

Working paper 30

A Gender Perspective on Conflict Resolution: The Development of the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition (NIWC) and its Role in the Multi-Party Peace Talks (1996-1998)

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Abstract

Although much has been written about the recent political struggles in Northern Ireland, too often it has been the women's experiences which have been left out. As a consequence, there are almost no records about the impact of female collective action on the peace process in Northern Ireland. Therefore, the purpose of this dissertation is, on the one hand, to tell the story of how women became visible in Northern Irish politics and, on the other hand, how they contributed to the transformation of the conflict. The analysis focuses on the development of the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition (NIWC) and its contribution to the multi-party peace talks. The major findings are the following: the NIWC is a party of the 'strategic middle-range leadership'. I argue that as long as there is an asymmetric relationship between men and women, women develop different skills than men while organising as a gender. This has allowed me to maintain that the NIWC led the parties to the conflict through what Italian feminists have referred to as a process of 'rooting' and 'shifting' allowing for a middle-ground position to emerge. Using Lederach's theory of conflict resolution I have also argued that the NIWC has introduced a reconciliation paradigm at the top-level leadership. Its value- and goal-based approach to politics/the peace process conferred to the NIWC the role of a facilitator. While it is true that the NIWC played the role of a facilitator, it was at the same time a party to the conflict whose role was to make women visible in politics. It also introduced a feminist agenda at the top level of politics.

Patricia Barandun

Dedicace

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Patricia Barandun

INTRODUCTION

'As far as history goes we were never on the scene of the crime'.

Eavan Boland cited in McWilliams and Kilmurray (1997:1)

The invisibility of women in politics and conflict resolution has been a constant feature in the history of Northern Ireland. Because they 'typically [have been] organiz[ing] outside of state structures (Spike Peterson and Sisson Runyan, 1993:113) women's activities remained unnoticed. This had at least two implications.

First, women have been underrepresented in the arena of formal politics. 'A variety of barriers to the full participation of women in public life' (McWilliams and Kilmurray, 1997:4) such 'as an inequitable division of domestic labour, the paucity of child-care, generalised discrimination and the more particular effects of party selection procedures' (ibid.) contributed to the exclusion of women from politics.

Second, 'although much has been written about the recent political struggles in Northern Ireland, too often it has been the women's experiences which have been left out' (McWilliams, 1995:16). As a consequence, there are almost no records about the impact of female collective action on the peace process in Northern Ireland.

Therefore, the purpose of my dissertation is, on the one hand, to tell the story of how women became visible in Northern Irish politics and, on the other hand, how they contributed to the transformation of the conflict. I will focus my analysis on the development of the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition (NIWC) and its contribution to the multi-party peace talks (1996-1998).

I wish to contribute to filling some of the 'many gaps in most interpretations of recent political events' (McWilliams, 1995:16). Despite the difficulties this implies in terms of historical records 'for the analysis of (...) political events involving women' (ibid.), I hope to make an innovative contribution to the study of women and conflict.

My arguments are the result of a combination of existing feminist political theories and theories in the field of conflict resolution. In my eyes chapter two is the most innovative in terms of analysis on gender, politics and conflict resolution. Chapter one sets out the context, namely how the NIWC has developed, and chapter three gives empirical evidence for the assumptions made in chapter two.

With respect to my research I was able to overcome some of the difficulties linked to the lack of sources on women and conflict in general and on the latest peace process in Northern Ireland in par-

ticular by completing my study with data-based research. I met women from the Women's Coalition and I conducted three interviews. Apart from the fact that I used the interviews as a fact-finding tool, they have been most helpful allowing me to link theory and practice in my dissertation.

Agreeing with Monica McWilliams (1995:17) I think that 'there can be no single view of what [goes] on in Northern Ireland' and I write 'this [dissertation] as one of the many contributions which will be written by women' (ibid.:98-99) on the conflict in Northern Ireland, in my case from an outsider's point of view. Like Elisabeth Porter (1997:98-99) I assume 'no privileged knowledge of the women who have lived through the 'troubles''. I hope that my 'identity as an (...) outsider brings advantages, like an interplay between distance and new found positionality' (ibid.:97-98).

CHAPTER ONE

The development of the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition (NIWC)

'Social movements are a fluid element within political and social systems, from which more formal political organizations rise and which may bring radical change'

Collins Dictionary of Sociology (1995:616)

Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to explain how the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition (NIWC) has developed. The literature on the latest peace process (1996-1998) is sparse. However, from a few written sources as well as from an interview with Valerie Morgan¹ one can conclude that two complementary sets of analysis exist regarding the origin of the NIWC. The first set of analysis can be said to be gender neutral whereas the second one is gender sensitive.

Jon Tonge² is the advocate of a 'gender neutral analysis' drawing on explanatory variables exogenous to the Northern Ireland women's movement. Specialised in political science, his analysis of the peace elections of 1996 suggests that the formation of the NIWC is due to the complex electoral system underpinning the peace elections. Valerie Morgan, on the other hand, argues in favour of a 'gender sensitive analysis' drawing on explanatory variables endogenous to the Northern Ireland women's movement. As a member of the Northern Irish feminist academic community Morgan thinks that the formation of the NIWC is due to the existence of the Northern Ireland women's movement.

Tonge's analysis is interesting for at least two reasons. First, it suggests that the women involved in the formation of the NIWC were motivated by the promising prospects for small political parties to get elected to the peace forum and the peace talks. Second, it highlights that as a result of the success of the NIWC in the peace elections women were able to take part in 'a consociational (or top-down) approach to conflict resolution' (Dixon, 1997a) for the first time in the history of Northern Ireland.

Morgan's reasoning is interesting because it suggests that the women involved in the formation of the NIWC benefited from the

¹ Valerie Morgan is the director of research of the Initiative on Conflict Resolution and Ethnicity (INCORE) at the University of Ulster (Northern Ireland).

² Jon Tonge is a lecturer in Politics in the Department of Politics and Contemporary History at the University of Salford (GB).

existence of the kinds of safe spaces women at the grass-roots had been instrumental in establishing despite the 'troubles'. Figure 1 will resume my findings based, on the one hand, on an interview with Morgan and, on the other hand, on feminist literature.

I will then put forward my own analysis as a kind of third set of analysis. Linking my findings from a field trip to Morgan's analysis as well as to Lederach's (1997) framework on the types of actors involved in peace building I will argue that the NIWC is a party of 'strategic gender activists' from the 'grass-roots leadership' and from the 'middle-range leadership'. Figure 2 will resume my findings.

1. The 'gender neutral analysis': the peace elections of 1996

Referring to a tentative suggestion made in the Mitchell Report³ of January 1996 the British Government suggested to hold peace elections to confirm a mandate for representatives within a peace forum. Despite initial nationalist objections interpreting 'the plan as another stalling device, produced by Unionists and supported by the British Government to avoid the need for all-party talks' (Tonge, 1998:160) on the future of Northern Ireland, nationalists grudgingly agreed to take part in elections. The elections took place on 30 May 1996 with 'the purpose to produce teams of negotiators for the promised all-party talks [due to open on 10 June 1996], drawn from parties successful in elections to the peace forum' (ibid.:159). It is in this latter context that the NIWC successfully obtained two elected seats

³ United States Senator George Mitchell was the chairman of a commission appointed in 1995 to solve the log-jam around the issue of decommissioning, which had become a major stumbling-block in the peace process in 1995. It concerned the question whether the paramilitary groups ought to be required to get rid of their weapons and armaments. The unionists and the British Government wished to see the IRA begin to disarm before any entry into all-party talks. The paramilitaries, on the other hand, insisted that no decommissioning should take place before a negotiated political settlement. In its report, the Mitchell Commission came out in favour of parallel decommissioning. All-party talks could start, with the decommissioning of weapons to take place at the same time.

to the 26-member negotiating table and to the 110-member peace forum as shown in table 1 below.

Table 1: The Northern Ireland Forum election results 1996

Source: Tonge, J. (1997) 'The origins and development of the peace process' in: Gilligan, Chr. and Tonge, J. (eds.) *Peace or War? Understanding the Peace Process in Northern Ireland*. Aldershot: Ashgate.

Tonge (1998) suggests that the success of the NIWC in the peace elections is due to the existence of an electoral system whose aim was to secure the inclusion of the UDP and PUP to the peace talks. As representatives of the political wings of the loyalist paramilitaries their inclusion was a guarantee that the loyalist cease-fire would hold during the talks. However, because the latter 'did not possess sufficient electoral strength to be elected [to the peace forum] under the constituency format, but were almost certain to gain sufficient support to be in the top ten parties' (ibid.:161), a so-called 'top-up' electoral system was grafted onto the constituency list elections' (ibid.). As a result, 'in addition to the 90 constituency members,

20 additional candidates, drawn from party lists, were elected to the forum, 2 each for the 10 parties attracting the most votes in the constituency election list' (ibid.). As shown in table 1 above, four parties got into the peace forum in this way.

Under these circumstances the entry into the talks of minority parties such as the NIWC seems indeed not surprising. 'The election outcome was in some sense bizarre' (Tonge, 1998:162) because 'the fringe loyalist paramilitaries, Women's Coalition and Labour all now had negotiating teams in all-party talks of equal size to those of the main nationalist and Unionist parties, despite attracting a mandate from a tiny percentage of the electorate' (ibid.).

The fact that the NIWC 'formed in haste [only] six weeks before the elections' (Porter, 1997:98) seems to confirm Tonge's argument. However, Elisabeth Porter⁴ (1996) adds to this that the formation of the NIWC was also motivated by the Northern Irish women's frustration over the exclusion of women's voices in politics.

Indeed, as reported by Porter (1997), Bronagh Hinds, one of the cofounders of the NIWC, sent detailed demands to the British Government, the main political parties in the north and the south, councils, trade unions and women's groups prior to the peace elections. They were seeking gender proofing of the election process, child-care allowances for elected persons, crèches and family-friendly working hours. However, no main party in the north responded. As a consequence, 'two women with a long involvement in the women's movement discussed the possible opening that the proposed electoral system gave for a women's party to stand in the elections. The discussion (...) concluded that the successful election of representatives drawn from a women's party would act as a shot across the somewhat complacent bows of the existing parties, and could well achieve more than all the years of lobbying in terms of ensuring that women were represented in the political process' (Kilmurray and McWilliams, 1997:6).

⁴ Elisabeth Porter is an Australian academic working in the Department of Sociology at the University of Ulster (Northern Ireland).

Source: Taillon, R. (1992) *Grant-Aided or Taken for Granted? A Study of Women's Voluntary Organisations in Northern Ireland*. Belfast: Women's Support Network, p.18.

By placing the formation of the NIWC in the context of the Northern Ireland women's movement Porter, Kilmurray and McWilliams point in the same direction as Morgan's gender sensitive analysis.

2. The 'gender sensitive analysis': the women's movement

Morgan agrees with Tonge that the electoral system might have given the final impetus to the formation of the NIWC. The latter would however not have come into being had it not been embedded in a social movement existing prior to its formation.

In an interview on 25 July 1998 Morgan suggested that the formation of the NIWC was due to a history of highly skilled yet informal political activism within the Northern Ireland women's movement. Despite the 'troubles' women in Northern Ireland have managed to

conduct coalitions around various 'low-policy issues' in cross-community, single-identity or single-issue campaigns. They learnt that they could improve the situation within their own specific location as either a Catholic or a Protestant by working together. As a result, they were able to set up a whole range of informal networks. The latter were important for the founders of the NIWC because they used these networks to mobilise candidates for the peace elections.

McWilliams' statement seems to support Morgan's analysis. Cited in O'Neill (1996:18), McWilliams locates the secret of the NIWC in the fact that it was able to 'incorporate the informal politics that women in Northern Ireland have been building down the years'.

The dynamism underlying the formation of the NIWC can best be captured by rendering Northern Irish women's informal political activities visible. From V. Spike Peterson's and Anne Sisson Runyan's (1993) overview of the literature on women's antiwar and peace movements as well as from voices of the Northern Irish feminist academic community, such as Eilish Rooney (1992), one can conclude that one of the most far-reaching attempts to conceptualise female collective action in protracted conflicts arises from considerations of third-world feminism by Maxine Molyneux.

In an article on *Mobilization without Emancipation? Women's Interests, the State, and Revolution in Nicaragua* (1985) Molyneux developed two useful concepts allowing to understand what types of women have been involved in the formation of the NIWC and out of what kinds of women's informal networks the NIWC has developed.

First, Molyneux puts forward the concept of 'practical gender interests' (1985: 233). 'Practical gender interests are given inductively and arise from the concrete conditions of women's positioning by virtue of the gender division of labour [and are] usually a response to an immediate perceived need' (ibid.). Political activities coming out of the latter 'are based on neither a shared political analysis of the conflict, nor on a shared feminist agenda' (Rooney, 1992:478). Women from the practical gender front typically belong to the 'com-

munity activism camp' (ibid.:482) and organise at a grass-roots level of political activity.

Recognising that some cleavages clearly do cut across the sectarian divide women at the grass-roots level of political activity were able to form temporary alliances around various issues relating to health, housing, education and child-care despite communal pressures to do otherwise. In an attempt of being practical such collaboration led to the creation of a number of networks (women's groups, community organisations and umbrella organisations, such as the Women's Support Network) over the years of the 'troubles' providing all kinds of safe spaces outside of formal politics where women can meet. The success of these organisations lies in their ability to 'work together on concrete local problems without denying their underlying commitment to their own tradition' (Morgan, 1995:68).

Women from the 'rights camp' (Rooney, 1992:232) typically belong to the strategic gender front. Their 'strategic gender interests' derive from 'an analysis of women's subordination and from the formulation of an alternative, more satisfactory set of arrangements' (Molyneux, 1985:233). 'The demands that are formulated on this basis are usually termed 'feminist' as is the level of consciousness required to struggle effectively for them' (ibid.:233). In Northern Ireland the influence of the strategic gender front has been important in turning 'individual problems into collective demands' (McWilliams and Kilmurray, 1997:2). The basic concept used to achieve this 'is that of using education to empower women (...) to fight for control over their lives, environment, work, creativity, minds and bodies' (Evason, 1991:55).

Women from the strategic gender front have been instrumental in establishing umbrella organisations 'creating links between community women's groups and feminist groups' (Evason, 1991:55). Apart from this, the strategic gender front has encouraged women from the practical gender front to address their specific needs and to debate the politics with 'the capital 'P' of the constitutional question' (McWilliams and Kilmurray, 1997:2).

3. The relative involvement of the practical and the strategic gender front in the formation of the NIWC six weeks prior to the peace elections

From various interviews and from the literature on the NIWC I have concluded that the women involved in the formation of the NIWC belong to the strategic gender front. Although some of its members refuse to identify themselves as feminists, they belong to the strategic gender front in the sense Molyneux (1985) defines it because they share a feminist agenda which consists of achieving political equality with men.

Bronagh Hinds is a key analyst and strategist in the NIWC. She has worked with Oxfam and Gingerbread and is now Director of the 'Ulster People's College' (NIWC, 1998:10), an umbrella organisation in the field of peace and reconciliation.

Monica McWilliams, the leader of the NIWC and the second talks delegate, is a feminist. 'A university professor and pioneering policy analyst in Northern Ireland, Monica has been particularly active in the field of violence against women' (NIWC, 1998:10).

Avila Kilmurray, another key figure of the NIWC, 'has lived and worked in Northern Ireland since 1974, initially as a community worker in Derry and then as Women's Officer for the Transport and General Workers Union. She is currently Director of the Northern Ireland Voluntary Trust, yet another umbrella organisation.

May Blood, a cofounder of the NIWC, is a long-term trade unionist and community activist in the Shankill area of Belfast. She says of herself that she is not a feminist. She has always worked on practical working class issues. Currently, she is employed by the Greater Shankill Partnership. As a cross-community organisation the Greater Shankill Partnership is committed to the regeneration of the Shankill area. Blood also is a representative of the Northern Ireland Partners-

hip Board. As an umbrella group, the partnership administers all peace and reconciliation funds attributed to Northern Ireland by the European Union. Finally, she sits on a number of government boards allowing her to make grass-roots concerns heard by the top-level leadership.

Pearl Sagar, one of two talks delegates, 'has her roots firmly in the loyalist working class community of East Belfast. Prior to her work in the Talks she was the fund-raiser for the East Belfast Community Festival. She also is a member of Women's Information Day Management, one of the women's umbrella organisations in Belfast' (NIWC, 1998:10).

Gerry Gribbon, a lecturer in history and women's studies at a college for further education, has never been involved in mainstream politics. She is a committed feminist and has been involved in gay revolution politics since the early 1970s.

4. The NIWC: a party consisting of 'strategic gender activists' from the grass-roots and from the middle-range leadership

During my field trip in Northern Ireland I also found that the majority of the women from the NIWC, and in particular the key actors, belong to what Lederach (1997:39) calls 'the middle-range leadership'. They make up what I would call a 'strategic middle-range leadership'. However, a number of women from the NIWC have been and still are active in peace and reconciliation groups, in community-relations groups and in the integrated education movement. Therefore I would suggest that the NIWC is also made up of women who belong to 'the grass-roots leadership' (ibid.:40) or what I would call a 'strategic grass-roots leadership'.

With respect to the 'middle-range leadership' Lederach (1997) suggests that it can be delineated along several lines. One approach is to focus on people who enjoy a certain prestige within the

conflict setting. May Blood is a well-respected person within her own community as well as amongst the top-level leadership. Another approach focuses on persons who are highly respected as individuals and/or occupy formal positions in sectors such as education, business, agriculture or health. As an academic, Monica McWilliams is a representative of this category of middle-range leaders. Yet a third approach consists of considering 'the primary networks of groups and institutions that may exist within a setting, such as those linking [women's networks]' (Lederach, 1997:39). As managers of umbrella organisations, Pearl Sagar, Bronagh Hinds and Avila Kilmurray are examples of the third type of middle-range leaders.

In addition, middle-range leaders 'are positioned so that they are likely to know and be known by the top-level leadership' (Lederach, 1997:41) and 'they have connections to the broader context and the constituency that top leaders claim to represent' (ibid.). In other words, they are connected to both the top and the grass-roots level. May Blood said in an interview that she has strong connections to the top-level leadership as well as to the grass-roots. As I will argue in the conclusion of my work usually only a few women have connections to the top-level leadership. Their strength rather lies in their expertise with community development work. This suggests that Lederach's framework needs to be adapted, so that it becomes more 'gender friendly'.

Ann McCann, the NIWC's administrator, belongs to the 'strategic grass-roots leadership'. 'She worked for the peace movement until she moved to the NIWC' (NIWC, 1998:11). Anne Carr, who became a local councillor in 1997, 'was, and remains, active in the women's peace movement, and in the integrated education movement' (ibid.:10). She also belongs to the 'strategic grass-roots leadership'. Again, their strength lies in their expertise with community development work.

Conclusion

Tonge's and Morgan's arguments can be said to be complementary with respect to the development of the NIWC. Tonge points out correctly that the NIWC has been formed because of an electoral system favourable to small parties.

Morgan uncovers the social dynamics behind the NIWC. Together with Molyneux's concept of practical and strategic gender interests it has allowed to discover what types of actors and what kinds of networks make up the social tissue of the NIWC. Figure 1 resumes my findings.

During my field trip in Northern Ireland I found that the practical gender front was not directly involved in the formation of the NIWC. I would argue, however, that the practical gender front has been indirectly involved in the formation of the NIWC. Some of the women from the NIWC have not only started their political life within the practical gender front before they became strategic gender activists but also the practical gender front has been instrumental in setting up some of the networks the NIWC has used in order to mobilise candidates for the peace elections of 1996.

Based on various interviews it became clear to me that the majority of the members of the NIWC, including the core figures, such as Bronagh Hinds and Monica McWilliams, belong to the 'strategic middle-range leadership'. However, there is also a whole range of women involved in the NIWC from the 'strategic grass-roots level leadership'. Since some of the women from the NIWC work closely together with women from the practical gender front I argue that the NIWC is well connected to the practical gender front/the grass-roots. Figure 2 resumes my findings.

From the sources I was able to collect during my field research and from interviews I learnt that although the roots of the Coalition are well embedded in the women's movement the NIWC is not exactly synonymous with the latter. This is especially true with regard to the younger generation of the NIWC. Barbara McCabe, for example, was never involved in the women's movement. Her motivation to join the NIWC arose out of her interest around the issue of participa-

tion. Therefore one can add to Morgan's analysis that the NIWC is also made up of women outside of the women's movement. As a development officer at the Ulster People's College, McCabe belongs to an umbrella organisation which places her within the middle-range leadership.

Finally, an article I brought back from my field trip allowed me to understand that three external events had raised the specific issue of women and decision-making and therefore had also contributed to the formation of the NIWC. First, 'the election of Mary Robinson as president in the Republic of Ireland sent a shot of adrenalin through women's groups and individual female activists across the island. [This was] underpinned by the explicit interest that President Robinson was to continue to show in the work and contribution of local groups, both North and South,' (Kilmurray and McWilliams, 1997:3) to the improvement of women's participation in politics. Second, 'the priority placed on women and decision-making by the European Union Fourth Medium-Term Action Programme and the participation by women from Northern Ireland in the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995' (ibid.) contributed to raise 'the question as to where women were in the political processes in Northern Ireland' (ibid.).

Source: Taillon, R. (1992) *Grant-Aided or Taken for Granted? A Study of Women's Voluntary Organisations in Northern Ireland*. Belfast: Women's Support Network, p.62.

Figure 1
The fundament of the NIWC: women's networks

Figure 2

The NIWC: a party of 'strategic gender activists' from the grass-roots and the middle-range leadership

CHAPTER TWO

The contribution of the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition (NIWC) to the transformation of the Northern Irish Conflict

'We need to be very aware of the fluidity of feminism, which has historically adapted itself to a wide variety of political views ... There is no magical politics that will unite all our aspirations into one grail. Our lives as socialists and feminists express the most acute political and moral tensions. Let us confront them rather than trying to wish them away.'

(E.Wilson cited in McWilliams and Kilmurray, 1997:17)

Introduction

The contribution of the practical gender front to the transformation of the Northern Irish conflict has been officially acknowledged. This seems not to be the case for the strategic gender front.

Hence, after having outlined briefly what contribution women from the practical gender front have made to the peace process I will show which potential for conflict transformation the strategic gender front has brought to the peace process. Since - with a few exceptions - the majority of the women from the NIWC belong to the middle-range leadership, including the key actors, I will argue that it is above all the 'strategic middle-range leadership' that has brought a potential for conflict transformation to the negotiating table. My arguments will be based on the assumption that women develop different yet not better skills while organising as a gender in order to achieve political equality with men.

By linking my findings to Lederach's (1997) integrative approach to conflict resolution I will argue that the NIWC has integrated a 'reconciliation paradigm' (Lederach, 1997:34) within the top-level leadership. Figure 3 will resume my findings.

1. The contribution of the practical gender front to the peace process

The contribution of the practical gender front to the peace process has been acknowledged by the Opsahl Commission⁵. Cited in Ward (1998:152), the Commission contends that 'while there is no simple relationship between women's participation and the resolution of the conflict, the experience of women's involvement in local

⁵ The Opsahl Commission was established as part of initiative '92 to give a report on the impact of citizens on the peace process.

community groups suggests that they could have an important contribution to make in the search for a political and constitutional settlement'.

Typically organising at the grass-roots, the practical gender front has managed to conduct cross-community coalitions on a number of issues resulting in the formation of women's groups, community organisations and informal network organisations. By creating education programmes for women, children's groups and holiday schemes for children their activities provide examples of 'citizen-based diplomacy' (Rupesinghe, 1998:120), giving people 'an opportunity (...) to build personal relationships, dismantle defensive barriers and dispel negative images of one another' (ibid.).

The women at the grass-roots are interesting because they had established contact across the 'social, political, and religious divide' (Porter, 1996:319) long before the Community Relations Council⁶, the Central Community Relations Unit⁷ and scholars in conflict resolution began to underline the importance of improving community relations⁸ as a necessary step to create 'the will for peace' (Rupesinghe, 1998:121). As a result of their networking women in Northern Ireland not only secured the provision of basic social services but they also contributed to the improvement of community relations within Northern Ireland.

⁶ The Community Relations Council was established in January 1996 as an independent organisation to promote better community relations and to advance the acknowledgement of cultural diversity in Northern Ireland.

⁷ **The Central Community Relations Unit is a governmental body.**

⁸ Fraser and Fitzduff cited in Heenan (1997:89) 'understand community relations as work to include work which improves communication and understanding between the two communities, promotes tolerance of diversity and encourages structures to safeguard the rights of all citizens of Northern Ireland. In practice, though, community relations work in Northern Ireland has become synonymous with cross-community relations. (...) This particular interpretation of community relations overlooks the fact that a significant amount of work attempts to overcome and resolve sectarian conflict in Northern Ireland is undertaken within single identity communities. Furthermore as much of the initial community relations work within these communities has been undertaken by women, this narrow interpretation serves to undervalue the importance of their contribution'.

As I will show in chapter three, the NIWC is strongly committed to the improvement of community relations. I argue that this commitment to 'a civil society (or bottom-up) approach to conflict resolution' (Dixon, 1997a) is due to the fact that a number of women from the NIWC belonged to the practical gender front before becoming strategic gender activists.

2. The contribution of the strategic gender front to the peace process

Gender theories are based on the hypothesis that women by virtue of their gender are subordinated to men. By taking this hypothesis as a starting point I argue that the aim of female collective action is to overcome women's continuing subordination to men. Molyneux (1985) suggests that one feature of women's oppression/subordination is its multicausal nature and the extreme variability of its forms of existence across class and nation. As a consequence, according to Molyneux (*ibid.*), female collective action must begin by recognising difference rather than by assuming homogeneity.

More generally I put forward the argument that as long as there exists an asymmetric relationship between men and women, women develop different skills than men while organising collectively. Various feminist authors suggest that the features of female collective action can be best explained by the 'concept of situated knowledge' (McWilliams and Kilmurray, 1997:9) and by the concept of 'rooting' and 'shifting' (*ibid.*:19). Both concepts reflect the idea that women have to take difference rather than homogeneity as a starting point while organising collectively for women's liberation.

Rosalind Brunt, cited in McWilliams (1995:25), describes the concept of situated knowledge as being the recognition that unity among women is not founded on common denominators but 'on ... a whole variety of heterogeneous, possibly antagonistic, maybe magnificently diverse identities and circumstances'. In other words,

women's alliances are based on the recognition that each woman speaks from her own point of view and shares her own situated knowledge. Acknowledging that each woman's perceptions are partial and unfinished, group cohesion flows from the respect for difference/heterogeneity rather than from the consensus around specific issues.

Based on the assumption that each woman brings with her the rooting in her own membership and identity she engages in a process to which 'Italian feminists have referred to as 'rooting' and 'shifting' (McWilliams and Kilmurray, 1997:19). According to McWilliams and Kilmurray (ibid.) the idea is that while each woman speaks from her own point of view she tries at the same time to shift in order to put herself in a situation of exchange with other women who have a different situation and identity. 'The process of shifting does not mean that one has to give up one's own set of values or aspirations. What it does demand is that one is open to change and development as a result of the contact with women with divergent views. This journey involves a sharing of compatible values and goals' (ibid.).

Porter (1997:92) refers to the product of the process of rooting and shifting as being a middle ground which 'affirms gender, religion and cultural identity, as well as the need to transcend the constraints of identity. It is not a compromise position, or a simplistic additional position that adds a bit of this and a bit of that. Rather, it is a strong position that respects diversity, makes space for different forms of individuality, and seeks grounds for commonality'. In other words, for Porter (ibid.) the middle ground is the product of the encounter between 'the tensions created by our differences and our needs for interdependence'.

As a result of the above-described process of constructing group cohesion women have developed several skills. They provide evidence for the fact that if women organise as a gender they bring different yet not better skills to politics/the peace process.

First, the principle of situated knowledge suggests that women have learnt to respect difference.

Second, the process of 'rooting' and 'shifting' implies that women have learnt that any political position is the product of a dynamic process. The outcome of this process is a middle-ground position that is more than the addition of each woman's individual position. Translated to conflict resolution, I argue that the process of 'rooting' and 'shifting' is a process of 'trust building' (Porter, 1997:96). This suggests that women have gained experience in the process of trust building while organising as a gender. More generally I argue that there is a potential for transformation inherent in the process of 'rooting' and 'shifting'. The fact that women recognise the need to transcend the constraints of identity seems to reinforce my argument.

Third, based on the assumption that human language and the capacity to listen are the media through which the process of 'rooting' and 'shifting' takes place I argue that women have not only developed listening skills but also adopted a new political discourse while organising as a gender. Earlier in this chapter I have suggested that women had to find a way of addressing each other which is based on the respect for heterogeneity in order to secure group cohesion. This has a direct implication on the language they choose to address each other. The latter has to be sufficiently inclusive to guarantee the respect for each woman's own identity. In this respect, women have realised that issue-based politics require a degree of homogeneity which is almost impossible to attain within a group characterised by diversity. Instead, they have found it easier to take value- and goal-based politics as a starting point. In such a context, values and goals act as a kind of mediator/catalyst whose role is to allow women to deal creatively with diversity.

R.Wilford, cited in Dixon (1997), seems to support my argument according to which women bring different skills to politics/the peace process. In Wilford's eyes (Dixon, 1997a:12), the promotion of women might have a desirable effect: '(...) firstly (...) female politicians virtually monopolise desirable political traits - the ability to compromise,

practicality, approachability and incorruptibility; and secondly, they are associated with a different agenda from that of men, one more concerned with low policy issues like health, education and welfare which have been marginalised by the preoccupation with high politics'.

The fact that women at the multi-party peace talks on the future of Northern Ireland not only represent a cross-religion, cross-class and cross-sector party reflects the idea that women - by using the skills they have developed while organising as a gender - have been able to create a political space which not only respects diversity but also contains a potential for conflict transformation. By basing their political agenda on agreed values rather than on fixed positions on contested issues, they have provided a mechanism that allows for the process of 'rooting' and 'shifting' to take place.

By introducing this mechanism at the top-level leadership, the NIWC has brought a 'third' option to Northern Irish politics. This option consists of the possibility to negotiate a position which is neither unionist nor nationalist but which flows from both political traditions. From an interview with Barbara McCabe I concluded that for the NIWC the only rational way from which to start to transform the conflict is to consider unionism and nationalism with equal legitimacy. If the recognition of equality is your starting point, McCabe said, you can work towards accommodation.

Now that it has become clear that the NIWC provided a mechanism for conflict transformation it is time to define this mechanism and to show how it works in practice. Acting as a kind of mediator/catalyst the three core values of the NIWC are an effective mechanism for conflict transformation. The three core values of the NIWC are inclusion, equity and human rights.

First, the principle of inclusion concerns the inclusion of women in political processes as well as the 'believe that all parties should be involved in the negotiations' (Porter, 1996:319). 'In earnest of this [belief] the Coalition issued a letter opposing the exclusion of Sinn Fein from the peace talks when they were convened on Monday, 10 Ju-

ne 1996' (McWilliams and Kilmurray, 1997:17). If one takes the stand that a middle-ground position is something which comes out of both political traditions then all parties need to be represented at the negotiating table.

The NIWC also sees 'inclusion as an aspiration in terms of developing a sense of radical democracy in the organisation and governance of society. We must deepen the sense of citizenship that we have grown accustomed to during the operation of representative democracy. This can be achieved by developing the concept of participatory democracy that can draw on the expertise of the many sectors and layers of society' (<http://www.pitt.edu>). Hence, with respect to conflict transformation the principle of inclusion secures the right of all parties to be included in peace talks regardless of the political tradition they represent as well as the inclusion of the citizen's voice by making democracy more radical.

Second, the principle of equity is based on the respect and the equality for all. 'The need for equity covers the broad spectrum of justice issues. Many people have suffered from injustices and discrimination. The NIWC wants a pluralist society that is multicultural, multi-ethnic, and multi-religious, and is based on the respect of equality' (Porter, 1996:319). If one takes the position that each party's views are equally legitimate there seems to be ground for a common solution and hence for conflict transformation.

Third, with respect to human rights the NIWC wants everybody's rights to be respected and guaranteed. 'It is committed to an incorporation of the European Convention on Human Rights, and to the formulation of a Bill of Rights which includes civil and political rights, as well as social and economic standards of living' (Porter, 1996:319). The human rights perspective does not only act as a catalyst for change based on a 'culture of rights' (<http://www.pitt.edu>) but it also provides a whole range of instruments to protect the individual against abuses of fundamental human rights. In this sense, a human rights perspective fully incorporates the refusal to harm and hence also puts a limit to the kinds of instruments that are acceptable in the search for a common solution. So, for example, if one takes a

human rights perspective on the issue of prisoners one could argue that the issue is not about the release or internment of a prisoner but about the human rights of a person. If the latter become the guiding principles as to how to treat a prisoner it becomes clear that any decision needs to take fully into account the respect of a prisoner's fundamental human rights. Equally, the NIWC's believes that one basic human right is to live free from fear of violent attacks. Consequently, this calls for the abstinence of any recourse to violence from any quarter.

The NIWC's stand on the constitutional question resumes what kind of political culture the 'strategic middle-range leadership' has brought to the negotiating table and how this has contributed to conflict transformation. The NIWC 'believed that its strength lay not in taking fixed positions on the divisive constitutional issues, but rather in attempting to address the issues from the perspective of seeking consensus rather than confrontation' (McWilliams and Kilmurray, 1997:13). In fact, from an interview with Barbara McCabe it becomes clear that the NIWC refused to have a fixed position on the constitutional question. McCabe said that if one starts from the perspective of the three core principles - inclusion, equity and human rights - a constitutional position has to flow from these principles.

With respect to inclusion, a constitutional position can neither be based on a constitutional outlook which is strictly unionist nor can it be based on a constitutional position which is strictly nationalist. Instead, it has to be something that encompasses both. By applying the principle of equality a constitutional position has to emerge from the respect for both political traditions as being equally legitimate.

From a human rights perspective - whatever constitutional position one adopts - it has to respect and guarantee everybody's rights. In other words, whatever the constitutional position is going to be it is acceptable to the women from the NIWC as long as it respects the three principles of inclusion, equity and human rights.

3. Embedding a reconciliation paradigm at the top-level leadership

Earlier in this chapter it has become clear that women in Northern Ireland have developed all kinds of skills while organising as a gender. They have learnt to listen to each other. They have developed a new political discourse. They have gained expertise in the process of trust building. They are open for change and new thinking, and finally they see politics as a process from which a middle-ground position can flow. As a result of their success in the peace elections, the NIWC has been able to introduce the possibility for conflict transformation at the top level of politics/the peace process by allowing people to disagree and by encouraging top-level politicians to recognise that dialogue is the only way towards accommodation.

In chapter one I have argued that although the NIWC is made up of both women from the grass-roots and women from the middle range the key figures of the NIWC belong to the 'middle-range leadership'. They can be considered as the 'think tanks' of the NIWC.

Scholars in conflict resolution, such as Jean-Paul Lederach (1997), argue that middle-range leaders have a special potential for transformation building 'on the idea that middle-range leaders (who are often the heads of, or closely connected to, extensive networks that cut across the lines of conflict) can (...) play an instrumental role in working through the conflicts'. Based on this observation Lederach (ibid.) argues that because of their position between the top level and the grass-roots middle-range leaders have a special potential for establishing a relationship- and skill-based infrastructure for sustaining the peace process. Therefore, he suggests that a reconciliation paradigm needs to be introduced at the middle range of both sides of the conflict so that activities can be co-ordinated across all levels.

When applied to the NIWC it appears that its middle-range leaders have a similar approach to reconciliation as Lederach (1997),

namely that reconciliation is a social space which engages the sides of a conflict with each other as humans-in-relationships. However, they did not integrate this reconciliation paradigm at the middle range of society but rather at the top level of both sides in the conflict.

Compared to Lederach the women from the NIWC seem to have a slightly different view concerning the way they perceive social change. Whereas for Lederach social change needs to be built from within the middle range of society, for the women of the NIWC real social change can also occur once political structures have become more democratic. The difference of both approaches lies in the fact that the women from the NIWC challenge existing structures, whereas Lederach takes them as given. Based on the assumption that the nature of today's conflicts is civil, he argues that the solution of contemporary conflict lies within civil society.

In my eyes Lederach's integrative approach to conflict resolution is only truly integrative if it also provides mechanisms of inclusion for women because they make up at least 50% of civil society and hence should have a saying in the kind of peace they would like to become reality. If women are left out of civil conflict resolution, Lederach's framework is yet another structure perpetuating what Galtung (1996) has termed structural violence. However, despite this criticism I argue that Lederach's integrative approach to conflict resolution also makes conflict resolution more democratic. By providing a framework which explains why and how the middle range could be empowered in order to participate in the resolution of contemporary conflicts, Lederach shows an alternative to traditional diplomatic approaches to conflict resolution.

Conclusion

First, I have argued that by working together on a number of issues the practical gender front has contributed to the peace pro-

cess by improving community relations. The NIWC's commitment to the improvement of community relations reflects the fact that some of its members have been gender activists for a long time.

Second, by using feminist political theory I have been able to show that when women organise as a gender they bring different skills to politics/the peace process. I have taken the view that the NIWC has contributed to the transformation of the conflict by bringing these skills to the negotiating table.

Third, from a comparison with Lederach's integrative approach to peace building I have concluded that although the key women of the NIWC and Lederach share the same understanding of reconciliation they believed that a reconciliation paradigm had to be integrated within the top-level leadership rather than within the middle range. The NIWC's position was motivated by their commitment to make sure that women were going to be included at the peace talks. Consequently, I argue that the key figures of the NIWC have contributed to make the peace process more inclusive at the top-level leadership. Figure 3 resumes my findings.

Figure 3

The contribution of women at the grass-roots and within the middle range to the transformation of the conflict in Northern Ireland

CHAPTER THREE

The role of the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition (NIWC) in the multi-party peace talks (1996-1998)

'We are not going into these negotiations with mind-sets but with a mind set for peace. We will have our differences but we will agree to differ. We are committed to keep working until we reach an accommodation'.

May Blood cited in McWilliams and Kilmurray (1997:19)

Introduction

The assumptions made in chapter two have been based on the hypothesis that as long as an asymmetric relationship between men and women exists, women develop different skills than men while organising as a gender. By translating this idea to conflict resolution I have argued that women have taken a different approach to the peace process. While adapting their experiences of 'woman organising as a gender' to conflict resolution they have concluded that conflict is a process.

For them, the peace negotiations provide a political space/an encounter where different yet equally legitimised identities meet in order to be gradually transformed. Having recognised the need to transcend the constraints of identity I argue that the women at the peace talks had the role to lead the parties through the process of 'rooting' and 'shifting' allowing for a middle-ground position to emerge. The mechanism that allows for this process to take place is to consider values and goals as a mediator/catalyst of conflict transformation.

The aim of chapter three is to bring together the theoretical assumptions made in chapter two with the NIWC's experience of the multi-party peace talks. I will show which roles the NIWC played during the 'Talks process [which] took place in Castle Buildings, Stormont, three days a week, from June 1996 until April 1998' (NIWC, 1998:8) and what can be considered to be its major contributions to the multi-party agreement.

I will draw my findings from the very few written sources that exist on the role of the NIWC in the peace talks. More important, I will give voice to a woman who belonged to the back-up team at the talks by transcribing what her personal experience of the peace talks was. Hopefully, this inside perspective will complete my more theoretical assumptions and suggestions outlined in chapter two. Figure 4 will resume my findings.

1. The role of the NIWC at the multi-party peace talks

In chapter one (see table 1) I have explained that the NIWC 'came ninth as a party' (<http://www.pitt.edu>) at the peace elections held in May 1996 'and thus was entitled, being among the top ten parties, to two seats with a back-up team of three [persons] to the talks' (ibid.). As the NIWC's Manifesto below suggests the NIWC has played two major roles at the multi-party peace talks. First, as a party to the conflict the NIWC has made women visible in politics and has introduced a feminist agenda at the top level of political activity. The NIWC has also secured that the citizen's voice was included in the peace process. Second, as a third party the NIWC has facilitated the multi-party peace talks.

'The Women's Coalition brings together women ... from all walks of life. They are Protestant and Catholic, Unionist and Nationalist, Republican and Loyalist. They share two common goals;

- to include women on an equal footing with men;
- to achieve an accommodation on which we can build a stable and peaceful future.'

(McWilliams and Kilmurray, 1997:13).

As a party to the conflict the NIWC has first made women visible in politics. In Northern Ireland 'women (...) have been noticeable by their absence' in formal political structures (McWilliams and Kilmurray, 1997:1). In 1992, while examining the elected political representation the Equal Opportunities Commission of Northern Ireland reported that 'all seventeen members of the Westminster Parliament were men, and that the same applied to the three members of the European Parliament for the region. At the level of local government, representation by women did appear - although only 70 out of a total of 565 elected councillors (12.4 per cent) were women' (ibid.:3).

According to May Blood (<http://www.pitt.edu>) 'one of the coalition's ongoing roles is to provide opportunity for women to engage

with the political process'. As a result the Coalition fought three elections in two years. In 1997 it stood for the British general election and the local government elections in Northern Ireland. In a year's time 'the Coalition more than doubled the vote it had received in the previous talks election of 1996. In the local council elections the Women's Coalition was pleased to record success with the election of a councillor to Down District Council; her name is Anne Carr' (May Blood, *ibid.*). In 1998, following the success of the referendum on the Good Friday Peace Agreement in the Republic of Ireland and in Northern Ireland, the Coalition stood for the Northern Ireland assembly elections and obtained two seats in the new assembly. These are concrete examples of what can be seen as a process of making women visible in politics. Rachel Ward (1997:161) suggests that 'the NIWC may [also] have helped to facilitate women into positions of influence within their respective parties because of the heightened focus on the gender imbalance'. However, according to Ward (*ibid.*) 'this will be a slow process'.

Second, it has made feminist politics. In Molyneux's (1985) eyes, feminist political practice is most likely to succeed if its agenda reflects the needs of women from the practical gender front/the grass-roots. For Molyneux 'it is the politicization of (...) practical gender interests and their transformation into strategic gender interests (...) which constitutes a central aspect of feminist political practice' (*ibid.*:234). By translating this idea to the Northern Irish case study one could argue that the more the NIWC's agenda reflects policies which address the needs of women from the practical gender front the more it makes feminist politics happen in Northern Ireland.

The NIWC's proposition (<http://www.pitt.edu>) for the nomination of 'a Minister for Children and Families', its commitment to the establishment of 'free pre-school education, (...) publicly funded child-care' and its commitment to the establishment of 'labour regulations for all workers' (*ibid.*) which 'must recognise and support the unpaid work of caring for families' (*ibid.*) and which must allow both parents 'to be eligible for realistic periods of parental leave' (*ibid.*) seem to tackle some of the needs of the practical gender front and women in general. In addition, the NIWC also works towards the recognition

that the latter issues are not perceived as 'women specific issues' only but rather as citizens' issues, concerning men and women equally.

While the NIWC is committed to the implementation of feminist political practice 'it does not shirk from the constitutional questions' (<http://www.pitt.edu>). Hence, one could argue that the NIWC is committed, on the one hand, to transform 'low-policy issues' into 'high-policy issues' and, on the other hand, to find a peaceful solution to the Northern Irish conflict.

Finally, it has made the citizen's voice heard at the negotiation table. According to Blood (<http://www.pitt.edu>) 'the Women's Coalition (...) [also] play[ed] a part in ensuring that there [was] external consultation with a wider number of groups representing the community, women, trade unions, business interests, churches, and others, and that the views of these organizations [were] taken account of and fed into any talks process'.

The idea of including the citizen's voice in the peace talks is a corollary of the principle of inclusion. In order to put this idea into practice 'the Women's Coalition (...) developed the idea of a Civic Forum' (NIWC, 1998:8). According to the NIWC 'it is important to extend the range of involvement in politics by creating a completely new body that will complement the work of elected representatives, through participation and representation from the various sectors of civil society - community activists, trade unions and employer bodies, youth groups and the education sector' (ibid.).

As a third party, the NIWC has acted as a facilitator. In chapter two I have stated that the middle-range leaders of the NIWC brought a special potential for conflict transformation to the negotiating table. Based on Lederach's (1997) idea that middle-range leaders can play an instrumental role in working through a conflict I have argued that the NIWC introduced a reconciliation paradigm within the top-level leadership. As mentioned above, the NIWC's reconciliation paradigm is reflected in its manifesto.

Translated to the practice of conflict resolution the inclusion of a reconciliation paradigm in its agenda conferred to the NIWC the role of a facilitator. While it is true that the NIWC was at the same time a party to the conflict, it becomes quite obvious from the literature on the latest peace process that the two women negotiators also endorsed the role of a third party during the peace talks, whose main role was to focus on consensus-building between the parties to the conflict and to make sure that misperceptions resulting from poorly functioning communication were minimised. In this sense, the NIWC has contributed to maximising the mutual understanding between the parties to the conflict.

According to Blood (<http://www.pitt.edu>) 'the Women's Coalition [saw] itself as a catalyst for change, and as a main protector of the need for inclusive and meaningful talks which really address the substantive issues on which [parties] need to achieve accommodation'. Here, the link with the theoretical assumptions I have made in chapter two becomes apparent. I have argued that the reason why the NIWC has been an agent for change lies in the adoption of a political agenda based on values and goals whose function was to act as a catalyst for conflict transformation.

McWilliams (<http://www.pitt.edu>), one of the two women delegates to the multi-party peace talks, supports Blood's argument by saying that the role of the NIWC 'was to help parties with a fixed constitutional position to reach consensus' and that the goal of the coalition was 'to arrive at a set of formal structures people can live with' (ibid.). Furthermore, McWilliams (ibid.) points out that 'the manifesto, agreed by a group made up of all shades of political colour in Northern Ireland, stands as a proof of our commitment to the goal of peace and reconciliation through dialogue, accommodation, and inclusion'.

Porter makes a similar point when she says that 'the [goal of the NIWC was] to negotiate a political accommodation which takes account of all sides of the political spectrum and allows for cultural and political diversity. Such accommodation [was] to work to secure agreement across all interests and parties for a workable solution.

Hence, by shattering the mould of traditional obstinate politics and in being focused on acceptable solutions and new ways of thinking, fresh modes of inclusionary and reconciliatory democratic processes [were] being established' (Porter, 1996:320).

Blood's (<http://www.pitt.edu>) statement according to which 'the Women's Coalition [has paid] attention to process and dynamics [and has] (...) often 'interpret[ed] for others to ensure that differences in position are clear and can be addressed as such, without conflict being exacerbated by confusion over communication or use of language' clearly reflects the idea that the NIWC has functioned as a facilitator to the multi-party peace talks.

'The Coalition also (...) address[ed] outmoded antagonistic, sectarian, sexist behaviour which [was] frequently used as a tool by some parties to avoid substantive discussion and political progress. [In this sense,] the Women's Coalition (...) play[ed] its part in building cross-party agreement, particularly through regular meetings of the four smaller parties at the talks' (Blood, <http://www.pitt.edu>). Again this confirms that the NIWC 'act[ed] as a honest broker in attempting to bridge some of the political divides within the talks' (ibid.).

Not only feminists and the women from the NIWC but also other insiders to the peace talks as well as various newspapers seem to agree that the NIWC played an important role as facilitator at the peace talks. The chairman of the talks (US Senator George Mitchell, cited in *Common Cause: The Story of the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition* (1998:9), for example, stated that 'they are professional, prepared, and I think they have made an enormous contribution to the process'. 'Mo Mowlam, the first female Secretary of State for Northern Ireland agrees [by saying that] one of the things that has helped the talks process is the Women's Coalition' (ibid.). Even the 'Sunday Times has noted that the NIWC were the true facilitators of the Talks' (ibid.).

2. An insider's perspective on the multi-party peace talks

I wish to complete my own findings with an insider's perspective on the peace talks. I transcribed an interview with Barbara McCabe, a member of the talks team, on the 1 September 1998. The transcription allows me to capture a moment of reality as it is seen by somebody else. However, I did some editing regarding the sequence of the arguments. When asked what role the NIWC played during the talks Barbara McCabe answered the following:

'I think over time a lot of the parties involved in the talks came to trust us because we were very open about our positions. We didn't do things like throw up obstacles. (...) We had a complete open-door policy, we talked to anybody. If messages were to be carried from one to another, we did it. (...)

Towards the end one of the most important roles that became obvious to me, I felt, was that we were translators. (...) Everybody in Northern Ireland talks in code[s]. (...) When they say something they may mean something quite different. Somebody else may attach another different meaning to what they are saying, (...) and [we] actually tried to explain to one party what another party meant when they said whatever they said.

And we were in a good position to do that because we had people in the Coalition who were from all of these different perspectives. (...) If the unionists just didn't understand what the nationalists were going on about, why this [was] an issue, we had people in the Coalition who are nationalists, already engaged in discussion with unionists, and able to explain what the issue [was] and why this [was] an issue (...). And vice versa, if the nationalists just didn't understand a position that the unionists wanted to take, we were also in a position to explain why they were in that position.

So I think we did that. (...) [In the end] (...) there were sections in the agreement that we were asked to write [because we] knew the

language that everybody can live with. All of that flowed from the make-up of the Coalition and the fact that it was people who were unionist and who were nationalist and who kept that mind-set. (...) As I already said, any of the positions we took as a Coalition was already the result of a negotiation process within the Coalition before it actually went into the negotiation process.

I think that the other thing was that because of not having a fixed constitutional position, and instead working out from the basic principles - and because we did that all the time - (...) within two years other parties began to understand where we were coming from and how we (...) had an internal consistency which they found quite difficult to argue against. (...) In the end, (...) the civil servants (...) said that they thought that we got more of what we wanted in the agreement than any other party. (...) The reason for that was because we were concerned with processes and with starting off right and then working out to whatever position would make the principles come into practice. (...)

[Then] there were several parties who came into the talks along with ourselves - we were completely new (...) - and we were really (...) very inexperienced, especially at the whole sort of negotiating structure and (...) roles of procedure, (...) standing orders and all these sorts of things. (...) We had a number of women in the Coalition who - not in a political sense but in other respects - were very used to working in that sort of environment and would actually work through those processes with the other new parties. So, in the early days there was a certain amount of training (...) involved with some of the newer parties. (...) So that, I think, was another role. (...) There was a certain amount of sitting down with people and talking through not only what this was all about but also where political parties were meant to have a political influence on and what the consequences of certain rules and procedures may be further down the line.

So, I suppose at the very early stage some of the women in the Coalition who were very strong strategic thinkers led that strategic thinking to the smaller parties (...) and actually formed (...) 'the group

(...) of four' [NIWC, UDP, PUP and the Labour Coalition], which was the four smaller parties doing things together and taking common positions (...). That was a stage when you weren't having unionist/nationalist debates, you were having decision-making debates and what the role of small parties should be. So, there was obviously a common interest for them to work together. (...) I think that the confidence of dealing with legal documents (...) started off with the Coalition, but also being very pro-active and encouraging other parties not to feel intimidated by that. (...) I think it is a way of trying to co-ordinate political thought (...), and that was quite an important role for the Coalition.

And I think the fact that this was a group of women was good because we were able to suggest things which we felt if some of the other parties, namely men, suggested them they would just be immediately dismissed (...) like (...) social and economic issues. (...) The issue of prisoners was [also] one [of these delicate issues]. (...) The Women's Coalition didn't have any prisoners, and we took it upon ourselves to take the position (...) of not addressing the parties that had prisoners (...). They all had (...) lots of interests to what was happening to prisoners and we didn't. But in the whole sort of mind-set of Northern Ireland politics, which is everything has to be seen in 'us' and 'them' (...), we broke that up a bit. (...) What we did was that we brought to other parties a perspective that they couldn't ignore in the same way they could ignore Sinn Fein (...). I mean if Sinn Fein, the UDP and the PUP spoke up for a prisoner release, the reaction of some parties would be that [they] would say that [anyway]. Whereas when we stand up and speak in favour of prisoner release, they can't say that [we] would say that anyway. They have to think about why we were saying that. (...)

We specifically addressed the parties that were hostile to prisoner release, and we specifically did it with the argument that said we do not have prisoners either but we do have an interest in the success of the peace process, and the issue of prisoners is a substantial element to a successful peace process. (...) So, we do not have a personal interest in them but we have this 'bigger' interest in the peace process. (...) We were very repetitive, and (...) practically

everything we said was underlined by the argument that this was for a successful peace process. So, again it was that issue of being consistent which puts you on the side of different parties at different times, which they stated off seeing as something that was very inconsistent. (...) But over time they began to realise that because we were starting from the position of principles plus the notion that a peace process was not only possible but necessary (...) they began to understand how we worked things out. (...)

We [also] consistently argued for [Sinn Fein] to be in the talks. When they weren't in the talks we met with them outside the talks because we felt it was important that they be kept in touch with what was happening and that they didn't simply rely on (...) the media. (...)

Last winter [1997] we had a new [outbreak] of loyalist violence (...) there was an indictment (...) to have the UDP thrown out. (...) We were the only party that met with the UDP saying to them what we felt the situation was. (...) We also met with the Secretary of State and we passed on their perspective to her and her perspective back to them. And in the end we offered advice about what the next move should be. (...) We were the only party that called for them to be kept in the talks, which didn't mean that we were just saying: (...) 'never mind about all the killings, stay in the talks anyway'. (...) What we were asking them to do was something we thought was much more difficult than just leaving the talks. We were asking them to go back to their loyalist paramilitary organisation to declare a cease-fire in much clearer terms and to retract a terrible statement they [had made to justify the killings]. (...) We were very angry at the other parties to chuck people out of the talks. [It] is the easy thing to do (...) when other more constructive [ways] could be [found to deal] with the situation.

I think a lot of people learnt from us like [for example] the civil servants (...) in that we were very determined - well I suppose it's the old scenario where half of the people that you are working with think that you shouldn't be there, but that you should be in the kit-

chen doing the dishes - that we [were] going to do this a lot better than they are capable of, [somehow] to prove ourselves.

We tried to be really problem-solving in our attitude, so it was not [like saying] 'oh dear what a terrible disaster', it was to sit down and work out what to do. (...) [So, for example when] the North Commission produced a report on contentious parades we realised that it was very close to our position (...). We went off and we commissioned a parliamentary draftsman to write us a law. (...) We then presented it to the government. 'You don't have time, we did it for you!' It was literally the North Report converted into legislation. (...) From the Report coming out to our draft legislation was one week. (...) We had the civil servants coming (...) to us saying: 'How did you do that, it would take us six month to do that'. (...) It was one of our ways trying to maximise our influence, [to show] that you can do the work, that you can produce the goods. (...) We always tried to use the same tactic (...) regardless of whoever it [was] (...) [namely] to produce a document that was as complete as possible.

We often had conversations in our office saying that (...) we have a 'real' life too. Do this, but stop it, and go home and see your family instead of (...) sitting around and having [useless] discussions [about the other parties]. (...) [We were] thinking about the other lives we all had (...) outside. When asked whether she thought if this was 'women specific' she answered that maybe, but one thing she was sure of was that she felt 'that these people had no life outside of politics'.

3. The achievements of the NIWC

As a facilitator the NIWC has contributed 'to the final drafting [of the multi-party peace agreement]' (NIWC, 1998:9). In an interview, Barbara McCabe said that according to her the constitutional position of the NIWC has become reality and is reflected in the pea-

ce agreement which explicitly recognises the equality of both political positions.

As a party to the conflict the NIWC (1998) contributed to promoting its own unique principles and proposals. So, according to the NIWC (ibid.:9) they 'were the only party proposing to acknowledge and seek to address the suffering of victims of violence in the reconciliation process'. They also consider themselves as having been 'the only party to place integrated education and the right of women to full and equal participation on the agenda' (ibid.). They also 'insisted that a commitment to community development should be included to complement the recognition of the importance of economic development' (<http://www.pitt.edu>). In this latter context, the NIWC 'believe[s] that an adequate safety net for all citizens is the basis of a democratic society. (...) This includes enhancing co-operation and joint work where appropriate across the border as well as between east and west'.

Knowing that women are strongly represented within the community activism camp and on condition that resources are allocated in a non-discriminatory way, this policy should improve the situation of women at the grass-roots level of political activity.

'Unfortunately, though the [NIWC] persuaded the PUP, the UDP, Sinn Fein, the Labour Coalition and the British and Irish governments of the merits of [an] inclusive and proportional electoral system, the other three parties [DUP, SDLP and UUP] did not support it' (NIWC, 1998:9). In the future, the NIWC will therefore have to concentrate on how to make the electoral system more women-friendly. This will, as Ward (1997) indicated, indeed be a slow process.

On the citizens' front, the NIWC has 'successfully lobbied for [a] Civic Forum. [They] argued for a comprehensive independent review of the police service. There will be such a review. [They] argued for the release and reintegration of politically motivated prisoners as a necessary part of any settlement, and that a review of sentencing, release and licensing should form the basis of reintegration. There will be such a review. [They] argued that solid community infrastructure

combats social exclusion. [In this respect] the Agreement commits the government, and later the Northern Ireland Assembly to such a policy' (NIWC, 1998:9).

Conclusion

My own findings as well as the interview with Barbara McCabe give evidence that the NIWC has effectively led the parties through what has been referred to in chapter two as a process of 'rooting' and 'shifting'. Indeed, while each party was encouraged to speak from its own point of view, the NIWC helped the parties to put themselves in a situation of exchange with each other. Facilitating this process by acting as a translator, the NIWC encouraged the parties to agree on common values and goals. The latter can be said to be a catalyst for change.

The Peace Agreement gives evidence for the fact that the parties have agreed to share common values and goals. In section 2(i) of the agreement, for example, the parties endorse a commitment to 'recognise the legitimacy of whatever choice is freely exercised by a majority of the people of Northern Ireland with regard to its status, whether they prefer to continue to support the Union with Great Britain or a sovereign united Ireland' (<http://www.nio.gov.uk>).

With respect to human rights in section 6(1) of the Peace Agreement

'the parties affirm their commitment 'to the mutual respect, the civil rights and the religious liberties of everyone in the community. Against the background of the recent history of communal conflict, the parties affirm in particular the right of free political thought; the right to freedom and expression of religion; the right to pursue democratically national and political aspirations; the right to seek constitutional change by peaceful and legitimate means; the right

to freely choose one's place of residence; the right to equal opportunity in all social and economic activity, regardless of class, creed, disability, gender or ethnicity; the right to freedom from sectarian harassment; and the right of women to full and equal political participation' (<http://www.nio.gov.uk>).

The citation above also gives evidence that the NIWC contributed to secure that women will no longer be ignored in political processes. It is, however, quite difficult to evaluate to what extent the NIWC has been able to put its feminist agenda into practice. I have argued that since women are strongly represented in community groups and on condition that resources are distributed in a non-discriminatory way, women should be able to benefit from the commitment to community development. This is endorsed in section 6(13) of the peace agreement. Figure 4 resumes my findings concerning the role of the NIWC during the peace talks.

Hopefully the two women from the NIWC who were elected to the new assembly will be able to pursue the NIWC's commitment to feminist political practice. Hence, after the conclusion of the peace talks 'we [now] await the unfolding of [the NIWC's] story' (Porter, 1996:317) concerning the realisation of feminist politics in the new assembly.

Figure 4
The role of the NIWC in the multi-party peace talks

CONCLUSION

'The Northern Ireland Women's Coalition has now effectively moved beyond the comfort zone of lamenting and lobbying about the lack of women's involvement in decision-making. It is now at the 'scene of the crime' in Northern Ireland and this brings with it an extensive range of responsibilities as well as opportunities'.

(McWilliams and Kilmurray, 1997:18)

By applying Molyneux's (1985) concepts of practical and strategic gender interests to the NIWC I have concluded in chapter one that the women from the NIWC belong to the strategic gender front because they all share a feminist agenda consisting of achieving political equality with men. Most interestingly however, the interviews revealed that there exists a discrepancy between the way some of the women in the Coalition act and how they perceive themselves. Although they all act like feminists in their struggle for the achievement of political equality with men, not all of them perceive themselves as feminists. Some even overtly declare that they are not feminists. It would be interesting for the women of the NIWC to investigate the reasons for this apparent paradox a bit further.

I would therefore suggest that the NIWC should organise a workshop addressing what one could call a 'behaviour-perception paradox'. The aim of the workshop should be to find out why some people feel uncomfortable with the term feminist and how feminist the NIWC agenda is.

The workshop should start by asking the participants to write on a sheet of paper whether they think they are feminists or not. The leader of the workshop would then collect the sheets. In a next step the leader of the workshop would define the concept of strategic gender interests. Based on this definition the participants would be asked to make a list of what they consider to be the strategic objectives of the NIWC. In a next step the leader of the workshop would draw attention to the fact that in the literature most of the things they have put on their lists are termed feminist.

The leader of the workshop would then refer to the results of the investigation with which the workshop began. [If my conclusions from the interviews are correct, there should be both women who see themselves as feminists and others who do not]. The participants should be asked if they see any advantages or disadvantages in labelling themselves as feminists. Furthermore, the question could be investigated why some of the participants distance themselves from feminism. Is this due to the fact that it is disadvantageous to overtly declare oneself as a feminist, or is it rather due to the way people

use the term feminist, or is it because of the behaviour of some feminists with which some women cannot identify? Is there a potential for conflict inherent in the fact that some women within the Coalition are feminists and others are not? If the answer is yes, Molyneux's concept of strategic gender interests should help to show that, at the end of the day, they all share a kind of 'feminist' agenda, but that the overtly feminist women are maybe more radical while the 'non-feminists' are less radical in what they would include in a feminist agenda.

If all women from the NIWC recognise that they share an agenda which is termed feminist in the literature it should be easier for them to negotiate what needs to be put on such an agenda. In other words, it should be easier for them to decide how 'feminist' their agenda should be.

Based on the findings of chapter one, namely that most of the women of the NIWC belong to the 'strategic middle-range leadership' I have maintained in chapter two that the 'strategic middle-range leadership' has made an important contribution to the transformation of the Northern Irish conflict. I argued that, as long as there is an asymmetric relationship between men and women, women develop different skills than men while organising as a gender. This has allowed me to say that the NIWC led the parties to the conflict through what Italian feminists have referred to as a process of 'rooting' and 'shifting' allowing for a middle-ground position to emerge. Using Lederach's theory of conflict resolution I have also argued that the NIWC introduced a reconciliation paradigm at the top-level leadership.

However, although I used Lederach's framework in order to highlight the contribution of the female middle-range leadership to the transformation of the Northern Irish conflict, I felt that it reflects an analysis of 'reality' as Lederach sees it and not as other cultures or in my case the other gender interprets or maps it. I noticed, for example, that while all Lederach's definitions of the middle range apply to men, it is more difficult to apply them to female middle-range leaders. Three out of four definitions of the middle range

clearly lead to a selection of male rather than female middle-range leaders. Women are not only clearly underrepresented within 'formal positions of leadership in sectors such as education, business, agriculture, or health' (Lederach, 1997:41) but also they usually are not 'prominent within a particular institution' (ibid.) and they do not normally 'enjoy the respect of people' within the conflict setting.

Lederach also states that middle-range leaders have a special potential for transformation building because 'they are connected to both the top level and the grass-roots level'. This definition is rather discriminatory when applied to women. The fact that the establishment of the NIWC is a consequence of women's unfruitful lobbying to become included at the top level of political activity suggests that it is not only harder for women to be taken seriously by the top-level leaders, but it is also more difficult for women to establish links with the top-level leadership. Within the NIWC, for example, there are only a few middle-range leaders who are directly linked to the top-level leadership.

Since I have found that the strength of female activists lies in their strong connections to the grass-roots as well as in their expertise with community development work I suggest that women should be included in civil conflict resolution on the basis of their relative involvement in community development work.

Clearly, if conflict resolution practitioners want to avoid that the same happens in conflict resolution as has happened in politics, namely that women have to secure their inclusion in conflict resolution before even thinking of how to resolve a conflict, mechanisms need to be put in place to secure women's inclusion in civil conflict resolution at all levels of political activity. This might imply, for example, the organisation of workshops to train women in conflict resolution.

In chapter three I have argued that the NIWC was both a party to the conflict as well as a third party. As a party to the conflict it made sure that women were included in the peace process. Cited in McWilliams and Kilmurray (1997:16) Bronagh Hinds stated that the

choice to form a women-only party 'was proved to be right in the end [since] it has provided the only women at the Negotiation Table (of the Peace Talks)'. I have also shown that the NIWC has a feminist political agenda. However, it is yet early days to evaluate to what extent the two delegates to the new assembly will be able to translate the NIWC's feminist agenda into practice. As Ward suggested, this will be a rather slow process. For the moment it can be said that the NIWC secured - by successfully lobbying for a Civic Forum - that the citizens' voice is going to be better represented in the future. By including a clause committing the parties to the conflict to community development it made yet another important contribution to the peace agreement.

As a third party the NIWC endorsed the role of a facilitator. After having explained the possible reasons of the NIWC to become a facilitator in chapter two, I took the opportunity in chapter three to provide empirical evidence to support my theoretical assumptions. After having found out in chapter two that because women's oppression is multi-causal, female collective action must be based on the recognition of difference/heterogeneity I have maintained that the NIWC's value-based agenda provided a catalyst for change within the top-level leadership. I have supported this argument by showing that the peace agreement provides evidence for the fact that the parties have agreed on common values on which they can build a sustainable future. By giving voice to one of the members of the talks team I have been able to broaden my analysis. The interview is meant to complete my perspective as an outsider with an insider's perspective on the peace talks.

Although the peace talks were presented as a success by the media Brendan O'Neill (1996:19) made an interesting statement with which I wish to conclude my dissertation. According to him the peace process was 'blatantly undemocratic' (Ward, 1997:159) because small parties had 'almost as much clout at the talks' as the bigger parties. O'Neill argues (1996:19) that 'the electoral process [was] gerrymandered to ensure that nobody [was] represented, not even the political parties themselves. As a result, an organisation like the Women's Coalition, which represents virtually nobody, [could] waltz into

the talks, claim the moral high ground as the 'representatives' of a beleaguered minority, and set a new agenda'. 'The Women's Coalition was not elected by the people to discuss the future of Northern Ireland. It was effectively appointed by the British government to dilute the talks and to keep a check on any silly ideas about majority rule and democracy' (ibid.).

Annie Campell (<http://www.pitt.edu>), a member of the NIWC, counters: 'I understand and respect the depth of feelings of anger over (...) [the peace talks] which can appear to be a facade, but we had to take advantage of this opportunity. We were the only ones pushing for inclusion of everyone - even Sinn Fein (...) without a cease-fire'. Although I argue that the Coalition has to live with the ambiguity that it got into the peace talks because of an undemocratic electoral system, it seems to be the only party who '[raised] new ideas about democracy' (McWilliams and Kilmurray, 1997:20).

In my eyes, 'the 30 May elections and the ensuing all-party negotiations serve as a timely reminder that the British government' (O'Neill, 1997:19) has not yet finished to deliver democracy in Ireland. Therefore, for a sustainable peace process to become reality Britain will have to continue to assist Northern Ireland in its difficult journey towards democracy.

Source: Taillon, R. (1992) Grant-Aided or Taken for Granted? A Study of Women's Voluntary Organisations in Northern Ireland. Belfast: Women's Support Network, p.42.

Chronology

- 1993 Downing Street Declaration issued (Joint Declaration for Peace) by the British Prime Minister, John Major, and the Irish Taoiseach (Prime Minister), Albert Reynolds. It confirms that there is to be no change in the constitutional status of Northern Ireland without the consent of the majority. The future of Northern Ireland should be self-determined by the Irish people on a north and south basis.
- 1994 IRA announces cease-fire. Combined Loyalist Military Command reciprocates six weeks later. Establishment of the Forum for Peace and Reconciliation in October 1994 following the cease-fires announced by the IRA and loyalist paramilitary organisations. The forum aims at the pursuit of 'lasting peace and reconciliation by agreement among all the people of Ireland.
- 1995 Daylight troop patrols end in most areas. Framework Documents published, calling for a devolved Northern Ireland Assembly and cross-border political and economic bodies.
- 1996 Mitchell Commission proposes decommissioning of paramilitary weapons parallel to all-party talks. The British Government calls elections to a 'Peace Forum'. The IRA resumes violence by detonating a bomb at Canary Wharf in London which kills two people. Sinn Fein are excluded from multi-party peace talks beginning on 10 June 1996.
- 1997 New Labour Government insists that the 'settlement train is leaving' at round-table talks in September. IRA renews its cease-fire in July to facilitate Sinn Fein's entry to these talks. Sinn Fein enters talks on 15 September 1997. All-party talks remain a distant prospect, however, as the DUP and UK Unionist Party stay away.
- 1998 Good Friday Peace Agreement signed by the parties to the conflict and accepted in a referendum both in the south and in the north of Ireland.

List of abbreviations

| | |
|--------|--|
| DUP | Democratic Unionist Party |
| INCORE | Initiative on Conflict Resolution and Ethnicity, University of Ulster&United Nations University |
| IRA | Irish Republican Army |
| NIWC | Northern Ireland Women's Coalition |
| PUP | Progressive Unionist Party |
| SDLP | Socialist and Democratic Labour Party |
| UDP | Ulster Democratic Party |
| UKUP | UK Unionist Party |
| UUP | Ulster Unionist Party |

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