

GENDER, NATION, CLASS: THE POLITICS OF DIFFERENCE IN NORTHERN IRELAND

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INTRODUCTION

Politics in Northern Ireland appears to move endlessly in a vicious circle, with the conflicting and irreconcilable objectives of Irish nationalism and union with Britain providing the momentum. The battle between the forces committed to these objectives has held the centre of the political stage in this small region for most of the twentieth century, taking a particularly violent and apparently insoluble form in the past 28 years with the revival of an armed republican movement intent on forcing Britain to accept Irish unity and independence, and the appearance of armed loyalist groups prepared to use all means necessary to prevent Britain from abandoning them. The divisions go so deep that it has even been difficult to find agreement on how the conflict, or the parties to it, might be described; for some, it is Britain versus Ireland, for others, terrorists versus democrats. Unionists in Northern Ireland see themselves as the 'majority', with certain rights automatically following from that in a democracy; republicans prefer to describe the unionists as a 'minority in the island of Ireland', with at best only limited rights which they might, in any case, have forfeited. These problems of definition can be illustrated by pointing to the different meanings attached to 'peace', a goal to which all groups claim to aspire. For most, 'true peace' can be distinguished from a mere absence of conflict; one group's 'peace' tends to mean another's 'surrender'.

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Of course, the image of two symmetrical communities, each lined up behind clearly-defined objectives, confronting each other over the single issue of whose rule will prevail in Northern Ireland, is misleading. Neither the catholic/nationalist nor the protestant/unionist community is homogeneous or unified; there are groups who refuse to be classified as belonging to either of the 'two communities'; and there is great ambiguity and confusion about the roles of the British and Irish governments. Allowing for this greater complexity, however, it is still the case that the conflict over nationhood absorbs the energy and attention of people in Northern Ireland to such an extent that representation of other issues or interests is inevitably shaped and limited by it. While most politically-involved people would have no difficulty with accepting that there are many divisions and differences in Northern Ireland, it is clear that only one difference is felt to have true political salience. This is a consequence not only of the fact that to great numbers of the population the 'national question' takes priority over other issues, but also of the political structures which focus attention narrowly upon the national/religious divide. Just as efforts to insert class-based politics into Northern Ireland's systems of representation have failed to undermine the dominance of parties founded upon nationalism or unionism, attempts to construct a politics based upon gender differences have encountered the constraints placed upon the representation of 'other' identities by the institutionalised politics of nationhood.

Even during the various phases of what has become known as the 'peace process', the prospects for the emergence of a more complex politics have not been encouraging. The paramilitary cease-fires seemed to indicate that substantial progress was being made towards the creation of institutions and procedures for political decision-making which would be acceptable to the leaders of the various groups of unionists and nationalists and have the support of British and Irish policy-makers. As the ending of the IRA cease-fire - and other set-backs - have shown, an acceptable accommodation over the constitutional future of Northern Ireland continues to be elusive, which means that other divisions, identities, inequalities and exclusions receive limited attention or interest. At various times since the British and Irish governments signalled publicly - in the Downing Street Declaration of December 1993 - that a search for compromise was underway, feminists and others interested in a wider definition of democracy have expressed frustration at the narrow range of interests and issues reflected by those participating in discussions about the political future of Northern Ireland. (Porter 1995) The difficulty has been to find ways of including women while allowing the differences among women to find expression.

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The history of feminism and women's rights activism in Northern Ireland has been marked by the effects of precisely this difficulty, a difficulty which has presented itself to women in many other places during every phase of feminist campaigning. Can women identify and organise around issues which affect them as women, which can be isolated from other issues or campaigns? How can women decide which oppressions or grievances take priority over others? Chantal Mouffe, commenting on essentialism and difference in contemporary politics, argues:

for we feminists committed to a political project whose aim is to struggle against the forms of subordination that exist in many social relations and not only in those linked to gender, an approach that permits us to understand how the subject is constructed through different discourses and subject positions is certainly more adequate than one that reduces our identity to one single position - be it class, race or gender.
(Mouffe 1993, p.87)

Mouffe is attempting to move away from what she regards as a futile debate within feminist writing on politics, in which there has been much agonising over how women can gain equality with men without either sacrificing their distinctive feminine qualities or - by transforming the system to acknowledge women's 'difference' - committing women indefinitely to a fixed and limited range of opportunities and identities. Like Anne Phillips and others, Mouffe finds the solutions offered by political theorists influenced by radical feminism unsatisfactory in many respects, not least because of the reductionist implications of the feminine identities presented by them. Those writers who try to express women's interests or to define feminine values which can transform the existing systems so that they become more responsive to women's needs risk trapping all women in positions which they find inhospitable. Discarding essentialist ideas of womanhood does not, however, mean the collapse of the possibility of feminist politics. It should lead to the creation of a politics which involves awareness of the multiplicity of forms of subordination, of the many possible ways in which feminist goals can be constructed, and which abandons the idea that there can be a 'true' feminism which corresponds to a 'real' essence of womanhood (Mouffe 1993).

The experiences of feminist campaigning within the context set by the conflicts between nationalism and unionism in Northern Ireland seem to

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show that there is validity in Mouffe's arguments, but also that the construction of such a politics is neither easy, nor, apparently, immediately advantageous. Already at the turn of the last century, politically aware women faced the requirement of articulating struggles for different political objectives when a women's suffrage campaign, modelled on the British movement, proposed that a 'votes for women' clause be added to the Home Rule Bill. Many nationalist women - and men - opposed this demand because they rejected the legitimacy of the state which could grant it. Subsequently, women in Ulster, seeing the possibility that the province might be treated differently, set up branches of the Women's Social and Political Union to put pressure on Unionist leaders, a development which nationalist women found objectionable (Ward 1983). The resolution of that phase of the conflict between nationalism, unionism and Britain was the creation of two separate states in Ireland. Women in the Irish Free State won the right to vote straight away, while Northern Ireland followed the slower track laid down in Westminster. In neither state, however, could women be said to have political influence commensurate with either their percentage of the population or their contribution to the movements which had fought for the union or for independence.

The compromise settlement by which Northern Ireland remained in the UK, although with a semi-autonomous government in Belfast, began to be undermined as a result of the Civil Rights movement which emerged in 1968 to protest against unfair treatment of the large Catholic minority population. Modelled upon the movement for Black civil rights in the US - and therefore by implication claiming to suffer similar levels of oppression - the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association was a coalition of moderate nationalists, socialists, republicans of various sorts, liberals and people with no previous political affiliations. Many young people, including students, attached themselves to the campaign, for the most part through the university-based People's Democracy movement, itself a rather unstructured grouping of radicals of various sorts, some of whom immediately identified with the amorphous wave of student and youth radicalism which had been sweeping over the US and Europe. In other countries, the new left and counter-cultural groups which emerged at this time gave birth to radical feminism, as women tried to take the revolutionary ideals to greater lengths than previously imagined. Such a movement was formed in Britain in 1970, and a lively feminist grouping appeared in the Irish Republic a little earlier, but in Northern Ireland the arrival of any variant of second-wave feminism was somewhat delayed. Many women participated in all the activities of the civil

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rights campaigns, but few felt able to turn the concern for rights to include gender issues (Roulston 1989).

The slow growth of interest in feminism should not surprise us given the events which followed from the civil rights campaigns; within a year the Northern Ireland government had lost control of public order, sectarian strife was revived with a vengeance, and a relaunched IRA had returned to armed struggle to complete the process of winning unity and independence for Ireland. Attitudes about women's roles and rights were also rather conservative. Women in Northern Ireland at this time were beginning to enjoy new educational and work opportunities, as the public sector expanded and new multi-national companies moved in to replace declining textile industries. The workforce was segregated along gender lines - as it was in Britain - and, also as in Britain, women's wages were lower than those of men. Because of high male unemployment in parts of the region, women were often the main family breadwinners, but also bore responsibility for domestic labour and childcare, in the absence of publicly-funded day-care. The Northern Ireland parliament at Stormont had autonomy in certain domestic matters and used its powers to uphold the religious convictions of both catholic and protestant members; abortion law reform, divorce reforms and the decriminalisation of male homosexuality were all blocked in the 1960s.

While unequal treatment of women did not attract much attention at this time, there was more space permitted to consider class issues, though these too tended to be subordinated to the national question. Women were active in trades unions and socialist groups; the People's Democracy became highly focused upon the need to 'unite Protestant and Catholic workers'.

The contrast between the potential for raising class as opposed to gender issues can be illustrated by a brief consideration of the career of Bernadette Devlin (later McAliskey). A prominent member of the People's Democracy, unafraid to address public meetings or demonstrations, Bernadette Devlin was passionately concerned to combat power inequalities arising from inequalities of wealth. In the political turmoil of 1969, she was nominated as the 'nationalist unity' candidate for mid-Ulster, following the death of the sitting Unionist MP. As the constituency had a catholic majority, she had achieved a rare feat in securing nomination for what was virtually a safe seat, which had been won by Unionists as a result of nationalist divisions over strategy. There was criticism from both traditional nationalists who were unimpressed by Bernadette Devlin's radicalism and from socialists who

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disliked the elevation of nationalism in the campaign, but in a poll with a 92% turnout, she won the seat with a majority of over 4,000 votes (Flackes and Elliot 1994). Her opponent, in what was a most important seat for the Unionists, was also a woman - the widow of the former MP - but although much was made of Devlin's youth and radicalism the campaign and the surrounding publicity did not produce much discussion of women's rights or opportunities. Subsequently, both critics and supporters of Bernadette Devlin commented on her transgressive or heroic escape from traditional gender roles, presenting her as an exceptional woman; she herself did not become associated with any women's groups until somewhat later in her career.

Many women were drawn into activism, as Bernadette Devlin had been, by the civil rights campaigns and the subsequent events. When internment was introduced to deal with the republican campaign, in 1971, women from catholic communities organised resistance groups. Women in both catholic and protestant areas also mobilised against paramilitary violence on occasions, as peace became viewed as a particular responsibility of women. Many women became involved in protests against poverty and poor housing. In such campaigns, women seemed to act as the guardians of family life and in the interests of the community rather than as fighters for women's benefit. Women, especially mothers, were seen as having a unique insight into the needs of the community and a special role to play in protecting or promoting its interests (Buckley and Lonergan 1984). Such movements have reappeared frequently over the past twenty-five years, often initiated by women within a particular community, then taken up and transformed by other organisations or individuals. (The Peace People and the Relatives Action Campaign for prisoners are two very different examples of this process.) The mobilisation of women had often been based on appeals to their responsibilities in and for the family rather than by appealing to their individual needs or interests.

Against this background of community organisation, and drawing upon a tradition of trade union agitation for women's rights, some more self-conscious women's groups began to appear in the 1970s. The first group formed was based in a working-class community, Belfast's Ormeau Road. Still maintaining a focus on community needs, this group used humour and imagination to campaign against poor housing conditions in the area and against the poverty suffered by its inhabitants. Highlighting women's needs and calling for women to be consulted on matters such as housing and welfare, they opened a space for women's activism where others hurried to join them (Belfrage 1988). In 1974, a consciousness-raising group involving women from the New University of Ulster and from the nearby town of

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Coleraine was set up, and soon became a campaigning as well as a discussion group, focusing public attention on the existence of domestic violence against women and on the related problems of lone mothers (Ward 1987). Their campaigns sparked off a response to domestic violence from women throughout Northern Ireland; within a short time, a Northern Ireland Women's Aid Federation was formed, lobbying for law reform to protect the victims of violent male partners and providing emergency assistance to women seeking refuge from abuse.

Gradually, then, the ideas of second-wave feminism became attractive to some groups of women, predominantly in urban, academic, politically active circles. The evidence of the growing interest in feminism - consciousness-raising groups, well-attended seminars and discussions - inspired some to attempt a more formal structure for political engagement. In 1975, the Northern Ireland Women's Rights Movement was founded. The initial impetus came from some women members of the Communist Party of Ireland, who wanted to take advantage of the publicity surrounding the opening of the UN Decade for Women to create a movement in Northern Ireland. Other founder members included women from the Civil Rights Association (which continued to exist in an attenuated form), trade union activists, women who belonged to the section of the Republican movement which had rejected the Provisional IRA's strategy and individual women interested in feminism. At the outset, it was hoped that the Women's Rights Movement might become the nucleus of a mass movement of working-class women as well as 'middle-class feminists'; for some of those involved, the creation of the Movement was an end in itself, offering opportunities for involvement as much as specific reforms. However, the structure envisaged was a rather bureaucratic model of a federation of women's groups and sympathetic affiliated organisations, which did not fit happily with the image of liberation in the minds of some of those involved in the founding conference. The promise of this early phase of feminist organisation was not realised; the mass movement of women was not achieved. What has emerged, over the past twenty years, has been likened to a 'wheel with spokes but no hub'. There are now hundreds of women's groups of various types and sizes throughout Northern Ireland, relating to each other through multiple, unstructured networks (Evason 1991). These groups are working without the benefit of the common structures or agreed agendas imagined by those who came together to found a feminist movement in 1975; the original group succumbed to divisions over certain key issues, among which the troubled question of nationalism became the central one.

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Feminism in any context involves the construction of analyses, interpretations and strategies which, while having the stated objective of drawing women together to oppose oppression, in practice serve to highlight differences. In attempting to speak with authority, feminist writers and campaigners have, inevitably, presented definitions of oppression or liberation which were received with resentment or hostility by many women. The very process of deciding who and what a movement is for involves processes of inclusion and exclusion, which immediately give rise to competition among different versions of 'true' feminism and to the alienation of many of the women presumed to be likely supporters. Almost as soon as the Women's Rights Movement was formed, splits emerged which resulted in the creation of a new, alternative group, which in turn gave rise to further fragmentation. At first there appeared to be a high degree of consensus that the priority was to draw up a programme which would reflect the needs of and be attractive to working-class women; initial demands and statements displayed a socialist-feminist orientation. The structure of the movement, however, quickly gave rise to concern among those members who regarded autonomous action by women as a priority and therefore found unacceptable the possibility that affiliated trade unions might send a male delegate to certain meetings. On this issue no acceptable compromise could be found; once this debate opened, unhappiness with the entire structure came to the fore. After a general meeting where the majority had voted in favour of the existing arrangements, a small group left to form an alternative centre for feminist organisation, the Socialist Women's Group. As often happens, following the split other differences became more exaggerated, with the Socialist Women's Group becoming identified as 'more feminist' than the Women's Rights Movement. The latter were at first hesitant about supporting calls for abortion law reform in Northern Ireland, for example, which brought some criticism from members of the Socialist Women's Group.

Within a relatively short time, the two groups began to diverge on the issue of how feminists should best respond to the conflicts over the future of Northern Ireland which divided men and women in the community. Within each of the two feminist groups there were differences; the Women's Rights Movement, having a somewhat broader appeal, included women who were sympathetic to both nationalist and unionist views, women who saw themselves as not aligned with either side and women who took the view that violence could not be justified in any circumstances. Reversing the radical feminist slogan 'the personal is political', the Women's Rights Movement agreed that opinions about the politics of nationalism or unionism should be a private matter which would not be allowed to lead to conflict within the

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women's movement. This was an echo of the 'leave your politics at the door' approach employed by the trade union movement (Goldring 1991); it did not easily transfer into the arena of feminism, which, after all, tends to require radical critiques of the political structures of any society. Although there were good reasons for this neutral attitude, it had the effect of suppressing rather than resolving differences among members, and it seemed to encourage the belief that women were not or should not be concerned with the conflict in Northern Ireland. In effect, women's issues were to be separated from, and elevated over, other political involvements or identities (Loughran 1986; Roulston 1989).

This non-position was rejected by the Socialist Women's Group. In their turn, however, they encountered difficulties in reconciling the different variants of feminism, socialism and republicanism contained within their small group. While they all, to a greater or lesser extent, accepted that the fundamental cause of women's oppression in both parts of Ireland was British imperialism and that 'true liberation' could come only in a united, socialist Ireland, this did not provide an automatic guide to practical policies. For some, the logical consequence was to become feminist-republican, which meant accepting the aims of the republican movement while attempting to win support for feminist politics within that sector of the population. Other members had reservations about sacrificing autonomy to a male-dominated leadership which was militaristic and elitist. Eventually, the pressure of these differences caused the Socialist Women's Group to dissolve into different groups, one of which attempted to maintain a position which would be women-centred but not follow the path of the Women's Rights Movement. The tensions inherent in this effort eventually led to the disintegration of this group, with former members preferring to work on single-issue campaigns. Even these were not immune from occasional outbreaks of disagreement over the priority to be given to nationalist or republican objectives.

OBSTACLES TO COOPERATION

Trying to maintain a common feminist purpose in the midst of all these quarrels, a number of groups convened a series of 'unity' meetings with the aim of building campaigns around issues on which there was at least some agreement. From 1978, these were well attended, and were successful in bringing together community-based groups from working-class areas of Belfast, which then set up their own co-ordinating network to share resources and exchange information. This Women's Information Group is one of the

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survivors from that era, supporting the emergence of women's groups and centres in many working-class areas all over Northern Ireland.

This attempt to draw the various elements of the women's movement together was undermined by the disputes over the escalating campaign for political status for republican prisoners. 'Special category status' for those convicted of terrorist offences was withdrawn in 1976; from that date all prisoners were to be treated as ordinary criminals, wearing prison uniform, refused permission to associate with others from their organisation and expected to do prison work alongside other prisoners. Resistance to this policy was immediate (in both loyalist and republican communities), both inside the prisons and on the streets. Outside the prisons, in republican areas, a Relatives Action Campaign was set up. Involving as it did many women, this campaign attracted the support of the republican-feminists who had left the Socialist Women's Group to form a new group, Women Against Imperialism. Within the prisons, resistance to the new regime at first took the form of refusal to wear prison clothes or to leave cells to work. The determination of the authorities to impose the policy meant that all protests were dealt with harshly, with the result that, by 1980, prisoners were confined to cells, wearing blankets and refusing to wash (Clark 1987). When some IRA women prisoners joined the protest, they were supported by Women Against Imperialism, who came to the unity meetings to seek support from other feminists. They argued that not only was the protest itself just, but that the women prisoners were specifically harassed in a misogynist fashion by prison officers through repeated strip-searching and, during the protests, refusal to supply sanitary protection. This call for support was received with mixed feelings by other groups, even by those who sympathised with the republican cause. After much agonising on the issue, the Women's Rights Movement decided not to have a policy on political status, but to have a general discussion on women in prison with the aim of drawing up a reform programme. This was unsuccessful. When the IRA initiated a hunger-strike in the prisons, in 1981, which ended only after ten prisoners had died of starvation, the unity meetings became extremely acrimonious. Those who wanted support for the prisoners and their families were angry at the lack of response from other feminists, many of whom felt powerless to act, disagreeing with the government's actions, but unwilling to join a campaign which was so overtly republican (Loughran 1986; Ward 1987). The echoes of these bitter arguments were still heard in 1985 at a conference convened to mark the end of the UN Decade for Women (Ward 1987); since then, it has been possible to discuss differences more calmly. The differences, however, remain and have been an obstacle to cooperation among feminist groups on various occasions. If anything, there is more

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fragmentation as awareness of feminism and women's rights has become more widespread and women's groups have emerged in loyalist communities. Among some of these groups and among the population of Northern Ireland generally there are also strong reservations about the term 'feminist' itself, with feminists being assumed to be middle-class, self-interested, too radical and, sometimes, too sympathetic to republicans (Miller et al 1996).

NEW OPPORTUNITIES?

Nevertheless, there is an identifiable women's movement in Northern Ireland, however amorphous or lacking in common purpose it may be. It exists in women's centres and community groups, in domestic violence campaigns and lobbying forums. The groups are strongly integrated into the remarkable network of voluntary organisations which have been a feature of activism and policy-making in Northern Ireland under Direct Rule, compensating for what has become known as 'the democratic deficit'. This voluntary participation is viewed by some as a possible basis for the creation of a new type of citizenship which will be essential to the emergence of successful new political structures (Wilson 1996). It is not self-evident, however, that women will benefit from new structures in proportion to their efforts over the past twenty years, for although there have been improvements in women's lives they are still, as one report concluded, 'mending a lot of pots' rather than designing the pots themselves (Meehan 1996).

In the 1990s, women in Northern Ireland enjoy some of the benefits of a growing awareness of gender inequalities while they suffer the effects of economic decline and the persistence of ideologies which serve to exclude women from power or control. Women have entered the spheres of paid employment and community work in great numbers, but there are few women in leadership roles, with the exception of the voluntary sector. In 1960, fewer than 30% of married women worked outside the home, and only 12% of mothers with pre-school children were in paid employment. By 1990, the figures had become 60% and 43% respectively. Women's careers are still restricted by factors such as the lack of affordable child care, the 'poverty trap', and sexism, but it is clear that more and more women are aware of their rights and are using the law and the Equal Opportunities Commission to demand them (Kramer and Montgomery 1993). The Equal Opportunities Commission and the associated legislation on equal opportunities and sex discrimination were introduced in the 1970s under Direct Rule, by order-in-council; no-one is entirely confident that a devolved government would be

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automatically disposed to concern itself with gender issues unless subjected to sustained pressure.

That lack of confidence in local political leaders is based on the evidence of the slow pace of change in the world of electoral and party politics. There are no women party leaders, and no women members of the parliament at Westminster, and nor are there likely to be in the near future. Northern Ireland sends three representatives to the European parliament, all men and likely to be still all men at the time of the next elections. By comparison, in the Irish Republic there are four women out of a total of fifteen Members of the European parliament, 13% of members of Dail Eireann are women and women hold some of the key offices of state, including Minister of Justice and, of course, President. Of the 26 local councils in Northern Ireland, three have no women members at all and overall only 12% of councillors are women. Some of the major parties have also expressed reservations about the continuation of the policy influences of voluntary sector groups (Meehan 1996), raising fears for the future.

The women's movement has had some impact upon the parties, however. In the early 1980s, some republican feminists joined Sinn Fein, which was at that time creating a Women's Department. By the early 1990s, Sinn Fein's Women's Department had become very effective on certain issues. Women's centres in catholic working-class areas have been opened, traditional catholic attitudes to sexual preference, divorce and contraception - though not abortion - have been challenged and a quota to ensure that women are represented in the policy-making bodies of the party has been introduced. It is clear, however, that while the Women's Department has great autonomy to influence and develop policy on women's issues, women members have been less influential in the making of policy on the broader set of issues concerning the resolution of the conflict between unionism and nationalism, Britain and Ireland. While the Sinn Fein leadership has made a point of including some women in the delegations to take part in talks and negotiations during the current 'peace process', these women delegates have been remarkably silent during press conferences and give the appearance of being relatively junior. The larger nationalist party, the SDLP, in 1995 declared that it would develop a quota system to include women in its executive bodies. One of the small loyalist parties which have come to the fore since the loyalist paramilitary cease-fires - the Progressive Unionist party - has also declared a commitment to encourage women's participation.

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Perhaps the most exciting development has been the creation of a Women's Coalition, which put up candidates for the election of delegates to the newly created Forum and all-party peace talks process. The Coalition was created at an open meeting to which women's groups and individual women were invited; women representing diverse interests and opinions from all over Northern Ireland attended and decided that the elections presented an opportunity to draw attention to the under-representation of women in the political discussions about the future of Northern Ireland. Like the early Women's Rights Movement, the Coalition includes nationalist, unionist, socialist, unaligned and agnostic women. Now, however, they are prepared to acknowledge and address the divided loyalties which women have experienced. This has meant that agreement on contentious issues has had to be worked out; the Coalition has expressed support for inclusion of all parties in the talks - which some unionists disagree with - and has called for a restoration of the IRA ceasefire, therefore implicitly criticising Sinn Fein. They have 'agreed not to be rushed on sensitive issues', but accept that 'they should not shy away from political and sectarian problems' (Cummins 1996).

The Coalition is attempting to draw together a number of problems and hoping that they can achieve a pluralist structure, where what is agreed upon becomes more important than what is not accepted. Some members and supporters are attracted to them because they feel that there are feminine values and methods which could make a difference if they were introduced into the presently masculine world of Northern Irish politics. From this point of view, women are seen as inherently more accommodating or conciliatory than men. Other supporters are unsure about this, but are hoping that the presence of the Women's Coalition in the current process will ensure that new political structures will take account of the existence of differences other than religion or national affiliation. This concern for the future has been expressed by women of all opinions in a series of conferences which have taken place since 1994. Women from the republican tradition in a conference to draw up a women's agenda for peace expressed reservations about the direction of the peace process and criticisms of the lack of transparency in the Sinn Fein leadership's approach. They were particularly concerned about the lack of consultation of women members and women in the community about the issues which should be highlighted in negotiations. Many women from other traditions have expressed similar concerns, though they would not agree that British withdrawal should be high on the agenda for women. At a Conference in 1995, convened to discuss the Framework Document issued by the British and Irish governments, to which women from all political traditions were invited, many areas of agreement were found especially on

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the need to bring women into policy-making institutions, but on broader political questions there was limited consensus (Porter 1995).

The electoral system adopted for the Forum elections was designed to ensure that smaller parties would be represented at the talks. The Women's Coalition, with just over 1% of the poll (7,731 votes), managed to take two seats, giving them a place in the all-party talks. They are the only elected women party members at the talks process, though the existence of the Coalition did have the positive effect of encouraging other parties to be more aware of gender issues. In all, only 15 women were elected to the 110-member Forum from all parties. Not all feminists or activists for women's rights would have voted for the Coalition. Chrissie McAuley argued that 'there is no better place for a woman to be than Sinn Fein' (Sharrock 1996). Obviously, many women in loyalist communities felt the same way about the Progressive Unionist party, there are feminists who see their best contribution as being made in the Alliance Party, the SDLP and in some of the smaller socialist parties. Extending the pluralist principles of the Women's Coalition to draw in some or all of these women will be a great challenge to be faced if women's interests are to be considered in the lengthy process of creating a new system of government for Northern Ireland. What has become clear, after over 20 years of feminist organisation, is that alliances have to be constructed. It cannot be assumed that women will automatically converge to act upon those problems which they have in common if by doing so they risk losing the possibility of a voice on other matters.

Much will depend on the systems for representation which are introduced. Bhikhu Parekh has argued that 'multi-cultural, multi-ethnic societies need to develop new models of political universalism that both respect deep differences and ensure equal citizenship' (Parekh 1995). Experience has shown that certain differences are more likely to be overlooked than others. Because of prevailing ideologies as well as unequal distribution of resources, gender is one of the differences which tends to be ignored in Northern Ireland. While the history of feminist organisation shows the dangers of expecting women to sacrifice all other identities in favour of feminism, there are perhaps more risks in failing to give gender inequalities the priority they deserve.

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