Women's Contributions to the Northern Ireland Peace Agreement

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Le Pacte de la paix de l'Irlande du Nord est le schéma utilisé pour la nouvelle constitution de l'Irlande du Nord, ce qui représente le résultat des négociations pour faire la paix en 1990. Cet article aborde la contribution des femmes dans ces négociations qui furent ardues, donne quelques résultats de cette contribution et comment elles ont influencé le Pacte .

Human rights and equality are central to the new structure of governance in Northern Ireland. Given the historical context, this is unsurprising (Harvey 103). Human rights and equality *are* central to Northern Ireland's new structure of governance, thanks in part to the increased participation of women in the peace negotiations. However, contrary to Harvey's suggestion, this development is surprising because Northern Ireland's political history has continually failed to incorporate broad equality and human rights issues. Harvey's misleading statement reflects two consistent shortcomings in Northern Ireland politics and scholarship. The first is the failure of Northern Ireland's main political actors to address any equality issues outside of the Catholic-Protestant religious divide (Sales), and the second is the failure within mainstream scholarship on Northern Ireland to acknowledge this (Connolly).

In recent years considerable scholarship has been produced on Northern Ireland which provides accounts of the political peace process that led to the development of the Agreement[1]—the document responsible for delivering constitutional change and devolution to Northern Ireland in 1998. There has, however, been little acknowledgement, outside occasional reference to the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition, of women's contributions to this process or the final document.[2] As a result, the Agreement's development appears to the uninformed to be overwhelmingly the result of male negotiations. However, these dominant androcentric perspectives overlook the important contributions women in Northern Ireland made to this important aspect of the peace process.

This article will explore women's contributions to the development of the Agreement, the document which represented the first negotiated position on Northern Ireland endorsed by the majority of Northern Ireland's political representatives and the Northern Ireland electorate. The first section of the article will contextualize the political arrangements of the Agreement, and the second will analyze the different political capacities of the women who contributed to this document's development. By analyzing women's involvement in this process, it can be seen that women contributed to a number of valuable changes in the way politics is done in Northern Ireland. As a result, under the new arrangements policy and political decision-making has become more inclusive of both communities and the broader representations within them.

Northern Ireland and Constitutional Change

Northern Ireland underwent constitutional change in 1998 when, as part of a peace settlement, the governance of the region was re-organized to establish new bodies, structures and government institutions. The Agreement outlined the terms of these new arrangements and the *Northern Ireland Act 1998* was the main piece of legislation to formalise them.

The Agreement was formally delivered through the process of debates, discussions and compromises made between the parties elected to the Northern Ireland Forum and Peace Talks.[3] It was voted on by referendum in May 1998, receiving the support of 71 percent of the electorate, and a majority of both unionist and nationalist votes.

The new peace arrangements, particularly the devolved Assembly and Executive, have not gone unchallenged. For this reason, scholarship on this aspect of Northern Ireland politics must first recognize that the implementation of the Agreement has been plagued with disruption and uncertainty. The Assembly's future has been constantly precarious. In October 2002 it was suspended for the fourth time. Suspension, however, is not the collapse of the Agreement, as some anti-Agreement advocators would suggest. Suspension only directly impacts on the Assembly and Executive, while other devolution arrangements continue. What this means is that new bodies established through the Agreement

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and *Northern Ireland Act 1998*, such as the Equality Commission and Human Rights Commission, remain in place irrespective of suspension, as do aspects of the *Act* that detail new governance approaches, such as Section 75. Ministerial portfolios are maintained, however this is now via "home rule," i.e., through the Northern Ireland Office by the Minister of State and the Under Secretaries of State (Westminster MPs). Therefore the structures and processes the Agreement has delivered to Northern Ireland are still relevant, regardless of suspension. While the threat of a re-writing, or total disbandment, of the Agreement, its institutions and processes is real, analysis at this point should focus on the sustainability of elements of the documents, and their continued broader impact on Northern Ireland's new political and policy arrangements.

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Women's Mobilization Around the Peace Process

Constitutional change in Northern Ireland represented a significant opportunity to change the way politics was done, providing the opportunity to develop more democratic and inclusive arrangements and to establish a basis upon which a lasting settlement could be achieved.

Women's mobilization in the lead-up to, and establishment of, constitutional change was organized and well developed, as there was a clear recognition that the Agreement and the subsequent *Act* would provide the basis for Northern Ireland's future. This co-ordinated effort was effective because it approached the negotiations through a number of avenues or, as Connolly articulated, different groups of women occupied different political spaces (151). As will be shown, this multi-layered approach proved effective, with different achievements being gained through different negotiating capacities. These political spaces are best explained in terms of the formal and informal political arenas, with the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition and main parties occupying the formal political arena, and civic groups occupying the informal political arena. In addition to this, there is often an overlap between these two arenas, establishing a third, merged space in which women come together to mobilize.

Formal Political Arena

Many of the accounts of women's contributions to the recent peace process only acknowledged the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition (NIWC). This has been the case because, since its formation in 1996, it has been the most prominent voice of women in the formal political arena. The NIWC formed in order to ensure political representation for women in the peace settlement negotiations (Fearon; Hinds). Their successful election and participation to the Forum and Peace Talks that produced the Agreement led to their election to the devolved Assembly in 1998, where they continue to provide a political voice for women within the formal political arena. A cross-community party with a strong membership of grassroots activists, it has consistently provided an alternative voice in a number of the political debates, while playing a crucial role in promoting inclusive politics and policy agendas (Fearon).

The NIWC was formed specifically with the intent of allowing more women to contribute to the peace settlement negotiations. Their success in securing a place in these negotiations allowed them to pursue a number of agendas that reflected their priority of promoting inclusive governance. Their success in pursuing this agenda was highlighted when they secured support for the Civic Forum. The concept of the Civic Forum was based on the principle of inclusion and on the NIWC's belief that the vibrant activity of Northern Ireland's civil society should somehow be harnessed and fed into the political forum (Fearon 6). Hence, the Civic Forum was designed to promote a new style of politics that was more inclusive and consultative, and one that more fully utilized the wealth of policy expertise of civil society. In addition, by promoting a greater "ownership" of the political process by the communities through the Civic Forum, it would facilitate support for, and sustainability of, the new devolved arrangements.

The NIWC was also responsible for securing elements of the Agreement such as "the right of women to full and equal political participation," which facilitated the strengthening and broadening of the Agreement's equality agenda. They also made significant contributions to developing the Agreement to include broader issues of social inclusion. For example, under "Economic, Social and Cultural Issues," the NIWC lobbied for the inclusion of the intention to: "take action to promote community development and the advancement of women in public life" (Agreement Section 6(b)1).

While the NIWC's achievements were considerable, especially considering its embryonic existence, it is also important to acknowledge women in the main parties who had been involved in the formal political arena for a considerably greater time. Unfortunately, the impact party women have had on the peace process has often been overlooked due to limited evidence as, ultimately, as party members they are represented by party policies and there is little focus on individual achievements outside of the (male) leadership. However, analysis of women's participation in the Forum election does provide some evidence of their will-

ingness to participate in the peace negotiations. For example, of the four main parties that dominate Northern Ireland electorally, Sinn Fein, Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP), Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP), women made up 21 percent of candidates and 13 percent of their elected representatives to the Forum and Peace Talks negotiations. These participation rates were unprecedented for Northern Ireland and provided an indication of the desire of women in the main parties to contribute to the peace settlement negotiations (Donaghy). These representation levels were sustained for the Assembly election, suggesting that women's contributions to the settlement negotiations were valued. In particular women in the nationalist parties (Sinn Fein and SDLP) were very well represented, constituting 21 percent of their MLAs and being appointed to three ministerial portfolios.

The formal political arena is not an avenue in which women have played a significant role in Northern Ireland politics. What we can see though, is through the NIWC contributions to the Agreement negotiations and outcome and the evidence of the desire of women from the main parties to be involved, women in the formal political arena mobilized in a way previously unmatched in Northern Ireland, resulting in a number of tangible and valuable contributions to the new arrangements.

Women and the Parallel Peace Process

While severely underrepresented in the formal political arena, women's participation at the civic level has been considerably more advanced. The Northern Ireland women's sector is not a homogenous women's movement, and is not intended to be portrayed as such in this article. However, a number of active women's groups and organizations can be seen to have co-ordinated to argue a "unified" position on the peace process at different stages. This mobilization made a substantial impact on both the drawing up of the Agreement and the substance of the *Act.*

Throughout the Troubles women in Northern Ireland have mobilized within civic society to promote and implement peace-building initiatives (Sales; Hinds). The dominant form this has taken is cross-community developments, a large majority of which deal directly with the "policy casualties": traditionally neutral policy areas that have become interwoven with the politics of the Troubles, such as welfare, education, and housing. As a result, the community sector, in which women and women's organizations play a prominent role, has developed sophisticated understandings of policy challenges facing Northern Ireland. This understanding in many ways has surpassed the expertise within the main political parties, who traditionally have focused on constitutional issues. It is therefore not surprising that the greatest impact of the Agreement and *Act* on public policy practice came from initiatives instigated by the community sector.

While the Agreement was largely a result of intensive negotiations among political parties (Fearon; Wilford and Wilson), community groups and organizations also undertook a number of initiatives to contribute to its development. The most organized approach was orchestrated by a loose alliance of civic groups called the Equality Coalition. Women's involvement in this approach was central, from the individual participation of women such as Inez McCormack from the trade union Unison, through to grassroots organizations such as "Women into Politics."

The involvement of this alliance and civic society more broadly in the peace negotiations was known as the "parallel peace process." This was a term coined by the journalist Mary Holland to describe the presence and activity of a range of organizations that were informally politically active and were concerned with securing constructive terms for a lasting settlement (McCrudden). Women and their organizations were central to this process due to their dominance and expertise at the community level, and the parallel peace organizations' power came from their pivotal role in community development.

It was recognized that the acceptance of the Agreement at referendum would require more than political party endorsement; it would need a broad-based community endorsement. On this basis, community groups, and alliances such as the Equality Coalition, began their own lobbying on elements of the Agreement. Their influence was significant. For example, the Equality Coalition advocated a statutory duty on public authorities to promote an equality mainstreaming approach to policy making. This demand was achieved, with little input or interest by the main parties, and was represented under Section 6.3 of the Agreement's "Rights, Safeguards and Equal Opportunity."

The Equality Coalition was also central in developing the substance of the equality duty in the *Act.* McCrudden details this process, stating that considerable consultation, debate, and work went into the details of the equality duty Section 75 of the *Northern Ireland Act 1998.* The participation of civic groups in this process ensured that the *Act* was both well developed generally, and specific on the equality requirements on public authorities. A legacy of their input is the emphasis on consultation with civic groups as part of the

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implementation of Section 75, a development that cemented civic society's interaction with policy makers under the new governance arrangements.

It is particularly important to recognize the contributions of civic society generally, and those women and groups concerned with equality specifically, as to date accounts of the Agreement and *Act*'s negotiations rarely mention negotiators outside of the main political parties[4] and so, women's contributions are once again written out of the peace process.

Merging Mobilizations

There is a fluid relationship between women's political activity within the formal and the informal political arenas, with individuals or campaigns often being intertwined with both (Sales; Fearon; Connolly). Many women in political parties, particularly the NIWC, but also the main political parties, have strong links and experience with community activism. Similarly many women in community groups have networks and influence with politicians. In the development of the Agreement and *Act* most women concentrated their efforts on their own arena and agendas, however there were times when women occupying vastly different political spaces came together to lobby on shared concerns (Brown, Donaghy, Mackay and Meehan). The most notable of these mergers was in relation to the proposed Equality Commission.

Within the Agreement it was mooted that a single Equality Commission be formed to oversee all equality matters, and this body be formed through the amalgamation of Northern Ireland's four equality agencies: the Fair Employment Commission, the Equal Opportunities Commission, the Commission for Racial Equality and the Northern Ireland Disability Council. There was considerable debate at the negotiations around the Agreement by various concerned parties. It was made clear by the NIWC, women in the main parties, individual women, women's organizations, and by the Equal Opportunities Commission that there was a consensus that this merger would be detrimental to women. It was believed that because the Fair Employment Commission dealt primarily with religious equality issues, and subsequently was the dominant agency of the four, this dominance would carry over into the Equality Commission, at the expense of gender, race, and disability issues. The debate gained momentum throughout the development of the *Act*, making it one of the most contentious issues for many within the women's sector and beyond. Despite heavy lobbying around the Agreement and during the drafting of the legislation by women's groups and those concerned with gender, race, and disability issues, the recommendation was formalized (in sections 73 and 74). Some concessions were made but these related only to the details of how the Commission would be structured, have its funds distributed, and how it could organize its consultative councils (McCrudden).[5] What is significant about this process, however, was the way women mobilized through a range of political spaces, to present a unified position on the Agreement and new institutional arrangements.

This joint mobilization was repeated for a number of issues in the Agreement. For example the proposed *Single Equality Act* and the proposed Northern Ireland Bill of Rights also received joint and coordinated support. In addition, efforts were made to work in partnership across political spaces by women in supporting the Agreement at referendum.

The outcome of the Agreement reflected the intense political negotiations, compromises, and contributions from those within the formal political arena as well as those outside of it. This mobilization extended to the promotion of the Agreement at referendum, and resulted in it being "sold" to the Northern Ireland electorate from a range of standpoints, from political leaders to community organizations. This partnership approach by political parties and community organizations can be seen as having provided the foundation for future relationships between these two groups, and the central importance of women's contributions within this movement should be acknowledged.

Conclusion

Women's contributions played an important role in the development and acceptance of the Agreement. In particular two key elements of the Agreement can be seen to have been heavily influenced by the NIWC and the broader women's sector: the promotion of inclusive politics and policy practice; and the establishment of a governance of consultation, whereby civic expertise is valued by government in its policy making. However, these contributions have often been overlooked, because they were not achieved through the traditional political route or because an element of them was more "loudly shouted" by main political actors. For example, many attribute the tireless efforts of John Hume of the SDLP as having been responsible for centralizing the concept of "inclusivity" in the settlement process (Patterson). What is rarely acknowledged is that this exercise, while valuable, was largely focused on the consociational element of an agreement between parties, and it was only through the work of the NIWC and women within the communities that any gender (or broader equality) dimension was given to this discourse. For example, it was only through initiatives such as the Civic Forum or the mainstreaming strategy (Section 75) that structures and opportunities for a fully inclusive approach to governance was achieved. Yet despite this, the literature that refers to inclusivity and democratic governance as a central element of the settlement invariably focuses

solely on Hume's contributions or the outcomes in terms of political party power-sharing. Only by expanding the understanding of the process, and including the role of women in this process, can a full acknowledgement of women's contributions be achieved.

An article such as this can offer only one perspective of the valuable contribution of women to the Northern Ireland peace process. However, through the analysis of the contributions to the Agreement and subsequent *Act* it can be seen that there was a feminized process and outcome, and this is something which needs to be incorporated, or at least acknowledged, in future mainstreamed literature on Northern Ireland.

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[1]On the front page of the Agreement, it is entitled simply, The Agreement. It fuller title inside is: The Agreement. Agreement reached in multiparty negotiations. The popular nomenclatures, Belfast Agreement/ Good Friday Agreement reflect the document being reached in Belfast on Good Friday (April 10) 1998. Some people use the popular names interchangeably. Others see in them a unionist (or Protestant) and nationalist (or Catholic) preference.

[2]This has been the case even by those who have traditionally excelled at providing a gender perspective in Northern Ireland scholarship such as Wilford; Wilson.

[3]With the exception of the Democratic Unionist Party, led by Ian Paisley, who refused to participate once Sinn Fein was included in the negotiations.

[4]McCrudden is the main exception in the literature on this point.

[5]While many women continue to hold reservations regarding the impact this merger will have on gender issues and developments, it does appear that since the appointment of key women from the Equal Opportunities Commission to the Equality Commission and its Commissioners Board, these fears have relaxed amongst some, while criticisms of the Commission have not been voiced or highlighted in the way it was first expected.

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for Holofernes

Prozac can consume
the flames of purgatory.
Only death can drown
the fires of hell, the place
where crimson-haired Judith
dwells.

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