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Bridge-builder feminism: the feminist movement and conflict in Northern Ireland

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ABSTRACT

While gender has been widely used as an analytical category to understand the dynamics of conflict transformation in Northern Ireland, surprisingly little has been written on the ways in which the conflict has shaped or constrained feminist organising. Singular focus on groups or initiatives like the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition, Peace People or the Women's Support Network has overshadowed the contested history and intricacies of the wider feminist movement. Adopting a more holistic view, this article takes the concept of 'bridge-builders' as conceptualised by Ruane and Todd in *The Dynamics of Conflict in Northern Ireland* (1996) to examine the fractured development of the feminist movement in the North. It charts how 'bridge-builder feminism' became a distinguishable feature of the feminist movement during the Troubles and was used as a mechanism to transgress what Todd calls the 'grammars of nationality' (Todd, 2015). I argue that although this organising approach pioneered some changes in Northern Irish society, it overlooked key feminist struggles and thrived at the expense of an inclusive, intersectional feminism. Though the movement has undergone significant changes in the last two decades, the legacy of bridge-builder feminism continues to impact the capacities of the movement to address key feminist issues.

KEYWORDS Feminism; social movements; ethno-national identity; peace; Northern Ireland

Introduction

Despite the plethora of work on gender in Northern Ireland, feminism during the Troubles is a relatively understudied subject. Gender has been used as an analytic category to understand the dynamics of conflict from a variety of angles including women as combatants (Alison, 2009), women in conflict transformation (Gilmartin, 2018; Wahidin, 2016), the gender gap in political representation (Galligan, 2013), and gendered conflict transition (Ashe, 2015; Hoewer, 2013). Surprisingly little has been written, however, on the

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ways in which the conflict has shaped feminist organising in the North and the development of the feminist movement as a whole. Bar notable exceptions (e.g. Rooney, 2000; Roulston, 1989) the literature on feminist activism has tended to focus on singular groups or initiatives like the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition, Peace People or the Women's Support Network rather than a comprehensive analysis of movement development, divisions and tactics. Moreover, normative assumptions about the relationship between gender, peace and conflict, and indeed the interchangeability of feminism with peace, have resulted in a lopsided cartography of the North's feminist movement, which in turn has masked the contested history, intricacies and fissures of the wider feminist movement there throughout the decades of violence and political instability.

This paper, as part of my larger body of work on feminist formations that arose in the context of the protracted conflict in Northern Ireland, seeks to ask wider questions about the relationship between feminism and peace in divided societies. I argue that a particular form of feminism emerged during the Northern Irish conflict, a feminism that was a marriage of peace work and institutional feminism, which I term 'bridge-builder feminism'. I borrow the concept 'bridge-builders' as introduced by Todd (1987) and further developed in Ruane and Todd's *The Dynamics of Conflict in Northern Ireland* (1996) and apply it to the feminist movement to trace the development of this particular feminist approach, the associated organisational strategies, and its legacy in relation to the growth of feminism since the signing of the Belfast Agreement in 1998.

> 'Bridge-builder feminism,' as will be demonstrated, became a distinguishable feature of Northern Irish feminism and was used as a mechanism to transgress what Todd calls the 'grammars of nationality' (2015), to side-step the political discourse typically framed as emanating from either nationalism or unionism. With its emphasis on cross-community accord, I suggest bridge-builder feminism tended to prioritise peace-building over what might otherwise be viewed as overtly feminist issues like abortion and gendered state violence as contentious gender issues were often circumvented in the pursuit of building bridges across the ethno-national divide. Many struggles faced by women during the Troubles were made invisible or neglected as bridge-builder feminism was elevated at the expense of intersectional expressions of feminism. Intersectional feminism normalises discord and diversity, and recognises that for many women neither the use of a gender lens alone nor the pursuit of a cross-community movement could resolve the inequalities or oppressions that burdened their everyday lives.

This analysis of bridge-builder feminism raises questions regarding the discursive constructions of feminist peace work beyond the Northern Irish context. In the absence of an intersectional feminist approach, how do the prioritisation of bridge-builder feminism and the elision of feminism with peace work marginalise some feminist struggles and histories? How might

it be counter-productive to key feminist struggles or even reinforce a gender myopia in relation to significant structural issues like state violence? What are the limits of institutional feminist approaches in divided societies as a mechanism for change? In a climate where the women, peace and security agenda prioritises feminist peace work such questions must be asked of feminisms in other deeply divided societies too.

Gender, conflict and peace

The study of gender, peace and conflict has undergone a series of transitions since the field burgeoned in the 1990s. Prior to feminist interventions, we knew little of the gender dynamics of armed conflict and its impacts on women. Initially, feminist scholarship focused almost exclusively on the ways in which women were victims of conflict. The previously hidden weaponisation of sexual violence was brought to the fore alongside analysis of how women's livelihoods, care work, health and wellbeing suffered in times of conflict. Emphasis on sexual violence as a weapon of war became the overarching theme of the literature, however (see Brownmiller, 1975; Copelon, 1995; Enloe, 1990; Leatherman, 2011; Lenţin, 1997; Stiglmayer, 1994). The dominant narrative to emerge from these feminist interventions was that '[o]verwhelmingly, it is men who make war' (Cockburn, 2001, p. 20) and women are the victims. War was constructed as a male pursuit, a blood sport, and women are its casualties. By extension, peace was discursively imagined as pro-feminist while to engage in active combat, in revolutionary struggle, was counter-productive, antithetical to and destructive of feminist aims (Brock-Utne, 1985; Reardon, 1993). Feminist scholarship thereby cast war/violence as oppositional to peace/anti-violence, where women were constructed as having a vested interest in peace and by extension anti-violence as they were 'on the side of life' (Ruddick, 1989). Women combatants did not feature widely in initial feminist studies of conflict and the limited interventions tended to dismiss women's roles as active agents of armed conflict, imagining them as naïve, misguided and furthering patriarchy by their participation in 'masculine projects' (Cockburn, 1998; Dworkin, 2002; Enloe, 1990). Thus, a dichotomous discourse emerged that positioned men as agents of conflict with women its passive victims. Despite strong criticisms from postcolonial, non-western feminisms which characterised this dichotomous view of gender, war and peace as divorced from the realities of colonialism, and of oppressive state and societal structures in which armed struggles where borne (Jayawardena, 1986), the feminisation of peace persisted in the literature and normalised feminism as synonymous with peace work.

This binary approach also sits in stark contrast to intersectional feminism, which contends that it is not possible to extricate gender from other systems of domination and violence. Intersectionality comes from a long history of US

Black feminist thought and activism. Though legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term (1989), intersectional analysis predates Crenshaw's feminist legal framework and is found in the writing of the Combahee River Collective (1982), bell hooks (1984), Angela Davis (1981), Barbara Smith (1979), and other seminal Black feminist thinkers. As Bilge and Collins (2016, p. 22) explain, intersectionality is a tool to understand how power and structural inequalities are 'shaped not by a single axis of social division, be it race or gender or class, but by many axes that work together and influence each other'. To use an intersectional lens is to recognise that a theory of women's subordination is not reducible to gender alone, nor does it privilege analysis of gender oppression over that of other forms of domination.

That gender, peace and conflict studies was late to embrace intersectionality as an analytical framework has led to an unevenly developed body of scholarly work that privileges gender, unintentionally or otherwise, over other systems of domination. The commonly held assumption that women who participate in revolutionary movements choose ethnicity over gender illustrates this narrow-sightedness as it disregards the interconnected nature of structural oppression, which can motivate women in such directions. Similarly, the women, peace and security agenda championed by the United Nations, most notably through UNSCR1325, largely ignores other forms of structural inequality in its prioritisation of policies that solely address gender. The intersections of gender and other forms of domination such as those connected to ethnicity and nationality are largely absent (Gibbings, 2011; Pratt & Richter-Devroe, 2011). As Claire Pierson (2019) argues, the lack of an intersectional interpretation of UNSCR1325 has reproduced the peacemaker/victim trope as the language throughout the resolution relies on the feminisation of peace.

This binary approach also makes invisible the varied roles women occupy in conflict zones and minimises the reasons women participate in armed conflict to begin with. Finally, it presumes that doing violence and doing peace are antithetical: that those who use political violence cannot also be agents of peace. This narrative came to dominate in Northern Ireland and is reproduced in the retelling of women's work during the Troubles. This conflation of women and feminism with peace and non-violence is evidenced in bridge-builder feminism and its advancement had particular consequences for feminism in Northern Ireland as I outline below.

Bridge-builders

Jennifer Todd has dedicated a considerable part of her career to mapping out the meaning of identity categories in divided societies. Her work seeks to understand the importance of ethno-national identities as a means of sustaining or weakening conflict (see, for example, Todd, 2007, 2018; Todd, O'Keefe, Rougier, & Bottos, 2006). Out of this body of work emerges the concept of

bridge-builders – those who, in divided societies, see themselves as spanning the ethno-national divide. The bridge-builder identity category was introduced by Todd to explain unionists in the north who set themselves apart from more traditional unionist positions (Todd, 1987). Bridge-builders, according to Todd's initial conceptualisation, are unionists who take 'Northern Irish Protestants and Catholics as their imagined community' (Todd, 1987, p. 1).

The concept was fleshed out further in subsequent publications and most significantly in the seminal book that Todd co-authored with Joe Ruane, the *Dynamics of Conflict* (1996), published nearly a decade later. Here, bridge-builder ideology, though rooted within unionist history. is broadened out beyond the unionist community. Bridge-builder ideology is deemed observable as a 'minor cluster' of people concerned with transcending the ethno-national divide and, as such, are 'ecumenist or secular on religious issues, pragmatic or 'agnostic' on constitutional matters, and with a Northern Irish identity' (Ruane & Todd, 1996, p. 72). The agnosticism on constitutional matters is borne out of a desire to appeal to what is framed as 'both sides' of the ethno-national divide, and is based on the assumption that the intensity of the conflict in the North of Ireland is in fact rooted in binary, competing ethno-national claims.

Bridge-builders are often represented as deviants within their communities (Ruane & Todd, 1996, p. 81). In fact, the role of bridge-building has been a dangerous position to occupy, read not just as deviant but traitorous, with perhaps the most notorious example being when Northern Ireland Prime Minister Terence O'Neill was branded as such by the Reverend Ian Paisley: '[H]e is a bridge builder he tells us. A traitor and a bridge are very much alike for they both go over to the other side' (Mulholland, 2000, p. 84). So, while on the surface bridge-builder ideology may appear neutral, it is not necessarily read as such.

Bridge-builders are also characterised as those who see a break from the past and emphasise modernity and modernisation as core values. Unionism and nationalism are viewed as ideologies of the past and their associated traditions are considered passé, antiquated, archaic. Bridge-builders eschew violence, specifically republican and loyalist violence (as opposed to state violence) and see it as a barrier to progress. Such violence is the cause of unwelcome global perceptions of Northern Ireland as backward, neither cosmopolitan nor urbane. Thus bridge-builders seek a break with the past by appealing to a supposed progressive common ground. They work in cross-community groups or foster cross-community relations in an attempt to transcend division. Bridge-builders also accept the legitimacy of the state (which, arguably relates to their relative silence on state violence) and look to institutions of the state to be mediators of change, urging what Ruane and Todd (1996) suggest are 'imaginative solutions' to conflict, including consociational democracy, bills of rights, and a wider egalitarian scope that includes protections for a range of minority groups (pp. 79-81, 97). Bridge-builders are also inclined toward the Union, though they are set apart from

traditional forms of unionism insofar as the latter seeks to reinforce the dominance of British nationalism. Bridge-builders on the other hand seek institutional reforms to bring about a fair deal for all (1996, p. 97). Throughout the Troubles, bridge-builder ideology was found in community groups, charitable organisations, political parties, ecumenical groups and, as documented below, it also gained a strong foothold within the feminist movement. Leaving aside the question of whether the bridge-builder model as originally outlined by Ruane and Todd remains relevant in post-Belfast Agreement Northern Ireland, its applicability to feminist organising during the Troubles reveals a myriad of dynamics that raise further questions about the possibilities and limitations for feminist movements in divided societies.

Bridge-builder feminism during the Troubles

The feminist movement in the North has a fragmented history that includes internecine splits and warring factions not uncharacteristic of movements elsewhere. Much like the rest of Ireland, the movement began to gain traction in the 1970s and, in the face of exceptional challenges, managed to achieve a sizeable presence by the 1980s. One of the key features of the feminist landscape in Northern Ireland has been the establishment of a number of women's centres. Peppered throughout the North's working-class republican and loyalist communities, the centres played a pivotal role in the support of women during the conflict, creating spaces where women could come together to access services and talk about issues they struggled against. Two of the larger centres, the Falls women's centre and the Shankill women's centre, offered services like childcare facilities, education, and support for victims of domestic violence. The Women's Support Network, the umbrella organisation over the centres, was founded in 1989 and offered a tenuous cross-community cohesion.

From early on, the ethno-national divide became both a challenge and a focus for feminist organisers. Many feminists became preoccupied with building a cross-community movement and implemented a number of strategies in the hopes of realising this aim. Bridge-builder feminism as a blend of institutional feminism, which looks to institutions as the primary mechanism for achieving gender equality, and peace work emerged early within the feminist movement. The common frames include a commitment to bridging the ethno-national community divide, a desire to break with past, agnosticism on constitutional issues, a rejection of political violence, and the acceptance of the legitimacy of the state.

The first notable appearance of bridge-builder feminism is in the foundation of the Northern Ireland Women's Rights Movement (NIWRM) in 1975. NIWRM, one of the North's first broad-based women's organisations, was formed after a film festival at Queen's University. The persistence of bridge-builder feminism

is in many ways a product of the inward-looking nature of the feminist movement in the North, as there was much overlap between groups. For instance, the founding members of the NIWRM formed the spine of many subsequent groups, including the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition (NIWC). Its former members were also peppered through groups like the Women's Information Group, Belfast Women's Collective, the founders of the *Women's News* magazine, and the Women's Support Network, and these groups went on to adopt bridge-builder characteristics. The following section will detail the emergence of bridge-builder feminism, its characteristics and development over the course of the Troubles, concentrating in the main on two of the larger entities, namely the NIWRM and the NIWC.

Cross-communal unity and shared sisterhood

The priority for bridge-builder feminism in Northern Ireland is cross-communal unity, with primary emphasis placed on bridging the divide between Catholic and Protestant communities, and amongst women from those communities in particular. This perspective draws on the wider notion of universal sisterhood that was articulated in feminist movements elsewhere at the time. Universal sisterhood presumes a cross-cultural homogeneity, a singular 'women's experience' (Morgan, 1996). For bridge-builders, uniting women was seen as paramount and indeed necessary for moving beyond the ethno-national divide and thus to be prioritised. Much emphasis was placed on interests and issues that were presumed to be of universal concern to women.

The NIWRM was founded on the principle of cross-communal unity with the desire, as Carmel Roulston says, 'to unite women of all political traditions or none' (Roulston, 1989, p. 225). The NIWRM served as an umbrella organising to bring together elements of the emergent trade union movement and, according to Lynda Walker, its membership was so diverse as to include communists and the wife of a Church of Ireland minister (Walker, 2007). Members prioritised cross-communal unity and as such the organisation adopted particular strategies and mechanisms in pursuit of this goal. Walker suggests the group formed because unionist politicians consistently failed to support women's issues. The NIWRM opened the North's first women's centre in 1979. Located in Donegall St. in Belfast city centre, the Downtown Women's Centre became a meeting space for those active in some forms of feminist politics and for organisations like the Northern Ireland Abortion Campaign and the Belfast Women's Collective (Hill, Walker, & Ward, 2018a, 2018b). According to Walker, the NIWRM was founded on the goal of becoming a cross-community group, as 'some kind of united movement across the communities' (Northern Visions, 2011).

The Women's Information Group (WIG), now Women's Information Northern Ireland, explicitly sought to unite Catholic and Protestant women.

Founded in 1980, WIG organised regular meetings in both communities and strove to highlight commonalities amongst women, with the aim of bringing women together from both communities to discuss shared concerns. Lynda Walker (formerly Edgerton) compared the group to the NIWRM in that both worked to 'actively create a non-sectarian women's movement' (Edgerton, 1986, p. 80). It is therefore unsurprising that in their book, *Religion, Civil Society, and Peace in Northern Ireland*, Brewer, Higgins, and Teeney (2011, p. 72) firmly locate the Women's Information Group in the category of peacemakers.

Among the outgrowths of the NIWRM was the NIWC, an all-female political party formed almost overnight in 1996, when it became apparent that women would not have a voice in the upcoming multi-party peace talks that were to be held that year. Many of the founding members of the NIWRM went on to form or become members of the NIWC, including Lynda Walker, who stood for election as an NIWC candidate in 1997. Leading figures in the Coalition included Monica McWilliams, Jane Morrice, May Blood, Margaret Ward and Bronagh Hinds. Like its predecessor, the foundational aim of the Women's Coalition was to build an organisation that spanned the ethno-national divide. A self-defined 'cross-community political initiative' (Northern Ireland Women's Coalition, 1997), the Coalition adopted a cross-community model whereby its leadership was drawn from nationalist and unionist communities, a model the media and existing political establishment struggled to comprehend. In the Coalition's first electoral race, a candidate from each of the dominant ethno-national groups was chosen to stand for election. Pearl Sager, a community worker from loyalist east Belfast whose husband was a soldier in the British Army was joined by Monica McWilliams, a feminist academic practitioner and self-described nationalist. In its first election manifesto the party declared '[o]ur primary concern is to move Northern Ireland society out of conflict, to create a culture of tolerance and inclusion' (Northern Ireland Women's Coalition, 1998). The Women's Coalition, like the WIG and the NIWRM, also invested in the notion that women had shared concerns, like political under-representation, that could be used as a basis for building a broad-based, inclusive venture. Coalition members faced abuse from all sides and were derided as pro-unionist, pro-republican, 'Sinn Féin in skirts,' 'silly women', 'scum' and 'traitors' (Kilmurray & McWilliams, 2011), while Sagar was forced out of her east Belfast home because of threats (Sengupta, 1998). Bridge-building work, despite its position in the centre, was neither neutral nor safe.

Breaking ties with the past

To seek cross-communal unity, bridge-builders eschewed traditional identities and loyalties perceived to perpetuate the ethno-national divide. Such

identities were framed as archaic and backward, with calls to break with the past a recurrent collective grammar in bridge-builder feminism. An emphasis on breaking with the past relied on the construction of sectarianism, ethnonationalism and ethnonational identities as being outmoded and anachronistic. To advance and move forward was to break ties with the past and leave outmoded identity categories behind, a theme that was prominent in the rhetoric of the NIWC.

The Women's Coalition framed their appeal for cross-communal support as a break with antiquated identities. The Coalition sought to set themselves apart from existing political parties, which they branded as outmoded and whose ties to old-fashioned political identities were preventing progress in Northern Ireland. For its first campaign, the Northern Ireland Forum for Political Dialogue elections, the Coalition adopted the slogan 'Wave Goodbye to the Dinosaurs'. The desire was to frame the party as forward-looking, progressive and a break from the masculinist politics of nationalism and unionism, and therefore having cross-communal appeal. An emphasis on positive partnerships was placed in opposition to past loyalties, a rejection of loyalist or republican, nationalist or unionist politics. The launch of the Coalition in 1996 was portrayed as a new way of doing politics by sympathetic media outlets. The *Irish Times* coverage included an article by Mary Cummins (1998) with the headline 'Northern women unite for tradition free politics.' This theme was echoed throughout their various party manifestos, including their 2001 Local Government Election Manifesto: '*For us, politics is about getting on with people, about building positive relationships and strong partnerships, moving beyond the often destructive divisions of the past*' (Northern Ireland Women's Coalition, 2001, p. 1). So, a shared, cross-communal identity was, in essence, framed as oppositional to identities connected to ethnonationalism that had tied Northern Ireland to the past.

Agnosticism and avoidance

In order to preserve a commitment to cross-communal sisterhood, bridge-builder feminist groups adopted an official position of agnosticism on any issues arising out of the conflict. A 'no policy position' on partition and constitutional futures allowed groups to portray themselves as open for dialogue, with no prior loyalties and thus an active transgression of the ethno-national divide. Bridge-builders feared adopting positions on or, in some cases, just discussing issues deemed contentious would alienate supporters and members.

Most feminist and women's groups in the north went on to adopt this strategy. The WIG for example steered clear of discussions on conflict-related issues like prison conditions, decommissioning, violence and sought to identify issues that were assumed to be relevant to most women in Northern Ireland

(McIntyre, 2004, p. 151). *Women's News*, a feminist magazine founded in 1984 after a series of monthly unity meetings between a range of women's groups, also adopted a similar position. The founding collective, which characterised the magazine as an overtly feminist endeavour, elected not to take a position on the political divide, much like other groups at the time.

The NIWRM adopted agnosticism from its foundation, and declared opinions on nationalism or unionism to be private matters (Roulston, 1989). They introduced a 'check your label at the door' policy as a means of enforcing this position. Those who attended meetings or events were expected to remain silent on issues that would bring forward disagreement. To speak specifically as a republican or loyalist woman, for instance, or to issues perceived to be connected to nationalism or unionism, was prohibited. The belief was that internecine conflict could be avoided if only universally shared concerns like childcare and the gender pay gap were addressed. This reductionist or lowest common denominator approach (O'Keefe, 2013) assumed that using gender as the only analytical category to set core principles would be productive for fostering cross-community dialogue and building a broad-based movement.

The Women's Coalition was also agnostic on ethno-national politics and from its foundation similarly adopted 'no position' on constitutional and other contentious issues. In the first-ever election to the multiparty peace talks in 1996, the Coalition adamantly resisted a position on the constitution in order to negotiate and accommodate a range of views (Northern Ireland Women's Coalition, 1997). This policy remained in place until the party's demise in 2006. While the Women's Coalition framed this position as a way of bringing everyone to the table, to encourage dialogue and foster peace, it meant that the alignment was not adequately addressing key issues shaping the lives of women.

Rejection of sectarian violence

A central facet of bridge-builder feminism is its rejection of sectarian violence, or more precisely, the violence of republican and loyalist paramilitaries. Sectarian violence, typically conflated with paramilitary violence, is viewed as the cause of the conflict and the main obstacle to progress. As such, a condemnation of sectarian violence or, in many cases, actively working to eliminate it, was a key feature of bridge-builder feminism. The Women's Coalition, for example, prioritised its work against 'sectarian violence.' Founding member Kate Fearon (2002) identifies this as one of the key areas where the party was successful and situates it within the party's work as advocates for peace, inclusion and human rights. This condemnation of paramilitary violence was a necessary feature of bridge-builder feminism for it to be consistent in its cross-communal sisterhood. It was also a source of tension,

especially as the republican prison campaigns gained momentum in the 1980s.

Bridge-builder feminists avoided taking a position on the prison struggles during the Troubles and were accused of turning a blind eye to the plight of women political prisoners in Armagh Gaol, including their experiences of prison violence (Loughran, 1986). Feminists from republican communities, joined in solidarity by international feminists, held pickets outside the prison to raise awareness of prison conditions, which included the weaponisation of strip searches by prison authorities. Throughout the prison protests there were repeated calls for a wider Northern Irish feminist presence at the prison gates. The NIWRM rebuffed these calls for solidarity and denounced the campaign as a republican stunt rather than a gender issue, thereby dismissing the gendered dimensions of the prison struggles. Such a framing justified the NIWRM's position, as doing otherwise would, in their view, contravene their rejection of paramilitary violence. They issued a statement to reject the calls for solidarity and used it as an opportunity to denounce republican paramilitary violence (Loughran, 1985, p. 4). Members of the NIRWM went as far as to deny republican women prisoners their political agency by accusing them of 'aping the tactics of their male counterparts in Long Kesh' (Loughran, 1986, p. 72).

As Mary Corcoran (2006, p. 143) writes, the NIWRM saw the dual oppression of women as emanating from a patriarchal state and paramilitary violence, with violence consequently being constructed as a tool of paramilitaries. The NIWRM accused women who supported republican and loyalist groups associated with violence as being complicit in the subordination of other women. Yet similar accusations were not levied against women prison wardens, police officers or soldiers.

The Belfast Women's Collective, a splinter group to emerge from the NIRWM, also issued a statement to declare its unwillingness to support the women's protest in Armagh because of its connection with the broader republican political status for prisoners campaign. The statement was issued after intense internal debate as tensions arose around the issue within the group, eventually leading to the dissolution of the Collective.

Initially, *Women's News* was also relatively silent on the issue of state violence as it tried to procure a broad-based appeal. The feminist magazine was criticised by republican women for featuring stories on gender in conflict zones across the globe while neglecting the war at home. The magazine began to cover the feminist tensions erupting across the North over conflict-related issues, including the thorny issue of splits within the movement that arose in relation to state violence and partition. The magazine subsequently printed letters and articles from women political prisoners in Maghaberry in the latter half of the 1980s (Women's News, 1987). The shift in coverage was no doubt shaped by the involvement of women who were

from republican communities and had themselves participated in protests against state violence in the North. As such, over time *Women's News* slipped out of step with other bridge-builder feminists during the Troubles.

Despite being agnostic about the conflict-related issues, bridge-builder feminist groups were openly critical of sectarian violence, with condemnations typically directed against republican and loyalist groups. The tendency to conflate sectarian violence with paramilitary violence implied the impartiality of the state and meant that state violence was insufficiently problematised within bridge-builder feminist groups. There was limited acknowledgement of the state as a perpetrator of violence, including violence that was clearly gendered (O'Keefe, 2017). This tendency extended well beyond the prison campaigns.

The NIWC also championed the condemnation of paramilitary violence while being considerably less vocal about the violence visited upon republican women by the state. Yet, in their pursuit of the supposed representation of all interests, the Coalition did seek to include the voices of those who were victims of attacks by the army or police as part of the 'dealing with the past' agenda (Fearon, 2018, p. 13).

Legitimacy of the state and institutional r eform

Agnosticism on conflict-related issues led, in some cases by default, to the acceptance of the legitimacy of the state, which manifested in a lack of condemnation of state violence, the acceptance of state institutions and the reliance on institutional mechanisms to achieve reforms. In some instances, these tendencies are one and the same, such as the case with policing.

The acceptance of institutions as mechanisms for change is a key component of bridge-builder feminism. While bridge-builder feminists accepted that changes to institutional frameworks were often necessary, much of the advocated changes served to reinforce state institutions as arbiters of conflict. Electoral politics, gender discrimination legislation and equality provisions are some of the notable examples.

Arguably, the agnosticism of bridge-builder feminism meant that institutions were accepted by default. By engaging with institutions to effect change, feminist groups were by default, legitimising existing institutional arrangements. The NIWRM, for example, developed a charter which called for parity of rights for women in Northern Ireland with women in England, including the extension of UK abortion rights to the North. They also advocated for greater feminist ties with Britain rather than the South of Ireland and suggested that a united Ireland might be against the interests of women in the six counties due to the patriarchal nature of the Republic's institutions **(**Loughran, 1986, pp. 70–71). As Carmel Roulston (1989, p. 227) points out, the NIWRM believed that substantial change was possible by working within the existing political framework to bring about a series of reforms.

Bridge-builder feminism's commitment to institutional politics as a mechanism for change is exemplified in the work of the Women's Coalition. It formed a political party on the belief that institutional feminism can deliver tangible change. As key architects of the Belfast Agreement, the Coalition worked to incorporate equality measures that they had hoped would make for a new, more equal Northern Ireland. The party also called for a stronger mandate for the Equality Commission, a Bill of Rights, and affirmative action measures (McWilliams & Killmurray, 2018, p. 551).

The recognition of state legitimacy is perhaps most obvious on the issue of state violence. A policy of no-position on women's prison conditions, as illustrated above, meant that bridge-builder feminists accepted the mandate of prisons and their effectiveness as an arbiter of the conflict. The absence of any significant effort to question state violence by proxy legitimated the criminal justice system. . Despite community organisations and human rights groups' repeated allegations of state collusion with loyalist paramilitary groups, feminist bridge-builders tended to be largely silent on the matter or at best slow to demand investigations.

Notwithstanding, for instance, the NIWC's call to widen the category of victims to include those who experienced the violence of the state, they did not take a hard line on the existence or legitimacy of the structurally sectarian Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC). Though the Coalition played a significant role in the reformation of policing in Northern Ireland, it initially did not envision the disbandment of the force despite repeated calls for its dissolution: 'The Women's Coalition does not believe that disbanding the RUC is really an option, but we are convinced that change is inevitable – and should be welcomed as evidence of putting the conflict behind us' (Northern Ireland Women's Coalition, 1998). The 1998 election manifesto was rather conciliatory to the police force: '[W]e know that the police themselves support change. It is a very different thing to police a society experiencing communal conflict and one at peace with itself. We will advocate programmes that will support the police during this transition' (Northern Ireland Women's Coalition, 1998). The party called for a range of reforms including that the force be transitioned into a service, better gender representation, the use of guns to be extended to women police officers, and greater religious diversity its ranks. Thus, the legitimacy of the institution of policing was never appropriately questioned and the legitimacy of the state as an arbiter was upheld, albeit with the recommendation of some reform.

Discussion: implications of bridge-builder feminism

There is much to be written on feminism during the Troubles and, in particular, the imprint the conflict has on groups active in the North today. A study of the extent to which bridge-builder feminism continues to inform the

movement is also needed. Among the more obvious consequences are the fragmentation of the movement, the conflation of peace work with feminism, and an under-developed grassroots movement that was eclipsed by institutional feminism.

The fragmentation of the feminist movement was the most immediate consequence, with splinters emerging from the sections that wished to tackle some contentious issues being censored by bridge-builder feminism. Splits occurred early on, even within the first year of the formation of the NIWRM, due mainly to the polarisation on conflict-related issues (Hill et al., 2018a,2018b). Through these cracks space emerged for anti-imperialist and republican feminist groups like Women Against Imperialism and Clár na mBan as they sought to address the gendered consequences of the conflict and state violence in particular (O'Keefe, 2013).

Despite the growth in new forms of feminism, bridge-building became the dominant approach found within the feminist movement. The concept of bridge-building even entered into usage within the movement itself. For instance, in 1995 the Women Building Bridges project was established in Belfast by scholar and activist, Cynthia Cockburn, and co-founder of the Women's Support Network, Marie Mulholland. The project was dedicated to the study of women's cross-communal work in conflict zones and was in essence an exercise in peace-building (Cockburn & Mulholland, 2000, p. 120). The project was also an example of bridge-builder feminism's tendency to amalgamate feminism with peace work and treat them as interchangeable.

Bridge-builder feminism's emphasis on cross-communal harmony and peace-building normalised the conflation of feminism with peace work, which in turn normalises women's work as (informal) peace work. This reinforces essentialist assumptions about gender and women's roles in war and conflict. The conflation of peace work with feminism is problematic insofar as it infers that women's role is to mediate, to be neutral, to not be conflictual.

Scholarship on women's political activism during the Troubles tends to concentrate on bridge-builder feminism, which has resulted in a disjointed documentation of the wider movement's history in the North. The NIWC is perhaps the most researched and widely known women's organisation and has become synonymous with feminism in the North. While there have been some interventions on women's roles as combatants (Alison, 2009; Gilmartin, 2018; O'Keefe, 2013; Wahidin, 2016), rarely are these classed as feminist. Feminism is that which is perceived to transgress the ethno-national divide, and it is this approach that is given prominence in the literature (see, for example, Cockburn, 1998; Molinari, 2007; Murtagh, 2008; Roulston, 1999). As a consequence, there has been no attempt to catalogue the movement in a more holistic fashion.

One might go so far as to suggest that this concentration of research on women's bridge-building work is consistent with normative assumptions

around women's wartime roles and the feminisation of peace. Similarly, a limited view of what counts as feminist is derived from this singular focus whereby 'respectable' modes of women's politics are favoured over the knottier forms that are inconsistent with feminist theorisations of wartime violence. Women are predominantly placed in the category of victims of wartime violence rather than perpetrators and this has resulted in male-oriented disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration programmes (Gilmartin, 2018). To regard peace activism as synonymous with feminist activism also makes invisible the feminist work being done on the margins or in movements in conflict with the state. Women's Coalition founders, McWilliams and Kilmurray (2018), for instance, have framed republican feminism as 'conflict feminism,' thereby casting it as antagonistic to the dominant feminisms. The elevation of bridge-builder feminism is problematic then as it marginalises that which does not fit this mould and further entrenches gender norms regarding women's relationship to war.

Similarly, the narrow view of violence adopted by bridge-builders has tended to overlook state violence at the border, in prisons, on the streets and in homes. This has given way to a shortage of feminist theorising of the violence of the state during the Troubles. The subject is under-researched relative to other conflict zones and the gendered nature of some state violence in Northern Ireland remains a relatively overlooked subject.

Because of the emphasis on shared sisterhood, the feminist movement in Northern Ireland struggled to deal with a range of issues not perceived to be universally shared. Through this pursuit of what Siobhán Byrne calls 'single identity work,' issues like racism, class and homophobia were slow to be raised, because of the fear of 'putting off ordinary women' (Byrne, 2014, p. 119). A desire to appeal to the middle ground on standard feminist issues like a right to choose left a deeper wound within the movement. Under-developed feminist organising on traditional feminist issues meant that the abortion rights and reproductive justice aspects of the movement were very slow to develop (Thomson, 2018). Abortion access, for instance, was a divisive issue in the North and this posed a challenge for bridge-builders. As it was a taboo subject in Northern Ireland, many were fearful to vocalise a pro-choice position (Connolly, 1999; Thomson, 2018).

When, in 2000, a motion was introduced to the Assembly to oppose the extension of UK abortion rights to Northern Ireland, the NIWC as represented by Monica McWilliams did not advocate a 'clear-cut' pro-choice position' (Thomson, 2018, p. 172). To prioritise the maximising of the support base meant that the abortion rights movement was diminutive throughout the Troubles. This raises questions regarding the extent to which cross-border solidarity was impacted by this context and whether a more developed, cross-border movement might have secured abortion access across the island of Ireland even earlier.

This appeal to the middle ground was also heteronormative and, as a result, offered a chilly climate to women who were queer, according to some. The emphasis on universal sisterhood enforced by groups like the NIWRM through the 'check your label at the door' policy meant that sexuality and queer issues were not deemed to be of universal concern at best or, at worst, off-putting to others and were therefore not given space within meetings (O'Keefe, 2013).

Large pockets of the movement also fell foul to 'NGO-isation,' wherein conflict resolution funding from the European Union was made available to many community organisations, including feminist groups. Bridge-builder feminism was further normalised by the widespread uptake in PEACE funding as groups were required to orient their activities toward peace-building under the terms of the programme. Between 1995 and 2013, 1.3 billion euro in PEACE funding was awarded in Northern Ireland (European Parliament, 2019). While more research is needed on its impact on social movements, many women's groups and women's centres in particular were successful in their funding applications (Donahoe, 2017, p. 136), raising further questions concerning the conflation of peace work and feminism.

Furthermore, placing confidence in institutional mechanisms to affect change has had implications for wider equality issues in the North. Reliance on the Belfast Agreement and the Northern Ireland Assembly as executors of change have had detrimental consequences for women in Northern Ireland as these institutional arrangements have frequently failed to function. Stormont collapsed for three years only to reconvene in January 2020 while Brexit negotiations undermined the Belfast Agreement and delivered a political reformulation that the majority in the North did not vote for. Despite the promises offered by the inclusion of equality principles in the Belfast Agreement, women in Northern Ireland have been failed by reformed institutional arrangements. Domestic violence reports have increased and income inequality has widened as cuts to social welfare that predominantly affect women were introduced through austerity budgets (Deiana & Pierson, 2015; Horgan, 2015). The consistent failure to implement same sex marriage and abortion rights also made life very difficult for women in the North. It must be noted that the historic 2019 victories in both were achieved in the absence of working institutions and resulted more from invigorated social movements.

Bridge-builder feminism, despite the criticisms offered here, did alter the Northern Irish landscape in a number of positive ways. It placed women's equality on the agenda and did so under the most challenging of circumstances. It forged cross-community relations and brought women together in the fight against gender inequality. It propelled women to the forefront of peace negotiations and played a central role in delivering institutional reforms that have substantially reduced conflict-related violence from all quarters. Undeterred by the constraints of organising in a warzone, the feminist movement managed to name gender inequality as a problem, and to

keep gender issues alive in the public domain. The movement, despite the fractures and fissures, not only survived in tumultuous times but also grew and nurtured future generations of feminists across the North. Groups like the Belfast Feminist Network, Alliance for Choice, and Rally for Choice are among those who have played a key role in energising Northern Irish feminism, witnessed in particular through protests over sexual violence and the criminal justice system, abortion rights and same sex marriage. Though the extent to which the grammars of nationalism and bridge-builder feminism persist is yet to be determined, the recent victories are prodigious and stand as evidence to the importance of a vibrant grassroots, intersectional feminist movement for effecting egalitarian social change.

Bridge-builder feminism in Northern Ireland raises wider questions about the assumed relationship between peace and feminism that arises out of essentialist gender thinking; and it problematises assumptions regarding feminist priorities in deeply divided societies. More broadly, this case illustrates the need to study feminist strategies, tensions, divisions and movement-building in deeply divided societies and to do so using an intersectional framework. Ideally, this should trigger wider reflections on how feminist scholarship can best apply an intersectional analysis of gender, war and peace to deconstruct essentialist gender thinking on what constitutes feminism and why certain forms of feminism are prioritised. Finally, and though beyond the confines of this paper, an intersectional approach should force feminists in this field to confront the gender binary that continues to dominate feminist analyses of gender, peace and war.

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