needs and away from nationalist aspirations.

Internationally, the inclusion of women in constitutional debates and dialogues has delivered gains in particular contexts. During the eight years during which the Ugandan constitution (1995) was developed, 'some of the most active civil society groups were women' (Moehler, 2008:66), and women's groups submitted the highest number of memoranda to the Ugandan Constitutional Commission (UCC) (Tripp, 2010). Women made gains in terms of the gender sensitivity of the final Ugandan constitution, although these gains were limited by the nature of the political authority in the region. This level of participation was supported by a broader programme of civic engagement by the UCC. This programme reached an extensive number of people, with 30,000 community leaders engaged in seminars combined with 870 sub-county seminars that explained the process of reform and solicited views through memoranda (Tripp, 2010). Other international contexts, such as Tunisia, also demonstrate the relationship between

women's participation in the creation of new constitutions and gains for women. Through meaningful participation, women succeeded in inserting Article 46 into the 2014 Tunisian Constitution: 'The state commits to protecting women's established rights and works to strengthen and develop those rights', and guarantees 'equality of opportunities between women and men to have access to all levels of responsibility and in all domains' (Constitute.org, 2014:9).

This project was committed to a globally situated approach – not just in terms of comparing Ireland to other places – but rather to a fundamental shift in how we rethink our own ideas from our own perspective but look outwards. It draws specifically on the histories and contemporary experiences of feminist activism in Latin America and the Caribbean to illuminate and provoke debate. It takes inspiration from the constitutional process in Chile, where the perspectives of marginalised viewpoints, including women and indigenous communities, were prioritised. Elsewhere in the region, in Colombia, women's organisations successfully lobbied the constituent assembly to include a constitutional provision that guarantees women's representation in the decision-making ranks of the public service. Individual women within the constituent assembly pushed for the protection of marginalised groups (Tamaru and O'Reilly, 2018).

International case studies then reveal that avenues for participation must be created. It is important to note the spaces that have begun to develop in the Irish context; however, these spaces remain limited. Moreover, there are challenges for grassroots women's groups in terms of resources, both financial and practical, concerns about maintaining community relationships when entering into these discussions, and a wide range of additional barriers that reduce the participation of not only women, but also other identity groups that include women. CEAB aimed to provide cross-community, cross-border, and co-created spaces to enable grassroots women to develop and share critical, multilayered, and diverse epistemologies on the gender implications of shifts in constitutional arrangements and/or relationships. As such, CEAB connects to Articles 7 and 14 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which asks states to take appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women (including rural women) in political and public life.

Part Two

Methodology

In an earlier project already referenced, the UU team (Ashe, 2022) facilitated 20 90-minute constitutional conversation workshops with grassroots women North and South of the border between March and November 2021. The findings from these workshops shaped the focus and methods of CEAB. The participants in these workshops described their experience as ‘transformative’ and there was a range of learnings in terms of the themes that women wanted to engage with which included socio-economic issues, extensive informational needs, practical ways of participating and building cross-border relationships. Women participants also stressed what they believed were the benefits of cross-cultural learning. CEAB was framed to provide dedicated and safe spaces for conversations around the key thematic areas identified by the participants in the UU research led by Ashe (2022). However, it was enriched through the addition and integration of feminist creative methodologies developed in the Latin American context and adapted by the UCC team for the CEAB project. The inclusion of conceptual and practical tools from Latin America not only supported practical engagement, but also learning from other international contexts that had dealt with constitutional contestation, adaptation, and change.

The UCC methods were inspired by the work of Mexican American/Chicana writer Gloria Anzaldúa (1987). Anzaldúa captures the metaphorical, figurative, and creative potential of border crossing to activate identities as multiple, fluid, and contingent. Crucially, she insists on viewing and remembering borderlands as material spaces of pain and death, or *una herida abierta*, an open wound. Anzaldúa reminds us of the moral and political imperative to seek new ways of envisioning a life lived together rather than being separated and contained. This insistence on relationality is also present in the Andean indigenous cosmovision of *buenvivir* or *Sumak Kawsay*, which allows us to dream of alternative modes of being in the world: modes that are community-centric, multi- and pluri- lingual, ecologically balanced, and culturally sensitive (Gudynas, 2011). The UCC methods based on this framework were designed to build new and unexpected knowledge through artistic and experimental approaches.

Workshop Design

Given the range of themes that emerged in the UU team's research project, it would be impossible to cover these themes through the UU's short workshop format of 90-minute sessions. Instead, the CEAB team developed a residential format that focused on one theme in each workshop that emerged from the UU research. As women had indicated that they wanted to engage across the border with other women's groups, CEAB created residential workshops where women's groups in the North and South could exchange knowledge about their lived experiences and their diverse perspectives. Following Foucault (1980, 82), CEAB researchers framed women's set of epistemologies as 'subjugated' having been 'disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated: naive knowledge, located low down on the hierarchy.' Often, women's grassroots' expertise is marginalised from visions of nations and their constitutional concerns relegated to the periphery of debates. Revaluing women's grassroots expertise is recognised as one of the most direct methods of facilitating women's inclusion in constitutional debates (Ashe, 2023). Moreover, a vast amount of international literature has shown how the inclusion of women in constitutional debates can lead to more open and democratic societies.

The design of workshops is essential if the objectives of the research are to be met. Rather than the participants adapting to a traditional workshop structure, it was vital that the workshops were adapted for the participants. Grassroots women do not interact through formal modes of engagement built around notions of objectivity and rational decision-making – notions underpinned by class dynamics and a host of other factors (Ashe, 2022; Kostovicova and Paskhalis, 2021). A range of diverse ice-breaker exercises alongside more traditional meet and greet activities were inserted into the workshop programme to provide space for participants who may occupy different positions, hold opposing views, or consider themselves on an unequal footing to adapt to the environment. An informal evening meal provided them with space to walk outside, talk, and learn about each other before the second day of the workshop.

The workshops were based on feminist methodologies and were qualitatively different to the 'mini public' approach. The 'mini-public' format can be difficult for some women to access (O'Leary, 2019) and 'presets deliberative agendas and decision-making options' (Ashe, 2022).

They did not provide room for sustainable relationship building. In contrast, the focus and structuring of CEAB workshops were co-created with the participants, and knowledge-making processes were procedural and in constant development rather than conclusive. The aim was not to reach a resolution on questions of constitutional change, but rather to provide space and resources for new epistemologies to develop around the gender dimensions of constitutional change. In this regard, the workshops also employed feminist epistemologies developed in Latin America that prioritise multiplicity and fluidity and focus on decentring binary thinking around identity formation. In total, a series of seven weekend workshops were held across two years in locations near the border in both Ireland and Northern Ireland, and an additional workshop to review the findings that included all groups was held at the end of the project. Ethical approval for the empirical research was processed through Ulster University and registered also with University College Cork. The outcomes and design of each workshop were assessed by the research team shortly after completion.

Sharing critical epistemologies across borders

Each workshop facilitated open discussions around the five pillars of gender equality which map to the thematic issues identified in the UU team's short-format workshops. Each residential was designed to enable participants to cross various borders, while bringing their distinctive 'parcels' of knowledge into discussions. These methods facilitated bottom-up gendered epistemologies to develop and unfold across difference. The methodologies combined to promote fluid and shifting engagements with past, present, and future identities in the context of relationships with others. They were shaped to enable women to speak through situated knowledges and experiences rather than through practices of silencing.

Pillar 1: Political

Pillar 2: Social/Cultural

Pillar 3: Economic


Pillar 4: Affective

Pillar 5: Security

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Each weekend workshop addressed one or two of the five pillars through a structured format described in the workshop designs below. The workshops were divided into three components: sharing our knowledge, learning, and visions for the future. Sharing critical epistemologies between women was guided by a range of questions. Learning consisted of an expert on each pillar presenting recent research findings, and visions of the future enabled both diverse visions of our constitutional future to emerge and new understandings of the practical components of these visions. The aim of each workshop was to blend feminist, civic education, and creative methodologies through these areas of exploration.



Workshop formats and options

Healthcare	
	Sharing our knowledge <p>When the primary welfare agencies are struggling, women often pick up the slack. Women also work in all areas of healthcare but are over-represented in roles such as nurses, healthcare visitors, care assistants and cleaners. Strong and well-functioning healthcare systems are essential for society as a whole and for women, in particular. This workshop implements a ‘dig where you stand’ approach to enable women from N/S to share their knowledges and experiences of healthcare systems to gain greater knowledge about both systems and their outcomes.</p>
	Expanding our knowledge <p>Expert: Prof. Sheelah Connolly, Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI).</p> <p>There is wide variation in health outcomes for countries with similar levels of income and</p>

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 	<p>education due to differences in the design, funding, content and management of health systems. These differences create differentials across a range of outcomes such as fairness, quality, responsiveness and equity of treatment. This session provides an expert overview of both systems. It will cover a range of issues including: What are the strengths and weaknesses of each system? Can greater convergence between healthcare systems improve healthcare outcomes for women?</p> <p>Envisaging our futures</p> <p>Rebecca Milner wrote, ‘If you check the health of a woman, you check the health of a society’. What are the problems with healthcare systems on these isles? What are women’s hopes for improved healthcare on the island of Ireland? What should the priorities and focus be for policymakers in terms of healthcare. What issues does greater convergence of healthcare systems present for women?</p>
<p>Security</p>	
	<p>Sharing our knowledge</p> <p>Women’s participation in discussions about peacebuilding and constitutional change is a right enshrined in international law. However, when women’s security is undermined, their public participation becomes more challenging. Insecurity is not only created through public or political threats/intimidation that emerge from the legacies of conflict; it also emerges in the private sphere. This workshop implements an approach to enable women to consider security in the home, the street and the community.</p> <p>Expanding our knowledge</p> <p>Expert: Prof. Fidelma Ashe</p> <p>Women’s security has been prioritized at the level of the United Nations. International laws have been developed to support the protection of women. This</p>

Critical Epistemologies Across Borders 2025

 	<p>session provides an expert overview of the persistence of insecurities in the home, the street and the community. Drawing on empirical data and relevant research, the session explores the issues of gender insecurity across these arenas.</p> <p>Envisaging our futures</p> <p>Nelson Mandela commented that: “Safety and security don’t just happen; they are the result of collective consensus and public investment’. What policies do we need to increase women’s immediate security and their future security on these isles? What are women’s hopes for improved security on the island of Ireland? What should the priorities and focus be for policymakers in terms of women’s security and secure communities on this island. What issues does greater convergence of approaches to women’s security on the island present for women?</p>
<p>The role of civil society</p>	

Critical Epistemologies Across Borders 2025



Sharing our knowledge

There is no settled definition of civil society and what it encompasses. However, those working in this sector are driven by values, not profit. Civil society is a resource for the protection of rights and democratic legitimacy in any constitutional arrangement. This workshop implements an approach to enable women to consider their experience of civil society support, advocacy and activism around equality and other issues.

Expanding our knowledge

Expert: Prof. Meryl Kenny



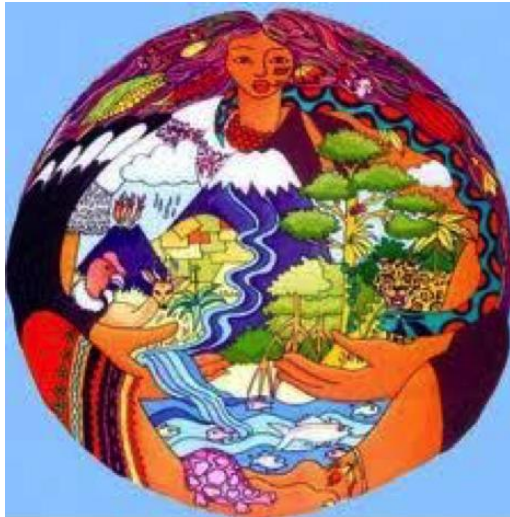
There are numerous case studies that document how women have engaged with referendums on constitutional change to gain rights and better equality outcomes for women. This session provides an expert overview of women's activism during the Scottish Independence referendum in 2014. The session examines how women organized into pro-independence and 'better together' campaigns. It highlights how demands for gender justice were situated within these women's campaigning groups' agendas.



Envisaging our futures

President Biden noted that: 'No fundamental social change occurs merely because government acts. It's because civil society, the conscience of a country, begins to rise up and demand - demand - demand change'. What is the role of civil society in relation to discussions of constitutional change? What resources do women's groups in civil society need? What can stakeholders do to support the women's sector? What opportunities are there for building deeper cross-border civil society links? Can deepening cross-border links support women's civil society work?

Widening Participation



Sharing our knowledge

The effects of widening participation in political decision-making have been viewed as both positive in terms of its enrichment of democracy and negative because, it is claimed, too many active citizens do not have the capacities required to make good and non-biased decisions. Advocates for gender equality argue women's participation in public debate and decision-making is essential if imbalances in gender power are to be challenged. This workshop implements an approach to enable women to consider participation in debates about change.

Expanding our knowledge

Expert: Dr. Avila Kilmurray



Citizen's assemblies have become a popular tool for facilitating the participation of diverse voices and identities in constitutional change. This session looks at the gender dynamics within citizen's assemblies – do men speak more than women? It also examines the gender outcomes of citizen's assemblies on constitutional issues and futures. Moreover, it examines participation in the public sphere to promote gender equality.

Envisaging our futures

Hilary Clinton noted: 'When women participate in politics, the effects ripple out across society... Women are the world's most underused resource'. How can we deepen participatory opportunities for women and all the social groups they belong to in current constitutional debates?



Recruitment

Groups that had participated in the UU research were invited to attend a workshop. The research team reached out to identify a diverse range of grassroots women including those who were not fully represented in the UU project to incorporate as many voices as possible. All ethical protocols were applied before and during each workshop. Rather than simply advertising workshops, civic education reaches out to communities where they are in civil society. Much time was invested in explaining the aims of the research, how participants could contribute to the broader goals of social justice through participation, and how civic education could be tailored to the needs of specific identities. Participatory mechanisms, such as civic education, must be tailored to specific groups. It is also important to emphasise the value of supporting both difference and inclusion in safe and respectful ways. Through this approach, CEAB recruited approximately eight participants from NI and eight from the ROI for each workshop. Overall, the project included women from both unionist and nationalist backgrounds, migrant women, young women, ethnic minority women, women from different social classes and geographic locations, as well as different sexualities and gender identities.

Part Three

Findings

Women were eager to engage in the workshops. They were keen to have their say on the issues discussed. Many felt that the weekend workshops gave them time to think about the issues and meet women from the other side of the border. While there were diverse standpoints on many issues covered by the workshops, those who participated agreed that cross-border meetings were very valuable. However, some groups had specific barriers in the form of the need for translators, childcare, location - due to visa requirements of non-Irish or non-UK citizens, and mainstream explanatory frameworks. The time required to remove barriers to participation illustrates that simply opening discursive spaces is not enough to encourage inclusion; spaces must be shaped around the needs of historically marginalised identities to ensure that as many barriers as possible are removed. The presence of younger and older women was a positive element.

During the workshops, women disagreed on several policy issues on both sides of the border; for example, there were different perspectives on issues such as reproductive rights, welfare rights, and even disagreement around which terms should be applied in dialogue to describe constitutional change. Terms such as Irish unity were viewed as problematic for some women. They found terminology such as sharing the island less difficult. In general, groups in the ROI, especially those who are not located on or around the border, are less invested, less knowledgeable, and largely unaffected by the ethno-nationalist tensions that characterise

conversations around unity in the North. There is a diversity of perspectives on the topic. The migrant women participants from ROI lacked awareness and knowledge about the history of the island and partition and, in many cases, were not aware of debates around Irish unity. Bridging gulfs between knowledge was, therefore, a central element in the discussions. What was clear, however, was the shared reality that many had in common. One example was the shared experience of sexual, domestic, and obstetric violence, as well as violence perpetrated by state actors in particular international contexts, against themselves and their family members. The workshops are discussed in the order they were delivered.

Security

Sharing our knowledge

The first workshop chosen by the participants explored the issues of women's security. The session began with women sharing their experiences of psychological, physical, and economic insecurity. Women from the North discussed feelings of fear when moving across community boundaries and provided examples of how the conflict had created silences around women speaking that had persisted. Women from the South discussed how they had concerns about economic and climate security and the effect of gang cultures on societal security. Migrant participants explained the economic insecurities of 'direct provision' of housing, relayed how they could be approached at any time by the police force, and asked to produce identification. All women shared powerful stories of inter-generational violence. The participants asked the question, where do these concerns fit into wider constitutional conversations? How can we raise the issue of women's security which creates barriers for women to engage in constitutional debate that spreads much farther than fears surrounding voicing standpoints on the constitutional debate?

Expanding our knowledge

The expert session was delivered by Prof. Fidelma Ashe, who outlined how women's right to participate is enshrined in the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement, international law, treaties, and the resolutions that emerged from the United Nations Women Peace and Security Agenda. The discussion that followed engaged with how these international tools could be utilised at local levels to highlight the need to ensure women's insecurity was reduced to open pathways to participation in constitutional discussions.

Envisaging our Futures

Women believed that much work would have to be undertaken to create safer spaces for them to participate in constitutional conversations. They believed that the workshops represented a model that supported women's participation because they alleviated the financial barriers caused by economic insecurity and provided a safe, respectful space where all voices were

heard and respected. They believed that women needed time to understand the conditions of insecurity on both sides of the border, and this understanding would form the basis for cross-border activism around any constitutional change by women to highlight insecurities and what action needs to be taken to address those concerns.

The participants agreed that women's safety should be front and centre in any conversation about their inclusion in constitutional discussions. They insisted that there would be no meaningful discussion on including women in these discussions if there were continuing fears about security. Several women noted that fear of attacks on women increased with the emergence of social media. Responses to viewpoints on social media were often designed to 'chase' women out of that space. Women believed that the normalisation of violence and threats against women, whether in the private or public spheres, had to be continually challenged. They also noted that women cannot participate in constitutional conversations if they are in a situation of economic insecurity without dedicated action to include those at the economic margins of society. Moreover, several women had little confidence in the law, the police, and the wider infrastructure capacity to address the sources of women's insecurity.

Women argued that alongside the discussion on constitutional change, we need a discussion on how we change negative models of masculinities. However, they also recognised the important role that male allies could play. They felt that women had been the underdogs in society for a very long time, and their on-going resistance on both sides of the border laid the foundations for cross-border learning and activism around the gender dimensions of the constitutional debate.

Migrant women argued that their participation could be supported by an end to direct provision. They also felt that greater educational opportunities and easier entry into the workforce would enhance their security. They felt marginalised in society, and the workshops were the first occasion on which they could see how migrant women's lives fit into constitutional debates in Ireland. They stressed the importance of the invitation to include them and noted the importance of translation in spaces where constitutional futures were being discussed.

Widening Participation

Sharing our knowledge

This workshop provided time and space for women to think about how participation in constitutional debates and discussions could be widened, including what methods would work best for specific groups of women to participate in. In sharing their knowledge of the barriers to women's participation, many of the themes of the first workshop resurfaced, including economic constraints, caring demands, and insecurity. However, they also stressed the need for women's representative equality in the public sphere and noted their low representation in formal politics in Ireland. Women from NI recognised the representative gains that had been made by women but felt that the issues related to women's inclusion in broader political life remained low on the agenda. They also noted that policymaking in the NI Assembly was 'sluggish' and often delayed due to periods of suspension. Women on both sides of the border

were unhappy with the routes open to them to influence the policy. Women often found that they spent a lot of time responding to policy consultations but received no response from government departments. They also believed that there was a normative gendered model of the participant in public debates, and that the model was middle-class men often unencumbered by the kind of caring pressures women experience.

The participants noted that in NI politicians were in ‘combat mode’ around the issue of constitutional change. They ‘don’t want a debate’ because they are invested in historical positions on the constitutional question. They believed that this kind of context makes participation in constitutional discussions unattractive to women. They also noted that the penalties for speaking about constitutional change could be greater for those in smaller communities, where there is pressure to conform to dominant political agendas and views. They felt there was a general unease among many people and not just women in terms of discussing change on the island, and that people were always trying to guess others’ opinions before they commented on the issue. They believed that societies needed to move away from the framework of divided blocs and place emphasis on the rights of the individual and multiple communities to participate. Moreover, they stated that women’s participation had to be valued by dominant groups and viewed as a social good.

The expert session was conducted by Avila Kilmurray, a founding member of the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition and a lifelong advocate for women's inclusion, equality, and poverty alleviation. She analysed the history of women's activism in both NI and ROI, demonstrating how women's efforts had resulted in tangible advancements. She emphasised the significance of women coordinating and collaborating with one another, irrespective of other differences. She asserted that women needed to advance their agenda within the policy environment and secure political alliances. Furthermore, she raised the issue of a Bill of Rights as a potentially significant aspiration for women, as it could solidify commitments to women's equality.

[Envisaging our futures](#)

Women want more information about the issues surrounding constitutional changes. Some mentioned that it felt as if the whole discussion was being reduced in the media to a horserace in terms of community numbers for or against change. They stressed the need for reliable information that used open, accessible, and inclusive language. They believed that the more opportunities there were for transference of learning, the better people would be able to engage. The participants recognised that the issues could often be shaped by people’s histories and experiences of trauma. Women believed that more work was needed to promote critical skills and political knowledge. Some felt that the education system had let women down by not being more proactive in developing their confidence to participate. The study of politics was not always offered in schools, and unlike countries in Scandinavia, young people are not taught political skills analysis as a standardised part of their education. As one participant put it, ‘some of us live in fear of offending someone’. They also argued that there needed to be more information about what a constitution is and the processes around changing it. Some argued that the dearth of accessible information on key social and welfare issues made it difficult for

them to know where they should stand on the issue of constitutional change. This need for information was exacerbated by social media, which often shares misinformation and/or uses algorithms to ‘mirror back your own reality’. Migrant participants also raised the issue that so many in their communities do not have a vote and noted that people coming from corrupt countries are often afraid to vote.

The role of civil society

Sharing our knowledge

Workshop 3 explored the role of women’s groups in any plans that emerge around constitutional transition. The session began with women sharing the whole range of civic society participation and activism that they had undertaken. This participation included reaching out to isolated women, providing training schemes, campaigning and lobbying for women’s rights, and accessing funding to support those activities. Some women had ‘pushed’ into political spaces, such as local council meetings, to raise issues, while others had participated in responding to political consultations. Several relayed their work in education, mental health, youth, and peacebuilding initiatives. There were participants who had not engaged in any civic engagement activity, but during the session they said they felt a great deal of solidarity with other women as they discussed the issues that had been most engaged with politically and socially.

Women felt that there were still many biases in society surrounding women’s civic engagement. They felt that policymakers often dismissed them or engaged in a ‘box ticking’ exercise. Many women indicated that they felt that despite their advances, especially in NI, they were still viewed as a peripheral group. Fears of being visible in relation to contentious political issues were also raised. Some women felt that there was little opportunity for them to engage in civic engagement given the caring demands that had been placed on them.

Expanding our knowledge

The expert session was conducted by Professor Meryl Kenny, who holds the position of Professor of Gender and Politics at the University of Edinburgh. Drawing on her research on women’s participation in the Scottish Independence referendum of 2014, she delineated the strategies that women employed to influence the Scottish Independence agenda. Furthermore, she examined the implications of the Scottish case study for women on the island of Ireland.

Envisaging our Futures

Women believed that the role of civic society would be crucial for future discussions on the constitutional status of Ireland. They were concerned about the level of influence that women and other civil society organisations would have. As they shared their experiences of civic engagement, barriers to effective engagement emerged many times in the conversations.

Several participants argued that appropriate funding would be needed for women to participate effectively in the future. Moreover, politicians would need to be receptive to women's concerns and include them in shaping the future. Many felt that the status of the women's sector, in general, needed to be raised to ensure that those voices were heard in constitutional debates. One commented, 'We need to create awareness of the civil society benefit of women's groups work, and the difference the community sector makes in local districts across mental health, well-being, education, training, and human resources.' Collectively, participants argued that civic activism would be needed to ensure 50/50 gender representation in any institution dealing with constitutional change. One participant explained: 'If women are not at the table; they are not on the menu.' They stressed that if a white paper was produced, it would be important to consult the grassroots and not simply the political parties.

There was broad agreement that socioeconomic issues were of crucial importance for women. One participant asked, 'Who brings my voice from the home to the negotiating table?' Participants believed that women's influence could be strengthened through strategic alliances by women from the North and South. Women felt that strategic alliances across participation and socio-economic issues would provide a foundation for lobbying government, the EU, and other global players. They believed there was a common agenda across the needs of communities but stressed the need for dialogic spaces to enable women to develop a set of common concerns. They highlighted that a general invite for grassroots women to engage in debates about constitutional change was insufficient. Spaces for dialogue needed to be shaped around the lives of ordinary women in terms of time, resources, and access to information. These kinds of spaces that formulated a more proactive approach to including women would provide for local knowledge but would need to eventually lead to political outcomes.

Healthcare

Sharing our knowledge

In this workshop, some women who were members of organisations detailed how they had been consulted on healthcare issues by government departments and other stakeholders. Other participants stated that they felt that women were invisible in healthcare systems and had little voice or influence in terms of how these systems are shaped and function. Moreover, they stressed that women are experts in healthcare systems through experience. Participants on both sides of the border relayed their experiences with waiting lists and inadequate care. All believed that mental health was an urgent problem that is being insufficiently resourced, pushing people towards the community sector that lacks the resources to support them. Many described the measures they had taken to keep their families healthy. For ROI participants, the cost of healthcare is an urgent issue. There were concerns that women were facing increasing demands because of the problems in both healthcare systems because women pick up the slack in underfunctioning healthcare systems.

Concerns were also raised that under conditions of inadequate funding models, some participants believed that certain groups become viewed as taking more than their fair share out of the system – they become scapegoats for broader failures in the system. These groups included, but were not limited to, people with addiction and sexual and gender minorities. Some participants believed that more co-ordination of healthcare on the island could improve services, while others felt that ‘talk’ of further coordination was frightening because it could eventually undermine their British identity.

Expanding our knowledge

The expert session was conducted by Professor Sheelah Connolly, a Senior Research Officer in the Social Research division and joint Research Area Coordinator for Health and Quality of Life research at the ESRI. She also holds the position of adjunct associate professor in the Department of Economics at Trinity College, Dublin. Professor Connolly elucidated the disparities between health services in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland by utilising available data. Her analysis encompassed funding models, healthcare accessibility, and quality of care. She also examined the existing and potential future healthcare coordination opportunities across the island.

Envisaging our futures

When considering how healthcare systems on both sides of the border could improve health outcomes, participants emphasised the social determinants of health. A healthy society requires adequate nutrition, universal public health services, housing and heating, sufficient family income, and accessible childcare. Inclusion, access, and participation with measurable outcomes, they concurred, are crucial. Rural areas require Internet access and support for well-being. They posited that addressing sustainability and climate change is essential for ensuring healthy societies. Safety in public spaces, accessibility to services, support systems, and community connections are vital. They asserted that social justice, equality, and early intervention are necessary to prevent social issues from escalating into healthcare problems.

Participants postulated that acceptance, inclusion, and respect for all individuals are fundamental to improving healthcare. Better coordination of systems and preventive measures to improve health are essential. Participants contended that improving health on the island required learning from good practice and ensuring appropriate staffing levels combined with appropriate levels of treatment. They emphasised that improving healthcare, regardless of whether it was through greater north-south coordination, needed to be value-driven. They advocated for healthcare free at the point of delivery, viewed as a right of citizenship, asserting that dignity for all should be the overarching theme and that stigma and discrimination needed to be eliminated as they affect people's care. Overall, they envisaged that any future healthcare system on the island would require substantial investment and review.

Outcomes

One of the practical outcomes of the cross-border relationship-building element of the research was the commitment shown by the groups to further conversation and communication. A joint application to the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) by the Falls Women's Centre and Ronanstown Women's Collective to produce a template for inclusion was supported by Fidelma Ashe. Following a workshop on security, UCC Researcher Céire Broderick partnered with the Glencree Centre for Peace and Reconciliation Intercultural and Refugee Programme to obtain funding from the National Forum for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education to organise workshops that brought students of UCC and International Protection Applicants based in Cork together. These workshops focused on joining these two heterogeneous groups, students and IPAs (and some who intersected both groups), who do not normally operate in the same spaces to build a sense of community, belonging and solidarity through creative methodologies, such as collaging, and trauma-informed self-care and wellbeing practices. There is continued contact with the women's groups and further outcomes are envisaged.

Conclusions

Women on the project discussed many issues related to constitutional changes. The diversity of participants meant that conversations were pushed beyond the traditional community boundary towards issues of how any change on the island would impact people and how women could shape any change. The areas highlighted by women in earlier projects reinforced the importance of socioeconomic issues in constitutional discussions. Overall, the participants wanted to participate in shaping future island agendas. However, there are barriers. There are fears surrounding participation which can be a deterrent to women engaging in constitutional discussions. Issues of personal safety emerged many times in the conversations. It is clear that women's participation requires safe, accessible spaces, and work must be undertaken to ease anxieties and gain trust. Formal, structured environments may not be attractive for some women, who may need more informal spaces to engage with complex issues in their own time and in ways familiar to them, such as discussions with other women. The research team adopted a hosting 'with care' approach and this played an important role in creating informal, welcoming spaces, allowing for social space and time so that women could participate in informed discussion. Attention was paid to the structure of the sessions, such as tone, facilitation, and atmosphere, and this encouraged women to engage openly, share their reflections, and contribute with their knowledge. The creative methodologies were key to the success of the workshops and participants paid tribute in their feedback to the positive integration of photographs, posters and collaging processes, as well as the introduction of global case studies from Latin America on collective feminist organizing.

Participants had faith in women's capacity as changemakers, but felt they lacked the resources and political and social recognition to reshape debates about change on the island. Economic barriers, caring responsibilities, and the dismissal of women's views were all identified as mitigating women's inclusion in constitutional debates. Moreover, it became evident during the workshops that specific groups of women faced particular barriers to participation. Insufficient reliable information on issues related to change on the island was also identified as a significant barrier to women's participation in debates.

On the basis of the findings, the researchers contend that the inclusion of women in constitutional debates requires the recognition of women as key stakeholders in any change on the island. Furthermore, they recommend that policymakers recognise women's expertise and experiential knowledge of many issues related to constitutional change, value and respond to those knowledges when shared. This research has illustrated the importance of providing women with the resources, environments and security they need to participate. Long-term, ongoing participation of women will require more than simply an invite to participate. Rather, responses to the barriers faced by women need to be developed with women in all their diversity.

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