

Feminism During the Troubles in Northern Ireland

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Drawing from historical research, feminist theory, and personal experience gained on the Journeys Northern Ireland trip, I will explore how the emergence of second-wave feminism in the US, England, and Ireland interacted with the simultaneous explosion of the Troubles in Northern Ireland. The Troubles refers to a period of sectarian violence perpetuated on one side by nationalists/republicans, who believe Northern Ireland should join the Republic of Ireland, and on the other side by unionists/loyalists, who believe Northern Ireland should remain in the United Kingdom. I will argue that as a result of second-wave feminism and the Troubles coinciding, feminism in Northern Ireland became associated with nationalist militancy, and mainstream feminism was restricted from making significant advances until the conflict subsided. First investigating the relationship of nationalist and Catholic Northern Irish women to feminism, I will then explore feminism and gender in the nationalist paramilitaries using the experience of interned nationalist women as a key site of analysis. I will consider tensions between unionism and feminism, as well as between nationalist and mainstream feminism, as essential factors influencing the relationship between the emergence of feminism and the Troubles. Finally, I will examine feminism in Northern Ireland today, focusing on the role of feminism in the peace and reconciliation process following the Troubles.

Introduction: The Unique Emergence of Feminism in Northern Ireland

The 1960s and 70s are understood to be times of radical social change in the West, but for Northern Ireland, this period also marks the sectarianism, or political and religious conflict, known as the Troubles. As feminism emerged in Northern Ireland, it was influenced both by the rising conflict and by feminist movements in England, the United States, and the Republic of Ireland. As Carol Coulter writes, the feminism emerging in the 1960s in the US and England which featured “the economically and socially impotent urban housewife... was not one which would strike a chord with the majority of Irish women of that time” (Coulter 38). However, the African-American Civil Rights Movement in the US significantly informed the burgeoning Catholic Civil Rights Movement in Northern Ireland (see fig. 1), which mobilized women

who found connections between feminism and sectarian discrimination. These factors caused the feminist movement in Northern Ireland to be much more inclusive of working-class women as it coalesced (Turtle 277-278). Tragically, the peaceful Civil Rights Movement in Northern Ireland abruptly came to an end when it was met with state violence on Bloody Sunday. This event caused nationalist paramilitaries’ membership to skyrocket, and violent conflict escalated rapidly on both sides. Because this conflict peaked as feminism gained momentum on the Western stage, Northern Irish feminism became associated with nationalist militancy, while the progress of mainstream feminism stagnated until the conflict subsided. However, despite challenging tensions, the Northern Irish feminist perspective proved itself essential to the peace and reconciliation process.



Fig. 1. Bernadette Devlin, a prominent Northern Ireland civil rights activist, in 1971. “Saturday Morning Pictures,” *Standard Issue Magazine*, 2016.

Feminism in Northern Ireland During the Troubles

Nationalism and feminism were concretely linked through civil rights efforts, but many researchers writing from a nationalist perspective have found feminist concerns simply in the “otherizing” of the colonizer/colonized relationship. In this way, these researchers argue that “the British conceptualized themselves as a masculine nation thereby defining the Irish as collectively feminine” (Earles 14). However, this does not mean that the nationalist movement was innately feminist, nor that all nationalist women would have identified with feminism. In writing that “growing nationalist sentiments defined womanhood in terms of motherhood and otherness in relationship to men,” (Earles 12), Earles shows that parts of the nationalist ideology were hostile to feminism. Similarly, Wilford and Galligan describe that nationalist women often felt that they had to wait on feminist issues in favor of the more important nationalist cause (173). The Irish Republican Army (IRA), which was the main nationalist paramilitary, and Sinn Féin, the political party of the IRA, made efforts with varying success to address

gendered violence and discrimination in the nationalist movements. However, after founding the first Belfast Rape Crisis Centre in 1981, Susan McKay writes that “the violence of the conflict was masking horrific levels of violence against women and children, some of it carried out by men who saw themselves as heroes within their communities” (McKay 240). Considering that there was significant overlap between the nationalist and Catholic population, there was also friction between Catholicism and mainstream second wave feminism as sexual liberation. Therefore, the relationship between nationalism and feminism was complicated, many of the tensions coming to a head in the nationalist paramilitaries.

At the beginning of the conflict, many women who had an interest in the IRA were funneled into Cumann na mBan, a women’s paramilitary organization somewhat secondary to the IRA, but women were also allowed into the actual IRA early on (see fig. 2). Members of Cumann na mBan and female members of the IRA could still become combatants, although some women were dissatisfied with their treatment in the



Fig. 2. Mural of Cumann na mBan members in Belfast. "Belfast Murals," 2017.

IRA as subservient to men (Talbot 134). When connected to paramilitaries in any way, women were held responsible for the family unit. If their husband was in the IRA or in jail, women had to simultaneously support their spouses and children, while when women were members themselves, there was a grave awareness that "the consequences of their activism could affect their family" (Talbot 153). Earles writes that nationalist women often used their femininity as a weapon in that British soldiers would overlook women's bodies as capable of violence, and thereby in portraying themselves as passive and desexualized, these women could more safely transport weapons and warn nationalist men of raids (19).

As more women joined the IRA, the organization was forced to address the paradox of women's presence in a hyper-masculine space. Earles posits that because England had designated Ireland the feminine "other," the nationalist movement became a site of exaggerated masculinity to compensate. She notes that "when radical groups form paramilitary organizations not divided along lines of gender, intricate steps must be taken to insure the appearance of an overall masculinity within these armies despite the presence of women" (29). The IRA as a result required that female members "adhere to a kind of desexualization" (28) that was present not only in dress standards but in the IRA's internal judicial system. IRA regulations prohibited not only sexual abuse but also consensual sex between members, and men had a greater chance of acquittal when tried for sexual misconduct in British rather than the IRA's provisional courts (28). However, to imply that sexual violence was not a problem during this time as related to the conflict would be gravely inaccurate. McKay argues that the Troubles marked a period of "armed patriarchy" where "men with guns which they held supposedly to defend their people or to liberate their people... used those guns to intimidate, overpower and silence women and children" ("Speech by Susan McKay"), explicitly condemning both nationalists and unionists.

A central location for feminist theorizing and activism is found in the experience of nationalist women who were interned during the Troubles. Male prisoners' protests gained international attention, yet when female prisoners participated they were often ignored or discouraged by other nationalists. In particular, the hunger protests, dirty protests, and strip searches were each parts of the internment experience with feminist implications on the body. According to Earles, women at the all



Fig. 3. Mairéad Farrell's 1980 cell at Armagh Prison. Powers, Maria, *The Irish Times*, 2015.

female Armagh Prison were under pressure to stop their December 1980 hunger strike to refocus media attention on the strike at Long Kesh, the men's prison (46). The women abruptly called off this protest after nineteen days; "while women starved themselves for the cause of a united Ireland, only men's suffering was validated – even by the women themselves" (Earles 46). The IRA discouraged them from attempting to show solidarity again with male prisoners during the dirty protests, where interns refused to bathe and smeared excrement around their cells. When the women also began smearing menstrual blood on prison walls (see fig. 3), they were shunned and sexualized for their display of uncontrolled feminine bodies (Earles 52). However, the rampant strip searches in Armagh and Maghaberry in the 1980s evoked a considerable outcry from both mainstream feminists and nationalists because they were rife with sexual abuses, leading even Sinn Féin to write in 1988 that nationalist women simultaneously faced both gendered and colonialist oppression (Talbot 142). Although dominant nationalist forces eventually took a more feminist stance in this way, women's overall experiences in Armagh and Maghaberry exemplify how "heteronormativity dictates that women ignore the significance of their

own suffering and emotionally disconnect from their bodies in order to effectively 'support' the campaign of men" (Earles 46).

Because in Northern Ireland feminism became so associated with the radical nationalist movement, tensions developed between nationalists and mainstream feminists, as well as between feminism and unionism. Margaret Ward discusses two dominant feminist ideologies in Ireland: "nationalist feminism" which mainly considers patriarchy in the context of colonialism, and "essentialist feminism" which focuses on the less radical issues that would typically be associated with mainstream Western feminism, such as job discrimination and contraceptive access (Ward 61). Essentialist feminism has often conflicted with nationalist feminism in that nationalist feminists are unwilling to decenter colonialism from discourse (Ward 61), while mainstream feminists were reluctant to ostracize less radical supporters by supporting nationalist militants until the sexual violence of the strip searches emerged in the mid 1980s (Talbot 142). Meanwhile, Coutler traces unionism's tension with feminism all the way back to loyalist leaders rejecting the women's suffrage movement in the early 1900s, arguing that "the weakness of feminism

among Northern Protestant women today is the legacy of that heritage” (Coulter 29). More contemporary hostility toward feminism is evident in instances such as Ian Paisley, an Evangelical Protestant minister who was symbol of hardline unionism, mooing at Catholic members of the peace-

focused Northern Ireland Women's Coalition (Clarity 1997). While not necessarily reflective of unionist ideology as a whole, Paisley's remarks reflect that feminism is not exactly a priority in the loyalist movement.

Conclusion: Feminism's Role in Peace and Reconciliation

Just as the escalation of sectarian violence in Northern Ireland shaped the emerging feminist movement, the peace and reconciliation process could not have looked as it did without feminists' voices. Northern Irish women have vocally expressed their frustration at being excluded from the peace process (Hinds 110). Particularly interested in integration, women have spoken out against the so-called peace walls that institutionalize residential segregation, “articulat[ing] their ability as Catholic and Protestant women to cooperate and work pragmatically on the issues that affect their lives” (Hinds 112). Feminist approaches such as intersectionality lend a valuable lens of analysis in allowing for a multiplicity of identity that, in the context of Northern Ireland, allows for transcendence of the Catholic/Protestant or nationalist/unionist dichotomy. Many Northern Irish women have spoken to feeling that other identities of theirs, including gender, preclude their sectarian ties (Hinds 117), and to this end have been involved in projects that unite women across political divide. One such example is the Theatre of Witness project at the Derry Playhouse, which cathartically shares the stories of women on total opposite sides of the Troubles. To American feminists, these projects may seem reminiscent of consciousness-raising sessions, existing at the crux of tension between the personal and political. However, just as it can be problematic to

apply US racial paradigms to the Troubles even though many nationalists find solidarity between the Catholic and African-American Civil Rights movements, so it is insufficient to view women's rights in Northern Ireland through an American feminist lens. For example, when American feminists began talking about politicizing the personal, there may have been less tension among activists because they placed themselves more similarly on the political spectrum. However, for Northern Irish feminists, there are two planes of politicization: one's view of feminism, and one's nationalist or loyalist allegiance. Women involved in such projects have found solidarity despite these painful differences, confronting instead of glossing over centuries-old conflicts. Their work speaks to just how essential women are to not just preventing more sectarian violence but healing the wounds it has already caused.

It is important to consider that peace is not necessarily inherently liberating for groups that are doubly marginalized in such conflicts (Earles 61), so peacemaking efforts must be more intentional than broad proclamations of unity and reconciliation. It is also clear that sexual and domestic violence during this time have to a degree been dismissed as secondary to the sectarian violence that dominated the Northern Irish landscape. However, “the long, painful experience of exclusion and marginalization

suffered by women makes them ideal champions for new structures, relationships, and arrangements that can accommodate people's multifaceted identities" (Hinds

126). The resilience of Northern Irish women speaks to a new era of hope moving forward from a violent and traumatic past.

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