

## **Women's Role in the Resolution of Northern Ireland Conflict**

*"We in the West are heirs to a tradition that assumes an affinity between women and peace, between men and war, a tradition that consists of culturally constructed and transmitted myths and memories..." (Elshtain 1987)*

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Fall 2012

## Origin of “The Troubles”

“The Troubles” of Northern Ireland began in the 1960’s, and until what many believe to be the Belfast “Good Friday” Agreement of 1998. The issues arose from tensions between Protestant unionists and Catholic nationalist communities. The nationalist community generally identifies as Roman Catholic (Irish), and unionists are considered Protestant (British). The origin of the conflict is an incident referred to as “The Plantation of Ulster”. Ulster was a province of Ireland (the most Gaelic part), home to the small migrating community, and existing mostly outside of British control. In the 1600's, the English noticed that much of the land was being underutilized; land was taken from natives and colonized by English and Scottish plantation owners (half a million acres), in order to “civilize” Ulster. Essentially, the natives' lands were taken and redistributed to newcomers.

Furthermore, the new owners were banned from having Irish tenants, and from selling their land to the Irish. The devout Irish Catholics were relocated to areas with Protestant churches. The British settled Undertakers there, whose job it was to import tenants from their own estates. This was all done in hopes of creating a loyal British majority in the region. The land purchase was subsidized by companies in London in exchange for the creation of their own city (Londonderry next to Derry). By inserting themselves into the Northern Ireland region, the British were threatening the Irish way of life, and endangering the security of land, property, and religious freedom that they had previously enjoyed. A 1641 massacre of Protestant settlers by Irish rebels killed 4000 and expelled an estimated 8000; the fear of revenge caused many to flee back to Britain. In response, the Scottish parliament sent 10,000 soldiers to crush the Irish Catholics. (Goddard, 2012) As the bloody struggle continued, both sides committed atrocities

resulting in a high death toll, and increased resentment for “the other”. The Irish republicans saw the forces as enemy occupants and combatants in the conflict. Meanwhile, the British government claimed that it was using its force to maintain peace, and uphold law and order. The Plantation created a divide between natives and settlers that segregated the two groups in the following centuries.

“The Troubles” beginning in the 1960's stemmed from the formation of the UVF (Ulster Volunteer Force) that formed in response to the IRA (Irish Republican Army). The UVF was a loyalist group that attacked and intimidated the Catholic community, putting forth this statement,

*“...we solemnly warn the authorities to make no more speeches of appeasement. We are heavily armed Protestants dedicated to this cause.” (Taylor, 1999)*

In response to a housing discrimination incident in 1968, where a house was allocated to a young Protestant woman instead of two homeless Catholic families, Austin Currie led the first Civil Rights Protest in Northern Ireland, using the strategies and language of Martin Luther King Jr. The protests aimed to address housing discrimination, unequal representation, and other repressive strategies against the nationalists. The protesters were attacked and banned, but they marched again, and were subdued with violence. The riots and bloodshed continued, and thousands of Catholics were injured and displaced from their homes. Finally, the Republic of Ireland publicly stated its support of the nationalist causes in 1969. Through the decades, the

violence raged on; the events are not detailed in this work since the focus of this research is the peace process.

### Peace Process: Overview

“The Troubles” were brought to an end by a peace process in the 1990's that included ceasefires, decommissioning of the IRA's weapons, reform of the police, and withdrawal of British troops from the streets. The 1998 Belfast Agreement (The Good Friday Agreement) stated that Northern Ireland would remain in UK unless a majority of Northern Ireland voted otherwise. The British government recognized Northern Ireland to have the right to resolve Northern/Southern issues without outside interference. The government would be power-sharing, between unionist and nationalist. In terms of human rights, The Agreement affirmed a commitment to "the mutual respect, the civil rights and the religious liberties of everyone in the community". The multi-party agreement recognized "the importance of respect, understanding and tolerance in relation to linguistic diversity".

Two things make the Northern Ireland situation significant: first, the length of time over which the conflict has been sustained; and second, the relatively small size of the country. When a decades-long battle has been fought throughout a population of 1.5 million, it is a sign that no areas went untouched. (McWilliams, 1995) Amid the widespread violence and civil rights violations, women fought to be both represented leaders in the male-dominated political arena, and peace-builders within the community. On a community level, they facilitated between Protestant unionists and Catholic nationalists by bringing together key members of each community as mediators to calm tensions. This circle of mediators worked with local police

throughout the protest marches and the accompanying violence, meeting quietly and maintaining contacts on a 24-hour basis. This intervention provides a powerful display of peace-building within the community, through human interaction. It is difficult for someone to hate another as an enemy when the two are meeting personally. These mediations portray the power that can be used, even in a time of limited political power and resources. (Hunt, 2001)

Although this research is focused on the legislative inclusion of women, it is important to note the crucial movements that were carried out to maintain peace on a smaller scale.

In this research, the role of women in various stages of the peace treaty will be examined. The factors contributing to women's involvement will be identified, as well as the prospects for women in the future of Northern Ireland politics.

### Media and Women

Media plays a large role in the politics of war and peace, and the case is no different with regards to Northern Ireland's politics. After all, media is the channel through which most of the population receives interpreted stories of the news. Politicians use the media to promote their own legitimacy and shape societal ideas. Essentially, media creates a political environment by setting the public agenda—it focuses on stories from which it will somehow benefit, and omits stories from which it will not. Media tells the public what to care about, and how much to care about it. The media does not just report politics; the media itself becomes a public actor. It has the power to either promote or undermine a cause.

Some 2004 researchers examines how the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition viewed the media as a role in the peace process from 1996-1998. (Spencer, 2004) The NIWC was

founded in 1996 by Monica McWilliams (Catholic) and Pearl Sagar (Protestant). The group opposed the violence, but did not represent or advocate the causes of either side of the conflict. The 1995 establishment of the NIWC led to the required 1% vote that allowed the NIWC to take part in the democratic negotiations. Seven members who were actively involved in the Coalition were interviewed about how they felt the politics of the peace process were reported—in a way that promoted either inclusivity, or continued exclusivity observed during the Troubles. Their answers help evaluate the condition of the political environment, which aimed to be more accommodating and inclusive with the NIWC influence. The research found that the NIWC perceived a general lack of interest by the news media in the non-confrontational aspect of the news. Those interviewed found that more focus was placed upon the dramatic and violent stories involving well-known politicians. This finding raises questions regarding the validity of the news media, and its ability to promote unity rather than division.

In relation to women, the media in Ireland advocated the concept of “women of peace, men of war”. (Roulston, 1996) Although this title of peace-makers seems beneficial, the effect of that nomenclature is a perception of women as passive in the legislative arena. It insinuates that women cannot hold their own in the heated environment of politics, and ensures their further marginalization. Female candidates are less represented, unless they are being used to reinforce male-dominated discourse. The media supports and promotes the traditional gender roles through its choices of headline stories, and the language used to report them.

## Women's Role in the Assembly

The media can shape the concept of the women's movement in Northern Ireland, but more telling is the experience of the women involved. A study following the peace accords (Cowell-Meyers 2001) examines the role of women as Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLA's) in the peace-building process that followed the Good Friday Agreement. The researchers interviewed 12 of the 14 female MLA's and 6 male pair-matches, and referenced secondary sources and government records. The characteristics evaluated were: women's approach to politics, their perception of their roles, and the institutional challenges they faced as women in such a traditional society. Although there is division among the women, many feel that the peace agreement could not have come to pass without their input. This research analyzes the role of women, not as grassroots activists, but as legislators in the context of peace-building.

The Assembly in Northern Ireland consisted of 108 members, formed as a product of the 1998 Agreement. Of the 108, only 14 were women (12%). Both the men and women interviewed indicated a bias in perceived gender roles, and reasons for personal investment in the political process. The women also found differences among themselves regarding self-concepts as part of their gender group; these various divisions, as well as the nationalist/loyalist divide, bring to the forefront some key issues about addressing the gender imbalance in Ireland.

How can one objectively evaluate the role of women in "making a difference"? First, it must be understood that women's difference is only significant if women are inherently different than men. Based on past studies, it is accepted that women legislators base their decision-making on a different set of concerns than their male counterparts. (Thomas and

Welch, 1991) Additionally, women in politics tend to use language, power, and symbols in a different manner. (Kathlene, 1990) Essentially, women see themselves and their goals differently, and have a separate set of guidelines for decision-making. Second, women's influence depends on the critical mass of the minority group in relation to the majority group, which increases as influence increases. Increased proportion of women in the legislative process may lead to: changes in individual goals to align with the group's goals, an increase in legislation addressing specific concerns of women (and children and families), and a change in priorities of male legislators as women's attitudes influence the overall environment. (Flammang, 1985) Third, a determining factor is the presence of a formal women's legislative caucus. Essentially, issues of women and families are more likely to be addressed in places where a delegation of women are publicly recognized and represented. (Thomas, 1991) Fourth, institutional constraints determine the role and success of women in the legislative process. Limited resources or gender imbalance in social norms can reduce the attention given to women-specific issues that exist. (Whip, 1991)

Women are historically under-represented in politics—especially in times of national conflict, women's issues are dominated by the increased focus on nationalist identity. The election of the 14 women to the Assembly occurred as Ireland itself was forming its government, separate and independent from English rule. As Ireland's status as a country shifted, so did the dynamic of the Irish government within itself. With regard to the research, more women considered their political activity a contribution to society, while men saw their role in terms of an individual or career activity. Women tend to prioritize issues relating to children and families, and women see themselves as better at conflict resolution, negotiation,

self-expression, and practical deal-making. (Kolb, 2001) Even with this understanding, women still do not see themselves as a united front. Barriers to their collective action range from religion and class, to the general perception of the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition. This research suggests that within societies that are recovering from internal or external conflict, women face the obstacle of traditional gender roles, which can be of "less priority" to the nation than the conflict itself.

#### Connections to Other Writings

The conflict in The Lemon Tree is centered on the issue of Palestinians being removed from their own land, land they struggle to regain to this day. In Northern Ireland, many of the original residents were displaced by British immigrants that were being settled there to create a more compliant group of people. The characters struggled with identity, since so much cultural identity is tied to two major things: land and religion, both of which were threatened. In the same way, the Irish farmers were displaced from their homes, and their Catholic religion was suppressed. The violence that ensued for many years is similar to the violence seen in the Middle East; although the origins of the conflict are long past, the legacy of hatred between groups is passed down, leading to a culture of blind hatred toward "the other". The minority group feels that the only option for justice is violence, and the cycle of violence continues through generations.

In her excerpt from Sexism and the War System, Betty Reardon addresses the gender bias that is inherently tied to the war system. In the case of Northern Ireland, her writings are

applicable to both the Catholic discrimination and the under-representation of women in Irish politics. With regards to the British holding power over the Irish (going back to the 1600's), the British were a minority that held power of the majority of land-owning Gaelic residents. By sending settlers to Ulster to integrate the Protestant ideology into the lives of the Irish, Britain did what Reardon refers to as, "keep[ing] the basic conflict between elites and the majority submerged in cultural norms, traditional myths, and political ideologies." (Reardon, 1996) By redistributing the land and overriding Catholic sentiment, the British were creating a framework for repression. They sought to establish new cultural norms in order to have a more compliant colony, in hopes that the new norms would replace the old ones, and that the Irish nationalists would inherently exist as lower-class citizens in the future. In the same way, it is a traditional norm, especially in Irish society, for women to be uninvolved in political processes. Once a norm is established, it is difficult to overcome the barriers that have existed for so long. Reardon explains that "there is a common objective that holds the elites together: the maintenance of their own control and dominance." Through the under-representation of women, the dominant group can maintain control. In addition, the media can determine the public perception of women in politics; in this case, the media chose to focus less on the peace-building aspect and more on the violent aspect. In this way, the norms are reinforced by society. Reardon says, "Neither sexism nor the war system can be overcome independently." The two are inextricably intertwined, since both require a massive change in attitude toward the intrigue of war, and its continuation as a destructive force across the globe.

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