

Submission to Ireland's Third National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security.

The National Deaf Women of Ireland, in collaboration with the Irish Deaf Society, put forward this submission to The Conflict Resolution Unit of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade to assist with and be considered in the development of Ireland's Third National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security.

The National Deaf Women of Ireland is an interested party in this plan as we are a representative organisation whose aim is to empower Deaf women and to ensure equality for the Deaf women of Ireland. There are many barriers faced by Deaf women in Ireland, one of the most significant of these barriers being a language barrier. This is as a result of their first language being Irish Sign Language. Irish Sign Language is the preferred language of 5,000 Deaf people in Ireland and approximately 40,000 people, in general, will communicate in Irish Sign Language. (Leeson and Saeed, 2012) It is the indigenous language of the Deaf community and research shows that sign languages are full languages with its own complex linguistic structure, rules and features. Irish Sign Language is different from all other sign languages such as British Sign Language, American Sign Language etc. Through our work, we have been made aware of the lack of legislation and support available for a certain cohort of Deaf women; Deaf Refugee Women. The barriers mentioned above that are faced by Deaf Women can be doubled, or often tripled for Deaf Refugee Women. There is sufficient support available for Deaf Women through the National Deaf Women of Ireland or through the Irish Deaf Society, however, there is not enough support, if any, available for Deaf Refugee Women. There have been many projects and support groups ran to support the Irish Deaf Community, however, this would be the first time a specific plan would be implemented to support Deaf Refugee Women.

There are many issues facing a Deaf Refugee Woman. Above we have mentioned a double/triple language barrier. This refers to the fact that not only can Deaf Refugee Women not access information in English but they also cannot access information in Irish Sign Language. They also have more barriers to overcome as a result of the oppression faced by them because they are women and also the oppression faced by refugees. In a report carried out on hearing refugees it was stated that poor physical and mental health, resulting from the isolation, uncertainty and powerlessness experienced in Direct Provision were commonplace. (Irish Refugee Council 2016) This powerlessness experienced can be double when you take into account the perspective of a

Deaf refugee having no form of communication. There is often an element of poverty present in this group with high levels of unemployment, low-income levels and inadequate access to necessary services, such as public services and health services. There is often a sense of isolation connected to these individuals as they are a minority within a minority. Another issue that must be considered is if these Deaf women have Deaf children, there are not many options available for their education apart from sending their children to a Deaf school which is only in Dublin. As the cost of living in Dublin is extremely high, the only way to attend these schools can be through boarding or travelling every day. This can take its toll on your mental health and therefore adds to the list of issues facing a Deaf Refugee Woman.

The Irish Sign Language Act 2017 was written into law by President Michael D. Higgins on the 24th December 2017. This Act provides for the recognition of Irish Sign Language and therefore serves to protect the Irish Deaf Community and their language and culture. It sets out obligations for Irish Sign Language interpreters to be provided to the Deaf Community at no extra charge for the Deaf person. (Irish Sign Language Act 2017) This includes GP and Maternity Services. (SLIS) Unfortunately, another major issue we have encountered by working with Deaf Refugee Women is a serious lack of awareness of their right to an interpreter under this Act. It is also important to note at this stage, that once these women are aware of their right to an interpreter if they are based in a rural part of the country, access to an interpreter is not always available. This leaves Deaf Refugee Women living in areas outside Dublin at a disadvantage to those living in Dublin.

Pillar Two of the 2nd National Action Plan (2015–2018) focuses on the Empowerment, Participation and Representation of Women in Decision Making. We propose this pillar is expanded to Deaf Refugee Women through the provision of workshops in which this group of Women have access to information and Irish Sign Language classes. These workshops will ultimately assist with their personal development and therefore empower them in making their own decisions. Under Pillar Three of the 2nd National Action Plan (2015–2018), which moves the focus to Protection, Relief and Recovery, we recommend the setting up of support groups in which like-minded Deaf Refugee Women can meet-up, along with their children, diminishing the essence of isolation that they have experienced, as well as contributing towards the integration of their children. We would initially target the areas with a higher population of Deaf Refugee

Women such as Drogheda and Dublin and in time look into spread this service across Ireland. The Irish Deaf Society provides a service called Deaf Adults Literacy Service. This service aims to provide classes for Deaf people all over Ireland. All our classes are taught by Deaf tutors using Irish Sign Language and are free of charge. If we supported Deaf Refugee Women and provided them with the above information, they could access free Irish Sign Language classes as well as classes in various subjects. We need to support and empower this cohort of women so that they possess the confidence necessary to set about in learning a new skill. We will now share with you a case study that we have encountered, showcasing issues experienced by Deaf Refugee Women.

Case Study:

In a meeting with a member of the Deaf Community, a Deaf Refugee Woman and her Husband, in which the majority discussion was regarding the Deaf Refugee Woman. The husband understood a basic level of Irish Sign Language but the wife did not. This resulted in the husband communicating for the wife. This can be dangerous in some situations as the husband has the power to control what information his wife is receiving. This ideology can also stem from a cultural norm in the country the couple is originally from. Encouraging the woman to speak for herself can cause conflict between the couple and this can be worrying in situations where domestic violence may be prevalent. This situation results in the Deaf Refugee Woman lacking in independence and confidence which has a knock-on effect on her ability to go places on her own or even learn Irish Sign Language, a skill that is crucial for her to have access in Ireland.

Deaf Refugee Women not only face an attitude from society because they are refugees but also face the attitude some people have towards the Deaf Community. In the 2016 census, it was reported that 18.5% of Irish people had suffered from their mental health. (Central Statistics Office 2016) It has been reported by DeafHear that the Deaf Community, as a result of the oppression they have experienced can be at double the risk of developing a mental health issue. It has also been reported by Doras Luimni that refugees are up to 5 times more likely to experience mental health issues. (Doras Luimni) These statistics are not favourable for a Deaf Refugee and therefore prove to us that it is vital that we understand that we need to start focusing on this group of Women.

References

Central Statistics Office. 2016. *Census*. Dublin: CSO.

Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. 2015–2018. "Ireland's second National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security."

Doras Luimni. n.d. *Direct Provision*. Accessed 2018. <http://dorasluimni.org/direct-provision/>.

2017. "Irish Sign Language Act."

Leeson, L. and Saeed J. I. (2012) *Irish Sign Language*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press

SLIS: Sign Language Interpreting Service <http://slis.ie/services/#gp-primary-care-service>