

## **A movement stalled: outcomes of women's campaign for equalities and inclusion in the Northern Ireland peace process**

**Cynthia Cockburn**

### **Abstract**

*The Good Friday Agreement signed in Belfast in April 1998, and the post-conflict constitution embodied in the ensuing Northern Ireland Act, differed in one important respect from most other peace accords. Thanks to the input of civil society, and particularly of the women's voluntary, trade union and community sectors, the Agreement was not limited to a settlement between the belligerent parties. It envisioned a transformed society, rid of the inequities of a colonial past and reshaped according to principles of inclusion and human rights. The persuasiveness of this agenda lay in its promise to address the poverty, disadvantage and exclusion afflicting the working class of both Catholic and Protestant communities. This article draws on a re-interviewing in 2012 of feminist activists with whom the author engaged in a major project in the 1990s. It evaluates the extent to which the principles and policies for which their movement struggled have been enacted in Northern Ireland governance in the intervening decade and a half.*

## Introduction

In the period 1996–99 I carried out a project of action-research among feminist activists in the women’s community sector in Belfast, Northern Ireland. It resulted in a book, *The Space Between Us* (Cockburn 1998) in which I documented and analysed their movement, framed between studies of similar conflict-crossing women’s projects of the period in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Israel-Palestine.<sup>1</sup> In early 2012 I revisited all three countries to recover contact with as many of the original activists as I could find, and ask them to evaluate with me the developments of the intervening decade and a half.<sup>2</sup> I had left them at a moment when peace accords were in the air, or newly achieved. Would ceasefire become peace, and, if it held, would it deliver justice as well as disarmament? Would grassroots aspirations, especially those of women, find expression in a transformed post-war society fit for a new millennium? In this article I draw on in-depth interviews carried out in February 2012 with twelve of the original Belfast feminist activists, and shorter conversations with four others.<sup>3</sup> Drawing also on publications and news analysis, I review their perceptions of the late 1990s, their input to the Good Friday Agreement and their evaluation of conditions and policy-making in Northern Ireland since then, and today, under a devolved, power-sharing government.

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<sup>1</sup> The ‘sister organizations’ studied in the original research were Medica Women’s Therapy Centre in Zenica, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Bat Shalom in northern Israel, a partnership of Israeli Jewish and Israeli Palestinian women. My revisiting of all three projects in early 2012 is reported in ‘When is peace? Women’s experiences in “post-Accord” periods in Northern Ireland, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Israel-Palestine’, in *Soundings: Journal of Politics and Culture*, issue 53, Spring 2013.

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<sup>3</sup> I would like to express my warm gratitude to the following women who afforded me their valuable time in in-depth interviews during February 2012, and also for the wealth of knowledge and experience they have all shared with me in the more distant past: Edel Quinn, Eleanor Jordan, Gillian Gibson, Inez McCormack, Joanna McMinn, Joanne Vance, Joy Poots, Margaret Ward, Marie Mulholland, May McCann, Patrician McKeown and Úna ní Mhearáin. My thanks also to Carmel Roulston, Shirley Simpson, Sean Brady and Angie McManus for informative conversations during my recent visit to Belfast.



*In the fifteen years since the Good Friday Peace Agreement was signed, poverty persists in working class areas, but central Belfast has acquired the air of a modern European city<sup>4</sup>.*

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<sup>4</sup> All photographs by Cynthia Cockburn.

## **Rebellion in Britain's first colony**

The Irish movement for 'home rule' involved decades of parliamentary conflict and episodes of bitter armed struggle between nationalists, mainly of Catholic religion and native to the island, and those determined to retain union with Britain, mainly Protestant and of British descent. It culminated in the Anglo-Irish Treaty of December 1921, a settlement in which Britain conceded independence with the status of Crown dominion to an Irish state comprising twenty-six of the islands thirty-two counties. Protestant resistance led to a compromise whereby six counties in the north-east of the island, historically a stronghold of the Scottish and English settlers, remained a province within what was henceforth termed the 'United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland'. For the ensuing half-century the Ulster Unionist party ruled Northern Ireland single-handedly in the interest of the Protestant majority, enacting discriminatory and repressive legislation against the Catholic minority. Simply, 'the disloyal Catholic population were not regarded as part of *the* people by Ulster Protestants' (O'Leary and McGarry 1993, 109).

It is important to remember that the upsurge of activism in the mid-1960s that challenged this situation, sparking off the thirty-year period of violence in Northern Ireland known as the Troubles, was not a renewal of sectarian ethno-political war, but rather a *civil rights* movement. The initial actors, among whom were many women, represented themselves as the economically, politically and socially disadvantaged group they indeed were. It began in January 1964 with a Campaign for Social Justice, and by 1967 the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA) was leading a full-scale movement against discrimination in employment, against a biased allocation of housing and services, and an undemocratic electoral system in which the franchise was limited to property-owning rate-payers, among whom Catholics were severely under-represented. This campaign of civil resistance in Northern Ireland echoed the black civil rights movement of the period in the USA, and was contemporaneous with the '1968' moment, a surge of student activism and renewal of the Left in Europe.

The civil rights marches evoked a violent response from Loyalists in the Protestant community. The extremist Ulster Volunteer Force harassed the marchers and attacked areas of Catholic housing, resulting in mass displacement. In 1969 the conflict entered a new phase with the resurgence of the historic Irish Republican Army, which that year divided into an Official and a Provisional IRA, the latter an armed force pursuing Republican interests in Northern Ireland. The same year the British Army intervened, and direct rule from Westminster was imposed three years later. There followed a further twenty years of civil war, in which the British authorities, far from playing the neutral role they claimed, colluded with the Loyalist forces, and further alienated the nationalist community by supporting the overwhelmingly Protestant Royal Ulster Constabulary and imprisoning large numbers of fighters and suspects, many of whom were interned without trial.

The appointment in 1989 of the relatively progressive Conservative MP Peter Brooke as Secretary of State for Northern Ireland can be seen in retrospect as a turning point in the conflict. In November 1990 he made a creative move towards an eventual peace agreement by famously asserting that the British Government had ‘no selfish strategic or economic interest in Northern Ireland’ and affirming that, should a majority vote for it, Britain would facilitate the unification of Ireland (Hume 1993, 228). Crucially, for the theme of this article, Brooke looked beyond the immediate security situation and remembered that what had brought the civil rights movement onto the street twenty years before had been those two key components of ‘rights’: the twin issues of equality and inclusion. As John Hume, the Social Democratic and Labour Party leader put it, the marchers had ‘asked a very simple question of the unionists: can you give us justice? And can you survive with the answer “yes”?’ (Millar 2009, 7). Brooke now stated on behalf of his British masters that equality and social need, justice in short, should penetrate all policy-making. At this time both Britain and Ireland were attentive to the processes of European Union. What Brooke offered Northern Ireland was effectively the British government's response to a European directive on gender equality, broadened to include religion and political affiliation. Two years later, in 1992, Patrick Mayhew, Brooke’s successor as Secretary of State, presented a formal equality protocol under the title *Policy Appraisal and Fair Treatment* (PAFT). Technocratic though it sounded, this document had a popular impact, for it used a language of ‘equality’ and ‘fairness’ that civil society actors could understand, speak and put to work as an instrument of institutional change.

### **Women’s efforts to shape the peace**

Meanwhile peace was becoming thinkable. On 15 December 1993 the Irish and British Governments issued the ‘Downing Street Declaration’ affirming the principle of consent in determining the future of Northern Ireland. Next summer, following a series of secret talks between John Hume, leader of the Social Democratic and Labour Party and Sinn Féin’s Gerry Adams, the IRA declared a ceasefire, followed in October by the Loyalist commands. Although thereafter progress towards a cessation of the armed struggle was unsteady and interrupted by violence, 1995 saw the joint publication by the British and Irish Governments of a document titled *Frameworks for the Future*, foreshadowing a peace process. Importantly, it picked up on the ‘equalities and inclusion’ agenda, stressing ‘accountability’ and making proposals as to how, in John Major’s words, ‘local people could take more control over the way Northern Ireland is governed, on a fair and equitable basis’ (Aughey and Morrow 1996, 217).

While the politicians and combatants were occupied with these manoeuvres, a new society was indeed being imagined and invented by people far from the headline-hitting events. Belfast women had always been the mainstay of the working-class communities in both Catholic and Protestant areas, and in the

1980s they had become active in an emerging community development (CD) movement. Responding to CD's ideology of self-help and empowerment of the disadvantaged, some got together to open women's centres. They were localized, grass roots, street level initiatives, and, given the ethno-political segmentation of Belfast, this inevitably meant clear 'green' / 'orange' distinctions between them. It transpired however that some women, in both the Republican and Loyalist communities, finding common ground as the ones responsible for sustaining everyday life in adverse conditions, were ready for cautious contact and dialogue. Some of the women's centres began, in a quiet, unpublicized way, to take the risk of bringing women into touch across the lines demarcating the segregated communities.

In 1989 a significant development occurred in the relationship between the women's centres. Beginning with a startling act of solidarity between the women's centres in the Protestant Shankill and Catholic Falls Road areas, responding to palpable injustice in Belfast City Council's funding practices, a permanent linking mechanism, the Women's Support Network, came into being (Cockburn 1998, see also Mulholland 1999, McCoy 2000). Although the Women's Support Network (WSN) was, first and foremost, a support organization for the coordinators of the several Belfast women's centres, it drew in other member organizations. Belfast Women's Training Services, and the Women's Resource and Development Agency participated. Another important partner was Women into Politics, a project that furnished neutral ground on which women from the opposed communities could come together safely and talk about 'Politics with a big P', something heretofore the preserve of men. Most importantly, women of the public sector trade union Unison participated in the Women's Support Network. Formed in 1993 as a merger of NUPE, COHSE and NALGO, Unison had a track record, unusual among Northern Ireland trade unions, of actively fostering cooperation between Catholics and Protestants on workplace and economic issues. It also had a high proportion of women members, employees in health and other public services, among whom were energetic feminist activists with a clear idea of what equality should mean.



be ‘closed, exclusive and vertical’. They were designed, she felt, to do ‘something *to*, not *with*, those whom policy targets’ (Mulholland 2001, 172, emphasis added). The European Union however proved more accessible. When the EU sent a Special Task Force from Brussels to engage in consultations on the peace process, the Network and its trade union partners found them receptive to their call for inclusion of the most vulnerable communities in preparing for peace. At this point the alliance of women’s organizations gave their initiative the name *Women Working for Change*. Then, as the peace process accelerated, they joined additionally with the National Women’s Council of the Republic of Ireland in a project they called *Making Women Seen and Heard* (MWSH), funded by the European Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation. During 1997, the MWSH allies reached out to involve in a year-long project no less than 400 other women’s organizations, ranging from the Women’s Institute to small village groups, some of them from the most marginalized areas in the counties north and south of the Border. Together they launched a major report in early 1998, calling for a rights-based approach to social inclusion and participation in the imminent peace agreement (Making Women Seen and Heard Project 1998).

Meanwhile, in 1996, a non-sectarian women’s political party, the Women’s Coalition, had formed to represent women’s concerns in the political structures. They obtained two seats in the Northern Ireland Forum, the locus of all-party talks leading to the peace agreement, and lobbied with verve and imagination for the equality clauses in the peace agreement (Fearon and McWilliams 2000, Deiana 2007).<sup>5</sup> Recognizing a shared interest in addressing working class poverty, disadvantage and exclusion, smaller parties from both sides, including the loyalist Progressive Unionist Party, the Ulster Democratic Party and Sinn Féin, added to the pressure as the negotiations climaxed. They had the support of Mo Mowlam, Tony Blair’s feminist Secretary of State for Northern Ireland at that moment, who shepherded the clauses through. ‘It was an exciting time,’

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<sup>5</sup> In founding the Northern Ireland Women’s Coalition (NIWC) Monica McWilliams, Pearl Sagar and their colleagues responded to an abysmal under-representation of women in Northern Ireland’s political system (Fearon and McWilliams 2000). This absence had also motivated the creation of the community-based project Women Into Politics, an important element in the Women’s Support Network (WSN). However, while the NIWC used ‘the language of inclusion without “naming” the disparities between Protestant and Catholic women’ (Rooney 2000, 181n), the community-based feminists were by contrast aiming to create a space in which women of the warring communities could practise a forward-moving ‘transversal politics’, facilitating dialogue in a search for shared values, precisely without foreclosing on conflictual differences. I wrote of them, ‘the Network reasoned that, to hold together in the context of big-P elections, a woman’s party representing women as women would be obliged to adopt neutrality on issues that were at stake in the constitutional debate. This was different in their view from seeking tactical common ground while maintaining political differences’ (Cockburn 1998, 83). On this basis, the WSN made the difficult decision not to formally endorse the NIWC electoral campaign. This was just one of the many debates and divergences in the Northern Ireland women’s movement of the period.

Unison's Patricia McKeown remembered when I interviewed her recently. 'We felt we were shaping the new agenda...getting the building blocks of human rights and equality in place so that what would emerge would be a fairer society...And our model was one of participatory democracy, emphasizing the process we wanted to see'.

### **A peace settlement with a difference**

Despite interrupted ceasefires, irresolution on several hotly disputed issues and the virulent opposition of some political actors, a Peace Agreement was eventually signed on Good Friday, 10 April 1998. It addressed the sectarian divide by means of a plan for devolved government in Northern Ireland. It provided for a process involving the early release of prisoners, the decommissioning of paramilitary weapons, and the reform of policing and the criminal justice system. To bring an end to armed conflict it could do no less. It did however do more. Thanks to the sustained and imaginative efforts of the women's sector and many other civil society organizations, it contained significant clauses on the twin rights agenda: equalities and inclusion. The principles of the Good Friday Agreement (GFA) were soon afterwards given effect in British legislation in the Northern Ireland Act 1998, which likewise contained provisions for equalities and human rights. Part VII was titled Human Rights and Equal Opportunities. Its Section 68 provided for a Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission. Section 73 provided for an Equality Commission for Northern Ireland. Both sets of commissioners, though appointed by the Secretary of State, were to be fully representative of the NI community. The section of the Act most often quoted subsequently by women activists, however, is Section 75. It establishes 'a statutory duty on public authorities' (defining these comprehensively and closely) to have due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity between persons of different religious beliefs, political opinion, racial group, age, marital status or sexual orientation; between men and women generally; between persons with a disability in persons without; and between persons with caring responsibility for dependents and persons without. These were known as the 'Nine Grounds'.

The GFA, Beatrix Campbell wrote, in her impassioned book *Agreement!*, came to be recognized 'as a dynamic exemplar of reform democracy for the twenty-first century' (Campbell 2008, 57). It located the blame for the conflict not with the people but with the state. The negotiators 'proposed a transcendent duty: to produce more than peace, to begin the millennial work of transforming the sectarian and sexist power relations that structure society' (ibid, 71). She believed that the radical potential of a legal duty for equality lay in the infusion of values in the practice of democratic government, the values of *equality, transparency, accountability and participation* (ibid, 57, emphasis added). And all this had been the work of 'ingenious movements and interests that were not included within the arc of the conflict' (ibid, 71).

### **Post-conflict : an incomplete peace**

The period 1996-98 during which, in my research role, I was working closely with the women of the Women's Support Network and interviewing many of its activists, is thus remembered as a high point for the women's community sector, as it was for feminism in Northern Ireland more generally. The women were fully involved, speaking clearly, being heard and feeling positive. Joanne Vance says, looking back on that period, 'I was certain the women's movement was in a strong position. The women's sector had resources, capacity and know-how, and had gained political experience. I felt we couldn't be overlooked.' Today however, she, like many of the other women I spoke with, is deeply disappointed in the longterm outcome. 'We had felt it was important to have our experience shape the new dispensation. That was our goal. But that never happened.'

What went wrong? For a start, events in the years immediately following the accord seemed more like a continuation of conflict than the dawn of peace<sup>6</sup>. On 2 December 1998 a Devolution Order from Westminster transferred powers to the first post-Agreement Northern Ireland Assembly. The power-sharing arrangement brought the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) into partnership with the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP). A twelve-member Executive was established, the ten ministries or departments carefully distributed between the 'sides'. So far so good. But the work of this devolved power-sharing government began in a context of continuing sectarian provocation and violence. The Loyalist July 'marching seasons' in 1998 and 1999 had been as inflammatory as ever. In August 1998 the dissident Real IRA had exploded a 500 lb bomb in Omagh, killing 29 and wounding 200. Punishment beatings in Republican areas were increasing by the hundred, year on year. In 2001 a Loyalist mob violently blockaded a Catholic girls' school in Ardoyne.

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<sup>6</sup> Please refer to a second article arising from this case study of Northern Ireland, 'What became of "frontline feminism"? A retro-perspective on post-conflict Belfast' (forthcoming in *Feminist Review*, 2013) in which I address the problems faced by the women's community sector, and its loss of feminist political momentum, in the fifteen years following the peace agreement.



*Despite a community 're-imagining' project, new aggressive murals continue to appear in loyalist neighbourhoods.*

Besides, outstanding disagreements remained between the parliamentary parties. As Jonathan Powell, Tony Blair's negotiator, puts it in his diary, 'the problem that was to dog us in the years that followed was the constructive ambiguity we had to deploy to get the Good Friday Agreement' (Powell 2009:117). While the Democratic Unionist Party, led by the intransigent Rev. Ian Paisley, had boycotted the peace talks from the start, the more moderate Ulster Unionist Party led by David Trimble had reluctantly signed up to the Agreement on a studiedly vague promise of early decommissioning of IRA weapons. When Sinn Féin failed to satisfy Trimble's conditions by a given date in February 2000, the British government arbitrarily suspended the power-sharing executive and returned Northern Ireland to direct rule. On 5 May 2000 the IRA committed to putting its arms 'completely and verifiably beyond use' and three weeks later the power-sharing institutions were reinstated. However in October 2002 the elected Assembly was again suspended amid claims of a Republican spy-ring in Stormont. Direct rule this time would endure a further five years. In the interval, IRA weapons would be bunkered, but the genuine reform of policing, following the nominal conversion of the Royal Ulster Constabulary into the Police Service of Northern Ireland in 2001, and the

devolution of the judicial system, would remain crucial unresolved issues for Sinn Féin for some years more.

A significant shift was meanwhile occurring in the balance of support among the parties. The original power-sharers, the constitutional nationalist Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP), and the middle-class Ulster Unionist Party (UUP), lost much of their support in elections in 2001, 2003 and 2004. It became clear that any renewed power-sharing government in Stormont would need to be a partnership not between these relative moderates but between the ascendant extremes, the far more radical Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and Sinn Féin. Indeed an agreement of this kind between them narrowly failed in 2004. The British and Irish government then sponsored talks at St. Andrews, in Scotland, in the autumn of 2006 which resulted in elections in March 2007. The resulting power-sharing settlement between the DUP and Sinn Féin has lasted to the time of writing, despite the basic contradiction within it: that the two parties aim to use their presence in government for contrary ends, the DUP to consolidate the union with Britain, Sinn Féin to progress to a united Ireland.

It was in early 2012 that I began my project of ‘revisiting’ the women that had been the subject of my research in the period 1996-98 (Cockburn 1998). In this connection I spent part of February in Belfast, during which time I carried out interviews with twelve of my previous contacts. All had been involved, centrally or peripherally, in the Women’s Support Network. All had participated energetically and hopefully in the mobilization for the equalities-and-inclusion agenda described above. While in Belfast I also benefitted from two meetings, one a get-together of seven women of the former Women’s Support Network (WSN), the other an open meeting hosted by the Women’s Resource and Development Agency (WRDA). Prompting their memory by means of photographs and videos, I asked women to cast back their minds to 1996.<sup>7</sup> My intention was to learn these women’s perceptions of developments in the intervening decade and a half. The period had begun with the signing of the peace agreement, fostered by a New Labour government in the UK. As it ended, a Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition ruled in Westminster, in a moment of economic crisis and downturn affecting Ireland, Britain and the wider world.

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<sup>7</sup> My methodology in this memory work included making, as prompts to recall, posters using my photographs and texts from the earlier period. In spanning place as well as time (since the revisiting involved Bosnia and Israel Palestine as well as Northern Ireland) I made extensive use of language interpretation. I have written about these methodological choices and the contradictions they involve in ‘Women Living and Re-living Armed Conflict: Exploring a Methodology for Spanning Time and Place’, a chapter in *Gendered Wars, Gendered Memories*, edited by Ayse-Gul Altinay and Andrea Peto, forthcoming 2013.



*Women of the former Women's Support Network regather in 2012 to review the outcome of the 'equalities and inclusion' intentions of the peace agreement. On the wall - some of the original photos from the '90s.*

What I heard in my interviews was that, throughout these turbulent years, women had continued to experience social problems of many kinds. First, though reduced in number and scale, some acts of war continued. Republican dissidents, refusing the peace accord, continued to carry out attacks on British targets. There were Loyalist attacks on Catholics in a number of flashpoint areas. More common than sectarian combat however, violent feuding has developed between Loyalist paramilitary groups seeking to dominate communities and monopolize the drugs trade. In Republican areas a vigilante group, Republican Action Against Drugs, has been carrying out vicious punishment shootings and exilings of supposed dealers and users. A study carried out by the Women's Resource and Development Agency found violent crime to be felt by women to be more threatening now than during the Troubles (Women's Resource and Development Agency 2008). Violence specifically directed against women and girls – rape, trafficking, abuse in the home – also appears to have been growing rather than diminishing with 'peace' (McMurray 2009).

While cross-communal contact has come to feel less perilous in these years following the peace accords, people continue to be alert and cautious about

where they go, with whom and when. Housing is still markedly segregated, and integration of the school system is moving at snail-pace. Joanna McMinn explained why there is so little movement across the old sectarian lines that box in the local neighbourhoods of North and West Belfast. She said, 'The material conditions have to change first. If there were prosperity, so that people could climb to a better standard of living and have more opportunities, that could contribute to ending the segregation'. But there is no money, public or private, flowing into these poor working class areas. Meanwhile, the recession, unemployment and public sector spending cuts have made things worse.

On the gender front, too, relations continue to be resistant to change. Northern Ireland has continued to be run largely by men. The elections of May 2011 returned 20 women to an Assembly numbering 108, just 18.5%. Statistics of public office show women, despite being half the population, to be less than one-quarter of the power holders (Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister 2011). The government is failing to implement international and national gender equality law (Hillyard 2006). Women are bearing the brunt of the downturn in the economy (Hinds 2011). Meanwhile, no less in Northern Ireland than elsewhere, marketization, commercialization and commodification are invading every aspect of life, facing young women with highly damaging expectations. Besides, young women's experiences are crucially shaped by young men's enactment of masculinity. The dominant model of manhood in Northern Ireland during the Troubles was a tough and combative one. In spite of efforts to reintegrate ex-combatants, many of whom have served prison sentences, into local economies and community life, militarized masculinity is proving resistant to change (Magennis and Mullen 2011). Meanwhile, male aggression has found new targets in ethnic minorities and homosexuals.

### **The betrayal of the 'equalities-and-inclusion' ideal**

The most profound disappointment expressed to me by the women I interviewed in 2012, however, centered on the promised equalities-and-inclusion agenda. There had of course been profound contradictions within these provisions, interests pulling their interpretation in different directions. Among the questions persisting in many people's minds in the days and months that followed the signing of the GFA and the subsequent passage of the Northern Ireland Act were these.

- How would equality on grounds of sex/gender be interpreted in practice?
- Would sex/gender equality, in being newly framed as one of the 'nine dimensions' of equality, get muffled, subordinated, sidelined?
- Would the equalities themselves translate as intended into the principle informing the new post-conflict system of governance?
- Would the economic dimension of equality, missing from the nine but crucial to the working class of Northern Ireland, be honoured or forgotten?

I will address these questions one by one.

### **So what became of sex equality?**

The women's movement, in Northern Ireland as elsewhere, had imagined a future shaped not only by a reform of the sexual division of labour, an equalizing of opportunities and outcomes, but by a transformation of gender relations themselves, changed men, changed women. Hopes for this long agenda were dashed early on. Instead, the women of Northern Ireland found themselves entering, as Beatrix Campbell put it, 'a new historic settlement, the new era of neo-patriarchy' (Campbell 2008, 83). Even the short agenda, the notion of 'women's equality', was contentious, because the conflict had involved mainly men, and it was to men the policy-makers were looking for a solution. And who were those policy-makers themselves if not (overwhelmingly) men?

An Equal Status Act passed in 1975, dealing with gender equality, and Fair Employment Acts of 1976 and 1989 addressing discrimination on religious or political grounds, had established a firm understanding of the legitimacy of creating a 'level playing field' by positive discrimination in favour of the disadvantaged. But in post-Agreement governance there was amnesia about this. When you look at the small print, you see that Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act actually speaks only of 'equality of opportunity', not 'equality of outcomes', or of 'achievements'. There was nothing in this wording to prevent a back-tracking on positive action for women. And this indeed occurred, with a reduction of equality to 'equity', and a further shift of emphasis to 'equity for men'. Some court cases and settlements began 'redressing' positive discrimination in favour of women by making awards to men. Already in 2006 Margaret Ward was writing, 'there is evidence that a commitment to "gender mainstreaming" is being interpreted as a method by which to marginalise women"' (Ward 2006a). Carmel Roulston, speaking to me of this, termed the approach 'punitive equality'.

Eleanor Jordan, in interview, elaborated on the post-conflict experience of the women's community sector. 'There's been a backlash, so that the equalities agenda is often interpreted as meaning equality for men as much as women'. For instance there had been a push for women's centres to become 'family centres'. There had been a move to divert money for countering domestic violence against women by men into activity addressing domestic violence against male family members and same sex partners (which is, besides, often inflicted by other males). Úna ní Mhearaín concludes that 'There's no understanding of gender politics now'. Equality policy 'has become a weapon used against us'.



*Una ní Mhearáin, former coordinator of the Falls Road Women's Centre.*

I learned that the women's centres, despite their activity and purposes, are not allowed to advertise their job openings as for women only, because that would be considered discriminatory. Only Women's Aid are exempt from this ruling. It poses the centres with a quandary. A man might apply for a job at a women's centre, offering some appropriate skills – as a trainer for instance. Were the appointment panel to refuse him, he could bring a discrimination case against them. A number of men had indeed applied for, and been given, positions in women's centres without any discussion as to how this might impact either upon the social relations of the centre or upon the wider women's sector. This

issue had fractured the cohesion among the various centres, while the Women's Support Network and the WRDA had been inhibited from protesting about it by the fear of being challenged on equality grounds.

In 2002 an Ad Hoc Women's Policy Group, with members contributed by twenty-eight organizations, was set up by women activists in an attempt to position women as the subject rather than the mere object of policy debates. It joined the consultation on OFMDFM's cross-departmental '*Gender Matters*' strategy. It made plain its disquiet about this 'gender neutral' approach that was distorting the intentions of the equality legislation (Ad Hoc Women's Policy Group 2006).

### **The nine equalities – sex/gender lost to view?**

We have seen how, in the course of the peace negotiations, the equalities agenda was elaborated to include nine dimensions: difference in relation to (1) religious belief, (2) political opinion, (3) racial group, (4) age, (5) marital status, (6) sexual orientation, (7) sex/gender, (8) disability and (9) responsibility for dependants. In other words, the agenda prefigured a generally egalitarian culture, a 'fair' society. This approach was extraordinarily progressive in Northern Ireland terms because it did not list people in the habitual way by types or identity labels ('Catholics', 'Protestants'). Rather, it identified the kinds of circumstance or situation (being divorced or single, being a carer for an elderly person, for instance) that may give rise to disadvantage. As Beatrix Campbell wrote, 'In a society transfixed by embalmed identities, the diversity of the Nine Grounds creatively unsettled the identity issue' (Campbell 2008, 84).

Some have said however that this broadening of the agenda, which involved the consolidating of separate equality watchdogs into a single Equalities Commission, resulted in reducing the importance ascribed to sex/gender equality, in its de-feminizing, its invisibilizing. Others on the contrary do not believe this was an inevitable outcome of the more encompassing agenda. Marie Mulholland for instance had always believed that 'inequity in Northern Ireland can only be effectively erased when the concept of equality is recalibrated to include all the grounds on which discrimination takes place' (Mulholland 2001, 175). Rather, what had been lacking was a grasp of what was coming to be called 'intersectionality', that is to say an understanding that the chances of any individual are determined by his or her relation to power of not one but several kinds. Gender, race, age - such variables cut across, are articulated within, and are expressive of each other. This perception is of special importance in Northern Ireland where the gender regime, as Eilish Rooney puts it, is *constitutive* of sectarian and social class inequalities and not separable from them (Rooney 2006, 359; 2008). Had this intersectionality been recognized, the effect could have been to strengthen and 'mainstream' sex/gender equality across the board, in principle and practice. This is precisely what *Making Women Seen and Heard* had been proposing. In a conference paper of April

1999 they wrote that mainstreaming means ‘that equality be seen as an integral part of all public policy making and implementation, not something that is separated off in a policy or institutional ghetto’ (Making Women Seen and Heard Project, 1999).



*Edel Quinn, who in the late '90s ran the Women's Advice and Advocacy Services Project.*

The administration did not allow this to happen. It is remarkable for instance that United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 of the year 2000, mandating the inclusion of women in peace negotiations, was not applied in ensuing years in the case of Northern Ireland, even in the renewed peace talks at St.Andrews in 2006 that led to a restored devolved power-sharing government.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> The spurious ground on which Northern Ireland was excluded from the UK's 1325 National Action Plan was that its conflict was deemed not to qualify as an 'armed conflict' within the definition in the Geneva Conventions and the Additional Protocols (Women's Resource and Development Agency, 2011) The fieldwork on which this article is based ended in March 2012. In a late editing just prior to going to press I can add that, since then, the all-Ireland feminist group Hanna's House, a project involving the Women's Resource and Development Agency, the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland and the National Women's Council of Ireland, have been energetically engaging women in cross-border activation of UNSC Resolution 1325.

Edel Quinn, in interview, summarized something of the women activists' experience in these years. There had been 'honest potential' in PAFT, she believes. Subsequently, *Making Women Seen and Heard* had been an extraordinary achievement. Four hundred women's organizations mobilized! The statutory duty was clearly established in law, but a lack of political will, of a genuine process and commitment of resources had scotched its implementation.

### **Would the 'equalities' idea be implemented in government policy?**

The Good Friday Agreement inevitably gave pre-eminence to issues, such as disposal of weapons and reform of policing, that had to be resolved for armed violence to be halted. Nonetheless, the equalities agenda was strongly stated in the Agreement, where it was clearly understood as a necessary condition for lasting peace. From the start it was an open question whether that unprecedented insight would be sustained in the course of implementation. In passage through the British parliament the Northern Ireland Bill was subject to subtle changes. Beatrix Campbell's book is notable for tracking this betrayal. She describes how the 'central theme' was 'lost in translation' between the two texts. 'The drafters of the British bill had tried to re-instate in it the orthodox view of the conflict, by giving priority to good community relations as the condition of the peace and diminishing the status and processes concerned with the equality duty'. The champions of the equality duty, including Unison's Regional Secretary Inez McCormack, found themselves engaged in a dense schedule of meetings with the drafters to try to retain the intention that had, after all, been endorsed in the popular referenda both North and South of the border. In a keen defensive struggle they tried to 'protect the primacy of equality in the Agreement from sly textual manoeuvres'. As the Bill passed through the second house, the Lords helped by making the good relations duty specifically subject to the equality duty, thus placing the burden of responsibility for the problem on the state. As a fortunate result, the ensuing Act was 'neither an elite stitch-up nor an ethnic carve-up' (Campbell 2008, 71-74).

However, while the duty of Section 76, which deals with religious, Catholic and Protestant equality, is legally enforceable, the duty of Section 75, dealing with the other equalities, is not. And furthermore, the way the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister interpreted Section 75 greatly disappointed

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They have made a formal proposal to Stormont and Dail Eireann to weave the 1325 provisions retrospectively into the Good Friday Agreement. In July 2012 they made a submission to the Good Friday Committee on the impact of the conflict on women's lives. In November 2012 at Croke Park in Dublin they hosted an all-Ireland conference on 'Women Delivering Peace and Security'. They have called on the London and Dublin administrations to work together on the implementation of UNSCR 1325 by ensuring complementary sections on Northern Ireland in their National Action Plans. See <<http://www.communityfoundationni.org/Programmes/Women-and-Peace-Building/Women-Delivering-Peace-and-Security>> and <<http://www.hannashouse.ie>>.

the women of the community and voluntary sector. Some recall a specially distressing conference in the offices of the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action when a senior civil servant presented government thinking. It seemed that, since the passage of the Act, the politicians no longer needed the support of civil society in the way they had during the conflict. Inez McCormack, looking back, told me recently

The conflict here leads to a situation in which everything is seen as having to do with sectarian relations. That way the powerful get let off the hook. The problem is defined as only the fault of the two sides. It's a deliberate masking of the problem... There *are* real issues between communities that do indeed have to be addressed. *But* expressing the problem as one of 'good relations' ignores the fact of inequalities and exclusions.

The potential of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 was of course stalled by the re-imposition of direct rule in 2000 and 2002. That had had a particular impact on the implementation of the equalities duties in that the Westminster-controlled Northern Ireland Office deemed 'high level' policy-making to be beyond the reach of the equality duty. Simply, it had never been intended to apply to Britain. Thus, a £16 billion investment programme, 'a once-in-a-generation enterprise' was subject to no equality impact assessment and no social need assessment (Campbell 2008, 92-3).

A three-year plan for Northern Ireland was drafted by the British government during the period of direct rule. Titled *Shared Futures*, it was issued for consultation in 2003 and published by the Executive in March 2005. Unsurprisingly it expressed Westminster's priorities: 'important though it is for government to tackle unfairness and inequalities in people's life chances, a key challenge for government is to build strong cohesive communities'. Equality must not prevail over de-segregation of housing and schools: 'separate but equal is not an option' (Northern Ireland Assembly 2009, 2). As Eilish Rooney put it, this state-managed narrative was representing sectarianism as 'dysfunctional attitudes belonging to "Catholics" and "Protestants", or as a pathological problem that the "two communities" share equally' rather than as structural inequalities with redistributive policy implications (Rooney 2006, 28). Women's organizations, including the Women's Support Network and Women into Politics, pitched into the draft. In their consultation document they deplored 'the absence of interconnection being made between community relations and the promotion of equality and human rights... indication of a severe limiting of the definition of the issue in question'. They recommended that the Equality Commission be designated under Section 75 so that 'good relations is without prejudice to equality' (Women's Support Network et al 2003).

The second major policy programme, *Cohesion, Sharing and Integration*, was issued after the reintroduction in 2007 of a power-sharing Stormont following

the St. Andrews agreement. It was adopted as the government's programme for the period 2008-11. But, as was already clear from the title, 'CSI', as it became known, yet further relegated the equalities principle. Although it paid lip service to equalities and inclusion, the aim of this programme was clearly stated as being: 'to address the divisions within our society and achieve measurable reductions in sectarianism, racism and hate crime' (Northern Ireland Assembly 2009, 4). A swingeing critique of CSI by the WRDA included the following.

Throughout the conflict and its aftermath, the issues of gender, women and human rights were frequently seen as 'soft issues' that could be addressed after the 'important' or 'hard' security issues have been addressed. The long-term impact of this is that the post-conflict political structures and processes are founded on pre-existing inequalities. This is despite the fact that the Good Friday Agreement expressly recognised 'the right of women to full and equal political participation' and required the government to 'pursue broad policies for... the advancement of women in public life' (Women's Resource and Development Agency 2010).

The Agency pointed out that much of government policy directed at the post-conflict transition had ignored or devalued women's needs and contribution, and the CSI document perpetuated this shortcoming. More precisely, they wrote,

the draft strategy ignores the requirements of the government's own Gender Equality Strategy and it fails to properly address the requirements of Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. This is partly a result of a skewed approach – an approach that views sharing, cohesion and integration only through the lens of race and community background (ibid).

The anger the activist women were now feeling rings out. The draft document, they wrote, 'betrays its origins in the predominantly male-dominated narratives about the conflict', and sees 'women's needs and contribution as irrelevant'. '[T]he exclusion of women as a sectoral group is a particularly offensive manifestation of a lack of gender awareness on the part of those involved in drafting the documents'. They called on the government to renew its attention to working class women's views by involving 'grassroots workers, volunteers and activists in drafting and reviewing policy' (ibid).

As we have seen, when the women's community sector had pressed the equalities agenda in the 1990s they had not meant sex/gender equality alone. They had espoused an encompassing vision of a 'fair' society, in which the end of the discrimination perpetuating Catholic poverty would give Northern Ireland a hope of enduring peace. Was this conception of equality present in CSI? Disappointingly, that too was lacking. A study carried out for the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust report of 2010 carried a section on 'equality',

referring not to gender equality but specifically equality between the two communities. Even in this respect the authors' judgment of CSI was negative. They noted that 'equality of condition was present as a benchmark in the attempts to strengthen legislation between 1989 and 1998. The norms of the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement of 1998, including "parity of esteem" go considerably beyond "equality of opportunity". Yet they found that although 'the equality duty is reiterated more often in the text of *Cohesion* than in *Shared Future*...the actual formulations are no stronger. The emphasis on "equality of opportunity" in *Cohesion* is relatively weak' (Todd and Ruane 2010: 15). In interview, Patricia McKeown summed up for me the meaning of these developments.

What has happened is that the resources that should have been directed by government to challenging discrimination and promoting equal opportunities were diverted into 'community relations' - the 'shared society' thing. Because it's easier to do! 'Being together' rather than coming together in order to challenge what is fundamentally wrong, the things that are the reason we're divided in the first place.

### **Would economic equality be a principle of policy making?**

Low-wage poverty and joblessness certainly produce a dimension of inequality that cuts across all the nine listed in Section 75, including of course the sex/gender dimension – viz. women's lower earnings and prospects. However, the economic dimension of equality was, from the start, a notable, if logical, omission from the 'nine dimensions'. Robin Wilson points to the inevitability of this. 'Class inequalities cannot be dealt with within an equal opportunities discourse: the formal equality of the wage bargain belies the substantive inequality between capital and labour, as Marx famously dissected it' (Wilson 2007, 156). Economic inequality is foundational in the capitalist system, and ending it requires nothing less than political mobilization of working class interests for fundamental reform or revolution in the relations of property and production. It is not something governments of conservative hue, whether named Tory or New Labour, were ever likely to address through legislation.

On the other hand, there are two ways of looking at economic inequality. The first is to see it, as in the paragraph above, as a matter of class relations - an impoverished working class, an advantaged middle class, a property-owning power-wielding upper class. The other is to look through and beyond the class effect to see an ethno-national dimension – the existence in Northern Ireland of a Catholic population historically disadvantaged by discrimination in labour markets and public policy. Seen this way, economic inequality, expressed in an unfair distribution of job chances, benefits and housing, was primary among the causes of the conflict. Beatrix Campbell wrote, 'the equality and human rights duties promised more than peace, and for the combatants they offered a

dignified stake in a deal - an historically unprecedented way to address the crisis of *class* in Northern Ireland' (my emphasis). Just as it invited Protestant/unionist men to contemplate their class interest with, rather than against, Catholics, 'the deal offered men as men an opportunity for the first time to assert their class interest with, rather than against, women' (Campbell 2008, 105). Would this be addressed by post-Agreement policy makers? The answer would lie in where they would chose to invest, where they would create jobs, in which areas they would modernize the housing stock. Robin Wilson cites official statistics of deprivation to the effect that 'those, predominantly Catholic, working-class neighbourhoods which were most disadvantaged when the Troubles began are still the most disadvantaged today' (NISRA 2005, in Wilson 2007, 157). The women I interviewed in 2012 certainly felt that investment since the peace agreement, and even in recent years, had continued to be seriously tilted in favour of Protestant areas.

Beyond this, however, the circumstances and prospects of working class Catholics, as those of working class Protestants, in the last resort depend less on 'fair' and 'equal' government investment policies than on progressive economic policies by governments that seek to control exploitative, profit-seeking capitalist interests, to modify market forces, to promote social production and to use public resources to provide benefits and services for those who most need them. This is never more the case than in times of recession. In Northern Ireland an estimated 1,600 companies went to the wall in the years 2009-11. Ulster Bank's survey of business managers for January 2012 showed decline continuing month on month. Construction, services, retail and manufacturing sectors all, except retail, recorded a fall in activity, in contrast with restored growth in the rest of the UK. Also in contrast to Britain the services sector, including financial services and restaurants, contracted fastest in terms both of output and employment (Canning 2011a). In July 2012 it was reported that Northern Ireland property prices had fallen by 48% in five years (Canning 2011b).

Yet there is no left-right dimension of politics in Stormont. The relatively stable power-sharing administration installed as a result of the St. Andrews agreement in 2007 involves a carefully-engineered co-operation between two parties, Sinn Féin and the DUP, once held to represent the extremes of Nationalist/Republican and Unionist / Loyalist opinion. The smaller parties that might have offered a socialist option, such as the PUP, have been marginalized. Sinn Féin has a history of left politics. But while in the Republic of Ireland it is able to continue to express this in its platforms and policies, it can scarcely do so in Northern Ireland, where its mandate is to represent one 'side' in the historic conflict. The DUP, for its part, though the majority of its supporters have traditionally been the Protestant working class, is more populist than leftist. Besides, the most left-leaning member of the Assembly is likely to be 'contaminated' by his or her obligatory dealings with the lobbyists and representatives of big business, of corporations, with an interest in Stormont's economic policies. Those who, like the women I interviewed, wish to

move beyond sectarian politics and would cast a vote for progressive socialist economic policies, have nobody to vote for. As Úna ní Mhearaín puts it, with institutionalized power-sharing, the Sinn Féin and DUP Assembly members have necessarily ‘settled into their comfortable corners...class has disappeared off the agenda’.

### **Would the foundational concepts of human rights and inclusion be honoured?**

Feminism, in the meaning ascribed to it by the ‘frontline feminists’ of the women’s community sector of the 1990s has always had an outward-leaning, outward-leading, agenda. ‘Women’ has meant ‘equality’, ‘equality’ has meant ‘equalities’ in the plural, ‘equalities’ have entailed ‘human rights’, while rights in turn has inevitably entailed ‘inclusion’. So there have been two further questions in women’s minds as the years passed. Is the concept of ‘rights’, which underpinned the settlement, getting embodied in law and the judicial system as promised? And are the powerless, as so many hoped, being included in a participatory process of decision-making?

First, the consolidation of ‘rights’... The Good Friday Agreement foresaw the endowment of Northern Ireland with a Bill of Rights, something that had first been raised by the civil rights movement in the late 1960s. The Northern Ireland Act furnished a Human Rights Commission (NIHRC), alongside the Equalities Commission. However what it delivered was not a Bill of Rights, only a Bill of Rights *process* (Harvey 2006). The community sector and the trade unions however continued to exert pressure, and ten years after the Good Friday Agreement, in December 2008, the NIHRC presented advice to the British government on the possible content of such a Bill. In November the following year Westminster published a consultation paper, *A Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland: Next Steps*. The NIHRC however were dissatisfied with its content. Their Chief Commissioner responded, ‘Legislation of such importance is deserving of greater consideration and analysis...the Commission does not accept this as a genuine effort to increase human rights protections in Northern Ireland’ (NIHRC 2012)). The consultation ended in March 2010. The incoming Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government is even less enthusiastic on this issue than the outgoing Labour government.

Meanwhile, a poll of voters in Northern Ireland carried out in June 2011 showed overwhelming cross-community and political support for a Bill, with more than 83% of self-identifying unionist voters and 86% of nationalists in favour (Clarke 2011). When I interviewed Patricia McKeown, Regional Secretary of Unison in Northern Ireland, in February 2012 she had recently returned from a lobby of Westminster by the Human Rights Consortium, the civil society body that presses the rights issue in Northern Ireland. They had met with little encouragement. The British government were currently working on a possible eventual Bill of Rights for the whole United Kingdom, they had told the

delegation, and ‘we’ll whack in a bit about Northern Ireland’. Patricia McKeown says, ‘These are the themes around which we campaigned for a Yes vote on the Good Friday Agreement...Equality and human rights convinced the people we represented. Now these things are either incomplete or in regression. That is dangerous in a society working its way through a peace process. It’s only two decades since the conflict ended’.



*Joanne Vance, who led the Women into Politics project, a key initiative of the 1990s.*

Second, the question of inclusion and participation of the powerless...The crescendo that swells from ‘women’ to ‘human rights’ culminates in the concept of ‘inclusion’, the participation of the powerless in the processes historically monopolized by the powerful. This final link was already conceptualized in Women into Politics in the mid-nineties. WIP had been about inclusion, about women’s right to be involved in the decisions that were shaping their lives. Joanne Vance says now, in hindsight, ‘When people on the ground can access, dialogue with and get feedback from their political representatives, when they can hold them to account, that’s democracy. That has to be part of the purpose and achievement of getting women into political leadership’. Marie Mulholland later wrote of the aspiration of the Women’s Support Network and Women into Politics to ‘transform power’, to ‘develop new frameworks for decision-making

that accommodate those upon whom decisions have the most direct impact' (Mulholland 1999, 4). 'We must begin by producing the means to allow those furthest out on the margins of society to become active participants in their own futures, not just targets for whatever whim strikes those in authority or those with a violent predisposition' (Mulholland 2001, 176).



*Marie Mulholland, former coordinator of the Women's Support Network, with Joy Poots, former coordinator of Windsor Women's Centre.*

In the period leading to the Peace Agreement the Women's Coalition had proposed the creation of a Civic Forum to give civil society a voice in devolved government. This had indeed been approved by the first Assembly, as a body with 58 members. It was symptomatic that in 2004 this resource for the expression of grassroots opinion was suspended and never subsequently reconstituted. In the struggles that saw direct rule reimposed twice, as Joanne Vance said to me recently, 'power politics became more important than the process of peace building'. And Inez McCormack added, 'A peace process has to be something more than a consensus between the conflicting parties – it has to address exclusions. We have to get the powerful to change the way decisions are made. And that is at the heart of the conflict here. An inclusive future has to be built on changing the patterns of the past otherwise the poor are silenced and

marginalized.’ In 1999, only a matter of months after the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, in a paper she delivered at the World Bank in Washington, Marie Mulholland had already seen this challenge ahead. ‘How do we transform power?’ she asked. ‘...We must develop new frameworks for decision-making that accommodate those upon whom decisions have the most direct impact....What we have now is a fragile cessation of violence; it is not peace’. Peace has to be nurtured and its ‘essential proteins are: justice, equality and *inclusivity*’ (Mulholland 1999, my italics).

Of course, predictably enough, devolved power-sharing government by Northern Ireland politicians and civil servants turned out to be bare-bones electoral democracy. The people were not invited to make known their needs and voice their ideas except through the vote. In 2001 Inez McCormack and others, stepping straight into this lacuna, launched a project they called *Participation and the Practice of Right* (PPR). Their objective was to support disadvantaged groups in asserting their right to participate in social and economic decisions that affect their lives. What did they mean by ‘the practice of right’? Inez explained, ‘We took the language and framework of international rights and asked how these could be used to change the relationship between the powerful and the powerless. Rights are not an end in themselves. Rights can set a framework in which power is held accountable by the powerless, owning and using the tools to make needed change’.

The tools PPR employ are action research, policy work, mobilizing, alliance building, campaigning and creative use of the media. With these they began to define and pursue rights in mental health, housing, regeneration of working class communities, children’s play. The idea was to challenge not only the outcomes of government policies but the processes in which the decisions leading to those outcomes were made. With a team of hands-on development workers in certain urban areas, for a decade now PPR have been enabling the powerless, consumers of mental health services, tenants on dump estates, to challenge power and shape policy. Inez told me, ‘My life experience has shown me that people don’t get change unless they’re part of making it. That’s what our work is about now. This work frames issues in ways that, instead of people being defined as the problem, the focus is on the responsibility for power to change its behaviour’. Looking back to the community sector of the 1990s, Úna ní Mhearaín says, ‘Our organizations in the communities that led the campaigns before, in housing and health for instance, they’ve all fallen silent. I can’t think of such a campaigning group within the community now.’ Despite its very different constitution, however, and with nothing like the women’s centres coverage on the ground, PPR enables self-expression, collectivity and a challenge to political power in areas of housing and other public services, in the way that the women’s community sector once did, and the best trade unions, such as Unison, continue to do today with regard to employer-power in the workplace.

...

On the first day of my visit to Belfast in early 2012 I took a long taxi ride around the city to get a feel for what has changed. There are many new commercial developments, such as the colossal Titanic centre, the Odyssey Arena and the Obel Tower, that give the place the feel of a modern European city. But I was shocked to find the high, wire-clad ‘peace walls’ the authorities constructed at the height of the conflict along interfaces between Protestant and Catholic areas still stand today. Indeed it is said that one-third of the 99 existing walls have been erected *since* the ceasefires of 1994 (O’Hagan 2012). Declamatory murals remain on walls as ‘keep out’ warnings.



*The so-called ‘peace walls’, built to keep conflictual republican and loyalist communities apart, have not been removed, and some have been newly built.*

Where is cohesion? I asked the women I interviewed: why? Why are Catholics and Protestant communities still kept apart by physical walls, fourteen years after the peace agreement? They were emphatic that this sustained territorial defensiveness has to be put down precisely to the betrayal of the ‘equalities and inclusion’ agenda, without which the ‘sharing and inclusion’ agenda was never going to work. The working class of both communities continue to experience

deprivation. The Catholic working class, on top of that, continue to experience discrimination. '[I]n this world of identity politics *recognition* crowds out *redistribution*, the classic egalitarian demand' (Wilson 2007, 153). Inez McCormack said, 'You can't take the peace walls down without addressing the condition of the people living on either side of them. You can't take down the walls that embody the past until people are able to hope for a different future. There are walls of more than one kind!'

***I would like to dedicate this article to the memory of Inez McCormack, who passed away on 21 January 2013. In doing so, I recall the constancy of her friendship and support, experienced by so many of us, and honour her unmatched life-time contribution to feminism, trade unionism and human rights. Inez lives on in the love, energy, skill and commitment of a multitude of women in Northern Ireland.***

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### **About the author**

Dr. Cynthia Cockburn is a feminist researcher and writer, living in London, where she is active in Women in Black against War and the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom. She is a Visiting Professor in the Department of Sociology, City University London, and an Honorary Professor in the Centre for the Study of Women and Gender, University of Warwick. Her books on gender in processes of war and peace include *The Space Between Us: Negotiating Gender and National Identities in Conflict* (Zed Books 1998); *The Line: Women, Partition and the Gender Order in Cyprus* (Zed Books 2004); *From Where We Stand: War, Women's Activism and Feminist Analysis* (Zed Books 2007) and *Antimilitarism: Political and Gender Dynamics of Peace Movements* published in 2012 by Palgrave Macmillan. She can be contacted at [c.cockburn AT ktown.demon.co.uk](mailto:c.cockburn AT ktown.demon.co.uk)