

Gender, Citizenship and the Future of the Northern Ireland Peace Process

It has been seven years since the signing of the Good Friday Agreement and eleven years since the first IRA cease-fire, yet political stability in Northern Ireland remains elusive. This article considers developments over the past decade from a gender perspective, in order to argue that the lack of gender parity that exists throughout Northern Irish society is a key factor in hindering the development of a new, shared future. International commitments to the promotion of women's equality and the work of academics and activists in peace and conflict studies provide empirical and theoretical evidence for the importance of including a gendered perspective in negotiating and implementing peace agreements.

There has been increasing international recognition that a "gender-blind" approach to conflict resolution and reconstruction has been a critical element in the global failure to achieve a sustainable peace. Concerted pressure, particularly from non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working in conflict zones, has resulted in the adoption of a crucial measure, the promotion of which has done much to improve the visibility of women in war-torn societies.¹ On 31 October 2000, the United Nations Security Council passed Resolution 1325 on "Women, Peace and Security," calling for the full integration of women in all efforts regarding conflict resolution and

1. For background campaigning and full text of Resolution 1325, see www.peacewomen.org/un/UN1325/1325index.html

postconflict implementation. This landmark resolution is helping to achieve greater gender parity in countries like Iraq and Afghanistan, but it is one that the British and Irish governments have ignored in their efforts to resolve the Northern Ireland conflict. Achievement of Resolution 1325 requires a “critical mass” of women at all levels of society, and recognition that formal peace processes are not the only arena. Women’s involvement in informal processes of peace-building includes “constructing the conditions of society to foster peace through development and aid, human rights education, reconciliation and the restoration of community life.”² However, unless high-level representation is achieved, the good practice that exists at community level cannot be disseminated or developed into policy initiatives. Equally, because it is at peace accords where the foundations for a future society are often set, it is at this level where gender issues should be addressed and where a gender perspective on peace should be incorporated.³

The opportunities opened up by UN Resolution 1325 have enabled women to demonstrate what their priorities for peace and for the construction of citizenship would be. Research from Scandinavia reveals that it is mostly female politicians who place women’s issues on the formal political agenda.⁴ Christine Chinkin has given examples from Sierra Leone, Liberia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Afghanistan, and East Timor. In every situation women have argued that NGOs—and women’s groups specifically—have the right to participate in the work of reconstruction and that human rights relating to women, including health, education, political rights and equality, should be recognized. Significantly, as Chinkin points out, despite such extensive grass roots activity, a huge gap remains between these community-based processes and the formal, official negotiation processes of peace settlements that Resolution 1325 has not been able to bridge. The reality is that a peace process is a “top-down process,” whereby local

2. Elisabeth Porter, “Women, Political Decision-Making and Peace-Building,” *Global Change, Peace & Security* 15:3 (October 2003), 250.

3. Jacklyn Cock “Closing the Circle: Toward a Gendered Understanding of War and Peace” (2001): <http://www.uct.ac.za/org/agi/newslet/vol8/lead.htm>.

4. Drude Dahlerup, “From a Small to a Large Minority: Women in Scandinavian Politics,” *Scandinavian Political Studies* 11:4 (1998): 275–98.

communities—especially women—are typically excluded and women, despite their activity in informal peace processes, remain largely absent from the formal negotiations.⁵

This was not the case in Northern Ireland during the period in which the Good Friday Agreement was negotiated. Then, women were unusually visible in the political sphere. On the British Government side, day-to-day oversight of the negotiations was in the hands of Dr. Mo Mowlam, in her role as Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. As Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs, Liz O'Donnell formed part of the Irish Government delegation, while the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition made a major contribution to the agreement. What was achieved for women in the agreement will be discussed subsequently, as the legacy of the agreement is evaluated. What is significant, in terms of female political participation, is the fact that, although numbers elected to the Assembly have increased marginally from 13 percent in 1999 to 16.7 percent in 2003, this has not been accompanied by greater representation in substantive decision-making. When talks on the political future take place at the current time, they are all-male and confined to the major parties. Neither government has made any effort to include female politicians. Nor have they encouraged the political parties to include women amongst their negotiation teams although, when the occasion is appropriate, the Irish government has no hesitation in applauding the role of Irish women in the task of peace-building. For example, in December 2003, when briefing the Council of Europe on the role of women in the Northern Ireland peace process, the Department of Foreign Affairs declared that the benefits of involving women in conflict resolution to be "clearly evident in Northern Ireland, where women played and continue to play a pivotal role in building peace and are essential contributors to the ongoing process of fostering reconciliation."⁶ Despite this rhetoric, Irish and British governments, joint signatories of the Good

5. Christine Chinkin, *Peace Processes, Post-Conflict Security and Women's Human Rights: the International Context Considered*, 9th Torkel Opsahl Memorial Lecture, December 2004 (Belfast: Democratic Dialogue, 2005), 6.

6. Anglo-Irish Division, Department of Foreign Affairs, "The role of women in the NI Peace Process," paper presented to the Council of Europe (1 Dec. 2003). Thanks to Eimear Farrell for alerting me to its existence.

Friday Agreement, have done little to implement the pledges made in the agreement to ensure a greater level of gender parity in public and political life.

Is there an “added value” that women can bring to conflict transformation? This is an issue that has exercised academics, peace activists, the global women’s movement, and international agencies, whose varied contributions have brought much-needed insights to the discussion. This paper will argue that women in Northern Ireland have been vital in maintaining some semblance of “normality” throughout years of devastating conflict, and their insights should form a central part of government strategy regarding post-conflict reconstruction. The growing acceptance of the necessity to incorporate the skills and perspectives of women as well as men, not only into the task of peacemaking, but also within peacekeeping activities and reconstruction after conflict, is based in part upon principles of justice, democracy, and human rights and also, as Inger Skjelsbaek argues, upon recognition that women and men have different experiences of conflict and an effective peace process can only be built on the widest base of experience.⁷

Tangible evidence exists to demonstrate that the increased participation of women can “make a difference.” Without accepting an essentialist argument for women’s innate tendency to act as peacemakers, one can make a case that women’s creativity can be an important factor in achieving change. Cheryl Carolus, former South African High Commissioner in London and former ANC representative, witnessed this in the South African context. During negotiations with the South African government, the ANC policy was to insist that half of all negotiating teams had to be female. Carolus believed that if women had not been so heavily involved, “The talks would have suffered from what I call ‘testosterone poisoning.’ Women are used to dealing with conflicts, in the family, in the community. When they find an obstacle, they find a way to overcome it.” She expressed her astonishment at the few women involved in the Irish negotiations.⁸ Louise Vincent believes that women, who have

7. Inger Skjelsbaek, *Gendered Battlefields: A Gender Analysis of Peace and Conflict*, Prior Report 6 (Oslo: International Peace Research Institute, 1997), www.prio.no/publications/reports/battlefields/battlefields.html.

8. *Irish Times*, 5 March 2001.

been “relatively absent from the realm of production, politics, war and science” because of their different social position, have a perspective “drawn from their lives as mothers, carers, wives.”⁹

Kvinna Till Kvinna, a Swedish NGO that addresses the specific needs of women in areas affected by war and armed conflict, argues that postwar rebuilding processes must also include a change in attitudes regarding traditional gender roles:

If nationalism and prejudice are allowed to flourish then conflicts will easily rise to the surface again. In most societies affected by war and hostilities the gender roles are very conservative. The key to sustainable peace could therefore lie in changing stereotyped gender roles and improving gender equality within the various sections of the community.¹⁰

The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) Development Assistance Committee (DAC) established guidelines in 1998, focusing on gender equality and women’s empowerment and emphasizing the participation of women and men as necessary to processes of peace-building and development. A 2001 supplement to the OECD-DAC guidelines is testimony to the growing sophistication in thinking on the role of gender in conflict reduction strategies. The DAC now calls for greater inclusion in peace-building of the skills and initiatives women have demonstrated “that reflect collaboration and the principle of community action across ethnic, religious, linguistic and other divides.”¹¹ The G8 leaders also recognize the roles women played and have stressed the importance of:

... full and equal participation in all phases of conflict prevention, resolution, and peacebuilding; demobilization and reintegration programmes that consider the specific needs of female ex-combatants

9. Louise Vincent, “Current discourse on the role of women in conflict prevention and conflict transformation: a critique,” in *Conflict Trends: Women, Peace and Security* 3 (2003): 8.

10. Kvinna Till Kvinna, *Rethink! A handbook for sustainable peace* (Stockholm, 2004), 15, <http://www.iktk.se/publikationer/rapporter/pdf/Rethink>.

11. Richard Strickland and Nata Duvvury, *Gender Equity and Peacebuilding: from rhetoric to reality: finding the way* (Washington DC: International Centre for Research on Women, 2003), 12, http://www.icrw.org/docs/gender_peace_report_0303.

and their dependents; gender sensitive training for all members of peace-related operations; inclusion of women in operational posts at all levels; and integration of a gender perspective and women's participation in the development, design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of bilateral and multilateral assistance programs.¹²

Contributors at many different international events, such as conferences organized by the US-based Women Waging Peace, have amassed powerful evidence of women's global work, from Somalia to Sierra Leone and many other countries:

Women have their fingers on the pulse of the community and can gather essential information on the ground to mobilise post-conflict reconciliation and reconstruction. . . . Women foster confidence and trust among local populations, since they often care for the maimed, injured and orphaned. They propose constructive solutions while suggesting innovative approaches for dialogue among polarised groups. They sometimes use unorthodox means such as singing and dancing to diffuse potentially violent situations.¹³

Women Waging Peace echoes the views of many NGOs in exhorting policy-makers to “recognize that women's perspectives, women's agency, and particularly women's ways of promoting peace do make a difference in early warning, conflict resolution and conflict transformation.”¹⁴

Without women's participation at all levels of society and in all institutions, it is unlikely that proposed strategies for change will include a gendered understanding of violence, and without such an understanding, lasting change is highly unlikely. Northern Ireland society has not begun to deal with the “warrior-type” of masculinity evident in paramilitary organizations and nor has the consequences of the continued dominance of paramilitaries in many working-class communities and the kind of role models available to young boys and men formed part of the political discourse—at least,

12. Ibid., 13.

13. Swanee Hunt and Kemi Ogunsanya, “Women waging peace – making women visible,” in *Conflict Trends: Women, Peace and Security* 3 (2003): 46.

14. Women Waging Peace, summary of discussions at the 3rd Annual Women Waging Peace Research Symposium (2001). <http://www.womenwagingpeace.net/content/researchcenter/symposium/2001>

not until the recent McCartney family campaign. Without exploiting one family's tragedy, it can be argued that the presence of the McCartney family, in seeking the truth behind the murder of Robert McCartney, has opened up a space for a measured reflection on the consequences of women's continued under-representation in public life and a consideration of the nature of masculinity in a society that has been so profoundly affected by violence.¹⁵ The impact of this campaign has the potential to extend far beyond the immediate issue of who killed Robert McCartney. The appearance of a group of articulate and informed women, who readily acknowledge the importance of feminism in their lives, would (if it were not for the tragedy at the heart) be a breath of fresh air in the ill-tempered world of politics Northern Ireland-style. The debate that they have helped to open up raises profound questions concerning the nature of postconflict societies.¹⁶ As John Darby and Roger McGinty indicate, militarism has permeated Northern Irish society so that "violence and its effects have worked their way into the very fabric of society and become part of normal life so that (people) become accustomed to the routine use of violence to determine political and social outcomes."¹⁷

When the five McCartney sisters and Bridgeen Hagans, the fiancée of Robert McCartney, began their quest in January 2005 to find justice for their loved one, they generated extensive media coverage across the world. Some articles have included reflections on the roles taken by women during the past decades of "the troubles." Typically, it has been left to female journalists to make such connections:

The sisters have become another example of working-class Catholic women who are not prepared to accept the old rubric "Croppie lie

15. This is not an opportunity for "Sinn Féin bashing" as some beleaguered republicans believe (and which is undoubtedly the case in some quarters).

16. I wish also to acknowledge the efforts of Geraldine Finucane to seek the truth behind the murder of her husband, Pat. Her campaign, uncovering collusion between the intelligence services and loyalist paramilitaries, challenges the highest ranks of the British establishment, as the McCartney campaign challenges the power wielded over communities by republican paramilitary organizations.

17. Quoted in Marie Smyth, "The Process of Demilitarization and the Reversibility of the Peace Process in Northern Ireland," in *Terrorism and Political Violence* 16:3 (2004): 549.

down.” Like the women who were the backbone of the civil rights and peace movements, and those who rose to prominence during the hunger strikes, they will not be easily silenced by any oppressor, either foreign or home-grown.¹⁸

In her March 2005 column in the *Irish News* (Belfast), Susan McKay links the McCartney sisters’ involvement in women’s activities, their campaign for justice, and the concurrent struggle by the women’s NGO sector for emergency funding. According to McKay, as a facilitator for the Women into Politics organization Catherine McCartney “teaches working class women how to be effective as community activists, how to deal with the media, how to negotiate, campaign and lobby, how to speak out in a political way and be heard.” Her sister Paula is a graduate student of Women’s Studies at Queen’s University. While their campaign for justice was developing, community-based women’s groups were marching to the offices of the Minister for Social Development in protest against funding delays that threatened to close down women’s centers throughout the Belfast area. McKay’s article drew a pointed conclusion from this juxtaposition: “Men dominate northern Irish society, from its paramilitary armies to its political parties to its professions. It is time for the groups which give women the skills the McCartneys are using so powerfully to be respected and rewarded.”¹⁹

The Kvinna Till Kvinna Foundation is only one of countless organizations to acknowledge the contribution to the maintenance of civic society that has been made by women in Northern Ireland:

Women were actively building bridges between the Catholics and Protestants long before the official peace negotiations began. Instead of focusing on old injustices they discussed solutions and strategies for healthcare and education etc. The women developed a common cause that in time influenced public opinion. By cooperating they became a peaceful alternative which showed that coexistence is possible despite a bloody history.²⁰

Different grass-roots women’s organizations in the North continue to bring together working-class women, providing a mechanism to

18. Angeliqe Chrisafis, “We are not afraid,” *Guardian G2*, 11 March 2005, 2–4.

19. *Irish News*, 15 March 2005.

20. Kvinna Till Kvinna, *Rethink*, 15.

share experiences and to put pressure on policy-makers. While they would prefer not to articulate this work in terms of community relations development, they have succeeded in constructing what Eilish Rooney has termed “practical alliances.”²¹ Research figures from 2001 estimated that there were 1,071 “traditional” groups and 423 “activist” women’s organizations in the North, 68% of which were located in areas defined as economically deprived.²² The personal and political benefits that women gain from participation in such organizations occur in all instances where civil conflict has occurred:

Often women meet to discuss issues they find of concern in their society, but also because they want to empower themselves and others. Forming or becoming a member of an organisation can be a way for women to heal their war traumas. Sharing painful memories makes it easier to lessen feelings of hatred and start to think of the future. Becoming involved in an organisation is also a good stepping stone into politics. Discussing problems and possible solutions helps women become better equipped for making proposals for changes within society.²³

Empowerment is a key concept in understanding the importance of developing women-only space. The evidence from other areas of conflict highlights the crucial role played by women’s organizations. Interviews with Bosnian women, five years after the war, revealed that women who were looked after at women’s centers suffered much less from post-traumatic stress than women who received no help.²⁴

In a cultural exchange programme involving three cross-border partnerships, each involving two women’s cross-community groups, the focal point of a sustained dialogue centered on the recognition that “women’s experience of the conflict in Northern Ireland and the social, political and cultural divisions that resulted from this, compounded the general injustice and disadvantage experienced by

21. Eilish Rooney, “Political Division, Practical Alliance, Problems for Women in Conflict,” in *Journal of Women’s History*, special ed., 6:4 & 7:1 (1995).

22. Northern Ireland Voluntary Trust, *Where to from here: a new paradigm for the women’s sector in Northern Ireland* (Belfast: NIVT, October 2001), 2.

23. Kvinna Till Kvinna, *Rethink*, 14.

24. *Ibid.*, 36.

women in society.”²⁵ The result, after thirty weeks of discussion, was that participants felt themselves:

. . . beginning to resolve feelings of separation and alienation from the troubled North, taking active ownership of the Good Friday Agreement, and wishing to be involved in the making of a new dispensation in Ireland North and South, through participation at community and national level.²⁶

The difficulty is that sentiments developed within the safety of a women-only space have to be translated into action through participation in overwhelmingly male organizations at community and national levels—the very arenas that caused much of the feelings of separation and alienation identified through the workshops.

Thirty-five percent of women’s groups in the North are in the Belfast District Council area, the majority located within areas defined as deprived according to the Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measure. Research by Ruth Taillon has indicated the invaluable services provided by this women’s sector, including welfare advice, health and well-being services, policy development, education classes and childcare, and their importance in sustaining communities fractured by conflict and social and economic deprivation.²⁷ In a survey of experiences of women’s organizations in accessing European Union funding, the importance of their work in combating social exclusion was very evident. The majority of the thirty-one groups working with economically disadvantaged women who responded to a survey of their work ranged across the whole of Northern Ireland: lone parents, elderly and young women, women with disabilities, ethnic minorities, and traveler women, ex-prisoners and their families.²⁸

The advocacy and campaigning work undertaken by women’s groups has extended far beyond their initial preoccupations with

25. Mary Paul Keane and May McCann, *Exploring Differences: reflections on a model of cross-border/cross-cultural work* (Dublin: WEFT, 2001), 7.

26. *Ibid.*, 24.

27. Ruth Taillon, *The Social and Economic Impact of Women’s Centres in Greater Belfast* (Belfast: Women’s Support Network, 2000).

28. Ruth Taillon, *NI Women’s Organisations’ Experiences of EU Funding Programmes, Survey Report* (Belfast: Women’s Support Network, October 2002).

exclusively women's issues. While women's groups have been the catalyst for general community development in some areas, their ability to develop social capital remains constrained by the nature of the relationship between the women's sector and the wider community. In many neighborhoods that have experienced acute inter-communal violence, the ability of female activists to provide positive examples of acts rooted in a desire to promote reconciliation is limited, either because of the dominance of male community leaders following different agendas or because women remain too marginalized in mixed-sex organizations to be able to have an impact. The testimonies of the different women's centers that Taillon collated, provide evidence that such attitudes remain, as reflected in the report of Windsor Women's Centre:

. . . we are continuing with our efforts to ensure that women's views and experiences are listened to and valued by the government agencies who are working within this community. Our experience has been while women are the mainstream of everyday community work when it comes to the perceived 'big' issues they are often marginalised and not given an equal place in decision making.²⁹

Recent research, conducted as part of an international study into the gendered meanings of security in societies emerging from conflict, has heard of similar experiences from representatives from a variety of women's organizations.³⁰ Although women have been appointed to local partnerships, comprising politicians, statutory agencies, and community representatives, their experience has often been highly negative:

. . . the actual structures you were going into were all very much male-dominated, very much council-led, and they were all alien structures to a lot of women coming in . . . but if you challenged

29. Taillon, *Social and Economic Impact*, 116.

30. This article is based on research conducted for ESRC New Security Challenges Programme research project RES-223-25-0066, "Re-imagining Women's Security in Societies in Transition," analyzing postconflict gender relations in Northern Ireland, South Africa, and Lebanon. It is a joint project with colleagues from the University of Ulster, Queen's University Belfast, and Democratic Dialogue.

them over the time of a meeting or challenged them on the gender equality in terms of numbers, you were a lone voice.³¹

The only solution, as one respondent phrased it, is to ensure that women are involved “at the design stage” in terms of formulating new structures:

We are tolerated at best unless we get in at the design stage and say, if you are actually serious about incorporating women in every area of our life in Northern Ireland and making women feel equal partners, we have to start designing all our structures so that women feel comfortable there and we can contribute as much as we want to.³²

Chinkin has written of the omission of “any recognition of the whole range of movements, initiatives and networks that women undertake throughout conflict,” so that “women’s activities are not seen as building political or leadership expertise; rather stereotyped assumptions about women’s roles blind international negotiators to the potential of such activities to organisation and leadership post-conflict.”³³ One difficulty is that, though Resolution 1325 provides for women’s voices to be heard, it does not emphasize their role as agents of social change but merely reiterates the importance of their participation for the maintenance of peace and security. Therefore, while women are being included within organizations, they remain mere token presences. Increasingly, they are making it plain that much more will be necessary before women can effect meaningful change in society.

The situation today stands in some contrast to the peace negotiations, when the British government, the Irish government, the pro-Irish nationalist parties, and the pro-British unionist parties, after a long period of secret pre-negotiations among the main protagonists to the conflict, came together in the multi-party talks that gave rise to the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement of 10 April 1998. Then, the Women’s Coalition made history when their representative became

31. Participant from Women’s Aid, “Women in NGO Sector focus group” (June 2004), ESRC project.

32. Participant from a reproductive rights organization, *ibid.*

33. Chinkin, *Peace Processes*, 7.

the only woman standing alongside the other seven party leaders and the prime ministers of Britain and Ireland as signatories to the agreement. The formation of the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition in 1996 was the outcome of intense discussion by women activists from a variety of backgrounds and political opinions who, during the exclusively male pre-negotiation phase, had come to a realization that unless women formed themselves into a political party, elections for participants to talks on the future of Northern Ireland would result in an overwhelmingly male discussion and outcome.³⁴ As Fionnuala Ni Aoláin has noted, "While numerically small and politically untested their impact on the negotiation process and its outcomes was to be substantive."³⁵

Could it be said that this women's party, its membership gathered from across the political spectrum and founded on the core principles of inclusion, equality, and human rights, has demonstrated the ability of women to "do things differently"? During the talks, the task of the Women's Coalition was to ensure that women's voices were heard, despite the sometimes overt hostility of some politicians. The coalition was aware of how important issues such as seating arrangements would become and advocated that the parties should be located alphabetically around the table. Many parties had entered the talks as strangers to each other, and the seating arrangements ensured that at least some of them became acquainted during the following two years. The process of how delegates were to

34. There are many accounts of the formation of the NIWC and the subsequent internal debate among dissenting voices within republican feminism. There is not the space to consider these issues in this article. See Kate Fearon, *Women's Work, the Story of the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1999); Kate Fearon and Monica McWilliams, "Swimming Against the Mainstream: the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition," in Carmel Roulston and Celia Davies (eds.), *Gender, Democracy and Inclusion in Northern Ireland* (York: Palgrave, 2000), 117–37; Margaret Ward, "Times of transition, republican women, feminism and political representation," in Louise Ryan and Margaret Ward (eds.), *Irish Women and Nationalism: soldiers, new women and wicked hags* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2004), 184–201.

35. Fionnuala Ni Aoláin, Peace Agreements as a Means for Promoting Gender Equality and Ensuring Participation of Women, UNDAW, Expert Group Meeting on "Peace Agreements as a means for promoting gender equality and ensuring participation of women – a framework of model provisions" (10–13 Nov. 2003), Ottawa, Canada.

negotiate was as important to the Women's Coalition as the substance of what was to be negotiated.³⁶ The bi-communal nature of the party, with nationalist and unionist among its membership, meant that positions adopted had to be acceptable to a diverse range of political views, necessitating a regular process of consultation and feedback for party members. In addition, as part of their commitment to inclusiveness and equality, the party insisted that the process of negotiation should involve delegates from parties who were ex-combatants as well as members of constitutional parties. This approach was to prove critical to the maintenance of the peace process when both republicans and loyalists found themselves excluded from the talks, following breaches of their cease-fires. The coalition provided briefings for those excluded, ensuring that they remained in touch. For women, with bitter experience of exclusion, it was important to insist that all actors in the process be involved.

Included in the final peace agreement were provisions relating to policing reform, judicial reform, equality legislation, human rights protection, a civic forum, and measures relating to prisoners, victims, and language rights. Within a list of rights that encompassed a right to equal opportunity and provision for human rights protection was a separate clause affirming "the right of women to full and equal political participation."³⁷ Toward the end of the negotiation process, members of the Women's Coalition, "decided that it had not been in the process for two years for nothing to be acknowledged about women's rights," so they proposed the wording that was subsequently inserted into the text of the agreement. The importance of women's contribution to the process of achieving peace had not figured in the determinations of civil servants and male politicians until

36. When the New Assembly was formed after the Peace Talks this alphabetical arrangement was dropped because the larger parties wished to be seated on opposing sides of the Parliamentary Chamber, following traditional practice. This was seen by many as a step backward and indeed proved to be the case when it led to adversarial shouting matches between the opposing sides. Information on seating arrangements provided by Monica McWilliams, NIWC leader during the Talks and elected Member to the Assembly, 1998–2003.

37. *The Agreement: agreement reached in the multi-party negotiations* (Belfast, 1998), 16.

this challenge.³⁸ While this has proved to be an important aspiration, it has not been legally reinforced in the implementation process. Kate Fearon, political advisor to the coalition during the negotiations, provides an explanation for the reason why the clause on women was unlikely to be written into law: “Those components that are principle-based have no named authority to champion them—they remain the responsibility of the participants and require political leadership to embed.”³⁹ In a catch-22 situation, unless more women are elected to the Assembly, it is unlikely to pass legislation to promote the greater participation of women. Although gender issues form part of the outworkings of the peace agreement, in many instances women’s demand for equality of status has been sidelined by politicians and civil servants who continue to prioritize “constitutional” issues, namely, obtaining nationalist/ unionist cooperation.

When Mo Mowlam was Secretary of State, three women were appointed to the Parades Commission, an institution central to the task of mediating conflict. Her male successors did not extend their terms of appointment or appoint female replacements. In giving evidence to the House of Commons Select Committee on Northern Ireland Affairs, the Equal Opportunities Commission placed on record their concern over the implications this had for women’s future participation:

In our view, it is particularly important that high profile bodies such as the Parades Commission, which deals in matters of the utmost sensitivity and political importance, is [sic] truly representative of the community. Further, we believe that where no women are represented on a body such as this, there is a very real danger that a message is put out that perpetuates the stereotype of women not being suited to the “hard” issues.⁴⁰

38. Fearon, *Women’s Work*, 106. Avila Kilmurray, in her speech to launch the WEA *Women in Public Life Programme*, “Women on the Fringe of Power,” 9 Nov. 2001, Grosvenor Hall, Belfast, also confirmed that the women were told as this was not contained in the “chapeau” of the first paragraph of the human rights section it could not be included. The NIWC response was to argue a tired official into agreement.

39. Kate Fearon, “Gender and Peace in Northern Ireland,” in Michael Cox, Adrian Guelke and Fiona Stephen (eds.), *A Farewell to Arms? From ‘long war’ to long peace in Northern Ireland* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 157.

40. House of Commons: *Select Committee on Northern Ireland Affairs, Appendices to Minutes of Evidence*, Session 2000–I, Appendix 12.

In January 2006 appointments to a new Parades Commission were made by Peter Hain in his capacity as NI Secretary of State. This time three women and four men were appointed. One female member is a former election candidate for the Women's Coalition. For many years the question of parading in contested areas was an issue to be resolved by men only; it remains to be seen whether the inclusion of women will enhance the ability of the commission to negotiate and achieve compromise.

One acknowledged success within the reform of the police has been the appointment of Nuala O'Loan as Police Ombudsman, responsible for overseeing the work of the police service. Her work provides powerful evidence for the argument that women can be tough, principled negotiators. She remained resolute against the bullying of the former Chief Constable, Ronnie Flanagan, who viewed he would "commit suicide publicly" if his policemen were found to be at fault in the investigation of the Omagh bombing. O'Loan refused to retract her critical report and in the end it was Flanagan, not O'Loan, who was forced to resign.

Catholic under-representation in the police force has been a serious issue, with important consequences regarding the perceived legitimacy of the state. For that reason, Section 46 of the Police Act (NI) 2000 provides for affirmative action to ensure that appointments would be made on a 50 percent Catholic, 50 percent Protestant basis. Although the Independent Commission on Policing for Northern Ireland (known as the Patten Report), upon which the Police Act is largely based, ignored representation from quarters such as the Equal Opportunities Commission to include women within the scope of affirmative action measures, it did recommend that "Every effort should be made to ensure that the composition of the staff of the Policing Board, and the Northern Ireland Office Police Division (or any successor body) and the Office of the Police Ombudsman should be broadly reflective of the population of Northern Ireland as a whole, particularly in terms of political /religious tradition and gender."⁴¹ While efforts have been made to

41. *A New Beginning: Policing in Northern Ireland: The Report of the Independent Commission on Policing for Northern Ireland*, Recommendation 112 (Belfast: HMSO The Stationery Office, Sept. 1999).

attract more women and to eradicate a “canteen culture” that deters female applicants, women and Catholics remain underrepresented, with 16.9 percent of women and 14 percent of Catholics currently in the newly named Police Service of Northern Ireland.⁴² However, it must be noted that the proportion of Catholics has increased from a very low base, and affirmative action will further improve this figure, while any increase in female representation will be much more gradual.

The recommendation of the Patten Commission, that institutions related to policing should be “broadly reflective of the population,” were disregarded in the appointments made to the Policing Board, established to scrutinize the performance of the Chief Constable. Only two women out of a total of nineteen members were appointed to the Policing Board set up to monitor the work of the police. At the same time the Minister responsible for security issues claimed that it was a “well balanced board” because of the ratio of unionist and nationalist representation.⁴³ A paradigm shift in how the issue of “balance” is viewed in all areas of public life is crucial if lack of gender parity is ever to be understood as an important aspect of democratic transformation in a deeply conservative society. Other areas of public life also remain overwhelmingly male. Of 2,060 appointments to public bodies, approximately two-thirds are held by men, while the percentage of female chairs is under one-third, at 27 percent.⁴⁴

One area where change on the scale envisaged by Patten and in the spirit of the agreement has been carried out, has been in the appointments made to the twenty-six District Policing Partnerships, based in each local government area, which were set up to provide for community-based participation in the policing process. The Policing Board was responsible for determining the recruitment process. An independent recruitment agency established selection panels that used census data to ensure that the independent member appointments to these partnerships were truly representative of

42. Northern Ireland Policing Board, *Annual Report* (2004).

43. *Irish Times*, 9 Oct. 2001.

44. Central Appointments Unit, *Public Appointments Annual Report 2003/2004*, Vol. 1 (Office of First and Deputy First Minister, Nov. 2004).

the age, gender, and community background profile of each district council area. Of the 207 independent DPP members appointed, 127 were women. The report of the Independent Assessors concluded that the appointment process was “fair, robust, open and transparent.”⁴⁵ This should have provided a template for all appointments to institutions arising out of the agreement, but this has not been the case. While the Joint Declaration of the British and Irish governments in April 2003 claimed that the British government has pursued broad policies for “promoting social inclusion, including in particular community development and the advancement of women in public life,” there have still been no proposals on the advancement of women in public life, no positive action measures, and no enforcement mechanisms to ensure that any such policy would be implemented.

The questions that have been raised by the killing of Robert McCartney and many others before him lead to the inescapable conclusion that there can be no sustainable future until there is a strong social and political movement against the culture of violent masculinity. This culture embraces the youngster who proudly pronounces that he is a “hard man” through the aggressive behavior of male politicians, to the physical force tradition within the two communities. Sentiments to this effect have been expressed frequently by participants in the ESRC research project considering the gendering of security. One woman, working as a community worker in a loyalist area, expressed concern for a future in which young boys no longer had the expectation of paramilitary membership and the power derived from this, “while it wasn’t a healthy aspiration . . . they were very controlling of the community and also of their partners and of their children. The situation now is those young boys are at a loss completely in terms of where they fit. It’s quite worrying because that is going to come out in other ways in terms of control and violence.”⁴⁶ In some nationalist areas, the lack of republican weaponry (due to acts of decommissioning) and continued lack of

45. Judith Eve, John Keanie, Patricia Weir, *Report of Impartial Assessors to Appointment of Independent Members to Northern Ireland District Policing Partnerships* (Northern Ireland Policing Board, 2003).

46. Participant from a Belfast Women’s Centre, Women and NGOs focus group, June 2004.

an acceptable police service has led some young people to believe they can act without fear of consequence. One former republican prisoner expressed her concern for the future, “I think the young ones growing up, and especially anti-social violence (with the lack of policing) reeling them in, being accountable, there is more of an unruliness, there is actually more damage done to their communities than has ever been done before.”⁴⁷

Cathy Harkin, of Derry Women’s Aid, famously referred to the North as an “armed patriarchy.”⁴⁸ For feminists, the term encompasses men in the security forces as well as paramilitary groups. Women’s Aid refuges provide shelter to women fleeing from violent partners, some of whom belong to paramilitary organizations and to the police. Figures for incidents of domestic violence have risen steadily, from 6,727 in 1996 to 15,519 by March 2003.⁴⁹ While illegal weapons remain a bone of contention in political negotiations, the armed patriarchy is underpinned by 134,000 legally held small arms, with one person in 17.6 holding a shotgun certificate, compared with half that ratio in England and Wales. Shelley Anderson, coordinator of the International Fellowship of Reconciliation’s Women Peacemakers Programme, calls for an examination of the links between this “private” violence and the “public” violence of armed conflict:

The attitudes and values that give rise to the former lay the ground work for the latter. Both are rooted in mindsets where domination, control and beliefs in certain groups’ superiority and others’ inferiority are central. A mind set that permits and justifies the use of physical or psychological force by a “superior” against an “inferior” cannot be safely relegated to one corner of life, such as the home, or certain personal relationships. It will become a part of public life.⁵⁰

47. Republican ex-prisoner, Republican women ex-prisoner focus group, 15 March 2005.

48. Quoted in Nell McCafferty, *The Armagh Women* (Dublin: Co-Op Books, 1981), 88.

49. Police statistics listed on the website of Northern Ireland Women’s Aid Federation, www.niwaf.org/statistics/policeStatistics

50. Shelley Anderson, *Women and Reconciliation*, 4: <http://www.ifor.org/wpp/womrecon>

What is needed, as Marie Smyth says, is “demilitarisation at a cultural and ideological level.”⁵¹

A sustainable base for future conflict prevention cannot be achieved without examination of discourses around masculinity. Research on gender equity and peace building is convincing in arguing that “a framework of peace building and reconstruction must address socially entrenched gender-based discrimination,”⁵² including strategies to change masculine identities that underpin the dynamics of conflict and violence. Tina Sideris has suggested that men’s identities “may emerge more damaged from a period of conflict and if during reconstruction no attention is paid to alternative positive masculinities in opposition to essentialist masculinity, the reassertion of traditional gender norms and roles is inevitable.”⁵³ All this helps us to understand the realities of life in many parts of the North and the differences in gender behavior that women activists are vocal in highlighting:

For me anyway, to be a true revolutionary, and to be somebody that is really committed to equality and everything else, you have to have the same face in the house as you have out there. I’m sick of hearing about these great men out in our communities who are held in high esteem and they are in beating their partners . . . you can’t go out and fight for equality, political equality, and not fight for equality between women and men as well, for gender equality.⁵⁴

Donna Pankhurst, working in the Peace Studies Centre in Bradford University, in considering longer term transformative processes, discusses the consequences of the culture of masculinity, heightened in conflict. While dismissing essentialist notions, she argues that existing patterns of entrenched masculinity are highly unlikely to change without the increased representation and participation of women as an essential precondition. In postconflict contexts, changing the culture of organizations and institutions that typically embody aggressive values of masculinity is important. Transforming the traditional

51. Smyth, *The Process of Demilitarization*, 548.

52. Strickland and Duvvury, *Gender Equity and Peace Building*, 2.

53. *Ibid.*, 9.

54. Republican ex-prisoner, Republican women ex-prisoner focus group, 15 March 2005.

nature of security forces is as vital as disbanding paramilitary organizations. In terms of increasing the proportions of women in key institutions, Pankhurst stresses that the chances of success are increased when the responsibility for culture change is regarded also as the responsibility of men.

Although women have, on rare occasions, emerged empowered from the experience of war, it is more usual to find women losing what has been a hard-won autonomy once war ends. Cynthia Cockburn phrases this in stark terms:

. . . the civil society rebuilt after war or tyranny seldom reflects women's visions or rewards their energies. The space that momentarily opens up for change is not often used to secure genuine and lasting gender transformations. Effort may be put into healing enmity by reshaping ethnic and national relations, but gender and class relations are usually allowed to revert to the status quo ante. Old privileges may be in eclipse, but a new business elite, a new criminal underworld, a reformed police service come into being as the familiar masculinity hierarchies. . . . Instead of the skills and confidence forged by some women by the furnace of war being turned to advantage, the old sexual divisions of labour is reconstituted, in the family, in the labour force.⁵⁵

We have seen, despite the pledge contained in the Good Friday Agreement concerning the "full and equal participation of women in public life," that women have remained largely excluded from participation in institutions that are most directly concerned with conflict prevention. Notwithstanding assertions to the contrary, governments, politicians, and elements of civic society are content to see women confined to working on cross-community "bread and butter" issues, leaving the "real work" to men. Requiring a focus on women's involvement in reconstruction is not simply reproducing stereotypical notions of women's "natural" propensity for peace; rather, it is to highlight the number of ways in which they are excluded from the process. Women are absent from crucial institu-

55. Cynthia Cockburn, "Gender, Armed Conflict and Political Violence," background paper prepared for the World Bank (Washington DC, June 10/11, 1999), 17. A later version of this paper can be found in Caroline Moser and Fiona Clark (eds.), *Victims, Perpetrators or Actors? Gender, Armed Conflict and Political Violence*

tions like the Parades Commission, the higher echelons of the criminal justice system, and within the senior levels of most political parties. This has meant that there remains a significant gap between a political commitment to the inclusion of women and practice on the ground.

In her study of unfinished transitions, Elizabeth Friedman believes the evidence shows that “democratic transitions are unfinished when citizens of both genders are taken into account.” If women are not fully included, then the dynamics that led to a successful transition will not lead on to consolidation, because consolidation “calls for multiplying the issues placed on the table and allowing other actors to bring a chair.” Northern Ireland was different, in that women were included in the initial phases of transition and were able to make the case for equality in all spheres. However, that phase was not consolidated and the issues have narrowed to decommissioning and disbandment of paramilitary organizations. Little effort has been made to encourage wider participation and ownership of the process. It could be argued that taking away so many chairs, leading to an all-male process conducted solely through the major political parties and two governments, was bound to lead to failure. Women have been outspoken in articulating a range of issues that need to be included in the process. If more actors are not invited to bring their chairs to the table, the future prospects for the peace process remain very uncertain.