

# Gendering the 'post-conflict' narrative in Northern Ireland's peace process

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[journals.sagepub.com/home/cnc](http://journals.sagepub.com/home/cnc)**Niall Gilmartin**

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**Abstract**

The Good Friday Agreement negotiations gave a unique opportunity for the insertion of women's rights and equal formal representation in the new post-conflict Northern Ireland. Notwithstanding the robust and unambiguous commitments in the text of the agreement, the primary architects of the peace process, however, situated gender and women's position as peripheral to the main priorities of 'guns and government'. While conventional forms of peacebuilding claim to be beneficial for all, evidence from the so-called 'post-conflict' period around the world demonstrates a continuity of violence for many women, as well as new forms of violence. This article explores the position of women in Northern Ireland today across a number of issues, including formal politics, community activism, domestic violence and reproductive rights. By doing so, it continues feminist endeavours seeking to problematise the 'post-conflict' narrative by gendering peace and security. While the Good Friday Agreement did undoubtedly provide the potential for a new era of gender relations, 20 years on Northern Irish society exhibits all the trademarks and insidious characteristics of a patriarchal society that has yet to undergo a genuine transformation in gender relations. The article argues that the consistent privileging of masculinity and the dominance of male power is a commonality that remains uninterrupted by the peace process.

**Keywords**

gender, Northern Ireland, peace, post-conflict, security

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## Introduction

In addition to the arduous task of ending decades of violent conflict and securing power-sharing among the main political parties, the Good Friday Agreement (GFA) also marked itself out as significant for its inclusion and commitment to 'the right of women to full and equal participation in political life'. Moreover, some have suggested that the wider peace process was unique due to the relatively high levels of visibility and participation of women (Deiana 2013). This article explores the position of women in Northern Ireland today and by doing so seeks to problematise the 'post-conflict' narrative by gendering peace and security. Conventional approaches to conflict seek to separate various forms of conflict in hermetically sealed categories. Invariably, physical political violence is treated as an anomalous event, with relatively clear start and end points. While dominant, state-centric forms of peacebuilding claim to be universally beneficial, evidence from the so-called post-conflict period around the world demonstrates a continuity of violence for women, with many also facing new forms of violent practices. The article begins by exploring women's formal and informal political activism, moving on to examine increased levels of gender-based violence, before finally considering women's security in relation to the struggle for reproductive rights. While these issues are also commonplace in other regions free from the residue of armed conflict, 'the combination of challenging patriarchy and the particular impact of living with political violence for such a long time offers a unique voice for feminism in Northern Ireland' (Little 2002: 172). Given the deeply polarised conditions that define Northern Irish society, women of course do not represent a homogeneous bloc, and so we need to be attentive to the differences as well as the similarities among women in the region. This article, therefore, does not claim a universal experience for every woman in Northern Ireland. It does, however, cover a multiplicity of issues relevant to many.

While women can and do work for common goals across the ethno-national divide, this does not indicate the existence of an innate commonality of interest which can form the basis for sustained political activism. Once we shift the analysis away from reductive, essentialist approaches, the reality of women's multiple standpoints in Northern Ireland delineates a complex and often conflicting set of needs, interests and experiences. Notwithstanding the important fissures of difference between women in the region, power relations between the sexes remain pervasive and largely undisturbed. As part of the special edition of *Capital & Class* published to mark the signing of the GFA, Linda Connolly (1999) convincingly argued for the integration of Northern Ireland's heterogeneous feminist politics into the overall drive towards a negotiated settlement. Despite the rhetoric and widespread sense of optimism in the initial aftermath of the agreement, this article argues that traditional forms of male power are a feature of Northern Irish life that remain uninterrupted by the peace process.

## Women's representation in electoral politics in Northern Ireland

Historically, Northern Ireland's record on female descriptive representation is profoundly bleak. During the first 50 years of its existence (1921–1972), a total of nine women were

ected to its devolved parliament, representing a mere 4% of all elected members during that period. The eruption of armed conflict in 1969 positioned state-centric issues firmly as the primary concerns of Northern Irish political life. The links between militarism and hegemonic masculinity (though women were active protagonists in the conflict also) served to reaffirm the orthodoxy of male political dominance, ensuring that the realm of politics was conceptualised and presented as a thoroughly masculine one. Elections to Westminster lucidly illustrate the predominance of men, with only three female MPs elected in the region prior to the GFA. In 1998, the prospect of a new chamber comprising 108 Assembly members presented a sizeable and new field of opportunity for women to cultivate political advances. Furthermore, the proportional representation (PR) electoral system has proven to be favourable in increasing levels of female representation (Connolly 2013). Despite some very recent modest increases, women's formal participation over the course of the last two decades is marked by vast levels of under-representation, where the gendered characteristics of Northern Irish formal politics since 1998 have proven quite resilient to change. Regardless of the spotlight on gender and women's right to political participation during the GFA negotiations, the first 1998 Assembly dolefully indicated 'business as usual', with women comprising 16% of the overall candidates and a paltry 13% of those elected to the new chamber. Due to an increase of female candidates representing Sinn Féin and the Alliance Party (rising 10% and 11%, respectively), the 2003 Assembly elections produced a modest increase from 14 female Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) in 1998 to 18. Given the rhetorical commitments to women's full and equal political participation, one would expect the sounding of alarm bells within the main political parties in reaction to the dispiriting patterns of women's representation in the new Assembly. The 2003 and 2007 Assembly elections revealed overt stagnation in the political fortunes of women, with just 18 female political representatives elected in both elections. The doleful gender consistencies across several electoral contests are indicative of the low priority afforded by the main political parties to women's equal political representation. Appraisals of Northern Ireland's female representation would be entirely dispiriting were it not for the modest yet significant upturn in the 2016 Assembly contest. While the number of female MLAs rose to 20 in 2011, a total of 30 female members were elected to the Assembly in May 2016, representing a 50% increase from 2011. The recent Assembly elections in March 2017 once again reaffirmed this relatively progressive trend with women comprising 27 of the now reduced figure of 90 seats, again representing a relatively respectable 30%. The 2016 and 2017 figures stand out as the largest number of female MLAs elected since 1998 but are also important gains given that they effectively 'stopped the rot' in the dismally low levels of female MLAs up to that point.

The barriers to women's participation in Northern Ireland are attributed to several factors including the pervasiveness of gender stereotypes, male monopoly of power, gender division of domestic labour, education, training and occupational status, among others (Galligan 2013; Porter 2003). Despite the glaring dearth of women within their ranks of elected representatives, mainstream political parties have demonstrated no initiative or interest in gender equality, and their organisational structures do not prioritise the incorporation of gender considerations (Donaghy 2004). This is particularly pertinent when examining the issue of candidate selection processes. Sinn Féin marks itself as

relatively distinctive by reserving 50% of its *Ard Comhairle* (National Executive) seats for women and pursuing an 'unofficial' 30% quota target for local candidate selection (Gilmartin 2017). Such strategies have had an impact, particularly in its Assembly representation, thus positioning the party as comparatively progressive in terms of female representation. As a nationalist party, the SDLP is disposed towards a relatively conservative standpoint, adopting a more cautious approach to issues of gender quotas and candidacy. Candidate nominations remain embedded in local selection processes, which invariably favour incumbents, typically male MLAs, who also have a strong say in choosing their running mates. The DUP remains firmly wedded to its ostensibly meritocratic approach, rejecting mechanisms of quotas or positive discrimination. Because of its aversion to what it sees as superficial tokenism (Braniff & Whiting 2016), the DUP therefore lags significantly in its promotion of female representatives. Until recently, the UUP situated the locus of candidate selection power at a local level. In 2007, the party introduced candidate shortlists, constituency primaries and a headquarters-dominated selection committee which retained the final decision on candidates (Galligan 2013: 424). While the shift of selection power from localised associations to party headquarters is significant, it has yet to make any discernible impact on the male dominance among its party candidates. The headquarters of the Alliance party takes the lead in candidacy selection and provides an approved list of potential candidates to each constituency organisation, providing the party with a strong female membership among its political representatives. Given the vast discrepancies between men and women's paid occupations and education as well as the gendered discrepancies in pay and domestic labour responsibilities, it is safe to conclude that the merit principle, however, is tipped well in favour of male candidates. In view of their role as the primary gateway to political representation, the often diverse candidate selection processes within political parties remain a significant factor in determining the gender composition of Northern Ireland's public representatives. One of the few effective measures for ensuring an increase in female political representation is the Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates NI) Act 2002 which provides for political parties to positively discriminate in order to increase the number of female election candidates. Despite the availability of such a provision, not a single political party in Northern Ireland has utilised what is potentially a highly productive mechanism. Unlike ethno-religious equality, however, there is no legislative requirement for parties to do so, illustrating once again the lack of importance afforded to gender. While gender equality is left in the hands of male-led political parties and their idiosyncratic procedures, equality between nationalists and unionists is endowed with the full might of institutional power. Weighted voting, petitions of concern and other vetoes, the (now suspended) 50:50 recruitment strategy for the new police service, among others, demonstrate that while parties baulked at quota measures for women, they were zealous and prolific champions of such methods when it came to matters of ethno-nationalism.

## **Women's civil society and community activism**

Due to the male monopoly and elitist nature of institutional politics in Northern Ireland, women have historically turned to grassroots activism and community politics in order to have some influence over the policies that affect their families, communities and

themselves (McCoy 2000: 7). There is a strong history of women organising outside of formal political structures in Northern Ireland, providing essential support, training and services in areas of domestic violence, poverty, child-care, education and drug addiction, among many others (McCoy 2000; Sales 1997). Much of the community sector's motivation is the perceived inadequacies of the state; community activism, or what Elizabeth Porter (2000) terms the 'situated politics of everyday life', allows women to engage in issues that directly affect them and their communities. With formal politics firmly governed by state-centric and security concerns during the Troubles, it was often community activism and the voluntary sector that filled the void, providing essential supports and services for some of the most marginalised communities. For the most part, this activism was not concerned with aping or paralleling formal structures, but developed as an alternative form of politics, addressing issues that are all too often neglected or excluded by the state. In particular, the sluggish pace of formal politics contrasted sharply with the high velocity of community organising.

Given the highly polarised context in which they developed, it is unsurprising that many of Northern Ireland's women's sector groups, though by no means all, organised along ethno-religious lines. The strong presence of 'transveralism', or dialogue across difference (Cockburn 1998) among some of Northern Ireland's multifarious women's groups towards the latter years of the Troubles, particularly the dialogue between the Falls Women's Centre and the Shankill Women's Centre, engendered the conditions which resulted in the establishment of the women's support network (WSN) in 1989. According to McCoy (2000), the 'opening of a women's centre was viewed by women in many types of campaigns and groups in Northern Ireland as an achievement in its own right and a necessary stage in the process of empowering women' (p. 14). The WSN today attracts members from several women's centres in Belfast as well other member organisations including Belfast Women's Training Services and Women's Resource and Development Agency. Also included are members of the public-sector trade unions and another important partner, Women Into Politics (Cockburn 2013). WSN continues to provide a range of support and services to community-based women's centres, projects and infrastructure groups and associate members drawn from across the community and voluntary sector who support women, families and communities. In the lead up to the GFA negotiations, the Network and its partners mobilised 400 women's groups across Northern Ireland in a major policy initiative, *Making Women Seen and Heard*. Along with the representatives of people with disabilities, full-time carers, lesbians and gays, people from ethnic minorities, lone parents and other disadvantaged groups, women achieved an explicit commitment in the eventual peace accord to equalities (in the plural), and above all to a right to inclusion and participation in the decision processes of the future Northern Ireland (Cockburn 2013). Moreover, the women's community sector played a vital role in gathering public support for the cross-border referenda on the GFA.

The establishment and relative success of the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition (NIWC) provided a vital nexus between women's formal and informal political activism during the years of the peace process. In addition to providing presence and visibility for women during and after the GFA, one of the many vital contributions of the NIWC was the establishment of the Civic Forum which provided a gateway for community activists

and civil society groups into the Executive. In 2002, however, the Civic Forum ceased to function following the latest collapse and subsequent suspension of the power-sharing institutions. Much like the rhetoric of equality and the promise of 'new politics', the Civic Forum faded from view as the power play between ethno-national blocs once again eclipsed all other concerns during the suspension years between 2002 and 2007. The dysfunction within institutional politics during this period, marred by distrust over paramilitary weapons, policing and justice, among many others, sapped the morale of those within the community sector and reaffirmed their sense of alienation from mainstream, formal politics. Moreover, the diverse spaces and equality agendas created during the GFA were slowly squeezed by the dominance of a state-centric programme for peace and security. The negotiations aimed at restoring stable, power-sharing governance culminated with the St. Andrews Agreement in October 2006. With the NIWC now disbanded, the St. Andrews talks were distinctly male-dominated and focused solely on the principles of consociation between what had by that stage become the two largest parties, Sinn Féin and the DUP. Within this elite-fashioned, male-dominated process, it was not surprising to find that gender equality receded as a political priority (Deiana 2013: 403).

Following the demise of the NIWC in 2006, the energy around women's activism once again returned to the civil society sector where it remains relatively vibrant and wide-reaching (Cockburn 2013; Deiana 2013). A study on the Women's Sector in Northern Ireland, commissioned by the Community Foundation in 2001, estimated that there were some 1,071 'traditional' Women's organisations active across the North, and 423 'activist' Women's Groups/Centres, with the vast majority of the latter (some 90%) being community-based (Kilmurray 2013). The ability of this sector, however, to influence those who wield power in the formal realm remains relatively low, where formal and informal politics remain governed by rigid boundaries. Furthermore, the effectiveness of women's community and civil society activism as a valuable counterbalance to the state is significantly tempered by issues of funding. In exchange for sustained support from the Department of Social Development, Belfast community centres have to a large extent become service providers. According to Cynthia Cockburn (2013), centre managers must devote a great deal of their time to paperwork if they are to satisfy the authorities and secure resources, and the time and stress involved in this have increased with the downturn in the economy and cuts to public-sector spending.

While the women's informal sector continues to work at the coalface of social and economic disadvantage, the prospect of maintaining previously high levels of such community organising is significantly challenged by the dearth of funding available, particularly since the ongoing crisis in global capitalism began in 2008. In that year, the Northern Ireland Women's European Platform (NIWEP) urged the government to develop a specific stream of funding for women's civil society organisations, particularly in relation to key areas such as training and education. The current agenda of economic austerity, however, is having a negative impact on the government's response to this call and thus undermines women's community organising (Deiana 2013). In recent times, examinations of women's community activism have been quite dispiriting, with many believing that the women's sector has become too 'professionalised' and 'NGO-ised', with a loss of a discernible political dynamic (Cockburn 2013). Outside the 'official informal sector' women continue to organise as feminists in groups such as Belfast

Feminist Network or around single issue causes in bodies such as Alliance for Choice and Pro Choice NI. There is a feminist body at Queen's University that has a reading group and publishes a review carrying stories, poetry, academic essays, photography and art-work. However, this post-millennial feminism, rather than being embedded in working-class struggle in housing estates and workplaces, is a movement mainly of educated women, students, confident in their social networking skills. It has its own priorities – sexuality, reproductive rights, multiculturalism and violence against women – in contrast to the policy-challenging agenda of socialism, inclusion and workers' rights inspired by the former alliance of community centres and trade unions (Cockburn 2013; Deiana 2013).

Despite the demise of the NIWC in 2006 and the 'NGO-isation' of many, though not all, women's groups, the women's community sector has made some inroads in attempting to re-establish a discourse at Stormont around women's policy interests. The NIWEP has established an all-party group at the Assembly on United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325) which enjoys the membership of seven different political parties. Unanimously passed in October 2000, UNSCR 1325 reaffirmed 'the important role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts and peace-building ... and the need to increase their role in decision-making'. The resolution has been used as a platform by some feminists and women's groups in other regions emerging from armed conflict as a platform and tool for demanding the inclusion of women in all aspects of conflict resolution. Similarly in Northern Ireland, representatives from various political parties are increasingly aware of the need for mechanisms such as UNSCR 1325 and gender quotas that have the potential to deliver greater female involvement in formal politics (Kennedy et al. 2016). A Civic Advisory Panel envisaged under the 2015 *Fresh Start Agreement* is perhaps indicative of that heightened, albeit limited, awareness. Consisting of six people, the panel will be tasked by the Executive to consider specific strategic issues relevant to the Programme for Government and report to the Executive. From a community development perspective, the Panel will seek the views of a wide range of representatives and stakeholders from civic society. At the time of writing, the establishment of this Civic Panel remains outstanding, and once again illustrates the subjugated status of mechanisms that may augment women's political input and participation. While the now defunct Civic Forum offered a platform for grassroots and community input, particularly for women, the failure to resurrect the body alongside the restoration of devolved powers in 2007 is emblematic of the state-centric approach and indifference to alternative modes of political input. It remains to be seen if the envisaged Civic Advisory Panel can once again provide some meaningful conduit between Northern Ireland's formal and informal political spheres.

## **Insecurities in 'post-conflict'**

Conventional notions of security, particularly in the aftermath of armed conflict, are typically anchored in the classical school of Realism, which positions the state as a unitary and overarching actor in a world otherwise enmeshed in anarchy. Given the centrality of sovereignty and legitimacy to state power, the central tenet of realism assumes that the security of citizens is contingent on the security of the state. In other words, this

state-centric logic is premised on a belief that state security (through governance, economy, military, law and order, protected borders, among others) automatically signifies the presence of security for citizens. Female insecurity and exposure to various acts of violence during so-called 'peace time', particularly levels of domestic and sexual violence, is indicative of the masculine bias within conventional approaches to conflict resolution (Handrahan 2004; McLeod 2011). Given the correlation between decreasing military violence and increasing forms of gender-based violence, 'post-conflict' is exposed as a period of continued violence and insecurity for many women (McLeod 2011: 599), where they remain socially, politically and economically marginalised and exposed to various forms of physical violence (Cockburn 2013; Karam 2001; Pankhurst 2016). For some, therefore, there is no post-conflict; there is no 'aftermath' (Meintjes et al. 2001).

For all the official rhetoric regarding Northern Ireland's status as the site of a more secure and peaceful dispensation, data collected over the course of the last two decades indicate that violence against women increased exponentially in the immediate aftermath of the paramilitary ceasefires of 1994. The category of 'domestic violence' encompasses a broad range of actions beyond the insidious act of direct, violent assaults. The full extent of domestic violence includes emotional, physical, financial, sexual and psychological forms of abuse. The United Nations (UN) defines gender-based violence as,

violence that is directed against a woman, because she is a woman, or violence that affects women disproportionately. It includes acts that inflict physical, mental or sexual harm or suffering, threats of such acts, coercion and other deprivations of liberty.

Men are of course also victims and survivors of domestic and sexual abuse, and I do not wish to denigrate or trivialise their narratives and experiences. The statistics, however, reveal an overwhelming gender pattern to domestic violence, both globally and in Northern Ireland: the vast majority of victims are women.

In Northern Ireland, violence specifically directed against women and girls – rape, trafficking, abuse in the home – appears to be growing rather than diminishing with the 'peace' (Cockburn 2013: 163). The prevailing narrative of a post-war society belies the violent reality of women's daily lives in Northern Ireland. Statistics from Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland reveal that 14,714 women and 14,356 young persons and children received refuge between 1999 and 2013. Latest data from Women's Aid for the 2016–2017 period indicates that 955 women and 568 children sought refuge. In the 12 months from 1 July 2017 to 30 June 2018, Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) statistics record 30,595 domestic abuse incidents in Northern Ireland, an increase of 1,404 (4.8%) on the previous 12 months and the highest annual period recorded since the start of the data series in 2004/2005.<sup>1</sup> The number of domestic abuse crimes reached 15,049, an increase of 1,190 (8.6%) on the previous 12 months and the highest level recorded since 2004/2005. The latest figures covering 2016–2017 show 710 women currently living in refuge in Northern Ireland with a further 267 women unable to access refuge due to lack of provision. Domestic violence accounts for 13.4% of all reported crime to the PSNI. Threats to women are often depicted as 'stranger danger'; the hyperbole depicting the dangers of the public realm (dark alleys, consumption of alcohol in public spaces and so forth), conceals the 'private hell' for many women. The reality is



that current or former male partners account for over 80% of domestic abusers in Northern Ireland.

In addition to the insidious effects of domestic violence, various organs of the state are perceived as consistently failing victims and survivors. Research conducted by Women's Aid Northern Ireland and Women's Centres Regional Partnership reveals high levels of reticence in reporting domestic and sexual abuse. Using in-depth interviews and focus groups, victims and survivors recalled their anger and frustration towards the criminal justice response, which typically positions domestic violence as a minor crime or misdemeanour, with perpetrators often receiving short or suspended sentences. Others feared that psychological, financial or sexual violence within the 'private sphere' of marriage and intimate relationships will not be taken seriously by state agencies. The trial of four men in March 2018, in which Irish rugby players Paddy Jackson and Stuart Olding were cleared of raping a 19-year-old woman, and two of her friends, Blane McIlroy and Rory Harrison, were cleared of indecent exposure and perverting the course of justice, respectively, revealed the trauma and burden placed upon complainants of rape and sexual assault. Moreover, the evidence used within the trial – particularly text messages between the defendants – exposed what many believe is a pervasiveness culture of misogyny and sexism. The 2018 trial, however, is not untypical. In 2015, Keir Starmer, former Director of Public Prosecutions in England and Wales, published an independent review which was highly critical of the Public Prosecution Service in Northern Ireland with regard to their handling of allegations of rape and sexual violence by Máiría Cahill and two other victims against a former Irish Republican Army (IRA) prisoner Martin Morris in West Belfast in the late 1990s. In September 2018, a further independent report by the Police Ombudsman into the same cases found that the victims were 'failed' by a disjointed PSNI investigation and recommended that four officers be disciplined. The traumatic experiences of complainants in both cases have exposed what many believe are structural and cultural flaws within the entire judicial system, and has rightly re-ignited debate regarding the handling and conduct of rape and sexual abuse allegations in Northern Ireland.

Recommendations from Women's Aid Northern Ireland, legal scholars and Women's Centres Regional Partnership include the designation of domestic violence as a criminal offence, increased funding for provision of services and supports, reform of the judicial system to help more women engage positively to take legal recourse and protection and powers to compel perpetrators to cooperate and take responsibility for their violence. Gender-based violence is consistently patterned with discernible causal links and, therefore, cannot be reduced to arbitrary, 'individual' criminal acts. There is a compelling need to anchor all approaches – including support services, legal, academic, judicial, policy – in a framework of unequal gender relations. Societies which normalise, rationalise and institutionalise the subordination of both women and femininity breed a wider culture of power inequalities that threatens the security of many women. Scholarly research on gender and conflict transition has repeatedly uncovered the inextricable links between violent masculinity and the ending of armed actions. Conventional visions of peace and security are constituted by subjective ideological standpoints, which address certain forms of violence and conflict, and seek legitimation by masquerading as objective, universal, self-evident and unproblematic. Feminist interrogations of peace and

security, however, demonstrate the clear links between many forms of violence, highlighting the continuity between various forms of violence enacted before, during and after wars, and thus eroding the foundations of conventional thinking regarding peace and security (Gilmartin 2019). Certainly, the statistics from 'post-conflict' Northern Ireland challenge the discursive deployment of terms such as post-conflict, peace and security and, moreover, make visible many forms of violence and insecurities concealed by a limited and partial form of peace which addresses certain forms of violence while normalising others.

The presence of structured gendered inequalities and pervasive gender-based discrimination in a society remains a promising line of inquiry for understanding the causes and utility of widespread gender-based violence (Davies & True 2015: 502). A 2012 UN report found that levels of sexual and gender-based violence are most likely to occur in conditions of women's general subordination, their precarious economic conditions resulting from a lack of security from the state and the existence and acceptance in culture that women's bodies are objects that belong to men (Ban Ki-Moon 2012). I am not suggesting that the state is actively complicit in acts of gender-based violence; there are, however, compelling comparative case studies from other regions emerging from armed conflict which demonstrate the linkages between transformations in gender relations at a macro level and the potential for conflict in intimate partnerships. In her comparison of the peace processes in Northern Ireland and Chiapas, Melanie Hoewer (2013) found that while the former prioritised state-centric concerns such as power-sharing government, the latter recognised indigenous women's autonomy, and reversed neo-liberal socio-economic processes. In contrast to Northern Ireland, Chiapas' macro peace process was informed equally by female and male perspectives, and in doing so created the conditions necessary for challenging community traditions and masculine power, leading to a significant decrease in gender-based violence.

The documented experiences of women's exposure to various forms of violence in the aftermath of armed conflict, here in Northern Ireland and globally, undermines the very essence of terms such as 'peace process', 'conflict resolution' or 'post-conflict'. According to John Brewer (2010), terms such as 'post-conflict' are now widely interpreted as being too vague and inadequate, and so he argues for the use of 'post-violence' instead. Given the global pattern of increased post-war gender-based violence, and the inextricable links between conflict resolution and gender power, a question begs to be asked: post-violence for whom exactly? The daily reality for many women in Northern Ireland suggests that conventional definitions of violence, peace, conflict and post-conflict are entirely inept for the purposes of examining gender relations both during and after armed actions. The vast distance between the prevailing discourse of a peaceful and secure society, and the various forms of violence experienced by many women expose both the flaws and the consequences of a peace process that has failed to transform gender relations as an integral part of conflict transition.

## **Reproductive rights in Northern Ireland**

In April 2016, Northern Ireland made international headlines, once again, for ignominious reasons. A 21-year-old student was handed a 1-year suspended sentence after her flat

mates reported the young woman to police for procuring pills on the Internet to induce an abortion. In court, her barrister stated that if his client had lived anywhere else in the United Kingdom, she would 'not have found herself before the courts'. The court also heard that the young Belfast student tried to travel to England for a termination but could not cover the costs. Northern Ireland stands out as one of the few regions in Western Europe where women exercise less control over their reproductive capabilities, including relative to their fellow citizens in the rest of the United Kingdom (Sales 1997). Access to abortion in Northern Ireland is governed by the Offences Against the Person Act 1861. Section 58 of the Act criminalises any woman who has an abortion, and Section 59 criminalises anyone trying to help a woman to abort. Both actions are punishable by a maximum sentence of penal servitude for life. While the 1967 Abortion Act legalised terminations in certain, limited circumstances in Great Britain, the Act was not extended to Northern Ireland. Consequently, the legislation governing abortion in Northern Ireland resides in laws dating back to the mid-19th century. While Northern Ireland's highly restrictive abortion regime sates those who oppose any change to current legislation, abortion in Northern Ireland is nevertheless a daily reality. While the 2018 repeal referendum in the Republic of Ireland has amended the constitution,<sup>2</sup> thus allowing for legislation that expands the circumstances for access to abortion, the 'solution' hitherto to abortion in both states has been to export citizens to another jurisdiction. For those who cannot access abortion in Northern Ireland, the only option is to travel abroad, mostly to Britain, incurring costs in the range of £600–£2,000 (Bloomer & O'Dowd 2014). The current dispensation invariably discriminates against working-class, immigrant and younger women, due to the costs of travelling abroad (Horgan & O'Connor 2014). In such a socially conservative landscape, particularly outside urban centres, the reality of abortion in Northern Ireland is often hidden for fear of stigmatisation and so the numbers of women travelling outside Northern Ireland may indeed be much greater than estimates suggest.

While Northern Ireland is often (erroneously) characterised as the site of a 'religious war', the common ground between all the main churches in their outright opposition to abortion propagates a misleading narrative that the overwhelming majority of people oppose abortion. Moreover, this religious consensus provides a formidable support-base for a number of powerful 'pro-life', anti-abortion groups – the Society for the Protection of the Unborn Child, Precious Life, LIFE Northern Ireland, Christian Action Research and Education Care – who exert considerable influence in the debate. The views of the Protestant churches in Ireland on matters such as divorce, abortion and homosexuality are virtually identical to the Catholic Church, born out of the same social puritanism (Kitchin & Lysaght 2004: 87). While religious conservatism unquestionably informs the standpoints of some of those opposed to women's reproductive rights, linkages between women's reproductive capacities and the sectarian demographics serve to further embed virulent opposition to abortion on any grounds. While nationalism fabricates a narrative of horizontal comradeship, the gendered constructions of ethno-nationalism position and value women primarily for their symbolic and reproductive roles. The centrality of women as biological reproducers to sustaining ethno-national collectives provides the framework for restricting women's access to reproductive health care. The dominance of ethno-nationalism and/or religion as primary political

identities in Northern Ireland, therefore, ensures that women's health and women's rights remain subordinate to and contingent upon the needs of the ethno-national project. Abortion is then not only about practical and material rights; symbolically, it subverts the gender fundamentals on which nationalist movements are based. Demanding that women control their own bodies, not the nation, strikes a blow at the core of nationalism's ideological bedrock.

This dominance of religious conservatism and polarised ethno-nationalism is diffused throughout the formal political system with all of the main political parties vehemently opposed to women's full access to reproductive health care. During an Assembly debate on abortion law in June 2000, the proposer of a motion opposing the extension of the 1967 Abortion Act, Jim Wells, implored his fellow MLAs to 'send out this evening a very clear, cross-community message – supported by different parties with different viewpoints – that the people of Northern Ireland totally resist any extension of the 1967 Abortion act to this community'. In May 2008, a letter jointly signed by the leaders of the main churches and the leaders of the main political parties was sent to all Westminster MPs asking them not to vote for a proposed amendment that might extend the 1967 Abortion Act to Northern Ireland. The reason offered for such rare instances of consensus among the political parties, is a persistent belief that their overall electoral mandate automatically means that they speak for over 90% of the population. The orthodoxy of those who claim that the overwhelming majority of Northern Irish citizens want no change in abortion laws is consistently challenged by surveys which reveal public attitudes that are at odds with the conventional narrative proffered by politicians. An Omnibus survey of 1,400 respondents conducted in 2012, for instance, found that 59% believed abortion should be legal in cases of rape or incest. A 2014 survey by Amnesty International which polled 1,013 people found 69% said there should be access to abortion where the pregnancy is the result of rape, 68% said abortion should be available where the pregnancy is the result of incest and 60% of people think abortion should be available where the foetus has a fatal abnormality. In light of the consistent patterns within survey data, the claims by some elected representatives of cross-community unity in outright opposition to any change to Northern Ireland's abortion laws seem dubious and disingenuous. The mounting evidence from multiple polls and surveys strongly suggests that the political classes are well out of step with changing public attitudes.

Indeed, the recent repeal referendum in the Republic of Ireland paves the way for the state to liberalise its restrictive abortion laws, but moreover, will also significantly shape the debate regarding women's reproductive rights north of the Irish border. First, the Irish Government have already explicitly stated that women in Northern Ireland will have access to any new reproductive health care under the provisions of the General Scheme of the Bill to Regulate the Termination of Pregnancy. Second, the huge majority in favour of changing the Republic of Ireland's highly restrictive abortion laws means that Northern Ireland remains the only region in Western Europe where abortion remains illegal and women are forced to travel. Closer to home, Northern Ireland is now distinctly out of step with the citizens in the Republic of Ireland and Great Britain. While Sinn Fein has been unsurprisingly keen to bring Northern Ireland in line with the type of proposed legislation in the Republic of Ireland, declaring that 'the North is next', the DUP are left in a more politically awkward scenario. When it comes to the issue of

Brexit, the party is zealous in its belief and demands that there should be no border down the Irish Sea, arguing that there can be no separation between Northern Ireland and Great Britain economically, politically or socially. On the issue of abortion, however, among many others, the DUP consistently plays the 'our wee country' card, opposing any change to Northern Ireland's existing laws, and arguing that such matters are 'devolved' issues for local political representatives. Finally and related to the previous point, the vote for repeal in the Republic of Ireland was demonstrable evidence of a clear gulf between the conservatism of the political classes and the attitudes and opinions of citizens. This is a particularly pressing point for Northern Ireland where ethno-national allegiances are the dominant indicators of voting patterns and preferences within assembly elections. Rendered a peripheral concern within general elections, it is unsurprising that the issue of women's reproductive rights have never been a 'make or break' issue for any government or party during electoral contests. While most major political parties in the Republic deliberately eschewed the issue of abortion or adopted conservative policy positions, the huge vote in favour of repeal is indicative of the need for citizens in Northern Ireland to also have a direct say on this important matter in a way that is separate from the 'everyday' ethno-national issues that tend to dominate elections in the region.

Those tasked with the transformation of Northern Ireland frequently speak of the need to transform and re-negotiate all aspects of society. Women's reproductive rights, however, are actively excluded from that agenda. Women need full access to their reproductive rights if they are to participate as citizens equal to men and hence Northern Ireland's laws factor heavily in women's unequal status in both symbolic and practical ways (Fegan & Rebouche 2003: 222). What does Northern Ireland's restrictive abortion regime tell us about gender relations? What does it tell us about the status of women in Northern Ireland some 20 years on from the GFA? While women have made impressive gains in paid employment, the real story of gender in Northern Ireland is a perennial patriarchal culture which positions women and feminist politics firmly on the periphery of its peace and security agenda. Despite the rhetorical commitment regarding gender equality, women's lack of reproductive rights, the denial of their agency and the daily exile of Northern Irish women seeking abortions abroad suggest that little has changed in post-Agreement Northern Ireland.

## Conclusion

The negotiations that led to the GFA gave a rare opportunity for the insertion of women's rights and equal formal representation in the new post-agreement Northern Ireland. Notwithstanding the robust and unambiguous commitments in the text of the agreement, the primary architects of the peace process situated gender and women's position as peripheral to the main priorities of guns and government. The complete absence of gender and women's rights from the subsequent St. Andrews (2006) and Hillsborough (2010) talks right up to the recent Stormont House Agreement (2014) and Fresh Start Agreement (2016) is emblematic of the indifference afforded to gender equality. The realm of formal electoral politics remains what it has always been, a 'cold house' for women in Northern Ireland (Galligan 2013). Given the protracted nature of intra-state

conflicts, peace processes seldom deliver in short time periods. While women's status was undoubtedly secondary to the overriding ethno-national concerns, the passage of over 20 years since is a more than ample duration in which women's political participation in Northern Ireland should have yielded some discernible gains. While the recent Assembly elections of 2016 and 2017 reveal some advances, they remain modest and well off the pace of the United Kingdom's other regional assemblies.

Male power and control over women's bodies – through various forms of violence or the prohibition or restriction of access to full reproductive rights – remain prominent causes of gender inequality in Northern Ireland. The region's political parties, formal institutions, cultural norms and conservative dominant discourse are merely the manifestations and media in which they are re-enforced and reproduced. Social conservatism – particularly in relation to abortion, sexuality and divorce – remains in place despite rhetorical assurances regarding women's improving position. In sum, little has changed for women where they continue to experience high levels of physical and sexual violence, are concentrated in low-level employment, do the majority of unpaid care and continue to be the more likely to be in poverty (Cockburn 2013; O'Keefe 2012: 84). Despite the widespread optimism among many feminists and women, what emerged in the place of the promised 'equalities and inclusions' agenda of the GFA is in fact an era of 'neo-patriarchy' (Campbell cited in Cockburn 2013: 165). While the GFA did undoubtedly provide the potential for a new era of greater equality between the sexes, 20 years on Northern Irish society exhibits all the trademark and insidious characteristics of a patriarchal society that has yet to undergo a genuine transformation in gender relations.

## Notes

1. Notwithstanding the shocking levels indicated here, it is also important to bear in mind that the increases of reported incidents may be linked to the Sinn Féin acceptance of the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) in 2007. Since the foundation of the Provisional republican movement in 1970, its members refused to recognise the legitimacy of the Northern Ireland state, including its politics force, the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC). As part of the Good Friday Agreement (GFA), the RUC was reformed and renamed the PSNI in 2001. While initially rejecting this new force, republicans signed up to accept and recognise the legitimacy of the PSNI in 2007. The move paved the way for the wider nationalist and republican community to engage with and use the police. Undoubtedly, this increased the numbers recorded in statistics.
2. The 8th amendment to the Republic of Ireland's constitution, ratified by referendum in 1983, acknowledged the 'right to life of the unborn' as 'equal to the right of the mother'. The 8th amendment meant that abortion was prohibited but for extreme instances such as the immediate threat to the life of the woman. The repeal referendum took place on 25 May 2018 and was passed with a significant 2:1 majority in favour of repealing the 8th amendment.

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