

NI Women's Coalition Preliminary Submission to Independent Commission on Policing for Northern Ireland

1. Background to NI Women's Coalition Submission

The NIWC was established in 1996 as a specific response to the more traditional parties' failure to address the dearth of women within their ranks. We are a Coalition of women and men, from Unionist and Nationalist, Loyalist and Republican and other backgrounds. We have worked together on the basis of mutual respect and from the perspective of our three founding principles - respect for human rights, inclusion and equality. This submission is also informed by our commitment to these principles.

Indeed, as we have stated in relation to other issues, we believe these principles are the best safeguards for developing public institutions in keeping with the spirit of the Belfast Agreement. We feel that the same holds for policing. A genuine commitment to these principles would enable what is currently operating as a police force to become a police service in the truest sense.

The NI Women's Coalition welcomes this opportunity to make a preliminary submission to the Independent Commission. At this point, we are primarily concerned to make the case for adopting a certain orientation in relation to key issues.

2. Introduction to NI Women's Coalition Submission

The Women's Coalition is in broad agreement with the principles laid out in the "Policing and Justice" section of the Belfast Agreement (page 22). However difficult, there is an urgent need to address issues of policing in Northern Ireland.

As the Agreement notes, Northern Ireland's divided history has created a situation where policing is a "highly emotive" issue. In preparing to make this submission we have benefited from the varied and sometimes conflicting views of our membership on issues related to policing. This diversity of views points to an issue with serious implications for the work of the Independent Commission.

The police represent very different things to different socio-economic and political groups in Northern Ireland. People have diverse and often contradictory experiences of policing. For some, the police have been in the 'front-line,' making tremendous sacrifices throughout the years of conflict. These people point to the serious injuries and loss of life sustained by the police, and to the stress placed on their families. Others have had a much more alienating experience of the police. Some feel that the police is primarily a middle-class institution, with little appreciation for the needs of those in working class areas. Still others' experience is one of being policed as a 'suspect community,' by a police force defending a state that they never recognised as legitimate.

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All of these perspectives must be seen to express valid concerns. The Commission will be challenged by the fact that the RUC itself has been a potent political symbol for different sections of the community, and by the extent to which people tend to interpret others'

RUC a
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experiences in relation to their own experiences and analytical frameworks. At times, the statements made by others seem so foreign that people have no frame of reference which can allow them to 'hear' the concerns and experiences of others. In this situation, the tendency is often to dismiss what they have heard as mere propaganda.

In other words, whilst many people will argue that they have a 'problem' with the police, they are not necessarily talking about the same 'problem', and whilst people describe alienation from the police - they have different understandings of that alienation, caused by different reasons. The crucial point for the Commission is to recognise these differences and to work through the concerns to find a way forward. The challenge will be to negotiate people's tendency to accord certain viewpoints greater credibility than others. The work of the Independent Commission itself will be subject to such readings. Thus, we feel it is imperative that the Commission not only presses for meaningful and swift change, but that the rationale for these changes be transparent.

In order to steer a course through these concerns, we would urge the Commission to address policing from a number of angles:

1. Professional and operational matters,
2. Alienation of some communities deriving from the perception of the police as more interested in the concerns of middle class people than working class people,
3. The much more 'political' concept of the police as defenders of a state of which nationalist and republican communities have never found themselves a part, and these communities experiences of being policed as 'suspect communities'.

The Women's Coalition has some concerns that the remit of the Police Commission may be too narrow effectively to address all the relevant issues. Many of these hinge on broader questions of criminal justice, including emergency and human rights legislation. An integrated approach to problem solving, including a willingness to look at multi-agency approaches, is needed.

Finally, we would note that a difficulty with reforming any institution is internal resistance and resentment within the institution. We are heartened by recent signs that members of the police hierarchy have accepted the need for change. Measures must be taken to foster a sense of investment in the recommended changes among the police at all levels. If the police see themselves as agents of positive change, the transformation is likelier to succeed. International experiences should be trawled for relevant lessons.

3. Composition, Recruitment and Training

(a) Police representativeness: Police personnel *at all levels* should broadly reflect society as a whole, including in terms of gender, political beliefs, class and community background, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. This is in the interests of both the police and society as a whole -- it will broaden the pool of potential candidates and will help to safeguard against accusations of partisanship by the police. A policing organisation that is representative of the society it serves will benefit from greater public confidence.

*Should reflect
at least Society
broadly.*

Moreover, unless officers of a particular gender or religious or political background make up a significant proportion of the police population, they will function only as 'tokens' -- unable to influence the culture of policing. For example, women working in traditionally male occupations, where they are likely to be isolated, are far likelier to report **sexual harassment** on the job than are women working in 'female' occupations. The near absence of women in any occupational setting makes it easier for men to objectify women in and outside the institution, treating them as stereotypes -- where they are made to stand for their gender or seen as deviants from it -- rather than individuals. In such a situation, the sexualisation of women can even become can even be part of building solidarity on the job.

Typo.

The desirability of balance is obvious, but how might this be achieved? There are both practical considerations (reconceptualising the police as a 'shared institution' and addressing recruitment criteria etc.) and problems and obstacles to this happening (resistance to change, supporting the change, an institution's ability to change in the face of 'dominant cultures').

We advocate a commitment to achieving **equality of results** within a specified time-table. Discrimination may be so institutionalised that we need not presume there is a deliberate conscious conspiracy to maintain inequality. Good will is not enough to provide the desired changes.

Clear targets and time-tables are of the utmost importance if we are effectively to counter the homogeneous make-up of the police. These should be supported by outreach programmes (e.g., advertising, targeted recruitment drives, etc.), fast-tracking programmes, and other means of supporting the transformation of the composition of the police force. We would also recommend a re-examination of selection and testing procedures, with a view to identifying 'hidden' barriers to recruitment, for *institutional norms that do the discriminating for us, often do so in the guise of equal treatment.*

Alternative Action

We would warn against the impact of the well established practice -- intentional or not -- of senior managers 'recruiting in their own image'. We would urge a re-examination of what that says about the requirements of the job and the 'person specification,' and suggest that this might point to the need for a re-examination of Fair Employment and PAFT practises.

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Similarly, if ~~were~~ are to displace institutionalised -- often 'invisible' -- discrimination, changes to recruitment practices must go hand-in-hand with a change to the **culture, ethos and symbols** of the police force, to create a working environment comfortable to any section of society (see below).

We are concerned that the reported increase in applications from Catholics to join the police during the first IRA cease-fire was not matched by a similar increase in the numbers actually recruited.

We also believe the Police Commission should explore the possibility that both women and working class Protestants are better represented in the Reserve. Both of these groups need to be better represented in the police. It may be that the Reserve, far from being the expendable part-timers ought to be re-examined in terms of appropriateness of recruitment, training and affinity with communities. We suggest looking at why the Reserve force is more attractive to women and people from working class communities. Could there be lessons for how the

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1 regular force might reform itself to become more attractive to women and people from working class backgrounds more generally? For example, would more women enter the regular force if there was an opportunity to combine part-time work with good career prospects and progression within the police? Are the higher academic requirements for the regular service necessary to the effective community policing, which seems largely to be carried out by the Reserve at present?

(b) Training

2 Again, taking a lesson from the Reserve, a move towards 'civilianising' the police with training conducted in a less military and more civilian format might facilitate women – and parents of either gender – as mature applicants, to join the police without having to sacrifice their family commitments. We believe that training the police in a civilian rather than a military style and setting will also help foster the necessary transformation of police culture and ethos. In order to maintain police effectiveness in changing circumstances, we would also advocate 'life-long' training – i.e., police officers should have ongoing opportunities to learn new skills and information.

3 Human rights and equality training should be integrated through every aspect of the police training curriculum -- 'practical' as well as 'theoretical'. An isolated module on human rights training will do little to inform officers as to how they should apply these principles in practice.

4. Culture, Ethos and Symbols

(a) Ethos

4 The ethos of the police must have at its heart, a commitment to **safeguarding human rights**. In every aspect of their practice, the police must uphold, and be seen to uphold, the highest international standards of human rights for all sections of the community. Not only must conditions be created to make it very difficult for the police not to comply with these standards, but the goal should also be to engender an ethos where safeguarding human rights to this standard is the definition of good policing – the police's own measurement of success.

(b) Symbols and Institutional Culture

5 In Northern Ireland, the **symbols** of the ^{Typo} ~~sate~~ have 'belonged' to the unionist community. As stated above, the successful restructuring of police personnel requires a commitment to create a working environment comfortable to all sections of society. In turn, this requires examining institutional symbols with a view to changing those that contradict this aim. It may mean adopting new symbols. We suggest looking to Northern Ireland's arts community for innovative work in this regard. ~~We~~ *we have asked* ...

6 The police must have clear guidelines for dealing with sexual, racial or sectarian **harassment**. These guidelines should be supported with internal educational ~~and~~ programmes, designed to raise police personnel awareness of what constitutes harassment.

5. Re-training, Job Placement, etc..

(a) Restructuring as an Economic and Social issue

The need for major change to the composition of the police force is inevitably going to mean a painful period of transition. While policing in Northern Ireland is currently a critical political issue, the restructuring of the police must also be seen as an economic and social issue. Police officers are workers. Their rights must be recognised and upheld. We suggest looking to other industries and contexts where massive restructuring has occurred, for models of the best and most humane practice. It is vital for government to set aside sufficient resources at the outset to support this transition. We see this as a short term investment for the long term good of society and would urge government to remember that, in the past, they have found the resources for massive expenditures on security and public order policing.

(b) Internal hierarchies

We are concerned that members of the Reserve – part-time workers on short term contracts – will be given lowest priority when it comes to reducing existing numbers. Both women and working class Protestants are concentrated in this sector – both groups which are currently under-represented among police personnel. Moreover, we believe that it is the Reserve that is often most effective at community policing, an issue which we believe must be given top priority as policing adjusts to the changed situation.

→ Hierarchies may be seen as necessary for any police force - problems

6. Partnerships with the Community

→ Management recruited from outside.

To make the transformation from force to service, the police must develop effective and co-operative working partnerships with other social organisations and local communities. Without such working relationships, it will be almost impossible for the police to reflect the interests and serve the needs of the community.

Partnerships should range from **consultation** to **practical partnerships**, for example, in the case of stewarding of public events. Such an integrated approach to safety and security -- where the police are seen as one element of a larger structure -- will also facilitate the ongoing transformation of policing, so that the police changes in parallel with society.

Resources should be set aside for the training (e.g. stewarding, civil rights training), communication (e.g., community forums, regular meetings with police) and equipment necessary to make these partnerships effective. This may be a matter of redistributing resources within existing budgets.

We want to register our concern that the current **Community Police Liaison Committees** have not been transparent or effective enough in their relations with the wider public.

Sounds like you are going to put them down.

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7. Accountability to the Law and the Community

Greater legal and democratic accountability is in the interests of the police as well as the society they are serving. Rather than seeing transparency and checks and balances as a threat from outside or interference with the business of policing, accountability should increase public confidence in the police, making them more effective. We advocate the development of a broad range of mechanisms designed to produce accountability to the community. *These accountability structures must be accessible and effective in practice as well as in principle.*

*Transparency
not a threat!
but not
increase
public confidence*

In particular, we suggest:

- A strong, representative Police Authority for Northern Ireland;
- The development of legally instituted, representative, and accountable local liaison committees with clear aims and objectives;
- Independent monitoring and evaluation of police operations and community attitudes towards safety and security;
- A commitment to transparency through an openness to third party scrutiny;
- An effective and accessible independent complaints procedure.

We understand police concerns about operational independence. The structures we are suggesting are not designed to enhance police effectiveness, not interfere with day-to-day decisions.

The Belfast Agreement and ensuing legislation and institutions oblige the police -- as with all public bodies -- to adhere to the highest international human rights standards. These will also be augmented by the creation of a NI Bill of Rights, which will relate to issues particular to Northern Ireland. For the police, and others, this will require specific Human Rights training, but will also require on-going training and commitment, on-going monitoring with implications for the culture and ethos of the force, as noted elsewhere in this submission.

The conditions needed for full legal accountability exceed the remit of the Police Commission, hinging as they do on questions related to the criminal justice system, including emergency legislation, and to human rights legislation. An integrated approach is needed.

8. Provision for 'Exceptional Demands'

Redefining 'Public Order': We need a broader view of 'public order' -- one which understands it as a community issue, not just a policing issue. Public safety involves everyone. Recognising this requires a more diverse repertoire of responses, based in the community.

We see this as inseparable from the issue of 'partnerships with the community' -- it is an issue that requires multi-sectoral input. Councils, Health and Safety Agency, Community Funding Bodies, Sports and Music Promoters, and others, all have a responsibility for contributing to public order.

We recognise that public order policing is a very difficult policing task. But we would suggest:

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- Making the police **accountable** for the use of physical force;
- A reconsideration of the **training** of riot police, possibly involving community activists, a greater emphasis on mediation and communication, and an emphasis on the full array of possible options for dealing with public order difficulties;
- Development of a **shared understanding** between police, organisers of events and communities of their expectations of the police during public order situations;
- A reconsideration of the role of **community police officers** during public order disputes;
- Provision for an independent and accountable system of **monitoring** of public order situations.

⇒ look at growing trend for bars to use women bouncers - there could be something to learn there.

9. Other issues

An unarmed police force: We share the view, expressed in the Agreement, that it is desirable to have a police service that is "routinely unarmed."

Provision for Ongoing Review: 'The public' is stable in no society, in Northern Ireland it is undergoing particularly significant transformations at this juncture. Thus, we do not see the Commission producing a set of arrangements that will solve policing dilemmas once and for all. Rather, we believe the police will have to continue to change in order to meet the changing requirements of being 'public servants.'