Women's Responses to "Peace Women"

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Cet article explore les facteurs sociaux, politiques et structurels qui pourraient expliquer plusieurs des réactions spécifiques des groupes de femmes pacifistes aux conflits de l'Irlande du

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Nord au début des années 70. Le militarisme des femmes de diverses classes sociales et leurs positions politiques face à l'Etat, ont posé un sérieux défi aux groupes de femmes qui militaient pour la paix, non seulement pour organiser collectivement les femmes de l'OAS, mai aussi pour formuler la nature même de leur réaction à la violence de l'Etat. Si des femmes ont une vision différente de la "paix" c'est peut-être à cause de leur rôle politique dans les structures dominantes plutôt que le leur action collective commes "femmes."

The women's peace movement in Northern Ireland began to surface in the early 1970s as the contemporary conflict spiraled out of control following the repression of civil rights marches by Stormont—the Unionist dominated government—and British-led security forces. Two women's peace groups emerged in this environment of growing polarization and militarism. Many women of Northern Ireland—especially in working class areas—were increasingly becoming politicized by the conflict because of how it was affecting their families and communities. Women Together for Peace (WT) was founded in Belfast in 1970 after a series of sectarian riots had rocked nationalist and unionist working class communities, bringing the British army onto the streets and renewing militant republican activism. A maternalist and ecumenical vision shared by a Protestant and Catholic woman, WT represented one of the earliest attempts to organize large numbers of women in Northern Ireland as "women" and "mothers" in response to gender conditions imposed by the conflict. By contrast, the Derry Peace Women (DPW) was founded in 1972 by a small spontaneous group of Catholic women following Bloody Sunday, the suspension of Stormont and the imposition of Direct Rule from Westminister,

Britain. Although these two groups certainly shared similar maternalist influences in their peace activism, their projects for peace were shaped largely by different social discourses and material conditions of militarism. Nowhere is this so clear as in the case of their responses to internment in the early 1970s.

Under the "Special Powers Act" in Northern Ireland (August 1971-mid 1970s) internment was implemented under the British-led security forces in a campaign known as "Operation Demetrius" intended to crush the IRA. Between 1971-1972, 35,000 house searches and hundreds of arrests took place in largely working class Catholic nationalist and republican areas of Northern Ireland. However, many of those arrested were actually non-paramilitary/political opponents of the Stormont regime in Northern Ireland, and now it is widely acknowledged in scholarship on the conflict in Northern Ireland that internment was a political disaster and military failure.

However, the responses of women peace activists to internment seem to have varied considerably at the time. Critical geo-political conditions—including differences in the nature conflict and militarism and class factors, as well as specific social and political discourses (e.g., ecumenism versus civil rights) in various locations—may have played a strong role in shaping the perspectives of activists on the issue.[1]

Several important questions need to be raised about women's peace groups in Northern Ireland: How might maternalist and essentialist discourses in the wider political and social setting of the conflict have impinged upon the construction of "peace women" in Northern Ireland? What were the effects of militarized discourses as well as militarist campaigns on the development of their peace projects? To what extent were the responses of women's peace groups to internment shaped by different class and political positionings towards the state? Also, at a broader level, what might this analysis offer in the way of insights about the limits or potential of women's coalitions (feminist or non-feminist) in challenging state militarism and violence?

While Women Together and the Derry Peace Women shared in common the influence of "maternalism" in their discourses around peace, a female essentialist ideology emerged more clearly in WT's early records.[2] The "gender trope" of "peace woman" seemed to draw upon wider social discourses defining women in traditional terms as

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"peace-loving," life-giving," "caretakers of the family." The binary construction of "Peace Women" and "Men of Violence" appears to have provided a useful construct for mainstream media and political authorities who pressured nationalist and republican communities to expose "the men of violence." Who better to achieve this, than wives and mothers: the presumed "natural peacemakers" of the domestic sphere? Inevitably, the "peace woman" construct set women peace activists at this time against, not only men within their communities but also against other women—especially those for whom the issue of peace involved the much more political issue of justice. And, although many in women's peace groups may have seen themselves as unpolitically motivated, the highly political nature of their social context would have rendered very different interpretations, thereby complicating the very process of peace-building for women activists in Northern Ireland.

"Public Silence" and "Private Dialogue"? Responses in Women Together for Peace, Belfast

On November 26, 1970, under armed escort by the army and police, several hundred Protestant and Catholic women attended the founding meeting of Women Together for Peace in a "Dedication to Peace" ceremony at the War Memorial Hall in Belfast. As the WT leadership was officially inaugurated on this occasion, the newly appointed Chair, Monica Patterson urged women to use their influence to "resist and prevent violence in their streets." One of their explicitly stated aims was: "to give women a corporate strength to resist undesirable pressures and use their influence for peace." To this end, the leadership drew upon women's frustrations with the conditions of the conflict in an appeal for unified opposition amongst women to "violence." However, who and what would they oppose? This largely depended on how they defined "violence" and "peace." Several early WT reports described how their members (in largely working class "riot" areas) acted as human shields, stopping riots, theft, and general intimidation by loyalist or republican pressures within their communities. The WT organization also offered women a place to grow and have friendships with other women, a safe place to talk, and a general refuge from the everyday struggles they faced in a "war-zone." Although the WT leadership rejected the image of femi-

nism in justifying a "woman-only" group, they nonetheless highlighted the positive role they could play in strengthening women's self-confidence, developing their commu-

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nity leadership skills and providing a place for women to learn about each other "across sectarian divides." Established as a formal organization with chair, executive and administrative committees and area groups, and reaching out to women across communities, the WT leadership soon boasted a membership of "500 Roman Catholic women and Protestant women from both the "quiet areas" and the "riot areas" of Belfast and beyond" (*Irish News* 1970; *Newsletter, Women Together,* Geelan).

Following the election of hard-line unionists to Stormont in March 1971, tough military measures were to be taken against those suspected of republican activism in largely Catholic working class communities with the government's intention of crushing the IRA.[3] The resulting implementation of internment meant that women in these communities were significantly positioned against the state. Catholic working class women became increasingly politicized as they were deprived of fathers, sons, husbands, brothers—interned, injured or killed by the British-led security forces. As a result of this location in the conflict, many nationalist and republican women came to view WT's maternalist project of non-violence as dangerously antagonistic to their own maternal and community interests. WT was taken to task for what was seen at this time as their almost exclusive focus on ending paramilitary/street violence and an apparent refusal to condemn state violence including internment. Republican activist Maire Drumm—whose husband had been interned—argued: "Every woman wants peace, but we want peace with justice." Despite WT's denial, a belief soon began to emerge within nationalist and republican quarters, that WT was somehow complicit in state/military campaigns to defeat the IRA, and they were accused of encouraging

women to "hand over suspected IRA terrorists" to the security forces (*Sunday Press; Daily Mail*).

Perhaps it was because WT saw themselves as a non-political, ecumenical and reconciliationist organization, that their public response to internment was silence. There was some suggestion in the archival documentation that this silence may have been necessary because of fears that any public stance by WT to oppose internment would result in a "loss of Protestant support for WT." Perhaps it was also that members saw WT was a safe haven or refuge from political conflict in which friendship between women (and this was extremely important in a "war zone" where women could become very isolated)

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might flourish. However another insight has also emerged in the interviews conducted with WT activists. While their public response of silence may have been a logical result of their overall strategy for "reconciliation" between the communities, their private response seemed quite different. For Protestant unionist and Catholic nationalist women could come together often for the first time in WT to discuss the "dramatic events" taking place and share their different understandings of what was going on within various communities (Interview, July 1999). So, while WT was evidently silent in public on the issue of internment, this does not seem to have been the case behind closed doors—in more private settings of each other's homes.

"Political Protest And Diplomacy"? The Derry Peace Women, Derry

The Derry Peace Women was a very small loosely organized group established in May 1972 in direct response to the acceleration of violence between the IRA and the security forces following Bloody Sunday and the fall of the Stormont government. The DPW was founded by five women who led a mass protest of local Catholic women at the Official IRA headquarters in Derry when a young British soldier from their community—Ranger William Best—was killed by the Officials as part of a larger republican campaign to target the British army in Northern Ireland following Bloody Sunday.[4]Describing their motives for this protest, the DPW highlighted several key issues: a maternal response as well as a nationalist community response to Best's death; a contradiction of the Official IRA's claim to represent their community by

killing Best; and their opposition to republican military (offensive) campaigns. They did not however claim to speak for their community, but rather spoke out against the killing as "women and mothers who have suffered the most." Indeed, their outrage at the Official's killing of Ranger Best provoked the DPW to accuse the IRA of doing the same as the British Army in their community. Incensed that such an act be committed in their names, the DPW demanded that the Officials "cease their firing and stick to their defence." Within days of the DPW protest, the Official IRA announced a permanent cease-fire, leaving the Provisional IRA as the sole agency of republican militancy (*Irish Times* 1972).

The DPW response to internment was quite different to that of WT—largely because this group was operating under different conditions, as well as being located in a specific position to the state. Coming solely from working class Catholic nationalist areas where they felt some of the worst effects of the conflict, and having been either involved or supportive of the Civil Rights Movement (which began in Derry), the DPW roundly condemned all forms of violence—including internment. They called publicly for an end to internment—which they felt only made young Catholic men and women in their areas join the IRA—especially as they routinely witnessed the security forces searching their houses and dragging their male relatives off to jail. The small close-knit nature of the Derry community and their positioning towards the state gave them an intimate knowledge of the conditions of militarism at several different levels. As a result, the DPW viewed the IRA as a product rather than a cause of the violence in their community. For them, the roots of the conflict lay in larger socio-economic and political structures that required political solutions, not military ones. Their pleas to "end all violence" criticized the role of state military and police forces in accelerating the violence in their community: "Every death means another recruit for the Provisionals and we want the violence and killing to stop. We want peace..." (*Irish Press*). Therefore, the DPW strategy for peace—which began initially with a protest against the Official IRA actions—soon became one of dialogue and diplomacy with parties on all sides of the conflict—including the British Army, the Police and political leaders—North and South.

Challenges And Achievements of Women's Peace Groups

So, what happened to these groups? According to the few available records that exist, the Derry Peace Women survived as a group only until around the time of the Peace People Marches of the late 1970s, while the Women Together organization continues to thrive even today. Further analysis of the development of each group may yield important insights about how women—located differently in terms of class, culture, political identity and

especially in relation to the state—come together in collective ways to oppose violence and find peaceful solutions to conflict. Clearly each of these groups faced serious challenges in their efforts to peace-build—especially under the structural dimension of violence—where material conditions and social discourses affected women so diversely. A key challenge facing women's peace groups in Northern Ireland was largely ideological and political. The binary construction of "peace woman" versus "men of violence" within prevailing essentialist and maternalist discourses created a complex structural bind[5] for women peace activists—a bind in which gender identity could be made to serve specific political agendas and military campaigns of the state against those of a given community.

Some key challenges included:

1) Militarized public discourses (e.g., media, political speeches)—"war talk"—which instead of trying to create deeper understandings of the conflict, only served specific political agendas of "the powers that be" thereby further polarizing the communities involved.
2) Alienation, ostracism and even abuse from the very communities in which groups were trying to achieve some form of peace (e.g., being called traitors).
3) Addressing issues of difference amongst women as well as internal conflict within women's peace groups (which sometimes resulted in resignations and/or the gradual decline of members).
4) Defining "peace" and developing collective strategies to oppose violence at all levels of society in Northern Ireland.

Reflections of former members in both WT and the DPW reveal that some paid a high price for their peace activism during the early 1970's in Northern Ireland. A former member of the Derry Peace Women was most explicit: "...I suppose if it saved a life, one life, it was worthwhile, but I think if I had to do it again, I wouldn't. We really suffered for speaking our minds." This former member of the Derry Peace women also indicated her sense of betrayal not only by her community but also various politicians in Northern Ireland, underlining the structural bind within which they had found themselves at the height of the conflict:

Now, when I look back, I feel we were just a tool to be used by politicians. We were a Godsend at the time, because nobody knew where to turn or what to do, even John Hume. Whenever we talked to John he said that left the door open now for him to talk to Whitelaw [William Whitelaw—Northern Ireland Secretary] because nobody was talking to anybody....
(Kerr 42)[6]

A former WT member from working-class West Bel-

fast—who along with others, had experienced physical attacks during her involvement in the Peace People Marches—indicated that she did not support "peace at any price" instead highlighting the importance of "friendship" over peace. Here she described WT as "a life-line" in the midst of her hard circumstances at the time (Interview, Nov. 1999).

However, while structural dimensions of violence and militarized public discourses bore grave impacts for women's peace groups, documentary evidence indicates that the achievements of women's peace groups in Northern Ireland at the height of conflict were many. They included:

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•friendship and support (e.g., bridging communities in conflict)
•dialogue—creating a safe space to learn (development of mutual understanding re: cultural and political differences)
•diplomacy (facilitating political discourses of peace with justice)
•politicization of women into leadership roles in their community
•community development (their initiation of recreational centres, play schools, housing programs).

Why then had their efforts to make peace been seen to fail in the context of the contemporary conflict in Northern Ireland? What lessons can be drawn for feminist scholars theorizing around issues of conflict peace and violence?

Conclusion: Thinking about "Women and Peace-Building"

Peace theorist, Johan Galtung, has furnished a critical starting point for the field of peace studies with his analytical framework of "structural, cultural and direct violence." Challenging the traditional view of peace as merely the absence of war and violence, Galtung argued that "if peace was indeed the absence of war and violence" "highly unacceptable social orders would still be compatible with peace" (1969: 169). In this way, he highlighted the dimension of "structural" or "indirect violence"— equated with "social injustice" as the most "silent and least obvious dimension of violence "as it is built into a structure of unequal power and unequal life chances" (e.g.,

poverty) where not only are the "resources unevenly distributed but also the power to decide over the allocation of these resources is also unevenly distributed."[7]

More recently, the politics of language around war and violence has become an important focus of contemporary scholars—especially interrogating state discourses on "terrorism." Highlighting the power of the state to define the terms of conflict as well as legitimize and normalize specific forms of violence, some have noted that the use of the term "terrorism" not only operates to exclude state violence, but also to prevent "the possibility for inquiring into the political conditions which produced the violence" in the first place.[8]

Throughout the past few decades feminist theorists (such as Cynthia Enloe, Carol Cohen, Betty Reardon, and Christine Sylvester) have increasingly entered the fields of international relations, peace studies and foreign policy—contributing gender analyses and political debates.[9] Canadian feminist, Quaker and peace activist, Ursula Franklin has described violence as "resourcelessness" (5-6). Feminist analysis of structural and state violence as well as global militarism is especially critical now, given that the rhetoric—both past and present—of world leaders has dangerously absolved governments of any responsibility for creating the conditions under which violence festers and militarism is pursued as an ultimate solution to what are essentially social and political problems.

In a recent article critiquing the violence now being directed towards Muslim minorities living in India, Arundhati Roy highlights the dangers of binaries constructed to serve political and military agendas. Referring to the "Bush doctrine" developed in the aftermath of Sept. 11, "You are with us, or you are with the terrorists," Roy has stated:

> Those words hang frozen in time, like icicles. For years to come, the butchers and genocidists will fit their grissly mouths around them ("lip-synching" as the film-makers call it) in order to justify their butchery. (24)

Although maternalist and essentialist discourses may provide a critical starting point for women's collective action in conflict or opposition to militarism, their corresponding "dualistic thinking" universalizes the gender experience of women to the point of inviting political failure. Admonishing feminist peace activists and scholars to see women as "political thinkers who make political choices," bell hooks has argued that we must move beyond simple equations of militarism and patriarchy towards an analysis of imperialism (as well as other systems of domination) as "the core foundation of militarism." As she further points out, feminists must now begin to analyze the nature of the women's complicity in

maintaining and perpetuating the current value sys-

tem of our society which privileges violence and domination as the most effective tool of coercive control in human interaction, a society whose value systems advocate and promote war. (60).

If hooks is right, women's peace movements must be about radical social transformation and perhaps this requires that we begin with women's differences, rather than "sameness."

Songs of Peace (excerpt)

Women in the streets again,
hundreds in the streets again,
marching, holding hands,
singing frail songs against
death and destruction...
......
And I wish you were right,
I wish it were true that

If women enough would gather,
women enough, would leave
husbands and children and sing,
laying their bodies down in the muck.
Yet how often before
have we offered our flesh, in hope,
in barter, in supplication?
And who will it please, if they come
for us, to find this time
we have made our own camps

Unarmed in the dirt and dark?
And I wish you were right
that songs and kisses could do,
hold back bullet and bomb,
loose power, reclaim the night.
But soldiers have always liked songs of peace,
and women have sung them to war before this.
And on their return they have paid their respects,
have buried us bravely, buried us well,
with love and flowers and songs of peace.
(Dorcey 32-34)

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[1]For further information about women's experiences and perspectives of the conflict in Northern Ireland, please see: Aretxaga; Cockburn; Edgerton; Evason; Fairweather *et al.*; Lentin; McKay; McWilliams; Mulholland; Porter; Rooney; Roulston; Sales 1997a, 1997b; Shannon 1989, 1992: Smyth; Sullivan; Ward.

[2]My research led me to a variety of rich sources—both in archival material and in depth oral history interviews with peace activists who had been active in the early 1970s. The 1976 Bombing of the building where Women Together's office was housed (along with another peace organization in Belfast—Peace Point) as well as the fact that the DPW did not keep any official records made it necessary for me to conduct oral history interviews. Altogether I have conducted seven in depth, semi-structured interviews in Northern Ireland. Issues of confidentiality dictate that research participants will be provided anonymity and given pseudonyms in the overall Ph.D. study.

[3]By late 1969 and early 1970, the Irish Republican Army had renewed their military campaign but had now split into two separate groups: the Official IRA and the Provisional IRA.

[4]For further information, please see: Callaghan.

[5]The concept of the "structural bind" as applied to the conflict in Northern Ireland is found in works by Irish political scientists Ruane and Todd (1991, 1992, 1996). These articles are quite useful for gaining further understandings of the political nomenclature of the conflict. (See also Bew and Gillespie; Coulter.)

[6]William Whitelaw was appointed first Secretary of State for Northern Ireland after the suspension of Stormont and imposition of Direct Rule from Westminster in March, 1972, remaining in this position until Dec 1973. John Hume, better known today for playing a central role in the Good Friday Agreement, was a leader of the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) representing a high proportion of the nationalist community in Northern Ireland.

[7]By contrast, Galtung explained on the dimension of "direct" or "personal violence" as the most visible form of violence— involving the threat of physical attack as well

as the actual event (e.g., bombs, guns, etc.) (1969: 171). Galtung also analyzed a further dimension known as "cultural violence," involving "the symbolic sphere of our existence—exemplified by religion, and ideology, language and art, empirical science… [etc]—that can be used to justify or legitimise direct or structural violence" (1990: 291).

[8]A recent article entitled "Terrorism, War and Crime" by David Mutimer, scholar in political science at York University, Toronto, interrogated the concept of "terrorism" in terms of the politics of language and war discourse used by western state authorities used in the post-September 11 period. Here, Mutimer highlights two key points with regard to the framing of state discourses on "terrorism." First, he notes "There is no way to define terrorism that does not exclude state actions without doing so explicitly." He points out that although "states can use violence in ways which fit any reasonable definition of terrorism … all international agreements on terrorism feel it necessary to exclude *explicitly* the armed forces of states" (2002: 7).

[9]Feminist scholars and researchers in the fields of peace history, peace studies, and international studies (Burguieres; Cooper; Early 1995, 2000; Alonso; Forcey; Roberts; Sylvester) have indicated the critical importance of further developing feminist theoretical frameworks around key concepts in peace and conflict studies.

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MARIE JANICK BELLEAU

Libera Me

La mort nous hante
Toi, par les cimetières
Moi, par la pensée

Marie Janick Belleau a publié livres et de nombreux articles et poèmes dans différentes revues nationales et internationales.