

Critical Reflections and Situated Accounts Women on War and Peace

EILISH ROONEY

Les expériences multiples et les analyses d'un forum de femmes activistes pour la paix sont utilisées pour explorer les histoires vécues par les femmes en guerre « qui travaillent pour » la paix». La langue et les groupes sont les premiers terrains du débat. Les expériences de l'auteure en guerre et ensuite comme pacifiste dans le nord de l'Irlande, donnent à réfléchir sur l'effort fourni et sur quelques jugements critiques.

The northeast six counties of Ireland have a population of 1.5m. Recurring political resistance and conflict, since the setting up of the statelet of Northern Ireland in 1922, has centred on the sectarianism, which flowed from that act of securing a Protestant, unionist majority within the border. The unionist position defines the problem as the refusal of the Catholic, nationalist minority to accept the legitimacy of a state that is supported by a majority of its citizens. The north of Ireland need not have developed as it did, but the political, socio-economic, civic and cultural business of state building and state defending, and the relationship between the north of Ireland, the Republic of Ireland (Republic) and the British state, loaded the historical dice in favour of consolidating Protestant and unionist hegemony and dominance, in all of these spheres. The construction of a “majority” presupposes the construction of a “minority.” The Catholic, nationalist population within the border territory refused allegiance to the state and challenged its existence in elections and, intermittently, in armed resistance. Internment was introduced in the north of Ireland every decade until the 1960s. The place has never achieved the collective amnesia about its coercive origins that pertain in most modern democracies and which, at key public moments, appears to pertain, or to be enforced by the political elite, in the Republic. Every election since the setting up of the state has been a referendum on the founding act of bordering the six counties; in effect the legitimacy of the state is contested in each election. The conflict that is currently in a crisis-ridden process of resolution began in protest at sectarian housing policies, gerrymandering and demands for democracy.

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In the aftermath of some of the worst atrocities that Europe has seen since the Second World War, the Centre for Women's Studies in Zagreb organized an International Women's Peace Forum. It led to a little known but valuable bilingual publication, *Women and the Politics of Peace*.¹ Many of the participants came, “from conflict areas with long-lasting violence throughout the world” (Kasic 15). They gathered to consider: “How to articulate the politics of peace from a women's perspective” (Kasic 15). It will come as no surprise that the result is not a homogeneous collection of shared or even similar women's perspectives. Dispute and argument, about theoretical frameworks, about

strategy, and about politics are all elements of the mix. It is an insightful collection of accounts, analyses, reflections, and speculations about women making “peace” in different conflicts.²

Participants, representing women's and peace organizations, came from places recently, currently, or potentially involved in armed conflict; among them: Bosnia, Croatia, Herzegovina, Israel, Kosova, Federal Yugoslav Republic_Macedonia, Ireland, and Slovenia, Former Republic of Yugoslavia. There were also participants from other European (east and west) and north Atlantic countries: Austria, Canada, Germany, Great Britain, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Netherlands, Russia, Spain, and Sweden. This categorization (to convey the range of “voices” and listeners present) is problematic. Arguably, countries in the second set are “in conflict”: Spain in the Basque country; Russia in Chechnya; Britain in a peace process in the north of Ireland. Then there are nation-based arms industries supplying arms in conflicts across the world, and the dominance of U.S. interests, particularly in the Middle East.

Definitions of conflict, and of “peace,” and perceptions of conflict and peace, are each heavily politicized and historicized concepts and realities. In her insightful article on “War and Pacifism” Christine Schweitzer (80-88), raises fundamental questions about the politics of definitions and the implications for pacifism. She considers how

pacifists, and pacifist organizations, develop strategies in their approaches to violent political conflicts:

... dealing with peace by just looking towards direct, physical violence means missing the real point. As long as the other forms of violence aren't dealt with (and they are not less cruel, nor less persistent than direct violence), there is little hope to prevent conflicts from escalating. (85)

The "other forms of violence" that she specifies are structural and cultural violence. Schweitzer's words are challenging and heartening from the perspective of the Good Friday Agreement (GFA) in Ireland.³ The contentious elements in the GFA arise from exactly these issues of physical force and structural and cultural violation. Issues relating to physical force include: arms decommissioning; policing; army; and the justice system. And those that relate to "other forms of violence" include power sharing; the equality agenda; human rights; issues relating to structural discrimination and parity of esteem. Combatants to the conflict (ideological and political, as well as armed) continue to contest the legitimacy and priority of these matters.

Schweitzer calls for understanding the interconnections between the local and the global. This is crucial, she argues, to understanding the complexities of "peace making." She helps to clarify her argument by looping together some of the wider, historical and political realities of making peace: "pacifism and peace movements have always predominantly been Northern and Western movements," seen by activists from the "South" as a luxury: "which can only be afforded by those whose bellies are full and whose lives aren't threatened by death squads" (81). No women from the "South" participated in this Forum. Rada Boric acknowledges their absence in her presentation dedication to, "the women from the ancient mother continent of Africa" (141). She regrets that the Forum's limited resources meant that women from the South could not participate. Their absence meant that the historical, colonial, raced contexts and constructions, woven into the warp and weft of European nation building, are acknowledged but missing.

Many of the participants to the Forum had experienced, or worked with others who had experienced, devastation of such proportions that it is virtually impossible to grasp the individual narratives behind the gross figures. In one unfinished, and no doubt contested, sentence, Boric provides a grim outline of the consequences of the conflict in Bosnia, Croatia and Serbia:

Two million Bosnians (without a national prefix) driven away; two hundred thousand Serbians driven out of Croatia; one hundred thousand Croatians without a home; two hundred thousand dead; innumerable wounded; widows; orphans.... (142)

The last three stops are in the text. Boric invites the reader to consider the toll of misery. Awareness of the wastefulness of war, a shared conviction in the futility of war as a form of political conduct, and a common search for the means to resolve political conflict, without recourse to direct violence, appear to link the contributions to *Women and the Politics of Peace*. In the course of working through this collection it became clear that, whatever the perspective of the writer on a particular conflict, there remained the need to work with survivors. This involved listening to, and telling of, suffering and survival stories; working for human rights and justice through international courts; and doing what could be done in the circumstances. These political spaces may be confined and inadequate but they are the only places, in some cases, that some women can occupy, and where they can make a

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difference.

One example of making a difference is told by Daphna Golan, a member of Jerusalem Link. She responded to a Palestinian friend's request that she accompany her to visit two hospitalised Palestinians shot in a demonstration by Israeli forces. In a couple of pages Golan conveys the impacts of her decision to go. She is faced with seeing the injured "boys," 17 and 14 years old, handcuffed and footcuffed to the beds and guarded by an 18-year-old Israeli soldier who (she reminds him) could be her son. Having put herself in the position of giving support, and witnessing brutality, she is then faced with what to do. She questions the nursing staff, talks to journalists, and speaks to a group of Israeli women academics in the belief that Israelis, like most people, "care about how their neighbours perceive them" (55). She experiences derision and disbelief.

Golan learns from the experience and remains fused with an enviable optimism about networks and education; and about the importance of believing you can make a difference. She responded to a request, and was faced with knowledge, and with the moral and political dilemma of what to do about it. In acting as she does, she stirs the wrath of fellow Israelis who see her as betraying a beleaguered state. In the scale of conflict experiences covered in this collection, the experience that Golan relates is in a minor scale. Nevertheless, she challenges the

reader: “dig where you stand.” She urges links to be made between feminist struggles, collective responsibilities, and the apparatus of the state. At the very least, she urges vigilance about what is done on our behalf. Almost inevitably, such vigilance will involve acquiring knowledge that will then require decisions. Golan believes that the feminist tradition of challenging the status quo allows us “to better see violations of human rights” (56). She made a response to a phone call, and was propelled into a situation of acting, or refusing to see what was happening in her name, as an Israeli citizen. She acted. Golan’s reflection is impressive. I want to believe that feminists’ knowledge, gained in struggle, can and should translate into insights that fuel action on other human rights issues.

Jihad Abu Zneid is a Palestinian member of Jerusalem Link. She was prevented from attending the Forum by the Israeli government (Golan’s protest letter to the Israeli Prime Minister is reproduced; see Golan 63).⁴ Interestingly, her contribution tells little about her own experiences. Instead, she uses the space to inform the listeners of the situation of Palestinian, “women and children” in the Occupied Territories who, “are particularly vulnerable to violations of their basic right to a safe and secure place to live in peace and dignity” (57). Zneid provides the data of wrecked lives resulting from the practices of: “The Demolition and Sealing of Homes ... Evictions ... the Closure [of Jerusalem] ... [and] Military Raids of Villages ... ” (58-60). She gives human scale to this litany of human rights abuses by way of case studies: the attempted rape of a child following house demolition; death of a child linked to the refusal of residency status and subsequent denial of medical treatment. Her final case study describes community initiatives to mobilise self-help, services and resistance. She, too, is remarkably optimistic about the value and effectiveness of local educational and community development initiatives.

I imagine that Zneid had a hard time selecting and reducing what she had to say to this international audience of women peace activists and academics. She focuses on the experiences of women and children. Her objectives, presumably, are to inform and to mobilize support for Palestinian women. Perhaps she hoped that international pressure could be exerted on the Israeli government thereby. She may also have hoped to gain publicity, and much needed funding support, for the work of Palestinian community projects. She makes virtually no direct mention of the impacts of demolitions, evictions, and raids on Palestinian men. These practices are, presumably, carried out by male Israeli soldiers. I

read the absence of any direct reference to men as a familiar approach, in an international conference whose business is peace, politics, and women.

In reading Zneid’s account (and in the accounts of others) I recognized an approach I have used myself in these situations; and, uncomfortably, Zneid’s account forced me to rethink my strategy of self-censorship. Like Zneid, I have contributed to conferences, publications, debates and so on, and helped put women from the north of Ireland onto the map. In order to claim space for women, in order to document our lives and work in the north of Ireland, I too have written as though the men are invisible, albeit powerful, shaping forces in the lives of women. But, leaving out men has penalties. Writing about women in war situations is not the same as compiling a list of ignored women poets or playwrights. The dynamics are different. Just as the picture is always gender distorted by coverage which leaves women out, leaving men out of the war does not right the balance, but produces different distortions.

Ronit Lentin provides yet another approach in her contribution on the Middle East and the north of Ireland. She begins by situating herself: born

in the country which became Israel, and living in the Republic of Ireland for 25 years. She provides a feminist analysis of war, instancing these two conflicts to argue that war and peace negotiations are gendered (65); that a culture of violence “always breeds increased violence, by men, against women” (65); and that, regardless of their work in peace processes, women are invisible in negotiations. Further, she argues that Forum participants should demand that “feminist peace agendas be included in the national agendas” (66).

Lentin maps out her theoretical frame: rejecting the women’s rights approach to militarism (prevalent amongst many Israeli feminists) which argues for women to be included in the front line, and armed as heavily as the men. Nor does she see women as essentially “more peaceful” than men. She offers an understanding of gender as “socially constructed.” Manhood and mothering, maleness and femaleness, are shaped by processes of social construction.

In a short, packed, ambitious presentation simplicities may slip in. Lentin rejects essentialism but replaces it with a more complex approach which results in women peace activists (by virtue of being women?) being morally superior: “Women’s peace activism, both in the Middle East and in Ireland, is a feminist challenge to the military games the boys play” (70). *If male violence is socially constructed, is female peace work also socially constructed?*

If male violence is socially constructed, is female peace work also socially constructed? To some extent I would argue that it is. Women are expected to be more “peaceable.”

To some extent I would argue that it is. Women are expected to be more “peaceable.” Some women exploit the powerful ideological resource of gender both in the promotion of peace, and in the prosecution of wars (Aretxaga; Rooney 2000).

At times, when the violence was at its worst in the north of Ireland, women were frequently called upon to “make peace”; to “come out onto the streets and make the men stop.” On many frustrating occasions I listened to such calls, generally from prominent male church leaders, politicians, and commentators. Similar calls have not been made, by the same people, to women to participate in the political processes of resolving the conflict. The calls to “stop the violence” relied upon simplistic, essentialist concepts of femaleness; as much as they relied upon simplistic constructions of the political conflict (as if women *could* simply stop the war—as if the war required no political resolution).

Lentin argues that there are clear links between political violence in the north of Ireland and domestic violence in the north of Ireland and in the Republic of Ireland. The situation in the Republic of Ireland is explained in the following: “the spill-over of the Northern Ireland political conflict echoes loud” (70). What does “spill-over” mean? Politically? What does “echoes loud” mean? And how do these loose, unspecified, seemingly uncontrolled spreads and soundings influence the levels of violence towards women in the Republic of Ireland? I do not have the answers to these questions; I raise them in order to complicate the assertions. There may well be links between militarism, as a marker of masculinity, and increases in, or higher levels of, domestic violence. There are other factors. In a situation of political violence, the ideologies, political analyses and experiences which mobilize and drive the “war” are shared by many men and many women; by those directly involved in the violence and those not. The state is also an “actor”—and a powerful one. These factors must be taken into account in any tally of the connections between violence in the public and in the private spheres.

Fears in the Republic of Ireland of “spill-over” violence from the North are based on contemporary experience and shared history. The political landscape of the Republic of Ireland has been shaped by its shared history with the north. The political configuration of the main political parties in the Republic of Ireland (unlike the left-right configurations of other European countries) have their origins in the politics of the Treaty, the civil war, and the relative positions adopted towards the question of the union of the northern six counties with Great Britain in

the Act of Union. It has also to be remembered that the biggest loss of life, in an act of political violence, in the current conflict, occurred in the Republic of Ireland. The Dublin and Monaghan bombings in 1974 killed 33 people. There have been charges of state collusion and cover-up in this. Links between fears of political violence, or indeed the experience of political violence, and levels of domestic violence need to be established in a less assertive and more evidence based manner.

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It is a brave, or foolhardy, researcher who treads the complex landscape of northern Irish politics and decides to tell the tale. There is no guarantee of appreciation of the effort. And yet, the “mirror” that is thereby held up to people engaged, or entrenched, in the detail of local politics, and who have local understandings, is valuable. If I wish to take issue with something observed by an “outside” researcher it behoves me to think through the outsider’s perspectives and sources of understanding in order to dispute interpretation. In Lentin’s case, she enables me to see that much of the work published about women’s activism in the north of Ireland would not be catalogued under “women’s peace activism” and yet, much of the work

carried out by women in local organizations could be seen as civic development, and “peace-building” work; and necessary for conflict resolution. Lentin also raises issues about the gendering of conflict. Very little work has been carried out into the gendered roles of women and men in the northern Irish conflict.⁵ We need to understand these issues in north of Ireland. The simplicities of male = violence, female = peace, are seriously inadequate.

Cynthia Cockburn and Marie Mulholland consider the relationship between feminist research and women’s activism and caution that the relationship needs to be clearly thought out. In conflict situations, Cockburn says, clarity about the relationship is “vital” when: “the costs paid for getting it wrong may be high” (91). I am glad of this caution, and of the learning about the researcher’s assumptions, that Cockburn has obviously encountered in the course of her activist research work with women’s projects in the north of Ireland, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and northern Israel.

Marie Mulholland is typically straight-talking when she says we are all willing to condemn violence: “everyone does ... but it is much more difficult to get people to condemn the causes of violence—discrimination, injustice, inequality” (93). She picks up on one of the ongoing conversations in this publication: efforts to define “peace,” “justice” and “war”; and how different conflicts become the focus of international attention whilst others are ignored.

Gabi Mischkowski examines the politics of language, in her consideration of the complex problems involved in, “The Prosecution of War Rapes at the International Tribunal for Former Yugoslavia” (109-115). What she says about the construction of universal law, and about International Tribunals, reverberates throughout the collection:

Those states who define [universal law] or those states who call in International Tribunals are the same states who have the power to decide who is to be prosecuted under it and who not. There has never been an International Tribunal for the war in Vietnam and there will never be one for the war in Chechnya. And the nuclear bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki seemingly did not constitute a violation of the laws and customs of war, no matter how poisonous and “unjustified by military necessity” they ended up being. (112)

The observation is so obvious as to be easily missed: the definition of war, the prosecution of war crimes, the resolution of conflict are each conducted within the “real politics” of global power relations and interests.

I intend it as a tribute to *Women and the Politics of Peace*, that I have reflected on these particular contributions as a means of both understanding their specificities and of testing ideas and positions within the context of the north of Ireland. The two motivations came together in reading Ann McCann’s contribution: “The Emergence of a Women’s Political Movement in Northern Ireland” (47-50). She provides a partly anecdotal, partly analytical approach and claims that the “silent majority” in the north of Ireland identify with the undervalued “middle ground.” She tells of neighbours who are opposed to the violence carried out in their name. These people believe that political and economic reforms can bring about “equality for all” (49). However, the “middle ground” in the north of Ireland is a class-based place (as are the so-called extremes). I do not share the neighbours’ optimism. Over 30 years of fair employment legislation have not significantly reduced the differentials in Catholic and Protestant male unemployment in the north of Ireland.⁶ There are neither targets nor time-frames attached to current “equality” legislation. Affirmative action is neither on the British Government’s, nor on unionist parties’ political agendas. The aspirational language of the GFA is heavy in hope and thick with competing interpretations. In the interstices between the two there is vast room for doubt. Ann McCann lost a “much loved brother” in a sectarian

murder in 1972. The ways that I take issue with her approach are significant—the stuff of interpretation, analysis, political perspective, and experience. However, the future that she imagines, and works for, is a place where I would live, glad of the work that people like her have done to bring it about.

The business of a critical review is carried out in retrospect and in solitude. The conversations and interactions, which occur in conferences, are lost to the reviewer.

I suspect that much happened at the gathering, which led to this publication, which has not found its way onto the pages of, *Women and the Politics of Peace*. The interactions between people from countries in conflict; between people who hold opposed analyses and who have different experiences of conflict are complex.

Forums and publications are unlikely to result in conflict resolutions. They may not even affect the political situations. But they enable participants and readers to reach understandings and to learn from the experiences of others. They facilitate the development of personal, organizational, national, and global networks, which can be a useful resource, and a

consolation, in the work of surviving and acting to bring about conflict resolution with justice.

The *CWS/cf* editors asked me to end this piece with some reflections on my own work in peace-building in the north of Ireland. This presents me with a dilemma. Much of what claims to be “peace work” in the north of Ireland operates on a conservative “community relations” formula. It is about getting “Catholics” and “Protestants” to make contact. It avoids the causes of the conflict. Some people might feel better as a result of this work but it will not bring about peace with justice. If I were to name a contribution I may have made to justice and peace, it has been through being critical of the failure to implement the Good Friday Agreement in full, and in advancing the feminist debate about women’s lives in the north of Ireland. I have done this at key moments in public—in media contributions and in debate with people of different perspectives; in contributions to the literature; and in my teaching. We need to keep the conversations going about peace and justice in different places in the world and to learn from each other what works, and when. We can also learn from our failures and failings. Just peace is a prize worth living for.

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and political participation. She is currently a Visiting Scholar at Cornell Law School (NY) and working on an archive of accounts of the war in the north of Ireland.

¹Edited by Biljana Kasic and published in Zagreb by the Centre for Women's Studies in 1997.

²See Rooney (1999) for an earlier version of this article.

³The Agreement between the British and Irish governments endorsed in referenda in each jurisdiction.

⁴This predates the current Intifada.

⁵See, Aretxaga; Moore; Rooney (2000); Rooney and Woods. See Rooney (2002) for a useful bibliography of work on women in the north of Ireland.

⁶See Equality Commission; also Hamilton who shows the complex patterns of deprivation in Catholic and Protestant West Belfast.

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JAN BAILEY

Eileen Among the Lilies

Frail and wizened, too long since she had poked among the lilies, weeding this, replanting that, and for the first few hours she was overwhelmed by their profusion.

Hundreds rolled across a bank that collapsed into sea. This was before she succumbed to their smell, feeling faint; before she let herself languish in their sex; before her head reeled from orange and vermilion.

It was as if nothing else existed – cottage, road and village sucked away like her breath – and she sank, her knees buckling, amid a sweetness beyond the singular, amid so many green stems into a crush of bobbing heads.

All about her face and hair, shoulders, breasts, their amber pollen marked her for theirs, and a soft humming rose, which is the come cry of flowers, as she curled among the lilies until darkness fell.

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MARIE JANICK BELLEAU

Reconnaissable entre toutes

Inoubliable
Comme les madeleines de Proust
L'odeur de ta peau

Marie Janick Belleau's poetry appears earlier in this volume.