

DIS/AGREEING IRELAND

Contexts, Obstacles, Hopes

Edited by

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To the memory of the anti-sectarian United Irishmen, defeated
by the forces of reaction in 1798 with consequences which are
still with us two hundred years later'

12 Women, Equality and Political Participation

Christine Bell

One of the difficulties of addressing equality of political participation for women is imagining what it would look like. It is not as simple as imagining women leading political parties. As Margaret Thatcher illustrated, this might have very little to do with equality of political participation. It is a matter of imagining new structures of participation and new definitions of politics, and perhaps even new ideas of 'women'. Equality of political participation for women should mean equality of respect and equality of participation in the benefits, resources and decision-making of society.

This chapter seeks to use the experience of women's political activity in the Northern Ireland 'peace process' over the last few years to illustrate the conceptual and practical problems with women's equality of political participation. The problems with imagining effective political participation for women can be illustrated by the unsatisfactory nature of the very phrase 'women and the peace process'. It assumes a peace process and a shared understanding of what 'peace' is. It assumes that these women are somehow part of that peace process, or that they at least have something specific to contribute as women. All of these assumptions are problematic. Considering why they are problematic is not just important for women, but for all those concerned with social progress and settlement in Ireland and beyond. Drawing on feminist theory and focusing on recent developments in Northern Ireland, this chapter discusses each of these assumptions in turn.

All Women Together?

Given that Northern Ireland is a religiously, ethnically and nationally divided society, Catholic and Protestant women have come together in different fora knowing that perhaps more separates

them than unites them. Indeed, Evason in her review of the Women's Movement in Northern Ireland claims 'we have sometimes seemed oblivious of divisions elsewhere and started from the assumption that our divisions are special' (1991, p. 48). Yet, women in Northern Ireland have tried to find common ways of addressing day-to-day concerns which they face together as women. Sometimes women have tried to deal with their differences by avoiding them and sometimes by trying to recognise them and work with the resulting tensions. These two approaches indicate two different underlying conceptions of what constitutes effective 'feminist' action which come into conflict, particularly when the question of equality of political participation is considered.

The internal debates in the women's movement or movements in the North of Ireland, together with external political battles, most often revolve around how to bring about effective empowerment and change for women while dealing with the fact of women's political, religious, ethnic and national diversity. This is a debate that is paralleled throughout the world where women seek equality. In the last decade particularly, white Western feminists have been charged with 'colonialism': that they have assumed that a feminist agenda containing a core number of issues (as defined by them) could unite women across class, ethnic and national boundaries. As women of different backgrounds — women of colour, women from developing countries, working-class women, lesbian women and disabled women — have struggled for a public voice they have questioned the relevance of this feminist agenda to their concerns, and more fundamentally have challenged the exclusionary processes by which this agenda is achieved. For example, Audre Lourde, a black lesbian feminist challenging North American feminist academics asserts:

Poor women and women of Color know there is a difference between the daily manifestations of marital slavery and prostitution because it is our daughters who line 42nd Street. If white American feminist theory need not deal with the differences between us, and the resulting difference in our oppressions, then how do you deal with the fact that the women who clean your houses and tend your children while you attend conferences on feminist theory are, for the most part, poor women and women of Color? What is the theory behind racist feminism? (1984, p. 112)

She argues that to work on women's issues by putting the issue of difference to one side is to try to dismantle the 'Master's house

using the Master's tools'. Instead she suggests an alternative approach that involves 'learning how to take our differences and make them strengths' (1984, p. 112).

In Northern Ireland there are many issues where women have a relatively clear common agenda, for example as regards lack of childcare, patriarchal societal attitudes, reproductive issues, and equality in employment. In these areas it is possible to find some 'cross-community' consensus. However, many issues – particularly those connected with 'the Troubles' – do not make these connections; for example, approaches to reform/disbandment of police and army, how to achieve peace and how to negotiate peace. Further, some issues which would seem to have the potential for a shared approach may be complicated by lack of consensus between women in how to deal with conflict: domestic violence, for example, clearly implicates the policing debate. Ideas for improving the state response to domestic violence will therefore be contingent on views of the nature of the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) and its susceptibility to reform. While there may be cross-community agreement on the nature of the problem, suggestions for the way forward may break down along religious lines. Most fundamentally, the question of how women should prioritise political action (in particular the trade-offs between 'constitutional' intervention and issue intervention) is complicated by this same lack of consensus around the constitutional question, with its implications for strategies for effective social change (see Chapter 8, and Sales, 1997a).

This struggle to deal with difference politically is one which is a vital source of often untapped information for students of 'peace'. Women in Northern Ireland also have a contribution to make to one of the big debates of feminist action worldwide, namely, how women can work together without resorting to colonialism and to essentialist assumptions.

Negotiating for Peace?

The language of conflict resolution in Northern Ireland is a limited one. It is one that focuses explicitly or implicitly around the presence or absence of paramilitary violence through resolution of the 'constitutional question'. This limitation has many negative consequences, but in particular it operates to exclude women. First, it excludes a wider equality agenda, which particularly affects women. Second, its processes exclude women, who

must try not just to widen the agenda, but to change the very language around what constitutes 'peace' thus changing the priorities around how to achieve it. This task is further made difficult by the tensions described above, that is lack of consensus among women, and the debate over whether working towards such political consensus is a worthwhile goal.

One of the defining problems of conflict resolution in Northern Ireland has been the lack of attention given to addressing the past in order to arrive at a shared understanding of what the conflict 'is about'. Without a shared understanding of the nature of the conflict, understandings of what peace would look like are very different. Is peace simply terrorists not fighting, or does it mean a change to state structures and choices? The post-first-ceasefire discussions about what would constitute progress illustrated this, as contending demands passed each other in the night. Ostensibly the central log-jam was one of decommissioning versus all-party talks. Unionists, supported by the British government, insisted on decommissioning of paramilitary weapons (particularly those of the IRA) prior to any face-to-face talks. Nationalists and others asserted that the process of talks, if started, would lead to settlement which would provide decommissioning of 'hearts and minds' and eventually weapons. The log-jam meant that all-party talks did not take place, and resulted in the IRA abandoning its ceasefire altogether in February 1996. It can be argued that the log-jam was merely a surrogate for the traditional constitutional debate. All-party talks would require an acknowledgement that there is something to be negotiated, namely the Union, the nature of unionist power and the underwriting of the British state, a requirement that most unionist politicians are unwilling to meet. At the same time, the unionist insistence on decommissioning prior to talks required some relinquishing of IRA power, and a surrendering of some leverage on the political process. While constitutional negotiations ostensibly did not take place during the first IRA ceasefire, in effect the issues were negotiated albeit at arm's length.

While the British government position – as recently presented through the Downing Street Declaration, the 'Framework Documents' and the 'Heads of Agreement' joint government paper which set the terms for the 1998 'Agreement' – cannot be fully discussed here, it seemed to contemplate a compromise solution, presented to unionists as 'internal' and presented to nationalists as guaranteeing an increased Irish dimension and the possibility of a 'rolling United Ireland'. This is very much an

approach of trying to 'split the difference' between warring factions with irreconcilable goals. However, this search for common ground between the symbolic positions of British and Irish sovereignty does not directly address many of the key questions underlying the conflict, such as various human rights issues and the absence of just structures inspiring cross-community confidence and capable of negotiating conflicting claims and identities.

Moreover, the 'split the difference' approach to negotiating conflict resolution and the constitutional question particularly excludes women, as demonstrated by the de-gendering discourse of the all-party talks log-jam. Women as women, it is assumed, have no guns to decommission and no power or political aspirations to give up. Without guns and aspirations as women, they become undifferentiated unionists, Loyalists, Republicans or nationalists. Stripped of their gender, there is little problem with men speaking for them. As Ward asked in 1995:

Could it really be possible that a new society, constituted upon principles of social and economic equality, can emerge from the myriad elaborate constructions now being devised by civil servants and politicians, whose employment of sophisticated administrative devices has the sole aim of mollifying widely divergent aspirations? The final goal of the main players (the British and Irish governments) is the transformation of a divided society into a liberal democracy in which differences can be accommodated. But what about other divisions, whose existence has not had the same lethal consequences but which urgently require attention? (Ward, 1995a, p. 41)

As is illustrated by the frameworks established by British and Irish governments, the proposed structures are indeed limited. While forms of power-sharing and balance between Protestants and Catholics were set out, no attempt was made to design structures which would address the issue of gender equality. This could not only have been beneficial for women, but could have changed the numbers game as regards 'Catholics and Protestants', making it less predictable (Rooney, 1996). The British negotiating end-game assumed a fairly monolithic unionism and nationalism which they would attempt to reconcile in their present forms. In so doing, it failed to ask questions such as: Why do people see unionism and nationalism as protecting their interests? Are there ways to accommodate these interests to mutual advantage? To what extent can compromise mean redefinition, rather than giving up portions of aspirations? These are questions to which

women could contribute as a group who have explored the margins of both unionism and nationalism, and who have begun to redefine and subvert them. While Dr Marjorie Mowlam's appointment as Secretary of State feminised the role, not just because of her gender, but because she explicitly sought to do so (a move quickly labelled as the 'touchy feely approach' in itself indicating the backlash), at a deeper level it would not seem to have affected the British approach to conflict resolution. It is likely, however, that more analysis of her role as a woman will be developed in the future.

Women and Conflict

To understand women's possible contributions to a settlement it is helpful to review their place in the conflict; this also sheds light on the conflict. Whether as perpetrators or victims of violence, the place of women in Northern Ireland has been either denied altogether or stereotyped and then marginalised. While a few female writers have challenged this, on the whole the media, mainstream sociology, law and criminology discourses have adopted this approach.

Women as Perpetrators of Violence

As perpetrators of violence women are often placed in one (or more) of three stereotypes: the woman who is more evil and deadly than the man; the woman who will commit violent acts out of love for a violent man; and the woman who is dangerous and mad (Bell and Fox, 1996). Where the media present accounts of 'terrorist' women they often use all of these stereotypes, and in popular culture several can converge in one woman, as in 'Jude' of Neil Jordan's *The Crying Game*. In the first half of the film she is presented as the blond IRA girlfriend helping out by seducing a British soldier (with a price of harassment/assault). In the second half of the film, at the expense of character continuity, she dons an auburn wig and transforms into the ultimate female psychopath, both mad and 'more deadly than the male' (see Edge, 1995).

Academic and more serious journalistic accounts of the use of violence exhibit similar stereotypes although in many, the role of women is simply ignored. In Mallie and Bishop's account of the IRA there is no gender analysis (1987); neither is there in Boyer-Bell's account (1990). Likewise women do not feature in Bruce's

or Cusack and McDonald's account of Loyalist paramilitaries other than as victims (1994; 1997). Holland and McDonald's account of the INLA twice assures its reader that 'the IRSP's programme was notable for its emphasis on women's issues. The IRSP (Irish Republican Socialist Party) would remain notable for the role women would play in its history', and later that, 'women played a much more prominent role in both the INLA and the IRSP than ever was accorded to them in the other republican groups' (1994, pp. 73 and 327). Yet what this role was, what strategies were involved, how it shaped either INLA or IRSP, and how it affected the women involved, are all left unexplored. Recently an interview with the partner of a leading IRSP/INLA activist, who was herself politically active, indicates the complex weaving together of the roles of a wife meeting her husband and children's domestic needs, an ambivalence to involvement in the IRSP, an attempt to find a women's space for her politics through the organisation 'Women Against Imperialism', and a practical commitment to women in similar situations, for example by supporting prisoners' wives (Hyndman, 1996, p. 129). It is an account of a difficult life, of many layers, that is ignored in many accounts.

Where women are mentioned, the stereotypes abound. Martin Dillon's *The Dirty War* devotes a chapter to women with the title 'Honey Traps' (1991 pp. 231 *et seq.*). As in *The Crying Game*, he cannot resist using several incompatible stereotypes simultaneously. Thus women are particularly lethal:

The role of women in the shadowy world of espionage and terror has been depicted in novels and movies as glamorous and deadly. In reality that imagery holds certain truths, but in the world of terrorism women tended to be more deadly than glamorous. (1991, p. 233)

Yet, while acknowledging the existence of military women such as Mairead Farrell and the Price sisters, he concludes that women's most successful roles 'have been luring soldiers to their deaths and in accompanying IRA operatives abroad to create an image of young couples on holiday' (Dillon, 1991, p. 246). His own account of women in the IRA deals exclusively with women who lure British soldiers to their doom, as jars of honey lure wasps, thus the term 'honey traps', which becomes sexualised through Dillon's usage.

Stevenson's *We Wrecked the Place* is based on a series of interviews with Republicans, two of whom are women, and Loyalists

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(all men) (1996). Despite the inclusion of Carol Cullen and Ella O'Dwyer, both of whom were IRA members and served imprisonment, Stevenson's approach fails to address the gender dimension of their participation except to sexualise their presence through descriptions of their physical appearance at the point of introduction. Thus, Cullen is 'an attractive woman, sandy-haired with a broad smile and almondine eyes. She is hospitable as well ...', although according to Stevenson she 'has been programmed into an irrational belief in the Provos' fundamental benevolence that belies her obvious intelligence' (1996, p. 123). O'Dwyer 'is a strikingly pretty woman – her lush red hair, a sprinkling of freckles, and delicate features conjure cinematic images of milkmaid "colleens"'; Stevenson records her 'blushing' as she explains her life choices (1996, p. 163).

Accounts of the RUC and UDR address the issue of women in passing, where again their role is defined along traditional patterns. In Ryder's account of the UDR, women 'Greenfinches' appear as the counterparts to Dillon's honey traps:

In the year since Operation Motorman in July 1972, sixty-six women were charged with specific terrorist offences and three others were detained without trial. Mr Blaker [then Under-Secretary of State for the army] said that there were not enough women in the RUC or the Women's Royal Army Corps to search women suspects at checkpoints and during patrols, a situation he described as a gap in security arrangements. (1991, p. 65)

Thus women were to be used primarily against women. Greenfinches were not to be armed, but rather protected by their male colleagues.

Brewer and Magee's account of the RUC offers a less stereotyped view. They discuss the day-to-day difficulties for women, noting that the 'occupational culture of the [RUC] is heavily masculine' (1991, p. 49). They also deal with women's reactions to this treatment (1991, p. 241). They note how the issue of violence against women is seen as the main role for police women, arguing that "the marginalisation of police women's duties has divorced some policemen from the reality of sex crimes' (1991, p. 54).

Perhaps unsurprisingly this division of duties is not merely pragmatic, but has had negative effects for women in the police. In essentialising women as better suited to dealing with violence against women and children, a route for their exclusion was

established. In the mid-1980s the police tried to dismiss all women police officers from its ranks because they were not allowed to carry guns, in effect defining the combination of gun and penis as essential to the performance of police duties. This was ultimately resolved after challenge in the European Court of Justice when women were permitted to stay and later were armed (*Johnson v. Chief Constable of the RUC*, ECR 1651, (1986); CMLR 240 1986, Case 224/84).

Several women writers have presented a different account of women's relationship to violence; several of the best have been primarily historical (Ward, 1983, 1993 and 1995a; Benton, 1995). In addition, a few women (often journalists) have given the issue contemporary treatment. Nell McCafferty's *The Armagh Women*, while dealing in detail with the gender oppression of prison and the criminal justice system generally, also addresses the relationship between women and war (1981). In *Only the Rivers Run Free*, the place of women in different spheres of life is again presented as a picture of a relationship with political struggle and violence that was very different from the relationship between men and war (Fairweather *et al.*, 1984). A television documentary entitled 'Mother Ireland' also bore testimony to this through interviews with Republicans and nationalists, notably, Mairead Farrell later killed by the SAS in Gibraltar while on active service with the IRA (Derry Film and Video Workshop, 1988-89, not shown for some time in Northern Ireland). Less notably, MacDonald's book *Shoot the Women First* (1991) included a profile of an 'IRA woman', and Belfrage's *The Crack* (1987) looked at both Republican and Loyalist women associated with paramilitary groups. While there are problems with many of these accounts, they begin to present a picture where the reasons for women's involvement in political violence are different from those of men, particularly in being seen as part of a larger battle for equality (see McDonnell, 1996).

The case of women engaged in violence does not just pose problems for mainstream media and academic discourses; it has also proved problematic for feminists themselves. If feminism seeks to challenge patriarchal processes as well as patriarchal aims, what is its relationship with war? Does this relationship depend on the nature or justification of the war in question? The use of violence sits uneasily with feminist praxis which sees violence as a primarily male way of dealing with conflict. One response to violence has been the presence of women and feminists at the forefront of anti-war and peace movements the world

over. In Northern Ireland the role of women in peace movements is particularly notable, from the Peace People which had two women at its core and had a woman-centred structure, and 'Women Together' which organised large rallies as a response to the breakdown of the IRA ceasefire in 1996. In contrast to the plethora of fact, fiction and 'factional' accounts of paramilitary and security force groupings there has been no notable account of the role of such peace initiatives or the predominant role of women in them. Women's work again fails to register as relevant to the history of conflict.

However, while it is important to recognise the role of women involved in non-violent movements, going further and essentialising women as peaceful and peace-making as the true women's role is extremely problematic. It denies the diversity of women's political views and actions, including a decision to use violence as a means to a political end. Moreover, it chooses to ignore that some women see use of violence as part of an equality debate. MacKinnon has envisaged this difficult feminist/women soldier debate as two women meeting in the after-life with the feminist saying to the soldier 'We fought for your equality', to which the soldier replies 'Oh, no *we* fought for *your* equality' (1987, p. 34). This stark division between asserting use of violence simultaneously as an equality right and a tool for achieving equality on one hand, and rejecting violence as a means to this end, on the other, is indicative of the difficulty of suggesting a 'women's approach' to peace which is consistent with both notions of diversity and of equality.

Women as Victims

Women are 'victims' of the 'Troubles' in many different senses. They are direct victims of paramilitary and state violence – they are killed, maimed and psychologically damaged. They are victims as relatives of those who are hurt or killed. They are victims as those whose relatives are imprisoned. They are victims as those who are left particularly vulnerable to the policing, military and paramilitary priorities of the conflict. Politically, victimhood has been a contested concept in Northern Ireland, where the 'proper' victim is apolitical and forgiving and therefore 'innocent' and undeserving of the hurt. Victimhood is also gendered in important although often ignored ways. Where the women's victimhood fits stereotypes and essentialist assumptions her gender will be recognised, and can even become an integral part of her victimhood; thus the grieving mother is more symbolic

of loss than the grieving father. Indeed, the existence of the female 'victim' has meant that the word victim itself is problematic for women, signifying passive disempowerment. In contrast, where a woman herself is a victim or casualty, her gender is more likely to be seen as coincidental or irrelevant. She was in the wrong place at the wrong time, killed or injured because she was somebody's wife or partner, or because of her religion; not because she was a woman.

Recently, Radford and Russell have sought to politicise the killing of women, arguing that in many cases it should be re-labelled 'femicide' – 'the misogynous killing of women by men', and relocated at the extreme end of a continuum of male sexual violence in patriarchal society (1992, p. 3). This relabelling seeks to expose the ways in which women are killed precisely because of their gender, challenging the idea that many victims are women only coincidentally. It is possible then, to connect femicide with the patriarchy of 'the Troubles'. As Radford and Russell document, killings of women fail to receive attention in general. This is exacerbated in a period of conflict where resources are channelled disproportionately at controlling 'terrorism'. McWilliams and McKiernan's ground breaking research on domestic violence documents many instances of women being put further at risk by the priorities of the conflict (1993; see also McWilliams, 1997).

More directly, while women have been targeted along with men, by both state and paramilitary organisations, in practice their killings have often had a gender dimension. For example, a number of Loyalist killings, such as the killings of Marie Smyth or Margaret Wright, have had strong misogynist overtones (McWilliams, 1994). Femicide raises difficult identity questions which have not been explored. If a Loyalist killing is also misogynist was the act less loyal, or what was it loyal to?

Women and Political Strategies for Change

Examination of women both as users of violence and victims of violence indicates the complex nature of conflict, the symbiosis of state and paramilitary activity in making up the reality of women's lives, and the processes of rendering women invisible, and thereby denying the gender aspects of conflict. This has implications for women in the peace process. Women come to the issues of conflict and peace with a variety of experiences as women, which

must break open any essentialist understanding of a 'woman's approach' to conflict resolution.

Women concerned with political change and equality of participation have many different and contradictory fronts to address. They have to challenge male versions of unionism and nationalism, and they have to challenge the political cultures which seek to prevent this challenge. They have to widen the debate beyond the question of where the border is; while doing this they need to cherish the relationships which they have built up between themselves, dealing with the pain which forming such relationships can bring. Impossible as this seems, this is what women attempt to achieve, many women pushing on several areas at once. Below I identify and briefly discuss four strategies. These are not the only four strategies, neither is each strategy homogenous in itself but may incorporate varying approaches. Neither are the four mutually exclusive, but serve as broad categories (see Evason, 1991 and Sales, 1997a, for fuller accounts of the women's movement).

Irish Nationalism and Women

In a broadside against Irish nationalism, Edna Longley has charged nationalist women of co-opting feminism for nationalism (1990). This fails to recognise the struggle that nationalist women have had in creating space within nationalism. It oversimplifies the convergence between nationalism and feminism as a cynical political manipulation, and rests on an impoverished view of a monolithic feminism, that is subject to the same criticisms as Longley launches at nationalism. The convergence is due in some part to a similarity between the key struggles of nationalism and feminism: the issues of equality that have marked nationalism are similar to the struggles of women, and for Catholic women, the struggle has therefore been profound. The contribution of feminists has been to help to shift the concept of nationalism to one of inclusion of marginalised groups, rather than one of rescue by a Catholic-dominated state. This may or may not have become the present dominant conception of nationalism, but it is a significant shift all the same.

Nationalist women have found different ways to bring together a nationalist and/or Republican agenda with a feminist one. They have argued that the two are necessarily related – equality for women is an integral part of nationalist aspirations. This approach was articulated most publicly at a conference in 1994 organised by Clár na mBan (Women's Agenda) to give a space to nationalist and Republican women to discuss the developing peace process and

the Downing Street Declaration (Connolly, 1995). This discussion challenged a view of Irish unity which would not respond to women's concerns. In the words of Oonagh Marron:

As nationalist women and as feminists, we have very often given our support unconditionally to the overthrow of British colonialism in this country. We have often buried our demands for the sake of a common purpose – Brits out. In the past, that has been a way of censoring our demands. The danger is that once again we are going to be asked to bury our demands, this time in the common purpose of achieving peace. I think that it is time to send a message to those negotiating on our behalf that this time around our support will not be unconditional; never again will we collude with the exclusion of people, with the denial of their rights. (Connolly, 1995, p. 120)

In articulating a feminist vision of Ireland, nationalist women have sought to bring a different perspective to key debates, using the experience of the female body to inform issues of consent and self-determination (Hackett, 1995). In an article in *An Camcheachta* (The Starry Plough), Republican women used the concept of bodily integrity and personal self-determination over reproductive choices to explore the meaning of national self-determination (Madden, 1994). This is a creative process capable of delivering solutions which could not be imagined using a 'split the difference' approach.

However, in terms of putting this agenda on mainstream nationalist political platforms, or negotiating strategies, there is a battle still to be won. Looking merely at women's representation in the main nationalist parties, only 28 per cent of the SDLP and Sinn Fein candidates were women in the 1996 Forum and Negotiations elections. While Sinn Fein have had a stated commitment to participation of women, and were the only party with women on their negotiating team in 1997–98, apart from the Women's Coalition, as yet it is an incomplete victory for women. The women negotiators, for example, stand out for their silence in the face of cameras while the three men all have significant media profiles. Little indication is given of whether feminism plays a part in shaping negotiation strategies or demands, and again media appearances and statements would suggest not.

Unionism, Protestantism and Women

Protestant women have stood in a more ambiguous relationship to unionism and Protestantism. Women can be found organising

together in institutions such as the churches and Orange Lodges, although their role in these would seem to be one of supporting men. While these autonomous organisations empower women, it is fair to say that as yet women have not articulated a challenge to unionism comparable to that of nationalism. This reflects a problem at the root of what constitutes unionism. A male Canadian academic (originally from Northern Ireland) once asked me: Why are there no Unionist feminists? He was publishing an 'intellectual defence on the Union' and felt there were arguments to be made that the Union would help women. In Canada, he told me, there are feminists on every issue under the sun, so why no unionist feminists?

Of course, one answer is that there are indeed unionist feminists. Rhonda Paisley articulated a unionist feminism when she discussed 'Feminism, Unionism and "the Brotherhood"' (1992). She criticised the DUP in particular, and by implication the UUP, for their inability to increase the representation of women or respond to women's needs:

There exists very little room for feminism within the ranks of Unionism. That is the black and white of it. Unionism is well set in the rut of 'reaction to' feminist issues, rather than being in the position of setting an agenda for such issues and determining to accomplish it The answer to this inequality of approach must have something to do with the fact that Unionism is male dominated; and it must also say a great deal about those of us who are female within the ranks of Unionism. (1992, p. 32)

However, the problems of women with unionism go deeper than merely a problem of male representation – they raise the question of whether unionist feminism is capable of a full existence at all. To give an example, several years ago at a Young Unionist conference the Fair Employment Commission and Fair Employment law was berated using misinformed notions of both discrimination and the law itself. Most of the arguments made against this institution could have been similarly applied to the Equal Opportunities Commission of Northern Ireland and sex equality legislation. That this was not mentioned indicates the sectarian nature of the debate. It also illustrates how women's interests are submerged in a narrower unionist agenda, as both Protestant and Catholic women rely on such legislation daily. The criteria of what constitutes 'sound unionist politics' have been drawn so tightly that many unionists are left outside of the fold,

pre-eminently women. This goes wider than issues of discrimination, as the possible benefits for women of a union with England and Wales, such as liberality on divorce, abortion, or matters of sexuality more generally, did not apply in Northern Ireland which was specifically excepted by a unionist legislature through the Stormont parliament, prior to direct rule (McWilliams, 1993). As Sales notes, the politics of the 'Constitutional' question rob women of space from which to challenge this: '[t]he ties of Protestantism to Unionist hegemony have made it difficult for Protestant women to challenge the authority of "their" state and political leaders. Those who fight for their own interests are seen as "rocking the boat"' (1997b).

The relative silence of a specifically unionist feminism shows how unionism has reduced the constitutional issue to a symbolic rather than a substantive benefit for many of its constituents. It also of course signifies an inability of unionism to articulate a positive vision of inclusive political participation, rather than a negative agenda of what it will not accept. While marginalising women, this has much wider implications for conflict resolution. Interestingly, a spate of attempts to consider a broader political agenda for unionism, that appeared from 1996, did little to reverse this situation. 'Women' and 'gender' fail to register as a category in indexes, and indeed there is no specific contribution discussing gender implications (see e.g. English and Walker, 1996; Porter, 1996). Shirlow and McGovern's *Who are 'the People'?: Unionism, Protestantism and Loyalism in Northern Ireland*, with Sales's essay on 'Gender and Protestantism in Northern Ireland' (1997) provides a notable exception.

One of the few unionist parties to challenge the assumptions of unionism and attempt to forge a more practical definition of unionism is paradoxically that of the Progressive Unionist Party (PUP) which is associated with the Ulster Volunteer Force and Red Hand Commando. At one level, the difficulties of feminist unionism are perhaps just a different version of the difficulties of right-wing feminism. It is perhaps therefore not surprising that it is within a party which articulates a socialist unionism within working-class communities that feminist unionism has had most space. The PUP has both showed concern with women's issues, using meetings with Ministers to raise issues such as child abuse, and has encouraged the participation of women already active in their communities. However, it faces serious problems in trying to articulate its brand of unionism and also carry its constituents.

Women articulating agendas within nationalism and unionism have a vital role to play in asking the questions that expose the contradictions within both ideologies. As Connolly puts it:

Imagine a dialogue between Catholic and Protestant women's groups on the meaning of 'democracy'. Catholic women would be justified in asking whether it includes a state which systematically discriminated against Catholics, excluding them from housing and employment, and letting an armed and sectarian police force loose on them. But would the Protestant women be justified in asking how a democratic agenda for the future can be reconciled with a Protestant unwillingness to accept Irish unity? (1995, p. 123)

Women in Coalition

Another option is for women to work in coalition to form a common agenda. This is the approach of community and women's groups who work together on many issues. These vary greatly in their approach to politics, and an exhaustive account is not possible here. The Women's Support Network (WSN), for example, is a coalition of women's groups from both Catholic and Protestant communities who came together in response to an 'increasingly hostile attitude within Urban District Councils in the Greater Belfast Area ... culminating in funding cuts on those which fell victim to the sectarian politics of influential Councillors' (Women's Support Network, 1996, p. 3). Specifically, funding for the Falls Women's Centre in West Belfast was cut and the Shankill Women's Centre responded by showing solidarity against the combined politics of misogynism and sectarianism.

WSN provides a forum for women's groups to work together on common issues with mutual support, and has also challenged central government priorities. In 1994 WSN argued that government Community Relations policy in practice excluded many women's groups by defining Community Relations narrowly as about projects which were cross-community in content as well as in process (1996). WSN argued for an extension of the definition to include groups whose focus was community development but whose processes were cross community. Ironically the gap in Community Relations funding continues despite the fact that many women's centres find themselves under threatening local pressure due to the effectiveness of their cross-community work.

An example of a coalition approach whose focus is expressly around the religious/political division is the *Women into Politics*

education programme run from Downtown Women's Centre. This seeks to provide discussion space for women to find out more about political processes and discuss political issues. This is one of the few women's groups which meet across the religious/political divide to discuss overtly party political issues, as well as issues affecting women. It defines politics broadly to include a spectrum of political activity rather than a purely party political approach, and in particular focuses on the processes and skills of political participation (or exclusion) as much as political structures.

The coalition approach goes to the heart of the debate raised at the start of this chapter, of how far women can or should try to form common agendas. This approach has been adopted with regard to the 'peace process' by the 'Women's Coalition' – a group of women who came together explicitly to fight the elections held in May 1996 for representation in the Forum (see Kilmurray and McWilliams, 1997, for an account of its beginnings). While a 'women's party' had been discussed for some time, its final formation was a pragmatic response to the Forum election, which was designed to make some provision for the smaller parties (apparently to ensure that the PUP and the UDP would be at the negotiating table). The final system guaranteed places for ten parties altogether, and given that the traditional parties and the UDP and PUP account for only eight, that left the Women's Coalition and a collection of other parties fighting for the two remaining places. With a vote of 7,731 (1.03 per cent) the Women's Coalition secured two places out of 110 seats at the Forum (where only 15 women were elected altogether) and perhaps more significantly were then able to field a team for the talks process.

The Women's Coalition was formed to raise the profile of women as representatives; indeed, it started with a concern to gender-proof the election process. It provides a working example of a coalition which seeks to go beyond the issues which women have in common, such as inadequate childcare, to articulating a women's approach to the process of negotiation itself. Thus one of its central policies has been a commitment to 'inclusion' – namely an undertaking to attend all political fora and argue that no group should be excluded and that dialogue should involve all. This is based on the idea that women too often have known what it is to be excluded and therefore should operate on a basis of inclusion. It involved them arguing against the exclusion of Sinn Fein after the breach of the IRA ceasefires, and against the exclusion of the UDP after acts of violence attributed to the UFF.

The Women's Coalition has been openly attacked in predictable ways by many of the mainstream parties. Paisley once derided that he represented more women than the Coalition. However, in this he misses the point. The mandate is not purely a numerical one, but one of a difference of approach. Although more women may have voted for Paisley and the DUP, it is possible to challenge exactly how those women are represented as women. In contrast, the Women's Coalition has always acknowledged that it could not begin to represent the diversity of women's political views, and indeed that it would be demeaning to women to suggest that any one party could, or that women should automatically support the Coalition. An assumption that any one party could represent all men is unthinkable.

From the start the Coalition generated some unease both from women who became involved in it and from those who stayed outside. The unease centred around the dilemma of how to work together without giving up strongly held political allegiances. How workable would it be to form policies as a diverse group of women? Would all policies which sought to go beyond a core agenda specifically focused on 'women's issues' simply be the lowest common denominator to which no one could wholeheartedly subscribe? From within the women's movement, the most publicly hostile reaction has been from Republican women. A group of Republican women posted an open letter to newspapers noting that the Women's Coalition did not represent them. Also, several articles focusing on the Coalition in *An Phoblacht*, and *Andersonstown News*, quoted Republican feminists as critical of the Coalition for being not feminist enough, and not centrally concerned with human rights. Underlying such criticisms was surely the Coalition's attempt to move forward on issues without taking a stance on the Constitutional issue. This presents women with a difficult choice as to whether to fight a common battle at the expense of gains within ideologies and parties. It is not surprising that the criticism was most strongly asserted by a group of women who have made some of the biggest gains in terms of their feminist agenda and their political grouping.

The difficulties for the Women's Coalition in the future are the continuing ones of how to build a common constituency which will not by degree exclude different groups of women. However, the greatest problem is perhaps one of time and resources wherein the women involved, many of whom were extremely active in women's movements before the formation of the Coalition, can stay in touch with the broader women's movement, which they

cannot claim to represent, but must nonetheless be accountable to. This must be done simultaneously with trying to make an impact among the other parties in the forum and negotiations, a difficult task in itself.

Women and 'Participative Democracy'

A final strategy for women, which receives little support or public discussion, is that of affirming and building on women's participation in institutions that take on the functions of democratic government, that is, both affirming the participation of women, and further democratising the institutions themselves by pushing for broad societal participation and accountability. Livingstone and Morison have recently argued that an ongoing constitutional revolution is taking place, whereby the traditional functions of government increasingly occur at arm's length through next-step agencies and quangos that lack accountability (1996). They argue that given it is, in all likelihood, impossible to push the clock back and undo these changes, new mechanisms of democratising these institutions need to be explored.

One possible approach is to examine how effective participation takes place in, for example, community structures, and examine how such participation could be enabled in other institutions. This process of democratisation is one which can include equality of participation for women. It is a difficult and multi-faceted approach. But it has the advantage of a feminist praxis which looks to see where women are involved in politics – usually at every level except in local parties – and then seeks to affirm that participation as equally valid as party political activity. While options like the Women's Coalition provide a forum for women who feel excluded by political processes, it may be that the processes of electing majorities is difficult to reform satisfactorily in the short term and may leave many sites of power untouched. Affirmation of participative democracy (see Chapter 13) seeks to diversify the notion of democracy from elections and representation, to one which recognises the different political contributions which actually take place, while trying to reform political institutions in the broader sense, to make them more democratic.

Livingstone and Morison have argued that Northern Ireland provides some initial examples of how the institutions of government can be democratised (1996). In practical terms groups are already working to this end, ensuring that government lives up to commitments it has made. The largest union in Northern Ireland, UNISON, and recently the Women's Support Network and the

Committee on the Administration of Justice, have explored this, most concretely through their work using government guidelines on Policy, Appraisal and Fair Treatment, to influence decision-making to take account of how it affects women and other marginalised groups (see *In Re Down and Lisburn Trust* 6 June 1995, Queens Bench Division (unreported)). Also, UNISON have used concepts of accountability under Partnerships formed to distribute European 'peace and reconciliation' moneys (also to operate within Policy Appraisal and Fair Treatment). The European-driven move to formal Partnerships as fund recipients and distributors provides potential for diversifying the make-up of decision-makers that may not have been possible in the formal representative system, for example through the reform of local councils.

Conclusion

The difficulty with phrases such as 'Women and the Peace Process' indicates deeper difficulties with notions of womanhood, notions of peace and notions of effective political participation. Northern Irish women are not unique in grasping this issue. Dealing with diversity while making progress is at the centre of women's movements in different countries, and also at the centre of international debates on women's rights. The Fourth World Conference on Women and Human Rights in Beijing illustrated the diversity of different women worldwide, the diversity of their political agendas and the friction which common action can cause. In Northern Ireland women are committed to working from a variety of different perspectives and strategies simultaneously, and I have sought in this chapter to give some examples. Although there is energetic (and sometimes personalised) debate among women as to which strategies are the most effective and which constitute trying to 'dismantle the Master's house using the Master's tools', there is also a core of support for the different strategies from a broad base of women. Differences over strategy are themselves differences which cannot be ignored.

As Audre Lourde has suggested, the strength of the women's movement will not be found in a measure of how it can set aside differences to better work together, but how it can harness the energy of those differences and provide a working example of how to deal with diversity. This can inform the present political processes. These processes typically focus on unionism, nation-

alism and paramilitary activity, each exclusive of women in different ways. The lesson from women is that the possibility of accommodation lies not in constructing a finely split compromise between unionism and nationalism in the hope that it depletes and eliminates, or co-opts, paramilitary support. Rather it lies in exploring the margins within each to find creative re-definitions of what lies at their core. Such re-definitions may provide for mutual accommodation of interests rather than an improbable compromise between political ideologies – unionism and nationalism – whose defining essence is their mutual difference.