



National Assembly of Women

Bridge House, Newport Street, Hay-on-Wye, Powys HR3 5BG

naw@sisters.org.uk www.sisters.org.uk

Affiliated to the Women's International Democratic Federation – an NGO with consultative status with ECOSOC at the United Nations and registered in the Special Register of International Labour Organisations (ILO)

National Assembly of Women's input to the Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and association (FoAA)

The National Assembly of Women

The National Assembly of Women (NAW) is Britain's only affiliate to the Women's International Democratic Federation, an NGO with consultative status at ECOSOC at the UN. It was founded in 1952 for justice and equality for women and their families and for peace, without which such justice and equality would not be possible. You can find us here www.sisters.org.uk

We are the governance organisation for the *Charter for Women* (see 6 below) and are particularly concerned to promote and extend the rights of women in all spheres of activity. Our organisation has both individual members and affiliates from trade unions and other organisations.

There are no legal restrictions on participation in our meetings. Our events and activities attract politically left and progressive women of a range of ages and variety of backgrounds, many of whom are involved in several organisations and campaigns in addition to the NAW. We would like to draw in younger and black women in greater numbers. We are experimenting with different venues, meeting arrangements, topics of discussion and campaign formats to allow greater access to our activities. Electronic communications such as the web and our online magazine *Sisters* are becoming important and we are currently beginning to hold online meetings which we anticipate will broaden our reach and potential significantly.

Responses to the six questions posed by the UN Special Rapporteur on FoAA

- 1 In the United Kingdom, the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association for all adults, irrespective of sex, is enshrined in the law, specifically in Article 11 of the Human Rights Act (HRA) 1998. All public bodies or private bodies which carry out a public function are bound to follow the HRA, including the courts in their decision making. The Equal Rights Act 2010 makes discrimination against women and other protected categories unlawful. Therefore, in theory there can be no discrimination against women in respect of their rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and association.

An exception to the HRA is where exercise of the right to FoAA interferes with the rights of others. This potentially affects demonstrations and counter demonstrations between women's groups with conflicting platforms and between women's groups and others opposing their stances.

In practice there are factors which disproportionately affect women and intimidate them from participating in peaceful assemblies and associations. Examples include, infiltration by the security forces of protest groups, including through the formation of sexual relationships with women participants, as in cases given high profile by the media in Britain during the last

President Anita Wright; Secretary Sandra Durkin; Treasurer Carolyn Simpson

Vice Presidents Dame Vera Baird QC, Baroness Rita Donaghy OBE, Alice Mahon, Gloria Mills CBE, Frances O'Grady, Ann Scargill

decade. Fear that this gross abuse may happen to them affects whether women choose to participate in campaigns they would otherwise not hesitate to join. Another example is the police practice of 'kettling' to control protests, when a cordon is thrown around peaceful demonstrators and they are denied access to food, water, and toilet facilities for long periods. Fear of being kettled acts as a barrier to women's participation.

Women's participation may also be severely curtailed when safe facilities for women only to use during events are not provided, or quality childcare provision is absent.

Austerity policies during the last decade have also severely curtailed women's capacity to participate in both assemblies and associations. Austerity has included severe cuts to public transport meaning that women feel less safe in using the buses and trains that continue; there are fewer staff and women feel more vulnerable, especially in the evenings or at night when gatherings and meetings often take place. In some cases, the transport on which women rely has been cut out altogether; this often but not exclusively affects women living in rural areas. There have also been cuts in street lighting, meaning that women feel less safe getting to and from public transport and their homes. Frequent reports in the mass media of horrific attacks on women, including rape and murder, make women feel permanently anxious when in the public sphere.

Women are also disproportionately poorer because of austerity, with some 75% of cuts having come from women's pockets. This has compounded an already adverse situation in which most low-paid jobs are done by women. They are therefore less able to afford the costs incurred by participation in peaceful association and assembly – childcare, travel, etc.

In summary the barriers to women's participation in association and assembly are poverty, rurality, lack of public services that support participation and fear of police and security service action.

2. In general, the UK is a positive environment in which women and girls can form and join associations and networks of many kinds and this is rooted in a long historical tradition. Women join associations that are open to all adults, for example political parties, trade unions and campaigns at national and local level, such as for peace and international solidarity and against austerity (e.g. CND, Campaign against the Arms Trade, Peoples Assembly against Austerity) and community-based groups including for example tenants associations and environmental groups.

Some political parties and trade unions have women only conferences, sections and self-organised groups and introduce women's training sessions to develop skills and confidence and promote participation.

There are multiple examples of organisations and pressure groups to which only women belong. These include for example Southall Black Sisters (in London), Women for Refugee Women, Daughters of Eve (to protect young women and children from female genital mutilation), Women's Aid, the Women's Budget Group and the Fawcett Society. The NAW is affiliated to the Women's Resource Centre, an umbrella charity supporting women's organisations to be more effective and sustainable.

There is an expectation that the organisers of women only physical meetings will ensure that the space is accessible, welcoming and safe. It is more difficult to find secure space online and hard to guarantee lack of male intrusion, maliciously intended or otherwise.

So far as we are aware there are no issues on which women are denied the right to mobilize, associate or assemble. They are, however, in many circumstances denied the possibility of exercising the right. There are in some cases religious and cultural barriers. Also, it is often difficult if not impossible for women experiencing domestic violence to access or join associations or peaceful assemblies. Women who are poor may be unable to afford smartphones, laptops, etc and may hence be excluded from physical meetings promoted online and online associations and assemblies. In some cases, a household may share a device and hence women may have only limited access.

Thus the key measures and policies to remove existing obstacles and risks to women and girls' enjoyment of FoAA are to raise the status of women within society and the workforce – requiring real equal pay, properly funded public services, affordable childcare, and an education system that undermines the prevalence of the job segregation of women within particular, and often, low-paid work areas.

3. Some women and girls do face intimidation, threats of violence and actual violence in exercising their right to FoAA due to intersecting forms of discrimination. A prominent example at present is at the intersection of an element of the transgender rights campaign and the women's movement (as defined by biological sex) campaigning against sex-based oppression and exploitation. Meetings of Women's Place UK have been disrupted and women attending have been subjected to abusive name-calling. There have been threats of violence and a small number of instances of actual violence. Women's Place UK was established in 2017 to ensure that women's voices would be heard on proposals to change the Gender Recognition Act.
4. The National Assembly of Women works for full social, economic, legal, political and cultural independence, equality for women irrespective of age, race, religion, philosophical belief, sexual orientation or nationality, aims which can only be realised fully in a world at peace. This includes FoAA. Our organisation has not, however, worked specifically on the 2030 Agenda of Sustainable Development.
5. We have engaged in international solidarity work and campaigning on FoAA, including with women's organisations of Iran, Iraq and Sudan based in the United Kingdom – The Democratic Organisation of Iranian Women (DOIW), the Iraqi Women's League and the Sudanese Women's Union UK and Ireland.

The greatest challenge in international solidarity work on denial of FoAA is to promote understanding in the UK that the 'defence' foreign policy of our government impacts directly on the curtailment and denial of rights of women in many countries and that a primary act of solidarity is to challenge governance of British multinationals in pursuit of profit, including those engaged in the arms trade.

6. High profile measures and policies of the UN that impact on FoAA are the 1993 UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the formation of the UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (known as UN Women).

An initiative of great importance in the UK is the *Charter for Women* of which the NAW is 'custodian'. This aims to revitalise the socialist feminist movement in the UK. It sets out campaigning demands for women in three areas – in society, at work and in the labour movement. It specifically demands that "the principle of women only spaces be upheld – and where necessary extended" and states that "Gender neutral spaces should be additional to

women's spaces." The NAW also recognises that while all other demands of the Charter remain unmet, there will be barriers to the potential of women and girls fully to exercise their right to FoAA.

The preamble to the *Charter* introduces it as follows:

"Women have always fought for their long-denied rights; we must do so again. We hope to inspire a new and inclusive socialist feminist theory and practice that will motivate a new generation of women activists and revitalise the fight for women's liberation. One of the ways of doing this is to unite around a campaigning programme. This is the purpose of the Charter for Women. It does not offer new policy but instead seeks to bring together the key demands for which women are fighting in various arenas. The charter covers three broad areas, social policy, the labour market and the labour movement. It raises the main campaigning demands under each heading. We want it to be discussed, adopted and promoted by women in the labour movement, by all progressive women's groups and organisations. For us the price of equality is eternal vigilance – we must ensure that women's demands are heard and acted on."

The 50 year old history of diverse strands of the feminist movement in the UK (liberal feminism, radical feminism, socialist feminism, and so on) has clouded the basic issues in the public mind to the extent that individuals have often stated that they are "not a feminist" but support women's rights...

Whilst the role of Women's Place UK reported above has been essential in the partial undermining of the years-old conflation of Sex and Gender, it might be said that decades of trade union-led action by women has raised the profile with the general public more effectively. Notable since 2010 are: in 2016 Teaching Assistants in Derby and Durham (95% of them women) taking action against pay cuts of up to 25%; 8,000 women employed by Glasgow City Council in the biggest equal pay strike in the UK in 2019; and also in 2019 fast food chain McDonald workers linking in with the #MeToo movement over allegations of sexual harassment in the company.

Restrictive domestic legislation on UK trade unions remains a barrier to freedom of association and the right to strike, as does the UK's non-compliance with key ILO conventions, and is a major barrier to building on these impressive victories for women.