

INCLUSIVE OTHERS: THE NORTHERN IRELAND WOMEN'S COALITION IN THE PEACE PROCESS

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STILL HOLDING OUR BREATH ...

Several months after the signing of the Northern Ireland Peace Agreement, its endorsement in the historic referendums in both states and the successful election and opening of the new Assembly, the majority of citizens still do not seem disposed to celebrate. There is certainly widespread acknowledgement of how momentous all these events have been. Arriving in Northern Ireland to oversee the final stages in the completion of the Northern Ireland Peace Agreement, Prime Minister Blair spoke of feeling 'the hand of history on our shoulders'. During those days, all of Northern Ireland seemed to hold its breath, witnessing events which might allow us to begin to put behind us almost thirty years of civil strife, but which might also have resulted in failure, deadlock and continued conflict. In the event, on 10 April 1998, we took a step forward. Even among supporters of the Agreement, however, the prevailing mood as the months have gone by has been one of watchful optimism, a sense that while a significant milestone has been passed and a return to the worst violence of the Troubles seems less likely, there is still a long way to go before we really have peace.

Clearly, the caution that tempers optimism has been justified by the experience of setbacks to, and the awareness of obstacles in the way of, the peace process. The vociferous and sustained opposition of a substantial minority of Unionists and the persistence of paramilitary groups determined to use violence to resolve differences have been sources of anxiety. There have been extremely shocking events over the past few months, reminiscent

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of the darkest periods of the thirty years of civil strife, which have brought a sense of despair. There have been many reminders, too, of the fragile nature of the Agreement itself and of the unsteady nature of the alliances which brought it into being. The discord over the parades issue, the disquiet surrounding discussions about reforming the police force, rumbling disputes over decommissioning of paramilitary weapons and the stalled progress on creating the new Executive and cross-border institutions have all pointed to the extent to which politics in Northern Ireland is still marked by mutual hostility and suspicion. Several months on, we still need pressure and mediation from Westminster, Dublin, Washington and Brussels in order to keep making progress.

It has become established wisdom, of course, since the late 1980s, that expressing and managing hostile attitudes, insecurities and perceptions of grievance are essential elements of peace strategies. For many years, as several analysts and commentators have pointed out, public activities of various types in Northern Ireland have been marked by deliberate avoidance of discussion of contentious matters or differences. (Morrow and Wilson 1996; Cockburn 1998; Goldring 1991). There have been good reasons for this: fear of giving offence, of being misunderstood or mislabelled, of attracting unwelcome attention. Above all, this 'leave your politics at the door' approach was deemed necessary to the continuation of a reasonably normal life, allowing work and other activities to go on as far as possible uninterrupted. Increasingly, however, such self censorship has been judged to have contributed to the perpetuation of the conflict. However painful it may be, explicit discussion of differences, grievances and divisions is now seen as an essential prerequisite for moving beyond sectarianism and intolerance. As threats of violence have receded, it has become more possible for individuals and groups to speak out about what they resent or fear, what they have lost or are determined not to lose. As Eyben et al (1997, p.4) point out, in the short term such openness can increase hostility and anxiety. There appears to be an extension of the agenda of contentious issues, giving an impression of more rather than less conflict between the two major traditions since the signing of the Agreement. Continuing the process requires the creation of new - inclusive - rules for public discourse at all levels, which in turn requires paying attention to the insecurities and disappointments experienced by sections of both nationalist and unionist communities. This means that external mediation will continue to be called upon, as it is difficult to expect the parties in the Assembly to remove all obstacles to progress, especially as some parties are keen to install them. It also means that politics in Northern Ireland are still carried on, in some respects anyway, as a zero-sum game between unionist and nationalist camps. Indeed, the very rules of the process

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require that 'sufficient consensus' must be forthcoming from parties identified as belonging to those two traditions, leaving cross-community parties (registered in the Assembly as 'others') on the margins as far as certain vital issues are concerned.

WOMEN, POLITICS AND SOCIETY IN NORTHERN IRELAND

As many commentators have pointed out (Wilford 1996; Patterson 1989) the conflict over national identities and allegiances in Northern Ireland, with its dimension of sectarian aggression, tended to reinforce the desire for community solidarity, and therefore politics based on other identities have struggled for space. Feminist writers have long argued that in particular 'patriarchal' ideologies were more difficult to challenge in such a context. 'The traditional link between nationalisms (both orange and green) and their respective churches has ensured that the ultra-conservative view of women as both the property of, and the inferior of, men, remains strongly entrenched in Irish society' (McWilliams 1993). There have, of course, been changes in women's lives and opportunities in recent years, influenced by feminist activism, wider economic transformations and European developments. The position of women is by no means uniformly subordinate nor entirely restricted to the domestic sphere. Since the 1960s, the numbers of women with children in the workforce has increased threefold, despite the very poor provision of childcare in Northern Ireland. There is still a marked sexual division in employment patterns, resulting in women being concentrated in a small number of - usually - lower-paid occupations. Women are, however, increasingly likely to take action, through bodies such as the Equal Opportunities Commission or trades unions, to seek redress for discrimination or harassment.

If, by the 1990s, it was accepted that women had a place in the world of paid work, the same could not be said for that of mainstream politics. Of the 18 MPs sent to Westminster or the 3 Members of the European Parliament, none are women, nor are there any women candidates likely to be elected in the near future. In the 1994 European elections there were 4 women candidates, including Mary Clarke-Glass, former chair of the Equal Opportunities Commission for Northern Ireland who stood for the Alliance party. Her share of the poll was 4.1%, representing a small decline on previous Alliance performances. In local government, councils have had few powers but some of them include 'women's concerns' such as playgrounds and environmental issues. Of 26 local councils, 3 have no women members, 9 have only one woman member and, overall, 12.4% of councillors are women (Roulston 1996). Some of the political parties, including the SDLP, Sinn Fein, the

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recently-formed loyalist Progressive Unionist Party and the Alliance party, began, in the 1980s, to construct programmes for increasing women's representation on executive committees and in lists of candidates, but, as the parties prepared to begin a new round of political talks in 1995, women were very far from having significant influence or being close to leadership positions.

Yet, large numbers of women have for many years involved themselves in the work of grass-roots and voluntary sector campaigns, often unrecognised and unrewarded. The governing of Northern Ireland through executive action, the limited democratic accountability and the continuing violent conflict compelled both men and women, especially from socially excluded groups, to find alternative ways of influencing policy decisions. Networks of community-based and voluntary organisations were created, pursuing goals of community improvement and dialogue across religious and political difference. One of the most striking features of women and politics in Northern Ireland has been the extent to which women's participation and representation has taken place within such community-based groups.

In fact, as many commentators noted, women were the mainstay of a majority of voluntary organisations and community groups (Hinds 1998), including those which were concerned with goals which would benefit the public in general rather than women in particular. There was a huge gulf between this community leadership and the narrow exclusive world of party politics in Northern Ireland. While, increasingly, women's development was regarded as essential for community development in general, it appeared often to be seen as a means of allowing women to become a 'resource', an influence for stability, rather than to encourage women to participate on equal terms in the formulation of goals and strategies for the community. Women's groups in working-class communities find themselves required to direct their attention towards a wide range of activities, including childcare, adult education classes, youth work and other support services. The preferred objectives and outcomes, then, would be those that benefited families and the community in general, an extension of women's domestic, caring responsibilities.

Nevertheless, it is clear that such groups, even given these constraints, opened up possibilities for women to change and improve their conditions of life. For many of those involved, the experience of such activism has been positive. As the principal vehicle for women's participation in Northern Ireland, they have provided a means by which women's interests and needs can be articulated and in which differences among women can be expressed and negotiated. This community-based channel of participation, by men as well as women, was seen by many as the basis for a revived civil society in Northern Ireland,

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which would be essential for future political stability, and as an important part of the process of achieving a durable settlement. Ruth Lister, for example, saw the work of groups in working-class communities as being 'of value not only for its tangible achievements and outputs, but also for the less tangible impact it has on deprived communities and, potentially, the wider body politic'. In her view, the work of the community groups would be part of an essential process of reconciliation and reconstruction, making a potentially important contribution to the 'search for a settlement and the process of reconstruction which would need to follow' (Lister 1996).

From 1993, when it became clear that the Irish and British governments were firmly committed to renewed efforts to open political dialogue, some groups of women activists began to feel alarmed at the possibility that new political structures would be created which once again focused on unionist and nationalist identities and interests, at the expense of other needs and allegiances. With the cease-fires in place, as it became clear that a new round of inter-party talks, with some chance of greater success, was about to be launched, groups of women who had been active in a variety of organisations decided to take positive action. Two related aims motivated their initiatives: first, to ensure that women were not pushed to the sidelines, and second, to bring the experiences of the voluntary and community sector in general into the reviving peace process. Conferences and meetings were convened by women active in many different sectors attempting to find ways in which women could articulate their aspirations, needs and ideas without having to sacrifice their concerns as members of one or other community in order to speak as women. Many proposals for new strategies and structures - citizens' juries, second chambers, dual-member constituencies - which would 'allow organisations across all sectors to interact with the political system in a respected manner' (Hinds 1998) were put forward. But in practical terms the gap between formal politics and women's concerns appeared as wide as ever.

A WINDOW OF OPPORTUNITY

It was, ironically, a serious stalling of the peace process which offered an opportunity for women to make their way to the peace talks table. Early in 1996, the British Conservative government, under pressure from the Ulster Unionist party, announced that participation in the multi-party peace talks would be decided through elections to a Northern Ireland Forum. This decision was very unwelcome to the majority of nationalists, men and women; however, as this course appeared to be inevitable, some of the women's groups began to look for ways to improve the gender balance in electoral politics. One of the women's networks (the NI Women's European

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Platform) produced a paper on 'genderproofing' the elections, and the talks. They were unhappy that the government's briefing papers appeared to envisage a narrow range of political parties being in the talks, identified in relation to the unionist/nationalist divide, and drew attention yet again to the likelihood of women's perspectives being left out. An electoral system was in fact devised which would increase the likelihood of the parties linked to loyalist paramilitaries being elected. A modified version of a regional party list system, it increased the chances of other so-called fringe parties winning enough votes to be at the talks. Officials drawing up the lists of parties enquired of NIWEP whether a women's party would be standing for election. After some frantic consultation, at a hastily convened meeting of community activists, trades unionists and individuals, on 17 April 1996, it was decided to form a women's party to contest the elections: the NI Women's Coalition was born.

Agreeing to put a party name on a ballot-paper, of course, is a long way from creating a party or building support. Could the Women's Coalition avoid the pitfalls that had trapped earlier attempts to create a unified women's movement and attract support from all sectors of women? And would gender issues ever attract interest let alone votes in the world of Northern Irish politics, where the major political cleavage was based on national identity? As one feminist political theorist observed, 'nothing is more important than achieving a workable, peaceful political settlement. Hence, it may seem to some political scientists, politicians or citizens of NI, a political luxury or irrelevance to be thinking about the political representation of women' (Porter 1998). There was certainly a great deal of scepticism, criticism and even hostility from many women as well as men. The women's movement in Northern Ireland had been divided at many points over the years by conflicts over national identities (Roulston 1997; Sales 1997), and so it was hard to see how the Women's Coalition would be more successful. Indeed, some women's community groups publicly distanced themselves from or challenged the Women's Coalition. For some, the elections themselves were discredited; for others there was a fear that the Coalition would be unable to find policies which would truly represent the majority of women. Putting gender issues first, they reasoned, would inevitably mean having little of value to say on the wider questions of the constitution (Jacobson 1997; Cockburn 1998). Such views were echoed by women in the other political parties. While some welcomed the ways in which the Coalition was drawing attention to the small numbers of women in political life, in general they argued that women could be effective in politics only through working in the existing parties (Fearon 1996).

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As it turned out, the experiences of women working together at community level proved significant enough to overcome the doubts of sufficient numbers of people. A strong list of candidates was selected within weeks - indicating that there was no shortage of women prepared to engage in politics - and an electoral platform which could fuse ideas about women's representation with ideas about political dialogue was drawn up. The campaign - predictably enough run with the minimum of funds - attempted to combine humour and drama with serious political commentary: the key slogan was 'Say goodbye to the dinosaurs!'. With 7,731 votes, the Women's Coalition came ninth of the ten parties elected to the forum under the somewhat bizarre electoral system, and was therefore permitted to send two delegates to the multi-party Talks. In spite of the fact that a party list system had been used for the elections, there were still relatively few women elected to the Northern Ireland Forum - 15 out of 110 members. At first, the Women's Coalition members were the only women in the party delegations to the talks process. Other parties sent women as part of the back-up teams, and, when Sinn Fein joined the talks in 1997, they included a woman in their team. Sinn Fein, however, were excluded from the opening of the Talks because of the ending of the IRA cease-fire in February 1996. For a year after the elections, little progress was made on political dialogue within the Talks. However, the Women's Coalition was able to play a part in creating structures and frameworks for proceeding to an agreement, and to build its own support and policy-making structures. When the IRA cease-fire was resumed, and Sinn Fein re-entered the talks, the Women's Coalition delegates, and their back-up team, had already found a distinctive voice in which to deliver some clear messages.

PROMOTING DIALOGUE, PROMOTING INCLUSION

The Women's Coalition was one of only three parties elected to the Talks and the Forum which could claim to have 'cross-community' membership and support. The Alliance party, formed in the 1970s, aimed to find common ground among Catholics and Protestants and to find structures which would ensure the protection of minority rights within whatever kind of state might exist in Northern Ireland. The other was the Labour Coalition, an alliance of members of some of the existing left-wing parties, which was also formed shortly before the elections in an attempt to ensure that class issues and social inequalities would not be neglected in the Talks. Like the women's movement, the labour movement in Northern Ireland has suffered division and disarray as its potential members found it difficult to give priority to their interests as workers over their identities as unionists or nationalists. The Women's Coalition had something in common with both these parties, but differed from them, not only in its attentiveness to gender inequalities, but

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also in the insights it brought and the approach it took to the problem of creating solidarity across difference. These insights came from the experiences of women (and men) in community-based groups building alliances and working for common purposes despite deep and sincerely-held political, national or religious differences. They also came from some of the reflections of feminist writers from South Africa, Sri Lanka, Russia and the Middle East, as well as Europe and the USA on the 'ethnocentrism' and even racism which had been built into second-wave feminism. So, the Women's Coalition had learned that common purposes must come out of respect for and acceptance of differences, rather than from expecting people to be prepared to transcend or disavow community identities. From its inception, the Women's Coalition has tried to adopt an approach of principled dialogue and accommodation, both within the party and in its relationships with other parties and political actors.

Within the party, this has involved a series of meetings and discussions where all points of view are genuinely listened to with respect and where agreement on policies and principles is arrived at through attempts to understand opposing positions. The methods used have been described in terms which are very similar to the ideal of 'transversal politics', discussed by Nira Yuval-Davies (1997). Women building alliances across national conflicts need to feel that their identity as part of one or other national group will be respected, but at the same time be prepared to attend to the perspectives and experiences of others. To be successful, such dialogues need to identify core values and principles, which the NI Women's Coalition also had to attend to (Porter 1998; Hinds 1998). Agreements were reached step-by-step, with difficult issues given longer time in order to keep the process going. There was a commitment to respect for human rights and civil liberties, to aiming for social equality and to justice. Running through all these values and practices was a common theme of regard for a process which allowed all voices to be heard and for all to be facilitated to speak.

Translated into the hard realities of Northern Irish politics, this meant that the Women's Coalition consistently - and often solely - called for the inclusion of all parties in the Talks process, without preconditions. This meant calling for the admittance of Sinn Fein before an IRA cease-fire and arguing against the expulsion of Loyalist parties when their paramilitary cease-fires were breached. It also meant continually calling for an end to paramilitary violence and demanding that the parties linked to paramilitary groups demonstrate their willingness to achieve an end to violence. To many unionists, the Women's Coalition appeared to be supporting a republican agenda, to be part of the 'pan-nationalist alliance' which they feared was winning a lot of ground. To republicans, the Women's Coalition often seemed to be calling for

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'surrender' and to be working for a restoration of devolved government which would be compatible with unionist aims. Again, on the issue of reform of the police force, or the release of paramilitary prisoners, the Women's Coalition had to find workable policies that would encourage accommodation and keep the process going. As Yuval-Davis observed, this has not been a smooth, painless process whose outcomes could be predicted in advance. It has required long meetings, consultations, facilitations, drafting and redrafting of position papers and many arguments.

External pressures did not always make confidence-building within the Coalition any simpler. In common with other cross-community parties, as the multi-party Talks continued, through continual crises and deadlocks, the Women's Coalition negotiators faced many occasions on which their policies were misunderstood or misrepresented. Any group or party which came into the public arena throughout the history of Northern Ireland, but especially over the years since 1968/9, has had to face the challenge: where do you stand on the question of Northern Ireland's statehood? Are you for the union with Britain or for a united Ireland? Standing up as representatives of women also brought a very sexist response from some of the more insecure men in mainstream parties. In the meetings of the Forum, in particular, the Coalition representatives faced a considerable barrage of sexist abuse.

The Coalition was in fact trying to find a new kind of answer to the questions that dominated Northern Irish politics. In effect, they were arguing that these were out-of-date questions in the late twentieth century when sovereignty and statehood are being transformed and renegotiated. It might now be possible to create new types of institutions and relationships which would reflect and honour both nationalist and unionist identities and traditions, but also allow other aspirations and allegiances to emerge. The format of the Talks, in many ways, proved very compatible with the Women's Coalition methodology. One of the key principles was that 'nothing is agreed until everything is agreed', which meant that no party could hope to secure agreement on issues of importance to itself without contributing to compromise on other issues. Parties in the Talks had to remind themselves continually of the importance of the process as a whole and to weigh their 'bottom-line' issues against the possibility of undoing the achievements that had already been reached, however insufficient or tenuous they may have appeared at any time.

The Women's Coalition worked to keep this momentum going by offering to talk and listen to all the parties in the process, as well as to some who had left or were excluded, and to act as a conduit between parties which were not yet ready to meet face-to-face. Being prepared to negotiate with or on behalf of any party willing to enter dialogue, and being open-minded about possible

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outcomes, meant that they could on occasions assist in the building of trust and facilitate exchanges of positions between parties. Not all parties were willing to accept the Women's Coalition as mediators, but some on occasions found their interventions helpful.

The influence of the Women's Coalition delegates and talks team can be seen in the final version of the Agreement. Policies which the Coalition had developed in monthly members meetings and special working groups were adopted. They reflect not only the gender perspective which the Coalition brought into the Talks, but also the awareness and experience of the issues important to the wider community and voluntary groups with which many Coalition members have been involved. There are statements on equality issues and gender-proofing, as well as proposals for a Commission to take up the concerns of victims of the Troubles. Of particular importance is the commitment to create a Civic Forum, which will bring into the policy-making arena representatives of business, trades unions, the voluntary sector, women's groups and youth organisations. It is not yet clear how effective this body will be in bridging the gap between citizen activism and party politics; its final form will be determined by the parties in the Assembly. At the very least, it should provide a longer term means of broadening the political agenda in Northern Ireland.

THE FUTURE FOR WOMEN

One issue where the Women's Coalition lost the argument was over the electoral system for the new Assembly. Having argued for a system similar to that proposed for the Scottish parliament, which would be more proportional and more likely to result in greater numbers of women from all political parties being elected, the delegates were disappointed that the majority of parties opted for a single-transferable vote system. While preferable to first-past-the post, the system chosen still tends to disadvantage small parties. To the surprise of many analysts, the Women's Coalition won two seats (relatively comfortably) under this system, but it has produced an Assembly from which two of the parties - Labour Coalition and the loyalist Ulster Democratic party - which signed the Agreement are missing. The 108 member Assembly has only 14 women, which is no improvement on the gender-balance of the Forum or local councils. Gender issues remain a low priority for most of the major parties; only 16.5% of candidates chosen by the other parties were women. Of the larger parties, the Alliance selected the largest proportion of women candidates (27.3%) while the biggest party, the Ulster Unionists had only four women among its 48 candidates (8.3%). (Galligan and Wilford 1998)

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It is not really surprising that in the current circumstances space for other identities remains limited. The Assembly elections were contested around what appeared to be a new cleavage in Northern Ireland, with 'pro-Agreement' parties facing a much smaller number of 'anti-Agreement' parties. This split complicated, but did not entirely undermine, the pre-existing unionist-nationalist division, as subsequent events have reminded us. As the parties took their places in the Assembly, they were required to register as Unionist, Nationalist or 'Other'. This is essential, given that in these early days and months there must be some guarantee that there is 'sufficient consensus' among the two major communities over key policy issues. The Women's Coalition members were uncomfortable with the designation, however, both on the grounds that its membership includes people who are strongly unionist and nationalist, as well as those who would see themselves as neither, and because this system tended to marginalise the cross-community parties. They requested to be allowed to sign in as unionist, nationalist and other, which was ruled as incompatible with the Agreement, and in the end described the party as 'inclusive others'.

Maintaining this distinctive voice while continually raising gender and other equality issues will place huge demands on the shoulders of the Women's Coalition members in the Assembly. Given the history of exclusion of women, and the divisions that have beset the women's movement in the past, it is quite an achievement to have sustained the Coalition and to continue to have influence. There are a number of reasons which explain the survival and success of the Women's Coalition against all odds and obstacles.

Women in Northern Ireland, of course, occupy many different positions and hold a variety of perspectives: neutral peacemakers, intransigent loyalists or republicans, impatient with all sides, defenders of communities (Jacobson 1997; Sales 1997). As we have seen, the majority of women have found it impossible or chosen not to put their interests as women above their interests as loyalists, republicans or any other identity. However, as the new peace process was getting under way, many women were beginning to look at these identities from a 'women's perspective' and to begin to claim a right to define and redefine them. Challenging conventional definitions of gender roles, has, as Cynthia Cockburn (1998) suggests, encouraged them to question other kinds of accepted identities. The Women's Coalition was able to appeal to women who wanted to see progress towards a settlement, who believed that women had perspectives which were likely to be different from those of the majority of men but who also wanted to defend and show solidarity with their religious, or national, community or social group.

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The Women's Coalition managed to fuse together the issues of the injustice of women's exclusion from political structures with a broader package of ideas about dialogue and conciliation, justice and equity. These ideas were inspired by and based upon the practices and principles forged by many women over years of working in families, in campaigns and in their communities. And, to some extent, being a new voice untainted by 'baggage' from the past, the Coalition could, by their efforts and perseverance, win the trust of people from many different backgrounds. While they could not claim to have the support of, or represent, all women, the Coalition is distinguished by having members and supporters from all parts of the Northern Ireland population - including men. And, having achieved the apparently impossible by bringing women's perspectives to the talks table, Women's Coalition members had an enormous incentive to take great care to avoid alienating any of the interest groups among its core membership. There were disagreements; disappointed or disillusioned members left. Overall, though, members were informed, consulted and included in decision-making and disputes were resolved in such a way that those who were unhappy with the outcome were usually satisfied with the process.

It would be foolish and arrogant to make exaggerated or inflated claims for the contribution of the Women's Coalition to the securing of the Agreement or the success of the referendum campaign. It is possible, however, to argue that the Coalition has made a difference to the peace process over the months since its formation. First, by the style of leadership which it adopted, it has shown that women can be resolute and consistent in pursuit of goals without having to appear tough or domineering. This, it should be noted, required a lot of long meetings, research, professionalism. Second, by being open to dialogue and persuasion the Women's Coalition has been able to build alliances and make common cause with people from many different persuasions. Third, by building upon, identifying with and bringing into the talks the experiences of many years of cross-community work by Coalition members and others, the negotiators were able to show how much agreement might be possible, given a certain amount of goodwill. Fourth, by its commitment to a particular type of process - fair, inclusive, based on mutual respect, empathy and dialogue across differences - the Women's Coalition continually reminded the public of what we stood to gain by supporting this latest peace initiative.

There are, of course, many other people and groups whose contribution made the process possible in the first place, and ensured its continuation through very difficult times. Above all, the Coalition draws upon the insights and experiences of women working in the community, many of whom would vote for other political parties. In other post-conflict situations, as Ruth Jacobson

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(1997) points out, the women whose work has helped to bring an end to violence have not been included in the peacemaking. For perhaps the first time, however, the Women's Coalition brought the voices of women to the negotiating table and allowed women to be among the acknowledged makers of history in Ireland.

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November 1998