

Models of Peacebuilding in Community-Based Women's Empowerment Projects in Ireland

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Introduction

UN Resolution 1325 of 2000 states that women are to be involved in every area of post-conflict intervention and transition. This has been explained on grounds of equality and on grounds of human rights. In terms of equality, disparity between men's and women's participation, particularly in areas of political and economic development for example, lead to systems and mechanisms being developed that benefit men more than women. Equality of participation not only means that women's perspectives can be voiced, but also that there is a more balanced nature of post-conflict arrangements. The usual form of post-conflict arrangement, for example, caters for equality between national identities, rather than social equality¹.

Women's participation as also been urged on human rights grounds. This highlights the disparity between the experience of women and men in conflict. The inclusion of women and consideration for the experience of women also has the capacity to better safeguard the rights of women in post-conflict arrangements. The norm is for civil and political rights to be safeguarded, but women tend to see the need for social and economic rights which are often lacking in peace agreements².

These perspectives are acknowledged and supported. This paper examines another dimension: that of the relationship between women, social capital development and the transition to a peaceful society. The nature of civil society and social capital theory are explored and the inclusion – or not – of women, and the role of civil society in peace building after conflict. The relationship between women and the project of peace building is then examined and then some practical examples of how women have been working towards peace in Northern Ireland and the border counties of Ireland.

Civil Society and Women

There have been debates over the nature of civil society. Essentially, most definitions point to what exists where the state is not. In some definitions also, this defined as where work or business is not. It has also been described of the areas of civic organisation between the home and the state, meaning voluntary organisations, community organisations, church organisations, sports and social clubs, etc. These are the forms that Robert Putnam had in mind.

¹ Hill, M, Porter, F, McAuley, C and McLaughlin, E (2006), *80 Years of Talking about Equality in Northern Ireland: A History of Discourses and Practices*, Belfast: Equality and Social Inclusion in Ireland Project, Working Paper No 5.

² Chinkin, C (2004), *Peace processes, post-conflict security and women's human rights: The international context considered*, Belfast: Torkel Opsahl Memorial Lecture, Queen's University Belfast, December 2004.

Putnam defines civic society in terms of social capital: "The core idea of social capital theory is that social networks have value"³. This social capital is based on principles of trust⁴ and of 'general reciprocity', that is, deeds and relationships that do not expect an immediate or definable return, as in notions of exchange in business and trade, but that someone else will do things for them as well.

Social capital can also be defined in terms of that which bonds, i.e. holding the social fabric of the community together, and that which bridges, i.e. reaches out to others outside the community or immediate circle⁵. In Northern Ireland, while the predominantly male preoccupation with conflict was being waged, it was women who held together families and communities⁶, and it has been women who have reached across communal divides to engage with other women on issues that affect them outside of the dominant discourses of the constitutional question. The way women organise and act therefore best fulfil the definitions of social capital.

Putnam also describes the nature of civil society organisations in terms of 'horizontal' and co-operative structures, as opposed to 'vertical' and hierarchical structures⁷, as are found in state bodies, political organisations and business structures. Again, a glance at the nature of the way women's organisations work – the 'women's sector' – reveals a basis of trust, relationship and co-operation, as opposed to hierarchies. Male-dominated organisations even in civil society tend to have more emphasis on hierarchy and office bearers, leading to the conclusion that the way women organise is more in keeping with descriptors of civil society.

But there should not be assumptions that civil society automatically benefits women. The historical philosophical origins of citizenship have excluded women⁸. While the paid workforce of civil society organisations in Northern Ireland is 75% female, the majority of managers in those organisations are men. Anne Phillips has noted that feminists have generally avoided the idea of civil society, because it challenges the state for the public sphere, not the all-important private sphere⁹. Civil society has also adopted the gendered structures of the rest of society and can be discriminatory due to its unregulated nature.

However, the possible gains of a sector where women have a greater voice than in current political structures¹⁰, for instance, means greater role for civil society stands to benefit women in the long term.

³ Putnam, R (2000), *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, New York: Simon and Shuster, p.19.

⁴ See Putnam, R (1993), *Making Democracy Work: Civil Traditions in Modern Italy*, Princeton: University Press, pp.170-3; Putnam, 2000, p.21.

⁵ Putnam, 2000, p.23.

⁶ See Potter, M (2005), *In Their Own Words: A Research Report into the Victims Sector in Northern Ireland*, Belfast: Training for Women Network.

⁷ Putnam, 1993, p.173.

⁸ Pateman, C (1989), *The Disorder of Woman: Democracy, Feminism and Political Theory*, Cambridge: Polity, p.1; Pitkin, H (1984), *Fortune is a Woman: Gender and Politics in the Thought of Niccolò Machiavelli*, Berkley: University of California Press, p.25; Vogel, U (1995), 'Guarding the Boundaries of Liberty' in Wokler, R (ed), *Rousseau and Liberty*, Manchester: University Press, p.215; Phillips, A (1993), *Democracy and Difference*, Cambridge: Polity, p.8.

⁹ Phillips, A (2002), 'Does Feminism Need a Concept of Civil Society?' in Chambers, S and Kymlicka, W (eds), *Alternative Conceptions of Civil Society*, Princeton: University Press, p.72-87.

¹⁰ In Northern Ireland, 21% of local councillors, three out of 26 mayors, three of 12 MPs, one of three MEPs, 17% of MLAs, 32% of public appointments (but only 35 of 141 chairs) are

Conflict Transformation and Civil Society

Conflict resolution has traditionally been the preserve of elites. This is problematic on two counts: (1) Conflict elites gain status through conflict and if post-conflict arrangements do not maintain that status, there is less incentive to commit to peace; and (2) Clientelism¹¹ creates a situation where elites manipulate 'client' populations that are maintained in conflict through discourses of fear and threat. This has left other voices in society silent during conflict and in the transition from conflict, such as women¹².

Current theories of civil society emphasise the need to include civil society in the peace building process. The creation and involvement of civil society is seen as being essential for the rehabilitation of war-torn societies¹³. John Paul Lederach's model notes that all levels of society are involved in conflict in various ways, so all levels should also be involved in the transition from conflict and he identifies middle range actors as the most important to engage, that is, those between the elites, who define the parameters of conflict, and the grass routes, who tend to wage conflict¹⁴.

The transition from conflict has also been related to notions of building democracy. Again, modern theories of democracy expect some form of public participation beyond voting for a representative in an election¹⁵. This has developed into the notion of public consultation¹⁶, where policy development is – at least in theory – carried out in discussion with representative groups and the general public¹⁷. However, unless there is sufficient capacity in civil society organisations to engage in consultation processes, this form of democratisation is less affective.

Women and Peace Building

The association of women with peace has been long established. There are many women's organisations and groups that are committed to agitating for peace around the world but, although there are organisations dominated by men engaged in peace activities, there are no men's groups as such.

women, Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (2006), *Women in Northern Ireland*, Belfast: DETI, p.23.

¹¹ See Voutat, B (2000), 'Territorial identity in Europe: the political processes of the construction of identities in Corsica, the Basque Country, Italy, Macedonia and the Swiss Jura' in *Contemporary European History*, Volume 9 Issue 2, p.286; Briquet, J-L (1997), *La Tradition en Mouvement: Clientélisme et Politique en Corse*, Paris: Bélin, p.65.

¹² The feeling of being excluded from the future is expressed by Kate Fearon, Fearon, K (1999), *Women's Work: The Story of the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition*, Belfast: Blackstaff.

¹³ Kumar, K (ed)(1997), *Rebuilding Societies after Civil War: Critical Roles for International Assistance*, Boulder: Lynne Rienner, p.2.

¹⁴ Lederach, J (1999), *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies*, Washington DC: US Institute of Peace Research, p.39.

¹⁵ Samuel Finer defines democracy as "government which is derived from public opinion and is accountable to it", Finer, S (1970), *Comparative Government*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, p.63.

¹⁶ Harold Laski asserts that: "the first great need of the modern state is to organise institutions of consultation", Laski, H (1973), *A Grammar of Politics*, London: George Allan and Unwin, p.80.

¹⁷ Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 establishes the principle of consultation for all public policy development in post-conflict Northern Ireland.

This has by some writers been attributed to women being more peaceful by nature, their biological make-up predisposing them less to violence and more to peace¹⁸. Indeed, over 95% of violent crime is committed by men. The chemical make-up of women is said to depress violence. But this does not explain how women are involved in armed conflict or acts of violence and perpetuates the pervasive dualist of women as victims and men as perpetrators.

Women may be more aligned against conflict due to the fact that they suffer disproportionately to men, being more likely to endure poverty, hunger, become refugees and victims of direct abuse¹⁹. Essentially, women are regarded as having more to lose from conflict so it is unsurprising that they have become more opposed to it than men, who stand to gain power, dominance or spoils of war if they are successful.

Maternalism has been put forward as another reason, for example, Sara Ruddick, while not according with a view that women are naturally or hormonally any more predisposed to peace than men, their experience of being the primary carers in the community influences their attitude to war. Women nurture children, by extension the community and by extension again, the nation or humanity itself²⁰.

Prevailing thought on socialisation theory suggests that women are brought up to be more passive, peace loving and caring and so have internalised qualities and attitudes that make them inclined towards peace making rather than war making. Likewise, men are socialised into believing that men should go to war to prove their manhood, as Skjelsback and Smith explain:

Some of the violent acts perpetrated by men in armed conflicts are perpetrated precisely because the men have become convinced that that is the way to show their masculinity²¹.

While some of these theories may have resonance as to why women may be more predisposed to peace, they cannot explain the many women who are not. Evidence of women in war demonstrates that they can be just as willing and capable of fighting as men. Azza Karam adds that viewing women in terms of passive victims is a result of patriarchal structures rather than the reality of women's passivity and contributes to their subjugation²².

There are other theories, for example the coincidental factors of birth control and reduced conflict. In this thesis, violent conflict is prevalent where there are large numbers of younger people in the population, who are more easily radicalised²³. High birth rates create younger populations and so more conflict, birth control does the opposite, but also releases women to be more visible in society, for example in

¹⁸ Galtung, J (1996), *Peace by Peaceful Means: Peace, conflict development and civilisation*, London: Sage, pp.40-3.

¹⁹ Alonso, H (1993), *Peace as a Women's Issue: A History of the US Movement for World Peace and Women's Rights*, New York: Syracuse University Press, p.11.

²⁰ Ruddick, S (1990), *Maternal Thinking: Towards a Politics of Peace*, London: Women's Press.

²¹ Skjelsback, I and Smyth, D (eds) (2001), *Gender, Peace and Conflict*, London: Sage.

²² Karam, A (2001), 'Women in War and Peacebuilding' in *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, Vol 3 No 1, April 2001, p.22.

²³ Huntington, S (2002), *The Clash of Civilisations and the Remaking of World Order*, London: Free Press, pp.117-8.

politics or the economy, creating the illusion of women's participation and less conflict²⁴.

Whatever the explanations, there association between women's participation and peace is strong. It may well be that, for whatever reason, women are better at co-operation and peace building than men. But this essentialises women as peace builders and men as war mongers. There are indeed many men who are co-operative and adept at building peace and the relationship between gender and conflict or peace is extremely complex. However, in the context of Northern Ireland, because women are perceived less as a threat, there are more opportunities for access across conflict lines and more leeway to co-operate and negotiate than for many men. Likewise, the reality of women in caring roles in society creates a context where women are simply better placed and organised for the task of sustaining communities during and rebuilding communities after conflict

The Peace Programme

The European Union Programme for Peace and Reconciliation was established in response to the 1994 ceasefires to take advantage of the opportunities for building peace. Peace I (1996-1999) was mainly an economic programme distributing sums of money among many different groups around Northern Ireland and the border counties of Ireland. Peace II (2000-2006) was more focussed and had more of a requirement for projects to demonstrate their impact on the process of reconciliation. The current Peace II Extension (2006-2008) is more focussed again with even more focus on impacts for reconciliation, seen as a 'step up' from Peace II. The future Peace III Programme will be smaller again and more strategic.

Initially, there was no specific measure for women in the Programme. Mobilisation across the community divide by the so-called 'women's sector' in Northern Ireland succeeded in securing a measure for women's training. This was under Sub-Programme 4: Social Inclusion, Measure 1: Developing Grass Roots Capacities and Promoting the Inclusion of Women, delivered in partnership with the Training for Women Network in the north and ADM/CPA²⁵ in the south.

Women were included in Peace II, but the focus became more economic, under Priority 1, Measure 5, the Advancement of Women. Projects had to demonstrate both impacts on reconciliation and employability or entrepreneurship. In the design of the Peace II extension, the women's training measure was again deleted from the Programme. Another concerted cross-community lobbying campaign with representatives in Belfast, Dublin, London and Brussels succeeded in having the measure reinstated, albeit as the smallest measure at less than half the next smallest. The argument was won due to international and national commitments to women post-conflict, such as UN Resolution 1325, the overwhelming success of the women's training measure compared with other measures and the demonstration of impacts on the ground through the evidence of the activities of the women themselves and the continuing need. Unsurprisingly, when the call for applications came, this smallest measure had the second highest number of applications across the whole Programme, was over-subscribed over six times and only projects scoring 84% or above in the assessment process could be funded, compared with other measures funding at the pass mark of 65%.

²⁴ Regan, P and Paskeviciute, A (2003), 'Women's access to politics and peaceful states' in *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol 40 No 3, May 2003.

²⁵ Now Border Action.

Demonstrating the success of or otherwise of the impact of women's involvement in building peace is not straightforward. The women's measure is funded through the European Social Fund, which has stipulations on projects having an employability impact. The measure is also supported under Priority 1, which is for Economic Renewal, again requiring projects to have an economic impact. Reconciliation is additional in that it has to be threaded into an economic programme. Yet, in these terms, impacts are reasonably simple to demonstrate, for example by the end of 2005 there were:

- 4925 beneficiaries
- 3717 qualifications achieved
- 668 women entering employment
- By the end of 2004, 65 new businesses had been opened by women, figures to the end of 2005 not yet available

These figures demonstrate an impact in economic and educational development sense, yet they are only a small part of the story. Also, the connection between economic development and peace, or of lack of development and conflict, is still under debate²⁶.

The work among community-based women's training projects has an impact on the building of peace in Ireland that is more difficult to measure. Supporting women to be more personally, politically, civically and economically empowered contributes to the process of building civil society where it has been depressed by conflict, positive civic activity where activities in the community had been geared towards conflict and the opportunity to be more mobile in terms of employment, education, political engagement and the forming of relationships.

Empowering women's participation contributes the development of civil society by enhancing social capital and increasing linkages within and between communities. This in turn creates the opportunities for contributing to local regeneration through positive community engagement, democratic processes through policy consultation, positive civic engagement through the development of alternative community structures to those dominated by conflict elites and reconciliation through cross-community learning, understanding and relationship-building.

The work at project level is key to this process. Projects work in contexts where women have been particularly marginalised, such as in areas economically disadvantaged by the conflict, where the physical impact of the conflict has been greatest and where the conflict is continuing. Each has fulfilled specific criteria regarding need in the locality, support to women, project content and reconciliation outcomes. These can vary enormously from context to context and according to what is possible under the circumstances.

Projects include the following in their programmes:

- Personal development or confidence building leading to personal empowerment
- Work towards qualifications leading to educational empowerment
- Active citizenship and participation leading to civic and political empowerment
- Employability or entrepreneurship leading to economic empowerment

²⁶ See Piazza, J (2006), 'Rooted in Poverty?: Terrorism, Poor Economic Development, and Social Cleavages' in *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 18, pp.159-177.

- Mutual understanding through training, discussion and contact with the 'other' community leading to opportunities for reconciliation and the forming of relationships

For example, two projects in East Belfast, one in Republican Short Strand and one in the Loyalist Newtownards Road area have separately developed personally and educationally women with few or no qualifications whose participation on their community and the wider community has been marginalised by the conflict. This development has led to the confidence to engage with women from the 'other's side. Initially women from both projects met, which has now developed into a joint cross-community group that has explored issues relevant to them, each others' cultures and areas of conflict. Members of this group have helped each other through the continuing times of tension and violence between each others' communities, some having the confidence now to actively engage in their own communities and have an influence on calming situations of tension.

A project in Cookstown has brought together rural women isolated by the conflict, many of whom have hardly ventured out of their homes and had not participation in any training or education. One particular group of 12, for example, contained three women who had attempted suicide and five who had seriously contemplated it. Through a series of phased developmental interventions, these women have not only achieved qualifications leading to employment, but have engaged in activities exploring their own prejudices and the views of individuals from the 'other' community in a neutral setting.

A project in Lurgan works with individuals who have been directly affected by the conflict through bereavement, many having a background in the security forces. The project takes participants through a process of personal psychological healing, educational development and training, a course exploring awareness and understanding of the issues that have affected their participation in the conflict and contact with those whom they had formerly considered the 'enemy', including cross-border activities.

Conclusion

Women have been marginalised by the conflict in Ireland, their needs, voices and participation having been subsumed into wider constitutional political discourses. Processes that create opportunities for personal development, educational achievement and economic independence in a supportive environment empower women to participate and actively engage in their community context, allied with the development of mutual understanding and relationship building with the 'other' community, creates a context for women to contribute to building peace after conflict.

Women's organisations often better fulfil the theoretical criteria for social capital in that their mode of operation, structure and engagement matches the definitions for bonding and bridging social capital. Empowered to actively engage, they represent opportunities to bypass conflict elites, participate in consultative policy processes and take leadership roles in communities recovering from conflict, leading to opportunities for a sustainable peaceful society.

The empowerment and capacity building model offers additional reference points to the need for women's participation on the grounds of equality and human rights. Taken as a working example of peace building, the model also offers a reference point for the development of initiatives in other contexts of transition from conflict.