The Northern Ireland Women's Coalition:

Origin, Influence and Impact

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Abstract: The Northern Ireland Women's Coalition (NIWC) was a political party established in 1996 and dissolved in 2006, created to contest elections to the political peace negotiations that would result in the Belfast Agreement. Its later policies and actions, underscored by its three core principles of equality, inclusion and human rights were formulated and implemented in support of the Belfast Agreement. Drawing on their experience of activism in civil society and exclusion from mainstream political life, the NIWC seized the opportunity to successfully raise the issue of women in the formal political arena in order to shape the peace process. But what of its contribution to politics in Northern Ireland - and beyond - after the GFA, and what of its legacy after its dissolution?

This article sketches the context of negotiations on 'the constitutional question' in which the NIWC emerged, says something of its experience in the political negotiations, points to its achievements in the inaugural Northern Ireland Assembly, and the implementation of the Belfast Agreement within and outwith those formal structures, identifying three main legacy areas of the NIWC that still shape the political landscape in Northern Ireland today, as well as one legacy area that informs and resonates with peace-building globally to this day.

Keyword: Women, Peacebuilding, Northern Ireland

1 Background

Northern Ireland has been contested political terrain since its establishment in 1921, but in the late 1960s protest movements around civil and human rights put pressure on those that supported the status quo - chiefly the British government, and the unionist political parties (who had held the majority government in Northern Ireland since the outset), to share power equitably. The initially peaceful civil rights movement gave way to a violent struggle, advocated by those who saw opportunity for a bigger strategic gain than the award of individual and collective human rights. From about 1970 onwards a violent paramilitary and military conflict was waged by those purporting to represent, variously, unionist and loyalist (those who wished to retain a union with Britain) and, nationalist and republican (those who wished to reunite with the rest of Ireland)

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perspectives.

By the mid-1990s, around 3,185 people had been killed and 38,711 injured in 35,058 shooting and 17,021 bombing and/or incendiary device incidents[1]. Both the British and Irish governments, and the paramilitary organization, the Irish Republican Army (IRA) increasingly acknowledged that no-one was going to emerge the winner of the conflict through exclusively military means, often referred to as a "mutually hurting stalemate" (Zartman 2000:230). The governments thus sought a political settlement.

It had not been for want of trying previously. In the most recent iteration of the conflict (from about 1970), there had been four significant attempts at reaching a constitutional settlement. These were the Sunningdale Agreement in 1973, the Constitutional Convention in 1975-6, the Anglo-Irish Agreement in 1985, the Brooke-Mayhew Talks in 1991-92[2], a process that culminated in the Downing St. Declaration in 1993. The Downing St. Declaration was boosted by the declaration of an Irish Republican Army (IRA) ceasefire in August 1994, followed in October 1994 by a ceasefire of the Combined Loyalist Military Command (CLMC). These in turn laid the ground for a new talks initiative, convened by the British and Irish governments, and begun in 1996.

Before turning to that initiative, it is worthwhile to recall that there had been little really new or transformative in terms of content on the constitutional question since the early seventies. The competing constitutional interests in Northern Ireland coalesced around three sets of relationships: firstly, the relationship between the two main communities – nationalist and unionist, frequently referred to in shorthand as Catholics and Protestants; secondly, the relationship between the political elites in Northern Ireland, be that in the form of a Government or an Executive, and the Government of Ireland, and indeed to a lesser extent, the relationship between the nationalist population in Northern Ireland and the Government of Ireland – daubed the 'North-South' dimension; and, thirdly, the relationship between the Government of the United Kingdom and the Government of Ireland – termed the 'East-West' dimension. The table below illustrates the proposals put forward by State actors during a number of initiatives to at least manage, if not resolve, these sets of relationships, and the manner in which power might be distributed within and between the actors in each dimension. It demonstrates that substance- and approach-wise the initiatives have more in common than not, but also that context and timing played a part.

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[1] Between 1969 and 1994, from Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI, 2003) statistics derived from Police Service of Northern Ireland tables reported on the CAIN website, namely - Table NI-SEC-05: Persons injured (number) due to the security situation in Northern Ireland (only), 1969 to 2003; Table NI-SEC-06: Security related incidents (number) in Northern Ireland (only), shootings, bombings, and incendiaries, 1969 to 2003; Table NI-SEC-04: Deaths (number) due to the security situation in Northern Ireland (only), 1969-2002. It should be noted that different indices of conflict related deaths and injuries are available.

[2] The generally accepted timeframe is April 1991-November 1992, but in reality, Peter Brooke, as then Secretary of State had been engaged in talks with Unionists since early 1990, and certainly his November 1990 speech was a significant turning point. Furthermore, a separate, but linked process, the Hume-Adams Dialogue (on and off from 1988-1996) was also significant, but, not being conducted by state actors per se, is not included in this list, or in the table below. As part of this Dialogue, in 1993, John Hume, leader of the nationalist SDLP and Gerry Adams, leader of the republican Sinn Fein, issued a joint statement proposing that the nationalist community had a right to self-determination, but also that the unionist community had to be involved in any political accommodation.

Table 1: Outline Constitutional Settlement Initiatives

		Sunningdale Agreement 1973[3]	Constitutional Convention 1975	Anglo-Irish Agreement 1985	Downing St. Declaration 1993	Belfast Agreement 1998
Constitutional Elements	Strand 1 Inside Northern Ireland	Executive & Assembly	Parliament & Government	Executive	Relationships between 2 communities	Executive & Assembly
	Strand 2 Ireland, North & South	Council of Ireland (executive)	Imposed institutional association with Ireland should be rejected	Cross-border co-operation on social and economic issues	Institutional recognition of special links between British & Irish peoples	Ministerial Council (non-executive)
	Strand 3 The UK & Ireland/ Status of NI	UK & IE declare no change in status of NI without majority consent (consent principle)	External relations the preserve of UK Government	Expanded role of Anglo-Irish Intergovern-mental Council; consent principle	Institutional recognition of special links between British & Irish peoples; consent principle	British Irish Intergovern-mental Council
	Policing in NI	No change	No change	No change	No change	Review of Policing
	Criminal Justice	No change	No change	No change	No change	Review of Crim. Just.
Extra-Constitutional Elements	Elections to negotiations	No	Yes	No	No	Yes
	Women at the table	No	No	Yes	No	Yes
	Paramilitary Ceasefires	No	Yes	No	No	Yes

Though tempting to assign a causal relationship between the presence of women at the table during the Belfast Agreement negotiations and a positive outcome, that is not the assertion here. Many factors were at play that

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[3] Formally, Northern Ireland Constitutional Proposals

endowed the 1996 process with a different character: the existence and recognition of a mutually hurting stalemate between military, paramilitary and political protagonists; the paramilitary ceasefires; the direct engagement of the United States in the negotiation process; an agenda broader than constitutional arrangements; the decision to hold elections to determine delegates to the negotiating table, to name but a few.

However, what is asserted is that the different character of, and the different characters involved in, the 1996-1998 process individually and collectively both changed the negotiating dynamic and the negotiation agenda and thus enhanced the opportunity for a resolution.

But we get ahead of ourselves. The single most important difference for women's participation in the peace process was the governments' decision to hold elections to determine who would be delegates to the negotiations. Both the fact of holding elections, and the electoral methodology were principally intended to ensure that representatives of paramilitary organizations (namely Sinn Féin, linked to the paramilitary IRA; the Progressive Unionist Party, linked to the paramilitary Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF); and the Ulster Democratic Party, linked to the paramilitary Ulster Defence Association(UDA) would be enabled to send delegates to the negotiating table. The electoral system would see election to a 110-member 'Northern Ireland Forum' with 90 members elected directly from multi-seat constituencies and - the radical novelty - 20 'top-up' seats from the ten parties polling the most votes across the piece. This was given legal effect in the Northern Ireland (Entry to Negotiations) Act and was designed to be truly a multi-party and inclusive process, offering formal and arguably disproportionate participation based on relatively few votes. The Northern Ireland Forum[4] was essentially a Unionist plaything, a white elephant with neither tooth nor tusk, that met once a week during the course of the negotiations. But, from the ranks of those elected to the Forum the political parties were entitled to nominate their negotiating teams of three (for the bigger parties) or two members (for the smaller parties) each to the actual negotiations, which met three days a week when in session. Thus, not only was the system designed to enable a wider range of parties around the table, it also allowed those parties to carry almost equal weight, irrespective of the number of Forum seats it had won.

2 Access and achievement in the peace negotiations 1996-1998

In their consideration of the NIWC's approach to the process of negotiation, Nolan-Haley and Hinds sum up the general situation in 1996 well:

> "An abnormal and deviant political culture that indulged in antagonism, bullying, sectarian and sexist behavior had thrived during years of conflict and had become embedded as normal in the minds of politicians, the media and those working in the political arena. /…/ The language used had violent and militaristic overtones that corroded the democratic process." (2003: 396).

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[4] Formally titled the *Northern Ireland Forum for Political Understanding and Dialogue*. Informally it was referred to by many commentators as the *Northern Ireland Forum for Political Misunderstanding and Monologue*.

It was into this context that a group of women who had been activists and analysts in the academic, civil society and public and private business sector for years began to agitate. Initially they lobbied the existing political parties on women's political representation in the forthcoming political negotiations, to no avail. During this period, approximately February to April 1996, the Northern Ireland Women's European Platform (NIWEP, a Non-Governmental Organization) also lobbied the UK government civil servants who were designing the electoral system described above. In so doing, they had been informed – and inspired – by the Beijing Platform for Action, the outcome of the UN's Fourth World Conference on Women, held some 6 months previously, in September 1995. In particular the conclusions on women and power and decision making, with their strategic objectives on access to and full participation in power structures resonated (United Nations, 1995). The UK government's original draft named 15 political parties who would be permitted to contest the elections. This was not good enough for the NIWEP, which turned up the pressure on the government. Its members stated that the list was fundamentally undemocratic, and its leadership stated that space needed to be reserved for a women's 'caucus' or 'platform' on the ballot paper. The government listened, and, with only hours before the ballot papers were to go to print, asked for a name for this as yet unformed women's 'caucus' or 'platform'; 'Northern Ireland Women's Coalition (NIWC)' was secured for the ballot paper (Fearon 1999). Following that, a political enterprise had to be established to support it.

Subsequently, a number of meetings with women activists were held. On analyzing the proposed voting system more closely, they concluded that with around 10,000 votes across the whole of Northern Ireland, a party, even a new party, could get itself elected. On a practical level, if they could get 100 candidates and each of those 100 candidates got only 100 votes each, then it would be possible to get at least 2 women elected to the negotiations. This was only 6 weeks before the elections. There was thus little time for detailed policy reflection and definition - the campaign was a flurry of enthusiasm, intellect, organization and grit.

However, three core principles – equality, inclusion and human rights – were struck early on. These principles acted as the guiding framework for short-term political positions and responses during the campaign while policy details were yet to be worked out and agreed. Later, all policies were developed around this framework. The women who made up the membership of the NIWC came from different political, religious and cultural backgrounds, but were united in their determination to use their own common experience of political exclusion to influence the agenda, shape the process, change the dynamic and impact the outcome.

The NIWC ran under a campaign banner of 'Wave Goodbye to the Dinosaurs'. While 100 candidates with 100 votes each was the aim, in reality the NIWC ran 68 candidates and got 7,731 votes. It was not 10,000, but it was enough: the NIWC would be entitled to 2 delegates at the table – and a support team of 10. The two main NIWC delegates (those two candidates at the top of the electoral list) to the talks were from a nationalist and a unionist background, and, when it came to nominating members for sub-committees, the NIWC was careful to always have representatives from both unionist and nationalist background at the table.

Over the next two years at the negotiating table, and in the corridors outside it, the NIWC had to develop a thick skin, as some male participants, particularly on the mainstream unionist side, questioned – with

varying degrees of sexism and sarcasm – their right to be part of the negotiations. This was particularly the case with the Forum, where the lack of adult supervision (in the form of any UK or Irish Government representatives) meant a free rein on the verbal abuse. The NIWC representatives were described as 'feckless' with 'limited intellect' (Robinson 1997); as the 'hen party' and as 'traitor's' to Unionism, while continuously enduring what the media termed bully-boy tactics (Fearon 1999) and chauvinistic abuse (Murtagh 2008).

3 Shaping the Agreement

However, though having to endure these slights and this sexism, the NIWC team succeeded in carving out a niche for itself, making a unique and valuable contribution to the negotiations. The Taoiseach (Prime Minister) of Ireland who presided over the peace negotiations acknowledged the contribution of the NIWC, speaking of the 'outstanding contribution of the Women's Coalition, who, without the benefit of a party network, resources or administration, bravely stood their ground, stated their case and insisted gently on being heard.' (O'Regan 1998). The British Secretary of State, Mo Mowlam, speaking in the House of Commons stated that the NIWC had been a 'positive force' in the process (Cowell-Meyers 2014).

The NIWC contributed to the negotiating process – and the resultant political Agreement - in four main ways:

(1) being concerned about process and relationships between the actors in the negotiations and also communication channels between the negotiations process and members of the wider community (Fearon 1999; Nolan-Hayley and Hinds 2003)

(2) the production of high-quality, community-consulted policy positions (Fearon 1999)

(3) keeping the process inclusive, thus arguing against the exclusion of Sinn Féin and the smaller Unionist parties when they were suspended due to ceasefire violations at various times (Fearon 1999; Nolan-Hayley and Hinds 2003); and

(4) expanding the agenda beyond the traditional constitutional negotiating agenda to include a number of other matters (Fearon 1999; Barnett Donaghy 2004; Cowell-Meyers 2014), which ended up in the final text of the Belfast Agreement, under the <u>Rights, Safeguards and Equality of Opportunity</u> section

In relation to this last, some prominent examples are as follows:

· "Against the background of the recent history of communal conflict" (this was NIWC language used directly in the chapeau to the whole section as well) the parties affirmed "in particular" the "right of women to full and equal political participation"; "the right to equal opportunity in all social and economic activity, regardless of class, creed, disability, gender or ethnicity"

· The UK government committed to introduce public policy for promoting social inclusion including community development and the advancement of women in public life

·Incorporation of the European Convention on Human Rights in domestic legislation[5]

·Establishment of a Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, and a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland[6]

·A new obligation on public authorities to conduct their functions with due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity, and to provide for equality of treatment of both communities

·Provisions to acknowledge the rights of and address the suffering of victims of violence

·Provisions to address reconciliation and the promoting mutual understanding about the past

·The right to freedom from sectarian harassment and to freely choose one's place of residence. (Northern Ireland Office 1998).

Though not part of its core agenda, the NIWC also supported the provisions on prisoners. The inclusion of these provisions was also a break from past initiatives to resolve the seemingly intractable conflict.

None of this is to say that the NIWC did not also contribute on the more explicitly constitutional arrangements: it did, including on a novel proposal for a Civic Forum, and on the decommissioning of paramilitary weapons issue also. But that ground was heavily dominated by the traditional 'constitutional' parties, and so it was the basket of rights-based issues detailed above that the NIWC prioritized, championed and provided much of the language for. Thus, as Barnett Donaghy concludes, the NIWC shaped not only the peace agreement, but the subsequent political landscape: "the NIWC did substantially impact on the political culture [by] 'facilitat[ing] the expansion of Northern Ireland's traditional definition of equality to go beyond religion to include other aspects, such as gender." (Barnett Donaghy 2004: 29; Bell, Campbell, Ni Aolain 2004).

4 An Increased Presence of Women in Public Life

The masculinized nature of the society in conflict in Northern Ireland has been most succinctly described as an 'armed patriarchy' (Harkin, cited in McWilliams 1995: 15), but the conservative, masculinized and marital values, and the dominant discourses of nationalism, religion and conflict that underpinned the society and located the 'natural' position of women as mothers, wives and other variants of helpmeet which reinforced male privilege have also been well-attested to (Wilford 1999; Ward 2002 2004; Barnett Donaghy 2004; Murtagh 2008; Braniff and Whiting 2015). Electorally, this manifested in a very low electoral representation of women in Northern Ireland since the inception of the state: in Braniff and Whiting's (2015) words, Northern Ireland was 'nearly bereft' of female representation in the Home Rule (1921-72) and the Direct Rule (1972-1998) periods. Ward (2004) notes that despite female party membership levels of up to 50% (UUP) or 60% (DUP) only 5% of the 1973 Assembly Members, and only 5% of the delegates to the 1975 Constitutional Convention were women. While there is a tendency to see the problem of gender representation as 'more acute

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[5] Also lobbied for by SDLP, SF, PUP

[6] Also lobbied for by SDLP, SF, PUP; Also – approximately - in prior initiatives, e.g. Constitutional Convention

within the unionist parties', with the 'debilitating impact of evangelicalism' (Braniff and Whiting 2015: 93103) given as at least a part-explanation of this, and that nationalist parties have generally fielded more women candidates (Ward 2004) it is also the case that none of the women delegates to the 1975 Constitutional Convention came from the nationalist parties. To be fair to the nationalist parties, it has been calculated that between 1998 and 2011 it the "combined number of female nationalist members of the Legislative Assembly (42) is more than double that of the two unionist parties (17)." (Braniff and Whiting 2015: 99).

Wilford (1999: 77) notes that the 1997 parliamentary elections in the UK – a landmark election for women's representation with the highest-ever number of women MPs (120) elected - resulted in Northern Ireland having the 'dubious distinction' of being the only region of the UK without any women at Westminster. Barnett Donaghy (2004: 26) states that after the peace process, "the new political landscape has become more open and conducive to promoting women into positon of political power", and that the NIWC's experience in the talks process enabled women to demonstrate their capabilities to the public, something augmented by women elected to the new Assembly, who provided the "first legislative role models for Northern Irish women in over 30 years" (2004: 31).

Cowell-Meyers writing in the context of 'contagion theory' supports this view, asserting that, though the "direct effects were narrow" the existence of the NIWC "improved women's representation in nearly all other political parties in the system" (2011: 411),, by putting pressure on them to promote women within their own structures. She notes specifically that while there was no reference to women's participation in the 1996 campaign literature, by the next election cycle there was "an explosion of interest" (2011: 70): the SDLP, UUP and DUP all produced campaign documents on women after the formation of the NIWC.

There is no doubt but that the most immediate and most clearly visible impact of the NIWC was on the descriptive representation of women in public life; its creation and subsequent efforts in the talks catalyzed the more meaningful participation of women in other parties (Barnett Donaghy 2004; Cowell-Meyers 2011 2014; Foster 1997). The most immediate local effect could be seen in seating arrangements at the negotiations: when the NIWC first sat at the negotiating table, they were the only women from the political parties so to do. When the Belfast Agreement was signed two years later, there were women at the table from other political parties as well (Fearon 1999). And it was not just at the negotiating table – numbers of elected women elected above Council level increased.

Against all the odds, in 1998, the NIWC won two seats in the inaugural Northern Ireland Assembly. There have been 349 MLAs in total between 1998 and 2016 inclusive. Of these, 80 were women. Women therefore comprised 23% of the total number of MLAs during that period.

Taken as an average across the first four elections (1998, 2003, 2007, 2011), women have comprised around 16% of elected MLAs. The 2016 election, when women MLAs made up 28% of all MLAs, resulted in an increase of almost 50% from 2011. Potter (2016) has found suggests that there is greater turnover of female than male MLAs: women tend to sit for shorter periods than men, as they are more likely to serve a single term and men are more likely to serve three or more terms.

The table[7] below outlines the number and percentage of women in each of the first five Assemblies, presented beside the number and percentage of women at the negotiating table on the first day. It is not strictly speaking comparing like with like, but it is illustrative nonetheless:

Table2: Women Members and Ministers of the Northern Ireland Assembly 1996-2016

	May 1996 Talks	May 1996 Forum	June 1998 Assembly	Nov. 2003 Assembly	March 2007 Assembly	May 2011 Assembly	May 2016 Assembly
Women Members	2 8%	15 13.6%	14 7.7%	18 16.7%	18 16.7%	20 18.5%	30 27.7%
Women Ministers	N/A	N/A	0 0.0 % (later 3, 33%)	Executive suspended	4 30%	4 30%	3 30%

No women were appointed to the first Executive as Ministers in 1998. The NIWC, not being afraid to 'name and shame' on this matter, publicly highlighted the absence of women in leadership positions in the Assembly, in both domestic and international media. And, over time, 3 women Ministers were appointed (from nationalist parties) in the course of the first Assembly.

While it is arguably not difficult to appear competent when some of your fellow Ministers reject the theory of evolution, by and large the women who have been Ministers in the Assembly are held to have been competent, with around a third of Ministerial posts going to women. In the inaugural Assembly there were three women Ministers, in the second Assembly there were none (due to the suspension of the Executive), in the third and fourth Assemblies there were four, and of course the previous First Minister was a woman. [8]

While it is patently impossible to attribute a causal relationship between the number of women Ministers appointed to the inaugural Assembly, and the existence of the NIWC, what can be asserted is this: the presence of the NIWC in the negotiations, the way it spoke about constitutional issues, the unique agenda items it proposed and championed, and its presence in the media outside of the negotiations and during the Assembly created a climate in which women's political participation was firmly part of the new political landscape. The NIWC demonstrated that women would vote for other women, that women could constitute competent political leadership, and its presence resulted in an environment in which it became politically unacceptable for mainstream parties not to appoint women to senior positions thereafter. And women from both sides of the political side agreed. For example, Dawn Purvis, later leader of the Progressive Unionist Party stated that "What the NIWC did was actually prove that the public do vote for women" and Patricia Lewsley, an SDLP MLA was clear that the "NIWC highlighted the issue of women in politics, or the lack of it" (Cowell-Meyers 2014: 71). Even women UUP party members who didn't like the NIWC used their resentment of it being

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[7] Top row is from Potter, Michael, Women in the Northern Ireland Assembly, 2016

[8] Ministers who were in charge of running departments – the figures thus exclude women who held Junior Ministerial positions.

flagged as the only party working for women, to create policy change within the UUP (Walker 2000). And Arlene Foster, the first female First Minister admits that "The lack of women active in political life in Northern Ireland was an issue which really came to the fore in the Forum elections of 1996." (Cowell-Meyers 2011: 418).

Thus, while the degree to which the NIWC increased women's political participation in Northern Ireland may be debatable, what is clear, as Stryker, McGuire and White assert is that "The real transformation in the role of women in Northern Ireland began in 1996 with the formation of [the] Women's Coalition." (cited in Cowell-Meyers 2011: 418), and that it was a "milestone for female political leadership" (Braniff and Whiting 2015: 98). In a later article, Cowell-Meyers concludes that "though the representation of women has not changed dramatically, it is clear that patterns began to shift in the mid-1990s, just after the NIWC was formed." (2014: 69).

In the second elections to the new Northern Ireland Assembly, in November 2003, however, with the traditional parties dominating, and the NIWC in opposition, saw the NIWC lose both its seats. In effect it was squeezed out by increased polarization and extremization (Murtagh 2008; Braniff and Whiting 2015; Bell et al. 2004; interview with former Irish Government Minister 2017). It still had a number of Council seats (on two Councils), but, by 2006, it no longer had those. The party held a convention in May, almost 10 years to the day since it was first elected, to formally dissolve itself.

5 Influencing the Assembly

To step back from the numerical representation of women, the process of implementing the Belfast Agreement was long and demanding, with several periods of formal suspension (on full pay), and several periods of very low productivity. Within the first Assembly, the NIWC continued to play a key role. It took forward its original agenda on the rights and equality parts of the Agreement, and made substantial contributions to the reviews on Policing and Criminal Justice, submitting orally and in writing. It also made a substantial submission to the Victims Commission.

The Belfast Agreement contained the capacity to truly transform the political narrative from a zero-sum, win-lose game to a win-win. The trouble was, however, that though it was win-win, it was a narrow win: the winners never went beyond the political elites. In this, the Belfast Agreement created a permanent, top-heavy Executive, in which around 90% of political parties to the Assembly were always represented. A key factor in a mature democracy is a constructive opposition[9]. In the first Assembly the NIWC was it.

Though with only 2 out of 108 MLAs, the NIWC was able to highlight issues and confound the

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[9] As indeed, somewhat ironically, the 1975 Constitutional Convention Report recommended, on members of the opposition being awarded Privy Council places (para. 40); the UUUC proposed that 'opposition be effective; otherwise there would be no accountability in any meaningful sense' (para. 89 (2) (i)) and 'It does this to strengthen Parliament vis-à-vis the executive and to make opposition more effective. This is in keeping with the highest traditions of British Parliamentary democracy which in the beginning acted basically as a curb upon Monarch and Nobles. It is also a development of the committee system which has existed.' (para. 97). Northern Ireland Convention Report, HMSO 1975.

Executive parties on many occasions. For example, NIWC MLAs infuriated all parties early in the Assembly when they indicated their intent to subvert a rule on designated politico-national identity. The requirement was that every Assembly Member had to publicly declare their designation – as Unionist, Nationalist or Other (just in case there was any doubt). This was to ensure sufficient cross-community consensus in a number of 'key national interest' votes. NIWC members stated that both their MLAs would designate as either Nationalist or Unionist, depending on the issue. This would therefore give them more clout – their votes wouldn't effectively cancel each other out. This was a surprise, as most MLAs thought that the NIWC would designate as 'Other' (and therefore not be counted in cross-community votes).

The furor however spoke to a more fundamental, almost teleological, issue. In being prepared to play fast and loose with communal identity, the basic organizing principle of the polity, the NIWC challenged the received truth that national identity was privileged above all others, and furthermore, that it was fixed and immutable. To suggest that identity was not only fluid, but that it was elective – that choice could be involved, and that the NIWC did not intend either to be defined by national identity or be boxed-in by it was something that shook the new/old establishment. But it was not to be: the Speaker of the Assembly issued a ruling stating that the designation could not be changed, thus blocking the NIWC's flexibility in this respect.

However, the MLAs were innovative in other ways, as highlighted by Cowell-Meyers (2011) who points to the NIWC's role in creating the momentum for the establishment of family-friendly working hours in the assembly and a Commissioner for Children and Young People. In respect of the Commissioner, they were the first party, for instance, to draft and submit a Private Members Bill to the Assembly[10]. This was voted down, but later taken up by another party (SDLP), with the result that a Children's Rights Commissioner Bill was passed, in similar initial terms as the NIWC draft. As well as this, the NIWC held the position of Deputy Speaker, and thus played a role in managing the Assembly plenary sessions.

6 Victims' Rights and Dealing with The Past

But it was on another part of the political agenda that the NIWC had expanded in the Belfast Agreement that was to prove far-reaching in subsequent years. Prior to 1997, there was no meaningful provision for the rights of victims or survivors, nor, unsurprisingly, for transitional justice, or 'dealing with the past'. Neither was there much written or theorized about these matters. Since the passage of the Belfast Agreement, the field has quickly developed (Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission 2013): much has been written, and much discussed, but little further has been agreed.

Several scholars have dismissed the GFA provisions on victims and survivors as being of little significance, of being "silent", of having "side-stepped" or of not being detailed enough about the complex and complicated matter of dealing with the past (Ahmed et al. 2016:528; McGrattan 2015: 936; Lundy and Mcgovern 2008; Quirk 2015; Hamber and Kelly 2016).

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[10] This was written by the author.

While it is true that there was no explicit mechanism for example, on a truth-recovery institution, or a space in which to share testimony in the Belfast Agreement, others allow for a more nuanced view of the language (Bell 2016), and the context (Hamber 2003; Rolston 2006; Ashe 2015) acknowledging that the realistic possibility of reaching agreement on 'the past' in 1998 was less than zero. The frequently researched and reported sense of the politicization or potential politicization of the 'dealing with the past agenda', and of the asymmetrical fear of it from the unionist community in particular (Rolston 2006; Lawther 2012; Simpson 2013; House of Commons 2015) add to the sensitivity of the context when it was discussed as part of the peace process in 1998.

Bell argues cogently that while there was no formal mechanism, a closer examination of the provisions on prisoners, victims and survivors suggested these acted as proxies for progressing 'the past' agenda. This "piecemeal" approach, while not without flaw, formed the foundations for "post-agreement initiatives[11], such as those on victims and prisoners, [to] continue to build on the Agreement's provisions." (2003: 1116).

It is averred here that Bell's basic analysis is correct: that the provisions on victims and survivors represented the maximum politically possible at the time, but they acted as building blocks on which to build post-Belfast Agreement work on dealing with the past. And they were almost not included in the Belfast Agreement.

When the first draft of the Agreement was circulated to the parties by the negotiation Chairperson, it contained only a small paragraph on victims, in part because the NIWC had been putting it on the agenda throughout the process. The NIWC sought counsel outside the talks for the right language to insert, and lobbied other parties to include an amendment to the text. When the next draft was issued, however, what little language there was on victims had disappeared. The NIWC then "had to push hard to get a new, extended version back in." (Fearon 1999: 112), including a direct lobby to the British Secretary of State. This was successful and thus the language remained in the Agreement.

The emphasis on victims' rights and the reconciliation agenda of which the NIWC was a strong, and on occasion unique, champion in the negotiating process turned out to be much more significant than any of the participants – including the NIWC delegates –imagined.

From speaking to victims - all victims - throughout the negotiation process, the NIWC understood that the issue of victims would need much greater political attention. In not exploiting victims for political gain, but in understanding that the situation of victims was not only personal, but also a symbol of division and symptomatic of greater malaise, the NIWC language in the Belfast Agreement provided hope to those who had endured physical and psychological pain for years, sometimes decades. But it was not without criticism.

The NIWC advocated for an 'all victims' (not just 'our victims') approach. This meant that its proposals would equally apply to those who were victims of paramilitary attacks and State attacks alike. This was very

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[11] Consideration of these are beyond the scope of this article, but government- or quasi-government sponsored initiatives such as the 2001 Healing Through Remembering project; the 2006 St. Andrew's Agreement; the 2006 Victims and Survivors (Northern Ireland) Order; the 2010 Hillsborough Agreement; the 2009 Consultative Group on the Past, the 2011 Cohesion, Sharing, Integration consultation; the 2014 Stormont House Agreement; the work on the Bill of Rights over the years, the ongoing Eolas Project, An Crann/The Tree all form part of this canon.

difficult for many people to accept. The pre-existing narrative had been that 'innocent' victims (e.g. victims of paramilitary attacks) were entitled to rights, but more 'guilty' victims (e.g. members of paramilitary organizations who had been injured or killed by other paramilitary groupings, or the army, the police, or even themselves) were not deserving. This position was criticized by some individual victims. However, it was not only the right thing to do, but the politically astute thing to do. This was not least because issue of 'victims and prisoners', became in fact 'victims vs. prisoners' throughout the campaign before the Referendum on the Agreement was held. It is averred that, had the NIWC not insisted on rights for victims there would have been little or no counterweight to the rights for prisoners' clauses, the referendum would not have been endorsed by such a solid majority of 71% (Fearon 1999: 113).

However, in the twenty years since the Agreement was approved by popular vote these issues (referred to at the time as 'soft' rights-based issues, as opposed to the 'hard' issues around the constitutional arrangements) have emerged as the most difficult ones to resolve.

It is significant that many of the high-level interventions to support the implementation of the Belfast Agreement after 2003 have related to these matters (and here policing is included). What has now become known as the 'dealing with the past agenda' – justice for victims, reconciliation, acknowledgment as to what actually happened, what the conflict was all about, continues to hamper implementation. In the words of former First Minister Peter Robinson, when speaking of the three difficult issues of parades, flags and the past: "There is progress that can be made in all three areas, more in parades than in flags, and more in flags than in dealing with the past." (Moriarty 2013). In other words, dealing with the past remains the most difficult area to address.

But it is, as the NIWC correctly foresaw, vital for all parties (State and non-State actors) to the conflict not just to agree on constitutional instruments to administer power. In order to 'move on', it is vital to have a shared understanding of how that power was once distributed and, at times, abused to the detriment of individuals and communities (Bell 2003; Hamber 2003). It is vital to acknowledge right and wrong and to make amends. This failure, not to blame, but to agree facts and accept responsibility for past actions, has long dogged the implementation process. This has been recognized internationally important, because, at one time, as the below citation demonstrates, the Government (1975) could not even describe, yet alone define 'The Problem' properly.

> "A further aspect of the historical past is also highly relevant to the present task of constitution making. This is the history of the Ulster community's relations with its nearest neighbour. In the Government's White Paper of July, 1974, entitled "The Northern Ireland Constitution" (Cmnd. 5675), there is a Part devoted to "The Problem". In this there is no mention of the Irish Republic. Relations with the State which shares the same island with Northern Ireland are, however, an important factor in Northern Ireland's problem."

Today, we have a British government that has funded an Inquiry into the events of Bloody Sunday, and offered a formal apology for it, and indeed for the Irish Famine. Mechanisms for individual victims' compensation and

social welfare support have been established. They are not perfect, but they exist. Yet agreement on 'the past': what happened, never mind why it happened, what we can learn from it; justice or at least information and acknowledgement for victims; integration of ex-combatants; general political reconciliation remains elusive, as the Haas Report concluded in 2013 and as referenced again in the Stormont House Agreement (2015).

In addition, as several scholars have pointed out, the gendered nature of transitional justice must be taken into account (Bell et al. 2004; Ward 2013; Ashe 2015; Braniff and Whiting 2015; Ahmed et al. 2015), highlighting, inter alia, the exclusion of women from negotiations on 'the past'. Ward highlights the exclusion of women from the Community, Sharing and Integration consultation paper issued by the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, seeing a backlash against women's agency; Braniff and Whiting state, in relation to the Haas-O'Sullivan talks (that led to the Stormont House Agreement) that the process was "Described by women's groups as flawed from the outset because they minimized the contribution of women in the development of the process." (2015: 102). Ahmed et al. are rightly critical of the absence of gendered transitional justice arrangements, finding that Northern Ireland is sub-par on the international scale, without even a "rhetorical commitment to women's inclusion" (2015: 533).

In this, unfortunately, it almost brings us full-circle to the situation that motivated the NIWC to be established in the first place: it is important that women are at the table during political negotiations; it is important that language reflecting gendered experience is included in political agreements, and it is important that women's positions, and language is championed during the implementation phase of political agreements.

In terms of considering if the NIWC has long-term impact, this issue can be considered as a case-study. But is the 'glass half-full' or the 'glass half-empty'? Well, both, probably. The glass is half-full in that the fact that there was a hook on which to hang further work on 'the past' speaks to the NIWC's influence in the political process in the first place. It's half-empty in that, almost 20 years later, even with 30% of female MLAs, and post-Agreement multiple policy documents on women from all political parties, even the most conservative ones, other women's groups have had to come together as women and speak up when the exclusion was particularly egregious (as the Legacy Gender Integration Group did in this instance). This suggests that the formal NIWC impact over time was more limited. It demonstrates starkly that women's meaningful participation has to be about more than the number of women elected. Numbers are important, yes, but they cannot be the end of the story.

7 Wider afield - sharing the experience, informing and influencing globally

The final legacy area of the NIWC is its international work. At the outset, many think tanks, women's groups, academics and peace processes became interested in the NIWC experience. In particular, mainly simply due to timing, links were made between the South African and Israeli-Palestinian processes, with formal exchanges of the principal actors in each. The relationships developed between NIWC negotiators and Palestinian women negotiators in particular proved most durable. Mutual moral support, exchange of information, 'fresh eyes'

analysis in terms of bringing solutions to the respective tables were the fundaments of this relationship.

In the initial 5 years of the NIWC, funding was greatly assisted by women academics and activists, and women and men philanthropists, and simply interested parties in the United States, and NIWC representatives would frequently make the trip, especially to the East Coast, but also to the West Coast, to do speeches and fundraising events, seminars and conferences, and share the experience of the NIWC inside the negotiations. Those networks endure to this day.

International interest in the NIWC has remained high, despite its dissolution, and it is not uncommon for members of the original NIWC Negotiations Team to continue to give interviews to research students and to share the lessons learned with policy makers. In 2017 two documentaries on the NIWC are in production. It is estimated that the NIWC currently responds to around 10 speaker requests per year, and has done so for 20 years now. There are also requests to inform and advise on other political or peace processes, sometimes formally and sometimes informally through Track Two diplomatic or NGO channels. For example, in the past 5 years, on both gender and process/relationship axes, the NIWC has advised the UN-facilitated talks on Syria held in Geneva, the Columbian peace process in Bogota, the Kurdish-Turkish process in Eastern Turkey, the Mindanao process in the Philippines, and also at various times women's and other NGOs in East Timor, Iraq, Afghanistan and Israel-Palestine.

And, just as the NIWC itself relied on the experience of other women, for example in the Guatemalan and South African peace processes to inform its work, so other women's organisations and generalist NGOs have used the experience of the NIWC to inform, and in certain cases, influence theirs, in many different geopolitical contexts.

8 Conclusions

Bringing a different, feminist perspective to the political negotiations, having the foresight to lobby for women's meaningful participation and then being prepared to respond to a vacuum in a very practical way characterized the inception phase of the NIWC. Innovation, ingenuity and inclusion were key characteristics. Its vision - and practical implementation - of actively reaching across party lines within the negotiations and continually engaging with communities of interest and the general public outwith the negotiations continued this approach during the political talks.

Its capacity to absorb sexism, exemplified not least as a questioning of their very right to be at the table, and to contribute coherently and competently meant that women in other political parties had greater leverage to gain greater representation for women within their party structures, and, consequently in the Northern Ireland Assembly.

Pressure from the NIWC on the issue of women's political representation led to a situation where it is now normal to see women in public life, including at Ministerial level, and at a rate of 28% (in 2016, an increase of around 50% from the 20 women elected as MLAs in 2011), on par with the Westminster rate of

29% (Keen and Cracknell 2016).

But increased numerical representation of women, which is the clearest long-term impact of the NIWC is not, of itself, enough. Women not only need to be elected, they need to be prepared to propose and handle policy through a gendered lens, drawing on domestic and international frameworks so to do, as the NIWC did. The continued exclusion of women from meaningful political negotiations, such as on transitional justice speak to the limitations of the NIWC having dissolved.

However, the NIWC's ability to - presciently - expand and deepen the political agenda, on touchstone issues such as victims' rights, integrated education, and women's rights, and to champion them was a unique contribution to the process, and laid the ground on which to build further initiatives, in particular the dealing with the past agenda. In this, it not only changed the content of the Belfast Agreement, but reshaped the contours of the political landscape ever since.

Finally, though having been in existence for only 10 years, NIWC members have been sought out for information on its experience, and advice on other political processes and procedures, most significantly the political or peace processes in Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq, and Columbia. Thus internationalism has become a strong legacy area for this audacious group of women, who, in 1996 felt so strongly that a paucity of women in political life would result in a proposed constitutional settlement that would only ape the earlier versions, and not truly include the 'something for everybody' that, in the end, was the key to its acceptance by a large majority of Northern Irish citizens, and thus meant an end to a militarized phase in this long, seemingly intractable, conflict.

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