Creating Sustainable Peace in Northern Ireland: Inviting Women Combatants to the Table

Sandra McEvoy, Ph.D.
Director of Political Science and Global Studies
Wheelock College

Photo courtesy of Ian Wood, 2003
Outlining a pathway from violence to the peace table

1. History and key actors to the conflict in Northern Ireland.

2. Reframe the security debate to take a more thoughtful look at the threat that women combatants already pose to sustainable peace.


4. Solidify the connection between the threat and promise of bringing combatant women to the peace table.
Roots of the Northern Irish Conflict

- 1170 Norman Invasion of Ireland
- 1916 Easter Uprising
- 1920 Government of Ireland Act
- 1966 Republicans/Nationalists “celebrate 50 years of struggle” against the British
Language of Conflict

• **Loyalist**
  ○ Considered “extreme” portion of Protestant/Unionist population willing to use violence.
  ○ “Loyal” to the British crown
  ○ Main groups: Ulster Defense Association (UDA) and Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF).

• **Republican**
  ○ Considered “extreme” portion of Roman Catholic/Nationalist population willing to use violence.
  ○ Main groups: Irish Republican Army (IRA) and Provisional IRA.

• **Paramilitaries**
  ○ Members are civilian or non-state actors
  ○ Groups adopt military organizational structure
  ○ Loyalist paramilitary organizations (LPOs)
Gendering Peace and Security

“Analysis of women’s uses of politicized violence in global politics is needed if women’s experiences of war and conflict is to be understood beyond their status as victims” (Sjoberg and Gentry 2007).
Stereotypes of women as “threats” to peace and security

- Non-thinking
- Easily manipulated
- Overly emotional
- Unnatural
- Sex crazed
- Commonality - stripped of agency
Feminist-informed investigations by academic and activist researchers have revealed that many forms of public power and private power are dependent for their operation, legitimation and perpetuation upon…controlling popular notions of femininity and masculinity… if we do not become seriously interested in the conditions and lives of women, we are likely to craft analyses of international power dynamics that are at best incomplete, at worst faulty and unreliable.

Enloe 2007
Participants

- 30 women who identified as past or present members of LPOs
- Ages 22 – 64
- Married, divorced and very few single
- All self-identified as working-class
- Rural and urban women
- Mothers, grandmothers and those without children
- Highest levels of education - middle school (age 13) to high school (age 18)
- Interviews took place in the women’s homes or other safe place selected by them
Themes in interviews

1. Rejection of the stereotype that as a group, Protestants live among the comfortable middle-class.

2. Misconception that Loyalist women did not participate in LPOs or have an interest in participating in peace negotiations.

3. Anger and frustration with the British government’s cross-border negotiations with Republicans.
Cross-border Initiatives and “Disagreements”

• 1974 - 2007 the British and Irish governments engaged in 4 separate attempts to bring political stability and reduce armed conflict in Northern Ireland.

• Initiatives aimed to devolve power, create a power sharing executive and reform social and political structures.

• “Disagreements” - unacceptable compromises that Loyalists thought only rewarded Republicans for violence against the British state.

• In 30+ years of research on the conflict, scholars and political party leaders have either excluded LPO women from their thinking or have assumed that their views mirrored that of their male counterparts.
Cross-Border Initiatives

- Sunningdale – 1974
- Anglo-Irish - 1985
- Good Friday (GFA) / Belfast Agreement – 1998
- St. Andrews Agreement – 2007

Ballysillan Road, Belfast, 2006. Photo courtesy of Jonathan McCormick
Sunningdale - 1974

Respondent: That was the time whenever they tried to force that other agreement, not the Anglo-Irish one...the...the...

Interviewer: Sunningdale?

Respondent: Yes, because that was the reason why I got involved.

Sunningdale Agreement

As I say, because we felt at risk, you know? We felt hard done by. You could see your whole culture and your whole way of life just going down the drain and becoming a united Ireland. You know? You could just see that. You can see that to this very day we are all still very, very frustrated. You could see that then you can still see it.

“Chloe,” interview with author, Belfast, June 2006
Responding to Sunningdale

• Chloe repeatedly states her fear of her Protestant culture being degraded by further advances by Republicans. She saw Sunningdale was just the start of a “United Ireland.”

• Her concerns about the formation of a “United Ireland” was as present for her in July 2006 as it was in December 1974.

• In almost a refrain, she states, “You could just see that. You could see that then and you can still see it…” and, “You can see that to this very day” suggesting that she feels as though the threat of a United Ireland remains.
Reflecting on Good Friday

...[people] like me, they didn't understand all the implications. I knew the police force was going to get a good shake up. But I didn't realize how much and that we would lose the RUC all together... After thirty years we had had enough... but we didn't realize the price we would have to pay.

“Chloe” Interview with the author, Belfast 2006
Loyalist Opposition to the GFA

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>REPUBLICANS</th>
<th>LOYALISTS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Prisoners released</td>
<td>• Prisoners released</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Seats in Government</td>
<td>• Visas to the USA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Facilities at Westminster</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Visas to the USA</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Army-Police stations closed</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Home Battalions of the RIR disbanded</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• On the RNRs allowed to return</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Columbia 3 remain at liberty</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Bias against Protestants in employment practices</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Sean Kelly child murderer set free</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Increased in investment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Access to shared roads denied</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Loyalist culture eroded</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• £26.5 million-pay-off</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This is not equality - This is not parity of esteem - This is not what the Good Friday Agreement was meant to deliver.

Photo courtesy of Jonathan McCormick, 2006
Locating women in the dialogue on conflict and post-conflict
Conflict as a factor in “reshaping” women’s lives

1. sudden accession to household head with limited resources
2. mobilized as soldiers in patriarchal militaries
3. subjected to increased medical and social vulnerability
4. shoulder increased security risks in disintegrating polities

Karam, 2001
Conflict as a factor in “reshaping” women’s lives

5. confront increased sexualized violence
6. negotiate family disruptions
7. disadvantaged refugees
8. experienced increased violence in ‘domestic’ space
9. engage war structured sexual work

Karam, 2001
Women in the “post-conflict” period

- UNSCR 1325 (2000)
  - Calls on Members States to consider the special needs of women and girls at all levels of repatriation, resettlement, reintegration and post-conflict reconstruction processes.

- UNSCR 2212 (2013)
  - Calls on Member States to fund women’s leadership programs and local civil society organizations who disproportionately do the difficult daily work of conflict prevention and resolution.
Northern Ireland has never seen a formal DDR process and has never had a UN presence. 

- The focus was on decommissioning of weapons and demilitarizing the country at the expense of all other areas of focus.

- Not surprisingly these processes have excluded combatant women (as they often do in many post-conflict environments).

- Further complicating recovery - many women do not want it known that they were involved in politically violent groups for fear that they will be stigmatized or ostracized by their families.
DDR’s “mixed bag” in Northern Ireland

- In Northern Ireland, LPO women “self-demobilized.” This process allowed many women to return to the status quo immediately after the conflict ended.

- However, other women expressed a sense of frustration that the end to the conflict would also bring an end to a type of emancipatory politics that was impossible in traditional Protestant communities.

- The combination of the denial of women’s role and the race to normalcy following the conflict meant LPO women were by definition excluded from peace processes.
Impacts of excluding LPO women from conflict resolution processes
Making the link – combatant women and sustainable peace

1. Combatant women are a violent constituency capable of disrupting the success of any negotiated peace.

2. Combatant women have important insights and interests that are useful to negotiations.

3. Inclusion of combatant women interrupts gendered stereotypes of women as necessarily peaceful, lacking agency and interest in peace possibility increasing the likelihood of resolution.
Concluding Thoughts

- Inclusion of women combatants in conflict resolution processes is untested but the potential benefits are promising.

- Inclusion of politically violent women in such negotiations is not a panacea.

- The testimony of LPO women has exposed a fatal error of British negotiators that there is a gendered dimension to peace and security.

- Interviews with women members of LPOs reveals what scholars have previously been hesitant to acknowledge: where women stand on the multiple and complex issues surrounding political conflict has an impact on security and peace.