

By the time they are 12 or 13 years old, "cross-community" has become a bad word. A lot of baggage from the past 13 years has not been dealt with. There is nowhere neutral for you to be.

Linda O'Neill: Testimony to the Tribunal

Protestant. Despite the facts that girls have made advances and now outperform boys at all levels of education, there is a high incidence of educational failure, leaving school with no qualifications, especially among working class boys. Curriculum approaches that try to promote democracy and a culture of peace have largely failed. Although higher education is integrated in theory, in practice it is segregated along religious lines, especially in teacher training.

James Dunbar then pointed out that only seven percent of young people in his Roman Catholic community go to the local university, and that those who do enter tertiary education suffer insulting behaviour from other students. The result is that most young people leave school at the age of 16 with no qualifications, or have to go to university elsewhere, which is more costly. Linda O'Neill, from the same community stated that children who go to an integrated school, where Protestant and Catholic children are mixed, are then 'hassled' by people in their own community. The result is that they make friends across the religious divide when they are in school, but cannot continue with these friendships outside school. There is little in the way of choice of educational opportunities so that by 15 years of age, young men already have their options closed. Peter Bryson added that schools have been thought of as providing 'an oasis of calm' but they cannot really cope with what is happening in the wider community.

Colin Brown reiterated the point that those from the working class suffer most: 'Too many rich people in the community take the credit for work that is done by people who get their hands dirty'. There is considerable funding available for work in a closed community, but it is difficult to obtain. Donors will give funds for leisure centres, but are currently ending support for youth workers.

Questions to the Northern Ireland witnesses

In response to questions from the Tribunal, the Northern Ireland witnesses replied that change would take three decades, provided that 'the peace holds'. Employment is a major problem. Previous traditions of father-to-son transmission of jobs have been lost and there is no tradition of continuing education, so those who leave school without qualifications are likely to remain unqualified all their lives. Some improvements are occurring in educational opportunities, but the pace is slow.

The young witnesses stated that the individual factors that had helped them to 'beat the odds' and take control of their own lives included:

- Having to grow up quickly and take responsibility for their younger siblings;
- Taking a positive approach rather than accepting the role of victim;
- Having positive role models;
- Being given opportunities to get out of Northern Ireland and see what life is like, in places where peace rather than war on the street is normal.

The legal and human rights impact of the conflict in the North of Ireland from a child's perspective: Testimony

of Paddy Kelly, Director, Northern Ireland Legal Centre
Paddy Kelly began her testimony by drawing the Tribunal's attention to the duration of the conflict in Northern Ireland, which has entailed an impact on successive generations of children. She also emphasised that this has been a low-intensity conflict, so that the impact on children was not as severe as that experienced in some other parts of the world such as Rwanda. Northern Ireland does, however, serve as a case study with respect to low-intensity conflicts of long duration, in which the impact may be harder to name and the damage, consequently, harder to repair.

The nature of the conflict has called into question the very existence of the state. The effects have ranged from loss of life, through serious injury, imprisonment of children or their parents, to relatively mundane questions such as where children buy their sweets. The conflict has been, and to some extent still is, all consuming. It affects people's day-to-day decisions: 'Where our children live, where they socialise, who they socialise with, what school they go to, where they play, what leisure facilities they visit. While for many on all sides the focus for 30 years was literally, and still is, on survival.'

Other factors to be borne in mind are the relatively small size of the population (only 1.5 million, of which nearly a third are children), the small geographical area and the close-knit nature of both rural and urban communities. Ms. Kelly emphasised that this brings the conflict 'very close to home'. There is no knowing how many children have lost parents, brothers, sisters, friends, neighbours or other significant people in their lives as a result of the conflict. It is also likely that a considerable percentage of the child population of three generations has personally known someone who was killed or injured during the conflict. From a child's perspective, much still remains to be documented.

Children and children's rights organisations were very disappointed at the lack of consultation with children and young people throughout the peace process.

Paddy Kelly: Testimony to the Tribunal