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Ashe, F. (2023). A Gender History of the Northern Ireland Peace Process. *Socialist History*, 63, 71-88.
<https://journals.lwbooks.co.uk/socialisthistory/vol-2023-issue-63/abstract-9729/>

[Link to publication record in Ulster University Research Portal](#)

Published in:
Socialist History

Publication Status:
Published (in print/issue): 31/05/2023

Document Version
Author Accepted version

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A Gender History of the Northern Ireland Peace Process

Fidelma Ashe

Abstract

This article explores the gender history of the peace process in Northern Ireland (NI). The Good Friday/Belfast Agreement laid the foundation for ending the violent conflict that had characterised the region since 1969. Understanding the role that gender has played in building the peace in NI requires an analysis of the role of gender and gender-power relationships during the period of conflict, colloquially known as the NI troubles. Gendering both peace and conflict in NI exposes women's experiences during the conflict, which includes its gendered harms and women's resistance to gender hierarchies, stereotypes, and the militarism that marked the context. When opportunities for peace emerged in the 1990s, women wanted their voices to be heard during the negotiations that followed. However, the peace-building processes and institutions that materialised meant that women faced many challenges in their struggle for a positive peace that included addressing the gendered inequalities of the past and the present.

Key words: Gender, Northern Ireland, Political Violence, Peacebuilding

Mainstream analysts of the history of the Northern Ireland (NI) conflict have rarely framed it as a gendered conflict. The dominant categories in historical studies of what became known as the NI Troubles have been partition, nationalism and political violence. However, to fully understand the history of the conflict, gender and sexuality are important analytical categories. This year, 2023, marks the twenty-fifth anniversary of the 1998 peace agreement, and NI is replete with stories and reflections on the region's conflict and peacebuilding processes.¹ The gendered history of the NI conflict on this anniversary year highlights how it shaped inequality between men and women and makes visible the many resistances that

emerged within the field of conflict to a conservative gender order and militarised society dominated by men – an aspect of the conflict that has been given less visibility. The first part of the article genders the history of the period of overt armed conflict, usually considered to have started in 1969 and to have ended in 1998. The second part highlights how the gender inequities that marked the conflict were preserved when opportunities were opened up for peace in the 1990s. An analysis of both periods captures how women's activism contested both the social positioning of women in the region and the masculinist culture that emerged in a highly militarised society.

Gender and conflict

Analysis of conflict and war tends to link armed conflicts to the decisions of male actors and the 'masculine' spheres of violence and politics. The history of conflicts becomes represented as male events. This kind of historical framework sidelines the lives of women and erases them from the story of conflicts. However if, as Anne McClintock notes, all nationalisms 'are gendered' and that gendering limits people's access to the rights and resources of the nation-state, we must examine the role of gender in shaping both conflict and conflict-affected societies.² Much has been written about men and women's roles in conflicts, and McClintock's analysis reminds us that conflict-affected regions depend heavily on traditional gender ideologies that serve the national project. Gender identities within the context of conflict are not natural expressions of the self but rather products of historical power relationships. Moreover, nationalism levels intragroup inequities by prioritising nationalist grievances over all other social inequalities. Gender, class and sexuality tend to be treated as secondary concerns in nationalist ideologies. However, these cross-cutting identities expose the operation of broader societal inequalities within the fictional homogeneous communities nationalists attempt to construct.

If gender identities are framed in this way, gendering the analysis of the conflict in any region demands a mapping of the material power differentials between genders, as well as social classes and other subjugated identity categories. It also requires an examination of the ideological role of power in justifying these differentials through the production of hierarchies that act to privilege and subjugate identities along different axes of identity.³ Both forms of power are inextricably linked because both play a role in creating and preserving the concrete conditions of inequality and the ideological environments that support the reproduction of gender inequality and other forms of social injustice.⁴

Gender, power and conflict

The roots of conflict in NI lie in the region's constitutional status. Ireland was partitioned in 1921, which created the NI statelet which remained part of the UK and the Irish Free State, which later became the Republic of Ireland (ROI) in 1949. Partition left a dominant unionist majority who identified religiously as Protestant in NI and an Irish nationalist minority that identified as Catholic. After partition, sectarian tensions were never far from the surface, and they exploded in 1969. Both Irish nationalist/republicans, and loyalist armed groups drawn from unionist working-class communities, perpetrated physical violence to secure their constitutional objectives.⁵ These groups also claimed to be protecting their communities from violence by the opposing community. The police force and British army were also protagonists in the conflict. For many Irish nationalists the 'unionist state' including the police force was partial, protected the interests of the 'unionist people', and discriminated against the Catholic minority. From 1937 to 1998, the Irish Constitution included a claim on NI as part of the state's national territory.

Even before the onset of the conflict in 1969, NI culture was deeply conservative. When conflict erupted, the churches had already fashioned themselves as upholders of the

traditional family and had gained control over a religiously-segregated system of education. Moreover, scripture permeated politics as high-profile politicians such as Ian Paisley mixed the unionist aspiration that NI remained in the union with Great Britain (GB) with biblical narratives. Irish society, with which Irish nationalists identified strongly, was also highly conservative in terms of social issues.

In NI, during the conflict, concerns about safety combined with the patriarchal structuring of society along nationalist lines meant that the gendered composition of political parties and political life pushed issues related to gender equality to the margins of political debate. Both politics and militarism became normatively framed as male domains. The myth that only men were suited to the theatre of violence and the ‘rough and tumble’ of an aggressive political domain became reinforced during the conflict. Another myth developed that women were somehow placed outside of nationalist violence and conflict in the region. Nothing could have been further from the reality of women’s lives. Women experienced multiple harms during the conflict. Not only did they experience the trauma of losing family members killed during the conflict, but many struggled with the financial effects of the loss of the male breadwinner. 98 percent of those killed in the conflict were men but women made up the majority of the bereaved. Anne Cadwallader’s research on the effects of truth recovery on women exposed how women lived in poverty. One family with nine children, dependent on Widow’s Pension, a state benefit that was never intended to support young families sustained ‘themselves for decades peeling apples in a dark, cold shed’.⁶ Poverty and trauma caused long-term harms for women and their children.

At the community level, family life was upended by the conflict. Working-class communities bore the brunt of the violence. As Begoña Aretxaga illustrated in her groundbreaking work on the gender effects of the NI conflict, it impacted both community and family life in working-class areas. During the conflict, the space between the home and

the street was fluid as houses were attacked during episodes of local-level sectarian violence and the space of the home became increasingly subjected to searches by security forces. Moreover, with antagonistic communities living check by jowl, the security of both adults and children was compromised on a daily basis through sporadic outbursts of violence or through attacks on the person. The infrastructure of working-class communities that were already economically and socially marginalised was further eroded through local forms of violence and a lack of investment.

The contours of the conflict did not only harm women. Many joined the civil rights movement, a movement that campaigned for civil and political rights for the Catholic community. One of the groups' demands was 'one man, one vote'. Those women who joined, which included working-class women, learned campaigning and political skills. That experience supported women to campaign around a broader range of socio-economic issues related to gender equality and their communities. Women may have been excluded from formal politics, but, as the example above illustrates, women's political activism was often diverted into community-level politics. A range of local-level women's groups sprung up during the conflict that focused on meeting the concrete economic and social needs of women in both ethno-national communities.⁷ Characterised locally as the 'backbone' of the community, women were lauded for their roles in taking up the slack in social service provision and dealing with the worse effects of pre-existing deprivations that were exacerbated by the conditions of the conflict, particularly in inner-city areas. Located in the sphere of civil society, women lacked the traditional anchors of political power and influence. For example, throughout the period of the conflict women's civil society groups operated with a low resource base and women who were members of the main political parties were often relegated to the lower ranks. These gender differentials meant that women's activism

was either situated outside the formal spheres of political influence or within highly masculinised organisations.

Challenging Militarism

One area of activism where women acquired public visibility was through their participation in various peace movements that sprung up during the troubles. Mairead Corrigan and Betty Williams, who founded the NI Peace People Movement in August 1976, received significant media and political attention.⁸ Media and political narratives framed Corrigan and Williams as ‘brave women’ prepared to stand up to ‘the men of violence’.⁹ The narrative had ideological mileage in terms of increasing pressure on paramilitary groups to end, or at least reduce, the levels of violence. As Rob Fairmichael notes, the fact that Williams and Maguire were attractive women probably also fanned media interest in their campaign.¹⁰

The Peace People were portrayed as both dupes of anti-Irish-Republican forces and, conversely, as heroines ready to ‘face down’ the paramilitaries. However, outside of this ideological struggle to signify the intent of the movement, the Peace People’s standpoint posed a concrete political challenge to masculinised models for dealing with political differences and political inequality, and their emphasis on the right to life would later become the cornerstone of the 1998 Agreement.¹¹ However, as the majority of those who attended the peace marches were women, the association of women with the peace movements reinforced broader notions that women were naturally orientated towards peace. Framing women as peacebuilders, operating beyond and above the sectarian divide, situated women as apolitical or apart from the conflict. The stereotyping of women as natural peacebuilders became part of the mainstream narratives of the conflict and the activities of women in the so-called ‘safer space’ of civil society, which suggested that women had been insulated from the political violence were again reinforced. The irony is the movement was a response to the killing of 3

children during a conflict-related high speed car chase. Their mother eventually took her own life. Moreover, as the violence directed at the women who joined the Peace People illustrated clearly, even when women assumed traditional feminine roles they were not insulated from forms of sectarian violence.¹²

Narratives of woman as peacebuilder placed women with deeply held sectarian identifications and women who engaged directly in political violence outside of the circle of normative femininity.¹³ The dominant framing of women as naturally apolitical during the conflict meant that women who transgressed normative femininity were rendered incomprehensible or framed as aberrations of normal femininity.¹⁴ Women had invested in trying to create the conditions of peace, but they had also invested in the divisive sectarian standpoints and antagonisms that fuelled the conflict. There have been many contestations around the relationship between feminism and nationalism. For example, differences in how feminists should respond to the conditions of women politically-motivated prisoners created deep divisions within the movement.¹⁵ Some feminist groups refused to support campaigns by republican women prisoners due to those prisoners' association with physical force Irish republicanism. Subsequently, women's multiple standpoints on peace and conflict meant that there was no common agenda among women, which created a fragmented women's movement. However, different expressions of feminist politics had identified, collectively, a set of core gendered grievances including women's low political representation, recognition of the gendered harms of the conflict, women's poverty, domestic violence, and, to a lesser extent, reproductive rights. They were able also to highlight socio-economic issues and social marginalisation. Pushing this agenda forward after the peace Agreement would require a significant reconfiguration of both concrete and ideological forms of gender-power.

Gender, power and peace

The 1998 Agreement held the possibility of creating a political space wherein activists could deepen contestations around gender, which, if successful, would generate more democratic relationships between men and women and address a range of inequities that cut across gender, sexuality, class and ethnicity. Rather than attempting to provide an exhaustive list of barriers to gender equality in the post-Agreement period, the following discussion focuses on particular areas of inequality and examines how the gender ideologies and inequities of the past fractured the promise of peace for women. Peace failed to address the socio-economic issues that impacted women's lives and in many ways the traditional gender order proved resilient against change.

Both aspects of power, ideological and material, must be challenged if the promise of peace is to move beyond delivering a negative peace that secures a cessation of political violence, but fails to develop a political culture wherein all identities have parity of esteem to shape the emerging peace process and influence strategies designed to reconfigure traditional power-relationships and identity hierarchies.¹⁶ Consequently, gender provides a lens through which the analyst can reflect on how well a society emerging from conflict has realised the *democratic* promise of peace through the dismantling of traditional forms of gender subjugation in its different expressions, exclusions, insecurities, and violences.

The democratic promise of peace opened by the 1998 Agreement in NI emerged in a society with low levels of women's political representation. The first election to the NI Assembly returned 108 MLAs, of which 94 were men. The ideological constitution of women created a culture in which women's social and political grievances were given low political priority. Ethno-national identities had been the central reference point in discussions about peace and justice. When the promise of peace emerged in the form of the 1994 paramilitary ceasefires that eventually led to the election of politicians to multi-party peace talks, it provided an opportunity to include gendered harms and inequalities in any peace

settlement that emerged. Internationally, not only have gender issues been assigned little or no significance during peace negotiations by both indigenous elites and the international midwives of peace agreements, it is common for women to be absent from the negotiation processes leading up to the formal peace talks. Pre-negotiations tend to be held in secret and are conducted between men in key political and military positions,¹⁷ and this was certainly the case in NI wherein men dominated the pre-negotiation stage of the peace talks.

With the emergence of a formal talks process, it was essential that women in NI were included in the negotiations to ensure that issues relating to gender equality were included in any agreement designed to move the society out of political conflict. Subsequently, the women's sector called for the inclusion of gender issues in the peace talks. The women's sector knew that placing gender issues on the negotiation agenda would increase the possibility of shaping the peace process in democratic ways. One of the sector's key concerns was to try to ensure that women's marginalisation from sites of social and political influence would be addressed in any final agreement reached by the mainstream ethno-national parties through the multi-party talks.

Increasing women's presence at the peace table and placing gender issues on the peace agenda is a challenging task for women. A survey of 33 peace negotiations between warring groups found that only between four and eleven percent of the 280 negotiators were women.¹⁸ The figures indicate that increasing equality between different genders has not been part of the processes and language of many peace accords. In NI, when women asked for gender issues to be included on the peace negotiations agenda the mainstream ethno-national parties showed little or no interest in addressing gender inequality through the negotiation process. The local NGO, the Women's European Platform, lobbied the political parties to include women on their electoral lists but it became clear that gender would remain a low priority during the talks when several failed to respond.¹⁹ Irish nationalist/republican

and unionist women operating outside of the women's sector also realised that the peace negotiations and any final agreement between the two ethno-national blocs was likely to be an all-male affair that would no doubt marginalise issues relating to gender equality.²⁰

Against that background, the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition (NIWC) formed and two members were elected to the multiparty talks. The Coalition, as it was often called, was intended to act as a bridge between women in civil society including working-class women who had no voice in political decision-making forums. While limited in terms of what it could achieve within the context of the talks, which were largely concerned with securing an ethno-national settlement rather than producing an ethical roadmap that set out the principles for tackling multiple forms of inequality, the NIWC inserted a number of important principles that could have been developed to deliver greater gender equity in the peacebuilding stage. For example, as is well documented, the NIWC tried to copper-fasten the right of women to participate in public life into any final peace accord agreed between the negotiating parties. They succeeded in securing the following commitment to women's inclusion in public life in the final draft of the 1998 Agreement:

The parties affirm their commitment to the mutual respect, the civil rights and the religious liberties of everyone in the community. Against the background of the recent history of the community conflict, the parties affirm in particular: the right to free political thought... [and] the right of women to full and equal political participation.²¹

They also argued for the inclusion of a Civic Forum in Strand One of the 1998 Agreement that would provide a discursive and consultative bridge between the community and voluntary sectors, and the new power-sharing Assembly. In addition, they secured commitments to working towards a Bill of Rights, human rights, provision for victims, and

shared education. Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 placed demands on public authorities to monitor the composition of their workforce across a number of protected categories including gender and sexuality. Section 75 was intended to change the way that public institutions dealt with equality issues. These aspects of the Agreement suggested that the NIWC had laid some foundations for increasing women's political and social influence in the post-Agreement landscape. However, the inclusion of women in peacebuilding remained an arena of contestation after 1998 and meaningful recognition of gender and sexual equality remained elusive across a range of issues.

Politics and participation after 1998

After the Agreement the language of peace included terms such as power-sharing, parity of esteem, equality, justice, security and rights. If a more democratic and positive form of peace was to emerge in NI after 1998, these values would have needed expansion beyond ethno-national identities to support more equitable relationships between multiple identity groups. What happened after 1998 was that the application of these values was confined to relationships between ethno-national groups, which meant that the society achieved a formal peace settlement, but retained the inequities of the past in the arenas of gender and sexuality. In other words, the process of transitioning from conflict was constructed around narrow conceptions of power-sharing, parity of esteem, equality, justice, security and rights.

Despite the valiant efforts of the women's sector operating through the NIWC to gender-sensitise the Agreement, after 1998 forms of gender and sexual injustice were maintained within the narratives and institutions of peacebuilding. In terms of women's representation in public life, progress was slow with modest rises over consecutive elections. Katherine Side summarises the problems that have prevented significant progress on the participation of women in public life:

...there were no designated or mandatory institutionalized responsibilities set out for meeting this ambitious goal. Unlike equality mainstreaming responsibilities that were delegated, in part to civil servants across government departments and non-departmental public bodies, responsibilities for advancing women's political citizenship depend largely on the good will of individuals and political parties.²²

More recently, the issue of women's representation in public life has been investigated by the NI Assembly as part of a broader review of the 1998 Agreement. The roadmap for change that emerged from a very thorough investigation of gender inequality in public life set out an important series of recommendations. However, that roadmap will only be useful if it is applied in meaningful ways, and, to date that has not occurred.

Some political parties did increase women's electoral representation after 1998,²³ and more recently the DUP chose Arlene Foster as party leader in 2015, making her the first woman to fill the position of First Minister of NI. The 2016 NI Assembly elections returned 30 women – a 50 percent increase on the number elected in 2011. Eighteen years after the 1998 Agreement, women's political representation stood at 27 percent. While the appointment of a woman to the role of First Minister was symbolically significant, and the increase in women's representation a very positive sign, the problem remained that women in the NI Assembly align with their party's policies on gender and sexual equality. The DUP blocked equal marriage through the 'Petition of Concern' mechanism; a mechanism designed to ensure that neither unionist or Irish nationalist blocs in the devolved assembly could dominate policy decisions. However, the DUP were not alone in terms of their resistance to change. Members of other parties also blocked the liberalisation of NI's abortion law.

Moreover, peace requires freedom to engage in political activism for both men and women. However, women politicians' security continued to be compromised. For example, the Alliance Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA), Anna Lo was subjected to very ugly racist abuse in 2014, after her party voted to restrict the flying of the Union flag on Belfast City Hall to designated days. Anne McVicker (2014) described the scene as follows:

They (loyalist protestors) started to turn on her: they said, 'Go back to China, you Chink', absolutely awful. Anna couldn't actually get off the stage. We were trying to get the police – there was only one set of steps so that was the way she had to exit. The police weren't prepared to get involved. Someone doesn't need to touch you for it to be an assault – they were shouting into her face, and there were things thrown on stage, empty coffee cups aimed at Anna. ... It was people from the rally that made the corridor that got her down the steps.²⁴

While women's experiences in the arena of formal politics continued to be affected significantly by the continual festering of ethno-national grievances, women north and south of the Irish border also continued to contend with everyday sexism. In a *Belfast Telegraph* feature on candidates in the 2015 General Election, one well-known political commentator evaluated a Workers' Party candidate's election poster as follows:

Nobody likes austerity, do they? So it's only right that the party whose slogan is 'Standing against austerity' should have a stunning, raven-haired temptress with a come-hither smile as its poster girl.²⁵

Across the Irish border, gender representation in the Irish Parliament, the Dáil, was exceptionally low compared to other liberal democratic societies. However, unlike the NI Assembly the Dáil, after a long campaign by Irish feminists, passed the Electoral Amendment (Political Funding) Act in 2012.²⁶ The Act had ‘teeth’ in the sense that it penalised political parties that failed to run a percentage of women candidates in general elections.²⁷

Gender and Renegotiation

The failure to address the gender deficit in political life in NI led to claims that women in the region were being marginalised and silenced in the peacebuilding period.²⁸ The ‘mothballing’ of the Civic Forum in 2002 was a major loss to the women’s sector which could have utilised that discursive space to raise issues about gender inequality and advance counter-hegemonic perspectives on peace that included attention to the continuing anchors of gender and sexual inequality. The under-representation of women in peacebuilding and the failure of the political parties to include women in the peacebuilding script was evident in the renegotiations that followed the 1998 Agreement. Rather than deepening women’s inclusion in peacebuilding women’s influence in the conflict transformation stage seemed to wane, despite the unrelenting efforts of the women’s sector to highlight gender equality issues through lobbying, advocacy work, research and public debate.

The 1998 Agreement left a number of contentious issues in NI unresolved and prompted a series of renegotiations. During negotiations at St. Andrews in 2006 the parties reached agreement on unresolved issues relating to policing and the early release of politically-motivated prisoners. The St. Andrew’s Agreement (2006/7) was less concerned with equality issues than the 1998 Agreement,²⁹ but its text reaffirmed the commitment of all parties who signed that Agreement to equality and a section on human rights, equality issues and victims’ rights were included, ‘although there was little detail on how those rights and

forms of equality would be achieved'.³⁰ Gender did not feature in the Agreement but: 'There was much less emphasis on the "two communities" and instead, a shift towards recognizing "objective need" and "remedying patterns of deprivation"'.³¹

This emphasis on social need was reflected in the inclusion of a commitment by the incoming NI Assembly Executive to an anti-poverty and social exclusion strategy to tackle deprivation in both rural and urban communities 'based on objective need and to remedy patterns of deprivation.'³² As outlined earlier in this article, women's identities are not homogeneous, but are plural cut across by a range of other identities including class, ethnicity and sexuality. Clearly, strategies to deal with social need would support women located in lower socio-economic groups, but these strategies were not pursued with any rigour.

In June 2015, the Committee on the Administration of Justice (CAJ) won a legal challenge against the Northern Ireland Executive for failing to adopt a strategy to tackle poverty, social exclusion and patterns of deprivation on the basis of objective need (the anti-poverty strategy) as required by legislation passed as a result of the 2006 St Andrews Agreement. The Court held that it was clear that 'no such' anti-poverty strategy had in fact been adopted by the Northern Ireland Executive thereby breaching its legal obligation.³³

Across the policy agenda implementing change has been exceptionally slow and equality issues have often been delayed due to disagreements between the main political parties. By 2013, it was clear that the further rolling out of the UK austerity agenda which included changes to the benefits system was set to increase existing financial pressures on women in lower socio-economic groups. Moreover, the Westminster government intended to implement

those changes in a region marked by a low wage economy, sectarian tensions and forms of social deprivation reinforced by years of political conflict. In addition, the NI Assembly had failed to tackle the gendered situational barriers to employment. For example, it failed to deliver an adequate childcare strategy. The proposed changes to welfare would provoke another crisis in the NI Assembly which would have to be negotiated between the two dominant parties.

Political tensions

The 1998 Agreement did not erode the tendency of both ethno-national communities to perceive power as ‘zero-sum, one side’s loss amounting to the other’s gain’.³⁴ The failure to shift towards a framework that focused on achieving equality for all identities within the region, building reconciliation and shared spaces between the two ethno-national communities while supporting strategies for shared recovery from conflict meant that: ‘Within the political structures introduced in 1998 and consolidated in 2007, mainstream politics remained male-dominated and confrontational.’ As a consequence, ‘expressions of cultural identity, which became emblematic of expressions of entitlement and domination, continued to be a source of conflict between the two ethno-national groups’.³⁵

On-going violent disputes led to new attempts to gain agreement by the parties around a set of ‘running sores’ including flags, Orange Order parade routes and a number of conflict legacy issues. The negotiation mechanism emerged in the form of the 2013/14 all-Party talks on Flags, Parading and the Past which were chaired by Richard Haass and Meghan O’Sullivan. This strategy of inviting external mediators to chair negotiations between the parties was not new and ‘often results in internal political actors who fail to take steps to find pathways to resolve issues, displacing responsibility for breakdowns in negotiations on those external actors’.³⁶

Although Megan O’Sullivan acted as co-chair of the talks, women were poorly represented in the negotiations. While different members of political parties shifted in and out of the talks including a number of female advisors, only 2 of the 10 key negotiators were women. The women’s sector utilised the call for submissions to Richard Haass and particular groups and representatives of women’s organisations met with Megan O’Sullivan.³⁷ The sector identified a number of legacy issues that continued to impact women and advocated for the inclusion of these issues in the negotiations. The issues included practices that engendered fear, intimidation, sexual exploitation and insecurity in contexts where armed groups were still active.³⁸

The final draft of an agreement between the parties, Draft 7,³⁹ was not accepted by all the parties that participated in the talks but the document provided a clear indication of the low importance that had been assigned to gender in these negotiations.⁴⁰ Draft 7 ignored submissions from the women’s sector. The document mentioned gender once in the context of cultural rights. There was no commitment to the gender mainstreaming of the proposed institutional architecture to deal with conflict legacy issues. Importantly, there was also a failure to recognise the gendered impact of paramilitary activity.⁴¹

Overall, most of the issues that Haass-O’Sullivan attempted to address were left unresolved until Sinn Féin’s refusal to implement the UK government’s welfare reform programme discussed above provoked yet another political crisis. Against the backdrop of contestations surrounding welfare reform, allegations emerged that members of the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA) had been involved in the murder of Belfast man Kevin McGuigan Sr. who was shot dead in August 2015. Concerns about paramilitary activity and stalemate over the rolling out of the welfare reform agenda led to the political parties in the NI Executive returning to the negotiation table to strike an agreed way forward in terms of the continued presence of armed groups in communities, welfare

reform and also issues related to dealing with Northern Ireland's violent past. They were joined by representatives from the Westminster and Irish Governments. A deal between the parties emerged in the form of the Stormont House Agreement on 23 December 2014,⁴² and an implementation plan was agreed on the 17 November 2015.⁴³ Again, there was no attempt to gender-mainstream the institutional architecture that would deal with investigations into conflict related deaths during the troubles or the mechanisms that would enable the development of archives and a timeline of the conflict.

In response the Legacy Gender Integration Group composed of a team of academics in collaboration with NGOs launched the 'Gender Principles for Dealing with the Legacies of the Past' in September 2015.⁴⁴ The principles drew attention to the importance of including women in processes to deal with the past, recognising their experiences, skills and voice. In addition, it highlighted the need to resource both women and the range of service providers that act as vital supports to recovery from trauma. Recently, proposals for an amnesty for conflict-related killings have been welcomed by no community or group in NI including women, and women, like others, have claimed they were sidelined in the discussions leading up to these proposals.

The inclusion of Professor Monica McWilliams on the Fresh Start Panel that published its Report on the Disbandment of Paramilitary Groups in Northern Ireland in May 2016 integrated a set of gender issues into the examination of the mechanisms that could encourage paramilitary groups to dissipate.⁴⁵ The report drew attention to the effects of the continued paramilitary presence in working-class communities on women and called for capacity-building initiatives to ensure women's influence within the communities they often serve through community and voluntary work. These recent initiatives provoke recognition of the gendered nature of conflict legacy issues, but proposal and

recommendations to deal with gendered issues need to be enacted, monitored and developed.

Conclusions

Many aspects of the peace process that women hoped would be developed over time have yet to materialise. At the time of writing, the devolved Assembly has yet again been thrown into crisis due to disputes around Brexit. This crisis has again exposed the deep antagonism between the DUP and Sinn Féin, and the continuing problems created by the system of mandatory power-sharing. The power-relationships between the two electorally dominant parties is likely to continue stymieing progress on a whole set of policy issues that directly impact the lives and well-being of women, and indeed, of the whole society. For example, the Westminster government finally legislated for access to abortion in NI, but a unionist health minister has failed to deliver access to that service. Moreover, in a context dominated by ethno-national bargaining and division, it is likely gender issues will remain residual as political elites struggle to create effective and accountable forms of governance. The promise of a positive peace for women remains alive in women's continued struggles for recognition, rights, security and justice. However, in the current conditions meaningful progress on gender equality will remain an aspiration rather than a lived reality.

¹ The Agreement reached in the multi-party negotiations in 1998 is referred to as the Good Friday Agreement and/or the Belfast Agreement. I use the term 1998 Agreement throughout. The text of the Agreement is available at <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/events/peace/docs/agreement.htm>.

² Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather : Race, Gender, Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*, New York, 1995, p4.

³ See Fionnuala Ní Aoláin, Dina Francesca Haynes and Naomi Cahn, *On the Frontlines: Gender, War, and the Post-Conflict Process*, Oxford 2011, for a thorough analysis of both forms of power in the conflict transformation period.

⁴ For a more detailed analysis of the relationship between empirical and discursive power see Fidelma Ashe, *Gendering Conflict Transformation in Northern Ireland: New Themes and Old Problems*, London 2019.

⁵ Irish nationalist and Irish Republican identities are similar, but Irish Republicanism is general used to denote groups that use physical force violence in pursuit of Irish unity.

⁶ Anne Cadwallader, 'The role of women in truth recovery processes', 2017, on <https://wrda.net/anne-cadwallader-role-of-women-in-truth-recovery-processes-presentation-compatibility-mode>.

⁷ Carmel Roulston, 'Gender, nation, class: 'The politics of difference in Northern Ireland'', *Scottish Affairs*, 18:1, 1987, pp54-68.

⁸ The journalist Ciaran McKeown was also a founding member of the Community for Peace People later compressed to simply the Peace People.

⁹ See Rob Fairmichael, *The Peace People Experience*, Belfast 1987, pp18-20, on www.innatenonviolence.org/pamphlets/peacepeople1.pdf.

¹⁰ Ibid, p.19.

¹¹ See Marie Hammond Gallagher, 'Gender difference and the politics of location: Situating women's peace activism in NI and Quebec, Canada in conflict and in crisis, 1970-1972', unpublished PhD, National University of Ireland, Dublin, 2004.

¹² Women peace marchers were attacked on several occasions, see Fairmichael, *Peace People Experience*, p21.

¹³ Fidelma Ashe, 'The Virgin Mary complex: Feminism and Northern Ireland politics', *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*, 9:4, 2006, pp147-164.

¹⁴ See *ibid*.

¹⁵ Christina Loughran, 'Armagh and feminist strategy: Campaigns around republican women prisoners in Armagh Jail' *Feminist Review*, 23:1, 1986 pp59-79.

¹⁶ The concept of a negative peace was developed by John Galtung, 'Violence, peace, and peace research' *Journal of Peace Research*, 6:3, 1969 pp167-191, who argued for a positive concept of peace that addressed structural violence within the society emerging from violent conflict. Feminist research has framed gender equality as an essential part of a positive peace. For example, Judith Ann Tickner in *Gender in International Relations: Feminist perspectives*

on achieving global security, New York 1992, p6, argues: 'The achievement of peace, social justice, and ecological sustainability is inseparable from overcoming social relations of domination and subordination. Genuine security requires not only the absence of war, but also the elimination of unjust social relations, including unequal gender relations.'

¹⁷ Christine Bell 'Women and peace processes, negotiations, and agreements: Operational opportunities and challenges', *Policy Brief* 13, Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre, (2013), on www.peacebuilding.no/var/ezflow_site/storage/original/application/b6f94e1df2977a0f3e0e17dd1dd7dcc4.pdf.

¹⁸ Vicenç Fisas, cited in *ibid.*, p. 2.

¹⁹ Kate Fearnon, *Women's Work The Story of the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition*, Belfast 1999 provides an analysis of the struggles surrounding the inclusion of women and gender issues in the period before the elections to the multi-party talks.

²⁰ Fidelma Ashe and Carmel Roulston, 'The gender politics of negotiating and renegotiating the peace in Northern Ireland', in Joyce P. Kaufmann and Kristen P. Williams, eds, *Women, Gender Equality, and Post-Conflict Transformation Lessons Learned, Implications for the Future Northern Ireland*, New York 2017, pp75-96.

²¹ See <https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/events/peace/docs/agreement.htm>.

²² Katherine Side 'Women's civil and political citizenship in the post-Good Friday Agreement period in Northern Ireland' Occasional Paper 14, Centre for the Advancement of Women in Public Life, Queen's University Belfast, 2007, p6, on www.qub.ac.uk/cawp/research/KSIDE%20PAPER.pdf.

²³ Neil Matthews 'Gendered Candidate Selection and the Representation of Women in Northern Ireland' *Parliamentary Affairs* 67:3, 2012, pp617-646.

²⁴ Anne McVicker 'Insulting the women of Northern Ireland', *50:50 Inclusive Democracy*, 6 May 2014 on www.opendemocracy.net/5050/anne-mcvicker/insulting-women-of-northern-ireland.

²⁵ 'Election Posters: Which Northern Ireland candidates are topping the poles?', *Belfast Telegraph*, 30 April 2015 on www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/general-election-2015/election-posters-which-northern-ireland-candidates-are-topping-the-poles-31183952.html.

²⁶ Electoral (Amendment) (Political Funding) Act 2012, Irish Statue Book on www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2012/act/36/enacted/en/html.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Margaret Ward, 'Excluded and silenced: Women in Northern Ireland after the peace process', *50/50 Inclusive Democracy*, 12 June 2013, on www.opendemocracy.net/5050/margaret-ward/excluded-and-silenced-women-in-northern-ireland-after-peace-process.

²⁹ 'Agreement reached at St Andrews ('St Andrews Agreement') on www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/136651/st_andrews_agreement-2.pdf.

³⁰ Christine Bell and Robbie McVeigh, 'A Fresh Start for Equality? The Equality Impacts of the Stormont House Agreement on the 'Two Main Communities', Equality Coalition, 2016 on [www.caj.org.uk/files/2016/03/15/A_FRESH_START_FOR_EQUALITY_-_FINAL_\(2\).pdf](http://www.caj.org.uk/files/2016/03/15/A_FRESH_START_FOR_EQUALITY_-_FINAL_(2).pdf).

³¹ Ibid., p16.

³² Ibid., p20.

³³ Ibid., p21.

³⁴ Cera Murtagh, 'A transient transition: The cultural and institutional obstacles impeding the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition in its progression from informal to formal politics,' *Irish Political Studies*, 23:1, 2000, p32.

³⁵ Ashe and Roulston, 'Gender Politics of Negotiating', p83.

³⁶ Ibid., p84.

³⁷ Ibid., p85.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Northern Ireland Executive, 'Haass Report – Proposed Agreement' 31 December 2013 on www.northernireland.gov.uk/publications/haass-report-proposed-agreement.

⁴⁰ Ashe and Roulston, *Gender Politics of Negotiating*, pp88-90.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Stormont House Agreement 2014, on www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-stormont-house-agreement.

⁴³ A Fresh Start: The Stormont Agreement and Implementation Plan, 2015 on www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/479116/A_Fresh_Start_-_The_Stormont_Agreement_and_Implementation_Plan_-_Final_Version_20_Nov_2015_for_PDF.pdf.

⁴⁴ ‘Gender Principles for Dealing with the Legacies of the Past, 2015’, on www.ulster.ac.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0009/66285/Gender-Principle-Report-Sept-2015_Final-Version.pdf.

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