

# Women and Local Learning

## *Reflections from Formative Faultlines in the North of Ireland*

BY EILISH ROONEY

*Un élément important durant la guerre de l'Irlande du Nord a été l'émergence d'une centaine de groupes locaux et de réseaux de femmes. Utilisant la métaphore de la "fissure," l'auteure fait la critique de ce phénomène en le situant dans les contextes culturel, historique, socio-économique, politique et sectaire de ce conflit.*

### **Introduction: sending a parcel?**

When I was a child growing up in West Belfast we used to receive an occasional parcel from a great aunt who lived in the "States" (United States of America). We loved them. They had a sweet smell that I can recall vividly to this day. For us children these parcels were magical. From this distance, I can see that the parcels were the material and affective connection between those who had left Ireland to make a new life and those who remained to continue the old. They were my aunt's way of giving support, of continuing the connection, and they acknowledged something of her "blood and belonging." I imagine that, in return, she probably received letters; my mother would have sent a St. Patrick's Day card. Perhaps my aunt treated these items with the same reverence that we children felt for her parcels. We've lost touch. She must be long dead.

I thought of these parcels as I prepared this paper for *Canadian Woman Studies/les cahiers de la femme*; and I felt that in some ways this is one "parcel," amongst many, being returned. The fruitful problem of putting together this parcel is that I am aware (perhaps mistakenly) of what readers might wish to find in a parcel from the North of Ireland (NI), la-

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belled: Women and Local Learning. Readers may wish to hear stories of women's co-operation across "the sectarian divide"; of women finding that they have more in common than what divides them; of women demanding dialogue (whilst the men prepare for war?). And, in having these thoughts, and putting together the materials for my parcel, I am aware that readers may be disappointed. It is not that these things don't happen. Many women have marched and organized for "peace"; alliances are made "across the political divide"; and I have in store many stories of co-operation. But the peace marches, the acts of co-operation, and the alliances all occur within historical and political contexts wherein they are accorded selective and often politically motivated attention, approval, and sometimes support. This article sets out the "faultline" contexts within which women in urban and rural communities have got together locally, have

developed formal and informal learning, and have created mutually supportive networks within the contexts of conflict.

Gender power relations are not a "separable" set of relations of dominance and subordination, able to be isolated from other historicized relations of sectarian power in the North. In other polities, gender power relations are not "separable" from racialized, ethnicized, or class-based relations of power. Gendered forms of political agency in the North are ideological and political resources utilized by all political actors in the NI. The ideological, political, socio-economic, and religious differences, and different experiences of the conflict, between nationalist and unionist women, matter. On the economic front: if you were to randomly meet ten unemployed males in the NI, seven would be Catholic and three Protestant. Investigations of economic inequality in the West Belfast neighbourhood where I come from, indicate that people who work in West Belfast earn on average \$100 less per week than workers in the centre of Belfast. Women in work, in the same area, earn nearly \$170 less per week than men working in the city centre (McVeigh). Catholic and Protestant, working class women, "disproportionately experience more low pay," than their male counterparts (McVeigh). These differences have material and life chance meanings with cumulative impacts over time.

As I unpack this "parcel" I am aware of the role and influence of the "international community" and, particularly in the U.S. context, of the Irish diaspora. Internationally influential diasporas continue to play sig-

nificant roles in post-colonial and other conflicts across the globe. The aunt who carved a new life for herself brought with her versions of life "at home" which continue to shape the mechanics of the peace process, in the guise of direct U.S. influence and involvement in NI. Perhaps some of her offspring people the ranks of "corporate America," which has been visible in its support of the process. Critics and skeptics of the peace process have argued against collaborating with corporate America when people in Ireland, North and South, are suffering the effects of corporate relocations from Derry and Donegal to cheaper production sites in Southeast Asia (McCann). Another perspective suggests that the interests of corporate capital, in helping to resolve the Irish-British conflict, has more to do with the Irish Republican Army's bombing of London's Baltic Exchange, and with the political stability conducive to profitability, than with diasporic longings for peace in the "old country" (McIntyre).

#### **Founding faultlines: nation, class, and gender**

My title promises to explore "educational faultlines" in the NI. The geological metaphor is appropriate and hopefully provocative. Geologically, a faultline is a fracture in a rock formation marked by the relative displacement ... of strata on either side of the plane of the fracture; a fracture is the result of breaking strata under deformational stress (OED). The metaphor is appropriate in its implicit reference to the founding faultlines of post-colonial nationalism and unionism in modern Northern Irish society and politics. This "faultline" continues to shape everyday life, politics, culture, and the economy. The formation and features of this faultline could be usefully investigated by focusing on education. Education (in the sense of statutory or tax paid provision) is one of the means a society uses to formulate and to inculcate its norms

and values. In many societies education is also utilized by the state to promote a political culture. Education is also generally seen as, or argued into being, a legitimate means of intervention in relation to social problems (such as social exclusion).

In this article, I cannot critique the efforts of "nation building" in the

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Northern Irish state education system. Nor can I critique what might be seen as the critical-counter project of the Catholic schooling system. I wish simply to signal that a critical investigation of educational faultlines in the North of Ireland could subject to scrutiny the norms and values of the contested Northern Irish state and society. Further, it would provide insights about the efficacy of various educational initiatives and pedagogies as engines of change, or of conservatism, within the context of an historically and politically divided and stratified society. Ideally, from this, lessons might be learned about how education may be used to tackle the problems of reconciliation and justice facing any late modern society (and that surely includes most developing and developed countries in the world today).

The faultline metaphor is provocative in its naturalistic associations. Faultlines are natural features of the geological landscape. From observa-

tion, it might be reasonable to conclude that political "faultlines" are similarly "natural" features of any modern society. Certainly, Northern Irish society is composed of complex hierarchies of class, gender, religion, race, colour, ethnicity, able-bodiedness, sexual orientation, and age (and perhaps even hierarchies of discourse). These hierarchies do not parallel each other but are,

interlocked and mutually creating and maintaining. A setback or advance in one reverberates through the whole network of hierarchy creating consequences far away from where ... change began. (Harding 180)

The geological metaphor conveys no sense of the historicized, constructed, material, political and cultural hierarchies and power relations at work in shaping and maintaining the inequities which form the bedrock of political faultlines in the NI. These hierarchies are embedded within the shifting history of post-colonial, political relationships between Britain and the North of Ireland and the island of Ireland. "Hierarchy" and "power" are abstract, complex concepts. Concretely, in NI the rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer (this also applies to the Republic of Ireland and to Great Britain). Those who have the fewest resources may have the most to lose in any political process that seeks to redress or rectify the inequalities of the past.

It is in the areas of the NI that have some of the highest levels of deprivation in Western Europe that women have got locally organized. In the Catholic housing estate where I grew up (and to which my great aunt sent those parcels) six out of ten people are unemployed and the overwhelming majority of them (86 per cent) are long-term unemployed (*Economic Bulletin*). Of the twelve electoral wards in NI found to have the worst overall health, six of these are located in West Belfast (Taillon). In the

Greater Shankill Protestant area of West Belfast 57 per cent of those who leave school have no educational qualifications; 83 per cent of the working population have no educational qualifications (Greater Shankill Partnership). Taking West and North Belfast together (areas that have some of the worst levels of deprivation in the North), 73 per cent of the people have no formal qualifications compared with 49 per cent overall in NI (Rolston). These are also the neighbourhoods which have endured the highest levels of political violence in the course of the conflict.

Integral to these problems, and despite fair employment legislation, the Northern Ireland Office (NIO) has failed to significantly redress the historical imbalances in Catholic and Protestant employment profiles. In response to a review of the statistics in 1991, which indicated little projected change in Catholic and Protestant employment profiles over the next 20 years, the NIO introduced a Targeting Social Need (TSN) policy to reduce the differentials. The policy required all government departments to identify those areas and people in greatest need, and to target resources accordingly in order to reduce Catholic and Protestant differentials. When Inez and Vincent McCormack subsequently investigated the efficacy of this policy they found that only one of the 13 government departments had even embarked on the TSN program. This legislation has been superseded by the *Northern Ireland Act* (1998). The impacts of its implementation will be monitored by various groups. A great deal of hope is invested by people seeking a more just and equal society, in the language of the Good Friday Agreement and in the legislation enshrining its aspirations.

Sectarian employment profiles bear little relation to the economic realities as experienced by working class Protestant people in (for example) the Greater Shankill area, who now experience previously un-

known, and unacceptable, levels of unemployment; coupled with the impacts of the conflict. Nevertheless, the profiles, and the experiences they silently represent, are part of the socio-economic, and political reality which continues to fuel division and marginalization within and between marginalized, working-class, nation-

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alist/republican, and unionist/loyalist communities. One of the challenges in NI, and in particular for policy decisions, in relation to these communities, is to redress sectarianism whilst ensuring that poor, working class, Protestant areas and people are neither made to pay, nor feel they are paying, the price of compensatory policies. As well as being unjust, this would be counterproductive. What Sandra Harding has to say of race prejudice in the U.S. is salient to the problem of sectarianism in the context of some of the problems outlined above. She claims that:

the tendency to define racism as "race prejudice" settles for an account that lodges responsibility for racism only on the already economically disadvantaged poor whites ... who have not learned to avoid making overtly racist statements ... as have middle-class people, and who are forced to bear a dispro-

portionately large share of the burdens of affirmative action and equal opportunity programmes. (179)

Working-class Catholic and Protestant people have carried a disproportionate burden, as victims, and as activists, of the political conflict in NI. Inez and Vincent McCormack conclude from their study of TSN:

What is urgently required is the comprehensive reconstruction of the Northern economy to tackle inequality on the basis of need. This could promote peace and reconciliation by impacting upon the poorest Protestants as well as the poorest Catholics. (9-10)

If successful, the greatest differences would be made to the lives of women.

The bedrock of these faultlines has built-in properties of inequality which so many of us accept as the (dare I say, "natural") consequence of industrial development and devotion to profit. Thus, one in three of the children born into our society in the NI is born into poverty. Generational unemployment is an accepted feature of many "unwaged" neighbourhoods. This is accompanied by the widening wealth gap and a media culture increasingly devoted to consumerism. Imbricated with these are the particular and related historical features of sectarianism and political conflict. Strategic policies, designed to offset the worst impacts of these conditions, whilst being important, are no remedy. Policies which leave in place deep-rooted structural inequality will fail. Indeed, it is arguable that such measures, in treating the symptoms rather than the cause, provoke unintended dynamics of blaming the targeted groups as thankless and insatiable (Frazer).

So, what has all of this to do with women? I think it is a measure of my own gendered thinking, and how gendered I assume general readers interested in the NI to be, that I insert

that reassuring question—as though figures about unemployment or poverty are about men only. However, if women are not named in discussions on the political economy, then they are made invisible. This invisibility is related to my final “founding faultline”: gender. Gender is the basic structuring principle of the economy in NI (as it is in every known society). Gender materially and conceptually structures the fundamental division between paid “productive” labour and “unpaid” reproductive domestic labour. Women in the North are primarily responsible for the care of children, the elderly, and the sick. They are also primarily responsible for domestic labour and home management. Gender also structures the division within paid labour between higher-paid, male-dominated (manufacturing and professional) occupations and lower-paid, domestic and service occupations. The result is gender-specific modes of participation in the paid and unpaid workforce. It also results in gender specific exploitation, marginalization, and deprivation in both the public sphere of the economy and politics and the private sphere of the home (Frazer). If you look to the elected forums (the Northern Ireland Women’s Coalition, or NIWC, notwithstanding) or to decision-making arenas within the NI economy, women’s absence is an eloquent, if disgraceful testimony to gendered forms of public participation in NI.

If you were looking for either evidence, or analysis, of this most natural seeming and profoundly formative “*faultline*” in NI, you would not look to the prodigious mainstream literature that has emerged from the conflict. Women rarely feature. They are either assumed to be included or they are invisible. It amounts to the same thing. Neither women nor the category gender makes a difference to the description or to the analysis. The then President Mary Robinson, from the vantage point of a privileged insider, was surely right in her

observation that the full participation of women in our society is perceived as an issue that is “only for women.” And, she cautioned, it is a short step from this to the position that such issues are “merely for women.” Thus the impacts of gender structuring are sealed and hidden. Women’s domestic “labour” is unpaid and invisible in the “productive” economy; women are invisible in the public sphere (famous and infamous exceptions proving the rule); and they occupy the spaces between the lines in the dominant discourses of the literature on the conflict, history and political analyses in the North.

These oppressive absences have begun to be rectified in some historical and political studies and in the growing body of women’s studies literature in Ireland. But, even with this work, it is still not accepted that gender is a legitimate, let alone core, category of analysis. The erasure of “women” and the intellectual sleight of hand that denies gender, is pervasive and insidious.

### Women’s local learning

When I turn to consider women’s local learning initiatives within the context of this article so far, it is like coming upon a flower sprouting through the “founding faultlines.” There are approximately 400 women’s groups, networks, and support organizations in Northern Ireland. The existence of feminist support organizations and women’s area networks have stimulated these developments and provided them with skills and know-how; and the means of making contact with each other. This flowering of women’s groups in working-class urban and rural neighbourhoods across the North can be traced back to seeds planted by issue- and resource-based organizations in the early 1980s. They have eked out resources from government and charitable trust funding initiatives targeted for areas of high deprivation and need.

Critically, funding of women’s voluntary and community work can be seen as a form of social engineering and co-option by statutory bodies and by power broking funding agencies. The issue of the women’s movement being “shaped by funding” were recognized by feminists in England in the heady days of the Greater London Council:

the effect of cash and bureaucracy on women’s groups out in the community [result in] women’s groups [being] seen as having been co-opted into the local state machine. (Breugel and Hegewisch 6-7)

At around the time that Breugel and Hegewisch were penning their observations, a women-run *crèche* in West Belfast was the first of a number of voluntary organizations to have funding withdrawn by the NIO in what became known as the, “political vetting of community groups.” Until the emergence of the NIWC, voluntary women’s organizations have publicly steered clear of direct involvement in party politics. The message of political vetting for local organizations was loud and clear: if a *crèche* could have its funding withdrawn, without the possibility of legal redress, then women’s organizations had better watch out. The threat was not generalized towards all women’s organizations. Initially, it was directed towards particular women in a particular republican locality.

Subsequently, and particularly in the course of U.S. administration trips to the North in the course of the peace process, women’s organizations have been mobilized for conferences and receptions. At times, there have been promises of money. Individuals from the local women’s movement have been selected to “represent” women’s voices in various venues and organizations. Given the absence of democratic structures within the community women’s movement, the issues of representa-

tion—of who gets to represent whom, and for which ends—and of accountability, are problematic. Most women and organizations carry on with the work—there is plenty to do. And most groups knowingly manipulate the underlying politics of funding and co-option.

The current local groups and networks vary in size, funding, constitution, purposes, and approach. Without necessarily calling themselves feminist, and without developing an agreed political or feminist agenda, local women's groups and organizations have set about organizing to meet their own needs; to combat problems of poverty; of isolation; and the effects of deprivation in their communities. They commonly engage in informal and formal local learning in areas such as personal development, community development, skills training, and accredited academic classes. What Tom Inglis has to say about empowerment education could be applied to many of these forms of learning. He suggests that "empowerment," when used in relation to education, should,

be used to refer to the role education plays in enabling people to operate effectively within the existing structures of power. (3)

The local group plays an important role, for some women a central role, in their daily lives and, they argue, it plays a vital role in the life of their community (Rooney and Woods).

Inglis is commenting on the loose use of "empowerment" language to make grand claims about the effects of adult education. His refreshing, modest realism could be applied to education in women's groups in the NI. Through participation in local learning and in the group, women say they have become more confident, feel less isolated, and engage in their local community (Rooney and Woods). Participation in the local group, and the sense that this is also participation in the local community, is important. Recent findings

from the Christian Churches in Britain on unemployment indicate that the most dehumanizing impacts of poverty are exclusion from meaningful participation in society.

The material and political circumstances in NI, within which much of this local learning and organizing takes place, leads me to think of it, not only in terms of educational outcomes (e.g. being more effective), but in terms of this meaning-creating, humanizing, local community participation, whereby women affirm self-worth and give, or even contest, that worth in the local group and community.

Local group organizing is also significant in terms of some of the unanticipated and unplanned consequences of these developments. The unplanned outcomes are manifold. They include: tactical alliances and networks women have made within and between the political divides of nationalism and unionism; the emergence of the NIWC and the development of political and feminist education initiatives. I will deal briefly with each of these.

Tactical alliances have been made between women in working-class republican and loyalist areas in response to sectarian funding decisions taken, or threatened, by unionist-dominated local councils. Courageous and successful campaigns temporarily "transcended" political divisions. Women involved in these collaborations have formed a Women's Support Network to provide mutual support and a lobbying function for their respective groups (Rooney).

Some groups have formed alliances based on agreements to avoid the political conflict. The Women's Information Day Group consists of local women's groups from working-class neighbourhoods. The limitations of the alliance—for the exchange of information and support, is clear to all. The groups meet on a monthly basis in each other's neighbourhood. Politics is kept out. But many of the issues that women

exchange information about are the "political" issues of health, education, employment, and funding for voluntary groups.

On occasion, alliances that have avoided or excluded political conflict are tenuous. In 1993 the unionist-dominated Belfast City Council hosted an historic reception for International Women's Day. Three groups were excluded from the celebrations: the Brook Clinic Campaign (for provision of contraceptive advice to young people), Lesbian Line, and Sinn Fein women. In the course of the reception some women protested the exclusions. A lot of resentment was stirred amongst those present. Public letters raged between those women who had hoped for an historic celebration and those who felt justified in protesting.

### **Northern Ireland Women's Coalition**

Another unanticipated outcome of the women's groups and networks was the formation and success of the NIWC. The NIWC could not have put forward 70 women candidates at its first election (1996), and thereby have been elected to the talks and the forum, had it not been for the women's groups. The NIWC acknowledges the central importance to its existence of local women's groups and continues to organize communication between the NIWC and local groups. Joanna McMinn tells of being in one of the women's centres in west Belfast when a "phone call came through from a member of the NIWC asking if a member of the centre would be willing to stand for election on its behalf." A discussion ensued between the women present, with one woman saying she couldn't stand because, "he would kill me" (the "he" being her husband). Whether the woman was joking or not Joanna does not say, but she notes that not one woman said she was unable to, or incapable of going forward. They took the invitation in their stride.

## Women into politics

A number of educational initiatives have sprung from the demands and needs of local women's groups. The Belfast-based Women into Politics Project provides classes for local groups in loyalist and republican areas on an agreed political and historical studies curriculum. Coming up to elections a lot of interest was generated in the newly-introduced d'Haunt election method, designed to give entry to the small loyalist political parties. Groups that have participated in political discussion in their own areas are invited to "Belfast-Wide Discussions," where women discuss contentious issues within an educationally planned format. One of these discussions dealt with the politically explosive issue of marching.

Another educational development has been the establishment of a North-South Women's Education Program entitled: Politically Organized Women Educating for Representation (or Revolution! if you will). This group comprises membership from University College Dublin, University of Ulster, and a number of key Northern and Southern women's voluntary organizations. The program comprises a series of cross-border residential, accredited courses on women's history, politics, economics, effective organizing, and so on. Community organizers and activists from both sides of the border have participated in the program. There are many other initiatives—too many to mention here.

When giving a brief overview of some developments in local women's groups in the NI, it is easy to seem to valorize women as though they play no part in oppressive structures or "founding faultlines"; as though they have no part in the brutalities of militarism and structural violence. Simona Sharoni cautions against the tendency to either "idealize alliances," or to emphasize the ability of women to transcend political boundaries. Some women have participated, in gender-specific ways, in the war in

the North of Ireland, and in the peace process. They have been active in all military and paramilitary forces. Where they have not themselves been agents of military force, they have supported and sustained those who are. Women are a part of the conflict, not apart from it.

It is self-evident, however, that the cherished feminist axiom that "the personal is political" poses particular problems in a society like NI. This weary dictum is used to urge women to the realization that our motley experiences of the world are significant; that the singular experience of the individual woman has a commonality with the experiences of all other women. Through this realization it is hoped that internalized oppression will be revealed. In NI the problems posed by viewing sisterhood as transcendent can be inferred from asking: whose personal experience generates the politics around which we should organize—yours or mine? In other words, who decides what counts as *bona fide* female experience on which to base explanation, analysis, and action? The personal experience of one woman may be the oppression, through denial, of another.

Judith Evans cautions that it is an easy extrapolation from the insight that women have much in common to the dogma that all women face the same form of oppression. The latter has been challenged by third world women, women of colour, and by women in Ireland. Some of the latter would claim to share the challenge made by the former, that western feminism's preoccupations with the personal and psychological over the economic and the political is an irrelevance or a luxury.

It is an obvious thing to say, but still needs saying: women are not a unified group, sharing essential qualities or experiences. The lives of women in the North of Ireland cannot be isolated, either theoretically or practically, from their socio-economic, political, or cultural contexts. Nationalist women and Unionist

women will have different analyses and different experiences of the political conflict. They will have different expectations and aspirations about the future. These differences will not be less keenly disputed because the parties to the dispute are women. The word "difference" throws a blanket over the historicized, sectarian socio-economic, political, and cultural dominations of NI society, whereby the poorest women are maintained in asymmetrical power relationships. This "faultline" is shifting as I write.

### Fixing faultlines: or shifting boundaries?

The faultline metaphor in my title, has a nice postmodern feel to it. Geological faultlines can seem fixed and unchanging, but they are constantly subject to deep-rooted earth shifts. All is change and flux. It is well to reflect on this when considering the apparently unchanging political and economic faultlines of the North. Things that happened yesterday in NI quickly assume the mantle of historical inevitability. In reflecting on a recent study about Bloody Sunday, Eamon McCann, a civil rights activist at the time, reflected on the direction nationalist politics have taken since then. He thinks that knowing how politics worked out encourages the implicit working assumption that this was how it was bound to work out. But it didn't have to necessarily be so. That challenge is vital. How it is, is not how it has to be. The period of the cease-fires in the North, and the struggles and breakthroughs of the peace process, have allowed us to see this and to imagine different futures; and different ways of going to those futures.

Miriam Daly was right when she said that, "The liberation of women is the most profoundly revolutionary task civilized society can tackle" (51). In NI this task must contend with the realities of lives lived within the asymmetrical, political, material, ideological, and cultural constructs of gen-

der, class, nation, religion, and race. In modest and dramatic ways local groups contend with these realities every day. Their ways of working are not going to transform society, but they make a difference. Perhaps social and political transformations also require the cumulative effects of many small-scale sites of transformation, sites of resistance. There is a seam of hard-won, critical experience in the North.

I do not expect that negotiations or disputes about NI's constitution, or about the border, will transform how gender structures and shapes the lives of men and women. Disputes about the distribution of wealth, that are "gender free," are unlikely to change gender oppression. Margaret MacCurtain is instructive and redemptive in her reminder that,

The recognition of being oppressed does not preclude recognition on the part of the oppressed that they are capable of acting to influence their own destiny. (48-49)

Things can be otherwise. The women who participate in local groups, in working-class neighbourhoods, are acting to "influence their own destiny." They are also consciously attempting to influence the life and the futures of their different communities.

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## Agenda

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