



Women And War In Northern Ireland - A Slow Growth To Power

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Abstract

In Northern Ireland, until the 1990's, the women from both protestant and catholic areas contained the war, and limited its effects, mainly in so far as it affected themselves, their own families, and their own communities. By and large they were not directly involved in the politics of stopping the war until, following the ceasefires of 1994, they became actively engaged in politics. Using their extensive community connections and credibility, and their position as a cross community political party they helped to mediate and broker the Belfast 1998 agreement that was to herald the beginning of an agreed peace in Northern Ireland.

Author Profile

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In Northern Ireland, in the early eighties, I found myself living in an area that was known as the Tyrone murder triangle, or alternatively, the Killing Fields. It was an interface zone, where many Catholic and Protestant areas bordered each other, and it had the second highest sectarian murder rate in Northern Ireland. There was a continual battle going on around us between the Republican Nationalist Catholics, who wanted a United Ireland ¹ and the Unionist Loyalist Protestants², who wanted to keep Northern Ireland as part of Britain, and between the British Army, and the Northern Irish police force who frequently found themselves in violent conflict with the Catholic population. When I arrived in Northern Ireland, the war had been going on for almost a decade and a half and showed no sign of victory for either side. We lived in a mainly Catholic area, near what had been my husband's family settlement for almost 300 years. His Protestant forebears had come over from Scotland, probably in the search for religious freedom themselves, and eager to take up the opportunities available in the northern part of the island of Ireland. They had farmed and prospered, building up their distinctive houses and businesses through the efforts of the many indigenous Catholics in their neighborhood on the shores of Lough Neagh.

Our locality had seen the worst of much of the violence that had started again in the late 1960's.³ Many Catholic and Protestant neighbors, and soldiers and policemen had been killed within a few miles of where we lived, some in front of their family. The family business, because of its complicated history, had been blown up by both Protestant and Catholic paramilitaries and now functioned with only a square foot of a window of light, so as to better protect it from bombs.⁴ It was an area that was been continually patrolled and searched by the army and the police.

Our two sons, both born in the late seventies, had been brought up to the constant sound of surveillance helicopters, landing frequently beside our house, and the frequent sounds of bombs and gunfire. Their great aunt was the

¹ In 1921 Ireland had been divided into Northern Ireland, where the majority of people were Protestants (66%) and the Republic of Ireland where the majority of people were Catholics (90%)

² The Protestant were mostly descendants of the Scottish and British settlers who had come to Ireland in the 17th and 18th centuries so as to 'plant' or 'settle' the power of the British in Ireland. They were called Unionist because they wanted to retain the 800 year link that Ireland had had with Britain, and loyalists because they were loyal to the British Queen.

³ Discrimination against Catholics became rife in Northern Ireland in the decades following the division of the island in 1921 See Richard Rose, *Governing without Consensus: An Irish Perspective* (London: Faber, 1971). The civil rights movement started as a movement for Catholic equality in 1967, but not enough was done quickly enough to address issues of inequality and within 2 years, a peaceful process was turned into a violent campaign which saw the reemergence of paramilitary forces on both sides.

⁴ A few generations previously the family had become Catholic through marriage, but they retained many of the advantages of the settlers.

postmistress of the post office at the end of our lane that was so often robbed by the IRA in pursuit of funding for their military campaign that it was eventually closed. This great aunt was a very fine gardener – all of her spare time was spent tending her garden in the house she lived in near to the home farm, on top of a hill, alongside a crab apple fairy tree which was so sacred to the community that a road had been built around it rather than over it. One day, Aunt Evelyn, as we knew her, was out in her garden, when she looked up to see group of men in balaclavas – the normal paramilitary face mask uniform – coming through her garden fence of plants and flowers. Obviously they were up to no good – in fact it transpired that they were setting a bomb on the road outside the house so as to blow up some British military patrols, and were making their escape through her fence. But what mostly offended Aunt Evelyn was that they dared to harm her precious garden fence. She promptly yelled at them saying that they had no right to come through it – that there was a perfectly good gate into her garden just a few yards away, and they were to use that. And, somewhat disconcerted, they did.

I tell the story to exemplify both the success and the limitations of many women living in Northern Ireland and to illustrate the fact that by and large, until the early nineties, the women of Northern Ireland contained the war, in so far as it affected themselves and their families, and their communities – but, by and large they did not stop the war.

Gerry Adams⁵ once famously said “If the women of the Falls Road⁶ come and ask me to stop the war, I will.” But they did not come – and it took many decades after he had said it for the war to end. So what did they do – and why did they not get seriously involved in the politics of stopping the war until the early nineties?

Women Contained the War

Within, and occasionally between their communities, women were very involved in trying to ensure that the war did not affect their families, their children, and their communities. In Northern Ireland there are roughly 4,000 non-governmental groups (NGO's), most of them involved in social issues, or in community development i.e. empowering communities to address issues of poverty and social concern through grass roots development and policy leverage. Since the regional political representatives had been stood down by the British in 1972, because of the apparent inability of the majority Unionist government to maintain order in the region after the peaceful civil rights protests of the

⁵ A leading figure in the IRA –the Irish Republican Army, an illegal militia seeking a united Ireland.

⁶ The main thoroughfare of the working class Catholic community in Belfast.

Catholics were taken over by the violence of the IRA. The IRA maintained that the Unionist government would never concede equality to Catholics, and that they could only get such equality in a united Ireland. NGO's had played a powerful role in setting the social and economic agendas for their communities in conjunction with the British civil servants and ministers who retained responsibility for government.

There were many dozens of women's group doing community development through Northern Ireland, but mostly on a sectarian basis. One group which did begin to cross party lines was the Women's Information Group, set up to utilize Protestant/Catholic cross community power to seek better social rights and resources for families and their communities. In this they were very successful – but it took many years of working together before enough trust developed for them to begin to address very contentious issues such of politics and policing together, and even then, most of the group maintained their focus on easier issues such as childcare, better youth facilities, employment opportunities etc.

Another group that began to cross the community divide in the early 90's was WAVE – a cross community group who collectively tried to address the needs of those who had been victims of the violence from both communities.⁷ Women were also very involved in the development of integrated schools - i.e. joint Protestant/Catholic schools, whose numbers grew to over 60 such schools during the course of the conflict and whose success was due to the immense energies of the parents of the children who attended these schools. Within their communities, women were very also involved in trying to stop many of the anti-social manifestations of the war, such as joy riding, i.e. the tendency for young men to rob cars and drive them fast through their communities, often killing themselves and others in the process. The process of keeping social order within Catholic communities was very difficult, because the regular police who were almost totally Protestant were seen as anti Catholic and therefore not acceptable in Catholic areas.

The influence of women was more keenly noticeable in developing and maintaining viable social communities, and in containing the war by easing the anger of the families of victims. In addition, there were some women who took it upon themselves to act as informal go-betweens between the many groups in conflict such as the Catholic and Protestant militias, the regional police, the British Army, and the British government and their representatives in Northern Ireland. For many years they shuttled between such groups, undertaking the necessary social and political dialogues that were required if political talks were

⁷ There were over 3.600 people killed during the course of the conflict, out of a population of 1.5 million. The equivalent killed in population terms in the US would be 670,000 deaths.

to succeed while all the time refraining from becoming actively involved themselves in local or regional politics.⁸ So why did they abstain from being active in the very processes that looked to give the best hope for an eventual peace agreement?

War Is Mostly A Man's Game – At The Moment

The first thing to recognize is that women appear indeed to be different to men, when it comes to fighting wars. Gender difference in aggression and competitive tendencies start as early as two years of age, when sharing and helpfulness are displayed much more frequently by girls than boys. The differences in male and female biology almost always point towards men being both more willing and more capable of engaging in war⁹ although there is no doubt that the 'socialization' of the sexes plays an extremely important part in this difference. Whether or not it is a testosterone factor or a socialising factor, the reality is that aggression and violence is much very likely to provide meaning to the lives of men than to women. In past and current wars, men are the main perpetrators and victims of violence.¹⁰ In Northern Ireland it was mostly young men killing young men - women were only 8.9% of the victims i.e. 322 women were killed, and 3279 males were killed.¹¹

In Bosnia, according to the Red Cross, of those missing after the war, and presumed to be victims, 92% were men, and 8% women. In current armies men still vastly outnumber women i.e. they total about 97%, and they are even less represented in combat troops which are 99.9% male. In only 6 of the worlds 200 armies do women make up more than 5% although the figure for the United States is now US 14%. There are a slightly higher percentage of women who are participants in paramilitary groups e.g. women constituted 6% of the paramilitaries in Northern Ireland, in Eritrea their participation rose to 20% and in the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to 30%.

We Are Confused As Women About Our Equal Right to Kill - And Be Killed

One of the most difficult choices we had to make as women in Northern Ireland came about when a woman soldier – one of the few - took a case of

⁸ Sue Williams and Niall Fitzduff, *Cumulative Impact Case Study How Did Northern Ireland Move Toward Peace?* (Cambridge : CDA, 2007).

http://www.cdainc.com/cdawww/pdf/casestudy/rpp_cumulative_case_northern_ireland_final_Pdf.pdf

⁹ It is quite possible that new technology, which requires little physical strength to wage a war, will change this.

¹⁰ There is no sign in history of the fabled Amazonian warriors.

¹¹ Marie Smith with Fay, Marie-Therese and Mike Morrissey, *Northern Ireland's Troubles: The Human Costs* (London: Pluto, 1999).

discrimination to the Equality commission, because she had been given a smaller sized gun than her male companions, and she wanted an equal size gun. How should women feel about this?

Should women rejoice when they heard that Kurdish and Palestinian women are joining their guerilla movements in growing numbers, and choose to blow up others or themselves in order to achieve their political objectives? Should the Equality Commission have accorded the Northern Irish woman soldier an equal size gun, as they eventually did?

Burguières¹² asserts that women are indeed conflicted as a group – and that there are three tendencies within feminists in relation to war. The first is that as *pacifists* i.e. people who believe that because of their nature, women are much less likely to support violence than men – and who feel it is unnatural for women to take up the cause of killing.¹³ The second group is what she calls *Liberalists feminists* i.e. these are women who believe other women have as equal a right as men to kill. The third group is *the Anti-militarist Feminists*, who don't see women as necessarily peaceful - but reject militarism as a process for solving conflicts.

Women Often Collude In Keeping Wars Going

In fact, research shows that while some women oppose war, most support them. Often women have colluded with the men in seeing war as valorous – many of the white feathers sent to pacifist in World War 1 were from women, goading the men to go out and fight. Women worked in the munitions factories. Women did not take up the Lysistrata option i.e. they generally did not and do not go on sex strikes to prevent their men from killing other people's children - or sweethearts or fathers, or mothers.¹⁴

Women often sing war songs with their babies at their breast - the very songs that often send their boys and men out to war. My own doctoral research on why nationalist men from Northern Ireland take on violence showed that the stories and traditions learned from their families, including their mother, often taught them that there was honor in fighting violently for a cause.¹⁵ In Northern Ireland, when a nationalist woman was found to be dating a British soldier, it was other women who 'tarred and feathered her' i.e. poured boiling tar over her

¹² Mary Burguières, "Feminist Approaches to Peace: Another Step for Peace Studies," *Millennium journal of international studies* 19(1) (1990):1–18.

¹³ There is only some slight evidence to show that women vote a little more for politicians with peace agendas.

¹⁴ However, in 2003, the women of Liberia went on a sex strike to force their men to go and make a peace agreement.

¹⁵ Mari Fitzduff, *From Ritual to Consciousness*, unpublished thesis D.Phil 1989.

naked body, and poured feathers over her to teach her a lesson in not betraying her community through association with the enemy.

Many also colluded with their men by agreeing to defer the feminist cause so as to first win the nationalist cause – when the occupation is over, they were told by their men, later on, you can fight your feminist war.¹⁶ Some of the bitterest debates in Northern Ireland during the 70's and 80's were between those women who wanted to put the feminist agenda first - and those who wanted to fight only the nationalist agenda. To nationalist women, feminism was seen as being disloyal or self-indulgent.

Women Do Not Generally Believe That War Is Their Business

I remember a friend of mine, who had previously lived with a loyalist gunman, who was frequently involved in murdering Catholics. Many a night she would go out and secretly deactivate his car by ensuring a puncture in it, or smashing his front car window, so as to prevent him going out at night on what the paramilitaries called a night of 'action' i.e. a night of bombing and shooting the other side. However, it turned out in later discussions that her only thought in smashing the car was that she could prevent her man being killed - not his killing of other men, women or children. It is very common to find women focused on such a cause i.e. the Russian Committee of Soldiers' Mothers who protested against the war in Chechnya did so not because their sons were fighting in Chechnya with significant civilian casualties among the Chechens, but because they were losing their own sons in the war. The Peace People in Northern Ireland began in Northern Ireland as a reaction against the deaths of three children and subsequently their mother through suicide in an incident involving the British army.¹⁷ Mairead Corrigan, a sister to the mother of the children and Betty Williams together organized street marches with many thousand of people, mainly women, over the next few years, pleading for peace to return to Northern Ireland. The campaign gradually petered out because to many their plea suggested a return to the perceived injustices which had accumulated among the Catholic community, and which has energized the civil rights campaigns which had started the latest bout of the conflict in 1969.

Women Are Often More Reluctant To Divorce Relationships From Roles

As noted above, most of the women from the Women's Information Group, who fought together on social issues for many years, were very reluctant to talk together, or to seek common ground on issues of security or politics, rather than

¹⁶ I have also seen this among Palestinian men and where many women have been persuaded to desist from seeing their own liberation – until their country was established and free.

¹⁷ <http://www.peacepeople.com/>

common social issues.. Many were convinced that the newly developed relationships that they had forged across the divide on social issues would not survive the difficulties of such dialogue. When, in 1996 The Northern Ireland Women's Coalition (NIWC) was formed, and ran for seats in the newly set up regional Forum, which seats they won, they were astounded at the level of cat calling and mooing to which they were subjected to by the men while the forum was in progress. They found it impossible to understand how the politicians in the forum could express such bitter vehemence to each other while in the chamber, and then easily move on to drinks together outside of the Forum framework. They were unable to divorce their personal frameworks of relationships from their work frameworks, and it took them many months for them to achieve an ease with this process, and to develop the 'thick skin' that they needed to endure the political process.

Women Are Often Power Illiterate - But This Can And Did Change In Northern Ireland

Throughout the first two decades of the conflict, women were very reluctant to become involved in local or regional politics. Even women who had achieved significant social and economic influence in their community shunned the sectarian politics of the day. They were however very concerned about issues affecting women, so when in 1996, after both sets of paramilitaries had called ceasefires, and it was announced that a new political forum would be set up, they lobbied for the existing political parties to include women in their candidate lists. When this action was effectively ignored by all except one of the parties, they decided to form their own political grouping to contest the elections. The party was called the Northern Ireland women's Coalition (NIWC) and its party color was purple in honor of the suffragettes. They ran on a campaign agenda of women's issues, plus they put themselves forward as a process party - i.e. committed to facilitating a process of political agreement. The women involved came from all sides of the political divide, and they also spanned a wide range of fields i.e. community and voluntary workers, teachers and university lecturers, doctors and domestic workers. Many of them had had many years of local community work behind them. The development of the NIWC was the culmination of a long process where women eventually came to realize that they had to move into the political sphere if they were to significantly change the context of a war within which they had lived for 25 years.

The NIWC won two seats in the elections and they moved into political power.
¹⁸ Such a move enabled them to participate directly in the talks leading up to

¹⁸ See Conciliation resources site at <http://www.c-r.org/our-work/accord/public-participation/ni-womens-coalition.php> for a short history of the NIWC by Kate Fearon .

the Belfast agreement of 1998, which was to see the beginning of the end of the war. During the talks, almost all of the party delegations were male while the NIWC delegation was exclusively female. The NIWC was careful to ensure that both nationalist and unionist women were at the table at all times. Because they favored an agreement, and not a particular constitutional position, they were able to use their talents well in moving between the parties in a form of shuttle mediation which was significantly helpful during the two frustrating years it took for the parties to reach an agreement.

The NIWC's involvement in the negotiations not only facilitated and promoted women's participation, but it also showed the possibility that civil society can participate in and influence formal political negotiations, as their party was continually interacting with local communities during the process of negotiations, and taking lesson learned from the communities into the negotiations. In doing so they emphasized a new kind of politics, one which they as women could be proud of, and without which achieving an overall agreement, and the beginnings of peace, would have been so much more difficult.

What Lessons Have We Learned From The Involvement Of Women In The Northern Irish Conflict?

Women in Northern Ireland lacked neither courage nor ingenuity in ensuring that their families and communities were protected as much as possible from the effects of the three decades of the war. Most of the work they did however was within their own communities, where many of them were very active in addressing the social and economic needs of their families and those of their near neighbours. Realising that they had a better chance of getting more of their needs addressed by government if they worked on a cross community basis, many were even willing to do this – as long as contentious issues were left outside the doors of their somewhat fragile relationships.

However, it was only when the women realized that the direct political processes being set up to decide on the future of Northern Ireland could go ahead without them, leaving their needs outside, and that all of the power was moving to the political sphere, that they realised they had to forego their distaste for politics, and become part of that particular game. In doing so, they discovered that not only were they able to ensure that the issues they cared about were on the agenda of all politicians, and political parties, but they also discovered, almost three decades after the start of the war, that they had a taste and a capacity for direct political peacebuilding. In doing so they were only discovering what the many women politicians in Scandinavia had discovered some years previously i.e. that the track record of their men in the doings of politics was little to boast

about – and that it was time for them to prove that they as women could hardly do any worse than their men, and might in fact do a great deal better. It was indeed a pity that this realization came so late in the day, but better later than never for them to discover their new found political power and their capacity to more directly change the hopes of their communities for what turned out to be increasingly peaceful relationships between their peoples in the years ahead.